NATIONAL LANDSCAPES

The Australian Literary Community and Environmental Thought in the 1930s and 1940s

Jayne Regan

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Australian National University

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Thesis Certification

I declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of History at the Australian National University, is wholly my own original work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged and has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

__________________  __________________
Jayne Regan    Date
Abstract

In 1944 Nettie Palmer, a leading figure in the Australian literary community, asked ‘what is the human value of this last Continent, which stepped straight into the age of industry, world-communications, world-wars, and accepted them all?’ Her question, posed at the height of World War Two, captures well the anxieties that drove Australian literary production across the 1930s and 1940s. During these decades the atmosphere of international catastrophe mingled with a variety of distinctly Australian colonial insecurities and incited a literary effort to enhance the country’s cultural ‘value’. Writers set themselves the task of ushering in an era of cultural ‘maturity’ in Australia as a bulwark against a variety of perceived external and internal threats. This thesis explores the ways that the Australian environment was co-opted into this mission. I argue that unlocking the supposedly untapped and elusive spiritual and material potential of the continent was considered a critical step toward both economic prosperity and national and cultural adulthood.

Writers responded to environmental events and problems that were specific to the 1930s and 1940s: their writing registered changing approaches to closer settlement, the rise of institutionalised science, the environmental implications of new technologies and an emerging ecological consciousness. Their imaginative engagement with these processes – available to us in the books, poems, stories and letters they left behind – reveal the ways that contemporary environmental issues provoked and deepened literary concerns about white Australian belonging on the continent.

This thesis is a fusion of historical, literary and environmental approaches. I highlight specific authors – Nettie Palmer, Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Frank Dalby Davison and Brooke Nicholls, M. Barnard Eldershaw, Ian Mudie, William Hatfield and Flexmore Hudson – who wrote directly or indirectly about the Australian landscape in the 1930s and 1940s. Although they did not always share a unified environmental, political or even literary sensibility, this cohort was united by a sense of the social responsibility of writers and a desire to locate in Australia’s varied landscapes a national culture that they hoped would prove robust in the face of the catastrophes of the early to mid-twentieth century.
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<td>ANZAC</td>
<td>Australian and New Zealand Army Corps</td>
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<td>APA</td>
<td>Aborigines Progressive Association</td>
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<td>CSIR</td>
<td>Council for Scientific and Industrial Research</td>
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<td>CSIRO</td>
<td>Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation</td>
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<td>CLF</td>
<td>Commonwealth Literary Fund</td>
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<td>CPA</td>
<td>Communist Party of Australia</td>
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<td>FAW</td>
<td>Fellowship of Australian Writers</td>
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<td>PEN</td>
<td>Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, Novelists</td>
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<td>RSSILA</td>
<td>Returned Sailors’ and Soldiers’ Imperial League of Australia</td>
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<td>SLSA</td>
<td>State Library of South Australia</td>
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<td>TVA</td>
<td>Tennessee Valley Authority</td>
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<td>UAP</td>
<td>United Australia Party</td>
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<td>UNESCO</td>
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Introduction

The next few months may decide not only whether we are to survive as a nation, but whether we deserve to survive. As yet none of our achievements prove it, at anyrate [sic] in the sight of the outer world. We have no monuments to speak of, no dreams in stone, no Guernicas, no sacred places. We could vanish and leave singularly few signs that, for some generations, there had lived a people who had made a homeland of this Australian earth. A homeland? To how many people was it primarily that? How many penetrated the soil with their love and imagination?¹

In ‘Battle’, Palmer suggested that white Australia might suffer a similar fate – perhaps at the hands of the Japanese – unless the continent was convincingly settled.\(^2\) I have begun with a quote from ‘Battle’ because it sharply and succinctly reveals the subject at the heart of this thesis; in the 1930s and 1940s writers routinely connected international political crises to anxieties around Australian cultural progress and the white Australian relationship to the continent.

The heightened sense of emergency across the 1930s and 1940s drove writers to attempt to resolve the conflicts inherent in their settler status more urgently than in previous decades. Palmer and writers like him attempted to carve out positions for themselves as both defenders and inventors of an Australian cultural heritage. In ‘Battle’, Palmer even suggested that this was an integral part of Australia’s war effort. According to him, the early 1940s were ‘great, tragic days’ and he urged readers and writers to ‘accept them stoically, and make every yard of Australian earth a battle-station’.\(^3\) This battle was imaginative, ideological and internal, more than a physical mobilisation of Australians against an external threat. The goal was to become a ‘spiritually sounder’ nation and to transform Australians into ‘adults in a wider world’.\(^4\)

Writers set themselves the task of ushering in an era of cultural ‘maturity’ in Australia as a bulwark against external and internal threats and they co-opted the Australian environment into this mission.

Contemporary environmental issues provoked and deepened literary concerns around how to achieve a sense of belonging on the continent for white Australians. Writers were interested in extending physical settlement and in forging spiritual bonds with the Australian environment; this would, they believed, enhance both the country’s security and Australia’s apparent lack of cultural credentials. This thesis highlights specific authors – Nettie Palmer, Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Frank Dalby Davison and Brooke Nicholls, Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw who published together as M. Barnard Eldershaw, Ian Mudie, William Hatfield, and Flexmore Hudson – who all wrote directly or indirectly about the Australian landscape during the 1930s and 1940s.

\(^2\) The belief that white Australia could be dispossessed of the continent, as Aboriginal Australia had been, had caused anxiety among white Australians since at least the 1880s. See: David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1999), 1-9; Frank Bongiorno, ‘Aboriginality and Historical Consciousness: Bernard O’Dowd and the Creation of an Australian National Identity’, *Aboriginal History* 24 (2000): 53.


\(^4\) Ibid.
These writers responded to environmental events and problems – such as how to settle returned soldiers, constructing a national capital, the rise of the motor age and engulfing dust storms – and used them to demonstrate either Australia’s lagging development or its dawning maturity. Collectively they enable an exploration of the specific inflection that crisis acquired within the Australian literary community during the 1930s and 1940s and how environmental sensibilities became entangled in the nationalist literary response to international political developments.

A cohort of writers

The writers studied in this thesis were not always unified by an environmental, political, or even literary sensibility, but they did share a sense of the social responsibility of writers and a desire to locate, in Australia’s varied landscapes, a national culture that would prove robust in the face of national and international crises. They were a loosely affiliated community who wrote across a similar period and addressed, in their writing, many of the same problems. Some knew one another personally; all were connected by a network of literary sociability and communication which operated through private conversations, letter writing and around literary magazines, journals and organisations. Their work was the product of the creative ferment of the 1930s and 1940s, which was a response to economic depression, fascism and war. Importantly, all of the writers studied here believed that, to some extent, their writing performed a social function.

David Carter argues that the cataclysmic international events of the early twentieth century provoked a sense of crisis in ‘every aspect of civilisation’ that, despite physical remoteness from the hub of calamity in Europe, was deeply felt within Australian literary culture. Art historian Richard Haese argues that this sense of crisis gave rise to a period of ‘unparalleled intellectual and artistic ferment’ in Australia between the Great Depression and the Cold War. Haese, who is specifically interested in the growth of modernist art in Australia, traces this ferment through the rise of radical artists and their diversification into criticism and political writing, the advent of modernist art exhibitions, and the establishment and extended influence of modernist groups such as the Contemporary Art Society and Angry Penguins. A parallel and

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sometimes intersecting period of political and literary change and productivity occurred among Australian writers across these same years; the 1930s and 1940s saw a surge in the publication of socially critical fiction, poetry and non-fiction. The novel, specifically the realist novel, became the dominant form of literary expression and an unprecedented number of often short-lived little magazines offered an outlet for short stories, poetry, criticism and political articles. This thesis will demonstrate that a range of writers from a variety of literary and political backgrounds contributed to the politically inspired literary productivity of these decades. However, to date, the relatively small group of left-wing writers who circled around Vance and Nettie Palmer have received the most attention from historians.

According to Drusilla Modjeska, Nettie Palmer developed, through her criticism and essays, ‘a view of Australian national culture which gave writers a sense of purpose, of confidence in their work and a political as well as literary explanation of their position’. Palmer’s extensive correspondence brought a wide variety of writers into her sphere of influence, but she maintained closer contact with a select group of mostly politically left-wing literary friends. Marivic Wyndham, in her biography of novelist Eleanor Dark, borrows Dark’s book title – The Little Company (1945) – to describe ‘the small exclusive circle of writers’ to which Dark belonged in the 1930s and 1940s. Spearheaded by Nettie Palmer, ‘the little company’ principally comprised of Vance Palmer, Marjorie Barnard, Flora Eldershaw, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Frank Dalby Davison, and Dark herself, and sometimes extended to include Jean Devanny, Leonard Mann, Xavier Herbert and Dymphna Cusack. The geographic distribution of these writers, combined with the relatively slow nature of travel in this period, meant that the group was sustained primarily via correspondence. This cohort has sometimes been characterised as ‘cultural nationalists’ due to their enthusiasm for the ‘idea of a distinctively national Australian literary culture’, although their constant engagement with world literature and interest in progressive social reform have also routinely been


8 Modjeska, Exiles at Home, 11.

acknowledged. They imagined themselves as serious writers, however, as will be explored, they often had to write a wide variety of material to survive financially. Members of ‘the little company’ have received quite extensive attention in literary and historical studies. The Palmers, given their central role in the Australian literary community as writers, critics and correspondents, have inspired biographies, critical articles and a collection of letters.

Attention has also been afforded to the prominent women writers of this group. Modjeska’s Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925-1945 reveals the ‘network of intellectual and emotional support’ initiated by Nettie Palmer and highlights the contribution women made as a ‘dominant influence in Australian literature’ in this period. Although Modjeska gives some space to women such as Mary Gilmore, Dulcie Deamer, Kylie Tennant, Dorothy Hewett and Betty Roland, she is primarily focused on the women who made up Wyndham’s ‘little company’; Dark, Prichard, Eldershaw, Barnard, Cusack, Devanny, with the addition of Miles Franklin. Similarly, Carole Ferrier’s collection of letters, As Good As A Yarn With You, reproduces correspondence between Franklin, Prichard, Devanny, Barnard, Eldershaw and Dark. These historians have demonstrated that although women writers were popular, influential and often critically acclaimed in this period, feminist issues were


13 Modjeska, Exiles at Home, 3 and 15.

often subsumed by an emphasis on class, international political crisis and masculine nationalism. Susan Lever argues that many of these writers had ‘difficulty reconciling their commitments to left politics and feminism’.\(^{15}\)

In the wake of the Depression, left-wing politics came to dominate Australian literary culture. Historians have focused on ‘the little company’ partly because its members epitomised this political transition and, after 1934, were particularly prominent and influential members of the literary community’s foremost association, the Fellowship of Australian Writers (FAW). The politicisation of the FAW in the mid-1930s was indicative of the far-reaching changes the Australian literary community underwent in response to both international and national events. The FAW, established in 1928, was transformed across 1934 and 1935 from a conservative literary association into ‘an articulate and informed political lobby group’.\(^{16}\) In the early 1930s, a significant portion of the FAW’s membership was politicised by the Depression, which had revealed extensive social and economic inequalities in Australia and across the world, and by Adolf Hitler’s seizure of power in Germany in 1933. An increasingly influential left-wing faction would likely have come to prominence within the FAW by the end of the decade, but the furore surrounding the 1934-5 ‘Kisch affair’ hastened this process.

In November 1934, Czechoslovakian communist writer Egon Kisch travelled to Australia to speak at a small anti-war congress in Melbourne, organised by the Australian branch of the communist Movement Against War and Fascism. Led by Joseph Lyons, the United Australia Party (UAP) government, which would become notorious for political censorship during the decade, endeavoured to prohibit Kisch’s entry into the country. A chaotic and well-publicised few months ensued. Kisch was detained onboard the RMS \textit{Strathaird}, wharf-side protestors demanded his release, and in Melbourne Kisch jumped from the ship onto the wharf and broke his leg. In Sydney Kisch was administered a dictation test in Scottish Gaelic in a government attempt to exclude him under the Immigration Restriction Act. Ultimately, a High Court decision


permitted his entry into Australia, although legal proceedings continued until it was agreed that Kisch would leave the country voluntarily in March 1935.\(^{17}\)

On 22 November 1934, invited by some of the group’s left-wing members, Kisch attended a FAW luncheon in honour of visiting British poet laureate John Masefield. As a result, invited government ministers T.W. White (Minister for Customs) and Billy Hughes (Minister for Health and Repatriation) did not attend the event.\(^{18}\) Moreover, the move provoked objections from some FAW members, including influential founding member Mary Gilmore, and prompted the organisation’s conservative president George Mackaness to resign his position.\(^{19}\) In the wake of these resignations left-wing members such as Vance and Nettie Palmer, Flora Eldershaw, Marjorie Barnard and Frank Dalby Davison gained prominence and influence, and FAW became concerned with representing itself as an anti-fascist organisation. It also began to function as a kind of union for Australian writers and in 1939 successfully lobbied the Menzies-led UAP government to significantly increase the funding allocated to literary grants administered by the Commonwealth Literary Fund (CLF).\(^{20}\) Modjeska argues that during the Kisch visit ‘democratic and cultural rights were abruptly brought together’; the events also made it clear to Australian writers that censorship and political repression were not a phenomenon confined to Europe.\(^{21}\) Although the politicisation of writers was already well underway in the early 1930s, the ‘Kisch affair’ was a symbolic turning point in Australian literary culture; throughout the late 1930s and into the 1940s writers explicitly endeavoured to engage directly with the pressing social and political problems of the period.


\(^{18}\) 'Kisch at Luncheon', *The Argus* (Melbourne), 23 November 1939, 10.

\(^{19}\) It is not entirely clear why Gilmore, a long-time socialist, objected so strongly to Kisch's presence. But it is likely she preferred that the FAW remain a respectable literary body free of political scandal. When the FAW amalgamated with the openly political Writers' Association (previously known as the Writers' League) in 1938 she forfeited her membership, citing her belief that the FAW should remain non-political. See: Fox, *Dream at a Graveside*, 49 and 77; Modjeska, *Exiles at Home*, 118-9.


\(^{21}\) Ibid., 118.
Left-wing writers were at the forefront of the politically inspired writing culture and so are crucial in any understanding of the Australian literary community in these decades. Nettie Palmer and her ‘little company’ are critical characters in this thesis. Palmer, along with Davison and Barnard Eldershaw, are given extensive coverage in chapters one, three and four, and other members of ‘the little company’ make cameos throughout. However, I have also drawn on the work of authors outside of this clique to demonstrate that writers from different political and literary backgrounds contributed to the creative ferment of the 1930s and 1940s. Brooke Nicholls is a figure about whom little biographical detail is known; a lack of sources means I can draw no conclusions about his politics. Drake-Brockman, Mudie, Hatfield and Hudson are also lesser-known literary figures of the early twentieth century who were motivated by a variety of political positions. They were writers Wyndham might characterise as ‘fringe-dwellers of the Australian literary society’. Yet all still demonstrate the way that a combination of nationalism and social crisis shaped literary engagement with the Australian environment.

Mudie and Hudson identified with the Jindyworobak poetry movement, established in Adelaide in 1938, which very explicitly sought to engage in original ways with the Australian landscape. The Jindyworobaks had much in common with ‘the little company’ and were intermittently in contact with some of its members. However, the Jindyworobaks found themselves out of step with many other members of the literary community, who were inspired by the crises of the 1930s to take up left-wing politics, when they aligned themselves with Sydney-based publisher and critic P.R. Stephensen’s right-wing Australia First movement. Mudie was dedicated to Stephensen’s controversial politics, while Hudson, a socialist, was ill at ease with the alliance. Like some members of ‘the little company’, Hatfield was a committed communist. However, he had very little direct contact with that circle of writers. The crises of the era did not seriously challenge Drake-Brockman’s classic liberalism, though she too believed in the social function of literature. In 1941, recalling advice offered by H.G. Wells on a recent Australian visit, Drake-Brockman argued that Australian writers were ‘obliged to wake from our bush and bandicoot state of mind and face the world as a people’.

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23 Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Education for Life (Perth: Fellowship of Australian Writers [W.A. Section], 1941), 5.
Australian branch of FAW in 1938. This branch was more conservative than the original Sydney-based organisation, yet its members, like most Australian writers in this period, did find common cause in anti-fascist and anti-censorship campaigns.

From the mid-1930s, committed communist writers such as Katharine Susannah Prichard and Jean Devanny worked with more politically moderate writers. They coalesced around anti-fascism and came together in groups such as the Popular Front Against Fascism, especially after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Len Fox argues that, although left-wing members were particularly influential after the mid-1930s, the FAW remained a politically diverse organisation; Frank Clune and Tom Inglis Moore were prominent members not aligned with the left. In 1938, a FAW committee began work on an anti-fascist volume of essays titled ‘Writers in Defence of Freedom’, which, although organised by members of the largely left-wing ‘little company’, attracted contributions from writers as politically diverse as M. Barnard Eldershaw, Miles Franklin, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Eleanor Dark, Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Nettie Palmer, Norman Lindsay, Brian Penton, Dulcie Deamer, Dymphna Cusack and former Governor-General and judge Sir Isaac Isaacs. Although the collection never saw print, Maryanne Dever argues that ‘Writers in Defence of Freedom’ was ‘the most explicit expression of the nexus between writing and politics' of the period. Writers also published political and literary treatises in response to national and international developments. P.R. Stephensen’s *The Foundations of Culture in Australia: An Essay Towards National Self-Respect* (1936) showed signs of his developing interest in right-wing politics, but still proved popular and influential within the Australian writing community. Frank Dalby Davison’s *While Freedom Lives* (1938) appeared at the height of his interest in communism, although he would never join the Communist Party of Australia (CPA).

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24 Modjeska, *Exiles at Home*, 16.
25 Fox, *Dream at a Graveside*, 49.
26 FAW records include the proposed contents of ‘Writers in Defence of Freedom’ as well as typescripts of the articles that were to be included. ‘Contents’, box K22104, MLMSS 2008, Fellowship of Australian Writers records, ca. 1928-1972, SLNSW, Sydney. See also, Modjeska, *Exiles at Home*, 304-5.
27 Dever, ‘Subject to Authority’, 111-2.
28 This thesis will refer to the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) throughout, although between 1944 and 1951 the party went by the name Australian Communist Party. See Alastair Davidson, *The Communist Party of Australia: A Short History* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1969), 98.
A diverse range of writers also joined forces to oppose censorship. Throughout the 1930s, under the Lyons government, an increasing number of international and some Australian books were prohibited on grounds of either obscenity or sedition. Censorship reached a peak in 1936 when five thousand titles were banned, including James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Ernest Hemingway’s *Farewell to Arms*, Normal Lindsay’s *Redheap* and the works of Lenin and Stalin. From the mid-1930s, the FAW campaigned against most forms of literary censorship. In 1935, the Book Censorship Abolition League was established by a university academic and a radical bookseller in Melbourne and found support among various writers including J.M. Harcourt, Leonard Mann, P.R. Stephensen and Katharine Susannah Prichard. Across the 1930s and 1940s the atmosphere of crisis encouraged a range of politically disparate writers to forge political and literary alliances.

The writers and texts examined in this thesis also demonstrate the necessary pragmatism involved in negotiating a literary career in the 1930s and 1940s. Aside from Nicholls and Drake-Brockman, who were both wealthy, the writers considered here had to pursue a variety of literary and journalistic writing (and sometimes unrelated employment) in order to survive financially. Accordingly, I capture a diversity of genres and forms including short story, novel, non-fiction, poetry, comics and travel literature. This selection also reflects the broader definition of literature that existed prior to the introduction of Australian literary studies into universities in the mid-twentieth century. Meaghan Morris argues that the ‘expansive catholicity’ of H.M. Green’s literary classifications in *A History of Australian Literature: Pure and Applied* (1961) was replaced by ‘an increasingly reductive concept of literary form’ with the institutionalisation of literary studies from the 1950s. Writers did, of course, have their preferred forms and genres, although these were not necessarily financially

rewarding. After her collection of journalistic articles titled *Talking It Over* (1932) was published too late to take advantage of Christmas sales, Nettie Palmer lamented that ‘one simply mustn’t count on making money out of anything one wanted to do’ (original emphasis).\(^{34}\) This was a problem for the largely self-proclaimed literary elite; writers such as Drake-Brockman and Hatfield, who were dedicated to the production of ‘middlebrow’ literature, more readily found commercial success.

Educative, respectable and entertaining, ‘middlebrow’ literature set itself in opposition to allegedly crass and frivolous ‘lowlbrow’ writing as well as ‘highbrow’ literature, which was often accused of being over-theorised and inaccessible.\(^{35}\) Drake-Brockman and Hatfield drew on their extensive experience in remote regions of Australia to produce travel and adventure literature and journalistic contributions to newspapers and magazines such as *Walkabout*, which had broad appeal but remained respectable and informative. As explored in chapter three, Davison and Nicholls unsuccessfully attempted to emulate the commercial success of middlebrow writers with their 1935 travel book *Blue Coast Caravan*. David Carter points out that this was not uncommon in this period. While writers such as Palmer, Barnard, Eldershaw and Davison aspired to serious literary production, a lack of high cultural institutions in Australia meant their careers were ‘mostly lived in the range of the middlebrow’.\(^{36}\) Financial necessity and limited publication opportunities ensured that Australian writers of the period wrote across genres and forms and for a variety of audiences. By including lesser-known, politically diverse and middlebrow writers, this thesis significantly enlarges the company of writers that are usually offered as representative of Australian literary culture in the 1930s and 1940s.

Despite this broader focus, there are significant Australian writers and groups who do not receive extensive coverage. I have chosen to focus on writers who spent most of the period under consideration living in Australia. This enables me to demonstrate that even figures who have been deemed parochial and nationalistic were in fact keenly engaged and influenced by international events. As a result, the work of notable literary expatriates such as Martin Boyd, Christina Stead and Henry Handel Richardson, who

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\(^{34}\) Nettie Palmer to Miles Franklin, 22 February 1933, in *Letters of Vance and Netter Palmer*, 84.


\(^{36}\) Carter, *Always Almost Modern*, 147.
more obviously participated in international literary and political culture, is not analysed. Largely absent too are the bohemian, anti-modernist writers who coalesced around the *Vision* literary quarterly which published four numbers across 1923-4: Norman and Jack Lindsay, Frank Johnson, Kenneth Slessor, Hugh McCrae, R.D. FitzGerald and Dulcie Deamer. The first number of *Vision* (1923) aspired ‘to provide an outlet for good poetry, or for any prose that liberates the imagination by gaiety or fantasy’. Although many of these writers continued to produce literature in the 1930s and 1940s they, as pointed out by Modjeska, ‘rejected all liberal notions of progress, social intervention and reform and envisaged instead an artistic aristocracy aloof from and scornful of society’. They were a distinctly different group of writers to those highlighted in this thesis. Different too, were the poets who were attracted to the Adelaide-based avant-garde *Angry Penguins* magazine. Established by Max Harris in 1940, the Angry Penguin movement soon became allied with Australia’s burgeoning modernist art scene. Both the Angry Penguins and *Vision* ‘school’ explicitly rejected a focus on Australian landscapes and culture as narrow and restrictive, and instead endeavoured to engage with themes and images that they deemed universal. It is primarily for this reason that they do not feature in this history, which examines how a range of socially conscious members of the Australian literary community engaged with environmental issues specific to the period.

I do not address the ways that Aboriginal Australians engaged with place. All the writers in this thesis were white Australians and their writing unambiguously reflected the concerns of a white settler nation coming to terms with its place on a continent that already had an extensive human history. Writers did to varying degrees grapple with questions of white belonging on the continent with reference to the dispossession of Aboriginal Australia. As is evident in the Vance Palmer quote that began this thesis, references to Aboriginal dispossession were often oblique and submerged. Aboriginal Australia proved a point of tension in much of the writing about the environment in the 1930s and 1940s and was dealt with in a variety of ways. It was overlooked, dismissed as coming to an end, held up as an example of the way white Australia should relate to the environment, and offered as proof of the evils of colonialism. Sometimes more than one of these perspectives was present in the same piece of writing.

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38 Modjeska, *Exiles at Home*, 108. Significantly though, Harris was an ex-member of the Jindyworobak Movement.
Overwhelmingly, as had been the case with earlier Australian writers, Aboriginal history was invoked in order to help create a ‘useable past’ for Australian nationalists, rather than any desire to understand Aboriginal society as a living presence.\textsuperscript{40} The yearning for imaginative and cultural possession of the Australian continent was inextricably linked to ideas about race more broadly. Racial theories dictated that citizens of the nation’s new national capital would be more productive in a cooler climate, Australians remained nervous about the possibility of invasion by Asian neighbours to the north, and race and gender were fundamental to the desire to ‘civilise’ and ‘domesticate’ remote Australia through closer settlement and irrigation schemes. The cohort of writers examined in this thesis believed that white Australians had to both physically and spiritually settle the continent in order to demonstrate the nation’s ‘maturity’ to a wider world.

**The search for cultural maturity**

The belief that a singular national culture is born and develops from infancy through adolescence and into maturity is, at least from a modern perspective, a dubious one. Benedict Anderson argues that the nation is a distinctly modern concept; he characterises nations as ‘imagined communities’ made possible by the unifying capacity of commercial print cultures which emerged in Europe from the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{41} In the Australian context, Richard White contends that ‘national identity is an invention’ and James Curran and Stuart Ward have demonstrated that, even in the more recent past, a cohesive sense of cultural identity has remained elusive in Australia.\textsuperscript{42} However, before these contemporary critiques of national identity and at the height of enthusiasm for nation states, the writers in this study consistently argued that Australia required a cohesive national culture and that Australian literature was on a trajectory toward adulthood. David Carter points out that between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries there was a recurring belief that ‘the beginnings of a national literature could be discerned but that it had not yet fully arrived’ (original emphasis).\textsuperscript{43} I refer to the concept of ‘cultural maturity’ throughout this thesis, not so

\textsuperscript{40}Bongiorno, ‘Aboriginality and Historical Consciousness’, 42.


as to suggest that it was possible for Australia to achieve a national adulthood, but because, at the time, writers widely understood their contribution to contemporary Australian culture with reference to this objective. The desire to achieve a sense of cultural maturity took on a distinct urgency during the 1930s and 1940s, when economic depression, fascism and another world war seemed to threaten the legitimacy of capitalist democracies around the world. To bolster the nation’s cultural credentials, writers drew on Australia’s literary past and colonial history and, simultaneously, looked to a variety of rural and urban landscapes for cultural inspiration.

The 1930s and 1940s are often cast as a period of resurgent nationalism in Australian literature, when writers celebrated and emulated many of the literary tropes that characterised the writing of the Bulletin poets of the 1890s. Graeme Davison demonstrates that the renewed interest in the Bulletin ethos between the 1930s and 1950s was the direct result of a combination of modern circumstances: the Depression, international communism and its appeal among the elite urban intelligentsia, World War Two and the early years of the Cold War.44 He argues that within mid-twentieth-century nationalist movements around the world there was a ‘deepening disillusionment with European civilisation’, which prompted a ‘conviction that political redemption lay in a return to the uncorrupted values of the common people’.45 In Australia, that impulse led many back to the writing of the 1890s.

During the 1890s, Henry Lawson, ‘Banjo’ Paterson, Joseph Furphy and a coterie of other poets and short story writers associated with the Sydney Bulletin magazine popularised the notion that the rural population had developed a set of uniquely Australian physical and mental characteristics through contact with the Australian environment and colonial frontier. The Bulletin writers imagined that ‘the Bush’, and associated hardships of living and working in remote regions of the recently colonised continent, had fostered a collectivist mentality among bush workers and had given rise to a practical, anti-authoritarian and laconic rural population. In his 1958 book The Australian Legend, historian Russel Ward valorised the Bulletin poets as those who had given both literary expression and a wide audience to the ‘up-country ethos’ that had been spontaneously developing among bush workers of the Australian pastoral

industry. More recent historical work has demonstrated that the literature of the late nineteenth century was largely a product of the urban alienation of Sydney’s bohemian intelligentsia, rather than a reflection of Australian rural realities. In 1978, Graeme Davison offered ‘an urban interpretation of the “Australian Legend”’, arguing that the *Bulletin* poets were primarily influenced not by the Australian bush, but by Sydney’s ‘sleazy urban frontier’; they lived in inner-city boarding houses and were often active in socialist politics. Richard White similarly contended that the ‘Australian Legend’ Ward had identified was chiefly the product of a culmination of urban literary and artistic preoccupations, especially the bohemian revolt against Victorian-era values. As a result of the largely urban origins of the *Bulletin* writers, the Bush was often treated superficially in much of their writing; it was more an idea, and an amorphous one at that, than a real, ecological place. Yet, in the 1930s and 1940s, figures such as Lawson and Furphy were often celebrated as early interpreters of the Australian environment.

Vance Palmer’s ‘Battle’ article evoked the ‘Australian spirit’, which he defined as ‘sardonic’, ‘idealistic’ and ‘egalitarian’, characterisations that were certainly inspired by the *Bulletin* literature of the 1890s. In 1954 Palmer published *The Legend of the Nineties*, which celebrated the 1890s as a defining decade in Australia’s cultural development. Palmer was a member of the ‘left-wing intelligentsia’ that Davison argues ‘revived and theorised “The Australian Legend” in the 1940s and 1950s’. Barnard Eldershaw, in their 1939 book *My Australia*, similarly celebrated ‘the Australian spirit in literature which reached its finest flowering in the nineties of last century’. Dever argues that Barnard and Eldershaw were ‘profoundly uncritical’ of the Bush legend with which they identified, and cast themselves as ‘heirs to the writers of the 1890s, constructing themselves in the 1930s and 1940s as the vanguard of the second generation of Australian writers’.

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51 Davison, ‘Rethinking the Australian Legend’, 430.
53 Dever, ‘Subject to Authority’, 84-85.
alongside this revival of the literature of the 1890s.\textsuperscript{54} While Peter Pierce characterises this fiction as a ‘radical recoil’ from the recent realities of the Great War, I am inclined to see this writing, like the interest in the Bush legend, as part of the nationalist attempt to establish white Australia’s historical credentials on the continent.\textsuperscript{55}

Throughout the 1940s, the pages of \textit{Meanjin Papers} were littered with articles that celebrated and analysed the literary contribution of \textit{Bulletin} figures such as A.G. Stephens, Bernard O’Dowd, Randolph Bedford, Henry Lawson and Joseph Furphy. Between 1941 and 1946 the magazine ran a series of letters, written by various Australian writers, addressed to Tom Collins, Furphy’s pen name. These letters offered analysis on the state of Australian literature and nationalism suggesting that, at the height of international crisis, Australian writers quite literally sought answers to contemporary problems in their literary heritage. Yet these letters were not entirely uncritical of Furphy and the generation of writers to which he belonged. Historian Manning Clark’s 1943 letter to Collins, titled ‘Mateship’, was particularly provocative. He worried that ‘the swaggering, and the sensitivity to criticism’ of the Australian ‘type’ in literature concealed a national guilt about the historical treatment of both the land and Aboriginal Australia. Clark argued that ‘that this myth of “mateyness”’, a central tenet of the \textit{Bulletin} school of writing, ‘is not enough: we want, curse us . . . something more’.\textsuperscript{56} Clark’s pursuit of ‘something more’ exemplified the way that members of the Australian writing community were engaged in what White calls a ‘search for sophistication’; this was a search for a sense of cultural sophistication which could not be found in the literature of the 1890s alone.\textsuperscript{57}

Promoting the Bush legend – assumed to be the natural expression of Australia’s pioneering and folk history – was one way to demonstrate white Australia’s historical and supposedly organic relationship to the continent. However, the writers studied in this thesis had an ambivalent relationship to this literary inheritance. In the 1930s and 1940s, writers set themselves the task of ushering in an era of cultural maturity in Australia as a bulwark against external and internal threats; the pastoral industry and

\textsuperscript{54} Sheridan, \textit{Along the Faultlines}, 51. See also: Brenton Doecke, ‘Historical Fictions: The Historical Novel in Australia During the 1930s and 1940s’ (Melbourne: Deakin University Press, 1989); Peter Pierce, ‘Australia’s Australia’, 140-1.

\textsuperscript{55} Peter Pierce, \textit{Is War Very Big? As Big as New South Wales?: War and Parochialism in Australian in the 1920s and 1930s} (Canberra: School of English, University College, University of New South Wales, 1996), 13.

\textsuperscript{56} Manning Clark, ‘Letter to Tom Collins: Mateship’, \textit{Meanjin Papers} 2, no. 3 (1943): 41.

\textsuperscript{57} White, \textit{Inventing Australia}, 157.
nomadic swagmen – symbols of Australia’s nineteenth-century frontier – were not always considered sufficient material on which to build a resilient twentieth-century national culture. West Australian novelist John K. Ewers argued that the literature of the 1890s was a ‘lusty infant’ on which contemporary writers might build ‘an adult, mature national literature’. He believed that such an approach was the best way for writers to contribute to ‘the national growth of Australia’. In the 1930s, Eldershaw was confident that recent literature was showing ‘signs of maturity’ and that writers were now offering up ‘polished and perfected’ work rather than ‘rough and ready rhymes or thumbnail sketches’. P.R. Stephensen, in his influential book *The Foundations of Culture in Australia*, was also interested in the establishment of ‘a mature national culture’ that rejected the ‘uncouth’ elements of the “colonial” legend’ of the 1890s. Stephensen believed that the Australian continent itself would be critical in shaping a unique Australian culture; according to Stephensen, cultural maturity was reliant on the acclimatisation of European immigrants to the ‘strange beasts and birds and plants’ in an ‘environment new to them’.

Writers were not content to simply imitate or retreat into the literature of the 1890s, but were determined to build on this literary inheritance. Accordingly, writers borrowed only selectively from *Bulletin* themes; masculinity, egalitarianism and race generally remained central to the national project, while rootlessness and violence were routinely rejected. Drake-Brockman and Hatfield were interested in populating Australia with small family farms; a distinctly different project to the celebration of large pastoral stations and itinerant swagmen. Davison and Nicholls, preferring their own petrol-fuelled modernity, openly condemned a swagman travelling on foot in the 1930s as a ‘derelict, living in the tradition of days that have gone’. Barnard Eldershaw satirised the idea that Australia required a recognised canon of writers – perhaps a joke at the expense of a literary community that glorified figures such as Lawson and Furphy. Mudie was openly hostile to Australian agriculturalists and pastoralists, whom he blamed for the soil erosion problems of the 1930s and 1940s; he looked to

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61 Ibid., 11.
62 Frank Dalby Davison and Brooke Nicholls, *Blue Coast Caravan* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1935), 7.
Aboriginal Australia for his nationalist inspiration. Hudson was perhaps least interested in the Bush literature of the 1890s of all the writers presented here; he was dedicated to the representation of the Australian environment in distinctly local and international terms and was suspicious of nationalism. Despite rejecting some elements of the literature of the 1890s, Australian writers remained convinced that the environment, still largely characterised as the Bush, was central to national identity, particularly given the lack of recognised historical monuments in the landscape.

In *My Australia*, in a chapter titled ‘Towards an Australian Culture’, Barnard Eldershaw argued that the development of a reciprocal and balanced relationship with the environment was central to nation building:

> We would never possess [Australia] by conquest; only by the exercise of the imagination slowly drawing together the two incompatibilities can we attain that fusion with our environment that makes it our home. Culture is the image in which man and his environment are brought together. We cannot be a nation until we conceive ourselves as a nation, and we cannot possess anything until we have passed it through our imagination. The growth of our culture is part of the epic, man against the continent. In a struggle so large “for” and “against” become interchangeable terms.  

The belief that a spiritual accord with the Australian environment was crucial to the development of a mature Australian culture was common in this period, though it did not always carry the gentle, harmonious connotations that a modern Australian might assume. Struggle against and possession of the environment were imagined to be part of finally making a home of Australia. This thesis traces the ways that writers attempted to ‘possess’ the Australian continent in novels, poetry, travel literature and non-fiction in the 1930s and 1940s. It demonstrates that during these decades the Australian environment was incorporated into the literary community’s broader project of establishing a mature national culture; although it was not always clear what this maturity would look like.

Graeme Davison has shown that many intellectuals sought answers to contemporary international and national problems in the nation’s literary and cultural history; I argue that writers also – and often simultaneously – engaged with contemporary environmental issues. Alongside the search for Australia’s historical roots, there was a

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sustained interest in the cultural possibilities of the continent itself. The search for cultural maturity meant that writers had to attempt to reconcile a literary inheritance dominated by the Bush poets of the 1890s with a range of environmental and political events that were unfolding as they wrote.

A rebellious landscape

There is a strong precedent in Australian environmental history of engagement with art and literature. This study is especially indebted to Tim Bonyhady’s *Colonial Earth*, Michael Cathcart’s *The Water Dreamers: The Remarkable History of Our Dry Continent*, and Roslynn Haynes’ *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*. To differing degrees, these three books use literary and artistic sources to track broad patterns of change in Australian environmental attitudes across a minimum of one hundred years. In contrast, a focus on two decades enables me to dwell on the intricacies of individual texts and historical figures and evoke in detail the tenor of the period. Few historical studies consider the way the Australian literary community engaged with environmental thought in the 1930s and 1940s. Two theses, both over thirty years old, do address the rise of travel and descriptive writing – such as that produced by Drake-Brockman and Hatfield – that characterised the interwar years. Margriet Bonnin is primarily concerned with rescuing a range of writers, and their often overlooked but popular genre of writing, from relative obscurity and does not give much space to the way these works engaged with contemporary environmental events and issues. Garry Disher reflects on the way that ‘landscape writing’ was produced in an era when technological advances made writers highly mobile. He also contends that, despite a propensity for exaggeration and romance, landscape writing often reflected an increasing interest in nature preservation, enthusiasm for large-scale rural

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64 Cathcart’s broad-ranging history of water in the Australian cultural imagination draws on an eclectic variety of sources including novels, poetry and travel writing to argue that water, or more often the lack of it, has shaped the white Australian relationship to place, see Michael Cathcart, *The Water Dreamers: The Remarkable History of our Dry Continent* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2009). Bonyhady uses a combination of art, law and history to challenge the commonly-held belief that Australian colonists despised their new environment and were deliberately destructive, arguing instead that environmental appreciation and concern can be traced from initial white colonisation of the continent through the nineteenth century, see Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2000). Haynes traces changing Australian attitudes to the desert through art, literature and film, see Roslynn D. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).


development and the establishment of a national culture. Disher argues that landscape writers responded to the major political, social and environmental problems of the era. Although I do not focus on a specific genre of writing, like Disher I connect the environmental consciousness of Australian writers to their political and literary preoccupations.

Deborah Jordan has published two articles that examine the environmental imaginations of Vance and Nettie Palmer and Katharine Susannah Prichard in the 1920s and 1930s. Jordan’s close, ecocritical reading of a variety of work produced by these three writers leads her to argue that when ‘we fore-ground the environmental dimensions’ of their writing, we see things other than the nationalism with which they are so often associated. She demonstrates the influence of American transcendental environmental thought, evidenced by the Palmers’ extended ‘arcadian exile’ on Green Island in the early 1930s, and appreciates the intimate portraits of places such as Green Island, the Karri forests of south-western Australia and the Dandenong Ranges offered in their work. Jordan argues that these three writers, and perhaps others of the period, sought a ‘harmony’ with the Australian environment, which she interprets as a desire to ‘live according to the rhythms and laws of the natural environment’. Chapter three will show that the explicit advocacy of ‘harmony’ between white Australia and the environment did not always carry, in this period at least, the idyllic connotations that Jordan suggests. Moreover, while writers often demonstrated intimate knowledge of distinct ecological regions, I do not agree that they should be ‘celebrated’ as regionalist writers rather than nationalists. Although this study has much in common with Jordan’s work, I do not attempt to extricate authors from their indisputable preoccupation with nationalism. Rather, I read environmental sensibilities and the representation of specific regions and ecosystems alongside nationalist politics.

The writers in this thesis were concerned with putting various Australian landscapes to a national purpose. However, it is still possible to use their work to trace broader patterns of change in Australian environmental thinking across the period. Writers

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68 Ibid., 144.


70 Ibid., 122.
responded to both changes in the environment itself as well as the new ways Australians were experiencing the landscape; they registered the rise of scientific expertise in relation to environmental problems, the possibilities resulting from new technology and modes of transport, and changing notions of aesthetic value. They were especially concerned that white Australians had not yet satisfactorily settled the continent; their anxieties around Australia’s survival, in what seemed an increasingly hostile world, were deepened by the possibility that the continent itself was resisting white occupancy.

In the early twentieth century, the Australian continent had, despite a relatively sparse white population in northern and inland areas, largely been settled; the age of exploratory expeditions had ended. Over more than one hundred years, introduced forms of pastoralism and agriculture had transformed indigenous landscapes. This did not, however, necessarily mean colonisers had brought the environment under their control. The Federation Drought affected large parts of the continent between 1895 and 1903, devastating wheat crops and resulting in huge stock losses. Fire historian Stephen Pyne presents that drought as evidence that at the turn of the century ‘the land rebelled against cumulative abuse’ by colonisers.71 Similarly, Libby Robin and Tom Griffiths argue that in the early twentieth century ‘the very land itself seemed to be biting back’.72 Even species of animals and plants that the colonisers had themselves introduced were a part of this revolt.

Rabbits and prickly pear cactus both arrived in Australia with the First Fleet in 1788, although it would take decades and numerous introductions before either were considered an environmental problem. Multiple species of drought-resistant prickly pear were introduced to Australia across the first half of the nineteenth century and used as ornamental garden plants, fencing and as fodder for livestock.73 By the 1880s the species Opuntia inermis was considered invasive and had infested millions of acres across New South Wales and Queensland.74 For another fifty years landowners battled

74 Frawley, ‘Containing Queensland Prickly Pear’, 141.
the prickly pear and it would prove an impediment to the expansion of agriculture. Rabbits were introduced and bred in Victoria and New South Wales throughout the early and mid-nineteenth century. Within decades they had eaten their way to Queensland and South Australia and arrived in south-west Western Australia by the turn of the century. They reached plague proportions in parts of the south-east of the country in the 1890s, giving rise to a rabbit industry trading in skins, canned meat and frozen carcasses. My own great-great-grandfather James Valentine Regan, in partnership with a Mr. Davis, established the Gundagai rabbit freezing works in 1918, purchasing carcasses from ‘rabbiters’ which were ‘graded, classed and packed’ for export to Britain. The Gundagai Times celebrated that the ‘noxious animals’ were to give rise to ‘a big industry in our midst’ and in 1921 the freezing works processed up to 1600 pairs of locally-caught rabbits a day. However, from the 1920s, this kind of local entrepreneurial approach to managing an environmental issue was increasingly eclipsed by centralised government initiatives.

The shift toward ‘institutionalised science’, especially as a means by which to control agricultural pests, was particularly evident in Australia after the establishment in 1926 of the federal government agency for research, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). The CSIR was expected to focus specifically on developments that would benefit the rural economy. In 1926, the CSIR oversaw the introduction of the Catctoblastis cactorum beetle, which had successfully eradicated the majority of feral prickly pear by 1930. The organisation, renamed the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) in 1949, had more limited success when it released the myxomatosis virus into Australia’s rabbit population in the 1950s.

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77 ‘Rabbit Industry’, The Gundagai Times and Tumut, Adelong and Murrumbidgee District Advertiser, 8 January 1918, 2.
The authority of federal and state governments in relation to environmental problems was consolidated in the wake of the soil erosion crisis that gripped Australia’s southern and eastern states in the late 1930s and early 1940s. An extended drought plagued much of Australia in the years between 1937 and 1947, deepening wartime adversity. The drought, in combination with the long-term exploitation of Australia’s marginal soils, led to extensive soil erosion that was brought home to many Australian city-dwellers when spectacular dust storms reached Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. The extent of the erosion necessitated a variety of pieces of state government legislation and the establishment of state soil conservation boards, which will be discussed in chapter five. While the CSIR had initially been established to ameliorate rural conditions for increased economic productivity, Libby Robin argues that the soil erosion crisis tempered this approach and an emphasis on long-term development prevailed.81 The World War Two drought also contributed to the conditions which made the Black Friday bushfires of January 1939 so devastating. Pyne argues that the fires on January 13, which destroyed hundreds of homes and killed 71 people in Victoria, sucked ‘150 years of settlement into a colossal maelstrom of fire’.82

While the Australian continent appeared to rebel against its colonisers, many white Australians enjoyed closer contact with non-urban environments across the first half of the twentieth century. Nature columns, often aimed at young boys, were a popular addition to newspapers in the early twentieth century and during the 1920s and 1930s recreational bushwalking boomed.83 From the 1920s rates of Australian car ownership increased, mainly among the middle classes, enabling some – like Davison, Nicholls and Hatfield – to travel further afield. Moreover, despite increasingly apparent environmental constraints, the first half of the twentieth century remained a time of enthusiasm for the extension of agriculture in Australia. As will be explored in chapter two, closer settlement policies were revived in the wake of the Great War in an attempt to increase Australia’s rural productivity by settling nearly 40 000 returned soldiers on relatively small rural blocks. Later, in response to the financial crash of 1929, Prime Minister James Scullin encouraged Australia’s farmers to ‘Grow More Wheat’. The

81 Ibid., 169.
82 Pyne, Burning Bush, 309.
campaign succeeded in increasing the proportion of Australian land under wheat cultivation by more than twenty percent, but when the Senate rejected Scullin’s promise of a price-guarantee per bushel of wheat many farmers suffered financially. The increase in wheat cultivation probably also contributed to the soil erosion problems encountered in the 1930s and 1940s. The widespread failure of soldier settlers in combination with the soil erosion crisis did not alert all Australians to the environmental limits of the continent; chapter six will explore the hydrological engineering schemes that offered renewed hope for a densely settled Australia. Yet, in the late 1940s, there can also be detected a growing awareness among some Australian writers of the rise of ecological thought, that was primarily emanating out of the United States in the post-World War Two years.

The decision to draw primarily on literary sources does impose limits on the extent to which this thesis can comprehensively analyse the environmental events and developments of the period. Some themes simply did not seem to capture the literary imagination of writers. For example, although Griffiths argues that ‘Black Friday was a moment in the environmental history of Australia when people had to confront – and reform – their whole relationship with the bush’, the literary community did not engage extensively with the fires. Barry Smith identifies Judge Leonard Stretton’s Royal Commission Report on the disaster together with H.G. Wells’ description of the fires he witnessed as a visitor in Canberra, as ‘the most vivid’ evocations of that event. Despite these limitations, this thesis does contribute to the study of a period that has received relatively little attention from environmental historians.


Paul Sutter argues that American environmental historians have neglected interwar environmental thought and politics. According to Sutter, scholarship on earlier Progressive-era conservation efforts and the later green environmental movement has overshadowed what came in between so that there exists no ‘interpretive definition’ of the period. In ‘Australia Unlimited: Environmental Debate in the Age of Catastrophe, 1910-1939’, Warwick Frost has identified a similar phenomenon in Australia. In Australia, environmental historians have shown greatest interest in the colonial period and the years since the advent of modern environmental movements in the 1970s. The culmination of international political and economic crises in the first half of the twentieth century has contributed to this neglect; interest in these major events has sidelined historical treatment of environmental thought. I demonstrate that understanding environmental sensibilities in interwar and wartime Australia is contingent on considering them in relation to the events that have thus far overshadowed their study. Australian literary sources demonstrate that environmental thought and debate flourished, despite, and perhaps even because of, the major international political and economic events of the 1930s and 1940s.

Methodology and sources
This thesis is a fusion of historical, literary and environmental approaches. Each chapter, barring the first, takes as its focus a published text, or collection of texts, produced by an Australian writer or writing duo during the 1930s and 1940s. Rather than close textual analysis or literary criticism, texts are used to draw attention to a range of themes in the Australian environmental imagination during these decades. This approach is necessarily selective rather than comprehensive, yet it enables a close examination of nuances inherent in the environmental thinking of each writer. It reveals contradictions and tensions that might be lost in a broader approach. For example, I am able to reveal that beneath Hatfield’s enthusiasm for complete continental transformation through hydrological engineering was a genuine concern about the damage colonisation had wrought on the environment. Biography, to the extent that it illuminates the environmental and literary approach of each author, is also important. In Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia, Griffiths argues that ‘biography allows [him] to display the personal complexity and ambivalence

that undermines cultural expectations; collective biography enables [him] to reach beyond the individuals towards social habits and cultural metaphors’ (original emphasis).  

In a similar way, focused chapters enable me to explore the complexities of the environmental sensibilities of a range of individuals, but, taken together, these chapters reveal that the Australian literary community was engaged in a communal effort to encourage the physical and imaginative occupation of the continent.

These writers were part of a cohort; this thesis will demonstrate their literary networks, as well as points of connection within their otherwise diverse environmental imaginations. Haese argues that Australian art in these decades was ‘not a product of either social or intellectual isolation . . . Artists and writers lived together, talked, argued, and exchanged ideas’. Accordingly, I am sensitive to the literary networks and movements that characterised the interwar and wartime years and which often influenced, constrained and enabled particular kinds of environmental engagement. Especially important are the many personal, professional and intellectual relationships between Australian writers that created a ‘dense network’ of literary sociability, communication and influence. Respectively, Haese and Modjeska analyse the Australian art and literary communities across a similar period to this study; they use correspondence, magazines and personal papers to demonstrate connections and influence between writers. My specific focus on environmental engagement means I cannot do this to the same degree; however, I do draw extensively on letters held in the personal papers of many Australian authors to consider their literary relationships and so deepen the analysis of their environmental thought. While nine writers are given extensive coverage, numerous other figures are introduced to provide context, depth and comparison.

A variety of sources – including newspaper reports, scientific publications, advertisements, royal commission reports, parliamentary acts, and the environmental writing of figures such as Francis Ratcliffe and H.H. Finlayson – are introduced to conjure in some detail the broader developments in environmental thought to which these writers responded. In each chapter I attempt to get my boots dirty and analyse

90 Griffiths, Hunters and Collectors, 6.
91 Haese, Rebels and Precursors, 1.
the environmental developments and events of the era. I am, however, primarily concerned with the literary representation of landscapes and the purposes these representations might have served members of the literary community. There is not scope enough in this thesis to consider in detail specific ecosystems, plants or animals. Ultimately, this is a study of broader landscapes – both cultural and natural – that were primarily imagined in this period as national landscapes.

Structure
This thesis is arranged both thematically, to capture the way that writers responded to a range of environmental problems, and roughly chronologically, to trace developments in environmental thought across the 1930s and 1940s. Chapter one, which engages with historiographical debates about interwar intellectual disillusion and environmental optimism, draws primarily on the career of critic Nettie Palmer to demonstrate that the years between the end of the Great War and the mid-1930s cannot easily be categorised as a period of either intellectual disillusion or rampant support for environmental development and destruction. Moreover, considered together, the environmental imaginations of Palmer, D.H. Lawrence and E.J. Brady reveal that, although the colonial period of exploration and discovery had passed, the continent continued to elude and even antagonise its white residents. After this broad initial focus, chapters two through to seven reveal that the centre of gravity of this study is the period from the mid-1930s, when the Australian literary community was politicised by international events, to the end of the 1940s, when the spectre of the Cold War ultimately overshadowed a brief period of postwar optimism.

In chapter two, ‘The Gamblers’ (1934), a short story by West Australian playwright and novelist Henrietta Drake-Brockman, offers a starting point from which to unpack what Kent Fedorowich calls the ‘cross-fertilisation of the outback, yeoman and Anzac traditions’ in the Australian soldier settler context.93 The widespread failure of Great War soldier settler schemes remained a salient issue in the early 1930s, as soldiers continued to walk off financially unsustainable properties. Drake-Brockman’s story suggests that the failure of the schemes unsettled the notion that Australia had the capacity for closer, yeoman style, settlement and called into question national myths about the supposed relationship between Anzacs and ‘bushmen’. Ultimately though,

93 Kent Fedorowich, Unfit for Heroes: Reconstruction and Soldier Settlement in the Empire Between the Wars (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 146.
Drake-Brockman retained a belief in the resilience of Australian ‘diggers’ and an enthusiasm for closer settlement schemes that would supposedly bring population, prosperity and civilisation to remote regions of the country.

Chapter three considers the new ways the Australian landscape was viewed as private car ownership and road construction increased, alongside the boom in popularity of travel literature, in the 1930s. Writer Frank Dalby Davison and amateur naturalist Brooke Nicholls recorded the unanticipated environmental devastation, including deforestation and soil erosion, they encountered on a car trip from Sydney to Cairns in their 1935 travel book *Blue Coast Caravan*. The rise in car tourism offered a new view ‘through the windscreen’, which fuelled Davison and Nicholls’ concerns about the aesthetics of the Australian countryside. An analysis of *Blue Coast Caravan* demonstrates that the appearance of rural landscapes, towns and even homesteads was expected to change to meet the expectations of the tourists who experienced them. Davison and Nicholls suggested that beauty, ideally achieved through a balance between native, or ‘wild’, and humanised landscapes, could signal a kind of maturity in the Australian settlement.

In 1930, historian W.K. Hancock described Canberra as ‘a document of Australian immaturity’. It was precisely this supposed immaturity that prompted M. Barnard Eldershaw to set their 1937 novel *Plaque with Laurel* – the subject of chapter four – in Australia’s new capital. *Plaque with Laurel* satirised a fictional conference of Australian writers, who gathered in Canberra to memorialise the deceased, great Australian writer Richard Crale. The novel is probably set in the early 1930s, when the FAW was on the cusp of being politicised by prominent left-wing members including Barnard and Eldershaw themselves. Canberra, though superficially beautified by careful planning and tree planting, is presented as underwhelming, incomplete and lacking in culture. In *Plaque with Laurel*, Canberra and the surrounding landscape are the physical embodiment of interwar Australian cultural anxieties particularly around nationalism, a perceived lack of human history on the continent, and the absence of a recognised Australian literary canon.

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94 William Hatfield, *Australia Through the Windscreen* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1936).
Chapter five analyses South Australian poet Ian Mudie’s soil erosion poetry of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Mudie was a political outlier among the other writers dealt with here; while other writers were drawn to left-wing politics during the 1930s, Mudie was attracted to P.R. Stephensen’s right-wing politics and joined his Australia First movement in 1941. Mudie was also a member of Rex Ingamells’ Jindyworobak poetry movement, which drew the interest of a wide variety of Australian writers, but was embroiled in Australia First controversy during World War Two. Despite his unusual political allegiance, Mudie, like the other writers in this thesis, married an interest in the Australian environment with his political preoccupations. He engaged extensively with the soil erosion and dust storms that plagued South Australia and other states in the 1930s and 1940s; soil also proved a useful metaphor which Mudie could evoke in aid of his right-wing political stance. Despite echoes of Nazi ‘blood and soil’ ideology, Mudie’s soil erosion poetry was primarily the product of his settler imagination and resonated with the concerns of the broader literary community.

Large-scale environmental engineering projects were a feature of the first half of the twentieth century across much of the world. In chapter six we meet the now forgotten but once popular novelist and travel writer William Hatfield. His *Australia Reclaimed* (1944) sheds new light on ambitious Australian hydrological engineering fantasies of the 1940s, epitomised by J.J.C. Bradfield’s scheme to divert the floodwaters of Queensland’s coastal rivers inland. *Australia Reclaimed* was a piece of non-fiction, outlining Hatfield’s postwar vision for Australia as a socialist state. Central to Hatfield’s plan was the irrigation of the inland in order to correct environmental damage since colonisation and, at the same time, enable more intensive agricultural settlement. His writing demonstrates that conservation concerns and an enthusiasm for development could co-exist. This chapter will also address the tension between Hatfield’s often romantic and nostalgic literary portrayal of remote Australia, on which his literary persona and career were built, and his thoroughly modern belief in the potential for science and engineering to transform the landscapes and communities of Australia’s inland.

Poet, editor and schoolteacher Flexmore Hudson’s literary output across the 1940s, which included comic books, poetry and a long-running literary magazine, is the subject of chapter seven. Like Mudie, Hudson was a long-time member of

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*Sutter, ‘Terra Incognita’, 290.*
Jindyworobak, though his cosmopolitan outlook and socialist politics were often at odds with the literary and political nationalism at the heart of that movement. This chapter will investigate how Hudson negotiated his internationalist outlook as part of a literary community preoccupied with nationalism. Although this double allegiance yielded tension, Hudson took advantage of the ideological intersection that saw the environment become crucial to both nationalism and new ‘world-minded’ thinking – a concept I explore in detail. Hudson’s overtly ‘placed’ poetry, written while a resident of rural South Australia, resonated with the Jindyworobak call for literary attention to ‘environmental values’, as well as the emerging trend toward ecological thinking. This final chapter will also capture a sense of the international, and perhaps even utopian, moment that characterised the immediate postwar years.

In D.H. Lawrence’s Australian novel *Kangaroo* (1923), the narrator muses that ‘one man can’t bite off a continent in a mouthful . . . you must start to nibble somewhere’.97 Perhaps unwisely, I have chosen to ignore this advice. The locations with which I engage range from the Western Australian wheatbelt to the semi-arid regions of South Australia, from Canberra’s Limestone Plains to tropical North Queensland, but ultimately this is a broad history of Australian engagement with place. I acknowledge that this thesis does not, and cannot, represent the innumerable ecologically distinct regions of Australia – I barely touch on the Northern Territory or Victoria, and do not travel to Tasmania at all – but have still chosen to take the continent as a whole as my subject. The struggle to locate, create, adapt and consolidate Australia’s national culture in response to internal and external crises meant that writers in this period imbued local landscapes with national qualities. National landscapes were part of the broader literary project to construct a mature Australian culture, which writers hoped would prove resilient in the face of the catastrophes of the early to mid-twentieth century.

Chapter One

Nettie Palmer’s Dream and
D.H. Lawrence’s Disillusion

Nobody has seen Australia yet; it can’t be done. It isn’t visible.¹

Everywhere . . . I found Wonder, Beauty, unequalled Resource. Under the arid seeming of the plains I saw the possibilities of marvellous tilth. Barren hills poured out a golden recompense in minerals. The whole continent had proved to be a vast storehouse of mainly undeveloped Wealth.²

In 1922 English novelist D.H. Lawrence travelled to Ceylon, Australia and finally America in an attempt to escape the ‘horrible human mistakes’ of recently war-ravaged Europe.³ During his short stay in Australia, Lawrence repeatedly suggested that the continent, and the Bush in particular, was mysterious, elusive, even frightening. In correspondence with Katharine Susannah Prichard he claimed that ‘nobody has seen Australia yet’ because it ‘isn’t visible’; he argued the country was alternately fascinating and terrifying, but most of all it was ‘unget-at-able’.⁴ In apparent contrast, Australian editor and writer E.J. Brady proclaimed that he knew the Australian continent well and ‘saw’ in it endless possibilities for agricultural and industrial development. In his 1918 book Australia Unlimited, Brady argued that the continent abounded with both natural

² E.J. Brady, Australia Unlimited (Melbourne: George Robertson and Company, 1918), 14.
⁴ Lawrence to Prichard, 3 July 1922, and Lawrence to Prichard, 6 August 1922, in Prichard, ‘Lawrence in Australia’, 253-4.
beauty and resources that could be harnessed to maximise the nation’s population and wealth. Lawrence’s assessment of Australian nature was despairing, Brady’s was exuberantly optimistic. Nevertheless, both men suggested that white Australia had not yet fully come to terms with the continent; it remained deceptive, enigmatic and misunderstood. Lawrence identified a kind of spiritual disconnect between the Australian environment and its white colonisers, while Brady was more concerned that Australia’s natural resources remained unexploited. Lawrence’s anxiety about the elusive landscape and Brady’s aspirations for environmental transformation were two sides of the same coin; they shared the belief that the continent was still in the process of being settled.

The centre of gravity of this thesis is the period of creative and political ferment between the mid-1930s and late 1940s. However, this chapter will examine the formative 1920s and the long shadow cast over Australian culture by the Great War. Literary critic Nettie Palmer embodied the mixture of anxiety and aspiration that characterised the Australian postwar years. In *Modern Australian Literature 1900-1923* (1924), a short history of Australian literature since Federation, she identified the shortcomings of recent Australian literary output and attempted to generate an enthusiasm for a cohesive national literary culture. In this chapter, *Modern Australian Literature* is read alongside Lawrence’s Australian novel *Kangaroo* (1923) and Brady’s *Australia Unlimited*. These three books, which might otherwise seem quite dissimilar, make visible the complex ways that anxiety and aspiration drove literary engagement with the environment across the 1920s and into the 1930s. They reveal that, despite the nation’s supposed validation at Gallipoli, in the years following the Great War authors and intellectuals believed that Australia remained culturally and environmentally underdeveloped. Moreover, these books show that the search among writers for a new literary engagement with social issues was closely bound to their belief that a better understanding of the Australian landscape would give rise to a new and more authentic Australian national voice.

Taken together, Palmer, Lawrence and Brady also disrupt histories which have tended to characterise the Australian 1920s as a decade of either intellectual disillusion or rampant support for environmental and agricultural development. In a study that seeks to bring together environmental and literary history, the Australian 1920s is a particularly vexing decade. Cultural histories of the 1920s emphasise post-Great War intellectual disillusion. Nettie Palmer, Lawrence and Brady were all members of what,
in the American context, Gertrude Stein referred to as the ‘lost generation’; writers whose formative years were before and during the Great War, who were disillusioned by political conservatism afterwards. In *Dream and Disillusion: A Search for Australian Cultural Identity*, David Walker argues that a generation of Australian socialist intellectuals, enthusiastic about Australia’s progressive potential before the Great War, found themselves alienated from an increasingly conservative society in the postwar years. In contrast, in environmental history the interwar years are often characterised as a period of excessive and even destructive optimism for environmental and agricultural development; Brady’s *Australia Unlimited* is often made to stand for the general environmental attitude of the era. It is tempting to assume, especially from a contemporary perspective, that enthusiasm for large-scale rural development projects was a symptom of the postwar political conservatism to which many left-leaning writers objected. But, as this thesis will show, interest in agricultural development cut across the political spectrum; Brady himself was a committed socialist who had moved in the same social circles as figures in Walker’s *Dream and Disillusion*. Considered together, Palmer, Lawrence and Brady demonstrate that it is essential to consider the overlap, rather than just the divide, between postwar intellectual disillusion and environmental optimism. It is at the nexus between this disillusion and optimism that we can best observe the way that writers attempted to overlay the Australian environment with new cultural and political meaning.

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Nettie Palmer and the postwar years

Janet (Nettie) Gertrude Higgins was born in 1885 at Bendigo, Victoria. The Higgins family soon moved to Melbourne, where Nettie attended the Presbyterian Ladies’ College and the University of Melbourne. Between 1905 and 1909, as a university student in English and modern languages, she began to participate in various political groups and came under the influence of radical poet Bernard O’Dowd. In her final year at university she met Vance Palmer, who was connected with A.G. Stephens of The Bulletin and then developing an interest in guild socialism. Nettie and Vance both travelled independently to London in the years before the outbreak of war to further their education and literary careers. They developed a romantic relationship and married in London in May 1914 returning to Australia with their first daughter in 1915, after which they were involved in anti-conscription campaigns. While both the Palmers contributed to journals and newspapers in the early years of the century, it was during the Great War that Vance published his first novellas, collections of poetry and short stories, and Nettie two collections of poetry. After the war the Palmers’ literary output continued to increase; Vance began publishing novels and Nettie turned her attention to writing literary criticism. Vivian Smith argues that ‘no understanding of Australia between the two world wars is possible without’ reference to Vance and Nettie Palmer. They were, Smith adds, representative of the ‘serious, minority culture of their time’. Nettie Palmer believed that the Great War interrupted the promising literary nationalism of the pre-war years and throughout the 1920s she attempted to mobilise the Australian literary community around a new enthusiasm for the production of a nationalist literature. Although initiated amid postwar conservatism and disillusion, her critical career demonstrates her significant optimism for the future of Australian cultural development.

8 Deborah Jordan, Nettie Palmer: Search for an Aesthetic (Melbourne: History Department University of Melbourne, 1999), 42 and 52.


Many historians have demonstrated the way that ‘the sure and almost unanimous mood of the years before the Great War had vanished into faction and strife’ by 1919.\(^\text{12}\) Joan Beaumont argues that widespread pre-war enthusiasm for nationalism, given particular potency in the years immediately before and after Federation, was lost as deep political divisions emerged in the wake of wartime conscription debates.\(^\text{13}\) Moreover, the years after the war were more politically conservative than those around Federation. John Williams contends that the 1921 Customs Act, which outlawed the importation of ‘seditious’ material into the country, marked the beginning of the ‘unstated but de facto cultural quarantine’ that existed in Australia in the 1920s.\(^\text{14}\) In addition, the once progressive Bulletin magazine became a mouthpiece of conservativism, and the once radical tenets of its Bush poetry were absorbed into the new martial myth of Anzac.\(^\text{15}\) Home-grown literature also struggled to compete with imported books, music and film from Europe and the United States.\(^\text{16}\)

In 1924 Miles Franklin – another member of the ‘lost generation’ and a living link to the radical nationalism of the Bulletin ‘school’ of literature – complained to women’s rights activist Rose Scott about postwar political conservatism:

> It seems to me that Australia, which took a wonderful lurch ahead in all progressive laws and woman’s advancement about 20 years ago has stagnated ever since. At present it is more unintelligently conservative & conventional than England.\(^\text{17}\)

In a series of Commonwealth Literary Fund (CLF) lectures delivered in 1950, posthumously collected and published as Laughter, Not For A Cage (1956), Franklin blamed the Great War for stifling Australia’s burgeoning literary culture. The war, she contended, was ‘one of those cataclysms that disorientate thoughtful, imaginative


\(^{14}\) Williams, The Quarantined Culture, 5.


\(^{17}\) Miles Franklin to Rose Scott, 2 February 1924, quoted in Jill Roe, Stella Miles Franklin (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), 263.
Franklin argued that in the wake of the Great War and the new Anzac myth, which emphasised imperial bonds, Australian nationalism faltered. She even suggested more bluntly that a postwar dearth of quality Australian fiction was partly attributable to the fact that ‘dead men write no novels’. Richard Nile points out that, in fact, publishing statistics reveal that Australian novels flourished in the 1920s. He argues the idea that a literary drought characterised the years between the publication of Joseph Furphy’s *Such is Life* (1903) and Katharine Susannah Prichard’s *Working Bullocks* (1926) was largely invented by Australia’s literary elites who were dissatisfied that most of the novels published did not address their own nationalist concerns. It is, however, significant that across the 1920s and 1930s Australian writers produced few critical or enduring works of fiction – with the exception of Leonard Mann’s *Flesh in Armour* (1932) – dealing with the Great War. Although a range of middlebrow war novels appeared, which Franklin disparagingly accused of taking a ‘boy-scout’ attitude to war, literary elites generally recoiled from confronting directly the catastrophic human, social and political cost of the conflict.

In *Dream and Disillusion* David Walker explores at length the sense of disappointment many Australian intellectuals felt in the conservative postwar years. Walker focuses primarily on Vance Palmer, Louis Esson, Frank Wilmot and Frederick Sinclair, four men of the same generation whose intellectual milieu was Melbourne. Collectively he describes them as a group who:

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19 Ibid., 144.
20 Ibid., 141.
supported minority causes often on the fringes of Bohemia and the radical left, made sacrifices for Art, dreamt of great social changes, expressed kinship with bush workers with whom they had little in common and made frequent dismissive gestures of complaint at the mediocrity of Australian city dwellers from whom their reading public was drawn.²⁴

Walker argues that these men, along with many other Australian writers and intellectuals, were optimistic about the democratic and socialist potential of Australia prior to 1914, but were disillusioned after the war by pro-imperialism, the influx of American pop culture, political conservatism, and what they perceived as general Australian disinterest in social reform. Walker argues that the prevailing political conservatism of the 1920s and 1930s alienated writers and intellectuals. From the perspective of the four men at the heart of Walker’s history, ‘society had grown meaner and narrower’ in the postwar years, stifling creativity and obstructing social reform.²⁵

Australia’s 1920s were without doubt difficult years for many Australian intellectuals and Walker’s portrait of the four central figures in Dream and Disillusion, Vance Palmer among them, is convincing. Yet several historians have argued that Walker’s study obscures a variety of different responses to, and experiences of, the years after the Great War. Kay Iseman points out that Walker overlooks a range of other radical writers, such as Katharine Susannah Prichard and Brian Fitzpatrick, and Drusilla Modjeska suggests that he ignores younger writers who came to prominence in the 1930s.²⁶ Both Modjeska and Deborah Jordan argue that Walker’s treatment of Nettie Palmer is inadequate. Modjeska contends that, while Nettie Palmer was disappointed by the postwar political and literary climate, she maintained:

an underlying optimism in the potential of a literary elite to reconstitute cultural life in Australia. She set herself the task of working towards this end and within a decade had become an authoritative critic.²⁷

Similarly, Jordan points out that Palmer’s tireless efforts in cultural and literary criticism demonstrate that she remained optimistic about the prospects of Australian

²⁴ Walker, Dream and Disillusion, 1.
²⁵ Ibid., 8.
²⁷ Modjeska, Exiles at Home, 56-57.
literature and society more broadly. Palmer was certainly disappointed with the conservative climate of postwar Australia. For her, the Great War represented a political, social and creative rupture; the literary momentum of the years either side of Federation was lost amid postwar pro-imperialism and reactionary politics. Palmer echoed Franklin’s concerns when, lamenting escalating literary censorship in 1929, she explained that ‘most of us who were born some time before the war were successfully convinced of the existence of Progress. Thus we thought that liberty was automatically increasing’. The Great War and its political aftermath shook Palmer’s confidence in Australia’s progress toward social and cultural maturity. Overall though, Palmer transitioned more easily into the postwar climate than did her more embittered husband.

Like Jordan and Modjeska, I argue that Palmer’s postwar career in literary criticism, as well as the extensive network of literary contacts she cultivated through correspondence, suggests a more optimistic attitude to Australian cultural life than Walker outlines in *Dream and Disillusion*. Walker does acknowledge that Palmer ‘devoted much more of her energy to the cause of Australian literature’ during the 1920s, but argues that this was at the expense of her pre-war concern with ‘national consciousness and the emerging national culture’. In fact, like the other writers in this thesis, Palmer believed that the development of Australian literature was integral to rekindling the social and political momentum of the pre-war years. Palmer actively worked to re-establish a sense of progress toward a mature Australian literature and culture; a goal she outlined as early as 1924 in *Modern Australian Literature*.

**Modern Australian Literature**

In *Modern Australian Literature 1900-1923* (1924) Palmer offered a broad overview of Australian writing since 1900 in order to assess literary progress made since Federation and address, at least in part, the lack of critical work on Australian literature. She was primarily concerned with ‘writing that shows a more or less intense and imaginative view of the world’, rather than ‘capable work, produced with the eye fixed on the


30 Walker, *Dream and Disillusion*, 199.
market’. This signalled her interest in ‘serious’ rather than popular literature. The short book was organised around different forms of writing, analysing important contributions in the fields of drama, short story, criticism, history and biography, novel and poetry. Palmer gave most space to poetry, which – together with the short story – she considered the best developed forms of Australian writing. She worried over the ‘fugitive form’ that many critical essays took as contributions to periodicals and argued that the development of the ‘loose, individual’ Australian novel had stalled since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Palmer also highlighted some of the practical impediments Australian writers faced in the 1920s, including the absence of a strong local publishing industry and the lack of communication between writers. She argued some ‘accidents of journalism’ had brought writers together – such as the bohemian coterie that formed around The Bulletin of the 1890s – but that overall ‘there is little in Australia to suggest a conscious school of writers, and the headquarters of our literature is more elusive than Canberra’ (which in 1923 remained an embryonic national capital). Despite these shortcomings and obstacles, Palmer remained positive about both the literature already produced and the future of Australian writing: ‘the books sketched in the course of this enquiry have, in spite of their scattered origins, a combined and cumulative power, and they have left a sense of vitality in the air’. By drawing rather disparate contributions to Australian literature together in her short book, Palmer was manufacturing this sense of vitality in an attempt to foster enthusiasm for a cohesive national literary project. Yet, it was her emphasis on vitality and potential, rather than a sense of disillusion, which characterised both Modern Australian Literature and Palmer’s career as a critic from the early 1920s.

After the war, Palmer focused her attention on writing literary and social criticism and largely abandoned her early forays into poetry. She endeavoured to address the inadequacies of the Australian literary scene that she identified in Modern Australian Literature – namely a lack of critical engagement with Australian material and the relative isolation in which many writers worked. Jordan argues that after the

32 Ibid., 22 and 58.
33 Ibid., 8 and 55.
34 Ibid., 59.
publication of *Modern Australian Literature* Palmer was ‘extremely productive’ and throughout the 1920s laid the foundations for her ‘formidable power as a critic’ in later years.\(^{35}\) By 1925 Palmer was contributing criticism, essays and reviews to *The Brisbane Courier*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Bulletin’s Red Page*. From the late 1920s she also found two more regular outlets in *The Illustrated Tasmanian Mail* and *All About Books*. A selection of her work published under the title *Talking It Over* (1932) demonstrated both Palmer’s wide-ranging interests and ability as a journalist and her ongoing sensitivity to both international and domestic literary developments.\(^{36}\) Multiple historians have recognised the cultural significance of Palmer’s criticism. According to Modjeska, it was during these years that Palmer ‘became the most influential critic since A.G. Stephens’.\(^{37}\) Similarly, Jordan argues that ‘during the 1920s Nettie Palmer emerged as a prolific, influential and widely read cultural critic’ and Vivian Smith calls her ‘the most important non-academic critic of her period’.\(^{38}\)

Alongside published articles, Palmer also began to correspond extensively with other Australian writers. She often initiated contact with emerging authors to encourage their efforts and put like-minded writers into contact with one another. Through her letter-writing Palmer mobilised a wide range of often geographically isolated writers into a ‘creative community’ and by the 1930s this community was operating without her direct participation.\(^{39}\) In 1931, Marjorie Barnard thanked Palmer for her encouragement:

> I should like to say how very much I appreciate your kindness in writing to me and your sympathetic & understanding attitude. More than any other critic – than anyone else – you make us feel welcome. By us I mean Australian writers.\(^{40}\)

In 1956 Barnard reiterated her appreciation of Palmer’s correspondence: ‘I always did say that the only literary club of any value in Australia was composed of the people


As an influential figure, Palmer actively tried to privately settle political and literary disputes between writers in order to ‘maintain a good public front’ against external criticism, particularly given the writing community often felt ignored by the Australian public and under attack from the academy. Palmer, primarily through letter writing and her published critical work, contributed to a more connected and cohesive community of Australian writers. Moreover, she sought to revive the enthusiasm for literary nationalism which characterised her formative years before the outbreak of the Great War.

In *Modern Australian Literature*, Palmer emphasised that a quality national literature would ‘to some extent express our virgin and inarticulate continent’. Surprisingly, Palmer identified a foreigner, D.H. Lawrence, as an early inspiration in this regard:

> In his “Kangaroo” (1923) [D.H. Lawrence] has written a novel, shot with a wayward beauty, which will be of permanent value to our future writers. In its pictures of our landscape, seen through friendly, alien eyes, as well as in its revelation of our national character and social habits, it is a boon to us, and we may consider it as a brilliant gift from overseas.

*Kangaroo* was received relatively well by Palmer and many other Australian writers and remained influential well into the 1940s. The novel’s reception exposes the insecurities of the Australian literary community, which was preoccupied with the apparently inferior quality of its own output, and reveals that among Australian writers there was an appetite for a new account of the Australian landscape. For many, *Kangaroo* remained a touchstone of Australian landscape description and it inspired them to pursue the evocation of what Lawrence called the Australian ‘spirit of the place’.

**Theocritus in Australia**

D.H. Lawrence visited Australia for three months in 1922. Paul Fussell argues that he was a part of a wider ‘British Literary Diaspora’ that began once wartime travel restrictions were lifted. Lawrence, like many intellectuals in the late nineteenth and

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41 Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 17 February 1956, in *M. Barnard Eldershaw*, 278.


44 Ibid., 58.

early twentieth centuries, believed that social and even racial degeneration was underway in Europe and was pessimistic about the future of European capitalist democracies.\textsuperscript{46} He left England in search of an alternative. Lawrence spent the majority of his Australian stay at Thirroul on the New South Wales south coast, where he drafted the novel \textit{Kangaroo}. Richard Lovat Somers, \textit{Kangaroo}'s vexingly almost-autobiographical protagonist, had 'made up his mind that everything [in Europe] was done for, played out, finished, and he must go to a new country. The newest country; young Australia'.\textsuperscript{47} According to David Game, Lawrence, and by extension Somers, saw in Australia 'a potentially regenerative country that was spared the dead hand of old world attitudes and animosities'.\textsuperscript{48} Lawrence’s unhappy pilgrimage, which ultimately left him just as disappointed with Australia as he had been with England, is representative of the broader sense of division and disillusion felt by many intellectuals after the Great War.

\textbf{Figure 1.1:} D.H. Lawrence (left) at Thirroul in 1922. Wollongong City Library.


\textsuperscript{47} Lawrence, \textit{Kangaroo}, 18.

\textsuperscript{48} David Game, \textit{D.H. Lawrence’s Australia: Anxiety at the Edge of Empire} (Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), 3.
It quickly became clear to Lawrence that Australia was not immune to the postwar political divisions of Europe; *Kangaroo* sees Somers temporarily embroiled in clashes between socialists and a secret army of ex-soldiers called the ‘Diggers Club’. One character, Jack Calcott, might have been based on the historical figure Major John Scott, who was prominent in right-wing politics and allegedly involved in secret paramilitary organisations in postwar Sydney.\(^4\) In addition to these political disputes inherited from Europe, Lawrence suggested that the Australian environment itself might be inimical to the development of a robust new civilisation on the continent.

Lawrence admired the Australian landscape. He told Katharine Susannah Prichard: ‘I love Australia: its weird, far-away natural beauty and its remote, almost coal-age pristine quality’.\(^5\) Yet in *Kangaroo* the ‘ancient’ landscape is represented as potentially degenerative and is attributed responsibility for the apparent lack of cultural life in Australia. Somers muses:

> What was the good of trying to be an alert conscious man here? You couldn’t. Drift, drift into a sort of obscurity, backwards into a nameless past, hoary as the country is hoary. Strange old feelings wake in the soul: old, non-human feelings. And an old, old indifference, like a torpor, invades the spirit.\(^6\)

Somers laments the ‘lack of inner life in Australia’ and claims the country has ‘no genuine culture’.\(^7\) He argues:

> The Colonies make for outwardness. Everything is outward – like hollow stalks of corn. The life makes this inevitable: all that struggle with bush and water and what-not, all the mad struggle with the material necessities and conveniences, the inside soul just withers and goes into the outside, and they’re all just lusty robust stalks of people.\(^8\) (original emphasis)

For Somers, the material conditions of the Australian colonial frontier had fashioned a nation of people disinterested in the more refined intellectual pursuits of Europe,

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\(^5\) Lawrence to Prichard, 3 July 1922.

\(^6\) Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, 197.

\(^7\) Ibid., 33.

\(^8\) Ibid., 146.
though still apparently susceptible to the ideological conflicts that characterised the early twentieth century. Somers even questions the permeance of more ‘outward’ elements of white settlement in Australia; the ‘tin can’ houses, cities that seemed ‘made in five minutes’ and the frightening ‘emptiness’ of the inland.\textsuperscript{54} The physical city of Sydney ‘seemed to be sprinkled on the surface of a darkness into which it never penetrated’.\textsuperscript{55} That ‘darkness’ was an element of foreboding that Lawrence embedded in his descriptions of the Australian environment.

In \textit{Kangaroo} the landscape is ‘dark-looking and monotonous and sad’ and seems to be ‘biding its time with a terrible ageless watchfulness, waiting for a far-off end, watching the myriad intruding white men’.\textsuperscript{56} This anthropomorphised element of the landscape, watchful and waiting, is described in \textit{Kangaroo} as the ‘spirit of the place’.\textsuperscript{57} In an essay in 1924 Lawrence elaborated on this concept:

\begin{quote}
Every continent has its own great spirit of place. Every people is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland. Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is great reality.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

John Tregenza argues that in \textit{Kangaroo} the Australian ‘spirit of the place’ was ‘a kind of terrible deity waiting his time to destroy white civilization’.\textsuperscript{59} Rather than a ‘terrible deity’, I am inclined to agree with Game’s assessment that the ‘spirit of the place’ evoked ‘a hidden Aboriginal presence’ in the landscape ‘which destabilises the transplanted European population, remote from the centre of empire’.\textsuperscript{60} In \textit{Kangaroo} white Australians are not attuned to the ‘spirit of the place’; the country is not their homeland. In fact, Lawrence suggested that white Australians might never come to terms with the:

\begin{quote}
\textit{invisible} beauty of Australia, which is undeniably there, but which seems to lurk just beyond the range of our white vision. You feel you
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid. 17, 5 and 227.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 18.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 15 and 19.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Ibid. 19.
\item \textsuperscript{58} D.H. Lawrence, \textit{Studies in Classic American Literature} [1924] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12.
\item \textsuperscript{59} John Tregenza, \textit{Australian Little Magazines 1923-1954: Their Role in Forming and Reflecting Literary Trends} (Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1964), 51.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Game, \textit{D.H. Lawrence’s Australia}, 172.
\end{itemize}
can’t see – as if your eyes hadn’t the vision in them to correspond with the outside landscape.\(^{61}\) (original emphasis)

Although many of these reflections were voiced through the character of Somers, letters Lawrence sent to Katharine Susannah Prichard, written during his stay at Thirroul, suggest that these were Lawrence’s own impressions of the country. He confessed to Prichard: ‘I feel I slither on the edge of a gulf, reaching to grasp [Australia’s] atmosphere and spirit. It eludes me, and always would. It is too far back’.\(^ {62}\)

Lawrence’s contribution to the literature of Australia touched a nerve within the self-conscious writing community and his attempt to capture the essence of Australia, the elusive ‘spirit of the place’, inspired many prominent Australian writers in the three decades after Kangaroo was published. Lawrence was an internationally esteemed author whose presence exposed the Australian literary community’s reservations about the quality of its own output. Patrick Buckridge describes a unique ‘canonical anxiety’ that developed in the interwar years. He argues that Australia:

lacked the sort of cultural authority structure needed to constitute, stabilise and disseminate a literary canon, and hence to sustain a secure, public sense of itself as a country with a respectable national literature. The theme of Australia’s cultural “mediocrity” and lack of tradition [was] . . . commonplace among writers and intellectuals of the interwar years.\(^ {63}\)

Lawrence understood that he, a literary ‘great’ – as later decreed by F.R. Leavis – was entering a land wrestling with its own apparent lack of greatness.\(^ {64}\) In Kangaroo the character ‘Kangaroo’, leader of the paramilitary ‘Diggers Club’, encourages Somers to write not just of Australia but for Australia. He says ‘I hope you are going to write something for us. Australia is waiting for her Homer – or her Theocritus’.\(^ {65}\) ‘Kangaroo’ goes even further than this, arguing Australia was not simply lacking a great, foundational writer but was a complete ‘\textit{Tábula rasa} . . . without a mark, without a record’.\(^ {66}\) Theocritus, widely recognised as the pioneer of Greek pastoral poetry, was

\(^{61}\) Lawrence, Kangaroo, 87.

\(^{62}\) Lawrence to Prichard, 3 July 1922.

\(^{63}\) Patrick Buckridge, “‘Greatness’ and Australian Literature in the 1930s and 1940s: Novels by Dark and Barnard Eldershaw”, Australian Literary Studies 17, no. 1 (1995): 31. See also, Walker, Dream and Disillusion, 148 and 165.


\(^{65}\) Lawrence, Kangaroo, 122.

\(^{66}\) Ibid., 356.
an especially significant figure to conjure. The implication was that Australia required a foundational literary interpreter of the landscape.\textsuperscript{67}

While it is unlikely that Palmer saw an Australian Theocritus in Lawrence, she thought a brush with an author of established canonical status within the English tradition ‘valuable’ and addressed \textit{Kangaroo} and Lawrence’s landscape descriptions in multiple pieces of writing across the 1920s and 1930s.\textsuperscript{68} Palmer explained that she was disappointed that earlier foreign visitors to Australia had ‘looked in on us, but . . . gone away without in any way reacting to the Australian scene, which their European eyes found empty and monotonous’. According to Palmer, Australians ‘hoped for the arrival of some one with more open and eager eyes’ and were finally rewarded with Lawrence’s appearance; ‘with that news we all felt that Australia would now be subtly interpreted’.\textsuperscript{69} The possibility that Lawrence met actual members of a secret army while in Australia has been a tantalising point of contention among historians in recent years, yet this received very little attention in the three decades following the novel’s publication.\textsuperscript{70} Palmer thought the political plot ‘fantastic and false’; she was more interested in Lawrence’s ‘valuable’ impressions of the Australian landscape and character.\textsuperscript{71}

\begin{flushleft}


\textsuperscript{70} For over 25 years Robert Darroch has been compiling evidence in order to prove that during his Australian stay D.H. Lawrence met leaders of a Sydney-based secret paramilitary organisation, who inspired Lawrence’s characters Jack Calcott and Kangaroo. He is largely supported by historian Michael Cathcart, who has investigated Australia’s secret armies of the early twentieth century. Joseph Davis, although generally supportive of Darroch’s claims, is a little more cautious, suggesting that Lawrence might have gained knowledge about a Sydney-based secret army from acquaintances made during his Thirroul stay. David Ellis is sceptical about Darroch’s claim that Lawrence became intimate with members of a paramilitary group, although he does concede that Lawrence might well have heard rumours that such a group existed. See: Cathcart, \textit{Defending the National Tuckshop}, 82-85; Darroch, \textit{D.H. Lawrence in Australia}; Robert Darroch, \textit{D.H. Lawrence’s 99 Days in Australia Volume One: The Quest For Cooley} (Strawberry Hills: The Svengall Press, 2016); Robert Darroch, \textit{D.H. Lawrence’s 99 Days in Australia Volume Two: The Silvery Freedom . . . and the Horrible Paws} (Royal Exchange: EET Imprint, 2016); Joseph Davis, \textit{D.H. Lawrence at Thirroul} (Sydney: William Collins, 1989), 50-55; David Ellis, \textit{D.H. Lawrence: Dying Game 1922-1930} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 44-46.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
enthusiastic about the contribution this ‘extraordinary visitor’ had made to Australian literature.\textsuperscript{72} According to Palmer, prior to Lawrence’s arrival the ‘life and landscape’ of Australia had ‘not begun to live as a whole in literature’.\textsuperscript{73} She even argued that for the duration of his short stay, Lawrence had become ‘more Australian than the Australians’ in his ability to represent the landscape.\textsuperscript{74} Palmer did not suggest that Lawrence’s ‘eager eyes’ alone would instigate the nationalist literary revival she desired, but \textit{Kangaroo} seemed to offer a starting point from which Australian writers might begin to come to terms with the continent.\textsuperscript{75}

Palmer was not the only writer enthusiastic about the contribution Lawrence had made to Australian literature. Miles Franklin believed Lawrence’s treatment of the Australian bush in \textit{Kangaroo} was illuminating and the novel a ‘valuable gift’ to Australians.\textsuperscript{76} Like Palmer, she thought the political plot a ‘fantasia’ but was enthusiastic about Lawrence’s ability to capture ‘the bewildering ancienity [sic] and fascination of the bush’.\textsuperscript{77} Publisher, critic and polemicist P.R. Stephensen borrowed Lawrence’s phrase ‘spirit of the place’ and used it liberally in his 1936 book \textit{The Foundations of Culture in Australia: An Essay Towards National Self-Respect}. Lacking Lawrence’s anxiety around racial degeneracy on the continent, Stephensen argued that ‘a new nation, a new human type, is being formed’ in the unique environment of Australia.\textsuperscript{78} Despite Stephensen’s subsequent notoriety as an alleged fascist and government internee for the majority of World War Two, \textit{The Foundations of Culture in Australia} was widely read and well received in literary circles.\textsuperscript{79} Both Stephensen and Lawrence inspired Rex Ingamells, Adelaide-based poet and founder of the nationalist Jindyworobak poetry movement. In the 1938 Jindyworobak manifesto \textit{Conditional Culture}, Ingamells argued that \textit{Kangaroo} included ‘a superb piece of natural description at the beginning’ but appealed to Australians to

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{73} Palmer, ‘D.H. Lawrence: His Real Work’, 17.
\item\textsuperscript{74} Palmer, ‘Australia Leaks In’, 4.
\item\textsuperscript{75} Palmer, ‘D.H. Lawrence: One of Our Visitors’, 24.
\item\textsuperscript{76} Miles Franklin, ‘Novels of the Bush’, \textit{The Australian Mercury} 1, no. 1 (1935): 53.
\item\textsuperscript{77} Franklin, \textit{Laughter, Not For A Cage}, 163.
\item\textsuperscript{79} Craig Munro, \textit{Wild Man of Letters: The Story of P.R. Stephensen} (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992), 159 and 166-9.
\end{itemize}
better capture ‘the indestructible spirit of the place’ that a foreigner like Lawrence could only realise in ‘small part’.

Palmer also recognised that Lawrence’s interpretation of Australia was limited; she thought his assessments of the Australian character ‘cock-eyed’. Katharine Susannah Prichard was harshest on the novel. Although she recognised ‘the beauty of Lawrence’s descriptive writing’ she was ‘infuriated by comments and conclusions drawn from so slight a knowledge of Australian history, character and conditions’ and judged much of Somers’ ‘drivel’ about Australia ‘fatuous and absurd’. Finally, one of the Meanjin Papers ‘Crisis Number’ epigraphs was drawn from Kangaroo. In the excerpt two central characters converse about the lack of a passionate love of country in Australia; the landscape gives the impression of being unloved, as if men had never ‘made it a happy country, a bride-country – or a mother-country’. That editor Clem Christensen drew on the novel to emphasise the concerns of Australian writers during World War Two confirms the ongoing influence of Kangaroo within Australian literary circles. That figures like Palmer, Franklin, Stephensen, Ingamells and Christensen – all strident literary nationalists when they reflected on Kangaroo in the 1930s and 1940s – were so pleased to see their country judged by a visiting Englishman demonstrates the pervasive sense of cultural inferiority within the Australian literary community.

In August of 1922, Lawrence and his fictional counterpart Somers departed Australia bound ultimately for America. Lawrence had admired the beauty of the Australian landscape but, having already escaped the crumbling decadence of Europe, he fled too from what he believed was the ‘speechless, aimless solitariness’ of Australia. For some decades Australian writers attempted to articulate the Australian ‘spirit of the place’ with reference to his ideas, endeavouring to overlay the apparently ‘speechless’ continent with cultural meaning. But Lawrence’s despairing portrait was not the only postwar interpretation of Australia’s environmental and cultural potential. E.J. Brady, another member of the so-called ‘lost’ or disillusioned generation, contended with optimistic enthusiasm that the human prospects of the continent were unlimited.

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81 Palmer to Ingamells, 1 October 1944.
82 Prichard, ‘Lawrence in Australia’, 255.
83 Epigraph, Meanjin Papers 1, no. 8 (1942): 2.
84 Lawrence, Kangaroo, 379.
‘The freest, richest, happiest land on earth’

Brady is given only a few passing mentions in *Dream and Disillusion*, yet he, like the central figures in Walker’s study, was a socialist inspired by the social idealism of the years around Federation. He emerged from the same pre-Great War milieu as the disillusioned figures in Walker’s study, but has since become associated with postwar enthusiasm for environmental exploitation and development that was driven primarily by a conservative government. Neither literary historians nor environmental historians have recognised Brady’s position at the nexus between postwar intellectual disillusion and environmental optimism. Although his work has often been made to represent the supposedly careless and avaricious desire to develop Australia’s natural resources in the 1920s, Brady’s support for agricultural development into the 1950s demonstrates the persistence of dreams for closer settlement among Australians more broadly. Multiple chapters in this thesis will show that enthusiasm for agricultural and environmental development was recurrent among Australian literary figures across the first half of the twentieth century and that this enthusiasm often cut across political divides.

Brady was politicised while working as a clerk on the Sydney wharves for the wool exporters Dalgety & Co. in the late 1880s. He was dismissed from his position during the 1890 maritime strikes when he refused to be sworn in as a special constable to support the Sydney police.85 Brady was attracted to the socialist scene of inner-city Sydney, and became an active member of the Australian Socialist League.86 He would go on to edit the Labour Electoral League’s newspaper *The Australian Workman* and later the Australian Workers’ Union paper *The Australian Worker*.87 Brady also became involved in the bohemian writing coterie that had developed around *The Bulletin*; he contributed sea shanties and bush poems to the newspaper throughout the 1890s. Alongside Louis Esson and Vance Palmer he was a part of the group of writers and artists who met regularly at Fasoli’s Café in Melbourne in the years after Australian Federation.88 He had relationships with many of the other significant literary figures of the period, including Henry Lawson, Victor Daley, Roderic Quinn, C.J. Dennis, Miles

87 Webb, ‘Brady, Edwin James (1869–1952)’.
Franklin and Katharine Susannah Prichard. Prichard remembered him as the young and enthusiastic editor of the short-lived monthly magazine *The Native Companion* (1907):

Brady was the most dazzling editor I’d ever imagined: lank, gingery gold hair falling over his forehead, and a golden beard cut to a point. His eyes flashed green and blue lightnings as he talked, and his long legs sprawled under the office table.89

In 1916 Brady became president of the Australian Authors’ and Writers’ Guild, with Vance Palmer as secretary.90 Brady remained in intermittent contact with the Palmers at least until the late 1930s. His letters to them addressed a variety of topics: troubles with publisher George Robertson and Co. regarding *Australia Unlimited*, the prospect of collaborating on a weekly literary review, invitations to stay on his property at Mallacoota, the lack of a thriving Australian publishing industry, and by the late 1930s he worried about the threat of fascism.91

Brady’s complex literary and political interests have, however, largely been overshadowed by historical interest in his 1918 book *Australia Unlimited*. Running to over one thousand pages, *Australia Unlimited* was part history and part description of Australia’s primary industries. In the book, Brady celebrated Australia’s pioneering past and emphasised the ongoing centrality of the pastoral industry in Australia’s culture and economy. *Australia Unlimited* was funded in part by subscriptions from government departments and individual pioneering families; these subscribers essentially purchased a place in Brady’s story. Brady hoped to disprove what he called Australia’s “Desert” Myth and advocated the closer settlement of many of Australia’s marginal and arid lands.92 Although he admitted that some might find the book ‘over-optimistic’, he reassured his readers that he was well travelled and all his arguments were rooted in evidence. He spent considerable time in the book’s introduction listing the various experiences that he believed qualified him to make ‘sound judgements’ about

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91 Several of Brady’s letters appear in series 1, binders 17, 22 and 47, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1889-1964, MS 1174, NLA, Canberra.

92 Brady, *Australia Unlimited*, 628 and 875.
Australia’s future. Brady was anxious to dispel concerns that the Australian landscape was hostile and unattractive:

the message of Australian Nature [is not] uttered in tones of predominant melancholy, as many alien souls have affected to believe . . . To the sane, healthy native-born it is a mother of everlasting youth and beauty, and the freest, richest, happiest land on earth.

In contrast to the sombre note that Lawrence struck in his later descriptions of the Australian landscape, Brady was cheerfully confident that once the continent’s resources were revealed and appropriately harnessed Australia’s economy and culture would flourish.

Figure 1.2: One of the chapter headers in *Australia Unlimited*, which was elaborately illustrated and included hundreds of photographs. E.J. Brady, *Australia Unlimited* (Melbourne: George Robertson and Company, 1918), 871.

In *Australia Unlimited* Brady argued ‘the wealth of to-day is but a beggar’s moiety of the unlimited wealth of the future which will be won by the application of modern knowledge to local conditions’. In many ways his vision for Australia was futuristic and utopian; modern technology and environmental development would ensure the ‘well-fed, well-developed bodies’ of future Australians would ‘house vigorous and intellectual minds. They will be just, powerful and humane’. Brady believed Australian

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95 Ibid., 53.

96 Ibid., 101.
writers would eventually find in the story of Australian pioneering ‘pabulum for stirring verse and story while magazine and book artists of the future will decorate their dainty pages with many a happy picture of our sunlit Island Continent’. Unlike the menacing ‘ancient’ landscape in Kangaroo – that threatened to erode the intelligence and sophistication of its inhabitants – Brady believed that the continent, if exploited properly, would give rise to a civilised, cultured and prosperous Australian people. This was a belief Brady shared with many conservative politicians in the postwar years.

When Prime Minister Billy Hughes resigned in February 1923 he was replaced by his treasurer Stanley Bruce in coalition with the Country Party led by Earle Page. The Bruce-Page coalition adopted an economic policy – promoted using the slogan ‘Men, Money and Markets’ – that emphasised the role of primary industry in the continued development of the Australian economy within the British imperial framework. The economic policies of the Bruce-Page government emphasised the need for white Australians and British immigrants to continue the closer settlement of the continent, which would increase agricultural productivity. Williams describes this as ‘agrarian nostalgia’, an attempt to ‘return to the racial and simple values of [an] imaginary past’ that was reflected in the ongoing artistic preoccupation with landscape painting in the Heidelberg School tradition.

Given Brady’s own emphasis on primary industry and closer settlement it is little wonder that environmental historian William J. Lines links Australia Unlimited with ‘Men, Money and Markets’ in order to capture the environmental optimism of the 1920s. Warwick Frost goes even further, suggesting that Australia Unlimited might have directly influenced policies at a Federal level. Historical geographer J.M. Powell and historians Michael Cathcart and Stuart Macintyre have also used the phrase ‘Australia Unlimited’ to introduce or explain the environmental attitudes of the 1920s; both Cathcart and Macintyre use the phrase as a chapter title. Brady’s ‘Australia Unlimited’ mentality is often set against that of geographer Griffith Taylor, who publicly and persistently challenged popular enthusiasm for the continued agricultural

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97 Ibid., 871.
98 Williams, The Quarantined Culture, 5.
99 Lines, Taming the Great South Land, 167.
101 Cathcart, The Water Dreamers, 220-7; Macintyre The Oxford History of Australia Volume 4, 198-221; Powell, Griffith Taylor and ‘Australia Unlimited’.
and pastoral development of Australia throughout the 1920s. However, in a more considered portrait of Brady and his environmental ideas Sarah Mirams argues that Brady was a less influential figure than these histories would suggest. She contends that ‘Brady has become something of a whipping boy for the failures of the closer settlement schemes introduced during the First World War and the environmental damage that came with the expansion of farming into marginal land’. Mirams concedes that Brady’s belief that land could be made more fertile and support a large farming population was ‘the political orthodoxy of the time’, but also highlights that Australia Unlimited was the product of a very different political impulse than that which motivated the Bruce-Page government. During the 1920s, the desire to populate and develop Australia cut across the political spectrum; Brady was a nationalist and socialist, the Bruce-Page government was conservative and imperialist.

Although many of the ideas expressed in Australia Unlimited corresponded with government enthusiasm for closer settlement, Brady actually rejected many Bruce-Page policies. Brady sought to expand markets for Australian produce beyond the narrow imperial ones advocated by Bruce; he also opposed the government’s increasing use of literary censorship and escalating anti-communism. In advertising material Australia Unlimited was described as ‘a book that may decide the nation’s destiny’. In contrast to this claim and diverging from Frost’s assertion that the book was politically influential, Mirams demonstrates Australia Unlimited did not directly influence the policies of the Bruce-Page government nor did it sell particularly well, probably because it was a large and expensive book. Mirams argues that Australia Unlimited was not a reflection of the ‘bloated ambitions of the 1920s’, but was rather the product of the ‘intellectual, political, and social ideas’ of the 1890s and early post-Federation years when Brady was closely associated with the group of socialist intellectuals that Walker studies in Dream and Disillusion.


104 Ibid., 279.


106 Australia Unlimited advertising pamphlet, box 44, folder 35, item 3483, Papers of E.J. Brady, circa 1890-1952, MS 206, NLA, Canberra.


Mirams and Timothy Sherratt have also pointed out that Brady’s enthusiasm for environmental development schemes extended well beyond the decade his ideas are usually made to represent. Sherratt argues that historians have drawn selectively from Brady’s career and writing: ‘situated in 1918, [Brady’s] enthusiastic outpourings are assumed to reflect the spirit of the age’ but in later decades ‘they seem out of place, maybe even eccentric’. In *Australia Unlimited* Brady described himself as a ‘persistent advocate of closer settlement’, which he would prove over the coming decades.

Throughout his life, Brady campaigned to have *Australia Unlimited* republished and updated, extended into a series of books and even turned into a film, all to no avail. He also made myriad proposals for rural development in the years after *Australia Unlimited* was published, often focused on the possibilities for the growth of Mallacoota – a small fishing town in East Gippsland where Brady lived and worked for much of his writing career. In 1919 he tried to convince the Victorian state government to establish a Soldier’s Garden City in the region, in 1926 he remained hopeful that a seaport would be built at Mallacoota to enable timber milling, and in 1938 he proposed a Jewish settlement be established near the town which he argued could be powered by hydroelectricity. During the Depression Brady even established the Mallacoota Community Farm for unemployed men on his own property, though this attempt to realise both his agrarian and socialist dreams ultimately failed.

In 1944 he and businessman Leslie Rubinstein co-authored *Dreams and Realities*, which argued that ‘War in the Pacific has brought home to us – as nothing else could – the vital necessity for a more rapid development of our natural resources and the absolute need to increase our population’. Brady again argued for the development of East Gippsland, which he believed could support a population of 200,000. Brady’s astonishing predictions for population growth were in part influenced by fears of ‘racial

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110 Brady, *Australia Unlimited*, 875.

111 The Papers of E.J. Brady, held by the NLA, contain correspondence and other material which demonstrate Brady’s ongoing desire to update and extend his work on *Australia Unlimited*. For example, see: ‘Australia Unlimited: Victory Edition’ flyer, 1946, box 41, folder 6, item 488; letters to various correspondents regarding a series of *Australia Unlimited* books, box 41, folder 7, items 623-45; correspondence and other material relating to a film edition of *Australia Unlimited*, box 44, folders 37-40, Papers of E.J. Brady, circa 1890-1952, MS 206, NLA, Canberra.

112 Mirams, ‘Dreams and Realities’, 127-8, 154 and 212.

113 Ibid., 169.


115 Ibid., 138.
annihilation’ in an era when Australia was becoming increasingly concerned about the potential military threat posed by growing Asian nations.\textsuperscript{116} Brady also suggested that population and decentralisation would banish the loneliness, isolation and ancientness attributed to the Australian landscape.

As a writer and historical figure, Brady demonstrates that there is no easy distinction to be made between disillusioned intellectuals and those who were enthusiastic about large-scale environmental development in the postwar years. Moreover, like Palmer, Brady’s postwar experience did not quite correspond with Walker’s characterisation of the generation of Australian socialists that moved from dream to disillusion in response to the Great War and its politically conservative aftermath. Brady was routinely disappointed throughout his life, particularly when his proposals for development failed or were ignored, yet he remained perpetually optimistic that Australia might one day be a densely populated and modern socialist society. Although, as Mirams demonstrates, Brady’s book itself was not necessarily influential at the time, the general mood of enthusiasm for development did inspire a variety of Australian writers well into the 1930s and 1940s; chapters two, three and six of this thesis demonstrate that the dream of a modern, agrarian and densely populated Australia was recurrent.

**Barcelona and the Bush**

Nettie Palmer, like Brady, remained optimistic throughout the difficult years of the 1920s. She persistently, through correspondence and criticism, encouraged her fellow Australian writers to reignite literary nationalism and a sense of cultural development. Despite her primarily national focus Palmer’s political and literary interests were remarkably international, and her environmental imagination was captured by a range of local Australian landscapes. Jordan describes Palmer as ‘staggeringly’ cosmopolitan, particularly given that she and Vance lived primarily in small country towns between 1915 and 1935.\textsuperscript{117}

The Palmers lived in the small town of Emerald in Victoria’s Dandenong Ranges for most of the years between 1915 and 1925, then moved to the coastal town of


\textsuperscript{117} Jordan, *Nettie Palmer*, 209.
Caloundra in south-east Queensland where they stayed until 1929 (see Figure 1.4). Between 1929 and 1932 they lived in Melbourne, although during 1932 they camped for eight months on Green Island, a coral cay off the coast of Cairns in Queensland. After Green Island, they returned to the Dandenongs to live in Kalorama until they sailed for Europe in 1935. Palmer offered some reflections on living in the Dandenongs in a series of articles in the Melbourne *Argus* in 1934, which were later collected and published as *The Dandenongs* (1952). *Fourteen Years: Extracts from a Private Journal 1925-1939* (1948), based on a diary Palmer kept between 1925 and 1939, also provides some insight into her life in various isolated towns. In *The Dandenongs* Palmer made this Lawrencian observation (which also anticipates some of the themes that will be discussed in chapter three):

> The bones of the continent are old, but everything created by the hands of man had an unweathered look; it had not had time to merge inconspicuously into its background. Solid though it may be, it has the aspect of something unsettled and fugitive.\(^{118}\)

At the same time, she celebrated the ‘idyllic’ agricultural country created by pioneers that was slowly ‘harmonizing’ with the surrounding bush, which suggests a sympathy with Brady’s vision of a productive Australian landscape.\(^{119}\)

*The Dandenongs* – a mix of nature description, local history and personal reflection – was the product of Palmer’s ‘impulse to probe into the past of this little area of hilly country’.\(^{120}\) In the book Palmer endorsed the desire to appreciate and represent various regions of Australia:

> We are always being told that we don’t know our country well enough, and this usually means that we have not let our minds wander over the endless spaces enclosed by its outline. But there are other points-of-view. There is a good deal to be said for letting the mind rest in one spot, small enough to hold the affections and, perhaps, to be understood.\(^{121}\)

Although this might suggest a Thoreauvian preference for isolation and nature observation, in fact the Palmers spent the majority of their time in these small towns conducting their literary affairs via correspondence. Even when camping on Green


\(^{119}\) Ibid., 46-7 and 51.

\(^{120}\) Ibid., 6.

\(^{121}\) Ibid., 9.
Island and enjoying ‘the simplicity and guilelessness of the sea’ there always remained ‘the letters, books, journals from the outer world in our tent, our note-books – those battle-grounds of words’. 122 The island did not provide a refuge from the political realities of the era either: ‘over a lunch of coral-cod, pawpaw and coffee we talked of the Depression that seems to be paralysing the country and young people’s impulse to escape it’. 123 This ability to think simultaneously across local, national and international matters characterised Palmer’s critical writing. She had long advocated for Australian writers to be engaged with international politics, but her own experiences in Europe in the mid-1930s intensified her convictions.

Figure 1.3: Nettie Palmer at Caloundra, Queensland in 1928. NLA.


123 Ibid., 98.
In 1935 the Palmers left Australia for an extended stay in Europe. In Paris Nettie Palmer attended the Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture. With expatriate Australian novelist Christina Stead, she addressed the conference on censorship in Australia:

"Taking advantage of the distance from Europe, a reactionary Government bans books which would keep Australians in touch with progressive English and European thought. Obscure Customs officials, even if they are scarcely able to read their own names, are empowered to ban what books they choose. Moreover, apart from banning hundreds of books which are freely circulating in England, they banned last year more than 70 left-wing political books."\(^{124}\)

The pair went on to argue that Australian ‘literary leaders’ rather than politicians should judge the ‘worth and legality’ of books, and that Australian bans on books currently legal in England should be immediately lifted.\(^{125}\) After Paris, the Palmers had an extended stay in London and in May of 1936 travelled to Spain where, with their adult daughter Aileen, they intended to live for a year in a cottage outside of Barcelona. Smith admires ‘the ease with which [Fourteen Years] moves between Australia and Europe, following events and happenings in both; the way it registers life, at say Green Island or in Barcelona’.\(^{126}\) This is an observation that might be applied to much of Palmer’s writing; she was constantly attuned to local, national and international matters and tried to instil this complexity of interests in the writers around her.

The Palmers were soon forced to retreat to London after the attempted Falangist coup initiated the Spanish Civil War. Upon her return to Australia in October of 1936, Nettie Palmer campaigned extensively in print, on radio and at public lectures on behalf of the Spanish Relief Committee and Joint Spanish Aid Council.\(^{127}\) She recruited many Australian writers to this political cause and encouraged writers more generally to engage with the political crises of the era. In July of 1938 Palmer wrote to editor and drama critic Leslie Rees: ‘this is surely a time of literary activity, in spite of so many reasons for hesitation and numbness in face of general fears’. She went on to analyse some of the month’s best literary offerings.\(^{128}\) In August 1939, when the world was on

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\(^{125}\) Ibid.

\(^{126}\) Smith, Vance and Nettie Palmer, 95.

\(^{127}\) Walker, Dream and Disillusion, 161-3.

the brink of another war, Palmer was heartened by the appearance of Australian works of politically-engaged non-fiction, such as Frank Dalby Davison’s pamphlet *While Freedom Lives* and the manuscript of Leonard Mann’s ‘The Impending Crisis’. She believed that finally other writers had a ‘sense of the ground quaking beneath them as acutely as I have’.  

Palmer’s European experience ensured that she was attuned to the potential threat of fascism and in the late 1930s she was pleased to see that international political events similarly energised her Australian literary contemporaries. During the 1930s Australian writers enjoyed greater contact with one another than did the literary community of the years immediately following the Great War; this was partly the result of Palmer’s own tireless literary criticism and correspondence. Modjeska argues that through letter writing Palmer was also deliberately:

> initiating and consolidating literary relationships throughout the interwar period for definite political reasons. Her aim was to bring writers together and to instil in them an awareness of their political responsibilities in a period of crisis.  

This was an attempt to reignite the radical nationalist impulse around Federation that had inspired Palmer in her formative years, both in terms of politics and literature. By the mid-1930s, the literary community did again coalesce around nationalism and especially around anti-censorship, anti-fascism and within the recently politicised Fellowship of Australian Writers. This had more to do with the general mood of political crisis during this decade than Palmer’s specific influence, but this sense of a cohesive and politically engaged writing community did please her. However, this new nationalism was characterised less by a confidence in the Australian national project and more by the fear of national annihilation in the face of compounding global catastrophes.

**Conclusion**

In her 1929 article ‘The Need for Australian Literature’, Palmer had argued that Australia required ‘literature absolute and relative’. She defined absolute literature as that which illuminated ‘life as a whole’ and relative literature as that which interpreted

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129 Palmer, *Fourteen Years*, 250.

‘a given environment to the people in it and to its observers’. She was suggesting that Australian literature was valuable, at least to a local audience, even if it had not yet reached an international canonical standard. Palmer argued ‘a region or a way of life does not begin to exist until it has been interpreted by one artist after another’, but she was by now confident that ‘gradually our Australian writers are revealing the scene on which our life can become coherent and harmonious’. It was this search for a sense of coherence – in the literary community and Australian culture more generally – that drove Palmer’s criticism and correspondence across the 1920s and early 1930s. In the mid-to late 1930s the literary community did achieve a sense of coherence, though these years were hardly harmonious. It was during this decade of international crisis and uncertainty that the Australian literary community again largely coalesced around nationalism.

With the Great Depression, the rise of fascism and the looming threat of another war came a sense that the world was entering a radically new, uncertain and frightening phase. The Australian literary community became preoccupied with international politics. At the same time, writers issued numerous works of fiction, poetry and non-fiction with a nationalist emphasis that stressed the pressing necessity for white Australia to finally come to terms with and convincingly settle the continent, both imaginatively and physically. Suddenly more writers were attuned to the supposed shortcomings of the Australian national project, recognised by Palmer, Lawrence and Brady in the years following the century’s first international cataclysm. They pursued sometimes consciously, but often unconsciously, what Lawrence referred to as the Australian ‘spirit of the place’. The muted literary response to the Great War and uneasy combination of anxiety and aspiration that plagued writers in the 1920s hardened in the 1930s into a sense of urgent nationalism.

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132 Ibid., 4-5.
Chapter Two

‘A Nation of Gamblers’: Henrietta Drake-Brockman and Soldier Settlement Schemes

I have returned to these:
The farm, and the kindly bush, and the young calves lowing;
But all that my mind sees
Is a quaking bog in a mist – stark, snapped trees,
And the dark Somme flowing. ¹

In 1943 professor of agriculture and member of the Rural Reconstruction Commission Samuel Wadham argued that ‘since 1922 the countryside of Australia has been an area of disillusionment and not an area of steady progress’.² As discussed in chapter one, disillusion is a word that has very often been applied retrospectively to the Australian interwar years.³ Like David Walker, historian Ken Fry characterises the 1920s as a period of disillusionment; but Fry suggests that failed and failing soldier settlers were perhaps the most disillusioned group of all.⁴ In the aftermath of the Great War nearly 40 000 returned Australian soldiers were settled on farms under soldier settlement schemes administered by the various state governments. The schemes were designed

⁴ Ken Fry, ‘Soldier Settlement and the Australian Agrarian Myth after the First World War’, Labour History, no. 48 (1985): 42. See also, Kate Murphy, Fears and Fantasies: Modernity, Gender, and the Rural-Urban Divide (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 42.
to reward soldiers for their war service, and were a continuation of pre-war enthusiasm for the closer settlement of rural Australia with small family-run farms. Yet, by the 1930s, it was clear that soldier settlement had failed to firmly establish large numbers of returned men as productive and prosperous members of the rural community; over fifty percent of families settled under the schemes had abandoned or transferred their farms and many more were experiencing financial difficulty.\(^5\) Existing histories of soldier settlement have focused on the hardships endured by settler families and the extent to which the schemes failed; they have tended to draw primarily on government files, parliamentary debates, and the reports of various royal commissions. In contrast, this chapter uses short stories, novels and poems to investigate how soldier settlement and its failure reinforced or changed the way Australians imagined rural life, the human relationship to the environment and popular national myths about rural resilience.

I focus primarily on Perth-based writer Henrietta Drake-Brockman’s short story ‘The Gamblers’ which is set on a soldier settler farm in the Western Australian wheatbelt. This story is considered alongside the small number of other literary sources which engaged with soldier settlement between the 1920s and 1940s. Given Drake-Brockman’s own preference for writing on her often neglected home state of Western Australia, I have attempted to draw more heavily on soldier settler sources from that state, though have not focused on it exclusively.

‘The Gamblers’, along with a smattering of other soldier settlement literature, suggests that the failure of the schemes both unsettled and reinforced national myths about the resilience of Anzacs in the bush. While literary sources explored the well-publicised difficulties that soldier settlers faced, most authors continued to emphasise the resilience of Anzacs-cum-farmers and even suggested that they were individually responsible for their own ‘gamble’ on the land. Ultimately, the failure of soldier

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\(^5\) In 1929 Justice George Herbert Pike found that approximately thirty percent of soldier settlers had abandoned their holdings, see George Herbert Pike, *Report on Losses Due to Soldier Settlement by Mr. Justice Pike* (Canberra: Government Printer, 1929), 59. More recently, historians have disagreed about the extent to which the Australian soldier settlement schemes can be considered a failure. Marilyn Lake argues that more than sixty percent of Victorian soldier settlers had abandoned or transferred their farms by World War Two and Bruce Scates and Melanie Oppenheimer argue that by the late 1930s a little over fifty percent of soldier settlers had abandoned for transferred their land. In contrast, J.M. Powell and Stephen Garton have cautioned against excessively negative assessments of the schemes and the historiographical emphasis on ‘failure’. See: Stephen Garton, *The Cost of War: Australians Return* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996), 119-20; Marilyn Lake, *The Limits of Hope: Soldier Settlement in Victoria 1915-38* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1987), xviii; J.M. Powell, *An Historical Geography of Modern Australia: The Restive Fringe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 119-20; Bruce Scates and Melanie Oppenheimer, *The Last Battle: Soldier Settlement in Australia 1916-1939* (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 16.
settlement did not diminish the Australian desire to settle the sparsely populated continent more densely. By the late 1930s and early 1940s many writers, including Drake-Brockman herself, were again optimistic about closer settlement. But by then the vision for populating Australia had changed dramatically. Rather than an emphasis on the labour of individual soldier-farmers, there was a belief that the large-scale manipulation of the environment through science and engineering would ultimately bring large areas of Australia under cultivation.

Soldier settlement in Australia

In the final years of the Great War most British dominions initiated schemes to settle some of their returning soldiers on farms. Soldier settlement has a long and even ancient history around the world, although prior to the Great War a soldier settlement scheme had never been implemented by an Australian government. In Australia each state administered its own scheme that enabled soldiers without capital to purchase land. Soldier settlement was an attractive solution to a variety of perceived wartime and postwar problems. First, Australia relied on voluntary recruitment of soldiers during the war effort and soldier settlement schemes, which promised ‘a material reward for military service’, were thought to be one way to encourage men to volunteer. Additionally, the Australian government was increasingly concerned that large numbers of unemployed returned soldiers would lead to social unrest in cities and that some might be induced to join the growing labour movement. Soldier settlement would help to disperse these idle and potentially disruptive and radical men, and transform them into ‘a property owning yeomanry’. On top of these short term

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8 Ibid., 66.

objectives, soldier settlement was regarded as a way to enable Australia to achieve long-held economic, social and defensive goals.

Australians had long been interested in closer settlement for economic, political and moral reasons; many felt that the continent’s natural resources were being underused and that agriculture could be vastly expanded. Soldier settlement legislation was a continuation of both selection and closer settlement policies, which had been designed to encourage, with limited success, settlement on small agricultural blocks since the mid-nineteenth century. In part, these policies were an attempt to recreate an idealised English yeomanry – small-scale self-sufficient farmers who drew primarily on the labour of their family – on the Australian continent. During the Great War there was a renewed interest in closer settlement as nationalist fervour merged with concerns about Australia’s declining birth-rate, the migration of many rural residents to Australia’s cities, and the perceived threat of Asia. David Walker demonstrates that from the 1880s Australians were increasingly fearful that unless the continent was populated and cultivated more intensively Australia risked invasion by land-hungry Asian nations to the north. In 1918, journalist and historian C.E.W. Bean advocated the extension of rural settlement on the basis of national defence: ‘our country has five millions now; it will need thirty millions before it is safe – and a proportion of them must live in the tropical north if we are to keep other nations out of it’. There was also a creeping fear that white Australia had not satisfactorily justified, through intensive agricultural productivity, its dispossession of Aboriginal Australia.

In the final years of the Great War there was much anticipation of the productive potential of soldier settlers. In 1916, an article in the Bunbury Southern Times fervently proclaimed that soldier settlement would enable the south-west of Western Australia to ‘fulfil its destiny and to do its duty as the greatest producing asset of the State... [and afford] a happy substance to the men who have done so much for us at the

front. In a Soldier Settler Guide published in 1920, the Western Australian Department of Lands and Surveys confidently asserted:

Ex-soldier settlers will be provided with the best land and will be afforded every facility to develop same under the most favourable conditions. The Department merely requires consistent industry on the part of the settler.

Such enthusiasm was short lived. By the mid-1920s, newspaper articles, which had initially brimmed with excitement about the potential benefits of settling men on the land, were reporting problems associated with the schemes as well as pleas from soldiers’ groups for government assistance. In the early 1930s newspaper articles overwhelmingly emphasised the ‘desperate plight of many soldier settlers’ and relayed the ‘alarming reports of difficulties’ the settlers were facing. Throughout the 1920s it had become increasingly clear that many soldier settlers were struggling with debt, the ongoing physical and psychological legacies of war service and especially ecological constraints on their properties.

The ideological desire for closer, yeoman-style settlement in Australia drove the soldier settlement planners to allocate soldiers small blocks, generally between 60 and 160 acres. By the 1920s most of Australia’s best agricultural land was already settled and as a result many soldiers purchased small, uncleared and unwatered blocks on marginal land remote from towns and transport. This left soldier settlers around the country more vulnerable to the effects of drought, flood, bushfire, and infestation by rabbits, blackberries and prickly pear. In 1944 the Rural Reconstruction Commission argued that it was unfortunate that so many World War One soldier settlers were settled on the fringes of existing wheat growing regions around the country ‘where the climate is arduous and it is not easy for a wide range of produce to be grown by the farmer for his family requirements’.

15 ‘Settling the Returned Soldier: An Important Conference with Far Reaching Possibilities’, Southern Times (Bunbury), 15 August 1916, 3.
17 ‘Soldier Settlers’, The West Australian (Perth), 16 March 1925, 10; ‘Soldier Settlers’, The South Western Times (Bunbury), 11 June 1925, 4; ‘Soldier 27, Viticulturists’, The Swan Express (Midland Junction), 26 June 1925, 1.
19 Scates and Oppenheimer, The Last Battle, 3 and 8.
Under both soldier settlement and group settlement schemes, the Western Australian wheatbelt, located in the south-west corner of the state, expanded rapidly in the 1920s (see Figure 2.1). Soldier settlers often received marginal land with sandy soils on the fringes of settlement. The expansion of the wheatbelt also brought many soldier farmers on the fringes of settlement into contact with migratory emus that trampled crops and damaged fences. In late 1932 Minister for Defence Sir George Pearce granted the farmers military assistance to launch the ‘Emu War’. It is perhaps telling that, though the farmers had military personnel and two Lewis machine guns at their disposal, the emus were ultimately victorious. The wheatbelt was also expanded at the expense of already marginalised Aboriginal populations; many Aboriginal people were physically removed from land designated for soldier settlement blocks and forced onto large missions, such as that at Moore River. In addition small, fenced, family-run farms decreased employment opportunities for Aboriginal workers. Although the wheatbelt experienced relatively good seasons throughout the 1920s, it was farmers in established wheat-growing areas on long-settled, larger farms that were better suited to meet plummeting wheat prices during the Great Depression. A combination of environmental constraints, mounting debt and a lack of farming experience led to large numbers of soldier settlers forfeiting their properties. Bruce Scates and Melanie Oppenheimer argue that the Western Australian soldier settler scheme was one of the worst performing, with only 33 percent of returned soldiers still on their farms in 1939.


26 Geoffrey Bolton, A Fine Country to Starve In (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1972), 90.

27 Scates and Oppenheimer, The Last Battle, 236.
In the mid-1920s it was clear to Australian state governments that their settlement schemes had not been as successful or economical as originally anticipated. Various government investigations were launched throughout the 1920s to identify the flaws in the schemes and account for associated costs incurred by state and federal governments.\textsuperscript{28} World War One soldier settlement schemes were examined again as a part of the Rural Reconstruction Commission (1943-46) in preparation for post-World War Two reconstruction.\textsuperscript{29} These investigations identified myriad factors that contributed to the failure of soldier settlement schemes, including hasty bureaucratic


\textsuperscript{29} Rural Reconstruction Commission, Settlement and Employment of Returned Men on the Land.
decisions and poor administration, a lack of adequate supervision and training for settlers, inadequate capital and the pressures of debt, the economic recession of 1920-1, high postwar cost of farm equipment, and finally the small blocks on marginal land allocated to many settlers. In August 1929, the findings of the Commonwealth inquiry into ‘Losses due to soldier settlement’ were made public; commissioner George Herbert Pike found that many soldier settlers failed for reasons out of their own control. In response, *Reveille: The Official Journal of the Returned Sailors’ and Soldiers’ Imperial League of Australia (New South Wales Branch)* announced that soldier settlers had been ‘vindicated’. According to the journal:

> Mr. Justice Pike, in his report, has exposed in all its nakedness the woeful muddle and incompetence of those who were entrusted with the duty of settling the Diggers on the land. His report, too, has effectively scotched the oft-repeated gibe that the soldier settlers were wholly responsible for their failures.\(^{30}\)

In the following edition the Returned Sailors’ and Soldiers’ Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA) continued to celebrate; the cover featured a drawing of a soldier settler described as ‘a hero in peace and war’ whose ‘industry, honesty and integrity’ had been ‘vindicated’ by Pike’s report (Figure 2.2).\(^{31}\)

The failures of soldier settler schemes and the hardships faced by settlers and their families has received substantial attention from historians. Scates and Oppenheimer’s *The Last Battle: Soldier Settlement in Australia 1916-1939* offers the most comprehensive study of Australian soldier settlement to date. Drawing on a combination of AIF personnel service records, Lands Department files and previously closed repatriation records, Scates and Oppenheimer reconstruct the experience of individuals and families settled under the New South Wales scheme. They offer a ‘a social, cultural and environmental history of soldier settlement’ which ‘takes as its central characters those whose lives were directly involved with, and impacted by, soldier settlement’.\(^{32}\) Earlier work includes *The Limits of Hope: Soldier Settlement in Victoria 1915-38*, in which Marilyn Lake uses a sample of 300 Victorian soldier settler files to offer insight into the individual experiences of soldier settlement including settler debt, the politicisation of

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32 Scates and Oppenheimer, *The Last Battle*, 12.
Figure 2.2: RSSILA celebrated the findings George Herbert Pike made in the Commonwealth inquiry into 'Losses due to soldier settlement'. Reveille: The Official Journal of the Returned Sailors’ and Soldiers’ Imperial League of Australia (New South Wales Branch) 3, no. 1 (1929), front cover.
settlers and the experience of women and children on soldier settler blocks. Historical geographer J.M. Powell places a greater emphasis on the environmental aspects of soldier settlement; like Lake he uses a Victorian case study but investigates the geographic distribution and average size of soldier settler allotments in relation to levels of forfeiture by district. In *Unfit for Heroes: Reconstruction and Soldier Settlement in the Empire Between the Wars*, which considers soldier settlement across the British Empire, Kent Fedorowich dedicates a chapter to Australian and New Zealand soldier settlement schemes. Fedorowich is primarily concerned with the British ex-servicemen who were settled on farms in Australia, but he also briefly notes the ‘cross-fertilisation of the outback, yeoman and Anzac traditions’ in the Australian soldier settler context. It is this, less tangible, aspect of the soldier settlement schemes I am most interested in. Literary sources help to trace the way soldier settlement interacted with existing literary and national myths about Australia’s national character.

The early literature of soldier settlement

Roderic Quinn was a poet at the height of his popularity in the 1890s when he regularly contributed to *The Bulletin*, though he always distanced himself from the nationalism and Australian focus of the Bush balladists. In his 1919 poem ‘Soldier—Settlers’ Quinn urged returned soldiers to channel the work ethic and sense of brotherhood gained during their war experience into transforming the Australian countryside into productive farms:

Peace, not war, shall make your land
Great o’er earth’s dominions;
Soon her callow wings will grow
Into golden pinions.

Foul is war in spite of song,
Foul in spite of story;
Better golden fields of wheat
Than red fields of glory.

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33 Lake, *The Limits of Hope*.
34 Powell, *An Historical Geography of Modern Australia*.
Quinn’s poem suggests that farms would offer productive relief from the hardships of war, and is representative of the early exuberance regarding soldier settlement.

Frank Dalby Davison, who published his first short stories as a young soldier settler on a dairy farm at Injune near Roma in south-west Queensland, was at least initially similarly enthusiastic about the potential of the schemes. Davison contributed stories and bush sketches to his father’s various short-lived magazines between 1920 and 1924. These pieces generally satisfied Davison senior’s demand for contributions that were ‘hopeful in tone’ as opposed to ‘doleful’ and negative. In 1920 Davison published, under the pseudonym ‘T-Bone’, a fictionalised account of his own return to Australia and residency in rural Queensland after the war. The main character argues that ‘the destiny of a proud young nation hangs upon the outcome’ of the labours of Australia’s rural residents and declares that he is ‘eager to join their ranks’. By 1923, the year Davison and his family left their soldier settler block, his enthusiasm had clearly waned. Davison published a short article, also under a pseudonym, titled ‘Distant Fields Look Green’. The article described a fictional disorder – that Davison dubbed ‘Land Crazy’ – acquired by people who had never worked the land but suddenly become obsessed with reading the Agricultural Gazette and obtaining their own farm. It is very likely that Davison was drawing here on his own experience as an amateur soldier settler. Davison and his first wife Kay Davison, née Ede, warned that his stories, which were often written in first person, should not be interpreted as being written from life. However, although few explicitly mention soldier settlement, it certainly seems that many of Davison’s short stories, including those collected in The Woman at the Mill (1940), drew heavily on his difficult experiences as a failed soldier settler in rural Queensland.

Like Davison, contributors to the magazine Aussie: The Cheerful Monthly demonstrate early concerns about the problems associated with soldier settlement. Aussie: The Australian Soldiers’ Magazine was first published on the Western Front in France in 1918 for a military readership. The first issue stated that the magazine’s objective was ‘to be bright and cheerful and interesting – to reflect that happy spirit and good humour so

41 Frank Dalby Davison, The Woman at the Mill (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1940), np; Kay Davison, interview by Owen Webster, May 1971, ORAL TRC 509/3-5, NLA.
strongly evident throughout the Aussie Army’. Soldiers authored most of the early articles, stories, poems and drawings published in the magazine. After the war, the magazine was continued as *Aussie: The Cheerful Monthly*, and was aimed at a broader audience with a new emphasis on modern Australian city and town life. There remained, however, occasional contributions that dealt with the experiences of repatriated soldiers. While none of the literary contributions to the magazine engaged with soldier settlement, some of the drawings demonstrate that, as early as 1920, contributors had mixed feelings about the life of returned soldiers settled on the land.

![Figure 2.3: The image on the cover of the June 1920 edition of Aussie suggested it endorsed soldier settlement schemes; it was subtitled 'From No Man's Land to a Strong Man's Land'. Aussie: The Cheerful Monthly, no. 16, (1920).](image)

*Figure 2.3* The image on the cover of the June 1920 edition of *Aussie* suggested it endorsed soldier settlement schemes; it was subtitled ‘From No Man’s Land to a Strong Man’s Land’. *Aussie: The Cheerful Monthly*, no. 16, (1920).

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The cover image of the June 1920 edition of *Aussie* featured a healthy and content looking farmer. It was captioned ‘From No Man’s Land to a Strong Man’s Land’, implying support for settling returned soldiers on farms (see Figure 2.3). Yet, in the very same issue, a cartoon titled ‘The Optimist’ appeared which, although not specifically about soldier settlement, humorously highlighted that a farmer’s success was often reliant on forces beyond their own control. The farmer in the cartoon explains that he will make a fortune from his farm:

I only gotter wait till the Government raises the price of exported butter, and sends me some fodder, and lays a railway along ‘ere, and the cows start to give decent milk, and a few inches of rain comes along – an’ there y’are! (see Figure 2.4).

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44 David Barker, ‘From No Man’s Land to a Strong Man’s Land’, *Aussie: The Cheerful Monthly*, no. 16 (1920): cover image.

In November of the same year another *Aussie* cartoon emphasised the financial burdens of farming. The cartoon’s title – ‘The New Fight for Freedom’ – suggested it might have referred specifically to soldier settlers. The cartoon depicted a farmer working in the fields while a goblin labelled ‘mortgage’ sits menacingly on his homestead (see Figure 2.5). These early examples foreshadow the steady decline in enthusiasm for soldier settlement throughout the 1920s, as it became clear that many settlers were not experiencing the productive, yeoman-style rural life originally envisaged. As we will see, literary engagement with soldier settlement in the 1930s and 1940s almost exclusively focused on the difficulties faced by settlers. The writing of John K. Ewers, Edward Harrington, and particularly Henrietta Drake-Brockman demonstrates this.

![Figure 2.5:](image)

*Figure 2.5:* The title of this *Aussie* cartoon, ‘The New Fight for Freedom’, suggested it might have specifically referred to the debt problems faced by many soldier settlers. *Aussie: The Cheerful Monthly*, no. 21 (1920): 12.

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Henrietta Drake-Brockman

Henrietta Jull was born in Perth in 1901 to public servant Martin Edward Jull and Roberta Henrietta Margaritta Jull, née Stewart, the first female medical practitioner in Western Australia. Henrietta studied literature at the University of Western Australia and art at Henri Van Raalte’s Perth School of Art. In 1921 she married into ‘one of the Old Families’ of Western Australia when she wed civil engineer and army officer Geoffrey Drake-Brockman. Geoffrey Drake-Brockman had recently been appointed commissioner of the state Department of the North-West and, as a result, the couple lived in Broome for six years during the 1920s. Henrietta Drake-Brockman regularly accompanied her husband on his many trips into more remote regions of north-west where, according to her literary friend John K. Ewers, she ‘learned to roll a swag and to yarn with the toughest customers’. Although Ewers was quick to add that Drake-Brockman always retained ‘the elegance and graciousness of a true lady’. Geoffrey Drake-Brockman was also keen to emphasise his wife’s enthusiasm for the outback where, according to him, she would visit remote pubs ‘in order to enjoy the tales of cattle-men and prospectors’. Despite these outback forays, it is clear that the couple lived an extremely privileged life in the north and later in Perth; they regularly entertained high-ranking public servants, politicians, business leaders, engineers and other visiting ‘V.I.Ps’.

From the late 1920s Drake-Brockman began to contribute short articles to the West Australian newspaper under the pseudonym Henry Drake, which dealt primarily with her experiences in the north-west of the state. Throughout the 1930s she became a prominent Perth-based writer, producing plays, novels, short stories and many articles for the popular travel magazine Walkabout. Her literary work regularly addressed themes associated with rural and remote Western Australia; she frequently wrote about the gold rush, the pearling industry in Broome, race relations on remote cattle stations and the role of women in rural life. Her personal papers, held by the National Library

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51 Ibid., 178-9.
of Australia, demonstrate her lifelong interest in representing her often neglected home state in her literary work.\textsuperscript{52}

Historian Amanda Laugesen argues that Drake-Brockman’s work has received very little scholarly attention, partly because she ‘was not closely aligned with the cultural left of the 1930s’ and so has been ‘dismissed as conservative, a solid member of the middle-class and therefore uninteresting’.\textsuperscript{53} Although certainly not closely associated with her literary counterparts on the east coast Drake-Brockman did intermittently correspond with them and was an especially active member of the Perth literary scene in the interwar years. Perth was remote from the literary hubs of Sydney and Melbourne and Ewers argued that during the 1930s ‘writers in Perth were pretty much loners’.\textsuperscript{54} Together, Ewers and Drake-Brockman endeavoured to establish a Perth-based literary community; they were founding members of the Western Australian branch of the Fellowship of Australian Writers (FAW) and Drake-Brockman would later serve as president of the organisation. Moreover, her personal relationships with Ernestine Hill and Katharine Susannah Prichard demonstrate Drake-Brockman’s eagerness and ability to maintain close friendships with writers of various political persuasions. Hill was a popular travel writer who, like Drake-Brockman, wrote predominantly about her experiences in remote Australia. The politically ambivalent Hill was suspicious of the FAW and via correspondence in 1940 she and Drake-Brockman joked about the ‘Red element’ that seemed to dominate the Sydney branch.\textsuperscript{55} Prichard, also a novelist of remote Australia, was a committed communist who maintained strong friendships and frequent correspondence with writers on the east coast. Upon Drake-Brockman’s death in 1968, Prichard recollected that their friendship had ‘survived political differences of opinion’.\textsuperscript{56} Despite varied political positions, the three women had enough in common to travel together across the Nullarbor Plain in 1947.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{52} MS 1634, Papers of Henrietta Drake-Brockman, 1882-1975, NLA, Canberra.

\textsuperscript{53} Amanda Laugesen, ‘Writing the North-West, Past and Present: The 1930s Fiction and Drama of Henrietta Drake-Brockman’, \textit{History Australia} 8, no. 1 (2011): 112.


\textsuperscript{55} Ernestine Hill to Henrietta Drake-Brockman, 26 August 1940, series 3, box 13, folder 13, MS 1634, Papers of Henrietta Drake-Brockman, 1882-1975, NLA, Canberra.


Drake-Brockman was also interested in a variety of issues that preoccupied literary nationalists of the 1930s and 1940s. Like Nettie Palmer, Drake-Brockman advocated a supportive and friendly Australian literary community that would, she believed, eventually give rise to mature, quality literary output. In a letter to Miles Franklin, Drake-Brockman wondered why:

the writers of Australia are so mean, because lots of them are. If we put our shoulders to the national literary barrow, the whole load goes forward quicker – it is so obvious. Time alone will supply the hair sieve that makes classics.\(^{58}\)

Drake-Brockman’s sense of the social and cultural responsibility of writers was also heightened by the political events of the mid-1930s and World War Two. In a 1942 *Meanjin Papers* article she echoed the sentiments of Vance Palmer’s ‘Battle’, published only months earlier, arguing:

The tremendous problem looming behind the immediate urgency of winning the war, is the ultimate urgency of gaining some cohesion of thought on this matter of the Australian ideal of life.\(^{59}\)

Importantly though, Drake-Brockman emphasised that to achieve this the writing community must ‘catch the imagination of the people of its own country . . . it must have the common touch, the power to weld a literate people, in time of crisis, to one increasing purpose’.\(^{60}\) Unlike many members of ‘the little company’, discussed in the introduction, Drake-Brockman consciously produced literature for a broad, popular audience. Laugesen points out that Drake-Brockman’s historical and critical neglect is in part due to the fact that her work has not been considered ‘serious literature’.\(^{61}\) Although Drake-Brockman was more willing than some writers to produce commercial material, she remained hopeful that the war would inspire a ‘vast reorientation’ among the public which would ensure that nationalism and an interest in the peculiarities of the ‘Australian character’ would become central to Australian cultural concerns.\(^{62}\)

\(^{58}\) Henrietta Drake-Brockman to Miles Franklin, 2 September 1946, series 3, box 12, folder 12, MS 1634, Papers of Henrietta Drake-Brockman, 1882-1975, NLA, Canberra.


\(^{60}\) Ibid., 8.

\(^{61}\) Laugesen, ‘Writing the North-West, Past and Present’, 112.

Finally, like many of her literary contemporaries, Drake-Brockman had read D.H. Lawrence’s assessment of Australia in *Kangaroo*. She agreed that the continent was dominated by a:

> sinister silence which is made up of a thousand tiny sounds; of that oppressive sense of being an intruder, blatantly new, small, of no account, which is apt to overwhelm you whenever you stand in the depths of the forest – and feel the trees watching! Then you know that Australia is an old, old land; and you know she is loth to part with her solitude, half-fearful, half-resentful of giving her soil to the harvesting of man.  

At the same time, like E.J. Brady, she believed ‘the majority of Australians have not for a very long time been fundamentally resentful of their physical surroundings’ and was primarily interested in dramatising and celebrating the Australian ‘struggle to wrest the land from its natural apathy’. Her short story ‘The Gamblers’, about a soldier settler couple in the Western Australian wheatbelt, demonstrated Drake-Brockman’s willingness to depict the difficulties and even failures that were a part of this ‘struggle’.

**The Gamblers**

‘The Gamblers’ was first published in *The Bulletin* in 1934 and was later collected in Drake-Brockman’s 1948 book *Sydney or the Bush: Short Stories*. The short story introduces Mabe and Fred Willis, a married couple who have lived on a soldier settler allotment for thirteen years. They are in debt, nearly out of food and have had to regularly trap rabbits to eat. One of their children was killed in an accident on the farm and the other two have left as adults. The narrator moves between the perspective of Mabe, who is sitting in the dark in the couple’s two-room iron shanty, and Fred who is out walking on their property. Both are reflecting on the financial failure of their farm and the years of hard work that seem to have amounted to nothing. There is no sense of the specific geographic location of the farm; it is only described as being in ‘wheat country’. Given Drake-Brockman’s inclination to set her literary work in Western Australia it is likely that this refers to the Western Australian wheatbelt.

‘The Gamblers’ sets out what might be considered a typical failed soldier settler situation for those settled on marginal wheat-growing land. The story touches on debt,

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64 Ibid., 4.
inability to continue to purchase goods on credit at the local store, years of hard work for no financial gain, poor living conditions and diet, migration of children, high cost of farm technology and the relationship between war experience and life on the land. Both Mabe and Fred reflect on the farm as a place in which so much of their lives is embedded; it actually holds the body of their young son killed on the property. At the same time, there is a sense that the land is an enemy. Fred looks out over a long strip of land he had ‘cleared unaided’ only to see that ‘dark feelers from the scrub beyond were already sneering at his labours . . . and it seemed to him to-night, at all the labours of generations before’.66 While contemplating the farm’s failure, Fred reflects on some advice his father once gave him: ‘Learn to stake high – and to laugh when you lose’.67 Significantly, Fred’s father was present at the Ballarat gold diggings and the Eureka Stockade – when another earlier set of heroic ‘diggers’ had come to be associated with a distinctively Australian sense of egalitarianism. Gold evokes both the glory of nineteenth-century mining and the regret that those exhilarating days had passed.68 Fred also recalls a wartime friend who died smiling when ‘going over the top’ at Gallipoli. Like gold mining, the Anzac legend had both glory and failure at its heart. Based partly on these ‘quintessentially “Australian”’ experiences and memories, Fred decides that it is best that he and Mabe leave the property, but that they ‘go down smiling’.69

Fred returns to the shanty and convinces Mabe that, like him, she is a gambler but this time the gamble has not paid off. With his father’s advice in his mind, and now making the reference to mining clear, Fred argues that ‘all good diggers’ are gamblers, ‘it’s what keeps the country going’.70 The couple leave the property during the night:

Behind, the shack, unlit, gleamed white as a skeleton long-bleached.
In silence they walked straight ahead, and their breath blew out on
the cold air in vapour as vague and as separate as their thoughts.

Where the road branched the woman half-turned, but the man caught her arm.

66 Ibid., 41.
67 Ibid.
“No looking back!” he said gruffly. “That farm belongs to the bank. We’ve got nothing to do with it – it’s nothing to you or to me, Mabe. You and me’s going to look forward. So step it out sharp, or we’ll miss the rattler.”

This is clearly an attempt by Fred and Mabe to escape their mounting debt. William Scates Frances argues that after years of fruitless toil, soldier settlers often felt that abandoning their properties and evading debt collectors and police was their only remaining option. Yet this powerful image of the couple abandoning their property in darkness with only what they can carry suggests something more than a desire to get a head start on debt collectors. By placing the paradox of going ‘down smiling’ and leaving under the cover of darkness at the climax of the story, Drake-Brockman evokes a sense of humiliation in the couple’s failure to tame the land and shame in deserting neighbours who are left to carry on the communal effort of settlement. Despite Fred’s insistence that they accept defeat cheerfully and always ‘look forward’, the final lines of the story convey a deep sense of unease and uncertainty.

It is significant that ‘The Gamblers’ found initial publication in the pages of The Bulletin. Although only short, the story manages to evoke a range of themes that the newspaper claimed had powerfully shaped the Australian character: gold mining, the transience associated with rural Australia, the difficulties of agricultural pioneering and the new myth of Anzac. Soldier settlement schemes provoked an emotive and politically potent mixture of Anzac, Bush and pioneer legends.

**Anzacs and the Bush**

John Williams argues that ‘before a shot had been fired or an enemy even sighted, the legend had already surfaced that the elite of the still-to-be-named Australian Imperial Force (AIF) came from the bush’. This belief gained currency throughout the war. In 1918 C.E.W. Bean claimed that the AIF had learned ‘beyond all possible dispute, that the big, healthy, strong races are the country races; and that those soldiers who come from the big, crowded cities tend to be little, white-faced, stunted, narrow-

71 Ibid., 42.
72 Scates Frances, ‘Unsuitable from the Start’, 49.
chested men’. According to Bean, ‘for a nation to be strong, the best life is country life, where a man is mostly his own master and has to make up his mind for himself and contrive all sorts of things for himself which in the cities are provided for him’. Bean advocated a continued emphasis on raising supposedly superior men in the ‘fresh air and open space’ of rural Australia. The Anzac legend, born at Gallipoli in the Great War, shared many of the features of older myths – such as the Bush legend of the 1890s and the yeoman ideal – particularly the conviction that country and outdoor life was superior to urban industrial life.

In the soldier settler context, historians have specifically noted the connection between the literature the Australian 1890s and the new Anzac legend. Fedorowich argues that ‘the cross-fertilisation of the outback, yeoman and Anzac traditions had important political implications during the post-war era’, and that these connections helped fuel widespread enthusiasm for soldier settlement. He adds that ‘the soldier settler combined the ideals of the yeoman farmer with the Anzac tradition to become a symbol of post-war political stability’. According to Richard Waterhouse, after the Great War political conservatives appropriated the once radical Bush legend; the legend now existed ‘in a sanitised form: the emphasis was less on the anti-authoritarianist qualities of the digger and more on his unselfishness, his nobility, his willingness to sacrifice’. Additionally, Scates and Oppenheimer argue that during and after the Great War ‘the masculine idea of the bushman had morphed into the soldier, the Anzac’. Although these historians acknowledge the influence of the Bush legend, yeoman ideal and Anzac myth in soldier settlement rhetoric, none have considered the way the writing community – largely responsible for valorising the bushman in the 1890s and reviving Bush legend later – represented soldier settlement. Moreover, while

75 Bean, In Your Hands Australians, 22.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
79 Fedorowich, Unfit for Heroes, 146.
80 Ibid.
81 Waterhouse, The Vision Splendid, 258.
82 Scates and Oppenheimer, The Last Battle, 4.
historians have identified connections to the Bush legend, John Hirst’s concept of the ‘pioneer legend’ is perhaps more applicable in the soldier settler context.

Hirst argues that a ‘pioneer legend’ developed in Australia in the 1890s in parallel with, though not completely detached from, the more widely celebrated Bush legend. According to Hirst, the pioneer legend celebrated ‘courage, enterprise, hard work and perseverance’ and ‘usually applied to the people who first settled the land, whether as pastoralists or farmers’. Rather than an emphasis on itinerant bush workers, collectivism and political radicalism, the pioneer legend was ‘conservative in its political implications’ tended to celebrate pioneering families and preferred to see hardships overcome through ‘individual effort’. Although Hirst primarily traces the myth through the nineteenth century, he explains that it continued to be influential in the twentieth century and offered powerful ideological inspiration for postwar soldier settler schemes.

The influence of the pioneer legend helped to ensure that soldier settlement schemes carried conservative political implications. They were, as mentioned, a measure designed by governments to disperse and control disruptive and potentially radical men in Australian cities. Moreover, the desire to move men and their families into the country was a symptom of broader social anxieties across the Western world, which emphasised the possibility of social and racial degeneration in large, overcrowded cities. It was believed that the countryside improved physical health and encouraged the adherence to traditional values. However, support for soldier settlement was not exclusively conservative. In fact, soldier settlement schemes were intended to continue the work of pre-war closer settlement legislation in dismantling land monopolies held

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84 Hirst, ‘The Pioneer Legend’, 316-7 and 332.

85 Ibid., 334.

by many wealthy pastoralists; a goal which found support among progressives and socialists such as E.J. Brady, Vance Palmer and William Hatfield. Soldier settlement was a subset of broader ‘nostalgic agrarian dreams’ around which, according to Kate Murphy, there was a ‘tendency for liberal, conservative and even socialist thought to converge’. 87

Moreover, soldier settlers were not always exemplars of postwar political conservatism and stability. Scates and Oppenheimer demonstrate that ‘the language of trade unionism pervaded soldier settler grievances’ and that soldiers were ‘fighting for their rights’ when they wrote to government departments, politicians and newspapers about their plight. 88 Scates and Oppenheimer even argue that abandoning soldier settler blocks was a form of protest. 89 Yet, authors who engaged with soldier settlement in the 1930s and 1940s, while highlighting the difficulties faced by settlers, generally did not register the ‘language of entitlement’ and ‘deep sense of being wronged’ articulated by soldiers and their family members. 90 Rather, there was a tendency to suggest that as former soldiers and now rural residents the settlers possessed particular strengths that would help them to navigate any adversity without the intervention of the state.

In ‘The Gamblers’ it is clear that war service has not automatically prepared men to be successful farmers. Yet there is no indication that Fred and Mabe might seek government assistance. Rather, Fred accepts this ‘gamble’ on the land as his own and even connects this risk to his war service; he had been ‘ready enough to gamble with life on new land, just as for years he had gambled with death in No Man’s Land’. 91 Despite his disappointment with the farm’s failure, Fred does not seem to hold the government that oversaw his settlement responsible for his defeat. In fact, Fred argues that it is the risk he and Mabe have taken, combined with those shouldered by other individuals around Australia, that ‘keeps the country going’. 92 Appropriately enough, in her foreword to her Sydney or the Bush collection, Drake-Brockman wrote: ‘We are a nation of gamblers; and often our stakes are very high’, suggesting she saw gambling

87 Murphy, Fears and Fantasies, 35.
89 Ibid., 237.
90 Scates and Oppenheimer, The Last Battle, 67-68.
92 Ibid., 42.
as a national characteristic and perhaps even a virtue. In this sense, ‘The Gamblers’ maintains the expectation that rural Australian men would be decisive, accept personal responsibility for their own misfortune, and independently launch themselves into new challenges. In ‘The Gamblers’, Fred’s determination to ‘go down smiling’, however fraught, demonstrates a common theme in soldier settler literature; that even failed soldier settlers should confront hardship bravely, just as they had during their war service.

In 1928 Fred Davison, Frank Dalby Davison’s father and the first president of the New South Wales branch of RSSILA, called on soldier settlers to ‘cut the outstretched hand’ and pleas for government assistance. According to Davison senior, the “‘Gi’mee” attitude is unworthy of the Digger’ and it was time ‘for the soldier settlers to help themselves’. ‘Signaller’ was less accusatory. In his 1933 article in the agricultural magazine The Land, ‘Signaller’ surveyed the situation of a variety of his acquaintances who had taken up farms after their war service. He argued that on the land most of the men ‘have had a pretty hard fight, but those I have met in recent years are facing their troubles in the same spirit that they displayed in facing the hardships of war’. In the poem ‘A Cry from the Mallee’ (1930), Edward Harrington – himself a soldier who ‘went broke on a Mallee farm’ after the Great War, though not as an official soldier settler – outlined the difficulties faced by soldier settlers. These included isolation, drought and missing the ‘city’s joys’. Particularly disappointing were the ‘scrub and sand’ and ‘barren and wind-swept slopes’ with which the settlers were confronted, in place of the ‘thriving flocks and / paddocks of waving wheat’ that they envisaged in the early stages of their settlement.

The poem also included the quite extraordinary suggestion that a soldier would ‘sooner be fighting the Christian Hun or / chasing the pagan Turk’ than continuing to farm the Mallee. Despite the overall negativity of the poem, the final stanza ends on a hopeful note:

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93 Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Sydney or the Bush: Short Stories (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1948), np.
95 ‘Signaller’, ‘The Sword and the Plough’, The Land, 21 April 1933, 8.
98 Ibid.
But sooner or later the drought must break,
and the seasons change again.
We still have faith, though our hearts may
ache, and we’ll battle along till then.
You’ll get most things if you’re game to fight,
and we’ll reap our just reward
When Fortune smiles and the sun shines
bring on hope and a land restored.\(^9\)

Although there is no indication that the settlers are abandoning their farms, here, as in
‘The Gamblers’, there is an uneasy mix of optimism and disillusion and an expectation
that the individual settlers will ‘battle along’ and ‘fight’ in order to survive.

In his novel *For Heroes To Live In* (1948), Drake-Brockman’s literary friend John K.
Ewers explored the psychological difficulties suffered by returned servicemen, but also
reaffirmed his confidence in the ability of Australia’s rural residents to endure hardship.
Ewers was a schoolteacher who worked primarily in Perth, but also taught in the
wheatbelt town of South Tammin between 1924 and 1926; he stopped teaching in
1947 when he became a professional writer.\(^10\) In the 1930s, when family saga was a
popular genre of fiction, Ewers began work on a series of novels set in the Western
Australian wheatbelt.\(^11\) Only the first two novels were published; *Men Against the Earth*
(1946) is set in the wheatbelt between 1907 and 1918 and *For Heroes to Live In* (1948)
follows the fortunes of soldier settlers Ross and Avea Daniels in the postwar years.
The title *For Heroes to Live In* was an allusion to British Prime Minister Lloyd George’s
1918 election promise to build postwar homes ‘fit for heroes to live in’.\(^12\)

In the novel Ross Daniels, recently returned from the war, abandons his pre-war
occupation of school teaching to take up a soldier settler block with his new wife Avea.
In part, he is driven by the belief that farming offers a sense of escape and freedom
‘after four and a half years of army regulations’; he is enthusiastic about ‘rabbits and
wheat and sheep. The feeling of being one’s own boss. No rules and regulations’.\(^13\)

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\(^9\) Ibid.

\(^10\) Tony Hughes-d’Aeth, ‘The Shadow on the Field: Literature and Ecology in the Western Australian
Wheatbelt’, in *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and their Writers*, eds. C.A. Cranston and Robert Zeller,
(Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 56.

\(^11\) Tony Hughes-d’Aeth, *Like Nothing on this Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt* (Crawley: UWA

\(^12\) ‘Mr. Lloyd George on His Task’, *The Times* (London), 25 November 1918, 13.

Unlike many soldier settlers who are struggling ‘on the dry fringe of the wheatbelt’ where ‘things were pretty bad’ due to drought and salinity, the Daniels secure a farm in an established district and are doing relatively well.\textsuperscript{104} Despite this, the pressures of debt, drought, crop failure, rabbit infestations and a growing family begin to mount throughout the 1920s, culminating with plummeting wheat prices in 1930. As a result, Ross becomes anxious about the chance involved in farming; ‘it was the gamble of the thing that got him down’.\textsuperscript{105} He is irritated ‘beyond measure’ when Avea asks ‘Oh, what’s life but a gamble, anyhow?’\textsuperscript{106} When markets collapse altogether during the Great Depression, Ross becomes increasingly aggrieved about the risk involved in his farming venture. As he listens to the 1930 Ashes cricket series on the wireless, Ross hears the commentators talk about:

what they called “the glorious uncertainty of the game.” Ross supposed “glorious uncertainty” was all right in a game, when it didn’t matter if you won or lost. But when it was your living that was uncertain, it was only glorious when times were good and prices high.\textsuperscript{107}

In the final chapters of the book, this uncertainty becomes too much for Ross, and his farm, war and Depression experiences seem to merge:

The stubble and the standing wheat became transformed into all the things he had fought or wanted to fight against . . . row upon row of Germans advancing grey-green over no-man’s land . . . ignorance and prejudice standing in the way of understanding . . . privilege and vested interests holding up the world, starving millions, crushing others in an attempt to safeguard themselves, reducing labour to a pittance, killing dreams, smashing ambitions, stifling hope.\textsuperscript{108}

Ross commits suicide on the farm. While Ross succumbs to the psychological scars of war in combination to the pressures of rural life, in the final pages of the novel – in a conclusion reminiscent of Harrington’s ‘Cry From the Mallee’ – Avea with ‘quiet determination’ decides that she and her children will continue to work the farm.\textsuperscript{109}

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 213 and 218.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 177. The chance involved in soldier settlement has been emphasised since the 1940s. Jill Ker Conway described soldier settlement as a ‘gamble for independence’, see Jill Ker Conway, The Road From Coorain (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 19. As recently as 2016, Scates and Oppenheimer emphasised that luck played a significant role in whether soldier settlers would succeed or fail on their block, see, Scates and Oppenheimer, The Last Battle, 245.

\textsuperscript{106} Ewers, For Heroes to Live In, 177.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 197.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 240.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 248.
It is significant that both Ewers and Drake-Brockman afford Avea and Mabe, the wives of soldier settlers, considerable attention in their stories. In a sense this was unusual, as the struggles and sacrifices of women on soldier settler blocks often went unacknowledged in the interwar years.\footnote{Scates and Oppenheimer note that women who had served in the war, usually as nurses, were eligible to apply for a soldier settlement block. There were, however, only a small number of these women and they do not appear in works of literature about soldier settlement. See Scates and Oppenheimer, \textit{The Last Battle}, 204-6.} But it also demonstrates that women and children were considered critical to the project of transforming Anzacs into successful rural pioneers. Women and children were a source of farm labour, but also represented stability and domestication; they would, it was presumed, ensure returned soldiers were productive and moral rural citizens. Moreover, a continent peopled by stable, productive families, in contrast to the transient and independent bushmen of Australia’s nineteenth-century frontier, was envisioned as a critical step toward Australia’s national maturity. According to Bean, large sheep stations that only supported a few usually single men could be divided into small farms that had the capacity to support hundreds; crucially for Bean’s idealised rural vision, these new residents would be families.\footnote{Bean, \textit{In Your Hands Australians}, 53.} There was an expectation that these families would conform to traditional Victorian notions of gender, and a belief that ‘the true qualities of manliness and womanliness flourished in the country’.\footnote{Murphy, \textit{Fears and Fantasies}, 3. See also, Garton, \textit{The Cost of War}, 131.} As a result, women were generally expected to fulfil traditional roles of domestic helpmate and wife. For example, in 1920 an article in \textit{Aussie} urged women’s groups to arrange mobile kitchens to feed the many single and widowed soldier settlers who were disrupted from their daily farm work by the necessity of cooking their own meals.\footnote{‘Urbania’, ‘Tuckering the Soldier Settler’, \textit{Aussie: The Cheerful Monthly}, no. 19 (1920): 10.} In reality, the wives and children of soldier settlers often, out of necessity or desire, carried out tasks traditionally considered men’s work, though this was rarely publicly acknowledged.\footnote{Waterhouse, ‘The Yeoman Ideal and Australian Experience, 1860-1960’, 457.} Ewers and Drake-Brockman both recognised the valuable contribution women made under soldier settlement schemes. In \textit{For Heroes to Live In} it is Avea who actively chooses to continue to work the farm as a single mother, and in ‘The Gamblers’ Fred casts his wife Mabe as much a ‘digger’ and, significantly, a ‘gambler’ as himself.
From gold diggers to Gallipoli and English yeoman to Australian bushmen, writers sought to demonstrate that soldier settlers – and their ultimate failure – could be understood with reference to older myths about the Australian relationship to the rural landscape. It was, however, the concept of the pioneer that dominated literary engagement with soldier settlement. Pioneering families would be hard-working and resilient and, crucially, would take personal responsibility for their ‘gamble’ on the land.

Another chance
Soldier settlement schemes failed to permanently integrate thousands of returning soldiers into rural Australian communities. Lake argues that this failure not only resulted in thousands of personal catastrophes, but also signalled the end of a long history of rural development that had emphasised the desirability of closer settlement, the yeoman farmer and small family-run blocks. According to Lake, soldier settlement discredited the belief that the yeoman ideal could operate in Australia and ultimately had the effect of increasing migration to major cities.\footnote{115} The problems associated with World War One soldier settlement schemes certainly influenced attitudes to Australian land settlement; they at least led to a much more careful soldier settlement scheme after World War Two.\footnote{116} However, like Stephen Garton, I believe that the disappointing results of soldier settlement did not weaken popular Australian enthusiasm for land settlement, even if government interest temporarily waned.\footnote{117} Rather, the failure of many soldier settlers contributed to a transition from traditional ways of thinking about closer settlement to a more twentieth-century attitude that emphasised the role engineering and science might play in more densely populating the Australian continent. Graeme Davison argues that at the ‘end of the Great Depression, and in spite of a long drought’ – and here I will add in spite of many failed soldier setters – ‘Australians were still reluctant to surrender their vision of a more populous and prosperous countryside’. However, now ‘many people believed that science and technology could achieve’ what state governments had failed to do.\footnote{118}

\footnote{115}Lake, The Limits of Hope.
\footnote{116}Fry, ‘Soldier Settlement and the Australian Agrarian Myth after the First World War’, 29.
\footnote{117}Garton, The Cost of War, 135.
Ambitious engineering proposals to irrigate and populate inland Australia, often inspired by hydrological schemes undertaken in the United States and Soviet Union, were a feature of the late 1930s and 1940s. In the late 1930s engineer J.J.C. Bradfield, best known for his involvement in the design and construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, proposed a scheme to dam and divert the rivers of North Queensland so that they would flow into the often-dry rivers of western Queensland rather than out to sea. Writers such as Ion Idriess, William Hatfield, and Ernestine Hill enthusiastically advocated the well-known Bradfield scheme and others like it. Hatfield’s vision for a post-World War Two socialist Australia and his belief that the irrigation, population and modernisation of the inland was integral to such a goal, is explored in detail in chapter seven.

‘The Gamblers’ demonstrates that Drake-Brockman was acutely aware of many of the problems faced by soldier settlers on marginal land after the Great War, but this certainly did not diminish her own interest in the irrigation and closer settlement of remote regions of Australia. When reflecting on writing the novel Younger Sons (1937) in the early 1930s, Drake-Brockman said that she had been excited by the Western Australian centenary of 1929 and ‘all the stories of pioneering [she had] heard at first hand from members of [her] husband’s family’. This was approximately the same time ‘The Gamblers’ was written, suggesting that Drake-Brockman remained enthusiastic about further settlement in Australia, despite her awareness of soldier settler hardships. Moreover, like other irrigation enthusiasts, Drake-Brockman began to emphasise that twentieth-century technology would be able to overcome previous settlement problems. In a 1947 collection of her Walkabout articles, Drake-Brockman trusted the ‘scientific resourcefulness of modern agricultural experts’ to ‘create necessary techniques and solve problems’ in relation to water engineering in the Kimberley region of the north-west.

119 Ion L. Idriess, The Great Boomerang (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1941); William Hatfield, Australia Reclaimed (Parramatta: Cumberland Newspapers Limited, 1944); Ernestine Hill, Water Into Gold (Melbourne: Robertson & Mullens, 1937).
120 Henrietta Drake-Brockman, ‘Readings by Henrietta Drake-Brockman in the Hazel de Berg collection’, March 1960, ORAL TRC 1/78, NLA.
Drake-Brockman and her civil-engineer husband were both ‘great champions of developing and settling the North-West of Australia’ well into the 1960s. In 1939 both Drake-Brockmans, along with a range of other prominent West Australians, were confident in the environmental capacity of the Kimberley to support a settlement of Jewish refugees, though this never eventuated. Geoffrey Drake-Brockman published and gave lectures on development and irrigation and was one of the earliest advocates of damming the Ord River in the Kimberley; in the 1960s he remained convinced that ‘the patience, skill, and leadership of engineers and scientists’ could transform the remote north-west. Similarly, Henrietta Drake-Brockman argued that the combination of ‘water, applied mathematics, [and] irrigation’ were ‘the stuff that miracles are made of’.

In the revealingly titled article ‘Domesticating a Continent’ (1962), Henrietta Drake-Brockman argued that:

the full settlement of Australia has come to depend on what developments can be made in modern civil and mechanical engineering, more especially on the part played by electrical and aeronautic techniques in creating a quickly habitable environment for modern white women, and making it safe for them to embark on family raising in the outback.

Rather than the deprivation experienced by Fred and Mabe in ‘The Gamblers’, Drake-Brockman believed that modern technology could be harnessed to make remote Australia as liveable as the city. This would, according to her, finally enable large numbers of women to reside in, and ultimately ‘domesticate’, the whole of the Australian continent; an aspiration that had characterised the earlier vision of soldier settlement. For Drake-Brockman, ‘the future of Australia [lay] . . . very much in the hands of the engineers and the women’. Ernestine Hill similarly emphasised the need for white women in Australia’s north, who would ‘share the lives of their own white

122 Laugesen, ‘Writing the North-West, Past and Present’, 116.
125 Drake-Brockman, On the North-West Skyline, 30.
127 Ibid., 54.
men so patiently plodding on through the years, and rear children who understand and love the country for its own sake’. According to Hill, women would ensure remote Australia was not ‘a haunted, homeless loneliness’. In her 1938 play *Men Without Wives*, Drake Brockman also suggested that the presence of white women in the country’s north would guard against miscegenation. Drake-Brockman and Hill assumed the presence of large numbers of white women and their families in remote regions of Australia would represent the closing of Australian frontiers.

In 1947, criticising the historic failures of Australian land settlement, Samuel Wadham argued:

> It is no use crying we did not know. We did know – our experts forecast all that has happened, only being born gamblers, we took a chance, hoped for the best, and as usual drew a blank.

Echoing Drake-Brockman’s assertion that Australia was a ‘nation of gamblers’, Wadham suggested gambling on the land was an Australian national characteristic. However, rather than celebrating this propensity, Wadham rebuked Australians for ignoring sound expert advice that might have prevented a variety of historical land settlement disasters. While he did not specifically refer to soldier settlement he likely had this recent disappointment in mind. Drake-Brockman’s ongoing interest in settling remote Australia, despite her knowledge of the hardships of soldier settlement, serves as an example of Wadham’s complaint. There remained continuing enthusiasm among Australians for densely peopling the continent with small family-run farms. However, while post-World War One soldier settlement schemes emphasised the individual labour of farmers and their families, between the 1930s and 1960s it was widely believed that large-scale engineering and irrigation projects held the key to populating the continent and fulfilling the romantic vision of Australia peopled by yeoman farmers.

Soldier settlement schemes were an attempt to apply a traditional solution to a decidedly modern problem, the demobilisation and repatriation of an unprecedented number of men. The results were disappointing. Literary sources registered this

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130 Wadham, *Reconstruction and the Primary Industries*, 18.
disappointment and occasionally suggested the futility of some forms of settlement in Australia. However, for the most part, writers celebrated soldier settlers and their families as resilient rural residents whose mythic lineage included yeoman farmers, bushmen, pioneers and Anzacs. While the failure of so many soldiers on the land might have indicated the environmental limits of the Australian continent, many Australians remained hopeful that technology would facilitate continued rural expansion. The car – one new form of technology making rural Australia ever more accessible – is the subject of the following chapter.
Chapter Three

Roadside Beauty: Frank Dalby Davison and Brooke Nicholls Drive the East Coast

The swagman is fading from the Australian picture. Men don’t as a rule, in these days, tramp the roads in search of a job. Our wayfarer, with his bluey on his back and a billy dangling from one hand, was most likely just a derelict, living in the tradition of days that have gone. He lifted his face at the moment of our passing. It was a poor face, vacant and purposeless. We imagined that he was just tramping; marching with unhurried steps towards a destination that retreated as he advanced.¹

In 1934, on the first day of a caravan journey between Sydney and Cairns, Frank Dalby Davison and Brooke Nicholls observed a swagman travelling on foot along the side of the Pacific Highway just north of Sydney. The Australian swagman, an itinerant rural worker, had been romantically immortalised in the literature of the nineteenth century, particularly the Bush ballads of The Bulletin in the 1890s.² Yet this particular swagman, potentially an urban-dweller driven from the city by Depression-era unemployment, was described as ‘just a derelict, living in the tradition of days that have gone’. Although Davison and Nicholls did not explicitly acknowledge it, the swagman’s ‘unhurried steps’ were a stark contrast to their own petrol-fuelled modernity. The brief interaction between the motorists and the swagman demonstrates that the material modernity of

¹ Frank Dalby Davison and Brooke Nicholls, Blue Coast Caravan (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1935), 7.
the twentieth century had the power to transform the swagman, once an icon of the modernising and heroic Australian frontier, into an unsophisticated and even degraded figure.

Novelist, short story writer, and former soldier settler Frank Dalby Davison and dentist, amateur naturalist and photographer Brooke Nicholls recorded their sighting of the swagman in their co-authored travel book *Blue Coast Caravan* (1935). The book recorded their caravan and train journey north along Australia’s east coast between Sydney and Cairns and the landscapes, some aesthetically pleasing and others unattractive, that they encountered along the way. *Blue Coast Caravan* was written from a group perspective – encompassing Davison, Nicholls and their wives Kay Davison and Barbara Nicholls who accompanied them on the journey – and there was generally no distinction made between the opinions of the four caravanners. The group’s ultimate destination was Green Island, a coral cay 27 kilometres off the coast of Cairns on the Great Barrier Reef. For two weeks, they camped on the island and enjoyed swimming, beachcombing and exploring the island’s jungle paths. Davison and Nicholls’ car trip, and the resultant *Blue Coast Caravan*, offers important insights into the boom in travel literature in the 1930s and into the transformations that the Australian landscape underwent in the wake of increased interwar tourism.

During the 1930s, cars, buses, tourists and the infrastructure that supported them, proliferated across Australia, reshaping the way that Australians physically experienced the landscape. The commencement of car touring brought a great number of enthusiastic urban citizens into contact with a range of Australian landscapes, often for the first time. Tourists were primarily interested in visiting natural ‘beauty spots’ to experience what was perceived as ‘wild’ Australian nature, but to get to these locations they often had to travel through settled landscapes. Suddenly, agricultural and pastoral regions as well as rural towns and even homesteads, which had once been primarily functional, attracted the aesthetic scrutiny of travellers. *Blue Coast Caravan* demonstrates that the appearance of these landscapes was expected to change in order to meet the expectations of the tourists who experienced them. Moreover, Davison and Nicholls suggested that beauty, ideally achieved through a balance between native and ‘humanised’ landscapes, could signal a kind of maturity in the Australian settlement.
Frank Dalby Davison was born Frederick Douglas Davison in 1893 in Hawthorn, Melbourne. His father, also Frederick Davison but better known as Fred, ran a successful printing business and was an enthusiastic member of the Australian Natives’ Association, a friendly society and nationalist political pressure group. Davison junior left school at the age of twelve and spent three years working as a farm labourer on his uncle’s property north of Melbourne until his father moved the family to the United States. In America, Davison worked as a printer’s apprentice and served on a Caribbean cargo ship. In 1915 he travelled to England where he met and married his first wife Agnes ‘Kay’ Ede and enlisted in the British Army. He served on the Western Front and in 1918 was sent back to England for officer training and was commissioned, but the war ended before he could return to France.

In 1919 Davison returned to Australia with his wife and first child. The family took up a prickly pear infested soldier settlement block at Injune, Queensland, where they ran a small dairy farm. Davison gifted his wife a copy of Jeannie Gunn’s *We of the Never-Never* (1900), an autobiographical novel of hardship on a remote cattle station in the Northern Territory, to ‘prepare her’ for life in rural Australia. Later in life, Kay Davison claimed that in comparison to her own experience Gunn ‘had it easy’. During their time at Injune, Davison began to contribute poems and short stories to his father’s magazine *The Australian Post*. Like many other soldier settlement blocks, the Davisons’ farm failed; Davison withdrew from his lease in 1923 and the family moved to Sydney, where he worked at his father’s real estate business before establishing his own. He also became advertising manager for his father’s magazine, now simply called *The Australian*. During the Depression, Davison’s real estate business failed and he started to write for a living.

In 1931 Davison self-published two novels, *Forever Morning* and *Man-Shy*, binding them in wallpaper and selling them door to door. *Man-Shy* went on to win the Australian

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5 Frank Dalby Davison, *Caribbean Interlude* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1936).
6 Webster, *The Outward Journey*, 127.
7 Kay Davison, interview by Owen Webster, May 1971, ORAL TRC 509/3-5, NLA, Canberra.
8 Webster, *The Outward Journey*, 244.
Literature Society’s gold medal for the best novel of 1931 and subsequently found a publisher in Angus and Robertson. This achievement brought Davison into contact with the Australian literary community of the early 1930s. He struck up important friendships with Vance and Nettie Palmer, Flora Eldershaw, and Marjorie Barnard with whom he would also have a romantic affair. Despite this literary success, the Davison family struggled financially during the Depression. In response, Davison took up an offer put forward by Brooke Nicholls to undertake a four-month car trip from Sydney to Cairns with the intention of publishing a travel book afterward under both their names.

Edward Dunham Brooke Nicholls was sixteen years Davison’s senior, born in 1877 in Melbourne. He was a trained dentist who gave up his career to pursue a life as an amateur naturalist, nature writer, photographer and filmmaker. His wife Barbara Nicholls was also an amateur naturalist. Nicholls was a founder of the Gould League of Bird Lovers of Victoria and member of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists’ Union. He was clearly influenced by transcendental environmental thought; he instigated and largely financed a small group of Melbourne nature lovers called the ‘Woodlanders’ who spent their weekends in a bush hut they called ‘Walden’ in Victoria’s Dandenongs in the early 1900s. Charles Barrett and Claude Kinane were his fellow Woodlanders and nature writer Donald Macdonald was a frequent visitor to their Australian ‘Walden’. Throughout Blue Coast Caravan Nicholls was referred to as ‘The Doctor’, a nickname he had acquired in his Woodlander days. Barrett and Nicholls also travelled extensively together through New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia in the first two decades of the twentieth century, often as part of Royal Australasian Ornithologists’ Union ‘camps-out’. Across 1932 and 1933, Nicholls undertook a long journey through Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland during which he gave nature lectures and presented crowds with ‘Jacko’,

10 Brooke Nicholls, Jacko the Broadcasting Kookaburra: His Life and Adventures (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1933), 48.

Nicholls financed the 1934 journey between Sydney and Cairns and provided the caravan. According to Davison, who retrospectively described Nicholls as a ‘book-mad man of means’, this solved some financial problems for he and his wife during the Depression. Like Davison, Charles Barrett and Alec Chisholm both recalled Nicholls’ enthusiasm for authorship – he was known to proclaim; ‘There’s a book in it, boy!’ Nicholls probably saw in the partnership with Davison an opportunity to fulfil his literary ambitions. The chief purpose of the trip was to produce a travel book based on the experience; Davison, the more literary of the two, wrote the majority of *Blue Coast Caravan*. Nicholls’ name appeared in slightly smaller font on the dust jacket and title page of the book (see Figure 3.1). As a result, the book has only attracted the attention of historians and literary critics interested in Frank Dalby Davison; Nicholls’ contribution to *Blue Coast Caravan* has generally been overlooked.

Louise Rorabacher and Robert Darby give Nicholls only passing mention and Hume Dow openly dismisses the role he played in the book, rejecting the ‘supposed collaboration’ between the authors. In contrast, some contemporary reviews of *Blue Coast Caravan* recognised the importance of the book’s co-authorship. In the Launceston *Examiner*, a reviewer argued:

> the ability of Frank Dalby Davison, author of “Man-Shy” and “Forever Morning,” in association with the sound knowledge of Australia’s natural history possessed by Dr. Brooke Nicholls, was needed to make such an absorbing story of a mere motor caravan trip from Sydney to Cairns.

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16 Frank Dalby Davison to Don Meacham, 22 August 1942, series 1, box 1, folder 2, item 224-230, MS 1945, Papers of Frank Dalby Davison, 1859-1970, NLA, Canberra.


18 Davison and Nicholls, ‘Forward’, *Blue Coast Caravan*, np.


In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, another reviewer imagined that the detailed description of the landscape in *Blue Coast Caravan* was possible because ‘behind the pen of the novelist is the experienced eye of the naturalist’. Certainly Nicholls was sufficiently involved in the writing process to get on Davison’s nerves. In December 1934, once the caravanners had returned from their trip, Nicholls sent Davison 20 000 words which he expected to be incorporated into the manuscript. Davison complained to his friend Vance Palmer that ‘the trouble is that Nicholls’ interests are particular – doodle-bugs and similar things – while mine are general’. Nicholls was likely interested in producing a nature book while Davison, who had recently entered the Australian literary community that was preoccupied with nationalism and international political crises, was eager to address broader national problems. Far less biographical information exists on Nicholls than does on Davison, making it difficult to analyse Nicholls’ contribution. Yet, it would be dangerous to forget or dismiss the co-authorship of *Blue Coast Caravan* and the influence that Nicholls’ financial and practical contributions as well as his experience as a naturalist had on the book.

![Figure 3.1: Dust jacket of *Blue Coast Caravan*. Nicholls’ name appeared in a smaller font than Davison’s. Frank Dalby Davison and Brooke Nicholls, *Blue Coast Caravan* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1935).](image)

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22 Frank Dalby Davison to Vance Palmer, December 1934, series 1, binder 39, item 4535-7, MS 1174, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer 1889-1964, NLA, Canberra.
Figure 3.2: The route travelled by Frank Dalby Davison and Brooke Nicholls from Sydney to Cairns, with some of their significant stops highlighted. Map created by Jasmine Sarin, JS Koori Designs.
Historians and critics have tended to dismiss Blue Coast Caravan as a minor work in Davison’s literary oeuvre and have overlooked the book’s significance as an example of the boom in interwar travel literature. In comparison with Davison’s other literary output, Dow describes Blue Coast Caravan as being ‘competent, readable, but of no great importance’.23 Rorabacher claims that the short stories and sketches that Davison published in his father’s magazines following the Great War are more important than Blue Coast Caravan because they offer historical insights into Davison’s experience as a soldier settler in rural Queensland. According to Rorabacher, such historical value is lacking in Blue Coast Caravan, ‘in which [Davison] views Australia as a spectator’.24 Robert Darby’s PhD thesis, ‘While Freedom Lives: Political Preoccupations in the Writing of Marjorie Barnard and Frank Dalby Davison 1935-1947’, offers the only extended consideration of the book. In the half of the thesis dedicated to Davison, Darby argues that as a young man and budding writer Davison adhered to the conservative, classical liberal politics of his father and that within Davison senior’s various magazines the two ‘championed the national development fever which was such a feature of the 1920s’.25 He casts the 1934 car journey as revelatory; according to Darby, as a result of the trip Davison underwent a political ‘transformation’.26 He argues that the trip gave Davison an ‘awareness of what capitalism had done to the land’ and that this was the catalyst for his conversion to left-wing politics in the 1930s.27 Darby draws on the many negative descriptions of Australian landscapes in Blue Coast Caravan as evidence of this; Davison and Nicholls wrote especially about the ugliness of Australian rural towns and farmland.

Davison undoubtedly underwent a political transformation in the 1930s. His early contributions to his father’s magazines tended to echo Davison senior’s enthusiastic belief that ‘we have a country that is all the country any man needs. It is big; it is fertile; it is full of all the known minerals; it has a climate second to none – and it is all ours’.28 Davison’s stories also reflected the anti-government sentiment of his father’s editorials; in his column ‘A Bit of Australia’, Davison denounced the laziness of government

23 Dow, Frank Dalby Davison, 14.
26 Ibid., 130.
27 Ibid., 22.
employees and expressed relief that Australia’s ‘water problem’ was being handled by private enterprise. By the late 1930s, Davison had published the political pamphlet *While Freedom Lives* (1938), a socialist critique of capitalism in Australia, and had served as president of the left-leaning FAW. He had also established connections with the Communist Party of Australia, although he would never become a member. This was most certainly a break from his father’s anti-socialism, and the ‘gospel of individual self-help’ the two preached in the early 1920s. However, this change was less the result of the 1934 car journey and more attributable to Davison’s growing involvement in the intellectual community after the success of his 1931 novel *Man-Shy*.

Rather than evidence of a sudden political transformation, Davison’s political engagement demonstrates that his development as a writer reflected the experience of many other writers and intellectuals in the 1930s. By 1934, when he began writing *Blue Coast Caravan*, Davison had for a few years been under the powerful influence of Vance and Nettie Palmer. Their correspondence reveals that in the early 1930s Davison quickly became interested in Australian literature as a nationalist project and that he was already developing an interest in left politics. Davison’s changing political and literary interests are sometimes evident in the book – they were likely what he felt distinguished his ‘general’ interests from Nicholls’ preoccupation with ‘doodle-bugs’. However, *Blue Coast Caravan* largely adhered to the conventions of popular travel writing. Unlike other historians and critics of Davison’s work, this chapter will demonstrate that *Blue Coast Caravan* provides important historical insights into interwar Australian travel literature and tourism, particularly car touring. It is precisely Davison and Nicholls’ perspective as tourists – or ‘spectators’ as Rorabacher would have it – that is of interest.

**Travel in interwar Australia**

In *Blue Coast Caravan* Davison and Nicholls suggested that prior to embarking on their journey there was an expectation that the trip would offer adventure and an escape from their urban environment. The prospective caravanners were ‘trapped in the

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31 Davison’s personal papers show that his correspondence with the Palmers started soon after *Man-Shy* won Australian Literature Society’s gold medal. Vance Palmer initiated contact with a letter dated 31 August 1932. The Palmers were among his most regular literary correspondents across the 1930s and 1940s. See series 1, box 1, folders 1-9, MS 1945, Papers of Frank Dalby Davison, 1859-1970, NLA, Canberra.
familiar and the commonplace. Life, for all of [them], was represented by a pink roof in the suburbs and a tram to and from the city.\textsuperscript{32} Despite travelling the relatively populous east Australian coast, by suggesting that they were ‘in search of Australia’, the caravanners evoked a sense of discovery.\textsuperscript{33} As they made their way out of Sydney they were conscious of their ‘packed running-boards and canvas-hooded trailer’. They claimed that their ‘appearance proclaimed [their] expeditionary character’.\textsuperscript{34} Georgine Clarsen and Lorenzo Veracini argue in early-twentieth-century Australia long car journeys were ‘compensatory after the end of the “pioneering age”’ and so emphasised risk, adventure and discovery.\textsuperscript{35} According to Clarsen:

The nineteenth century marked the high point of European exploratory expeditions in Australia. But they enjoyed a dynamic afterlife in twentieth-century national culture. Motorised overland journeys emerged as a new form of settler expedition that drew on familiar colonial tropes of land being won through arduous feats of exploration and travel across “unknown” continents.\textsuperscript{36}

Accordingly, in \textit{Blue Coast Caravan} the authors often emphasised a sense of adventure and even danger, particularly when faced with difficult roads. For instance, they successfully crossed a flooded road and another group of motorists witnessed their ‘heroism’. They arrived ‘in triumph on the opposite shore’ and, as the other motorists then made the crossing, had ‘the pleasure of seeing others go where [they] had pioneered the way’.\textsuperscript{37} This episode demonstrates Clarsen’s argument that ‘the resistance of the landscape was a fitting challenge to . . . modern technology, masculine strength, and ingenuity’.\textsuperscript{38} It is significant that in \textit{Blue Coast Caravan} only the two male caravanners were recorded as being drivers.\textsuperscript{39} Treacherous roads and limited safety

\textsuperscript{32} Davison and Nicholls, \textit{Blue Coast Caravan}, 1.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{35} Georgine Clarsen and Lorenzo Veracini, ‘Settler Colonial Automobilities: A Distinct Constellation of Automobile Cultures?’, \textit{History Compass} 10, no. 12 (2012): 896.
\textsuperscript{37} Davison and Nicholls, \textit{Blue Coast Caravan}, 86-87.
\textsuperscript{39} George Clarsen has explored the gendered nature of driving in Australia in the early twentieth century, see: Georgine Clarsen, \textit{Eat My Dust: Early Women Motorists} (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008); Georgine Clarsen, ‘Tracing the Outline of a Nation: Circling Australia by Car’, \textit{Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies} 13, no. 3 (1999): 360.
features in motor vehicles certainly meant that car touring in interwar Australia could be hazardous, and the caravanners did find themselves in a relatively minor car accident along the way.  

In colonial New South Wales and Queensland roads were constructed haphazardly, often by timber-getters, farmers and local communities. Many ‘were opened up by common usage and not by design’; it is likely that some early roads followed well-established Aboriginal trade and travel routes. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, when rail – ‘the new technological marvel’ – was introduced to Australia, roads became a low priority for colonial governments. Roads were primarily designed to move people and goods, especially agricultural produce, to the nearest railway station. Wealthy nineteenth-century tourists generally travelled by train to natural attractions such as mountains, caves and beaches. However, at the turn of the century, an increasing number of wealthy individuals gained access to cars. In the 1920s, in response to the growing number of cars on Australian roads, New South Wales and Queensland established Main Roads Boards to coordinate the construction and repair of major roads. Despite this, railways still took priority over roads and the Main Roads Boards placed a low importance on the development of roads that ran parallel to railway lines: this resistance to road construction and maintenance lasted well into the 1930s. A 1935 article in the journal Main Roads: A Record of the Activities of the Department of Main Roads New South Wales, indicated that over the previous ten years the primary goal of roadbuilding was still to ‘give access to areas of land available for fresh settlement’, ‘extend the occupation of areas partially developed’ and help stimulate

40 Davison and Nicholls, Blue Coast Caravan, 63.
42 Marion Diamond, From Bulldust to Beef Roads and Beyond: Main Roads – the First 50 Years (Brisbane: Queensland Main Roads), 5.
43 Ibid.
45 Department of Main Roads, The Roadmakers: A History of Main Roads in New South Wales (Sydney: Dept. of Main Roads, New South Wales, 1976), 82; Diamond, From Bulldust to Beef Roads and Beyond, 14; Ford, Roads in the Wilderness; Lyall Ford, Roads to Riches: Development of the Main Road Network in the Mackay District of Tropical Queensland - The First 100 Years (Brisbane: Queensland Department of Transport and Main Roads, 2012).
46 Diamond, From Bulldust to Beef Roads and Beyond, 17; Ford, Roads to Riches, 191-2.
primary production. Yet, the continuing rise in popularity of recreational motoring meant that the states could no longer ignore the needs of tourists.

Across the 1920s, the rate of car ownership in Australia quickly increased from one car for every fifty-five people in 1920 to one car for every eleven in 1929, although the Depression and World War Two did curtail this exponential growth. The Royal Automobile Club of Australia was established in Sydney in 1903 and the Royal Automobile Club of Queensland in 1905. Although small groups when inaugurated, over the next two decades they grew into powerful lobbies, particularly once motorists began to contribute financially to state governments through a system of motor vehicle registration. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, state governments began to slowly respond to the needs of recreational motorists. The scattered and often poor quality coastal roads in New South Wales and Queensland began to be shaped into a system of sealed highways; although the Pacific Highway, which now connects Sydney and Brisbane, was not completely sealed and all single-lane bridges eliminated until the 1960s. When Davison and Nicholls tackled the trip in 1934 they encountered roads of mixed quality. The Pacific Highway between Sydney and Newcastle was in good condition having been recently upgraded, north of Newcastle the road was less consistent, and north of Brisbane the road deteriorated into a ‘bush track in bad condition’ and the authors were pleased to abandon the caravan at Maryborough for the fast and reliable railway.

49 Diamond, From Bulldust to Beef Roads and Beyond, 19.
50 Historians have shown that large-scale road construction was entered into more quickly in the United States, where roads in and around national parks were designed to provide car drivers and passengers with a highly structured experience of the landscape. See: David Louter, Windshield Wilderness: Cars, Roads, and Nature in Washington’s National Parks (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller, The World Beyond the Windshield: Roads and Landscapes in the United States and Europe (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008), Paul S. Sutter, Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009); Christopher W. Wells, Car Country: An Environmental History (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012). Little direct comparison can be made between these American roads and Australian interwar roads as Davison and Nicholls experienced them. However, the Great Ocean Road in Victoria, completed in 1932, was an early Australia example of a scenic tourist road (it was also a war memorial), see Rosemary Kerr, ‘The Great Ocean Road: Landscape, Memory and Emotion’, Agora 48, no. 4 (2013): 38-45.
51 Davidson and Spearritt, Holiday Business, 162.
52 ‘Historical Roads of New South Wales: Roads from Sydney to the Hunter River Valley and Newcastle’, Main Roads: A Record of the Activities of the Department of Main Roads New South Wales 14, no. 3 (1949): 86; Davison and Nicholls, Blue Coast Caravan, 116 and 198.
Despite increased rates of car ownership, in the 1920s and 1930s private cars remained a middle-class luxury. Working-class Australians had better access to paid holidays and weekends from the 1920s, but the prohibitive cost of private cars meant they were more likely to undertake group bus tours or travel by train. For example, in the 1920s, the boom in popularity of bushwalking was largely facilitated by train travel.

Paul Fussell argues that the ‘terms exploration, travel, and tourism are slippery’ (original emphasis). Davison and Nicholls were explicitly concerned with distinguishing their activities from those of people they considered tourists. In a chapter titled ‘Where the Tourists Go’, the caravanners visited Barron Falls just north of Cairns. In doing so they claimed to have ‘departed from the spirit of [their] itinerary, to visit “a recognised beauty spot” – one advertised, at home and abroad, as a tourist attraction’.

Visitors had been able to access Barron Falls since the 1890s when the Cairns to Kuranda Railway line was opened to passenger travel; the train would make a short stop at the falls so passengers could alight and enjoy the view. In 1932 work had begun on a major hydro-electricity station at the falls. The caravanners employed Mr Robertson, the contractor overseeing the construction of the station, to lead them away from the well-trodden tourist-route. The group descended to the base of the falls through a series of tunnels and pipes associated with the construction and were then winched up the gorge to see the view from above. From their position amidst the construction work across the gorge, they could smugly watch a ‘swarm’ of tourists.

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53 Cars would not become a ubiquitous feature of everyday Australian life until after World War Two, see: Graeme Davison, Car Wars: How the Car Won Our Hearts and Conquered Our Cities (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2004); Graeme Davison, City Dreamers: The Urban Imagination in Australia (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2016), 159-77


57 Davison and Nicholls, Blue Coast Caravan, 253-5.


60 Davison and Nicholls, Blue Coast Caravan, 255-9.
alight from a train to inspect the view, only to be recalled within fifteen minutes.61 They were similarly amused by day-trippers to Green Island:

Between rain squalls the tourists wandered about the jungle tracks, never getting more than about a hundred yards from the end of the jetty, and looking rather bored, as if they were comparing their actual experiences with those suggested by the coloured advertisements that had lured them northward.62

The caravanners were pleased to be referred to as ‘visitors’ rather than ‘tourists’ by one local island character.63 Access to a private car in combination with an extended holiday period – permitted by Nicholls’ financial support – enabled the caravanners to stop at any destination they thought interesting; they had the ability to experience places ‘in between’ designated tourist attractions and ‘beauty spots’.

The interwar glut of travel literature, of which Blue Coast Caravan was part, offered the armchair tourist an insight into this more privileged form of travel. Travel books were a popular and potentially lucrative form of publication in the interwar years. Garry Disher points out that the ‘1930s [were] a highpoint in terms of the popularity and success of descriptive books’ and Margriet Bonnin argues descriptive and travel writing was favoured by Australian publishers over poetry and other prose because it was more popular with the public.64 A growing number of magazines and newspaper columns, epitomised by the popular Walkabout magazine launched by the Australian National Travel Association in 1934, also engaged with themes of travel and tourism.65 Davison and Nicholls hoped Blue Coast Caravan might be a commercial success, particularly given the accomplishments of dedicated Australian travel and adventure writers such as Frank Clune and Ion Idriess.66 Blue Coast Caravan might even have been specifically inspired by E.J. Brady’s 1911 book King’s Caravan; Brady’s book recorded a year-long journey north between Sydney and Townsville in a wooden horse-drawn wagon.67

61 Ibid., 259.
62 Ibid., 265-6.
63 Ibid., 265-6 and 278.
66 Davison’s friend and lover Marjorie Barnard told Margriet Bonnin that Blue Coast Caravan was written ‘largely as a mercenary venture’. Bonnin, ‘A Study of Australian Descriptive and Travel Writing, 1929-1945’, 298.
67 E.J. Brady, The King’s Caravan (London: Edward Arnold, 1911).
Despite overwhelmingly positive reviews in Australian newspapers, *Blue Coast Caravan* did not sell well, nor was it ever reprinted. Contemporary reviewers described *Blue Coast Caravan* as ‘delightful and entertaining’ and believed it could ‘stimulate a desire in readers to go out and do a spot of discovering work on their own account’. For one reviewer the criticism of man-made ugliness in *Blue Coast Caravan* was important, but emphasised that ‘the book is much more than an indictment: it records beauty as well’. One notable exception was a review of *Blue Coast Caravan* that appeared on *The Bulletin*’s ‘Red Page’. The anonymous *Bulletin* reviewer criticised the ‘present vogue’ for travelling to a place with the specific goal of producing a book about it with ‘no pretence of . . . absorbing that sometimes heady and intoxicating beverage the spirit of place. Now you simply speed and look, and do a book’. Here the city-dwelling Davison and Nicholls were accused of producing a shallow and formulaic account of their journey; a challenge to their self-proclaimed superiority over ‘tourists’. The reviewer also implied that this propensity toward hasty production was a feature of the travel genre more broadly.

Travel writing was in high demand within a busy commercial print culture, and the potentially lucrative genre did likely encourage writers to produce hurriedly written and often exaggerated books. Moreover, travel writers willing accepted and often relied on modern technologies. They generally travelled by car, ship and aeroplane in order to cover large distances more quickly and cameras were often an essential item of luggage so that their adventures could be illustrated in newspapers, magazines and books. Some journeys were even given enough press coverage to attract commercial sponsorship. At the same time, travel writers were usually attempting to romantically and nostalgically document regional and remote Australia. In 1952, Flora Eldershaw

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71 Nicholls did carry a camera during the *Blue Coast Caravan* journey, unfortunately the photographs he took appear to have been lost.

72 Travel writer William Hatfield, the subject of chapter six, found sponsorship with the Hillman car company and the Shell petrol company, see chapter six, 203-4. See also: Clarsen, ‘The 1928 MacRobertson Round Australia Expedition’, 194-209; Georgine Clarsen, ‘Automobiles and Australian Modernisation: the Redex Around-Australia trials of the 1950s’, *Australian Historical Studies* 41, no. 3 (2010): 352-68.

73 Disher, ‘Before the Age of Hurry-up…’, 266.
argued that ‘the landscape writers’ produced books ‘touched with nostalgia for a lost world’.74 Disher points out that Davison, in a 1937 Bulletin article, was one of the first writers to refer to the interwar glut of travel literature as the ‘landscape school’.75 In the short article, Davison placed the ‘writers of the landscape school’ in the same tradition as the popular nationalist balladists of the late nineteenth century, probably in an attempt to lend credibility to the genre that was often accused of journalistic sensationalism.76 Moreover, Davison argued that writers in the landscape school helped reveal more detail about the ‘unknown and half known’ regions of Australia; tellingly he counted tropical Queensland among these regions.77 The job of the travel writers, then, was to experience and relay information about the country’s natural, remote and even ‘unknown’ landscapes to modern, city-dwelling Australians who lacked the means to travel themselves.

‘Wild’ nature and human landscapes

Paul Sutter argues that interwar tourism and cars in particular gave American tourists ‘unprecedented access to wild nature’.78 According to Christopher Wells, the growing availability of cars and continued construction of roads, put more Americans ‘than ever before within an easy drive of places where they could find ample greenery, recreational opportunities, and a sense of reconnection with the natural world’.79 While Australian road construction lagged behind that of the United States, growing access to cars in the interwar years did enable more Australians to experience non-urban landscapes. In Blue Coast Caravan, the caravanners were desirous to document the areas of ‘wild’ nature they experienced during their journey. Their ultimate destination was the Great Barrier Reef, where they experienced the natural features and relative isolation of Green Island. On the island they enjoyed ‘a contented citizenship of this unspoiled fragment of loveliness and its adjacent glories’.80 Their desire to visit the island and experience this kind of retreat from civilisation, was probably inspired in part by Vance and Nettie Palmer’s own extended stay there two years earlier.81

75 Disher, ‘Before the Age of Hurry-up…’, 1.
78 Sutter, Driven Wild, 19.
79 Wells, Car Country, xxxiii-xxxiv.
80 Davison and Nicholls, Blue Coast Caravan, 275.
Moreover, both Davison and Nicholls were aware of Thoreau-inspired naturalist E.J. Banfield who lived for over twenty years on Dunk Island; it is likely that Nicholls corresponded with Banfield in the early 1920s.\footnote{The group observed Dunk Island from the beach at Cardwell during a short stop on their train journey and briefly mentioned Banfield, see Davison and Nicholls, \textit{Blue Coast Caravan}, 204; In a letter to Charles Barrett, Banfield indicated he had recently received a letter from Nicholls, see E.J. Banfield to Charles Barrett, October 1921, partly reproduced in Barrett, \textit{Koonawarra}, 178.}

The group appreciated a range of other natural landscapes throughout their journey. During a bushwalk in the Blackall Ranges, they excitedly ‘said good-bye to that which man had made his own and plunged into the primitive’.\footnote{Davison and Nicholls, \textit{Blue Coast Caravan}, 135.} In addition, the caravanners admired Queensland’s Glass House Mountains, a group of spectacular volcanic plugs north of Brisbane, which they believed would remain untouched by human development due to the difficult geography of the region:

\begin{quote}
the Glasshouse Mountains seemed to embody the spirit of the untameable wild. They looked like a group of old men aborigines standing above the tides of change to mark the things that were. In their appearance there was assurance that they would not alter; man could put them to no profitable use. To beholders of our peculiar outlook there was something deeply satisfying in the reflection. There would be no scratch-and-plant cultivators disfiguring their hoary flanks; no cow-herder would hope to find room on them for his unblessed sheds. They would remain as we saw them while the continent endured.\footnote{Ibid., 119.}
\end{quote}

Here Davison and Nicholls celebrated the continued existence of an area of apparently ‘wild’ nature, but in the suggestion that the Glass House Mountains resembled ‘a group of old men aborigines’ was an implicit acknowledgement that the Australian landscape had a long human history.

On more than one occasion during the journey the caravanners met Aboriginal Australians and were forced to confront the legacy of white colonisation of the continent. At Urangan, near Harvey Bay in Queensland, they were struck by the way Aboriginal residents used ‘the word Australian when speaking of themselves’ which seemed to indicate that ‘they had a claim on [the country] more real than ours’. This prompted the group to feel ‘conscience-stricken on behalf of the western European
races from which we came’. In another instance, they claimed to have had a ‘close view of the tragedy of the aborigines’ and suggested that there was ‘no way of righting the wrong that had been done [to them] – short of the utterly impractical one of handing [them] back [their] country’. Despite these admissions of white Australian wrong-doing, in *Blue Coast Caravan* Davison and Nicholls still tended to describe Aboriginal Australians as childlike, of the ‘stone-age’ and even in one instance ‘animal-like’ which implied a kind of justification for colonisation. Moreover, while they occasionally acknowledged Aboriginal history on the continent, Davison and Nicholls remained enthusiastic about the white Australian project of ‘humanising’ the countryside.

While Davison and Nicholls thought it desirable that small sections of native Australian bush remain preserved, they were equally if not more interested in the renovated nature which colonisation had created. When approaching the Queensland border, the group admired a farmer’s neat tree plantings:

> Even more pleasing than [native trees] that in places had been left to embellish the scene were those parts of the road where the landholder had set out a row of coral-trees along by his boundary fence. The sight of them prompted the reflection that planted trees humanize a country-side in the same manner that flowers or music or books humanize a home.

This celebration of a ‘humanised’ landscape indicates that the travellers did not consistently acknowledge Australia’s long human history, nor did they simply advocate the preservation of ‘wild’, native Australian nature. The caravanners noted that ‘while nature’s arrangements are never out of harmony they are sometimes lacking in interest’. They described introduced trees providing a ‘melody above the deep harmonies of our own bush’. Similarly, when the caravanners visited Fraser Island they were most interested in seeing the introduced brumbies, believing that ‘had we not done so we would have left the island feeling that we had missed the best of the visit’.

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85 Ibid., 188.
86 Ibid., 197.
87 Ibid., 188 and 250.
88 Ibid., 97.
89 Ibid., 118.
90 Ibid., 36.
91 Ibid., 181.
Davison and Nicholls did acknowledge, and sometimes lament, that Australian national development could come at an environmental cost. When visiting Kangaroo Point in Brisbane the caravanners described the ‘iron heel of alleged progress’ that would soon destroy trees on the point to make way for a new bridge.\(^92\) Ironically of course, the Story Bridge – designed by engineer J.J.C. Bradfield who we will meet again in chapter six – was completed in 1940 as part of improvements to the Queensland road system that the caravanners had found so difficult to navigate. In another instance, the group confronted scenery just north of Ballina that was once densely wooded:

> The mind regretted the vanishing of the giant trees – hardly a stump remained – but the eye rejoiced in the rolling vista of green downs. One form of beauty had been removed only to reveal another.\(^93\)

This conflicted response to the destruction of native vegetation in the wake of rural development was common in Australian interwar travel books. However, Disher argues that although they were sometimes nostalgic about what would be lost, most writers, among whom we might count Davison and Nicholls, were inclined to promote continued national development over the protection of native landscapes.\(^94\)

Much of Davison’s other literary output demonstrated his interest in introduced species in the Australian landscape and nature’s ability to adapt in the wake of colonisation. In his award-winning novel *Man-Shy* (1931) the environment willingly accepts ‘scrubbers’ (escaped wild cattle) as ‘foster children’ and they become ‘as much part of the old and gentle Australian bush as were the creatures who had made it their home ten thousand years before the coming of horned cattle’.\(^95\) In Davison’s 1935 short story ‘The Wasteland’, the narrator’s property adjoins Lot 32, a selection that has never been developed or even visited by its owner. The narrator turns some heifers and an old horse onto the ‘wild’ block and comes to find it a place of escape. Although fenced, subject to classification as Lot 32 and home to these introduced animals, it is still celebrated by the narrator as ‘last home of the bush animals’. Despite human incursions, the block remains – in an echo of Lawrence’s ‘spirit of the place’ – the

\(^{92}\) Ibid., 115.
\(^{93}\) Ibid., 96.
\(^{94}\) Disher, ‘Before the Age of Hurry-up…’, 104.
\(^{95}\) Frank Dalby Davison, *Man-Shy*, [1931] (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1946), 6 and 166.
‘dwelling place of the spirit many have known though none have seen’. Here the native and ‘wild’ coexist with the human world of white settlement. Additionally, in his 1936 children’s book *Children of the Dark People*, set prior to white colonisation, Davison apparently unconsciously included brumbies in the story. In the preface he explained that ‘being moved by my knowledge of the extent to which imported animals gone wild – donkeys, camels, buffaloes, cattle, horses – have found so friendly a home in the outback bush that their original absence seems a little unnatural’. In the final pages of the story, upon witnessing white settlement, the guardian spirit of the land takes all the introduced domestic animals and perhaps even the white settlers themselves into his care. Davison was clearly interested in the Australian landscape as a product of colonisation, and, in *Blue Coast Caravan* he and Nicholls gave far more space to reflecting on landscapes that had very obviously been altered in the wake of colonisation. The book demonstrates that, in the interwar years, agricultural land, farm houses and small country towns – once primarily functional landscapes – were suddenly under the aesthetic scrutiny of travellers.

**Australia through the windscreen**

In his environmental history of Australia, *Spoils and Spoilers: Australians Make Their Environment 1788-1980*, Geoffrey Bolton points out that within one hundred years of colonisation sheep and cattle had spread across the Australian continent, excepting the desert interior. According to Bolton, in the first half of the twentieth century white Australia continued to clear the land ‘with indiscriminate zeal, spurred by the urge to render every acre productive’. In *A History of Queensland*, Raymond Evans similarly argues that environmental exploitation marked the nineteenth century:

There was much talk of ‘improving the land’ as the justification for colonisation but in reality it was more often degraded: fauna sacrificed in relentless killing sprees, forests levelled and ecosystems assailed by ring-barking, burning off and over-stocking. The introduction of hard-hoofed animals merely tore away at the lush grasslands, long husbanded by Aboriginal fire-stick farmers.

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96 Frank Dalby Davison, ‘The Wasteland’, *The Woman at the Mill* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1940), 92.


98 Ibid., 246.


As the colonial frontier relentlessly swept across the Australian continent, clearing, ringbarking, soil erosion and introduced species transformed the landscape. It was this ‘radically reconstructed environment’ – the product of colonial exploitation of the continent – which Davison and Nicholls faced along the coast of New South Wales and Queensland.\(^\text{101}\)

Prior to leaving on the *Blue Coast Caravan* journey, Davison told Vance Palmer: ‘I haven’t much idea of what we will see; it will be all fresh to me’.\(^\text{102}\) Davison had lived on a Victorian farm for some of his teenage years and in rural south-west Queensland as a soldier settler for a short period of time after the Great War, but otherwise seems to have travelled little outside Australia’s capital cities. Nicholls on the other hand was an ‘old campaigner’ when it came to road travel.\(^\text{103}\) In the early 1930s Nicholls and his wife had been on another caravan journey through Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, some of which he described in his book *Jacko the Broadcasting Kookaburra*.\(^\text{104}\) Nicholls had also previously visited parts of the Great Barrier Reef on at least three separate occasions.\(^\text{105}\)

In August 1934, upon his return from north Queensland, Davison told Vance Palmer that the journey had demonstrated to him ‘that we Australians have plundered the delicate beauty of our continent and disfigured it with a careless, tin-shanty semi-civilization’.\(^\text{106}\) Although Davison had witnessed soil erosion and deforestation on the trip, which might have provoked concerns about the environment itself, he primarily expressed his alarm at the aesthetic damage wrought on the Australian landscape by colonisation. Davison explained to Palmer that without ‘a supply of rose coloured spectacles’ the caravanners saw:

> bare little farms without so much as a tree to hide their ugliness, frowsey little hamlets, and big towns that could hardly have been more dreary looking than they were. I don’t know why I should so

\(^{101}\) Ibid., 145.

\(^{102}\) Frank Dalby Davison to Vance Palmer, 24 April 1934, series 1, binder 38, item 4408-9, MS1174, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer 1889-1964, NLA, Canberra.

\(^{103}\) Davison and Nicholls, *Blue Coast Caravan*, 3.

\(^{104}\) Nicholls, *Jacko the Broadcasting Kookaburra*.


\(^{106}\) Frank Dalby Davison to Vance Palmer, 12 August 1934, series 1, binder 38, item 4482-6, MS 1174, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer 1889-1964, NLA, Canberra.
suddenly have wakened up to it. But there it was. It was painful at times.\footnote{107}

The emphasis Davison placed on ‘I’ when he told Palmer that ‘the trip (I think) excepting for the Green Island part of it was something of a fizzle’ (original emphasis), suggests that Nicholls may not have shared Davison’s disappointment with the journey.\footnote{108} The outlook with which the authors were confronted on the Blue Coast Caravan trip could hardly have come as much of a surprise to Nicholls, given his extensive travel history. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest the relationship between Davison and Nicholls was strained throughout the trip. In 1942 Davison confessed to researcher Don Meacham that ‘the trip was a ghastly failure on the side of human relationships’ and Jules Tardent, a Queensland Department of Forestry employee the caravanners met along the way, sensed Davison and Nicholls did not share a ‘harmonious partnership’.\footnote{109}

In early 1935 while preparing the Blue Coast Caravan manuscript, Davison maintained that the journey was ‘a disillusioning trip’ and claimed that in writing the book he had to leave much out, afraid that if he was overly negative ‘no reader would accompany us to the end of the book’.\footnote{110} He planned to strike ‘the note of disapproval occasionally’, and include a final chapter that offered ‘a swift sketching in of what has been left out’.\footnote{111} Despite his efforts to contain his negativity, publisher Angus and Robertson refused Davison’s initial manuscript; according to Marjory Barnard this was because they found Davison ‘rather too outspoken’, though she did not indicate exactly what he was so outspoken about.\footnote{112} Davison revised the manuscript and the final chapter was dropped. Blue Coast Caravan was a compromised version of the original manuscript, which is unfortunately lost. However, even the published version

\footnote{107} Ibid.
\footnote{108} Ibid.
\footnote{109} Davison to Meacham, 22 August 1942; Jules Tardent interview by Owen Webster, 1970, ORAL TRC 509/9, NLA, Canberra. Marjory Barnard also told Vance Palmer in a letter that tension between Davison and Nicholls had taken its toll on the book, see Marjory Barnard to Vance Palmer, 4 March 1935, series 1, binder 40, item 4607-8, MS1174, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer 1889-1964, NLA, Canberra.
\footnote{110} Frank Dalby Davison to Nettie Palmer, no date (likely January or February 1935), series 1, binder 40, item 4554-62, MS 1174, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer 1889-1964, NLA, Canberra.
\footnote{111} Ibid.
\footnote{112} Marjory Barnard to Vance Palmer, 14 February 1935, series 1, binder 40, item 4592-4, MS1174, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer 1889-1964, NLA, Canberra; Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, 26 February 1935, series 1, binder 40, item 4606, MS1174, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer 1889-1964, NLA, Canberra.
demonstrates that Davison was surprised, disheartened and angered by what he encountered as the caravanners travelled north from Sydney, through a range of landscapes visibly ravaged in the wake of white colonisation.

In *Blue Coast Caravan* the authors were disappointed in the aesthetics of many rural towns. Gloucester was criticised for offering: ‘nothing of interest to be seen; no imaginative touch; no exploitation of regional possibilities; no leaven to leaven the lump’. Rather there are ‘dilapidated privies, heaped boxes’ and strips of ground ‘like raw flesh’ between the street and homes.\(^{113}\) In Taree the lack of street trees was criticised; the caravanners argued that with imagined trees ‘what grand avenues those straight-ruled roads would make. Such things are done in other lands’.\(^{114}\) Bolton agrees that many interwar Australian towns ‘were for use rather than ornament, and their appearance showed it . . . Little would be spent on ornament apart from the universal war memorial’.\(^{115}\) Upon his return from the trip, Davison complained to Vance Palmer that the group witnessed ‘a great deal of mutilated beauty, a small amount of accidental beauty, almost no created beauty, and a very great deal of created ugliness’.\(^{116}\) Ugliness, particularly with regard to Australian architecture, was a common complaint among intellectuals, which would ultimately culminate in Robin Boyd’s infamous *The Australian Ugliness* (1960).\(^{117}\)

In *Kangaroo*, D.H. Lawrence lamented the ugliness and temporary look of Australian residences; Davison explicitly agreed with Lawrence’s complaint in a short article in 1935.\(^{118}\) Similarly, Nettie Palmer criticised houses in the Dandenongs near Melbourne as having ‘a smugness about them, an air of imposing their own pattern of life upon the hills. Many of them make no effort to fit in with their natural background’.\(^{119}\) This is remarkably similar to Davison and Nicholls’ own complaint that ‘too often the Australian agriculturalist, desiring to proclaim his prosperity, causes to be built a dwelling that looks like a scrap of suburbia stranded in a paddock’.\(^{120}\) Davison stood

\(^{113}\) Davison and Nicholls, *Blue Coast Caravan*, 39.
\(^{114}\) Ibid., 53.
\(^{115}\) Bolton, *Spoils and Spoilers*, 143.
\(^{116}\) Davison to Palmer, 12 August 1934.
\(^{120}\) Davison and Nicholls, *Blue Coast Caravan*, 141.
by his observations in a *Bulletin* Red Page article defending the book in November 1935:

Our countryside – as distinguished from the unhandled bush – is in many places a scene of ravishment rather than of husbandry; our country towns are, mostly, distressingly bald statements; and our wayside cottages, as often as not, as ugly as lumps of congealed sin.\(^{121}\)

Statements such as this reveal that Davison’s ‘general’ interests – in contrast with the ‘particular’ interests of the naturalist Nicholls – aligned with the broader literary preoccupation with the idea of Australian environmental and cultural maturity. In *Blue Coast Caravan*, Davison suggested that managing the aesthetics of the countryside would be an important step toward national adulthood.

![Figure 3.3: Treeless Taree in 1937. State Library of New South Wales.](image)

*Blue Coast Caravan* indicated that change was slow, however, in the 1930s, previously practical agendas of road construction and country town presentation were increasingly influenced by the swelling number of recreational drivers and other tourists that began to demand more from the appearance of rural Australia. Despite the caravanners’ criticisms of Gloucester and Taree, Jodi Frawley has shown that between the 1890s and 1920s street trees had become more common in Australian urban landscaping

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\(^{121}\) Frank Dalby Davison, ‘The Australian Rural Scene’, 4.
outside the capital cities. By 1905, plants (both native and introduced species) were available free through the Sydney Botanic Gardens to public institutions. Frawley argues that ‘the state, in providing trees, was providing the means by which an aesthetic gloss was applied to these places to make them more civilised’. Rather than symbols of the natural or ‘primitive’, avenues of street trees denoted the modern city, modelled on mid-nineteenth-century Paris. The caravanners explicitly noted the ‘civilizing influence’ of trees, but were dismayed by what they believed was an ‘established Australian tradition’ of ‘sun-blinded streets flanked by rows of dusty weather-board boxes whose occupants, apparently, were united in a stern and unrelenting objection to foliage’. The caravanners were not alone in identifying a white Australian resistance to vegetation; this is the same decade that historian W.K. Hancock famously wrote ‘the invaders hated trees’.

The residents of Grafton, a regional city on the Clarence River on the north coast of New South Wales, were perhaps not so resistant, and more willing to take up the opportunity offered by the Botanic Gardens. In Grafton, famous for its exotic South American jacarandas, the caravanners were impressed with the trees that were ‘wide and tall. They over-topped the roofs around them; dull walls were mellow when seen through their leafy screen’. The trees created a ‘leafy arcade’ with their ‘great arms meeting’ over the road (see Figure 3.4). The caravanners’ description of Grafton’s street trees reflects the ideal ‘form, shape, size and denseness of foliage’ that Sydney Botanic Gardens Director Joseph Maiden had promoted for optimum beauty and practicality during his tenure between 1896 and 1924. In the 1930s, a pamphlet produced by the Grafton City Council claimed that street trees gave this ‘progressive city’ ‘a park-like appearance that makes it an abiding joy for nature lovers’.

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123 Ibid., 310.
124 Ibid., 307
125 Davison and Nicholls, *Blue Coast Caravan*, 161.
128 Davison and Nicholls, *Blue Coast Caravan*, 81.
129 Frawley, ‘Campaigning for Street Trees’, 314.
130 *Grafton – City of Trees* (Grafton City Council, 1932).
to the caravanners, Grafton was a spectacular exception among Australian rural towns; the people of Grafton ‘had found a place for beauty in the midst of life’.\textsuperscript{131}

\textbf{Figure 3.4:} Leafy Grafton in 1932. NLA.

In addition to town tree planting, in the mid-1930s, the New South Wales Department of Main Roads began an active campaign to beautify roadsides. In 1934, in the \textit{Main Roads} journal, the News South Wales Department of Main Roads argued that trees gave travellers ‘the added comfort and pleasure which the presence of trees always creates’ and warned that they would prosecute individuals who removed or destroyed roadside trees without permission.\textsuperscript{132} In a 1936 article, the Department announced a more active financial and practical role for itself with regard to tree planting. Where it had once shied away from roadside planting due to uncertainty about the extent to which roads would need upgrading, the Department would now actively plant and maintain vegetation along state highways and work in conjunction with local councils to beautify local roads.\textsuperscript{133} According to the Department, roadside vegetation was

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{131} Davison and Nicholls, \textit{Blue Coast Caravan}, 81.

\textsuperscript{132} ‘Trees’, \textit{Main Roads: A Record of the Activities of the Department of Main Roads New South Wales} 5, no. 3 (1934): 75.

\textsuperscript{133} ‘Tree-Planting of Main Roads: The Use of Trees on Roads.’ \textit{Main Roads: A Record of the Activities of the Department of Main Roads New South Wales} 7, no 2 (1936): 42-43.
\end{quote}
essential, as ‘our lives must be set about with that which is beautiful if we are not to become mere machines’. The Department’s goal was to strike a balance between ‘beauty and utility’.\textsuperscript{134} By the mid-1930s beauty was a part of the Department of Main Roads’ official agenda, though the results of this perhaps came a little late for the caravanners to enjoy. The Department had recognised that car touring meant that large tracts of landscape had come under the aesthetic scrutiny of travellers.

\textbf{Figure 3.5}: Four unidentified people with Brooke Nicholls’ caravan in 1932 (Nicholls might be the figure on the far left). It is likely that this photograph was taken on one of Nicholls’ earlier journeys through Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland with ‘Jacko’ the Kookaburra. NLA.

Car travel revolutionised the ways people both perceived and interacted with the environment.\textsuperscript{135} In 1937, William Hatfield, a character we will meet again in chapter six, published \textit{Australia Through the Windscreen}, a book Bonnin identifies as one of the most popular travel books of the period.\textsuperscript{136} In the book Hatfield described his car engine:

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{134}] Ibid., 41.
\end{itemize}
humming like a sleeping top and the miles fleeting by in grand style. In a speeding car you lose, somewhat, the impression gained in earlier years travelling with stock, or endless sweeps of treeless plain.  

Here Hatfield revealed that the view through his car windscreen offered a different perspective on the Australian landscape that he had come to know over the years on foot and horse. According to Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller, ‘the acceleration of travel had a profound impact not only on concepts of space and time but also on habits of visual perception’. Wolfgang Schivelbusch has demonstrated that, in the nineteenth century, train travel disrupted the experience of travelling through time and space; speed and relative comfort offered a new ‘panoramic’ perspective on the landscape. Private cars similarly reconfigured the experience of travel. Rod J. Kosar shows that after the Great War there were major developments in automobile technology such as ‘electric starters, closed bodies, glass windows, better sound insulation, cloth seats, [and] more informative dashboard instrumentation’. According to Kosar, these ‘technical, safety, and design increments’ ultimately had the effect of ‘closing off the car from its surroundings’. Certainly, Nicholls’ caravan had some of these luxuries: the driving cabin was enclosed with glass and the caravan was ‘well fitted’ with wardrobes, a table and seats. Wells suggests that such developments rendered nature ‘scenery’ rather than ‘weather’. According to Mauch and Zeller, ‘the view through the car’s windshield has redefined how we perceive the world around us’. In Blue Coast Caravan there is a sense in which the windscreen, to use the British English term, of the relatively fast moving enclosed car framed the Australian landscape in a new way. This framing prompted Davison and Nicholls to expect a picturesque outlook.

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137 William Hatfield, *Australia Through the Windscreen* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1936), 82.
141 Very little is actually said about the caravan itself in *Blue Coast Caravan*. This description of Nicholls’ caravan is taken from his 1934 book *Jacko the Broadcasting Kookaburra*, which was based on true events. Nicholls, *Jacko the Broadcasting Kookaburra*, 59-60.
When the Bulletin reviewer of Blue Coast Caravan jibed that Davison and Nicholls ‘have aesthetic ideas and would like to see the country conform to them’, he or she hit upon a truth that was partly to do with the way that the view from the windscreen of a car changed travellers’ expectations of the landscape. The reviewer criticised Davison and Nicholls for their propensity to ‘sub-edit’ the scenery according to their own aesthetic ideals. The caravanners themselves even confessed in one instance to “impertinently editing a particularly dreary landscape”. As car tourists proliferated across Australia new aesthetic demands – fuelled by the view through the windscreen – were made of the countryside. In Blue Coast Caravan, Davison and Nicholls suggested that the successful combination of functionality and aesthetic value, when it was finally achieved, might be a measure of the maturity of the Australian settlement.

Figure 3.6: The dust jacket of William Hatfield’s Australia Through the Windscreen emphasised the way that the car windscreen framed the Australian environment in a new way. William Hatfield, Australia Through the Windscreen (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1936).

144 ‘Writing by Car’, 2.
145 Ibid.
146 Davison and Nicholls, Blue Coast Caravan, 53.
Transient ugliness

Some of Davison’s earliest writing reveals that he was not completely unaccustomed to the ugliness, especially that of small Australian towns, that he claimed was so confronting on the *Blue Coast Caravan* journey. Across 1920 and 1921 he contributed a regular column – titled ‘A Bit of Australia’ – to his father’s short-lived magazine *The Australian Post*. In his first column a fictional settler-protagonist, arriving by train in a small country town after extensive overseas travel, is initially disappointed with what he sees:

The romantic glamour with which my mind used to endow such a bush town as this has thinned away to nothingness. I couldn’t help noticing that odd pickets were missing from the fences; here and there a gate hung by one hinge; the houses needed painting and the condition of the sales yard suggested that the volume of business didn’t warrant the expense of the repairs which were obviously needed. The tipsy men [on the pub veranda] were no longer bushmen on a glorious spree, they were a nuisance and an eyesore. This homecoming is a delusion.\(^{147}\)

Davison and Nicholls’ description of the swagman quoted at the beginning of the chapter would later echo this early portrait of degraded bushmen. In ‘A Bit of Australia’ the settler is concerned that his English wife, due to join him shortly, will react poorly to the ‘tin-roofed hamlet surrounded by a sprinkling of ragged eucalypti, much prickly pear, and a quivering horizon’.\(^{148}\) However, he is quick to recover his own faith in the country’s potential:

> for myself, I am well content. I know that the ugliness is transient and I know that despite occasional lapses into the lethe of alcohol, the spirit of a determined people is at work making a dry and hostile country habitable.\(^{149}\)

In this example it is unclear whether settlement or the natural state of the Australian landscape is the source of the perceived ‘ugliness’; either way it is human action that will beautify and make ‘habitable’ that landscape. The idea that Australian ugliness was ‘transient’, introduced here in one of Davison’s very first pieces of published work, was still central to his and Nicholls’ environmental outlook in *Blue Coast Caravan* in 1935.

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\(^{148}\) Ibid.

\(^{149}\) Ibid.
In *Blue Coast Caravan* the caravanners described environmental damage and ugliness as a symptom of the ‘inevitable discord’ that arose between man and nature in the wake of colonisation:

> It is an epic occasion when the pioneer first sets his tent in the wilderness. The battle that ensues is heroic, for the bush is a stubborn adversary. There comes a time when the pioneer – or his successor – rests victorious upon his haft. The scene is then unlovely. Dead trees, fire-blacked stumps and fallen logs – debris of the battle – litter the paddocks. The process of tidying and bringing about an air of mellow fruitfulness which is the charm of a country-side is very slow, and one in which the settlers, as men of practical affairs, take little interest.\(^{150}\)

This passage is important as it raises both the inevitability of environmental ugliness and suggests that such unsightliness was transient or temporary if acted on by its human inhabitants. The caravanners witnessed a region settled over one hundred years ago where ‘a mellow beauty had been achieved’ and acknowledged that such beautification could only occur at a ‘very slow’ rate.\(^{151}\) In regions that had been more recently settled they claimed that they were ‘not unsympathetic towards the settlers’ in wishing the beautification process speed.\(^{152}\) Katie Holmes argues that settler Australians planted home gardens in part to create ‘an ordered, controlled environment, one where the history of the land and the violence of its acquisition had been erased’.\(^{153}\) Davison and Nicholls advocated a similar project on a town, regional and even state-wide scale.

Robert Darby claims that *Blue Coast Caravan* was an ‘indictment of the pioneers’ and ‘a scathing critique of national development policies’\(^{154}\). In contrast, I argue that *Blue Coast Caravan* expressed disappointment with the rate of beautification in the wake of what Davison and Nicholls believed was inevitable and even essential national development. In fact, the caravanners hoped that Australia might achieve ‘her blossoming through a resurgence of energy similar to that which moved the pioneers; a resurgence to come with a new generation’.\(^{155}\) Pioneers remained a source of inspiration, rather than scorn.

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\(^{150}\) Davison and Nicholls, *Blue Coast Caravan*, 41-42.

\(^{151}\) Ibid., 36.

\(^{152}\) Ibid., 41.


\(^{154}\) Davison and Nicholls, *Blue Coast Caravan*, 155 and 536.

\(^{155}\) Ibid., 95.
In *Blue Coast Caravan* aesthetic beauty in rural Australia seemed to constitute evidence of the end of a major struggle between colonisers and the natural environment. Beauty signalled an emergence from the raw disruption and 'battle' of colonisation; it was the end of a phase of necessary transition, even evolution, through which the landscape and society must pass. It was not simply an imported English notion of beauty the caravanners were seeking or even a native Australian outlook, but rather a hybrid, a combination of domesticity and the wild, an environmental product of the empire in the new world. In part, Davison was influenced by the literary community he had recently entered; he had developed an interest, like many other writers, in the idea that twentieth-century Australia needed to move beyond its colonial identity and achieve a sense of national maturity. In addition to this, access to a fast-moving car and the framing of the windscreen prompted new aesthetic expectations of previously functional landscapes. As the next chapter will demonstrate, aesthetic achievements alone – especially in Australia's new national capital – did not convince all writers that white Australia had successfully settled the continent.
Chapter Four

‘The Synthetic Stronghold of Democracy’: Canberra in M. Barnard Eldershaw’s *Plaque With Laurel*

It's a little slice of paradise
Where the gentle Scullins nest,
And the taxes dream by the silver stream
That flows past the city of rest.
There the members doze in a Buddha's pose,
For there's never a thing to do;
Long days may lapse and naught e'er hap—
Though a snail may pass—or two.¹

Australia’s national capital, Canberra, a city conceived and designed in the early decades of the twentieth century, was an ambitious attempt to build from scratch a modern, innovative and clean national capital. It was hoped that Canberra would serve not only as the seat of Australia’s federal government and the cultural heart of the country, but also as an international exemplar of twentieth-century civilisation. By the 1930s though, Canberra’s construction had been repeatedly disrupted and delayed and much of the city plan, designed by American architects Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahoney Griffin, had been abandoned. In the 1931 poem quoted above, regular Melbourne *Argus* columnist ‘Oriel’ mocked both the capital itself and Prime Minister James Scullin’s recent plan to attract tourists to the city. Oriel, like many other

Canberra detractors, characterised the city as quiet, dull and incomplete. The national capital has remained the target of this sort of ridicule, often cast as a city without a soul and ‘a good sheep station spoiled’. It is perhaps fitting then, that the first ever novel to take Canberra as its setting, M. Barnard Eldershaw’s *Plaque With Laurel* (1937), was a satire.

Co-authored by Flora Eldershaw and Marjorie Barnard, in the context of the increasingly politicised literary community of the 1930s, *Plaque With Laurel* took as its subject a three-day literary conference held in Canberra in honour of recently deceased (and fictional) Australian novelist Richard Crale. As well as offering insights into the interwar Australian literary community, an analysis of the novel enhances our understanding of Canberra in the 1930s. Histories of Canberra have tended to focus on its early planning, design and construction or, alternatively, on the city as a seat of government; few have considered Canberra’s place in Australia’s broader cultural and environmental imagination. This chapter argues that Barnard Eldershaw chose to present in the novel a particular version of Canberra. Ignoring many subtleties of the city in the 1930s, they emphasised Canberra’s main tourist attractions, especially the region’s natural features and the city’s many trees. The authors suggested that the Canberra planners had not successfully integrated the human-centric modern city with the surrounding landscape. In this respect, the physical city of Canberra mirrored many of the concerns that preoccupied the Australian literary community of the period. Canberra was the physical embodiment of interwar Australian cultural anxieties, particularly around a perceived lack of human history on the continent and the country’s uncertain international cultural and literary relevance.

**M. Barnard Eldershaw**

Flora Sydney Eldershaw was born 16 March 1897 at Darlinghurst, Sydney. Her mother travelled to the city to give birth, but the family normally resided in the agricultural Riverina region of south-western New South Wales, where Eldershaw’s father was the manager of a large sheep station. Eldershaw was schooled in Wagga Wagga, where she boarded in a convent. She later attended the University of Sydney, again boarding

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in a convent before sharing a flat with her brother. Eldershaw gained her bachelor’s degree in 1918, having majored in history and Latin, and afterwards found work as a teacher. From 1923, Eldershaw taught at the Presbyterian Ladies College at Croydon and went on to become live-in Senior Mistress and head of the boarding school. Outgoing and energetic, Eldershaw, while a fulltime teacher, was also a politically active member of the Australian literary community during the 1930s and 1940s. In 1935 she was the first female president of the FAW, returning to the position in 1943, and between 1939 and 1953 was a member of the Advisory Board of the Commonwealth Literary Fund (CLF). In 1941 she left teaching to join the public service, first in Canberra and later Melbourne, before working as a private consultant. In 1955, as a result of ill health, she moved to her sister’s property in Forest Hill near Wagga Wagga and died in September of 1956. According to literary historian Maryanne Dever, Eldershaw ‘lived quite a peripatetic existence and never really established a home of her own’. In contrast, her university friend and later collaborator, Marjorie Barnard lived a longer and more settled life in suburban Sydney.

Marjorie Faith Barnard was born 16 August 1897 at Ashfield, Sydney, into a middle-class family. As a young child, she was schooled at home before studying at Cambridge School, Hunters Hill and Sydney Girls’ High School. She went on to attend the University of Sydney where she gained her bachelor’s degree in 1920, winning the University Medal in history. She was offered a scholarship at Oxford University but her strict father did not allow her to take this up. Instead, Barnard continued to live in the family’s suburban Sydney home and began work as a librarian, first at the Public Library of New South Wales, then at the Sydney Technical College and later in the Division of Radiophysics at the National Standards Laboratory, CSIR. Dever points out that ‘as an unmarried daughter in a solid middle-class household, Barnard experienced the double bind of security and dependence and often described her life as “sheltered”’. Barnard’s stable financial situation enabled her to enjoy periods

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4 Ibid.
8 Rorabacher, Marjorie Barnard and M. Barnard Eldershaw, 22.
without work to focus on writing; she took advantage of this luxury when her involvement in the literary community grew alongside Eldershaw’s in the 1930s and 1940s. Barnard continued to produce historical and critical work into the 1970s and died in 1987.

Barnard and Eldershaw met in 1916 as students at the University of Sydney and became firm friends. In the late 1920s they began a writing collaboration that would span nearly twenty years; their output included fiction, history and criticism. Their first, and most commercially successful novel, *A House Is Built* (1929) shared first prize with Katharine Susannah Prichard’s *Coonardoo* (1929) in a *Bulletin* novel writing completion. Their final novel *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* was written in the early to mid-1940s and published in 1947.¹⁰ The long-term literary collaboration between Barnard and Eldershaw has proved an enigma for critics and historians, particularly given the pair were quite secretive about the details of their working relationship. Throughout their lives both women destroyed letters and other papers in their possession, perhaps simply in order to tidy up but possibly in an attempt to hide the nature of their collaboration. Neither left behind a large collection of personal papers to mine for clues and only one, extremely short, example of correspondence between them has survived.¹¹

Later in life, Barnard claimed she was the main contributor to the collaboration during the 1940s, when Eldershaw spent significant periods of time in Canberra and Melbourne.¹² As Barnard was a prolific letter writer whose correspondence appears in the papers of many other writers, she has proved an easier historical subject than the

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¹⁰ All references to *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* are to the 1947 version published by Georgian House. The novel was first published as *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* by Georgian House in 1947, although Barnard Eldershaw had intended for the book to be titled *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*. In 1944 the novel had also been subject to censorship by the Australian government. In 1983 Vigaro republished the book as *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* using a manuscript held by the Mitchell Library (SLNSW) believed to represent the uncensored version of the novel (with the censor’s exclusions marked). Rachel Cunneen offers a detailed history of the censorship and publication of the novel, disputes the extent to which the novel was censored and suggests the Mitchell Library manuscript is problematic and may not represent that novel as Barnard Eldershaw wanted the book published in 1944. She argues that that manuscript may include the censor’s exclusions but also changes to the novel made by both Eldershaw and Barnard over time. Rachel Cunneen, ‘Organs of Becoming: Reading, Editing and Censoring the Texts of M. Barnard Eldershaw’s *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*’ (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2003).


more elusive Eldershaw. However, like Dever and Rachel Cunneen, I am inclined to give equal weight to both authors in the collaboration; Cunneen demonstrates, through the analysis of correspondence as well as of handwriting on surviving manuscripts, that Eldershaw was likely still a very active contributor to the collaboration in the 1940s. This chapter does not speculate further on the nature of the collaborative relationship between Barnard and Eldershaw but instead demonstrates that Plaque With Laurel helps to reveal their shared experience of entering the Australian literary community in the 1930s.

The duo was well regarded after their initial literary success in the late 1920s. A House Is Built, a historical novel written in a realist style, followed the fortunes of a family in Sydney in the nineteenth century. This kind of family saga found favour with both the reading public and the Australian writing community, which was by this time dominated by novelists producing realist fiction. However, Barnard and Eldershaw initially resisted joining any of the Sydney literary societies; in a letter to Nettie Palmer in 1931, Barnard judged these groups to be ‘depressing’ and later correspondence reveals she remained dubious of the worth of such organisations for decades. Contact with Palmer eventually encouraged the women to engage; they both joined the FAW, probably in 1934 or early 1935. Palmer also introduced them to Frank Dalby Davison; the three struck up a friendship, and between 1935 and 1942 Davison and Barnard had an affair. To varying degrees, all three were politicised by the atmosphere of the 1930s and began to advocate left-wing politics. After the ‘Kisch affair’ in early 1935, Barnard, Eldershaw and Davison were at the forefront of the FAW’s campaigns against fascism and literary censorship. From 1936, the trio began to host small literary gatherings at rented apartments in Potts Point and Kings Cross and within Sydney literary circles soon became known as ‘the triumvirate’. According to Dever, ‘at the height of their careers’ the influence of Barnard, Eldershaw and Davison ‘in local

literary matters was second only to that of Vance and Nettie Palmer’. Written across 1935 and 1936 and published in 1937, M. Barnard Eldershaw’s fourth novel *Plaque With Laurel* took the Australian literary community, which the writing duo had recently entered, as its subject.

**Plaque With Laurel and the literary community of the 1930s**

In *Plaque With Laurel* members of the fictional Australian Writers’ Guild travel from Sydney along the Hume Highway by a mixture of coach and private car to Canberra, where they memorialise the recently deceased, great Australian writer Richard Crale. The conference attendees stay in the fictional ‘Hotel Australasia’, easily identifiable as real Hotel Canberra, and much of the conference is held in the nearby Albert Hall. The conference culminates on the third day with a ceremony held at the National Library to reveal a plaque in honour of Crale. In between official activities the attendees are free to sightsee; they visit locations such as the Cotter River, Red Hill, Mount Ainslie, Parliament House, St John’s Church of England, and from the coach see the Kingston shopping district, the Prime Minister’s Lodge and the ‘aristocratic’ suburb of Manuka. While official activities and sightseeing occupy the majority of the attendees, the brooding outsider Owen Sale, who is coping poorly with the recent suicide of his wife, goes missing. The male conference attendees join the police in searching the banks of the Molonglo River for Sale, but the conference ends in tragedy when he is found drowned in less than three feet of water.

The Australian Writers’ Guild of the novel is a satirical representation of the conservative FAW of the early 1930s, before it became a politicised lobby group in response to the ‘Kisch affair’ of 1934-5. The opening conference address is delivered by visiting English Professor Ambrose Everton Standish, who maligns journalism as part of a ‘barbarian invasion’ of ‘ready-made culture’ into literature, without realising many of the conference attendees are themselves journalists. As he worries over the

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controversial address, the Guild’s fictional president John Bainbridge reflects on his role in the organisation:

the whole duty of a president was to lead his society through life without social misadventure, to keep things smooth and pleasant and safe . . . He would not land them in any embarrassing fights and scuffles.\textsuperscript{22}

This was quite a different approach to that taken by Edershaw as the president of the FAW; across 1935 Eldershaw actively politicised the group and encouraged the political engagement of members.\textsuperscript{23} While Bainbridge does not bear any specific similarity to Eldershaw’s predecessor George Mackaness, it is possible that Barnard Eldershaw intended their portrait of the ‘respectable’ president to reflect the once apolitical FAW.\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Plaque With Laurel} is a portrait of a community of Australian writers on the verge of transformation; the conservative Guild remains intact throughout the novel but left-wing politics seem to be bubbling under the surface.

Some historians have speculated that in the character of senior vice-president Mrs Connie Norton there can be detected a slight resemblance to Mary Gilmore and perhaps also Miles Franklin.\textsuperscript{25} At one stage, Norton refers to her childhood residency in the Canberra region; Gilmore was born in Goulburn and Franklin grew up in the Brindabella Valley and near Goulburn.\textsuperscript{26} Preparations to unveil the plaque in honour of Crale descend into a factional argument when some Guild members object to Australian flags being hung at the ceremony. One member argues that ‘to admire work because it’s Australian is a form of inferiority complex’.\textsuperscript{27} The austere Norton laments the ‘disloyalty’ among Guild members and argues that ‘young people were making the Australian Writers’ Guild a hot-bed of Bolshevism’, which she fears might force her to resign.\textsuperscript{28} This was perhaps an oblique reference to the outcome of the ‘Kisch affair’.

\begin{itemize}
\item[22] Ibid., 131.
\item[27] Barnard Eldershaw, \textit{Plaque With Laurel}, 259.
\item[28] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Gilmore, though long connected with socialist politics, objected when Kisch was invited by left-wing members to attend a FAW luncheon in honour of John Masefield in November 1934. However, overall Barnard Eldershaw were careful to ensure that their characters did not bear resemblance to any actual members of the Australian literary community; they were more interested in revealing, through satire, many of the challenges which faced the community as a whole. Censorship was one such challenge.

In late 1934, Eldershaw returned to Australia after an extended stay in Europe; she was in Nuremburg during the Nazi Party’s annual rally and attended a PEN (Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, Novelists) Congress in Edinburgh convened by H.G. Wells. The Congress denounced the increasing persecution of writers in Germany and literary censorship more broadly.\(^{29}\) This experience seems to have intensified Eldershaw’s criticisms of Australia’s own censorship laws; upon her return she argued that Australian censorship was ‘futile when the books that have been banned here have been passed by more eminent judges of literary value in other parts of the world’.\(^{30}\) In *Plaque With Laurel*, Barnard Eldershaw satirise the conservative Guild’s lax attitude to the issue of censorship. The Honourable Edgar Bunce, Minister for Customs, is invited to speak at the National Library ceremony where the plaque honouring Crale is unveiled. Bunce offers a connection to the federal government, but more specifically ‘the Ministry of Customs, in whom the censorship is vested . . . had ironically in the popular mind some vague connexion with literature’.\(^{31}\) Bunce admits that he reads very little and jokes that he is more interested in applying red tape to literary works.

Bunce is probably a caricature of Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Walter White, who was the federal Minister for Trade and Customs in the Lyons UAP government between 1933 and 1938. White oversaw the ‘increasingly interventionist censorship of political literature’ enacted by the Customs Department throughout the 1930s.\(^{32}\) In the 1940s, Barnard and Eldershaw would experience censorship first-hand. Barnard’s pacifist pamphlet ‘The Case for the Future’ (1940), written after she joined the Peace Pledge

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30 ‘Censorship is Futile, Says Authoress’, *The Star* (Melbourne), 24 December 1934, 8.
Union, was banned by the censor.33 Parts of Barnard Eldershaw’s final collaborative novel *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (1947) were also censored in 1944, though Cunneen has demonstrated that the censor was probably not as severe as has often been assumed.34 The fictional Bunce was likely a joke at the expense of the conservative FAW of the early 1930s who had invited White, despite his dubious relationship to Australian literature, to the luncheon for Masefield in November 1934; White ultimately declined when it was revealed that Kisch would be in attendance.

Robert Darby, in one of the few examples of critical engagement with *Plaque With Laurel*, focuses on Barnard’s contribution to the novel and argues that it demonstrates her increasing engagement with politics and the literary community across the 1930s. My above analysis establishes that this was certainly the case – although I recognise that Eldershaw shared in this experience. However, this begs the question: why – when Sydney and Melbourne were the primary sites of literary and political activity in the period – did Barnard Eldershaw choose to set their novel in the underdeveloped and apparently uninspiring national capital?

Historian Patricia Clarke’s article ‘Canberra in the 1930s: A Fictional Look at the National Capital’ recognises that *Plaque With Laurel* is ‘an invaluable historical record of Canberra’.35 But Clarke offers no critical analysis of why Canberra, a city which had barely registered in the country’s literary imagination, was selected as the setting. Darby almost recognises the importance of the Canberra setting. He suggests in passing that *Plaque With Laurel* might be interpreted as ‘an opportunity for landscape description’ and goes on to say that one of the novel’s dominant themes is ‘the nature of culture in a country without much history, without much sense of tradition, without the memorials which humanise the environment and make sense of the past’.36 Darby does not, however, identify the relationship between these two statements. I argue that, more than ‘landscape description’, Canberra was selected as the setting for *Plaque With Laurel* because, for Barnard Eldershaw, the new national capital seemed an obvious

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34 Cunneen, ‘Organs of Becoming’, iv.
example the country’s glaring ‘newness’. Canberra’s origins in a political compromise and architectural competition, and its history of careful if often interrupted planning is integral to understanding why Barnard Eldershaw chose to set *Plaque With Laurel* in the city.

**Canberra to the 1930s**

Historian Nicholas Brown argues that Canberra is ‘a city preoccupied with its own becoming’ and architectural historian Robert Freestone points out the ‘Griffin-centricity’ of much of the history written about Canberra. Although this chapter aims to shift the focus away from Canberra’s early years to the city in the mid-1930s, a brief outline of the establishment and development of the twentieth-century capital helps to elucidate why Barnard Eldershaw chose to set *Plaque With Laurel* in the city. John W. Reps argues that Canberra was ‘a city conceived in controversy, born in competition and nurtured in conflict’; this rather inauspicious beginning continued to influence attitudes to the city in the 1930s.

With the Federation of Australia in 1901 Australia’s most populous cities, Sydney and Melbourne, vied for the opportunity to be named Australia’s national capital. Ultimately a compromise was struck; Melbourne would be the seat of government until a new capital city was constructed no more than 160 kilometres from Sydney. Climate was an important consideration in the search for an appropriate location for the capital. Cooler regions were favoured due to the belief that white Australians were better suited to and would prove more productive citizens in a cool climate. However, it was not until 1908, after several years of debate around the most appropriate location, that the Canberra-Yass region was selected as the site of the future capital. Canberra’s ‘glorious crisp air’ and ‘exhilarating’, ‘healthy and pleasant climate’ would

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be used to advertise tourism and settlement in the capital for decades to come.\textsuperscript{42} However, prior to the Great War, Canberra remained an imagined national capital.

City planning emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a professional and intellectual movement that aimed to avoid the ‘evils of the nineteenth-century city’.\textsuperscript{43} Melbourne, dubbed ‘Marvellous Smelbourne’ in the late nineteenth century, primarily as a result of the insufficient inner city sewage system, exemplified the unclean nineteenth-century city in the Australian context.\textsuperscript{44} At the 1901 ‘Congress of Engineers, Architects, Surveyors, and others interested in the Building of the Federal Capital of Australia’, held in Melbourne, a range of experts influenced by various city planning principles convened to discuss a variety of issues including climate, architecture, road design and water management in relation to the prospective capital. One contributor emphasised that the ideal twentieth-century city would be ‘healthy and convenient for the population’, free from ‘dirt, dust, and smoke’ and contain ‘beauty and dignity . . . for the moral and intellectual welfare of its population’.\textsuperscript{45} Idealised visions of a clean and decidedly modern twentieth-century city, designed by those at the forefront of contemporary architecture and town planning, prompted the Minister for Home Affairs King O’Malley to initiate an international competition for the design of the capital in 1911. Controversially, although O’Malley convened a panel of experts to judge the entries, he personally retained the right to select the winner. This led the Royal Institute of British Architects to boycott the competition and as a result many of the leading architects of the day did not submit entries.\textsuperscript{46}

On 23 May 1912, O’Malley announced the winning entry as that of Chicago-based landscape architect Walter Burley Griffin, which was actually a collaboration between Griffin and his architect wife Marion Mahony Griffin. The Griffins’ entry was influenced by British garden city ideals but was more strongly inspired by the American


\textsuperscript{44} Graeme Davison, \textit{The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne} (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1978), 233.


city beautiful urban planning movement, in which the couple were immersed as young architects in Chicago.\footnote{Ibid., 34.} Ebenezer Howard’s garden city plans of the 1890s were intended to bring about social revolution by redesigning cities along ‘communitarian principles’. In town planning practice the radical politics of Howard’s vision was largely lost and the improvement of urban living through access to green space was emphasised.\footnote{Clara H. Greed, Women and Planning: Creating Gendered Realities (London: Routledge, 1994), 94. See also, Robert Freestone, Model Communities: The Garden City Movement in Australia (Melbourne: Nelson, 1989), 1.} However there remained a belief that garden cities and suburbs would help to shape heathy, model citizens.\footnote{Katie Holmes, Susan Martin and Kylie Mirmohamadi, Reading the Garden: The Settlement of Australia (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2008), 94-95.} Founded by Chicago architect Daniel Hudson, also in the 1890s, the city beautiful movement emphasised wide boulevards and promenades, near city parks and grand buildings. Freestone argues that city beautiful planners aimed to ‘conceptualise the whole city, rather than individual structures and spaces’; this was ‘a holistic notion of beauty as a redemptive quality’.\footnote{Robert Freestone, ‘Imagineering the City Beautiful: Parks, Gardens, and Town Planning Thought’, in Planting the Nation, ed. Georgina Whitehead (Melbourne: Australian Garden History Society, 2001), 159.} According to Freestone, the Griffin plan for Canberra was:

extravagant, formal, geometric, and artistically produced. The plan conveyed a monumental city dominated by grand axes and vistas, ensembles of monolithic buildings, terminal landmarks, citadels and cumulative massing.\footnote{Robert Freestone, Designing Australia’s Cities: Culture, Commerce and the City Beautiful, 1900-1930 (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007), 99.} Watercolours produced by Marion Mahony Griffin ‘magnificently visualised’ the city plans.\footnote{Ibid.} Multiple architects and historians have noted that the plan responded sensitively to the Canberra landscape even though the Griffins had never visited the region and were working only from the contour maps, climatic information and a clay model of the landscape that was made available to prospective entrants.\footnote{Brown, A History of Canberra, 53; Freestone, Designing Australia’s Cities, 103-4; David L. A. Gordon, ‘Capital Cities in the Twentieth Century’, in Planning Twentieth Century Capital Cities, ed. David L. A. Gordon (London: Routledge, 2006), 4; Christopher Vernon, ‘Canberra: Where Landscape is Pre-eminent’ in Planning Twentieth Century Capital Cities, ed. David L. A. Gordon (London: Routledge, 2006), 134.} Despite a generally enthusiastic response to the Griffins’ bold and artistic winning entry, the rules of the competition did not make clear what role they would have in the city’s development and O’Malley in fact suggested that a composite design, made up of
features drawn from many entries, might be produced. This uncertain beginning set the tone for the implementation of the Griffin design in Canberra for decades to come.

In the months following the announcement of the Griffins’ winning design, a Departmental Board within Home Affairs charged with overseeing construction began to make plans to implement a more modest design, which they claimed drew inspiration from several of the competition entries. According to Paul Reid, the Board ‘were preparing to build their own (undeclared) design’, which was later officially endorsed by O’Malley himself. In 1913 William Kelly, minister in the new Commonwealth Liberal Party government of Joseph Cook, invited Walter Burley Griffin to Canberra to consult with the Board and revise the initial plans. Eventually Kelly accepted Griffin’s revised design, dismissed the Board and appointed Griffin the Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction. Although Griffin retained this position until 1920, construction was slow, partly due to the Great War but also due to personal conflicts between Griffin and the ex-members of the disbanded Board who retained their positions in the Department of Home Affairs. After Griffin left the city in 1920, Canberra’s development remained slow and numerous changes were made to the Griffins’ design under the supervision of a series of advisory boards.

Figure 4.1: Watercolour by Marion Mahony Griffin, which was included as a part of the Griffin’s winning competition entry. NLA.

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55 Paul Reid, *Canberra Following Griffin*, 93 and 104.
By the 1930s Canberra seemed a city incomplete; large distances separated buildings and suburbs, bus services were inadequate and the Griffins’ ambitious plan to dam the Molonglo River, creating a lake system in the city centre, had not yet commenced. Access to the city was slow and difficult for those without a car due to the indirect train line, and the city was underused as a seat of government. Also, while some praised Canberra’s natural attractions, many leading town planners believed that the Griffins’ original urban vision had developed into a typical, sprawling Australian garden town. ‘A Young Australian’, writing in the Melbourne Argus in 1937, captured well the frustrations of many who felt Canberra had not reached its potential. According to ‘A Young Australian’:

if Canberra was made more accessible, if its beauties were enhanced, and it were “used” more truly, it would, in a very short time, fulfil its stately and historic purpose as the home of Australian sentiment, national pride, history and culture.

While ‘A Young Australian’ held out hope for the capital’s development, William Hatfield’s 1936 assessment of Canberra was far less diplomatic. Making his way home to Sydney after a round-Australia motoring tour, he decided against visiting ‘Australia’s hidden capital’, which he described as a ‘marvellous monument to ridiculous State Rights bitterness masquerading as national sentiment’.

The design and planning histories that have dominated the historiography of Canberra help us to understand how Australia’s national capital, once idealistically imagined as a modern and monumental centre of democracy, had developed by the 1930s into an underwhelming and incomplete city. Yet what they do not always help us to understand is how Canberra figured in the broader Australian cultural imagination in the period. Harriet Edquist argues that:

The capacity of literature to represent the problems and conditions of the modern city has been little explored by Australian architectural historians. When we seek to understand the discourse of the modern, twentieth-century city and its architectural legacies we tend to rely,

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57 Naturalist Charles Barrett was a notable admirer of Canberra’s beauty, see Charles Barrett, Koonawarra: A Naturalist’s Adventures in Australia (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 74. The Canberra Annual magazine advertised the city’s progress and floral attractions between 1936 and 1940, see ‘Canberra Marches On’, The Canberra Annual, no. 2 (1936), 5.

58 Freestone, Designing Australia’s Cities, 114.


60 William Hatfield, Australia Through the Windscreen (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1936), 294.
understandably, on the utterances of architects and other designers; the novel is not a natural sourcebook.61

An analysis of Plaque With Laurel offers the opportunity to add a cultural and literary perspective to a city largely treated with regard to design, construction and architecture. The locations visited in the novel reveal that Barnard Eldershaw chose to emphasise some elements of the city over others in order to suggest that Canberra lacked cultural, spiritual, and historical significance.

**Which Canberra?**

In his book *Atlas of the European Novel*, literary scholar Franco Moretti maps a range of features of nineteenth-century European novels to reveal the connections between literature and space. He maps, for example, the beginnings and endings of Jane Austen novels to demonstrate the exclusion of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Lancashire and the North; Austen’s novels present ‘small, homogenous’ old England, rather than the ‘the industrializing “Great” Britain’ that she might have engaged with.62 Moretti goes on to present a large number of more detailed maps, which he uses to analyse everything from the gendered nature of travel within novels, the geographic origin of nineteenth-century villains and the location of crimes in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories. Such a geographic approach to literature is not without precedent in Australia; Graeme Davison maps the radical Sydney inhabited by the Bulletin poets of the 1890s, Philip Mead argues for regional and local literary histories in Australia, and both Harriet Edquist and Susan King explore the literary geographies of Sydney.63 Edquist argues that mapping twenty-two Australian novels set in Sydney and published between the Depression and World War Two, reveals that they all take place in ‘quite a narrow geography’; she demonstrates the novelists’ collective preference for the city’s urban slums and the original, colonial portion of the city, centred around Sydney

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Cove. In *Plaque With Laurel*, Barnard Eldershaw were similarly narrow in both their engagement with Canberra both as a physical city and as a cultural landscape.

When plotted on a 1937 map of Canberra (see Figure 4.2), it is clear that most sites visited by the characters in *Plaque With Laurel* are south of the Molonglo River. The built environment occupied by the novel is primarily that of the parliamentary zone and the well-to-do suburbs of Parkes, Barton, Kingston, Manuka and Yarralumla. The attendees visit some of the natural attractions of the region, which are a little further afield, but these remain, as described by Clarke, ‘clichés of Canberra sightseeing’. The map also reveals that significant portions of the city are excluded from the novel. The characters do not venture much onto the northern side of Canberra and so do not describe the central business district still under construction near London Circuit. Nor do they visit or mention the workers’ camps at Westlake, Westridge or the Causeway. One character muses that ‘the really beautiful thing about Canberra . . . is the absence of slums’; Canberra’s workers’ camps were hardly slums, but they might have altered the impression in the novel that Canberra was a city of only wealthy public servants and politicians. Surprisingly, and perhaps in an attempt to minimise a sense of the future potential of the capital, evidence of construction in the city is only mentioned once; Red Hill is described as ‘a long, steep hill, scarred and harassed by the recent machinations of the Public Works Department’.

The novel also excludes the Aboriginal history of the capital region. When travelling to the Cotter River the conference bus passes by Government House at Yarralumla, once the homestead of a sheep station:

> The calm and gracious white house looked out over its gardens towards the mountains. It was poetic and right, everyone felt, that this old house, such an integral part of the story of peaceful penetration that was Australia’s history, should be her Government

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64 Edquist, ‘Reading Modernity’, 52.
65 Clarke, ‘Canberra in the 1930s’, 15.
68 Ibid., 71.
Figure 4.2: Map of Canberra in 1937, highlighting the places visited by characters in *Plague With Laurel*. Map created by Jasmine Sarin, JS Koori Designs.
House. It was a monument to the victory of the pioneer, a serene and affluent victory.  

Characterising Government House as symbolic of the ‘peaceful penetration that was Australia’s history’, actively denies Australia’s long history of frontier violence. It is not clear whether Barnard Eldershaw endorsed this view or meant to satirise it. Their acknowledgement of Aboriginal history in other publications was uneven. In *Phillip of Australia: An Account of the Settlement at Sydney Cove 1788-92* (1938), they similarly denied the significance of Aboriginal Australia and described Australia as ‘virtually a *tabula rasa*’ which ‘awaited its first settlers’.  

However, in their 1939 history *My Australia*, the authors recognised that Aboriginal people had been ‘disregarded and dispossessed’ in the process of white colonisation. Barnard Eldershaw probably highlighted or downplayed Aboriginal Australia when it suited their literary or historical purposes; in *Plaque With Laurel* they wanted to present the Canberra region as lacking in history and culture. For this reason, Barnard Eldershaw also declined to mention the Canberra-based literary community.

At the ceremony commemorating Crale ‘very few Canberra citizens . . . joined the throng’, and as a result Canberra is labelled ‘an incurious city’. None of the fewCanberrans in the audience are introduced to the reader. Clarke points out that *Plaque With Laurel* ‘does not mention Canberra’s literary scene and there is no interaction with any local literary figures although the city had had an active Society of Arts and Literature’. The Canberra Society of Arts and Literature was established in 1927 under the presidency of Sir Robert Garran, a high-ranking public servant. Prominent literary members included poet and public servant Robert Broinowski and journalist William Farmer Whyte. Although a branch of the FAW was not established in the national capital until 1950, it is hard to imagine that Barnard and Eldershaw were not aware of some of the literary activity occurring in Canberra during the 1930s. Although, Barnard Eldershaw did have to pay £25 to a Mrs Elvie Williams, the wife

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69 Ibid., 98.


73 Clarke, ‘Canberra in the 1930s’, 18.

74 ‘Records 1932-1936’, MS 646, Canberra Society of Arts and Literature, NLA, Canberra.

of Canberra-based novelist Vernon Williams, because an unpleasant character by the same name appeared in *Plaque With Laurel*. This does suggest some ignorance of the Canberra literary scene. On the whole though, their ignorance was probably intentional, in order that they might paint Canberra as culturally deficient.

‘L.F.F.’, one of *Plaque With Laurel*’s contemporary reviewers, was disappointed that ‘the Canberra described [in the novel] is entirely the Canberra of the tourist, Canberra seen, somewhat breathlessly, in a hurried week-end, with the inevitable crop of confused names and half-right impressions’. In fact, in October 1935, Barnard and Eldershaw did visit Canberra for the weekend to ‘collect background’ in preparation for writing *Plaque With Laurel*. This seems quite a short stay, especially given neither woman was particularly familiar with the city, but, according to Barnard, for this novel ‘surface knowledge [was] enough’. Interestingly ‘L.F.F.’, despite his or her disappointment in the shallow treatment of Canberra, similarly argued that in *Plaque With Laurel*’Canberra is merely a background, and no more than this tourist impression is necessary’. However, Canberra was not ‘merely a background’ in the novel. Rather, the ‘tourist impression’ offered by Barnard Eldershaw was intentional; they wanted to present Canberra as incomplete and culturally shallow.

After their weekend stay, Barnard offered Nettie Palmer some reflections on the capital:

> Canberra was packed but as placid as ever, no one to be seen, no busses [sic] to speak of and everything miles away from everywhere else. All nicely academic and positively thronged with Chemist’s shops.

At the same time, she conceded that Canberra was ‘beautiful & naturally decorative’.

Here Barnard foreshadowed many of the themes that would be taken up in *Plaque With Laurel*. ‘Placid’ suggested that Canberra was without excitement or culture and the use of the word ‘academic’ was probably an indirect reference to Canberra’s origins in a

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78 Marjorie Barnard to Nettie Palmer, October 1935, series 1, binder 42, item 4793-6, MS1174, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer 1889-1964, NLA, Canberra.  
80 Barnard to Palmer, October 1935.  
81 Ibid.
professional competition and careful governmental planning, and perhaps the more recent introduction of a university college and some sections of the CSIR. In *Plaque With Laurel*, many of the conference goers express opinions of the city very similar to those of Barnard. The sense that Canberra remained an underpopulated and incomplete city is articulated from the perspective of Jim Walters:

> he could hear nothing – no traffic, none of the deep murmur of a city. Canberra was like an abstraction, a point in dialectic, completely divorced from reality, a city without striving or competition or gaiety. It was no more than the thin imagining of an unimaginative mind.\(^{82}\)

The lack of sound and activity attributed to Canberra is a recurring theme in the novel. In another instance Imogen Tarrant notices that ‘there was no trace, in either sight or sound, of the city’ from her hotel window.\(^{83}\) Owen Sale, out walking during the evening, observes that ‘this place was very quiet and deserted for the heart of a city. There were no whisperings, no lovers behind the bushes. They didn’t do these things in Canberra’.\(^{84}\) This was the silence of a sparse and essentially vacant city, which failed to produce the sounds that a city should have. Yet, Canberra’s muteness in *Plaque With Laurel* might also be symbolic of the city’s inability to successfully occupy the landscape.

When the conference attendees take a trip to Red Hill, one member notices that ‘it was very quiet up here. The chatter of the tourists, the honking of cars on the hill, seemed to rest on the surface of the quiet without pondering it’.\(^{85}\) Here, even though sound is acknowledged, Canberra’s silence comes to the fore. D.H. Lawrence had similarly been struck by silence in Australia, even in the presence of sound.\(^{86}\) In *The Water Dreamers: The Remarkable History of our Dry Continent*, Michael Cathcart argues that early colonists often characterised unexplored and remote regions of Australia as silent. According to Cathcart, ‘colonists often represented the settlement of Australia as a process of bringing civilised sound and redeeming song to a timeless, silent land’.\(^{87}\) *Plaque With Laurel* seems to suggest that, despite international experts and careful planning, the

\(^{82}\) Barnard Eldershaw, *Plaque With Laurel*, 299-300.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 64.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 230.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 84.


'academic' city of Canberra had failed to penetrate the silence of the Australian bush. Moreover, though Canberra’s trees are frequently remarked upon in the novel, Barnard Eldershaw suggested that neither the neat city plantings nor the more natural city surrounds could compensate for the lack of white Australian history in the region.

‘Arboreal silences’
Given that the Canberra site lacked obvious monuments of human occupation, such as those found in the cities of the Old World, the Griffins’ design for the capital purposely emphasised the natural history of the region.\(^8\) It was a plan well adapted to the site’s physical features and made provision to develop Canberra’s natural attractions through tree planting. The desire to beautify Canberra was also the result of broader town planning trends that emphasised the health benefits of access to open space and nature. When the site for Australia’s national capital was selected, the long-time grazing region was almost treeless. Along with road construction, tree planting – in both the city itself and on the surrounding hills – was one of Griffin’s earliest priorities as Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction.\(^9\) English-born horticulturalist Thomas Weston, later described by high-ranking public servant Charles Daley as the ‘Founder of our Floral Beauty’, ensured that work to beautify Canberra and surrounds using vegetation was well under way by 1913.

Weston was appointed the officer in charge of afforestation in Canberra in May 1913.\(^9\) For the previous seventeen years, Weston had worked in Sydney, primarily with Joseph Maiden the Director of the Sydney Botanic Gardens. According to John Gray, Maiden was at the ‘forefront of thinking on contemporary issues surrounding botany, horticulture, public parks, forests and conservation’.\(^9\) Maiden remained a friend and advisor to Weston until Maiden’s death in the mid-1920s.\(^9\) Between 1913 and 1920, little work was done with regard to urban planting in Canberra. Instead, Weston focused on planting and encouraging the regeneration of native vegetation on the hills.

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\(^8\) Vernon, ‘Canberra: Where Landscape is Pre-eminent’, 134-5.
\(^9\) Ibid., 139.
\(^9\) Freestone, *Model Communities*, 121.
surrounding the city site. In 1915, Weston began offering trees from Canberra’s two nurseries to lessees of agricultural properties surrounding the city, in an effort to improve the region’s appearance. From 1920 onward Weston focused on urban planting, and, according to Freestone, is ‘directly responsible for the urban forest character of inner Canberra’. Horticulturist Alexander Bruce succeeded Weston when the latter retired in 1926. Little has been written about Bruce, who held the position until 1937, but Gray suggests he largely maintained and extended the work carried out by Weston, though he did add large flower displays in the administrative area of the city and established the National Rose Garden near Parliament House. In 1936, Ernest Walter Bick, curator of the Brisbane Botanic Gardens, estimated that under Weston and Bruce close to two million trees had been planted in urban areas of Canberra and over another two million had been planted in the surrounding district.

Despite the changes that the Griffin plan underwent in Canberra’s early decades, the city’s natural features were still, by the 1930s, seen as integral to the character of the city. The Canberra Annual, which published three editions in inconsecutive years (1934, 1936 and 1940), was a magazine that offered updates on Canberra’s construction and progress and attempted to attract tourists to the new city. In the 1934 Canberra Annual, one article argued that:

in the city to-day Nature has played a part greater even than that of man. The sporadic building groups have grown together in most places, and tree, shrub and flower have embellished the scene with beauty, dignity and character.

Other material advertising the capital as a tourist destination similarly emphasised Canberra’s natural attractions, especially the city’s vegetation. Advertisements in the Australian National Review, a magazine published out of Canberra between 1937 and 1939, proclaimed Canberra the ‘city of a million blossoms’ where ‘exotic trees, gathered

95 Freestone, Model Communities, 121.
96 Gray, ‘T.C.G. Weston (1866-1935)’, 209.
from all quarters of the globe, mingle with avenues of native trees and shrubs’. 99 At the end of the decade, in the 1940 Canberra Annual, one advertisement highlighted both the garden city aesthetic of the capital and the apparently ‘undisturbed’ nature of the nearby mountain ranges. Canberra was described as:

A garden city where millions of trees and shrubs have been planted in an ordered plan, so that throughout the year spring blossom, summer rose gardens, autumn leaves and winter berries succeed each other in a majestic pageant of colour. And beyond it always the ranges, where fern gullies and kangaroos and wombats remain almost as undisturbed to-day as they were centuries ago. 100

This edition of The Canberra Annual also contained a twenty-three-page photographic feature touting Canberra’s natural and built tourist attractions (see Figure 4.3). 101 Despite their many reservations about the city, even Barnard Eldershaw admitted that Canberra ‘is always beautiful, man and nature have agreed upon it’. 102 It is hardly surprising then, that Canberra’s natural landscapes and trees in particular featured repeatedly in Plaque With Laurel.

The conference attendees anticipate Canberra’s geographic isolation and rural surrounds in the initial pages of the novel. Just outside of Sydney, they enter ‘the real country’ where the ‘Australian spirit was reasserting itself’. 103 By the time they pass through Berrima, in the New South Wales Southern Highlands, they find themselves ‘really in the country’. 104 Once they reach the capital – entering the city near the Royal Military College at Duntroon – ‘the road became urban, winding suavely through an avenue of half-grown trees . . . They seemed to be entering a huge shrubbery. This was Canberra’. 105 In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ‘shrubbery’ had a horticulturally specific meaning; it described a close planting of hardy shrubs, often

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100 Advertisement, The Canberra Annual, no. 3 (1940): 1.
101 The Canberra Annual, no. 3 (1940): 13-35.
102 Barnard Eldersaw, My Australia, 145.
103 Barnard Eldershaw, Plaque With Laurel, 11.
104 Ibid., 16.
105 Ibid., 23.
with a path winding through, in an ornamental garden. This was yet another reference to the artificiality of Canberra.

In a later novel Barnard Eldershaw suggested that, more than simply evidence of Canberra’s artificiality, the city’s neat plantings might even pose a physical threat. In their futuristic science-fiction novel *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (1947) set in the twenty-fourth century, the central character, historical novelist Knarf, recounts the particulars of a right-wing invasion and left-wing counter-revolution that took place in Australia in the wake of World War Two. While all of Australia’s other major cities take a political stance in the conflict, with regard to Canberra amidst the turmoil he writes:

> Canberra had no voice. Canberra was deserted, a city of trees, shuttered down in green murmurings and arboreal silences, life gone to the faintest pulse of a few people living on uncertainty, having nothing to hold them to the place and nowhere else to go. Canberra, the synthetic stronghold of democracy had no longer any being. Like a faint echo of Ankor Wat Canberra lay overthrown by the mild assault of an alien spring; its once clear geometrical lines frayed and over-ridden; the hollow cubes, oblongs, squares of its buildings, dice thrown on the plain, half submerged in a tidal wave of foliage; its ears filled with leaves against its own death sigh. Pearl bushes grew bold, the tulips were rank; wave after wave of flowers rose from the sap of the unpruned roses; roots and the frail clinging fingers of creepers prized open the fabric of the city to rain, wind, and silent corrosive dust. Canberra was the first of the Australian cities to fall.107

In contrast to Canberra’s self-induced collapse the more spirited Sydney, while also falling in the revolution, does so far more spectacularly; Macquarie Street ‘burned with great dignity’.108 As in *Plaque With Laurel*, the Canberra of *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* does not produce the sounds of a human city and seems also to lack a population willing to defend it against even a ‘mild’ floral ‘assault’. Barnard Eldershaw suggested that Canberra, while an aesthetically pleasing city, lacked the cultural and historical depth required of a national capital.

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108 Ibid., 404.
Glimpses of the City that is a Garden

Millions of trees, shrubs and flowers provide the setting of Canberra. More than two and a half million trees and shrubs have been planted in its 80 miles of streets and 1,350 acres of plantations in the City Area alone, but this is little more than half the number planted in the rest of the Territory.

Top: Flowering trees make this pathway one of the Spring.
Centre: A glimpse across Commonwealth Ave. near the Albert Hall.
Bottom: Autumn has tinted this sylvan setting of the Canberra Post Office.

Figure 4.3: Part of a Canberra Annual photographic feature showcasing many of Canberra's tourist attractions, ‘Glimpses of the City that is a Garden’, The Canberra Annual, no. 3 (1940): 19.
Barnard Eldershaw weren’t the only authors to suggest that Canberra might succumb to an arboreal apocalypse. In *Ride on Stranger* (1943), novelist Kylie Tennant wrote that:

> The beauty of the Canberra landscape is that it has been carefully planned not for the convenience of human beings but of the trees. Everything a tree could possibly want is there; hordes of gardeners to tend them; fine, open spaces; and, dotted about, for a picturesque contrast, a few buildings. These cluster, almost cower, in a green scrub of arrogant trees.\(^{109}\)

According to the novel, ‘it is to be feared that in time Canberra, owing to this overweening regard for trees, will be submerged in the forest primeval’.\(^{110}\) Less dramatic, but perhaps more acidic, was leading Australian historian W.K. Hancock’s observation that ‘the plan of Canberra is that of a garden city, in which the garden is more emphasised than the city’.\(^{111}\) Canberra was, according to Hancock, ‘a chaos of prettiness’.\(^{112}\)

In *Plaque With Laurel* there is the suggestion that native trees and landscapes might be more authentic than the superficial ‘prettiness’ of much of the planned city. During a discussion about the use of exotic trees in the city one character jokingly argues that:

> if they planted gum-trees in Commonwealth Avenue Canberra wouldn’t have been Canberra at all. The gum-trees would have laughed and laughed and laughed at all the by-laws and red tape and the tin-pot bureaucratic gods, till Canberra fell down like a card-house. They had to get tame exotic trees to keep them in countenance.\(^{113}\)

This remark suggests at least some believed Australian native vegetation had more character than exotic plantings. Moreover, throughout the novel, the repeated admiration of the plains and mountains surrounding the capital over the neat urban plantings suggests a preference for the ‘wild dignity of untrodden country’.\(^{114}\) The Brindabella, Tinderry, Tindbinbilla and Bimberi ranges that surround Canberra were

\(^{109}\) Kylie Tennant, *Ride on Stranger* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1943), 207.


\(^{111}\) W.K. Hancock, *Australia* (London; Ernest Benn Limited, 1930), 280.

\(^{112}\) Ibid., 281.

\(^{113}\) Barnard Eldershaw, *Plaque With Laurel*, 86.

\(^{114}\) Ibid., 76. Canberra’s surrounding scenery is also mentioned on 73, 206 and 217.
of course not untrodden; various Aboriginal groups visited the ranges annually to feast on migrating Bogong moths.\textsuperscript{115} This, however, remains unacknowledged in the novel.

The conference attendees admire the rugged mountains, but the novel suggests that supposedly ‘wild’ country could also pose a physical threat. It is in the undammed Molonglo River, still winding its way through the centre of the city, that Owen Sale drowns. Sale’s erratic behaviour at the conference, attributable to the suicide of his wife and recent years of literary impotence, alienates him from the group. He is found drowned after leaving the conference on foot without notifying any other participants; it is implied that he has committed suicide. Prior to Sale’s death, Jim Walters recognises that the Guild’s members seem willing to forgive the dead Richard Crale’s ‘tragic failures’, but are indifferent to the living Sale’s ‘embarrassing misery’.\textsuperscript{116} To some extent, this suggests that the group is morally culpable for Sale’s death. On the other hand, the dangerous nature of the Molonglo and surrounding bush is also attributed some blame. As the male members of the conference assist in a police search for Sale along the river, they encounter ‘rough country’, ‘rocky ground’ and ‘difficult country’ and undergrowth which ‘tore with sinewy fingers’ at their legs.\textsuperscript{117} One searcher proclaims, ‘we can’t let the bush have him’ – suggesting something of Lawrence’s menacing ‘spirit of the place’ still pervaded the region. Ultimately the ‘recalcitrant bush’ and sinister Molonglo, which in the night is a ‘dark void without a gleam of water’, claims Sale.\textsuperscript{118}

Up until the 1950s, due to its relative remoteness, rural setting and delayed construction, Canberra was often derogatively called the ‘bush capital’. Despite the literary community’s ongoing interest in the Australian landscape, specifically the Bush, as a source of nationalism and literary inspiration, the rural character of Canberra’s surrounds did not seem to endear Barnard Eldershaw to the city. In \textit{Plaque With Laurel}, neither Canberra’s urban trees nor the remnant and perhaps dangerous patches of ‘wild’ country seem to make up for a perceived lack of human history in the region. The Canberra presented in the novel is neither a part of the Bush – where Australia had supposedly forged a new racial type and national identity – nor a legitimate modern

\textsuperscript{115} Josephine Flood, \textit{Moth Hunters of the Australian Capital Territory: Aboriginal Traditional Life in the Canberra Region} (Marleston: Gecko Books, 2010), 12-17.

\textsuperscript{116} Barnard Eldershaw, \textit{Plaque With Laurel}, 128.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 274, 277 and 282.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 278, 281 and 297.
city that might offer a hub for political ideas and literary culture. Moreover, the city itself is described as an ‘architectural rendering, an idealization done to scale’. St. John’s Church of England is the only ‘old and natural’ place the group visits, and apparently offers a ‘refuge’ from ‘all the premeditated newness of Canberra’.

In *Plaque With Laurel*, Canberra is abstract, academic, almost a piece of art; tree planting has not disguised the inorganic nature of the city and careful planning only seems to emphasise a perceived lack of human history and culture in the region. Young Canberra offered Barnard Eldershaw the perfect location to explore anxieties around Australia’s relatively brief white history on the continent. Additionally, setting their fictional literary conference in Canberra enabled Barnard Eldershaw to suggest a resonance between the underdeveloped national capital and a perceived immaturity of Australian literary culture.

![Figure 4.4: One of Canberra's natural looking hills, foregrounded by neat city plantings. Taken by R.C. Stangman during the 1930s. ACT Heritage Library.](image)

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119 Ibid., 72.

120 Ibid., 209 and 212.
Canberra and the canon

In 1930 W.K. Hancock labelled Canberra ‘a document of Australian immaturity’. It was precisely this supposed immaturity that attracted Barnard Eldershaw to using the capital in *Plaque With Laurel*. The novel explores a similar immaturity, or at least perceived immaturity, within Australian literature. In a 1936 editorial, Eldershaw engaged with the supposed ‘adolescence’ of Australian literature and argued that during the 1890s:

> The Australian novel hardly existed, and we, feeling our nationality quicken, began to worry about it. The hunt for The Great Australian Novel began. The rather touching belief that such a novel could be written once and for all was a sign of literary adolescence. Such novels as appeared were anxiously examined to see if they were the longed-for masterpiece; now and then one was acclaimed but only half-heartedly and more as a patriotic than as a literary gesture. All works not suspected of being the Great Australian Novel were left rigidly alone and permitted quietly to die without a single wreath. The Great Australian Novel idea was an incubus not an encouragement.

In her editorial, Eldershaw suggested that, rather than helping to improve the country’s international literary standing, the search for ‘The Great Australian Novel’ – that is, the creation of an Australian canon – only discouraged the vast majority of Australian writers. Patrick Buckridge describes a ‘canonical anxiety’ that developed in the 1930s and 1940s, as the Australian literary community became preoccupied with the apparently mediocre quality of its own literary output. In the late 1940s, Barnard and Eldershaw continued to resist this ‘canonical anxiety’ and warned others off the ‘profitless search for the Great Australian novel’.

In *Plaque With Laurel*, Canberra, a city itself obsessed with hierarchy, helps Barnard Eldershaw to satirise the Australian literary propensity to attempt to locate and canonise its Great Australian Novelists. The planners who attended the 1901 ‘Congress of Engineers, Architects, Surveyors, and others interested in the Building of the

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121 Hancock, *Australia*, 282.


Federal Capital of Australia’, were optimistic that the prospective Australian capital would be democratic and would avoid ‘shutting up the poorer quarters in back slums’. The Griffins were also ‘democratic idealists’; their original plan included a vaguely described ‘Capitol’ to be built on Capital Hill, that would be a place for popular assembly, gatherings and celebrations. However, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Canberra suburbs and residential groupings were planned with different categories of citizen and pay grades in mind. Susan Withycombe argues that ‘class was built into the very fabric of Canberra’. This did not go unnoticed by Barnard Eldershaw.

In Plaque With Laurel conference attendees mention that one drawback, among several, of living in Canberra is the class segregation of suburbs. Moreover, the public service ‘Blue Book’ made publicly available information about employees’ salaries, which apparently encouraged public servants to choose their friends according to pay grade. In Barnard Eldershaw’s short story ‘Christmas’, also set in Canberra and probably written around the same time as Plaque With Laurel, Canberra’s hotels outwardly look very similar but differ in ‘name, situation and tariff’. Canberra’s hotels are designed to appear democratic, but ultimately ‘follow the pattern upon which the Federal Capital is built and that is hierarchic’. A character in Tennant’s Ride On Stranger also comments on Canberra’s segregated nature: residents ‘all in one grade of income were isolated in a suburb far enough removed from the grade next below and above to hint that, perhaps, visiting so far out of their financial class might be inadvisable’. Barnard Eldershaw, who seem to advocate the communal and egalitarian development of Australian literature, ultimately reject Canberra’s hierarchies, as well as the desire to establish an Australian literary canon.

The character who articulates most clearly the benefits of acting collectively rather than striving for individual greatness is Crale’s lover, the non-literary Imogen Tarrant:

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126 Later Canberra planners chose to build new Parliament House on Capital Hill, see Davison, City Dreamers, 223.  
129 Barnard Eldershaw, Plaque With Laurel, 86-87.  
131 Tennant, Ride on Stranger, 208.
Don't you think that perhaps we do make a whole between us, even if each one only contributes a little? It doesn't mean that there is no pattern because we can't see it. We might make up for one another in the end somebody's plus fits into somebody else's minus. Like a jigsaw, you know. There's a whole, but it doesn't belong to anyone. We share it.  

Like both Patrick Buckridge and Maryanne Dever, I read Tarrant’s emphasis on the communal nature of Australian literary production as the approach which Barnard and Eldershaw themselves endorsed. In an unpublished CLF talk, Barnard Eldershaw made this perspective explicit:

To reduce the study of literature to the contemplation of one masterpiece after another would be like restricting geography to the study of mountain tops. A literature is not just a series of strong points, it is a communal effort, a living organism to which many, the names and the anonymous, the readers as well as the writers, contribute. It is a social as well as an aesthetic phenomenon.

This was not to say that no great Australian literary masterpieces would ever be written, but that authors and critics should not focus exclusively on their production. In a 1952 article, Eldershaw argued that once it had progressed through the ‘co-operative stage in which the sum is more important than the parts’, Australian literature would naturally reach ‘the delegated stage’, at which point the work of a few individuals would come to represent the whole. A canon, Barnard and Eldershaw believed, would eventually reveal itself – perhaps they sought a similar spontaneity of development in Australian cities that was lacking in the new capital. To convince the literary world to shift its focus from the search for great writers and novels to a ‘communal effort’ was an ambitious aspiration, and one Barnard Eldershaw clearly felt might have been impossible; as the fictional conference attendees leave Canberra, the coaches ‘carried away, not a corporate body, but a number of individuals, whose thoughts were bent on as many separate goals’. Moreover, while Sydney was a no less problematic city, it seems to offer the conference attendees an escape from the glaring cultural and environmental tensions in Canberra; it is with a sense of relief that they find themselves heading back north via the scenic coastal route.

133 Patrick Buckridge, “‘Greatness’ and Australian Literature in the 1930s and 1940s’, 36; Dever, ‘Introduction’, xxi; Dever, ‘Subject to Authority’, 84.
Canberra, more so than the major literary centres of Sydney and Melbourne, enabled Barnard Eldershaw to highlight many of the anxieties that plagued the Australian literary community in the interwar period. The particular version of Canberra they presented in *Plaque With Laurel* was specifically crafted to highlight themes of democracy, history and the creation of an Australian literary tradition. The novel’s characters and the real literary community – both before and after its politicisation in the mid-1930s – were constantly grappling with these issues. The material reality of Canberra mirrored broader Australian cultural concerns around the lack of a long history of white settlement in the country and the extent to which the country’s natural history might offer a surrogate source of national identity. Moreover, the capital, idealised at its conception as a centre of democracy, was in fact utterly hierarchical; the ‘synthetic stronghold of democracy’ called into question the desirability of an Australian literary canon. In their non-fictional *My Australia* (1939), Barnard Eldershaw characterised the process of settlement as a struggle to adapt to the environment. Successful settlement, they argued, involved not just physical adaptation but the ‘spiritual . . . interpenetration of the soil’. 137 Canberra seemed to represent the Australian inability to make this adjustment. In evoking the need for a spiritual relationship to the Australian soil, Barnard Eldershaw employed a common metaphor used by writers in the Australian 1930s and 1940s. As the next chapter will show, the soil erosion crisis that gripped Australia during those decades gave this metaphor particular potency.

Chapter Five

‘Racy of the Soil’: Ian Mudie, Right-wing Nationalism, and the South Australian Soil Erosion Crisis

... this shrouded sun
that spins unrayed from this dust-pall of sky
Shines on each acre of your continent,
that your unplanted bread now dissipates
into this roaring warmth of gritted air
and drifts forever into far Pacific deeps,
down, down, until the cool green no more
turfs the wide paddocks and the hills
but the red earth-layers spread beneath the sea

On Friday 18 September 1936, as part of a series of events celebrating the centenary of South Australia, residents of the state capital turned out to witness a floral pageant in the city centre. A crowd of 130 000 people marvelled at elaborately decorated city buildings and lined the route along which twenty-seven floral floats travelled through metropolitan Adelaide. The event was considered a popular success. However, in the week leading up to the festivities preparations were hampered when strong winds swept through the city, bringing with them a thick dust. Dust enveloped Adelaide; low visibility caused traffic congestion and accidents and delayed trains. The combination of wind and dust damaged houses and the flowers that festooned city buildings in preparation for the parade. This was a spectacular and timely reminder for Adelaide

residents, in the midst of their celebration of progress across one hundred years of white settlement, that this history had also unleashed an environmental disaster.

As dust from eroded regions of rural South Australia fell on centenary preparations, Adelaide-based poet Ian Mudie was, as yet, unknown. Over the coming years Mudie carved out a position for himself in the Australian literary community as a nationalist and an advocate for the Australian environment. The state of Australian soil especially alarmed him. Soil imagery became integral to much of Mudie’s poetry after he aligned himself with the right-wing nationalism espoused by his friend and mentor P.R. Stephensen in the late 1930s. Mudie’s environmental concern was intimately linked with his nationalism, yet critics and historians generally see Mudie as either a nationalist or an environmental thinker; they do not address the intersection of these two themes in his work.

Mudie has been described by historians and literary scholars as a ‘nationalist and propagandist’ and a ‘hectoring’ nationalist.2 His contemporary critic A.D. Hope even likened his rhetoric to that of the Hitler Youth Movement.3 Others have considered him an early conservationist, his literary associations even earning him the label ‘proto-ecologist’.4 The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature hints at the relationship between nationalism and environmental concern in Mudie’s work, labeling him ‘aggressively conservationist’.5 Similarly, David Bird recognises that ‘elements of “Nationalism and Radicalism” combined with environmentalism’ in Mudie’s work, though he does not investigate this in detail.6 The connections between environmental thought and right-wing nationalism have been given the most scholarly attention in Germany, particularly in relation to the Nazi period.7 Unsurprisingly, little has been

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5 Wilde et al., The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature, 552.


7 According to Frank Uekoetter conservation in the Nazi era is one of the best researched topics in German environmental history; see Frank Uekoetter, The Green and the Brown: A History of Conservation in
written about these connections in Australia. Ian Mudie and his poetry offer an opportunity to consider this relationship in the Australian context.

This chapter will show that, although Mudie was influenced by Nazi ‘blood and soil’ ideology through his affiliation with Stephensen, the relationship between nationalism and environmental concern in his poetry was the unmistakable product of his settler imagination. While Mudie’s metaphorical evocation of soil was occasionally used to further his extreme politics, he also engaged with the science of soil erosion. Histories of Australian soil erosion have emphasised legislative, scientific and governmental developments, as this was an era when scientific experts were gaining influence and public prominence. Mudie’s poetry both demonstrates this shift toward government control of environment issues, but simultaneously enables this chapter to contribute to an emerging literature that emphasises the wider cultural and social ramifications of soil erosion. Mudie’s poetry employed many of the metaphors and images that were


frequently conjured in other soil erosion writing, from government reports to works of popular science.

In addition to this, while German ‘blood and soil’ ideology emphasised the importance of the relationship between the peasant and the land, Mudie rejected popular Australian nationalism that celebrated the agricultural and pastoral relationship with the environment. For Mudie, farmers and pioneers were representative of the destructiveness of white colonists more generally; he presented the Aboriginal relationship with the environment as an alternative goal toward which white Australia should strive. Mudie did not argue for any active cultural exchange between black and white Australia, but appropriated Aboriginal symbolism and mythology in an attempt to claim a longer history and sense of authentic indigeneity for white Australians. Overall, Mudie’s combination of environmental concern and nationalism resonated with other Australian nationalist writing of the period that strove for a sense of cultural and environmental adulthood on the continent. Mudie was well-known and liked among his contemporaries and his poetry found favour among the many nationalist writers that dominated the Australian literary community in the 1930s and 1940s.

**Ian Mudie**

Ian Mayelston Mudie was born in Hawthorn, Adelaide, in 1911, to bank accountant Henry Mayelston Mudie and his second wife Gertrude Mary, née Wurm. Mudie’s family were well-respected, middle-class professionals; his grandfather was a school teacher and Anglican priest, his father the manager of the Savings Bank of South Australia between 1919 and 1924, and his brother was the town clerk for Hindmarsh, Adelaide. Between 1920 and 1926 Mudie attended Scotch College Adelaide, an independent Presbyterian school for boys where he performed poorly, more interested in reading books of his own choosing than the work prescribed by teachers. Mudie left school at the age of fifteen without obtaining his leaving certificate and held several jobs before he spent a few months in 1930 ‘carrying his swag’ around rural western Victoria with a friend. Retrospectively, Mudie claimed that they travelled this way ‘for

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13 Ian Mudie, interview by Hazel de Burg, 27 October 1966, ORAL TRC 1/187-188, NLA.
the fun of it’ and, as ‘clean and smiling’ swagmen as opposed to the unemployed, they ‘lived like kings’ on the donations of the public.\textsuperscript{14} From a young age Mudie was self-consciously dealing in Australian imagery and attempted to foster an image for himself as an ‘ordinary bloke’, distanced from his family and school background. When he insisted on pursuing a literary career, apparently from the age of ten, he departed from the financially sound and practical professions in which his family engaged.\textsuperscript{15}

In October 1934, after a short stint living in London in a failed attempt to boost his literary career, Mudie returned to Adelaide and married Renee Dunford Doble.\textsuperscript{16} The couple would have two children and it appears that Doble did not have paid work. To ensure the financial survival of his family Mudie eked out ‘a sort of a living’ writing journalistic articles and short stories for a range of Australian publications including the Adelaide \textit{Advertiser}, \textit{The Illustrated Tasmanian Mail}, \textit{The Bulletin} and \textit{The Australian Women’s Mirror}.\textsuperscript{17} Although skilfully adaptable as a freelance journalist, it was through poetry that Mudie expressed his personal, emotional and political ideas. In his unpublished early collection ‘Swifter Than These’ (1935), Mudie’s poetry focused on urban life as alienating and criticised urban populations whose hedonism apparently blinded them to the only virtuous feature of modernity, scientific progress.\textsuperscript{18} However, in this period novelists and travel writers dominated the Australian literary marketplace and publishing poetry was difficult.\textsuperscript{19} Prior to 1937 Mudie had only managed to get a handful of poems published. It was not until the late 1930s and early 1940s that Mudie found greater publication success, primarily because he had aligned himself with two movements that reflected the depth of social uncertainty and cultural questioning that characterised the interwar years.

Mudie was profoundly affected by publisher, critic and polemicist P.R. Stephensen’s popular book \textit{The Foundations of Culture in Australia: An Essay Towards National Self-Respect}\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.\textsuperscript{16} Peter Morton demonstrates that an inordinately large number of Australian writers left to pursue a career in London between 1870 and 1950, believing that the large literary marketplace there would provide greater opportunity for career advancement. Peter Morton, \textit{Lusting for London: Australian Espatriate Writers at the Hub of Empire, 1870-1950} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).\textsuperscript{17} Mudie, interview.\textsuperscript{18} For a more detailed analysis of Mudie’s early poetry see Jayne Regan, ‘Poetic Politics: The Life and Career of Ian Mudie, 1930-1945’ (B.A. hons. thesis, Australian National University, 2012), 18-25.\textsuperscript{19} Richard Nile, \textit{The Making of the Australian Literary Imagination} (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002), 167-8.}
(1936). In this extended essay, Stephensen argued that Australia needed to evolve beyond its colonial heritage and establish a unique Australian culture. Stephensen’s biographer Craig Munro argues that *The Foundations of Culture in Australia* was a ‘powerful stimulus’ for Mudie, which encouraged him to shift his poetic focus from urban degeneration to arid and bush landscapes. Mudie also found a publishing outlet in W.J. Miles and Stephensen’s magazine *The Publicist* from 1937 and became an enthusiastic member and contributor to Stephensen’s ultra-nationalist – and allegedly fascist – Australia First Movement, established in 1941.

In the same year, Mudie became a paying member of Rex Ingamells’ Adelaide-based Jindyworobak poetry movement, which advocated the production of an ‘authentic’ Australian literature inspired by the Australian landscape and Aboriginal history and mythology. Ingamells had come upon the word ‘jindy-worabak’ in the glossary of journalist and poet James Devaney’s *The Vanished Tribes* (1929), where it was attributed with the meaning ‘to annex; to join’. Ingamells decided that this word described a particular Australian quality in literature that he wanted to endorse. The Jindyworobaks claimed that their aim was ‘a more effective fusion between our inherited Western culture on the one hand and, on the other, the primitive culture and place values of the continent which we have made our own’. The annual *Jindyworobak Anthology* offered Mudie another opportunity for regular publication.

Once he had established relationships with Stephensen and Ingamells, Mudie shifted his poetic concerns away from generic urban scenes and found the Australian emphasis for which he would become renowned. Bush and arid environments, extreme nationalism and Aboriginal Australia all appeared in Mudie’s poetry in the late 1930s. The sudden, rather than gradual, appearance of these themes suggests that Mudie was primarily inspired to this change by Stephensen’s call for literature ‘drawn direct from Australian life’ and Ingamells’ insistence that writers pay particular attention to Australia’s ‘environmental values’. Once he harnessed the nationalism offered by

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21 James Devaney, *The Vanished Tribes* (Sydney: Cornstalk, 1929), 240.
Stephensen and synthesised it with a sense of environmental concern, Mudie found a firmer foothold within the Australian literary community and contemporary cultural and political debates.

**P.R. Stephensen**

In a period of world-wide political and cultural anxiety, Stephensen’s *Foundations of Culture in Australia* argued that Australian writers should demonstrate their cultural uniqueness and distance themselves from ‘barbarous and sub-civilised Europe’. Explicitly influenced by D.H. Lawrence, Stephensen claimed that a national culture was the expression ‘of the spirit of a Race and of a Place’. That Mudie found Stephensen’s ideas appealing is not surprising considering the similarly enthusiastic response from many other Australian writers and critics. *The Foundations of Culture in Australia* received praise from respected Australian literary figures such as Nettie Palmer, Mary Gilmore, Xavier Herbert and Miles Franklin. American literary critic C. Hartley Grattan thought the book captured well the ‘truth’ that an Australian culture ‘must be deeply rooted in the Australian earth’. Franklin argued that *The Foundations of Culture in Australia* ‘stimulated the languishing fires of Australianism’ in literature in the 1930s, and believed the book remained influential into the early 1950s. Bird argues that it was Stephensen’s ‘avowed intention to foster the development of Australian culture – his cultural nationalism’, rather than his interest in Nazi ideology, that primarily attracted literary followers like Franklin, Herbert, Rex Ingamells and Mudie. Mudie was one of many writers in the mid-to-late 1930s who sought to carve out a position in the Australian literary community with reference to Stephensen’s ideas.

Mudie’s relationship with Stephensen was also the catalyst for his important literary friendships with Ingamells, Herbert and Franklin. Franklin and Mudie corresponded extensively in the 1940s. In 1941 Franklin characterised Mudie’s work as ‘intoxicating’

26 Ibid., 14.
and enthused that ‘I think you have gone farther than any of us in capturing the spirit
of Australia’.\textsuperscript{31} Similarly, Xavier Herbert gushed:

\begin{quote}
Since I first read you I’ve considered you the only Australian Poet.
For long I’ve felt the urge to tell you so. Now overwhelmed by your
“Corroboree to the Sun”, I do it.

My homage to you, Song-Man!\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

By the late 1930s and early 1940s, when Stephensen began espousing right-wing
political views in \textit{The Publicist}, many literary figures began to distance themselves from
him. Herbert objected to Stephensen’s growing anti-Semitism.\textsuperscript{33} Franklin warned
Mudie off the potentially ‘suppressive or retrogressive politics’ of Australia First and
his fellow Jindyworobak Flexmore Hudson cautioned him about the ‘cheap alien
Fascism of \textit{The Publicist}.\textsuperscript{34}

Contributors to Stephensen and Miles’ \textit{Publicist} magazine expressed admiration for the
German and Japanese governments and in the May 1937 issue the magazine printed
the first of many extracts of Adolf Hitler’s speeches. In 1941, \textit{The Publicist} declared
itself ‘For “White” Australia; against heterogeneity’, ‘For Aryanism; against Semitism’
and ‘For national socialism; against international communism’\textsuperscript{35}. From October 1937
Mudie contributed poetry to the magazine; he quickly became \textit{The Publicist’s} in-house
poet and remained so until the publication’s demise in 1942. Despite the warnings
from his literary friends, Mudie remained a staunch Stephensen supporter. Mudie’s
racial politics were clearly influenced by his relationship with Stephensen. He had read
J.B.S. Haldane’s \textit{Possible Worlds and Other Essays} and Isaac Taylor’s \textit{Origin of the Aryans},
indicating an engagement with racial theory and eugenics that were recurring themes
in \textit{The Publicist}.\textsuperscript{36} Historian Cameron Muir points out that in this period a great number
of Australians ‘were gripped by anxieties and concerns over racial hierarchy,
population and invasion, and the effect of the environment on bodies and culture’.\textsuperscript{37}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Miles Franklin to Ian Mudie, 20 July 1941, series 9, folder 1, PRG 27, Papers of Ian Mayelston Mudie,
SLSA, Adelaide.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Xavier Herbert to Ian Mudie, 5 March 1940, series 1, folder 1940, PRG 27, Papers of Ian Mayelston
Mudie, SLSA, Adelaide.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Bird, \textit{Nazi Dreamtime}, 280
\item \textsuperscript{34} Miles Franklin to Ian Mudie, 21 April 1942, series 1, folder 1940, PRG 27, Papers of Ian Mayelston
Mudie, SLSA, Adelaide; Flexmore Hudson to Ian Mudie, 10 December 1940, series 1, folder 1940, PRG 27,
Papers of Ian Mayelston Mudie, SLSA, Adelaide.
\item \textsuperscript{35} ‘\textit{The Publicist’s Fifty Points’}, \textit{The Publicist}, no. 66 (1941): 16.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Ian Mudie, personal anthology, series 17, PRG 27, Papers of Ian Mayelston Mudie, SLSA, Adelaide.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Muir, \textit{The Broken Promise of Agricultural Progress}, 117.
\end{itemize}
In this sense, Mudie’s interest in eugenics seems less unusual. However, Mudie also demonstrated a more specific anti-Semitism. In 1941, he expressed his ‘indignation at Jews/Communists’ to Jindyworobak Victor Kennedy.\(^{38}\) Also, writing under the pseudonym ‘Wilka Yelper’ in *The Publicist*, Mudie objected to Jewish immigration to Australia, complaining that the ‘refugee is the refujew’.\(^{39}\)

Mudie travelled to the inaugural general meeting of Stephensen’s Australia First movement in the Shalimar Café on Elizabeth Street Sydney, 20 October 1941, where he was elected to the executive committee.\(^{40}\) Australia First would have very little political impact, particularly as it only had a lifespan of five months. In March 1942, Stephensen, along with fifteen other members and associates of the movement, was accused of treason and ties to the Japanese government and held without trial until the end of the war. Mudie’s home was searched by police, who confiscated an English translation of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* carefully annotated in Mudie’s hand, but he was not arrested.\(^{41}\) How Mudie, as an executive member of Australia First, avoided internment is unclear. His residency in Adelaide, away from the hub of Australia First’s Sydney-based activities might have saved him. Or perhaps as a ‘literary fellow-traveller’ he was considered less dangerous than more politically-minded members.\(^{42}\) Not only did Mudie avoid internment, but his close association with Stephensen, *The Publicist* and Australia First was not detrimental to his literary career. In fact, these connections seem to have helped garner him literary attention.

Mudie was not paid for his poetic *Publicist* contributions but regular publication boosted his profile in a literary marketplace within which, according to Mudie, it was difficult to make a name.\(^{43}\) Although the circulation of *The Publicist* was very limited, being associated with the increasingly infamous political magazine garnered Mudie some attention.\(^{44}\) Prominent Australian literary critic A.D. Hope, in his 1941 review of

\(^{38}\) Victor Kennedy to Ian Mudie, 23 June 1941, series 1, folder 1941, PRG 27, Papers of Ian Mayelston Mudie, SLSA, Adelaide.


\(^{40}\) ‘Australia-First Movement: Manifesto Issued and Meetings Arranged’, *The Publicist*, no. 65 (1941): 5.

\(^{41}\) Barbara Winter, *The Australia-First Movement and the Publicist, 1936-1942* (Brisbane: Glass House Books, 2005), 156.


\(^{43}\) Mudie, interview.

\(^{44}\) David Bird estimates that, at most, 3000 copies of *The Publicist* were sold per month. Bird, *Nazi Dreamtime*, 54.
several Jindyworobak books, clearly alluded to Mudie’s political connections when he described Mudie’s poetry as showing ‘traces of the fanaticism of the Hitler Youth Movement’.\textsuperscript{45} Retrospectively, Mudie remembered that such critical attacks had the power to ‘bring your name before people . . . it was wonderful, people talking about [his poetry] everywhere’.\textsuperscript{46} Mudie revelled in this sort of attention, which helped him to find more regular publication in a range of politically moderate Australian journals and little magazines including \textit{SALT}, \textit{Poetry}, \textit{Meanjin Papers} and \textit{Southerly}.\textsuperscript{47} Moreover, despite Mudie’s very different political allegiance, in 1948 Nettie Palmer told Ingamells that she respected Mudie’s ‘loyalty and vision’.\textsuperscript{48} That Mudie found greater publication success as his relationship with Stephensen developed suggests that, although occasionally extreme, much of his poetry resonated with many in the Australian literary community.

\textbf{Blood and soil}

In \textit{Nazi Dreamtime: Australian Enthusiasts for Hitler’s Germany}, David S. Bird argues that Mudie’s poetic emphasis on soil was ‘marked by the \textit{volksich} sensibility of blood and soil’ that was reflected in other ‘Nazi dreaming’ around the world.\textsuperscript{49} The phrase ‘blood and soil’ had been used by nineteenth-century agrarian romantics in Europe, but was popularised in 1930s Germany by Richard Walther Darré, Reich Peasant Leader and Minister for Agriculture between 1933 and 1942.\textsuperscript{50} Blood and soil ideology implied a ‘special connection between the German people (blood) and the land (soil)’, and emphasised the virtues of the peasant population who were so intimately connected with the soil.\textsuperscript{51} As will be explored below, Mudie was less than enthusiastic about Australian agriculturalists and pastoralists, whom we might expect to have acted as

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{45} Hope, ‘Culture Corroboree’, 31.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Mudie, interview.
\item \textsuperscript{47} In the six years prior to the publication of his first \textit{Publicist} contribution ‘South Australian Spring’, Mudie had only managed to get five poems published. In the six years following, he was able to get at least 29 poems published in magazines and journals, not including those that appeared in \textit{The Publicist} and \textit{Jindyworobak Anthologis}. These numbers are compiled from Jennifer Tonkin and Jennifer Van Wageningen, \textit{Ian Mudie: A Bibliography} (Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1970), 2-30.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Bird, \textit{Nazi Dreamtime}, 282 and 166.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Gesine Gerhard, ‘Breeding Pigs and People for the Third Reich: Richard Walther Darré’s Agrarian Ideology’, in \textit{How Green were the Nazis?}, 131; Olsen, \textit{Nature and Nationalism}, 76.
\end{itemize}
substitutes for a peasant population in the Australian context. Yet, there remained an

echo of the Nazi rhetoric of blood and soil in Mudie’s poetry.

Australian soil, which Mudie addressed in multiple poems across the 1930s and 1940s,
abounded in metaphorical potential that was exploited by many Australian writers,
especially those who advocated the creation of a unique and adult national culture.
Elyne Mitchell asked, ‘does not the strength of a nation need roots in the soil?’ and C.
Hartley Grattan believed that ‘the producers of literature must seek their basic
inspiration in the life of man on the Australian earth’. Additionally, this thesis began
with a quote from Vance Palmer who worried over the legitimacy of the white
Australian relationship to the ‘Australian earth’ and wondered how many Australians
had ‘penetrated the soil with their love and imagination’. Similarly, in The Foundation
of Culture in Australia, Stephensen had argued that it was imperative for Australia to be
‘culturally weaned from Europe’ and allowed to ‘grow upon this soil’. According to
Stephensen, cultural autonomy would ensure that white civilisation could survive in
Australia if it were to be destroyed in Europe and America. Inspired by Stephensen’s
soil rhetoric, Mudie prefaced his 1940 poetry collection Corroboree to the Sun with a quote
from Stephensen that argued ‘we have a job to do here in Australia, to become
acclimatised mentally in our own Austral latitudes and firm rooted in our own Austral
soil’. Throughout the 1940s Mudie employed a soil/growth metaphor in his poetry
to emphasise the possibility of white ‘acclimatisation’ to the Australian environment.

For Mudie soil acted metaphorically as the foundation from which the Australian
nation could grow, true Australian ‘flesh’ would be ‘quarried from its earth’. Although
Mudie’s poetry did not venerate the peasant or farmer in the same way that traditional
blood and soil rhetoric might, he did suggest that the white Australian population
should strive for an intimate and spiritual connection to the native Australian

52 Though peasant is a word not usually used in the Australian context, Mudie’s good friend and well
known Australian writer Miles Franklin had, in her 1901 novel My Brilliant Career, specifically addressed
the ‘Australian peasant’. She described Australian peasants as the ‘bone and muscle’ of the nation, who
battled hardships, many of them thrown up by the Australian environment. See Miles Franklin, My

53 Elyne Mitchell, Speak to the Earth (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1945), 213; C. Harley Grattan, ‘On
Australian Literature’, 33.


56 P.R. Stephensen, preface to Ian Mudie, Corroboree to the Sun (Melbourne: Hawthorne Press, 1940), np.

57 Ian Mudie, ‘This is Australia’, This is Australia (Adelaide: Frank E. Cork, 1941), 9.

> in which the sands of all our deserts run,
> and all our creeks and rivers flow, in which
> Katoomba’s rocks and red Macdonnell’s stone
> have ground in strange and national alchemy.\(^{58}\)

Here sand, rocks and stone are fused with the blood of white Australians. This excerpt exemplifies Mudie’s emphasis on the symbolic importance of the Australian environment – soil in particular – from which the Australian people might draw vitality and strength. For both Stephensen and Mudie unspoiled Australian soil was a ‘cultural asset’, and so was a useful metaphor that they could evoke in aid of their ultranationalist political stance.\(^{59}\) However, Mudie’s poetic engagement with the salient issue of soil erosion was not simply the opportunistic adoption of an environmental issue to lend metaphorical support to his right-wing politics. He also engaged deeply with the science of the unfolding South Australian soil disaster.

**The South Australian soil erosion crisis**

One hundred and fifty years of land clearing, pastoralism and agriculture in Australia culminated in widespread soil degradation by the interwar period. After the Great War, often under soldier settlement schemes, more of the ecologically delicate, semi-arid regions of Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales and Western Australia were opened up to wheat cultivation. Dry farming techniques imported from America intensified pressures on Australian soil.\(^{60}\) Dust storms – the spectacular evidence of wind erosion – were common in rural Australia, but throughout the 1930s and 1940s a combination of strong winds and severe drought brought dust storms to many Australian coastal cities, including Adelaide. The metropolitan experience of dust storms, combined with reports of disastrous consequences for agriculture caused by soil erosion in the American mid-west, revealed that erosion had the potential to diminish the long-term profitability of Australian soil.\(^{61}\) John Bradsen has demonstrated that, during the 1930s and 1940s, there was widespread political

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\(^{60}\) Sauter, ‘Australia’s Dust Bowl’, 355.

engagement with soil erosion and that this resulted in a shift in government land use policies from a developmental model to a conservation model.62 Through significant critical engagement with past practices and a sense of need for new programs and awareness, conservation of soil and other natural resources became central to the project of building and maintaining a wealthy stable nation. A range of state government legislation attempted to address the issue: Soil Conservation Act 1938 (NSW), Soil Conservation Act 1939 (SA), Soil and Land Conservation Act 1945 (WA) and Soil Conservation and Land Utilisation Act 1949 (VIC). Such government intervention in environmental issues was characteristic of the period.

Figure 5.1: A dust storm near Parachilna, South Australia, in 1951. SLSA.

American environmental historian Thomas R. Wellock argues that between 1920 and 1945 Progressive-era conservation, which was dominated by community-led environmental organisations, came to an end and environmentally concerned activists increasingly ‘accepted and often promoted institutional reform and placed power in the hands of new agencies, commissions, and technical experts’.63 In the Australian

context, Libby Robin labels this development ‘conservation science’.\(^6\) She argues that ‘the confluence of science and governance is a hallmark of the modern nation-state’.\(^5\)

The shift toward government control and technical and scientific expertise in Australia was particularly evident after the 1926 establishment of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). The CSIR investigated sheep blowfly, cattle ticks, rabbits and prickly pear – all problems pertaining to rural Australia and farming in particular.\(^6\)

The soil erosion crisis endangered the agricultural and pastoral industries that were seen as integral to the nation’s identity and wealth and, as a result, the CSIR became concerned with ameliorating the degraded and inefficient condition of Australian farming land. Moreover, Australia was influenced by the rise of experts and science in America in response to the Depression-era Dust Bowl on the America prairies and as a part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal policies.\(^6\)

Cameron Muir argues that during the early-to-mid-twentieth century ‘science was gaining authority as the primary interpreter of the natural world’.\(^6\)

Mudie’s poetry reflected this change; in the 1930s and 1940s he incorporated scientific knowledge into his soil erosion poetry.

Mudie had long believed that science should be integral to a poet’s work. In ‘Swifter Than These’, an unpublished collection of his early poetry, Mudie was enthusiastic about the ‘search for truth’ offered by science and astronomy.\(^6\)

He revelled in the ‘reality’ of human insignificance in light of the ‘uncountable immeasurability’ of space and the incomprehensible ‘minuteness of whirling orbits’ of ‘atoms and protons’.\(^7\)

By the 1940s Mudie even occasionally sought out personal contact with expert figures; he initiated correspondence with anthropologist A.P. Elkin in 1943 and agricultural scientist and member of the Commonwealth Rural Reconstruction Commission (1943-46) Professor Samuel Wadham in 1945.\(^7\)

He also took great care to make a

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\(^7\) Sauter, ‘Lessons from the US’, 300.

\(^6\) Muir, *The Broken Promise of Agricultural Progress*, 114.


\(^7\) Mudie, ‘Hymn to All Space’ and ‘Universe and Ostrich’, in ‘Swifter Than These’.

\(^7\) E.P. Elkin to Ian Mudie, 14 October 1943 and E.P. Elkin to Ian Mudie 21 January 1944, series 1, folder D-E, PRG 27, Papers of Ian Mayelston Mudie, SLSA, Adelaide; Samuel Wadham to Ian Mudie,
scientific understanding of soil erosion explicit and integral in ‘Wool-Cheque’, a 1940 poem representative of his poetic engagement with soil erosion and degradation. In ‘Wool-Cheque’, Mudie identified land clearing with ‘axe and fire’, damage done by ‘small sharp hooves’ and the ‘man-made rabbit curse’ as contributors to vegetation loss which left soil exposed to both wind and water erosion. He expressed the process of water erosion poetically:

Sheep and the man-made rabbit curse
ate the last shrubs, the flood was free
to rush in frothy licence down the hills,
bearing in brown and scummy arms
what once had been root-feeding earth.

Land without vegetation to promote stability and absorption was vulnerable to flood and the loss of nutrient rich ‘root-feeding earth’ limited the prospect of future flora regeneration. In other stanzas of the same poem, ‘rivers silt’ recognised the problem of salinity and ‘deserts creep’ engaged with the common fear of desertification, the human creation or expansion of deserts due to unwise use of the land.

Mudie’s understanding of the causes of soil erosion in Australia aligned closely with those outlined in the 1938 report of the South Australian Soil Conservation Committee. The Committee concluded that:

2. All cases of soil erosion are fundamentally due to the destruction of the natural vegetative cover and the consequent exposure of the bare soil to the erosive action of wind or water.
3. The factor responsible for the destruction of the perennial vegetative cover in the pastoral country of South Australia is the grazing animal. The effects of over-grazing are accentuated by dry seasons and the depredation of rabbits.
4. In the mallee areas the destruction of the vegetation was deliberately brought about to make way for the plough.\textsuperscript{76} In 1936 English biologist and CSIR investigator Francis Ratcliffe had similarly concluded that vegetation destruction, primarily as a result of grazing, was principally responsible for soil erosion in the northern areas of South Australia.\textsuperscript{77} That Mudie could identify all the major causes of vegetation loss and soil erosion outlined by both Ratcliffe and the Report of the South Australian Soil Erosion Committee indicates the pervasiveness, and importantly the accessibility, of government-funded scientific findings. Much scientific information was made publicly available, making non-expert engagement possible.

Books of popular science, which often had a broad scientific and historical focus, were aimed at a public audience. In 1938 Ratcliffe published *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand: The Adventures of a Biologist in Australia* based on his experiences as a CSIR investigator of flying foxes in Queensland and soil erosion in arid South Australia. Ratcliffe claimed the book – part popular science, part travel book – was ‘a collection of observations, impressions, and reminiscences, on the whole more subjective and trivial than scientific and serious’, though the scientific findings of his CSIR-sponsored travels were included.\textsuperscript{78} The work of independent researcher Jock Pick was published as *Australia’s Dying Heart: Soil Erosion in the Inland*, which Mudie had read and strongly recommended to his good friend Miles Franklin.\textsuperscript{79} Beyond Pick’s book it is unclear how much of this popular science Mudie had read. Nevertheless, he could have gained a reasonably sophisticated scientific understanding of soil erosion through South Australian newspapers, to which he often contributed as a freelance journalist.

During and in the aftermath of severe dust storms South Australian newspapers ran substantial articles on the ‘choking pall’ and ‘gloom’, and the damage and ‘havoc’ caused by the dust in metropolitan Adelaide.\textsuperscript{80} Newspaper articles also investigated the

\textsuperscript{76} South Australia Soil Conservation Committee, *Report of the Soil Conservation Committee* (Adelaide, Government Printer, 1938), 54.

\textsuperscript{77} Francis Ratcliffe, *Soil Drift in the Arid Pastoral Areas of South Australia* (Melbourne: CSIR, 1936), 8.


\textsuperscript{79} Ian Mudie to Miles Franklin, 8 April 1942, G27457, Correspondence and Literary Papers 1887-1954, NLA, Canberra.

cause of these storms, identifying drought and the loss of native vegetation through deliberate clearing, overstocking and rabbits as factors contributing to soil erosion.\textsuperscript{81} Ratcliffe’s research activities were reported in both the Adelaide \textit{Advertiser} and \textit{Mail} across 1935-6 and a summary of his CSIR report appeared in the \textit{Advertiser} in May 1936.\textsuperscript{82} Pick’s book was also favourably reviewed in the Adelaide \textit{Advertiser} and Pick authored a substantial article on soil erosion in the Adelaide \textit{Mail}.\textsuperscript{83} Between 1937 and 1940 Mudie collated newspaper cuttings on a range of South Australian topics, including sand drift and soil erosion, indicating that at the very least his soil erosion poetry was informed by these reports.\textsuperscript{84}

Although Australia did not produce any soil erosion literature as enduring as John Steinbeck’s American Dust Bowl novel \textit{The Grapes of Wrath} (1939), the accessibility of information about soil meant Mudie was not the only Australian writer interested in the topic. According to Flora Eldershaw in 1952, ‘the sight of the dust blowing our sparse and precious top soil out to sea wakens more acutely a sense of social responsibility for the right use of the land for the common good and for the future’.\textsuperscript{85} Over the preceding two decades a range of Australian writers had voiced their concerns. Examples of literary engagement with soil erosion in the 1930s and 1940s included Myrtle Rose White’s memoir \textit{No Roads Go By} (1932), Mary Gilmore’s poem ‘The Dust Bowl’ (1944), Judith Wright’s poem ‘Dust’ (1945), Myra Morris’ poem ‘Sand-Drift’ (1946), and Elyne Mitchell’s article ‘Books and the Soil’ (1944) and books \textit{Speak to the Earth} (1945) and \textit{Soil and Civilization} (1946). The fear that the continent was blowing away in response to European occupation aroused a great deal of passion among those – literary and otherwise – who were concerned about making a homeland of Australia. As a result, and despite the growing influence of science and expert opinion, soil erosion writing was characterised by a range of commonly conjured images, metaphors and rhetoric.

\textsuperscript{81} ‘Choking Cloud Over City: Dust from Denuded North Lands, Says Professor’, \textit{The Advertiser} (Adelaide), 23 March 1933, 9.
\textsuperscript{82} ‘Soil Drift Increasing’, \textit{The Advertiser} (Adelaide), 1 May 1936, 24.
\textsuperscript{83} ‘Australia’s Soil Erosion Problem’, \textit{The Advertiser} (Adelaide), 6 March 1943, 3; Jock H. Pick, ‘How to Save this State’s Saltbush Country’, \textit{The Mail} (Adelaide), 16 December 1944, 5.
\textsuperscript{84} Collated articles include those titled ‘Sand drift at Parachilna’ and ‘South Australia’s Shifting Soil’, see Newspaper cuttings relating to South Australian history, 1937-1940, series 14, item 8, Papers of Ian Mayelston Mudie, SLSA, Adelaide.
The language of soil erosion

War imagery, erosion as disease, creeping deserts and nationalism linked to the soil were repetitively invoked by literary writers and sometimes by popular science writers, journalists, government officials and scientific experts. In 1944 Labor member for Wakefield Albert Smith argued that for Australians the issue of soil erosion was second only in importance to the war. However, soil erosion was not always thought of as separate to war; the struggle with soil erosion was often framed as a war itself. In the *Journal of the Department of Agriculture of South Australia*, which was usually strictly scientific and instructive, experienced agriculturalist Wilf Roediger ventured a more metaphorical warning about soil erosion:

> We are at present spending colossal sums of money to prevent this country from falling into alien hands, but at the same time allowing this other enemy, just as dangerous, to apply a “scorched earth” policy, which, if unchecked, will ultimately render it almost unusable to anyone.

Like Roediger, Ratcliffe positioned soil erosion as an enemy in war:

> I have described nothing less than a battlefield, on which man is engaged in a struggle with the remorseless forces of drought, erosion, and drift . . . Must man in the end be routed and forced to abandon the territory he has seized?

> . . . To defeat the arch-enemy, drought, is of course impossible; but cannot its attacks be circumvented and their more lasting effects avoided?

Jock Pick went even further than Roediger and Ratcliffe, claiming that in soil erosion Australia faced an enemy ‘more deadly than all the Hitlers of history’. These Australian examples reflected the use of war imagery in international soil erosion literature. The titles alone of G.V. Jacks and R.O. Whyte’s *The Rape of the Earth* and American ecologist Paul Sears’ *Deserts on the March* demonstrate this. *The Rape of the Earth*, which suggested that humans were the aggressors, was most consistent with Mudie’s own use of war imagery.

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86 Janette-Susan Bailey demonstrates that Australian story-telling about soil erosion was especially influenced by Dust Bowl rhetoric emanating out of America, see: Bailey, *Dust Bowl*, 3; Bailey, ‘Wartime Political Ambition Behind One Image of a Dam in Australia is Developing a Dust Bowl (1943)’, 38.


89 Ratcliffe, *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand*, 314.

90 Pick, *Australia’s Dying Heart*, 89.
In ‘Wool-Cheque’ Mudie used the language of violence and war to emphasise the deliberate and destructive nature of human action. In settling the land pastoralists and agriculturalists launch an ‘invasion’, with ploughs and animal hooves their ‘weapons’. The phenomenon of gullying, associated with water erosion, becomes part of the war imagery as ‘erosion flung its trenches, digging in / for war upon the earth’. Mudie gave the land ‘flesh’ and ‘veins’ making it vulnerable to human violence and to metaphorical infection by soil erosion which becomes ‘the fatal plague’ and ‘leprosy’.91 Jacks and Whyte similarly likened soil erosion to a disease, from which ‘scarcely any climate or environment is immune . . . but . . . is most virulent in the semi-arid continental grasslands’.92 Pick described soil erosion in America as a ‘cancer in the body of the republic’ and Judith Wright explored the human cost of ‘sick dust’ plaguing rural residents.93 Even the 1938 Report of the South Australian Soil Conservation Committee employed the disease metaphor, quoting two international experts who respectively described erosion as a ‘malignant disease’ and a ‘gangrenous growth’.94 Francis Ratcliffe too labelled Australian erosion ‘a creeping cancer of the land’.95

‘Creeping’ and ‘creep’, common verbs used in relation to soil erosion, featured in ‘Wool-Cheque’ twice as well as in a range of South Australian newspaper articles on the subject.96 Implicit in the image of creeping deserts was a concern about the potential threat desertification posed to the future security of the nation. Historic examples of the disastrous consequences of soil erosion were routinely evoked. It was argued that ‘prosperous and extensive civilisations’, particularly in North Africa and the Middle East, met their demise as a result of creeping deserts accelerated by misuse of the soil.97 It was implied that Australia might suffer a similar fate if soil erosion was left unchecked.

92 Jacks and Whyte, The Rape of the Earth, 20.
95 Ratcliffe, Flying Fice and Drifting Sand, xiii.
97 South Australia Soil Conservation Committee, Report of the Soil Conservation Committee, 5.
Elyne Mitchell was one Australian writer who explicitly linked soil erosion with the prospect of civilisational collapse. Mitchell and her husband Thomas Walter Mitchell, a lawyer and politician, lived on a grazing property in the Snowy Mountains from the 1930s. The pair were seasoned hikers and skiers who both represented Australia in international skiing competitions.\(^98\) During World War Two, when her husband was a Japanese prisoner-of-war, Mitchell was left behind to run the property. She claimed this experience, which she detailed in *Speak to the Earth* (1945), helped her forge a closer relationship with the land.\(^99\) During this time she also became alert to the problems of soil erosion in Australia and began to advocate for the education of farmers in order that the soil – which she associated with ‘the nation’s greatness’ – might be conserved.\(^100\) In 1946 she dedicated a whole book to her concerns about Australian soil. In *Soil and Civilization* (1946), Mitchell used a mixture of metaphor and romantic and religious language to highlight the damage done to Australian soils since colonisation. She described a ‘circle starting with misuse of soil, curving through the weakening of the race and loss of awareness round to greater soil impoverishment and further decadence’ which she argued resulted in ‘a man-made alteration in the rhythm of the universe’\(^101\). Like many others, Mitchell gave extensive space in the book to describing the deterioration of historic civilisations as a result of the abuse of the soil.

In a book review, Geoffrey Leeper, an agricultural chemist and lecturer at the School of Agricultural Science at the University of Melbourne, objected to the ‘romantic and mystical’ tone of *Soil and Civilization*. He argued:

> One cannot have a rational argument with people who feel or write like this. If their feelings result in better soil conservation on their own properties, they are useful. But the real work of conquering erosion will be done by city-trained men who do not care whether “Nature” is infinitely wise or not, but who will tackle a problem scientifically by analysing it into its parts and applying the appropriate cure – whether it is a machine for working on the contour, a more successful rotation of crops, or a method of applying social pressure


\(^{100}\) Ibid., 98.

against any non-cooperators who are destroying the people’s wealth.\textsuperscript{102}

Leeper’s emphasis on science, analysis, methods, rationality and ‘city-trained men’ (over a rural woman such as Mitchell), demonstrates his faith in technical solutions to Australia’s soil problems. In a sense, Leeper was probably right; scientific and expert knowledge was to be more influential than Mitchell’s semi-spiritual rhetoric in changing farming practices over the coming decades.\textsuperscript{103} However, like Mudie’s, Mitchell’s writing was a part of broader public and literary engagement with the issue, which especially inspired nationalist rhetoric.

The nation was at the heart of literary, government and scientific concerns about soil erosion. The 1938 Report of the Soil Conservation Committee recommended that South Australia:

\begin{quote}
adopt a policy of soil conservation which would have as its aim the protection of the agricultural and grazing country from the effects of water and wind erosion, so that the productivity of those lands will remain unimpaired for the use of future generations.\textsuperscript{104}
\end{quote}

Similarly, in the \textit{Journal of the Department of Agriculture of South Australia}, Agricultural Advisor O. Bowden stressed that:

\begin{quote}
It is imperative that all sections of the community appreciate the essentiality of the land as the one great asset of the Nation, wherein lies the security of both their existence and that of the generations to follow.\textsuperscript{105}
\end{quote}

Mudie was a self-described Australian nationalist; however, he was less interested in the economic potential of the land that preoccupied these government agencies. He preferred to explore the spiritual, moral and environmental consequences of soil erosion and, like Mitchell, believed that ‘human dependence on soil is not only a material necessity, but metaphysical’.\textsuperscript{106} However, unlike Mitchell, who valued her experience as a grazier, Mudie argued against dominant national narratives that celebrated the relationship between the Australian landscape and the white pioneer or

\begin{footnotes}
\item[103] Arguably, it was the confluence of scientific knowledge and spiritual arguments gave the modern environmental movement so much force later in the century.
\item[104] South Australia Soil Conservation Committee, \textit{Report of the Soil Conservation Committee}, 57.
\item[105] O. Bowden, ‘Our Agriculture at a Cross Road’, \textit{Journal of the Department of Agriculture of South Australia} 46, no. 12 (1943): 351.
\end{footnotes}
farmer; in this he also broke with blood and soil rhetoric. As critic Gary Catalano points out, during the early 1940s ‘farmers are pilloried as the main agents of environmental degradation’ in Mudie’s poetry.  

**Anti-pastoral**

Kosmas Tsokhas explains that in 1939-40 Australian wool growers ‘earned a record wool cheque’. This was a result of the 1939 Imperial Wool Purchase Scheme, under which the British government purchased the entire Australian wool clip, other than that required by Australian manufacturers, for the duration of World War Two plus one year. For Mudie, however, the price of wool had more serious implications than the economic stability of an iconic Australian industry. According to Mudie, in the history of white Australia ‘spoliation, rape, greed, and unconcern, loomed large as a dust-storm’. Mudie attacked popular Australian nationalism that celebrated agriculturalists and pastoralists as pioneers; the title of ‘Wool-Cheque’ alone reveals his contempt for what he considered the economically motivated nationalism that destroyed South Australian soil.

In ‘Wool-Cheque’, farmers have ‘gold-blind, wool-blind, / hides-and-wheat-and-tallow blinded eyes’, and are motivated purely by greed. Mudie characterised agriculturalists and pastoralists as avaricious and destructive rather than the crux of Australian national wealth. Mudie’s hostility toward farmers and farming practices was even more direct in ‘Retreat of a Pioneer’, a poem that also appeared in the 1940 collection *Corroboree to the Sun*. It is worth quoting the whole of the short poem here:

Vacant he sits, sucking his yellowed teeth;  
hostile to change, sprawling uneasy feet  
that bullock-dray and shuffling camel knew.  
Half-blind from sand; the tribes he stole from, dead;  
the land he raped made barren as his mind.

Characterising the pioneer’s mind as ‘vacant’ and ‘barren’ at once engaged in hostility toward farmers and emphasised the damage done to the land. What is perhaps most

striking about the poem is Mudie’s use of the word pioneer in the title. Mudie directly challenged the accepted usage of the word, which typically brimmed with positive nationalist connotations. Instead greed and violence seemed to him the central themes of white pioneering and colonisation. This emphasis enabled Mudie to problematise popular national narratives that celebrated the relationship between the farmer and the land. In this sense, both ‘Wool-Cheque’ and ‘Retreat of a Pioneer’ can be considered anti-pastoral poems, and, as such, they demonstrate Mudie’s significant distance from German notions of blood and soil.

‘Wool-Cheque’ and ‘Retreat of a Pioneer’ both challenged the notion of a peaceful and prosperous Arcadia in rural South Australia and exposed the violent relationship between white settlers, the land, and the Aboriginal people who occupied it. William Lines argues that, in the 1920s, art depicting ‘pastoral panoramas’ and ‘subdued landscapes and the absence of conflict’ were popular. Artists generally ‘sought to minimise dissension and impose a view of the colonisation of Australia as an unqualified success’. Further, in her study of Australian pastoral painting, Jeanette Hoorn argues that ‘conflict and violence were unrepresentable under the dictates of decorum and it was the role of the painter of pastoral landscapes to efface this other, darker side in celebratory, decorous images’. Although Hoorn is specifically referring to the effacement of actual frontier violence between the colonisers and colonised Aboriginal populations, that Mudie emphasised the violent nature of European colonisation can still be considered an intentional, oppositional violation of the ‘decorum’ of the pastoral mode. Mudie positioned his poetry in opposition to other literature that idealised the white Australian exploitation of the land. He resisted the veneration of pastoralists and agriculturalists that was a feature of much of the Bulletin poetry of the 1890s, although he did still celebrate the figure of the swagman (see Figure 5.3).

In a youthful treatise on the political potential of poetry, Mudie had argued that poetry should be used to reveal ‘our faults and ugliness through the burning glass which only

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111 Lines, Taming the Great South Land, 185.
113 Mudie suggested that the ‘immortal swagman’ ran in the blood of all Australian men. Mudie, The Australian Dream, 23.
poetry can hold to life'. In his anti-pastoral poetry Mudie presented the Aboriginal relationship to place as a point of contrast to the ‘ugliness’ of white colonisation. He suggested that attention to the continent’s Aboriginal history might enable white Australia to develop a more harmonious relationship with the soil.

‘White dream-time’

In the 1938 Jindyworobak manifesto, *Conditional Culture*, Ingamells argued that prior to white colonisation Aboriginal Australians were ‘closely bound in every way with their environment’; he believed that ‘from aboriginal legend, sublimated through our thought, [white Australians] must achieve something of a pristine outlook on life’. Mudie held similar ideas, at least from February 1938 when he published a suite of poems in *The Publicist* that explored the history, mythology and, in a limited way, language of the South Australian Kaurna people. Mudie imagined that a genuine sense of belonging in the Australian landscape would transform white Australians into ‘new Kaurna-men’. In 1941, after he had officially aligned himself with Jindyworobak, Mudie made his views on the value of Aboriginal Australia more explicit. In a short prose article that appeared in *Cultural Cross-Section*, Mudie asked ‘isn’t it about time that we woke up to the boundless gain we may find in the study of the culture of a people that over umpteen-thousand-years-and-fifty-three adjusted themselves perfectly to their environment’. Mudie expressed this idealised Aboriginal relationship with the environment poetically:

The great land
slept,
with its dark sons and daughters well content
to leave its soil unraped, and worship it
as mother-goddess of their hero-gods.

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115 Ingamells, *Conditional Culture*, 1 and 17.
116 The Kaurna people traditionally lived in the Adelaide plains area, from Cape Jervis in the south to Crystal Brook in the north and bounded to the east by the Mount Lofty Ranges.
This characterisation of the Aboriginal population as ‘content’ in the Australian environment serves as a contrast to the gluttony and destructiveness Mudie ascribed to white Australian society.

Figure 5.2: The cover of Mudie’s *The Australian Dream*, designed by Margaret Preston, was a muddle of Aboriginal and white Australian iconography capturing well Mudie’s desire to see white Australia absorb elements of Aboriginal culture. Ian Mudie, *The Australian Dream* (Adelaide: Jindyworobak, 1943).
Mudie imbued the Australian environment with a sense of natural order that was missing from noisy, dirty and morally degenerate urban society. In ‘Wool-Cheque’, Mudie inverted the usual imagining of white man as order and nature as wild. When the land is cleared and sheep and rabbits eat the remaining shrubs, floodwaters are ‘free, to rush in frothy licence down the hills’ sweeping away precious soil.\(^{120}\)

Here it is the natural order that has been disrupted by white inhabitants. Further, in ‘Moana Increase-Site’ (1940) a ‘line of increase stones’ arranged by Aboriginal people once held meaning, but that meaning is ‘muddled’ amidst the chaos of white settlement:

\[
\text{litter, litter, litter, old tins} \\
\text{and broken beer bottles, a wood spade,} \\
\text{where once was order.}^{121}
\]

Cattle, campers and litter, including ‘yesterday’s tomato-sandwich-stained / dull news of Europe’s dull hysteria’, have destroyed the careful relationship Aboriginal people had cultivated with the environment. However, Mudie believed that white Australia might yet absorb an Aboriginal outlook that would provide environmental and cultural balance for modern, urban society.

In ‘Growth’ (1940) the speaker grew ‘from this earth, this air, / these few remaining trees’.\(^{122}\)

As a result of this earthy connection, he is able to locate a sense of Aboriginal spirituality despite no actual relationship with any of the ‘vanished people’:

\[
\text{There was none to tell me} \\
\text{The stories of this earth, nor tell the names of the sacred places, but,} \\
\text{Unknowingly, I found the camp-sites and the sacred places}^{123}
\]

Here the Aboriginal people and the environment are inextricably linked and have the ability to shape the new inhabitants of the land. Mudie imagined that white Australians could be ‘one / with the dark warriors and the lubras’, and have a legitimate claim to leading a ‘resurgence’ of true Australianness, creating ‘continuity’ between black and white Australia.\(^{124}\)

Like his fellow Jindyworobaks, Mudie did not advocate the actual adoption of Aboriginal cultural practices or religion, but believed Australian ‘writers and painters must become hard-working students of aboriginal culture’ in order to

\(^{120}\) Ian Mudie, ‘Wool-Cheque’, 13.

\(^{121}\) Ian Mudie, ‘Moana Increase-Site’, \textit{Corroboree to the Sun}, 5.


\(^{123}\) Ibid.

\(^{124}\) Ian Mudie, ‘Continuity’, \textit{Corroboree to the Sun}, 32.
inspire spiritual appreciation for the Australian environment in the broader population.\textsuperscript{125}

During the interwar years some writers – particularly Katharine Susannah Prichard and Xavier Herbert – were developing an awareness of contemporary Aboriginal politics and through their novels were asking difficult questions about the human victims of the white occupation of Australia. Stephensen himself was involved with both the Aboriginal Citizenship Committee and the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA) which organised the ‘Day of Mourning’ protest held on Australia Day 1938. He also provided financial backing for the \textit{Abo Call} newspaper and gave space to the discussion of contemporary Aboriginal politics in \textit{The Publicist}.\textsuperscript{126} Mudie briefly corresponded with Aboriginal activist and founder of the APA Jack Patten, but did not generally engage with contemporary Aboriginal politics.\textsuperscript{127} Mudie claimed that white Australians had a lesson to learn from the original inhabitants of the country – ‘that of adapting our culture to our environment’ – but he did not think to consult any Aboriginal people to achieve this.\textsuperscript{128}

The Jindyworobak emphasis on Aboriginal culture and language drew much contemporary criticism, notably from Max Harris, A.D. Hope and even fellow Jindyworobak Flexmore Hudson.\textsuperscript{129} These critics argued that Aboriginal Australia offered little of value to modern Australians and dismissed Ingamells early attempts to use Aboriginal language in his poetry as unintelligible. However, Lawrence Buell argues that the appropriation of indigenous cultures is common in settler societies:

\begin{quote}
the art of bringing to full personal consciousness and articulating a sense of place is arduous, and for new world settler cultures especially so, given the relative shortness of their history in place. These cultures face the uphill battle of jump-starting the invention of place-sense by superimposing imported traditions and jerry-building new ones –
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{125} Ingamells, \textit{Conditional Culture}, 17.
\textsuperscript{126} Bird, \textit{Nazi Dreamtime}, 170-1.
\textsuperscript{127} John Thomas (Jack) Patten to Ian Mudie, 27 February 1939, series 1, folder 1930-9, PRG 27, Papers of Ian Mayelston Mudie, SLSA, Adelaide.
\textsuperscript{128} Ian Mudie, ‘New Australian Voices’, draft radio script, undated, series 1, folder 1944, PRG 27, Papers of Ian Mayelston Mudie, SLSA, Adelaide.
Anglo-American wholesale borrowings and fabrications of Indian stories being a conspicuous example of this kind.\textsuperscript{130}

Similarly, in the Australian literary context, Frank Bongiorno argues that when poet Bernard O’Dowd, who was at the height of his literary career before the Great War, drew on the history of Aboriginal Australia his ‘principal concern was the construction of a national culture for the settler colonies rather than the understanding of Aboriginal society as a living presence’.\textsuperscript{131} Like O’Dowd before him, Mudie did not engage with contemporary Aboriginal culture. Rather he imagined a harmonious relationship with the environment, modelled on what he assumed about the historic Aboriginal relationship to place, as fundamental to the formation of a ‘true’ and importantly white Australian nation. His soil erosion poetry suggested that he feared white Australians may not be worthy of being Aboriginal Australia’s successors as custodians of the continent.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure53.jpg}
\caption{The Jindyworobak icon which appeared on most of the group’s publications indicated the movement’s preoccupation with connecting itself to a romanticised version of Aboriginal Australia. \textit{Jindyworobak Anthology, 1943}, ed. Flexmore Hudson (Adelaide: Jindyworobak, 1943), title page.}
\end{figure}

Mudie and Stephensen’s Nazi-inspired racism and simultaneous admiration for Aboriginal Australia may seem, especially from a contemporary perspective, irreconcilable interests. Stephensen rationalised this by arguing that ‘the Aborigines are the oldest Aryans on earth, and in my opinion the Aryan Race originated [in Australia], immigrated to India, then to Europe via Persia and the Caucasus – this means that Australia is verily our Home’.\textsuperscript{132} It is unclear whether Mudie endorsed this racial theory.


\textsuperscript{131} Frank Bongiorno, ‘Aboriginality and Historical Consciousness: Bernard O’Dowd and the Creation of an Australian National Identity’, \textit{Aboriginal History} 24 (2000): 42.

\textsuperscript{132} P.R. Stephensen to Ian Mudie, 16 July 1941, series 1, folder 1941, PRG 27, Papers of Ian Mayelston Mudie, SLSA, Adelaide.
However, Mudie’s belief that the Australian Aboriginal population was dying out perhaps enabled him to avoid the contradictions in his racial ideas.

Despite increasing awareness of contemporary Aboriginal issues, the conviction that the Australian Aboriginal population was a ‘dying race’ persisted well into the twentieth century. For example, a 1936 article in the Adelaide *Mail* argued that:

> today a few scattered remnants of a dying race are left as a ghostly monument to the legion that has passed. When another hundred years have passed, the only record of the black man is likely to be in museums and in distorted place names. 133

In 1938, the same year as Mudie’s Kaurna suite appeared in *The Publicist*, journalist and ethnographic researcher Daisy Bates further popularised the notion of the dying race in her book *The Passing of the Aborigines*. Bates characterised her work among Aboriginal groups in remote areas of Western Australia and South Australia as ‘easing their inevitable passing’. 134 This sort of attitude was evident in the specific case of the Kaurna people; as early as 1879 they had been declared ‘Extinct’. 135 Mudie believed Aboriginal Australia was in decline and his poetry almost always presented the Aboriginal population as dead or dying. In ‘Museum’ the Kaurna are already gone, ‘across their graves/bitumen lays a seal’, their skulls become mere curiosities to be displayed in a museum behind ‘cleaned and polished’ glass. 136 In ‘New Kaurna-Men’ the Kaurna ‘died and were buried’ within ‘half a life-span’ as a result of white settlement of the Adelaide region. 137 According to Mudie, Aboriginal and white Australia would not coexist for long; what would soon develop was a ‘white dream-time’. 138 He believed that a mental and cultural shift in white Australia’s environmental imagination would be progressive and inevitable, shaped by prolonged residency on the continent, a place permeated with the culture of dead Aboriginal groups. Mudie suggested that better soil conservation practices would demonstrate white Australia’s spiritual acclimatisation to the environment, and perhaps indicate that the continent was moving toward his imagined ‘white dream-time’.

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135 J.D. Woods, introduction to *The Native Tribes of South Australia*, ed. George Taplin (Adelaide: E.S. Wigg & Son, 1879), ix.


138 Mudie, ‘Prelude to the Next Ten Years’, 65.
Racy of the soil

Bird argues that figures such as Stephensen and Mudie demonstrate that ‘it was possible in Australia in the late thirties to be a quasi-Nazi dreamer utilizing aboriginal symbols and concepts in the service of “blood and soil”, as well as an advocate of a new society based on “Aryan” racial purity’ (original emphasis).  

Stephensen and to a lesser extent Mudie were both interested in the ideological possibilities of right-wing nationalism. However, this chapter has demonstrated that, for the most part, Mudie’s poetry was unmistakably the product of his settler imagination, rather than the regurgitation of Nazi ideology in the antipodes. In her article on the connections between right-wing politics and the organic gardening movement in Australia, historian Andrea Gaynor rightly concludes that “points of contact” between neo-romantic movements and fascist politics were evident in Australia . . . but were nowhere near as extensive and well-developed as in Nazi Germany’. Mudie and Stephensen were certainly one such point of contact. However, rather than simply an antipodean instance of Nazi blood and soil ideology, Mudie’s fusion of right-wing politics, environmental concern, scientific language and imitative Aboriginal mythology reveals local distinctiveness of his poetry and politics. Thinking through Mudie’s poetry using the phrase ‘racy of the soil’ – rather than blood and soil – helps us to place his work in a longer tradition of Australian landscape writing and alongside the nationalist literature produced by many of his contemporaries.

‘Racy of the soil’, a phrase likely Irish in origin and later transplanted to various British colonies, particularly Australia and Newfoundland, denoted a distinctively national quality. Now obscure, in nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Australia, ‘racy of the soil’ was used to describe someone or something celebratory of places, people and characteristics considered typically Australian. It was generally used in association with rural and bush environments, and often to describe books and poetry that took rural Australia or bush life as their subject. For example, in 1933 popular

139 Bird, *Nazi Dreamtime*, 166.
140 Gaynor, ‘Antipodean Eco-Nazis?’, 256.
author Arthur W. Upfield’s stories were described as ‘racy of the soil’ because the ‘thrilling’ tales were:

true to the Australian ideal in describing the bush, and the plain, rivers, the sport of drought, the hardy men of the saddle, the rough pioneering ways, and with a glimpse of the bush children of Australia, the aboriginals.\[142\]

In the poetry of Joseph Furphy, Bernard O’Dowd saw the foundations of an Australian literature that could be ‘racy of her soil and conscious of her destiny’.\[143\] Additionally, ‘Australianities: Topics Racy of the Soil’ was a weekly column that appeared for a period of six months in 1938 in the *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express* and included short stories, poetry and bush sketches.\[144\] ‘Racy of the soil’ better captures Mudie’s racially charged nationalism and neatly connects it with his interest in soil erosion, without over-emphasising the influence of Nazi ideology. Although he was a political outlier among the writers in this thesis, Mudie still produced poetry that emphasised the need for Australians to cultivate a spiritual relationship with the Australian environment in order to achieve a sense of cultural and national maturity.

Miles Franklin certainly remained confident of Mudie’s nationalist credentials, despite her concerns about his political associations. In 1944 she saw ‘The Enemy Within’, a newsreel film produced by Cinesound in conjunction with the New South Wales Soil Conservation Service focusing on the ravages of soil erosion in Australia.\[145\] In correspondence with Mudie she explained:

Cinesound gave a review of the Mallee desert – worse than the dust bowl in America . . . A person with your poetic powers shd [sic] not miss it. You should be sent by aeroplane to see the film at nearest town or better to the Mallee so you could Boanerge in a grand tragic poem about it.\[146\]

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145 *The Enemy Within: Soil Erosion* (Australia: Cinesound, 1942), filmstrip, 5:25 min., National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra. For an analysis of various soil erosion films of the Australian 1930s and 1940s see: Janette-Susan Bailey, *Dust Bowl*, 105-54; Bailey, ‘Wartime Political Ambition Behind One Image of a Dam in Australia is Developing a Dust Bowl (1943)’.

146 Miles Franklin to Ian Mudie, 26 November 1944, series 9, folder 1, PRG 27, Papers of Ian Mayelston Mudie, SLSA, Adelaide. Franklin likely derived the word ‘Boanerge’ from the biblical name Boanerges, which also means ‘a loud vociferous preacher or orator’. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. ‘Boanerges’,
Franklin may have been joking. However, she did believe strongly in the social importance of the poet and found Mudie’s nationalistic poetry ‘intoxicating’, so it is also possible that she truly felt that Mudie should have been sent to the Mallee by the government in some sort of official capacity. In a period when conservation was dominated by government agencies and scientific expertise it is hardly surprising that Mudie was not sent to lyrically record the demise of the Australian soil. However, as an unofficial preacher of the dangers of soil erosion, Mudie reveals that this governmental control did not suppress literary engagement with the issue. Mudie marshalled soil metaphors in aid of his increasingly extreme political views, but, simultaneously, contributed to broader – and generally politically moderate – debates and discourse around the issue of soil erosion in Australia.

Mudie was convinced that poetry could be profoundly political, with the potential to affect change in the reader and the wider population. Realistically Mudie’s poetry, in an era dominated by novelists, made a relatively minor literary and political impression. Yet, his poetry demonstrates Gaynor’s argument that ‘soil was both the dominant environmental problem of the day and an important contemporary point of connection between scientific and social discourses’. For Mudie, soil had an earthy actuality as well as important metaphoric potential; harnessing both enabled him to capture the intersection of politics, culture, and science around the salient environmental issue of soil erosion. Mudie’s was, however, not the only literary response to the soil erosion crisis of the 1930s and 1940s. These decades revealed the marginality and aridity of much of Australia’s pastoral and agricultural land prompting some writers, such as William Hatfield, to imagine technical rather than spiritual solutions to Australia’s shifting soil.


147 Miles Franklin to Ian Mudie, 20 July 1941, series 9, folder 1, PRG 27, Papers of Ian Mayelston Mudie, SLSA, Adelaide.
Chapter Six

Poets, Dreamers and Engineers:
William Hatfield Imagines Inland Irrigation for Postwar Australia

...Though Poet, Dreamer, and Engineer,
Have gone to their last long rest,
Their work lives on in a vision clear
Of a green and verdant west . . .

We must turn the wasted coastal streams,
We must fill the great salt lakes,
And work on the dams, and the hydro schemes,
Till this great dry land awakes.

Till the “Dead Heart” blooms like a desert rose,
And the forests rise anew,
Till wheatfields wave where the sand now blows,
And our dearest dreams come true.¹

In his poem ‘Australia Reclaimed’, published in the communist newspaper The Tribune in June 1945, Sapper R. Waters celebrated recent plans to transform Australia’s dry inland into a well-watered and closely settled farming landscape.² Engineer J.J.C. Bradfield proposed the most famous of these schemes. In the late 1930s, Bradfield began to advocate for the diversion of the floodwaters of Queensland’s north-eastern rivers inland, which he believed could be used to irrigate the dry western regions of

² Sapper R. Waters was likely a pseudonym, but I have been unable to establish the real identity of the writer.
the state. There were numerous others who published similar proposals. Waters’ poem specifically identified three deceased advocates of inland water engineering: the ‘Poet’ Henry Lawson who, though he died in 1922, dreamt of a time when western New South Wales might be an irrigated and hospitable landscape; the ‘Dreamer’ Frederick R.V. Timburry – rugby player, solicitor, and later mayor of the Queensland town of Roma – also championed water diversion until his death in April of 1945; and finally the ‘Engineer’, Bradfield himself, who died in 1943. Waters also acknowledged two living proponents of watering the inland – Ion Idriess and William Hatfield – both of whom were travel writers and adventure novelists. Waters’ poem was ‘principally’ dedicated to Hatfield, ‘whose title’ – *Australia Reclaimed* – he had ‘taken the liberty to borrow’.

William Hatfield – novelist, adventurer and (by the 1940s) communist – published the non-fictional *Australia Reclaimed* in 1944. The short book outlined Hatfield’s postwar vision for Australia as a socialist state. Central to his plan was the irrigation of the inland in order to correct environmental damage done since colonisation and, at the same time, enable more intensive agricultural settlement. Large-scale schemes to engineer the inland are one of the best-researched elements of interwar environmental thought; most historians have focused on Bradfield’s well-publicised scheme. By contrast, Hatfield has received almost no attention from historians, even though he began to advocate for inland water conservation in his travel writing as early as 1931.

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6. Tom Griffiths and Tim Sherratt recognise that Hatfield was a supporter of inland water conservation schemes but only give him passing mention, see Tom Griffiths and Tim Sherratt, ‘What if the Northern Rivers had been Turned Inland?’, in *What If?: Australian History as it Might Have Been*, eds. Stuart Macintyre and Sean Scalmer (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2006), 244. Michael Cathcart also mentions Hatfield briefly but mistakenly argues that Hatfield opposed closer settlement of Australia’s arid regions, see Michael Cathcart, *The Water Dreamers: The Remarkable History of our Dry Continent* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2009), 230. Garry Disher gives Hatfield some space, but focuses on his travel literature rather than his enthusiasm for inland irrigation, see Garry Disher, “‘Before the Age of Hurry-up…’: Australian Landscape Writing 1925-1950’ (M.A. thesis, Monash University, 1978), 50-52.
Historical geographer J.M. Powell argues that ‘outlandish proposals’ such as Bradfield’s scheme were given undeserved attention by development-obsessed state and federal governments during World War Two. Andrew Gillanders has traced the way that these schemes emerged in the troubled years of the 1930s and 1940s and how they re-emerged intermittently throughout the twentieth century in times of drought and economic downturn. Tom Griffiths and Tim Sherratt have imagined what might have happened if the Bradfield scheme had been implemented in postwar Australia. They are particularly interested in the potential environmental ramifications of diverting Queensland’s rivers. At the same time, Griffiths and Sherratt avoid characterising proponents of Bradfield’s scheme as ‘ignorant or naïve’. They argue that in the 1930s and 1940s such schemes were actually ‘championed as a sign of national environmental maturity’ because they recognised ‘the recurrent reality of drought and engineered around it’. This chapter is similarly sensitive to the environmental and cultural context that gave rise to these schemes and does not dismiss their proponents as unthinking champions of environmental destruction. In fact, many inland development enthusiasts were aware of the widespread environmental degradation in Australia since colonisation and believed that inland irrigation would not only enable the extension of agriculture but also help to protect Australian soils, flora and fauna. Moreover, unlike existing histories of inland engineering proposals, this chapter explores the literary following that large-scale water conservation inspired. Lawson was not the only ‘poet’ dreaming of a ‘verdant west’.

Bradfield was an engineer, although his expertise was primarily in bridge and railway construction, but many of his fellow travellers, like Hatfield, had no engineering experience at all. Literary proponents of irrigation – including Hatfield, Idriess, A.W. Noakes, E.J. Brady, Ernestine Hill and Henrietta Drake-Brockman – drew instead on their literary capabilities to try to popularise the notion of watering the inland. These

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9 Griffiths and Sherratt, ‘What if the Northern Rivers had been Turned Inland?’, 238.
writers also had expertise of another kind; they had all resided, worked or travelled extensively in remote regions of Australia. Large-scale irrigation schemes seemed to attract the support of popular, middlebrow writers who had built literary careers on their adventures in Australia’s harshest environments. In *Australia Reclaimed*, Hatfield’s literary persona as a bushman and adventurer who romanticised the Australian outback collided with his very twentieth-century environmental imagination. He emphasised the potential for science, engineering and modern socialism to transform the landscape and communities of the inland. This chapter will demonstrate that Hatfield’s desire for a well-watered inland in postwar Australia was wrought with tensions between nature conservation and national development, as well as nostalgia for Australia’s nineteenth-century frontier and the perceived need to build a modern, mature and secure twentieth-century society. *Australia Reclaimed*, read alongside Hatfield’s other publications and the work of other inland engineering enthusiasts, offers new insights into these ‘wild’ schemes.\(^{11}\)

**The Bradfield scheme**

Ambitious proposals to irrigate and populate inland Australia were a feature of the first half of the twentieth century. As explored in chapter one, E.J. Brady’s 1918 book *Australia Unlimited* argued for the boundless potential for agricultural development in Australia. Brady hoped to disprove what he called Australia’s “Desert” Myth and advocated closer settlement of the inland, which he believed was ‘destined one day to pulsate with life’.\(^{12}\) World War One soldier settlement schemes, investigated in detail in chapter two, were a renewed government attempt to successfully accomplish closer settlement after selection and closer settlement legislation had yielded limited results. Despite the widespread failure of soldier settlement schemes to permanently settle approximately half of these soldier settlers on the land, dreams of a densely populated continent persisted. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, partly in response to the soil erosion crisis and the fall of Singapore in World War Two, there emerged a renewed enthusiasm for closer settlement.\(^{13}\)


\(^{12}\) E.J. Brady, *Australia Unlimited* (Melbourne: George Robertson and Company, 1918), 628 and 630.

Figure 6.1: Bradfield believed his irrigation scheme would enable the large-scale agricultural settlement of parts of inland Australia. J.J.C. Bradfield, 'Watering Inland Australia', *Ryde's Business Journal* 14, no. 10 (1941): 587.
In 1938, Bradfield, well known for his involvement in the design and construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, proposed a scheme to dam and divert the floodwaters of Queensland’s coastal rivers so that they would flow into the often-dry rivers of western Queensland. Captured water would then be harnessed for hydroelectric power as well as irrigation purposes. Bradfield’s plan gained currency during World War Two as fears mounted about the potential invasion of Australia’s sparsely populated north. In 1941, Bradfield again outlined his ideas in Rydge’s Business Journal and the popular travel magazine *Walkabout*. In these new articles, Bradfield made the additional claim that above-ground storage of floodwaters would increase evaporation and rainfall, permanently altering the climate of the inland. Bradfield believed that irrigation in combination with a cooler, moister climate would transform a large portion of western Queensland, generally used only for pastoralism, into a region fit for agriculture (see Figure 6.1). In a rather dramatic call for support, Bradfield argued that ‘the nation without a vision perishes, but the heart and mind of any vigorous people responds to the dream of its national destiny and will endeavour to make full use of its heritage’. Despite the sometimes fanatical enthusiasm of his supporters, Bradfield’s scheme was never implemented. Individual scientists and engineers, as well as government investigations, consistently found that the plan was too expensive and very unlikely to deliver the volume of water or climatic amelioration that Bradfield claimed.

Widespread soil erosion encouraged Bradfield to dream of an engineered inland, but the dusty consequences of colonisation led some scientists and experts to object to plans for the expansion and intensification of farming. According to Michael Cathcart, in the 1930s ‘the patriotic optimism of the boosters was now open to debate’. Accordingly, the Bradfield scheme and related plans came under extensive expert scrutiny. Chemists, geographers and other engineers publicly criticised Bradfield’s scheme and his calculations. The climatic benefits that Bradfield argued would result

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16 Bradfield, ‘Rejuvenating Inland Australia’, 15.
from storing water in inland dams were particularly controversial. Agricultural chemist and academic Geoffrey Leeper – who would later give Elyne Mitchell’s *Soil and Civilization* a scathing review – was stunned by Bradfield’s ‘staggering statement’ that his scheme would result in a cooler and wetter Australian interior.\(^{20}\) Geographer J. Macdonald Holmes, who was a supporter of water conservation and dam building generally, was similarly suspicious of ‘over-optimistic patriots’ like Bradfield who claimed that human agency could transform parts of central Australia into well-watered agricultural land.\(^{21}\) Bradfield based his claims for the transformation of the inland climate on several articles written by respected meteorologist E.T. Quale approximately two decades earlier, but geographer Ann Marshall pointed out that Quale’s research had since been invalidated.\(^{22}\)

Supporters of inland engineering often accused state and federal governments of a failure to thoroughly investigate the merits of implementing Bradfield’s plan; in reality, the scheme was given substantial government attention. Correspondence files held by the National Archives of Australia demonstrate the active engagement of ministers, and even Prime Minister Ben Chifley, with members of the public in relation to Bradfield’s scheme between 1939 and 1949.\(^{23}\) Moreover, the feasibility of the scheme was officially investigated multiple times. In 1943, as part of the Rural Reconstruction Commission, the merits of Bradfield’s scheme were considered but the cost found to be too prohibitive and the environmental benefits of the scheme doubtful.\(^{24}\) The report also alleged that ‘Dr. Bradfield’s papers, though quoting certain figures, are of a popular rather than a scientific nature’.\(^{25}\) In 1945 the Commonwealth Meteorological Bureau found that Bradfield overestimated the extent to which the climate of the inland would

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\(^{23}\) ‘Dr Bradfield’s Scheme for Watering Inland Australia’, correspondence files, 1944-1947, Department of Post-War Reconstruction, A9816, 1943/664 PART 1, National Archives of Australia (NAA), Canberra; ‘Dr Bradfield’s Scheme for Watering Inland Australia’, correspondence files, 1947-1948, Department of Post-War Reconstruction, A9816, 1943/664 PART 2, NAA, Canberra; ‘Water Conservation – Irrigation Schemes Central Australia’, correspondence files, 1939-1949, Prime Minister’s Department, A461, R423/1/2 PART 1, NAA, Canberra.


\(^{25}\) Ibid., 58.
be improved by implementing his scheme, though one member of the investigating committee, Quale, issued a minority report in support of the plan. 26 Finally, in 1947, engineer William H.R. Nimmo evaluated the plan on behalf of the Queensland government. In his report, Nimmo argued that while the scheme may have been technically feasible it would not be economical. 27 Despite the growing number of experts who publicly argued against Bradfield’s scheme a large number of literary figures, especially travel and adventure writers, were attracted by the imaginative possibilities of promoting a well-watered continent. According to Tim Sherratt, ‘at a time when expert scepticism was gathering force against the hopes of “boosters”, these writers provided some of the most vivid depictions of the possibilities of progress’. 28 These writers did not have any scientific or engineering expertise and tended to reject the concerns advanced by specialists.

**Prophets and poets**

As suggested in Waters’ poem at the beginning of this chapter, inland irrigation was a cause that attracted a wide variety of water dreamers. 29 After Bradfield, the best-known proponent of engineering inland Australia was writer Ion Idriess. Idriess had published popular adventure stories based on his extensive experience in remote regions of Australia since the late 1920s. In his 1941 nonfiction book *The Great Boomerang*, Idriess advocated a scheme even more ambitious than Bradfield’s; he believed the floodwaters of Queensland’s coastal, northern and inland rivers could be harnessed and diverted into the Lake Eyre Basin to irrigate a much larger portion of central Australia. Idriess believed his ‘mad scheme’ would banish the ‘unutterable loneliness’ of Australia’s arid lands and enable the closer settlement of places that presently only supported ‘a few isolated cattle stations and the silence of harsh, lonely country’. 30 Idriess’ supporter C.E. Beurle described him as ‘a prophet and a poet who sees as in a vision water flowing in the desert’. 31 According to Beurle, Idriess’ extensive plan to rejuvenate the

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29 I have borrowed Michael Cathcart’s phrase ‘water dreamers’ here to refer to a variety of Australians preoccupied with inland hydro engineering schemes, though Cathcart actually applies the phrase more broadly, see Cathcart, *The Water Dreamers*.

30 Idriess, *The Great Boomerang*, 9, 92 and 204.

31 Beurle, *The Desert and a Dream*, 5.
often-dry Lake Eyre Basin was ‘the dream of a man who had wandered for years through all this vast continent’. Beurle did admit that Idriess was ‘a dreamer, and no engineer’.

It was common for non-expert engineering proponents to emphasise that ordinary Australians should not be discouraged by criticisms offered by scientists and government officials. Idriess warned his readers that:

> You may hear or read condemnations of these plans – coming perhaps from big men who seem more highly qualified than you are or I am to express an opinion. Doubts may be raised in your mind; but do not allow yourself to become prejudiced against an idea that your own reasoning accepts as sound.

Hatfield and L.H. Luscombe, another irrigation enthusiast writing under the pseudonym ‘Veritas’, both suggested that their plans might be ridiculed by experts and specialists but urged everyday readers to feel as though they could understand, contribute to, and support these ambitious proposals for the nation’s future. Lacking scientific or engineering qualifications, the literary proponents of inland engineering often emphasised expertise of another kind; their intimate knowledge of inland Australia.

In 1946 A.W. Noakes, though not an established writer, attempted to reach a wider audience by including his message about inland irrigation in a book of humorous stories about his time as a police officer in remote Queensland towns. He was, however, apparently embarrassed about the ‘the atrocious cover and title’ of *The Life of a Policeman: A Comprehensive Work of Conditions in the Outback of Queensland*, which had failed to sell well (see Figure 6.2). The next year, Noakes published *Water for the Inland: A Brief and Vivid Outline of Conditions in the Out-back of Queensland in which is Embodied the Reid and Dr. Bradfield Water Schemes*, which focused exclusively on promoting inland engineering. Noakes, who had been a police officer and later a sub-inspector in western Queensland between 1902 and 1938, emphasised that he had ‘lived and worked in the

32 Ibid., 8.
33 Ion L. Idriess, forward to *The Battle for the Inland: The Case for the Bradfield and Idriess Plans*, F.R.V. Timbury (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1944), viii.
34 Hatfield, *Australia Reclaimed*, 4; ‘Veritas’, *Australia Replanned*, 92.
Inland. I know the appalling conditions that now exist there. I know that these conditions can be remedied and the Inland restored once more to its great wealth producing capacity.\textsuperscript{37} He was even openly hostile to his apparently inexperienced, urban audience:

\begin{quote}
You people who live in the cities and on the coastal strip of this Continent haven’t the faintest idea of what the Inland is like. Its immensity is beyond your comprehension, its potentialities under an adequate water supply cannot be estimated. And to think that we will in the near future lose this country simply because of the apathy and indifference of the people and the ignorance and lack of vision of our politicians.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

The threat posed by Japan during World War Two had passed by the time this warning was published, but Noakes clearly still felt that an underpopulated north and interior might tempt Australia’s northern neighbours. Moreover, as a resident of remote Australia, Noakes claimed to know – better than both politicians and urban Australians – what would ensure the future security and prosperity of the inland.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{noakes-cover.jpg}
\caption{The ‘atrocious’ cover of A.W. Noakes’ first attempt to popularise his inland irrigation ideas. A.W. Noakes, \textit{The Life of a Policeman: A Comprehensive Work of Conditions in the Outback of Queensland} (South Brisbane: Rallings & Rallings, 1946).}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 11-12.
Unlike Noakes, Hatfield did not attack his readership, but he too drew attention to his experience as a well-travelled writer who had worked extensively in central Australia. In *Australia Reclaimed*, Hatfield used the popularity of his travel books to indicate that readers recognised his ability to speak to plans for postwar reconstruction in remote Australia:

Encouragement to attempt the task is derived from the nation-wide popularity of works like my *Australia Through the Windscreen, I Find Australia*, etc., in which I review and criticize Australian handling of land problems, without making any very definite suggestions for a complete revision of the national economy, though these are implied. That this has been pretty clearly understood is evident in the numerous letters I have received from readers agreeing with many of my recommendations, but asking how I imagined they could be implemented under the present economic system.\(^{39}\)

Here Hatfield argued that the ‘nation-wide popularity’ of his travel writing – within which he often embedded criticisms of Australian environmental management and politics more broadly – encouraged him to write *Australia Reclaimed*, which focused entirely on his plans for Australia as a socialist state. Hatfield is representative of the range of literary figures who argued, regardless of the rising number of expert dissenters, for the almost unlimited environmental and economic potential of the continent.

**William Hatfield**

William Hatfield was born Ernest Chapman in Nottingham, England in 1892. He briefly attended Nottingham University to train as a solicitor but, instead of completing his education, he voyaged to Australia in 1912 as a kitchen hand on a ship bound for Adelaide.\(^{40}\) Upon his arrival in Adelaide Hatfield attempted to immediately head north, hoping to obtain work in the interior of the country. Travelling on foot, he chose ‘the first road that seemed to head inland’.\(^{41}\) Later in life, Hatfield recalled that by the evening of his first day in Australia he found himself in Glenelg, a southern suburb of Adelaide, having walked entirely in the wrong direction.\(^{42}\) However, he soon found work as a boundary rider on a large sheep and cattle station near the town of

\(^{39}\) Hatfield, *Australia Reclaimed*, 6.


\(^{42}\) Ibid., 21.
Innamincka in the far north-east of South Australia.\textsuperscript{43} Over the next twenty years Hatfield did a variety of itinerant work in the northern regions of South Australia, the Northern Territory and in northern and western Queensland; he was a stockman, deckhand, an accountant for shipping, mining and pastoral companies, and sometimes made a living from kangaroo shooting, dingo-trapping and even cattle-duffing. Although keen to launch a literary career, he did not have much success as a writer until 1931 when Angus & Robertson published his semi-autobiographical novel \textit{Sheepmates}, which had run to over a dozen editions by 1946. West Australian novelist John K. Ewers thought \textit{Sheepmates}, a book celebratory of Australia’s ‘natural wealth’ that lay ‘undeveloped, untapped’, was an important and timely contribution to Australian literature during the troubling and uncertain Depression years.\textsuperscript{44} Throughout the 1930s and 1940s Hatfield continued to produce ‘widely popular’ novels based loosely on his experiences and adventures in remote areas of Australia, as well as non-fiction travel literature.\textsuperscript{45}

Almost everything we know about Hatfield comes from his own novels, travel writing and journalism. He has left behind no letters or personal papers, and decades of itinerant work make him difficult to trace. Both his semi-autobiographical novels and non-fictional accounts of his travels, written to sell in a period when adventure and travel books were extremely popular, unsurprisingly tend to emphasise masculine nationalism and the dangers and adventure of living and travelling in remote areas of the country. As a result, it is difficult to get a sense of where Hatfield’s real experiences end and embellishment and exaggeration begin. In this respect, his published work has much in common with other popular travel writers of the 1930s and 1940s. However, it seems he did not correspond with other Australian writers; there is no correspondence from him, for example, in the extensive papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer. He might have known P.R. Stephensen; in 1933 Stephensen twice invited Frank Dalby Davison for a ‘bite of grub’ with Miles Franklin, Louis Stone, Hatfield and himself, though it appears that Davison did not attend the gatherings.\textsuperscript{46} Hatfield

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 25-27.  
\textsuperscript{44} John K. Ewers, \textit{Creative Writing in Australia: A Selective Survey} (Melbourne: Georgian House, 1945), 82.  
\textsuperscript{45} ‘Book of the Week: Erosion and Rehabilitation: Hatfield’s Plan’, \textit{The Argus} (Melbourne), 23 December 1944, 6. Disher confirms that Hatfield was one of the ‘major’ travel writers of the period, see Disher, ‘Before the Age of Hurry-up…’, 52.  
\textsuperscript{46} P.R. Stephensen to Frank Dalby Davison, 1 May 1933, series 1, box 1, folder 1, MS 1945, Papers of Frank Dalby Davison, 1859-1970, NLA, Canberra; P.R. Stephensen to Frank Dalby Davison, 6 June 1933, series 1, box 1, folder 1, MS 1945, Papers of Frank Dalby Davison, 1859-1970, NLA, Canberra.
was certainly aware of Davison’s foray into travel writing, as he cited *Blue Coast Caravan* as part of a glut of travel books dealing with Australia’s east coast.\(^47\) As a writer of popular middlebrow fiction and autobiography, it is possible that Hatfield, less self-conscious about the literary quality of his work, distanced himself from ‘serious’ writers like Davison and the Palmers. Despite a lack of evidence for personal connections with the literary community, Hatfield’s short stories did appear alongside the work of a wide range of writers throughout the 1930s and 1940s in publications such as *The Bulletin* and *The Australian Journal*.\(^48\) Moreover, the absence of any private papers or letters enables me to focus on the way that Hatfield created a public and literary persona for himself.

![Figure 6.3: William Hatfield leaving Sydney for his ‘Darlinghurst to Darwin’ car trip, July 1931. An advertisement for Shell Petrol can be seen in front of the passenger door. NLA.](image)

In 1931 and 1932, Hatfield undertook two long-distance car journeys. The first, a trip from Darlinghurst in Sydney to Darwin via the interior of the continent, enabled him to establish a journalistic career; during the journey he regularly contributed updates, under the title ‘In Search of Cold Camp-fires’, to *The Sydney Mail* (see Figure 6.3). In 1932, Hatfield undertook a round-Australia trip sponsored by the English Hillman

\(^{47}\) William Hatfield, *Australia Through the Windscreen* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1936), 295.

motor-car company and Shell Petrol company. These car trips featured heavily in his autobiographical and travel books *Australia Through the Windscreen* (1936) and *I Find Australia* (1937), though these books were also interspersed with memories and yarns about his previous experience as a resident of central Australia. In *Australia Through the Windscreen* and *I Find Australia*, Hatfield crafted a literary persona that combined his early experience of the Australian inland with a sense of modern expedition. Georgine Clarsen has shown that extended and well-publicised car journeys in the first half of the twentieth century were performances of ‘cultural ownership’ over remote regions of the continent. Moreover, Clarsen points out that petrol-fuelled explorers were interested in the modernisation of Australia and ‘saw remote territory with the eyes of tomorrow’, but simultaneously exhibited nostalgia for supposedly transient frontier landscapes and lifestyles. This was certainly true of Hatfield who imagined the inland transformed by massive engineering projects and large populations, though he remained determined to embed himself in the Aboriginal, exploratory and pastoral histories of the outback.

In *I Find Australia*, Hatfield wrote about his friendship with Kuddramitchie, an Aboriginal employee of the Nappa Merrie cattle station in north-east South Australia. According to Hatfield, Kuddramitchie had, with other members of his tribe, interacted with the explorers Robert O’Hara Burke and William John Wills during their 1860-1 expedition to traverse Australia between Melbourne and the Gulf of Carpentaria. There was certainly a ‘Kudramitchie Jimmy’ working as a stockman at Nappa Merrie Station, on Cooper Creek just east of Innamincka, sometime in the early decades of the twentieth century. It is hard to know how old Kuddramitchie might have been when Hatfield knew him, but it is possible he had encountered the explorers Burke and Wills when they passed through the region in the 1860s. Hatfield also mentioned his friendship with another Aboriginal stockman named Silver, who ‘had been one of

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49 Disher, ‘Before the Age of Hurry-up…’, 51. A small pamphlet Hatfield published prior to *Australian Through the Windscreen* suggested he was likely also sponsored by Kodak and Dunlop tyres, see William Hatfield, *Circling a Continent a 10,000 Mile Trip Around Australia from the Pen and Camera of William Hatfield Noted Author and Explorer*, 1932, pamphlet, SLNSW.


52 Hatfield, *I Find Australia*, 168.

the few survivors of the Suliman [sic] Creek massacre some fifty years before’.54 A massacre of Aboriginal people at Suliman Creek in western Queensland, better known as the Woonamo Massacre, took place in 1878.55 Like Kuddramitchie, Silver also claimed to have met a famous explorer of central Australia – Ludwig Leichhardt – though based on Silver’s age Hatfield disbelieved he could have personally met Leichhardt in the 1840s.56 In publishing these memories, Hatfield purposely placed himself within the recent reality of outback sheep and cattle stations, which often relied on Aboriginal labour, but also within the longer history and mythology of Australian exploration. Early biographers of Hatfield, also working only from his published writing, tended to echo the sense of adventure and masculinity that Hatfield purposely evoked. In 1959, poet Marjorie Pizer contributed a short biography of Hatfield to the journal Overland. In it, she specifically connected Hatfield’s inland experience with the formation of his character in his newly adopted home. According to Pizer, Hatfield ‘wandered through western Queensland, the Northern Territory, and western New South Wales, becoming an experienced cattleman, and in the process a good Australian’.57

Hatfield’s travel writing was not, however, simply dedicated to valorising masculine nationalism and outback life. As early as 1931, Hatfield expressed concerns about the environmental and economic situation in central Australia; he mentioned the possibility of dams to enable closer settlement.58 At the height of the Great Depression he argued that ‘something big is needed and something vastly different from the policy that allows a quarter of a million decent Aussies to sit down and take the soul-destroying dole!’59 By the late 1930s, Hatfield was concerned about the deforestation and soil erosion he had witnessed during his sponsored car journeys, which he attributed to poor agricultural and pastoral practices. In the early 1940s, Hatfield’s concerns had developed a specifically political quality; he began to lecture as a communist, and the communist newspaper The Tribune regularly published his ideas. Hatfield’s communism and environmental concern were intimately linked; reviewer Len Fox pointed out that Hatfield objected to the way that the ‘competitive system

54 Hatfield, I Find Australia, 167.
56 Hatfield, I Find Australia, 169.
58 William Hatfield, ‘In Search of Cold Camp-Fires’, The Sydney Mail, 16 September 1931, 12.
[was] destroying the Australian countryside’.60 Fox even argued that ‘if the grime of London inspired Henry Lawson to write socialist poems, then the dust of Australia, blowing out into the Pacific Ocean, has inspired William Hatfield to write a socialist book’.61 Flora Eldershaw described *Australia Reclaimed*, as ‘one among many works of our landscape writers, turned propagandist for the soil’.62

It was in *Australia Reclaimed* that Hatfield published his economic, social and environmental concerns in detail, along with plans for a socialist Australia in the postwar years. Hatfield argued that in part what was needed was ‘a gigantic integrated scheme for the rehabilitation of our arid lands and basic improvement of the whole continent’.63 Like Ian Mudie, the protagonist of chapter five, Hatfield felt that the large dust storms of the 1930s indicated that white Australia had mistreated the continent. He complained about ‘tales of pioneer heroism [that] centre on the pioneer’s gallant war with axe and firestick against his arch-enemy the tree’ and believed that sheep were ‘completing the handiwork of man in devastating a continent’.64 Hatfield argued ‘irrigation must now be used to grow trees again, and reclaim the dust bowl’.65 At the same time, Hatfield also believed that with major dam construction large amounts of water could be directed into irrigating the inland for more intensive farming and a much larger rural population. He claimed that ‘when a continent has fashioned a people, an inspiring task faces that people, the task of fashioning a continent’.66 Embedded in this quote is Hatfield’s preoccupation with both Australia’s history and its future. Australia’s difficult environments and pioneering history had, according to Hatfield, been essential to the development of a resilient population, which now needed to mobilise to modernise and civilise those same environments. As a result, Hatfield’s enthusiasm for dam construction was replete with contradictions; he desired both conservation and development, and his writing was both nostalgic and futuristic.

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61 Ibid.
63 Hatfield, *Australia Reclaimed*, 74.
64 Ibid., 21-23.
65 Ibid., 36.
66 Ibid., 16.
'Perverse and warring natures'

Across the summer of 1901 and 1902, Scottish geologist John Walter Gregory, along with a group of students from the University of Melbourne, searched for fossils in the Lake Eyre Basin. Gregory’s published account of the journey revealed to many Australians that in prehistoric times the continent’s interior had been well-watered and supported an abundance of plant and animal life.67 Hatfield often framed his proposed inland engineering project as one of rehabilitation or restoration; he claimed that ‘nature’s methods must be copied to restore [the country] to that state in which we found it’.68 Sometimes Hatfield drew inspiration from the well-watered inland of Australia’s pre-history and at other times emphasised the pristine state of the continent prior to white occupation.

Hatfield suggested that human intervention might enable the recreation of the ancient Australian inland. He drew on fossil evidence, such as that published by Gregory, to demonstrate that central Australia had once been well watered and densely populated by flora and fauna.69 He idealised inland Australia’s ‘former tropical luxuriance’ when the Finke and other ‘mighty’ rivers constantly flowed into inland lakes.70 Hatfield hoped that Australia might harness science and technology in order to ‘progress back to the fertility of former ages’.71

Idriess was even more enthusiastic about revitalising Australia’s ancient inland. He went as far as to suggest that the scheme to water the inland was not his own; instead he identified ‘Nature’ as the mastermind of ‘the Plan’, reasoning that the Lake Eyre Basin, though generally dry, already existed. Idriess argued that ‘Nature had the Plan working in the days of the diprotodon; its structure lies there ready to be used over again’.72 In another instance, he identified ‘the Great Engineer’ – perhaps another reference to nature or possibly god – as the architect of the scheme:

This mighty system was planned by the Great Engineer so that the rivers might live and carry life to the lands which in turn would

68 Hatfield, Australia Through the Windscreen, 273.
69 Ibid., 125.
70 Ibid., 124-5.
71 Ibid., 124.
72 Idriess, The Great Boomerang, 213.
provide life for beast and man. In our Plan we have but to take advantage of the system already laid down by the Great Engineer.\footnote{Ibid., 99.}

L.H. Luscombe, writing as ‘Veritas’ in the 1945 book \textit{Australia Replanned}, similarly pointed out the prehistoric fertility of the inland. He warned that, like the dinosaurs, Australians might become ‘extinct’ if they failed to ‘adapt’ to their environment.\footnote{‘Veritas’, \textit{Australia Replanned}, 32.} By adapt, Luscombe meant to water central Australia both by turning northern rivers inland and connecting Lake Eyre to the ocean via a canal to the Great Australian Bight. Griffiths and Sherratt argue that in part the goal of the Bradfield and related schemes was “restoration”: both of an ancient reality of a watered inland, and of a landscape recently further degraded by reckless European occupation.\footnote{Griffiths and Sherratt, ‘What if the Northern Rivers Had Been Turned Inland?’, 239.} The restoration of the pre-colonial, native Australian environment was one of Hatfield’s objectives.

Hatfield’s travels revealed to him the extensive damage done to the Australian environment as a result of white colonisation and pastoralism and agriculture especially. Hatfield argued:

\begin{quote}
To date we have \textbf{mined} the Australian soil, not farmed it. The very size of the land, the enormous wealth to be gouged out quickly, blinded people to all previous conceptions of soil husbandry. Our resources have not been husbanded, but raped.\footnote{Hatfield, \textit{Australia Reclaimed}, 7.} (original emphasis)
\end{quote}

He raised concerns about ringbarking and tree clearing, the devastation caused by destructive flora such as prickly pear, and the damage done to soil and vegetation by introduced animals such as camels, sheep, cattle and horses.\footnote{Ibid., 21 and 39; Hatfield, \textit{Australia Through the Windscreen}, 34.} According to Hatfield, the environment in the interior of the country had been naturally deteriorating over thousands of years and stocking the land, with sheep in particular, ‘had almost finished the work of nature’.\footnote{Hatfield, \textit{Australia Through the Windscreen}, 124.} Despite the boosterish nature in much of his writing, Hatfield actually claimed he was attempting to dispel the common attitude that Australia was ‘a land of inexhaustible natural resources’.\footnote{Ibid., 42.}
Based on Hatfield’s environmental concerns, it is hardly surprising that some historians have identified him as an early conservationist. Garry Disher describes Hatfield in the 1940s as a ‘Communist and conservationist’ and Cathcart, perhaps not realising that Hatfield supported inland water schemes, argues that Hatfield was one of a growing number in the 1930s ‘who warned that the inland was too fragile or too hostile for closer settlement’.80 It is clear that Hatfield is not easily categorised as either a conservationist or a developmentalist, particularly from a modern perspective. Hatfield’s work demonstrates the tensions inherent in much of the irrigation literature of the 1930s and 1940s; in the same sentence, he could cast nature as an ‘enemy’ that needed ‘reconquering’ and suggest that colonial greed and ignorance had caused environmental degradation in the past.81 Moreover, further complicating Hatfield’s position is the fact that, though he blamed pastoralism for much of the environmental damage done to inland Australia, he continued to celebrate through his novels and travel writing his former life as an employee on large inland cattle and sheep stations.

Hatfield talked at length about what might be gained by irrigating and populating the inland, but very seldom talked about what might be lost. He believed massive irrigation and damming projects would help rectify environmental damage done by white colonisation but seemed completely blind to the possibility that his scheme for continental transformation might have unintended environmental consequences. On top of this, Hatfield seemed only occasionally alert to the fact that a large population in central Australia would diminish the atmosphere of the inland and north, those regions in which he made a living and from which he crafted a literary persona. Hatfield celebrated the ‘atmosphere of the North; as far removed from the bustle of the cities as the heart of man could wish’, he was also glad when he returned to central Australia and ‘severed all connexion with the ordered ways of civilization’.82 He even regretted that during his sponsored trips in the 1930s, he had to travel by car that was ‘too fast’ to truly appreciate the people and places he visited:

If time and the exigencies of earning a living by the pen allowed it I would prefer horses – stick my few belongings on a packhorse and mooch along the old droving trails; camp for a few days where the

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80 Disher, ‘Before the Age of Hurry-up…’, 51; Cathcart, The Water Dreamers, 230.
81 Hatfield, Australia Reclaimed, 18.
82 Hatfield, Australia Through the Windscreen, 152-4.
feed was good, handy to water, and go off with my rifle to replenish the food-supply.\textsuperscript{83}

Hatfield only occasionally acknowledged that his vision for remote Australia’s future necessitated the destruction of the existing character of these regions.

When commenting affectionately on the relaxed nature of people in northern Australia, Hatfield realised, ‘I suppose it will spoil all that when my North is buzzing with the wheels of commerce and industry’.\textsuperscript{84} In \textit{I Find Australia}, Hatfield was more explicit:

within me, as in most of us, exist two perverse and warring natures. I want to see the North developed and fully occupied, but at the same time that primitive love of Nature untouched and unsoiled wells up in me when I push out beyond all civilization.\textsuperscript{85}

That he continued to champion inland development after this, demonstrates that Hatfield thought it was unfortunate but inevitable that ‘untouched’ regions of Australia would be sacrificed in the name of progress. Ernestine Hill – travel writer, novelist and broadcaster – was another nationalist who wanted to see remote Australia further developed, but was similarly saddened by the passing of pioneering traditions:

Even as I write, the contours of the map are coming clearer. The aeroplane, the radio, and the motor-car are changing the face of nature, and the king-tide of colonization is setting to the full.

The men who subdued the wilderness with turkey red and tobacco are swiftly slipping away. I should like to be back [in the outback] before the last of the conquistadors is gone.\textsuperscript{86}

As Garry Disher points out, for most travel writers of the 1930s ‘the desire to see the inland developed along responsible lines outweighed their desire to see it left in its pristine state’.\textsuperscript{87} We might count Hatfield and Hill among these writers.

Hatfield’s ‘perverse and warring natures’ offer one example of what Davison calls the ‘distinctive blend of scientific aspiration and romantic nostalgia that governed

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 178-9.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 209.
\textsuperscript{85} Hatfield, \textit{I Find Australia}, 283-4.
\textsuperscript{87} Disher, ‘Before the Age of Hurry-up…’, 104.
\end{flushright}
Australians’ attitudes to the countryside’ during the twentieth century. Although his writing was often touched with nostalgia for what might be lost, ultimately Hatfield continued to promote plans to engineer inland Australia. Australians in this period were so anxious about the continent’s perceived environmental shortcomings, heightening during World War Two as fears mounted around the possibility of invasion, that many like Hatfield were willing to sacrifice those environments considered integral to the formation of Australian culture. Griffiths and Sherratt argue that ‘the vision that inspired Bradfield and his supporters was historical as well as futuristic; it is to the futuristic elements of the plans that I now turn.’

### Engineering dams and communities

Hatfield argued that Australians had to ‘face the task of drastic interference with the course of Nature’, and strongly believed that ‘with the aid of science, we can achieve wonders by way of repairs’ (original emphasis). He was confident that in the ‘machine-age’, a phrase he used multiple times throughout *Australia Reclaimed*, science and engineering could come to the aid of the environment and the Australian population, which both needed to be modernised. Travelling in the 1930s, he excitedly imagined a future in which a difficult creek crossing over the Adelaide River in the Northern Territory would be made easy on a ‘wide concrete roadway along the top of a great dam’. Other irrigation dreamers were equally enthusiastic about the potential for modern science and engineering to transform the continent and its inhabitants. Idriess was inspired by engineering feats in the United States, India and the Soviet Union, and believed that if his plan was implemented large swathes of the Northern Territory, Queensland and South Australia, generally only used for pastoralism, could be industrialised. Like Hatfield, Luscombe was excited by the ‘enormous potentialities’ of science in the “The Machine Age” to-day’. This sort of enthusiasm was not limited to Bradfield-like schemes for the inland: supporters of

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89 Griffiths and Sherratt, ‘What if the Northern Rivers had been Turned Inland?’, 253.
90 Hatfield, *Australia Reclaimed*, 27.
91 Ibid., 7.
92 Hatfield, *Australia Through the Windscreen*, 138.
94 ‘Veritas’, *Australia Replanned*, 16.
other Australian irrigation projects also celebrated the potential for science and engineering to transform the country for the better.

Elyne Mitchell, despite writing at length about the importance of achieving a spiritual and ecological balance between people and the environment, also supported large-scale dam building in the wake of Australia’s soil erosion crisis. She was impressed by the projects of the American Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which she believed proved that it was ‘possible to reclaim devastated land and rebuild it to fertility’. She was especially enthusiastic about the TVA’s establishment of demonstration farms, which she argued ‘bridged the gap between science and actual farming’. Ernestine Hill’s *Water Into Gold* (1937) – sponsored by the Australian Dried Fruits Association – was a history of the dried fruit industry on the Murray River in Victoria, which was made possible and profitable by irrigation initiated in the 1880s by the Canadian Chaffey brothers. Hill praised ‘the magic of science and the labour of men’ who, according to her, had ‘changed water into gold’. She also admired the physical components of the Murray irrigation system:

> Reservoirs vast as inland seas, engineering works monumental as the Pyramids, the great lakes that are natural storages, locks and weirs in every fifty miles, and a honeycomb channelling that has opened thousands of square miles on a trinity of rivers, with dams that keep it back and sluices that carry it on, are holding the treasure for the future.

Powell has argued that during the twentieth century ‘an engineering ascendency helped to narrow the Australian focus to dams, channels, and pipelines’, a phenomenon he labels ‘heroic constructionism’. This heroic constructionism led Hill to label the Hume Weir ‘majestic’ and the Burrinjuck Dam ‘a mighty lieutenant’. According to

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96 Ibid., 80.
99 Ibid., 47-48.
Hill, these imposing structures had enabled ‘browsing, drowsing sheep’ to be replaced by ‘intense cultivation’ and ‘hustling, bustling humanity’ along the Murray.102

Henrietta Drake-Brockman, a supporter of damming the Ord River in the Kimberly, also admired the physical nature of hydro engineering structures. Drake-Brockman was particularly impressed by America’s Boulder Dam, constructed between 1931 and 1936:

There was drama in the building of the Boulder Dam in America’s wild west, in the closing of the famous canyon that cleft Nevada from Arizona. There will be drama equally romantic and realistically sound in the building of a dam across the Ord River where its waters channel the ranges for fourteen miles through chasms as yet untrodden by man.103

While careful not to suggest that Australia was a land of ‘vast potentialities and unlimited opportunities’, Drake-Brockman did believe that the ‘scientific resourcefulness of modern agricultural experts’ would enable a successful ‘twentieth-century engineering drama’ to be played out on the Ord River.104 Janette-Susan Bailey argues that in an era of high modernism, dams – and the sense of control, containment and efficiency they conjured – offered Australians a sense of ‘technological salvation’.105 According to Drake-Brockman, damming the Ord would ensure ‘new territory will blossom with wholesome life, new markets will open, [and] new horizons offer themselves to adventurous young people’.106 Making dry regions habitable for more Australians was the central goal of the inland irrigation supporters; through damming ‘every little creek’, Hatfield imagined a future where ‘complete river-control’ would mean the inland could support closer settlement.107

Hatfield wanted to see the vast pastoral stations of Australia divided up so that large numbers of Australians and immigrants would have the chance to farm. He was especially interested in the extension of agriculture; he adhered to the belief that pastoralism was merely a stage of civilisation between nomadism and farming. Jennifer

102 Ibid., 47.
104 Ibid., 61 and 69-71.
105 Bailey, ‘Wartime Political Ambition Behind One Image of a Dam in Australia is Developing a Dust Bowl (1943)’, 68.
106 Drake-Brockman, On the North-West Skyline, 71.
107 Hatfield, Australia Reclaimed, 33 and 36.
Hamilton-McKenzie, in her history of the Mildura irrigation colony, argues that ‘irrigationist philosophy . . . revolved around the romance of the yeomanry and the civilized, idyllic societies they purportedly created’.\textsuperscript{108} Hatfield believed that pastoralism encouraged a nomadic, immoral lifestyle. In contrast, he argued that the expansion of agriculture would inspire stable, moral families to densely populate the inland; this would be an indicator of Australian social maturity.\textsuperscript{109} The supposedly civilising presence of women and families, explored in chapter two, was considered as an important indication that a region had been successfully settled.

\textbf{Figure 6.4:} An artistic impression of Bradfield’s hydro engineering scheme emphasised the imposing grandeur and techno-modernism of the proposed dams. R. Emerson Curtis, cover art, Rydge’s Business Journal 14, no. 10 (1941).

\textsuperscript{108} Hamilton-McKenzie, ‘California Dreaming’, 3.

\textsuperscript{109} Hatfield, Australia Reclaimed, 29.
Bold predictions that an engineered Australia might eventually support fifty or even one hundred million people were a feature of much of the inland irrigation literature.\textsuperscript{110} Increased population was seen as critical for the country’s defence, particularly after Japanese offensives in Southeast Asia from 1941. As a committed communist in the mid-1940s, Hatfield opposed the White Australia Policy and argued that in the postwar years Australia should ‘freely welcome people of all lands as helpers in developing the continent as a home for men’.\textsuperscript{111} He also believed that within white Australia there was a need for a ‘complete reorientation of outlook with regard to the blackfellow’, even suggesting that large part of northern Australia might be left in the control of Aboriginal people.\textsuperscript{112} But, like many Australians in the 1930s and 40s, Hatfield remained concerned that if Australia did not make use of the sparsely populated north of the country another ‘land-hungry nation’ eventually would. In one instance, he suggested that Britain might turn northern Australia into a garrison and in another that the Japanese might try to develop the region.\textsuperscript{113} An increased and decentralised population would, he believed, guard against invasion; Hatfield even imagined that ‘Alice Springs could well become our central metropolis’.\textsuperscript{114} Water, population and defence were inextricably linked, so perhaps it is unsurprising that Hatfield often described his irrigation plans using the language of war.

Hatfield advocated forming an ‘army’ of Australians, including returned soldiers, which would be tasked with ‘reconquering the enemy Nature which has forced such a tragic retreat from so many million hard-won acres’.\textsuperscript{115} He also believed that technologies developed and used during the war such as explosives and aeroplanes could be utilised for construction rather than destruction.\textsuperscript{116} Hatfield described the population and development of remote Australia using militaristic language:

\begin{quote}

a second wave must move out slowly from the nearer settled lands; a
wave of men with minds that think in acres, instead of hundreds of
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{111} Hatfield, \textit{Australia Reclaimed}, 71.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 59.

\textsuperscript{113} Hatfield, \textit{I Find Australia}, 299-300; Hatfield, \textit{Australia Through the Windscreen}, 141-2. See also, David Walker, \textit{Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939} (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1999), 124.

\textsuperscript{114} Hatfield, \textit{Australia Reclaimed}, 39.

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 17-18.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 27.
square miles; the infantry and pioneer battalions, consolidating, digging in. Building haystacks; planting rows of trees.\textsuperscript{117}

Here Hatfield imagined an army of pioneering yeoman systematically settling and rehabilitating Australia. Hatfield believed that returned soldiers, who he claimed longed for ‘a simpler mode of existence’, would play an integral role in this settlement.\textsuperscript{118} He was, however, careful to distance his vision from failed post-World War One soldier settlement schemes which he described as ‘madness’.\textsuperscript{119} Despite his interest in enabling Australians to experience a ‘simpler mode of existence’, Hatfield still imagined that his new inland settlements would be decidedly modern:

In these new towns, free from smoke and dirt, centred in a countryside chosen for its fertility in order to provide an abundance of fresh foods within minimum transport, art and education can go hand in hand as they always should have done, with science and industry (in smokeless, glass-brick factories) marching beside them, and a new generation can be raised with the best chance of physical fitness, mental alertness, moral stability and aesthetic appreciation.\textsuperscript{120}

Hatfield imagined that – more so than the country’s densely populated coastal cities – these imagined rural communities would give rise to strong, healthy and moral Australian citizens.

Hatfield believed that residence away from large cities would be morally, physically, and financially beneficial for the population. He was especially concerned about the ‘effeteness’ of urban Australians.\textsuperscript{121} Graeme Davison demonstrates that from the 1880s, and well into the twentieth century, there were rising fears about the apparent physical and mental degeneration of urban Australian men connected with concerns about the declining Australian birth rate and increasing migration of rural residents to cities.\textsuperscript{122} These fears gave rise to a range of environmental and social reforms in Australian cities; there was an emphasis on the need for access to open spaces and sanitary living conditions. As demonstrated in chapter four, the new capital Canberra,

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{117} Hatfield, \textit{Australia Through the Windscreen}, 293.
\textsuperscript{118} Hatfield, \textit{Australia Reclaimed}, 108.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 16.
\end{footnotes}
a product of some of these anxieties, was eventually ridiculed for offering residents too much open space. While some chose to reform Australian cities, others, such as James Barrett and Samuel Wadham, focused instead on making country life more attractive and comfortable through campaigns to improve the services and infrastructure available in the bush. Hatfield’s proposed that these sort of efforts be combined with large-scale water engineering schemes, to encourage both population increase and decentralisation.

At its core, Hatfield’s dream idealised the yeoman farming family, just as many supporters of World War One soldier settlement schemes had over twenty years earlier. Hatfield’s vision was influenced in part by a long Australian history of attempting to people the continent with small-scale farms. However, he was also influenced by both his relatively recent commitment to communism and the sense of potential for radical social change engendered by the prospect of postwar reconstruction.

Figure 6.5: In this illustration of Hatfield’s vision, the destruction of trees (across the bottom) and a Victorian city dominated by factory pollution (top left), are being replaced by the image of a young Australian couple admiring a well-watered and densely vegetated agricultural scene. George Farwell, ‘William Hatfield Sees’, Tribune, 26 October 1944, 4.

Postwar paradise

Hatfield admitted that, as a young man, he looked on ‘all socialists as lazy, kicking at the System because it meant they had to work’.

In 1931, though he was convinced that ‘something big’ and ‘vastly different’ was needed to develop northern and inland Australia, he had not yet committed to communism. In fact, he specifically argued against ‘the principle of Government ownership’ and advocated giving land away to individuals and companies in order that it might be brought into agricultural production.

He even defended the existence of large pastoral empires – such as that of Sir Sydney Kidman – arguing that only ‘a vast financial organisation with interests spread over a huge piece of territory can cope with the devastating droughts the country has always been subject to’. He did, however, hint that this might change when ‘my dam is built’.

In the late 1930s, Hatfield suggested that he was radicalised by socialist workmates on inland pastoral stations and as a result of gleaning ‘something of the fabulous profits made by pastoral companies’ in his role as an accountant at the Buckingham Downs station.

However, Hatfield had not actually worked in the inland for over a decade and it is more likely that, like other writers, he was politicised by the international political events of the 1930s. It is not clear when he joined the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) but by the late 1930s, when he published *Australia Through the Windscreen* and *I Find Australia*, his socialist leanings were becoming more obvious.

In 1936 Hatfield argued against land policies which allowed for ‘huge fortunes . . . [to be] amassed by a privileged few’, which he believed was ‘creating a landed aristocracy’ in Australia.

He was scathing when it came to the pastoral industry; ‘whenever I hear one of these millionaire pastoralists being lauded for his magnificent work for Australia I find the corners of my mouth drooping in an exaggerated stage sneer’.

Unlike Idriess, who published a celebratory biography of Kidman in 1936, Hatfield was now contemptuous of the Cattle King’s supposedly ‘remarkable achievements’.

Instead, Hatfield advocated that large pastoral stations be divided up so that a multitude of

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125 Hatfield, ‘In Search of Cold Camp-Fires’, 16 December 1931, 39.
126 Hatfield, ‘In Search of Cold Camp-Fires’, 16 September 1931, 12.
127 Hatfield, *Australia Through the Windscreen*, 54; Hatfield, *I Find Australia*, 61-63.
128 Hatfield, *Australia Through the Windscreen*, 65.
129 Ibid., 55.
130 I ion L. Idriess, *The Cattle King* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1936); Hatfield, *I Find Australia*, 276.
small farmers might make use of the land; he was more interested in the ‘solid yeomen type’ than the ‘Big Men’ who currently held a monopoly over much of the interior.\textsuperscript{131} Hatfield’s connections with socialist politics grew in the 1940s when the CPA was at the height of its popularity.\textsuperscript{132} In his 1940 non-fiction book \textit{This Land of Ours}, Hatfield’s socialism was explicit and across 1945-6 he undertook a speaking tour as a committed communist.\textsuperscript{133} He was even a CPA candidate for the Riverina in the 1946 Federal Election.\textsuperscript{134} Communist politics were, by the mid-1940s, integral to Hatfield’s vision for a well-watered Australian inland. \textit{Australia Reclaimed}, pitched as a plan for postwar reconstruction, made explicit the connection between Hatfield’s scheme to engineer the inland and his communist politics.

In \textit{Australia Reclaimed} Hatfield again attacked pastoralism, accusing the industry of being responsible for the exploitation of workers as well as environmental damage; ‘throughout the whole of its history, the pastoral industry in Australia has been its greatest blight, on the human community, black and white, and on the land itself’.\textsuperscript{135} His scheme to redirect the floodwaters of Queensland would, he argued, enable the land to be husbanded by small-scale farmers; he occasionally also supported the collectivisation of farming.\textsuperscript{136} Luscombe was similarly convinced that watering central Australia could only be achieved by ‘planned collective enterprise’ and took inspiration from Russia’s recent five-year plans.\textsuperscript{137} \textit{The Tribune}, probably pleased to have a popular Australian writer championing the communist cause, was eager to publicise Hatfield’s ideas. In 1949, the newspaper remained enthusiastic about the scheme to ‘make the desert blossom like the rose’; it claimed that ‘the only real patriots, the only men with a real plan to save our countryside are a few enthusiasts like Bradfield and Hatfield – and the Communists’.\textsuperscript{138} Although often associated with conservative politics, the project of populating Australia with yeoman families clearly had wide political appeal. Hatfield’s politics did, however, draw some condemnation. Hatfield’s early attack on the Australian economic situation in \textit{This Land of Ours} provoked the ire of a reviewer

\textsuperscript{131} Hatfield, \textit{Australia Through the Windscreen}, 86.


\textsuperscript{133} ‘Hatfield Touring NSW For Communist Party’, \textit{The Tribune}, 6 November 1945, 7.

\textsuperscript{134} ‘Communist Candidate’, \textit{The Tribune}, 2 April 1946, 8.

\textsuperscript{135} Hatfield, \textit{Australia Reclaimed}, 65.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 29.

\textsuperscript{137} ‘Veritas’, \textit{Australia Replanned}, 47 and 174.

\textsuperscript{138} ‘In Our Socialist Australia We Will End Flood, Drought’, \textit{The Tribune}, 3 September 1949, 4.
for the Adelaide Mail, who argued that Hatfield oversimplified Australia’s economic situation by dividing society into the “‘goodies’ (unemployed) and the ‘baddies’ (most other people)’. The reviewer dismissed the book as ‘just another Western’, which was probably a derogatory reference to Hatfield’s adventure fiction. A review of Australia Reclaimed in Perth’s South Western Advertiser disapproved of Hatfield’s ‘wholesale attack upon the entire pastoral industry’ and thought the book ‘rabidly controversial’.

Ultimately though, the greatest blow to Hatfield’s vision was that an inland hydro engineering scheme was not implemented in Australia’s postwar years.

Postwar reconstruction sought to channel the energies of government departments, which had successfully directed Australia’s war effort, into peacetime pursuits. Stuart Macintyre argues that reconstruction was an attempt to break with the troubled interwar years and implement centrally planned and progressive social and economic policies. Jan Kociumbas also points out that postwar reconstruction urged a ‘fresh assault’ on Australia’s natural resources so that they might be harnessed to serve the needs of an industrialised, modern and morally revitalised society. According to Kociumbas:

futuristic emblems of post-war industrial technology . . . were seen as sublime, brutally vanquishing Nature to generate a new, more democratic order where, at least for white families, want and need would be unknown.

Hatfield’s utopian vision for postwar Australia, which combined large-scale engineering, environmental control, community construction and political transformation, was not out of step with other postwar fantasies. However, the Rural Reconstruction Commission did not lend support to Bradfield’s scheme, or others like it, as it was considered expensive and risky. However, enthusiasm for large-scale hydro engineering projects did prevail, particularly among state and federal politicians.

Country Party politician Sir Earle Page – who briefly served as Prime Minister in 1939

139 ‘Mr. Hatfield States His Case’, The Mail (Adelaide), 7 June 1941, 7.
140 ‘Author Slates Australia's Pastoral Industry: Sees “Arrogant” Feudal Class’, The South Western Advertiser (Perth), 13 September 1946, 3.
143 Ibid., 3.
– was an enthusiastic proponent of postwar hydroelectric schemes. The implementation of the Snowy River Hydro-Electric Scheme (1949-1972) and later the Ord River Irrigation Scheme (1959-) demonstrates the ongoing postwar eagerness for environmental transformation.

The optimistic plans for postwar social and economic reconstruction have been well researched, but Hatfield’s work demonstrates that the environment played a part in these imaginings. Hatfield advocated continental-scale engineering projects in order to drastically alter the environment, which, he argued, would protect and improve the social fabric of the country. The proposals of Bradfield, Hatfield and other advocates of inland irrigation are evidence of the recurring appeal of the closer settlement of the Australian continent in the early twentieth century – already explored in this thesis in chapters one and two. Interest in closer settlement was given renewed impetus in the wake of extensive soil erosion in the 1930s and 1940s, anxieties around possible invasion during World War Two, and the anticipation of postwar reconstruction. Hatfield’s blend of nostalgia for rural Australia and enthusiasm for its futuristic potential captured well the aspirations of nationalists for Australia’s post-World War Two years. In the next chapter, I turn to poet Flexmore Hudson. Although Hudson did not share Hatfield’s enthusiasm for the technological mastery of nature, his vision for Australia’s postwar period was equally utopian.

Chapter Seven

A Cosmopolitan Jindyworobak: Flexmore Hudson, Nationalism and World-Mindedness

Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.¹

In 1948, Julian Huxley delivered his outgoing speech as the retiring Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). He emphasised that ‘UNESCO fills a vital need in the present circumstances of our planet . . . the world has become ripe for the emergence of an international organization dealing with things of the mind and spirit’.² Huxley advocated a ‘One World’ mindset, believed governments should not just think of ‘national problems’ but ‘a single world problem’, and thought that particularly gifted individuals could transcend national boundaries as ‘citizens of the world’.³ Huxley’s friend and occasional co-author H.G. Wells had long argued that a global rather than national approach to education, history and politics was necessary to ensure world peace. As the quote above demonstrates, Wells believed that ignorance of world politics could have catastrophic consequences for humanity. Wells made a controversial and well-publicised visit to Australia in late 1938 and early 1939, when the sense of an impending human crisis was quickened by

³ Ibid., 9-10.
mounting tensions in Europe. Although Wells died in 1946, worldwide enthusiasm for a ‘Cosmopolis’ – Wells’ co-operative global society – reached its peak in the moment of optimism and possibility that characterised the immediate postwar years.

Flexmore Hudson, a South Australian poet, editor, and schoolteacher, echoed both Wells and Huxley when he explained his desire for world peace and the ideal of a ‘world state’. Hudson, also writing in 1948, argued that Australians must be ‘unified by a concept of world-citizenship’ rather than a strengthening sense of nationality. This attitude permeated all of Hudson’s work between the late 1930s and late 1940s; including his poetry, his educational philosophy, his seven-year editorship of the little magazine Poetry, and his authorship of an educational comic book for children. Although he had to pursue a range of employment and literary forms to survive financially, Hudson maintained an outlook that I will characterise as ‘world-minded’. This chapter will introduce Hudson’s little-studied literary output as an example of ‘world-mindedness’ in the Australian context.

Paradoxically, Hudson explicitly voiced his support for a ‘world-state’ in the Jindyworobak Review 1938-1948, a collection of reflections on the first ten years of Rex Ingamells’ staunchly nationalist Jindyworobak poetry movement. Hudson’s outlook was often at odds with the literary nationalism at the heart of Jindyworobak, yet it is his long-time association with that movement for which he is best remembered. In order to explain how Hudson negotiated his internationalist outlook as part of a literary community preoccupied with nationalism, this chapter will highlight the way that Hudson’s poetry was attentive to the landscapes in which he lived. Hudson’s overtly ‘placed’ poetry, written while a resident of rural South Australia, resonated with the Jindyworobak call for literary attention to ‘environmental values’. These poems also gave him a curious advantage as an adherent of ‘world-mindedness’, as a new ecological perspective on the environment emerged out of the United States in the postwar years.

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7 Ibid., 84-85.
Flexmore Hudson

Flexmore Hudson was born Wilfred Frank Flexmore Hudson in 1913 at Charters Towers, Queensland to Baptist missionary Wilfred Flexmore Hudson and his wife Irene Maud Hudson, née Rathbone. As a child, Hudson was well travelled within Australia and New Zealand as his father’s career moved the family frequently. He attended at least thirteen primary schools before the family settled permanently in Adelaide in 1924. When interviewed by Hazel de Berg in 1969, Hudson recalled that his ‘was a colourful, good kind of childhood for a poet, because it enriched the senses’. Moreover, as a student of Mr W.R. Tynan of Thornleigh Public School in Sydney, Hudson was encouraged in his poetic pursuits and to take the Australian bush as a subject. Despite this early interest in poetry, when he finished his secondary education at Adelaide High School, Hudson wanted to join the army but was persuaded by his disapproving father to become a teacher instead. Hudson trained at Adelaide Teachers’ College and attended Adelaide University for a short time, but did not finish his arts degree. Between 1936 and 1946 Hudson taught in a handful of small primary schools in rural South Australia. While working as a full-time teacher, Hudson launched his literary career.

In 1937, when his first collection of poetry Ashes and Sparks was published at his own expense, Hudson entered a literary landscape preoccupied with the various political crises of the 1930s: Depression, the rise of fascism, and the threat of another major world conflict. Hudson’s development as a writer reflects the pattern of politicisation that influenced the other writers in this thesis. Between 1937 and 1944 Hudson published five collections of his own poetry; over this time love and nature poems were increasingly replaced by musings on war, politics and what Hudson called ‘social

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8 Flexmore Hudson, interview by Hazel de Berg, 18 December 1969, ORAL TRC 1/454, NLA, Canberra.
9 Ibid.
11 Hudson, interview.
12 In 1985 Hudson published Tales From Corytelia: The Collected Stories of Flexmore Hudson (Norwood: WAV Publications, 1985). Many of the short stories collected are clearly influenced by Hudson’s time spent teaching in rural South Australia, though it appears that the stories were written in the decades after Hudson left the region. I am concerned with the special, changing nature of the 1930s and 1940s, as so have chosen to limit my analysis to work produced in that period.
philosophy’. Like other writers in the 1930s and 1940s, Hudson was convinced that even the authors of fiction and poetry had a social responsibility to engage with politics:

The poet must live as fully as possible, enter into all the life of his age, and understand how many different personalities feel. When all that is precious to the human spirit is endangered, how can a man be justified in shutting himself off from social struggles for the sake of Pure Art?14

Hudson was a socialist, and when interviewed for 3AR’s radio talk series ‘New Australian Voices’ in the 1940s, he argued that ‘poets should use their most fervent eloquence in appealing for social justice, the world over’.15 Hudson’s little magazine *Poetry*, which he produced and edited between 1941 and 1947, increasingly bore the stamp of his interest in world politics and an international approach to Australian affairs, as did *Discovery*, his didactic comic for children published across 1947 and 1948.

Despite the impressive variety of Hudson’s literary output, critical engagement with his work is limited. Paul Depasquale’s twenty-four page *Flexmore Hudson*, part of a series of brief books titled ‘South Australian Writers and Their Work’, includes both biographical material and some literary criticism of Hudson’s poetry.16 Otherwise, Hudson is considered, generally briefly, in a range of other work and usually in relation to Jindyworobak.17 Hudson was one of the earliest and most prominent members of the Adelaide-based Jindyworobak movement and it is as a Jindyworobak that Hudson is best remembered. His uneasy relationship with the movement is always acknowledged, although it is usually explained simply in terms of his socialism or his aversion to the Jindyworobak emphasis on Aboriginal culture. This tension was more complicated. Applying the concept of ‘world-mindedness’ to some of Hudson’s little-studied literary offerings helps to elucidate how he reconciled his world-minded outlook with Jindyworobak nationalism.

13 Hudson, interview.
15 Flexmore Hudson, ‘New Australian Voices’ radio talk script, box 4, bag 2, Acc 02/280, Papers of Flexmore Hudson, circa 1939-1960, NLA, Canberra.
World-mindedness and H.G. Wells

World-minded thinkers sought, particularly through an emphasis on wide reading, to promote a greater understanding of other cultures, people and humanity as a whole. They set themselves in opposition to racism, war, limited reading habits and narrow nationalism. Patrick Buckridge and Eleanor Morecroft argue that the concept of ‘world-mindedness’ ‘as a moral and intellectual virtue gained considerable currency in Australia and overseas through the 1930s’, and was promoted by a variety of peace organisations, women’s groups and educators.18 According to Buckridge and Morecroft, world-mindedness was an attempt to ‘hold back the tides of hatred, prejudice and ignorance that seemed . . . to be engulfing Europe and threatening Britain and the Empire’.19 World-mindedness grew out of, and was a reaction against, the social and political upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century and was appealing in the wake of World War Two and the devastating results of Nazi nationalism and racism.

In 1948 a journalist in the Melbourne Argus made a direct connection between World War Two and world-minded thinking, arguing that since ‘we have fought a war against Hitler and his principle of racial superiority . . . there has been a tremendous increase in world-mindedness’ and ‘a proportionate decrease in the practice of racial discrimination’.20 UNESCO, established in November 1946 with the intention of defending peace by advocating the ‘intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind’, is perhaps the most striking example of what Glenda Sluga describes as the ‘curiously utopian moment’ between 1945 and 1950, when views of the future were dominated by internationalism and cosmopolitanism.21 Australian interest in world-mindedness reached a peak in March 1949 when UNESCO, in conjunction with the Australian government, held UNESCO Week. UNESCO Week aimed to promote ‘world-mindedness instead of narrow racialism, educational reconstruction in the war-shattered countries and the struggle against illiteracy’.22


19 Ibid., 49.


*Herald* reported on UNESCO’s plan to ‘purge’ school books of ‘hatred’ and ‘distortions’ in order to ‘assist world-mindedness’, and in 1949 Mr Beard, headmaster of Newcastle Boys’ High School and UNESCO Week attendee, was enthusiastic about the possibility of education to banish ‘ignorance and prejudice among the great nations’. The education of children was clearly seen as crucial to the successful propagation of world-minded thinking. In this Australians were likely influenced, at least in part, by the educational philosophy of British science-fiction novelist turned political commentator H.G. Wells. Wells was a world-minded thinker – though he didn’t use that phrase – who had visited Australia nearly ten years before.

Wells arrived in Fremantle on 27 December 1938, and visited Adelaide, Melbourne and Canberra before departing from Sydney on 26 January 1939. The primary purpose of his visit was to address the congress of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) in Canberra in January 1939. His main address at the congress, titled ‘The Role of English in the Development of the World Mind’, advocated the creation of an English-speaking intellectual and scientific elite to manage the world’s problems. The congress proceedings were temporarily interrupted on Friday 13 January when bushfires threatened the capital; on the same day, Victoria would be devastated by what would become known as the Black Friday bushfires. Wells travelled with Governor General Lord Gowrie to the fire perimeters to offer encouragement and distribute cigarettes to those fighting the fires. Wells offered one of the only literary evocations of the Black Friday fires when he wrote ‘a bush fire is not an orderly invader, but a guerrilla. It advances by rushes, by little venomous lunges of fire in the grass; it spreads by sparks burning leaves and bark. Its front is miles deep’.

Despite the brevity of Wells’ stay, his visit was highly anticipated and well publicised. He kept a busy schedule. Aside from his participation at the ANZAAS congress, Wells gave four ABC radio talks, attended a variety of dinners and other social events, and gave one public lecture in the Sydney Town Hall. In early January 1939, Wells ignited

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26 Wells, *Travels of a Republican Radical*, 47.

controversy when, in an interview with the Melbourne press, he referred to Hitler and Mussolini as ‘freaks’. He called Hitler ‘a certifiable lunatic’ and Mussolini ‘a fantastic renegade from the Socialist movement’.28 His comments earned him the ire of Prime Minister Joseph Lyons who, in a series of statements, rebuked Wells for levelling ‘personal insults’ at the leaders of other nations and insisted on making clear that ‘the views expressed by Mr. Wells are not the views of the Commonwealth Government’.29 While Wells offended the conservative government, his political statements were probably met with enthusiasm by a large number of Australian writers.

Wells spent his only night in Perth at a dinner given in his honour by the Western Australian branch of the FAW. John K. Ewers presided and Katharine Susannah Prichard and academic and essayist Walter Murdoch were in attendance. Minor travel and history writer Norman Bartlett remembered that Wells did not address his audience on literary matters, despite his extensive experience as a novelist, but instead focused on his own vision for the world’s future.30 Writing in the late 1970s, Bartlett paraphrased the political message Wells delivered to his largely literary audience:

> It was not extraordinary that Australian writers had turned in upon themselves and written novels about jarrah trees, gunyahs, bandicoots and bushmen. The time had now come, having gone to earth and rooted in, they must realize they were part of a greater world, part of a world-wide English-speaking community on which the future sanity of the world might depend.31

It is likely that Henrietta Drake-Brockman also attended the dinner, as in 1941 she too recalled Wells’ appeal for Australians ‘to wake from [their] bush and bandicoot state of mind and face the world as a people’.32 She also recollected, in a poem that was to be published in the FAW’s ill-fated ‘Writers in Defence of Freedom’ collection, that Wells did not ‘like oysters, dictators or history as taught’.33

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29 ‘Rebuke for Mr. Wells’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 January 1939, 9; ‘Rebuking of Mr. Wells’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 January 1939, 17.
31 Ibid., 68.
Wells was also received by the Melbourne and Sydney branches of the PEN (Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, Novelists) Club, an international organisation of which he was a founding member. On 25 January 1939, the eve of his departure from Australia, Wells attended a dinner hosted by the Sydney branch of the FAW. Xavier Herbert was likely in attendance, otherwise it is not clear which other writers might have encountered Wells that evening.\(^{34}\) In front of this largely sympathetic audience, Wells addressed the topic of censorship. He argued that until all forms of censorship were abolished Australia remained ‘a half-Fascist country’. He also urged Australians to shift their political focus from Britain, which was in the process of pulling defensive and financial support from Australia, to the Pacific; he emphasised the need to build relationships with the United States and the Dutch empire to Australia’s north.\(^{35}\) Although Wells spent three nights in Adelaide in late December, it appears he did not meet with any representatives of the literary community there, yet his beliefs about history education likely influenced Hudson’s own teaching philosophy.

At ANZAAS Wells gave a second talk, which was not a part of the original program, to the Education Section of the congress.\(^{36}\) This second talk was titled ‘A Provocative Paper on the Poison called History’ and was later published in Wells’ *Travels of a Republican Radical in Search of Hot Water* (1939). Wells set out to convince his audience that ‘schools generally are teaching history in the wrong way and in the wrong spirit’ and proposed a radical revision of history education in schools and universities.\(^{37}\) He advocated a move away from teaching national histories, which he believed contributed to needless international antagonism, to an emphasis on human history as a ‘longer biological adventure’.\(^{38}\) Wells’ emphasis on biology – in which he had been trained as a young man – was an integral part of his proposal:

> This new history arises naturally and necessarily out of the mighty revolution in biological thought that has happened in the past hundred years, and its development has been tremendously assisted in the last forty years and more by archaeological work. The new history deals with a vast and growing mass of concrete fact and scientific criticism, and it regards written records with an acutely


\(^{35}\) ‘Censorship Attacked’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 January 1939, 11.


\(^{38}\) Ibid., 99.
sceptical eye. The old history on the other hand is fundamentally documentary.\textsuperscript{39}

Wells emphasised the need for a more ‘scientific’ and material history, although there remained room in his vision for studies of language and the careful consideration of the development of national myths, so long as such myths were treated with scepticism.\textsuperscript{40} Wells argued that history education needed to be forward-looking; it needed to anticipate and encourage the ‘advent of Cosmopolis’.\textsuperscript{41}

Nearly twenty years earlier, in \textit{The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind} (1920) which spanned two volumes, Wells had attempted to put his historical vision into practice. He traced world history from before human existence into the present-day, even speculating about the ‘next stage in history’.\textsuperscript{42} The \textit{Outline of History} was, Wells argued, an attempt to avoid ‘narrow, selfish, and conflicting nationalist traditions’ and instead ‘to tell, truly and clearly, in one continuous narrative, the whole story of life and mankind so far as it is known to-day’.\textsuperscript{43} He included complex ‘time charts’ to visually demonstrate ‘enlarging human cooperations’ over time, offering this as evidence that humanity was on a trajectory toward a ‘Federal World State’ (see Figure 7.1).\textsuperscript{44} Hudson had read \textit{The Outline of History}, but unfortunately left no trace of his precise thoughts on the book. However, in a letter sent in the early 1930s, Edgar Mercer\textsuperscript{45} told Hudson that:

\textit{I also dwell frequently upon H.G.’s big “Outline of History” – a most fascinating and inspiring tome – a mine of information – the one coherent complete and assimalable history of civilization.} (emphasis added)

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 93-94.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 101 and 108.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{42} Wells, \textit{The Outline of History}, volume II, viii.
\textsuperscript{44} Wells, \textit{The Outline of History}, volume II, 580-1.
\textsuperscript{45} Hudson described Mercer as his ‘oldest friend’ and the pair corresponded extensively through the 1930s and 1940s. Mercer was a scientist who went on to work for the CSIR and in a variety of academic and other roles in the United Kingdom and United States. See: box 1, bag 3, folders M5 and M6, Acc 02/280, Papers of Flexmore Hudson, circa 1939-1960, NLA, Canberra; ‘Mercer, Edgar Howard (1913 - )’, Encyclopedia of Australian Science, accessed 16 August 2016, http://www.eoas.info /biogs/P001750b.htm.
\textsuperscript{46} Edgar Bunce to Flexmore Hudson, no date (likely early 1930s), box 1, bag 3, folder M5, Acc 02/280, Papers of Flexmore Hudson, circa 1939-1960, NLA, Canberra.
Hudson’s half of their correspondence is sadly lost, yet Mercer’s wording suggests that Hudson had initiated the conversation about Wells’ book and already declared his own admiration for it.

Figure 7.1: One of Wells’ ‘time charts’, which were intended to reveal the interactions between states, races and empires and that mankind was on a global trajectory toward a ‘Federal World State’. H.G. Wells, The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 602.

Wells was disappointed that his second ANZAAS talk did not seem to spark either enthusiasm or lively debate among his audience. However, Hudson and other Australian educators had begun to advocate a similar world-minded approach to teaching. Australian education historian Julie McLeod argues that in the interwar years two main themes recurred in debates around civics and schooling in Australia. The first was the need to cultivate a ‘cosmopolitan or worldly outlook’ in students and the second was an emphasis on teaching clear, independent thinking. McLeod calls this combination ‘clear-mindedness and world-mindedness’. Certainly Hudson’s own educational philosophy reflected such a combination. He believed that it was the role of the teacher to cultivate:

children of free personalities, not necessarily richly endowed with facts, but eager to reason, criticise, and create, familiar with much fine

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music, poetry, painting and sculpture, and bearing goodwill to all peoples, regardless of their colour, race or religion. We must produce self-conscious world citizens if we are to achieve world peace.\textsuperscript{48}

Hudson also advocated the abolition of religious instruction, the introduction of sex education, and the replacement of national and racial histories with the teaching of world history. He believed that such a radical re-orientation of perspective was unlikely to occur under capitalism and so supported socialism.\textsuperscript{49} Although Hudson never used the term world-minded his teaching philosophy demonstrated a sympathy with the emerging concept and he might well have been influenced by Wells’ writing on education. Hudson’s world-minded stance was not only crucial in his role as an educator, but was evident in a range of his work including his comic books and approach to editing Poetry magazine.

\textbf{Highbrow to ‘hack-work’}

In 1940 a war-time ban on all non-essential imports, including comic books, led to the sudden emergence of an Australian comic book industry.\textsuperscript{50} One contribution to this new industry, though somewhat unusual given it was ‘produced outside the Sydney/Melbourne nexus’, was \textit{Pacific Pictorial Comic} published by Lush Studies, an Adelaide-based commercial art and signwriting business.\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Pacific Pictorial Comic}, which included several serialised short comics, claimed to produce a range of comics to ‘satisfy the need for reading matter that will provide children with the excitement of the common comic without introducing slangy stories inculcating wrong attitudes to crime, war, and people of other races’.\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Pacific Pictorial Comic} was careful to set itself in opposition to ‘the usual gangster type of comic’.\textsuperscript{53} This was an attempt to guard against the publication being dismissed as mere entertainment or even being accused of promoting moral degeneration; allegations commonly levelled against imported American comic books. In 1935, the Cultural Defence Committee established by the FAW and chaired by P.R. Stephensen, issued a pamphlet protesting the dumping of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[48] Hudson, ‘New Australian Voices’.
\item[49] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
cheap American comic books, periodicals and pulp fiction on the Australian market. The committee labelled such material ‘degenerate and socially dangerous’.\(^{54}\) The overall goal of *Pacific Pictorial Comic*, to promote peaceful social relationships through reading, was in accord with world-mindedness.

In the pages of *Pacific Pictorial Comic*, *Discovery*, an educational comic for children written by Hudson, was serialised. *Discovery* was concerned with educating Australian and New Zealand schoolchildren about the human history of the Pacific Ocean and, according to Hudson, aimed to ‘cover the story of the Pacific and Australia, beginning with the Polynesian voyages and concluding with the achievements of contemporary Australians’.\(^{55}\) When the first four instalments of *Discovery* were republished in a collection titled *Discovery: The Adventures of the Polynesians*, the book was described as an ‘experiment’ in the presentation of history to schoolchildren and as ‘a reliable text book for students & teachers’ (original emphasis).\(^{56}\) The comic had covered Indian migration, Polynesian exploration, Easter Island history and some Spanish exploration of South America when the final instalment written by Hudson appeared in issue six of *Pacific Pictorial Comic*.

In both the text and illustrations of *Discovery* there was a concerted effort to displace Europe as the primary context of Australian history. The maps and images used all focused on the Pacific; Europe did not appear at all (see Figure 7.3).\(^{57}\) According to Hudson, to ‘understand the thrilling story of the discovery of Australia we must first learn about the exploration of the Pacific Ocean’; in his initial instalments Hudson focused on Indian, Polynesian and Spanish exploration.\(^{58}\) Moreover, in *Discovery* Hudson told Australian history around a geographic feature – the Pacific Ocean – rather than emphasising European explorers. In fact, European explorers did not appear in *Discovery* until the third instalment. Barnard Eldershaw’s 1939 history *My Australia* stands out as having a geographic focus similar to Hudson’s *Discovery*. ‘Part One’ of *My Australia* was a typical, chronological history of white colonisation while


\(^{58}\) Ibid., 1.
‘Part Two’ told Australian history around a range of geographical and environmental features across (not necessarily linear) time. Although *Discovery* was never completed, Hudson did make an attempt – perhaps in part inspired by Wells – to produce a world history, or at least a regional history, for schoolchildren that presented Australia as a Pacific nation rather than a European one.

![Image of 'Discovery' comic](image.png)

**Figure 7.2:** Although the ‘Discovery’ banner suggested a traditional history of European pith-helmeted explorers, in fact the comic included the much longer history of non-white exploration in the Pacific. Flexmore Hudson, ‘Discovery’, in *Pacific Pictorial Comic*, no. 1 (Adelaide: Lush Studios, 1947), 1.

In his attempted retelling of Australian history Hudson was not alone, but rather an example of Australia’s changing historical imagination and the development of Pacific political engagement in the first half of the twentieth century. David Walker argues that Australian engagement in the Pacific region, specifically through diplomacy and academia, began to increase from about 1910. Strikingly similar to Hudson’s purpose in *Discovery* was the rubric of Ernest Scott’s 1926 ‘Australasian History’ course at the University of Melbourne, the aim of which was to cover ‘the history of the discovery of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific’. From 1934 the popular magazine *Walkabout*, which ran articles on other countries in the region and advertised Pacific tourism, was another early example of Australia’s developing Pacific imagination. In the wake of World War Two, the need for Australia to engage with its Pacific

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neighbours seemed especially urgent. Travel writer Frank Clune argued, in his 1945 book *Pacific Parade*, that Australia’s ‘destiny is in the Pacific’ and that ‘the biggest war in history made us “Pacific-minded”’.\(^6^3\) Clune predicted that this new focus on the Pacific region would result in an expansion of Pacific literature that would be ‘as wide as that ocean itself, as diversified as its people’.\(^6^4\) Clem Christensen, editor of *Meanjin Papers*, also urged writers to explore the Australian ‘relationship with other countries, particularly East Asia and in the Pacific Basin’.\(^6^5\)

![Figure 7.3: Various images from *Discovery* demonstrate the way that Hudson emphasised the Pacific Ocean as the geographic heart of Australian history. Left: Flexmore Hudson, *Discovery: The Adventures of the Polynesians* (Adelaide: Lush Studios, 1948), cover. Top and bottom right: Flexmore Hudson, ‘Discovery, in *Pacific Pictorial Comic*, no. 1 (Lush Studios, 1947), 1.](image)

Despite the apparently progressive purpose of *Discovery*, in his treatment of Aboriginal Australia Hudson resorted to familiar tropes of savagery and backwardness. He represented the Aboriginal population as a group lacking technology who ‘like shadows . . . crouched silently among the bush’.\(^6^6\) Aside from Hudson’s representation of the Aboriginal population, a theme to which I will return, *Discovery* demonstrates his world-mindedness and his pedagogical preference for world history over racial and national histories. Yet, despite the high-minded purpose of the comic, later in life Hudson was ambivalent about the worth of his work on *Discovery*. He once called the


\(^{64}\) Ibid., 3.


comics ‘serious things’ but in another instance described them as the ‘hackwork’ he undertook to keep *Poetry*, his highbrow poetry magazine, financially afloat.

John Tregenza argues that an increase in the production of Australian little magazines in the 1930s and 1940s was a response to the culminating world crises that politicised many writers. Hudson’s *Poetry* magazine, produced primarily from rural South Australia with the help of his wife Myrle Desmond, ran for twenty-five numbers between 1941 and 1947. Originally sub-titled *A Quarterly of Australian and New Zealand Verse*, *Poetry* was established partly due to the guilt Hudson felt when illness prevented him from joining the Australian army during World War Two. According to Hudson, the magazine enabled him to fulfil his patriotic duty by establishing what he called a ‘first-rate’ place for the publication of Australian poetry. Up until number sixteen, all poetic contributions to the magazine came from Australia and New Zealand and Hudson tried to entice new subscribers with the promise that *Poetry* ‘brings to you the poems of your own land and time’. However, Hudson developed more international ambitions as the magazine achieved greater success. From number seventeen the magazine underwent a change of subtitle becoming *Poetry: The Australian International Quarterly of Verse*. In number twenty it was advertised that *Poetry* would accept English translations of contemporary poems originally written in any language. Hudson actively pursued international contributions; his personal papers indicate that he initiated contact with poets from the USA, India, England, Wales, Denmark, Israel, Ireland and Scotland. *Poetry* number twenty-five, published in December 1947, was prefaced by American writer William Carlos Williams and included an extensive collection of Indonesian poetry translated into English. Additionally, there were contributions from three Irish, two English, and one Israeli poet. It was with this issue, in which Hudson had achieved an impressive balance of Australian and international content, that *Poetry* ceased publication due to financial difficulties.

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67 Hudson, interview.

68 This comment is written in Hudson’s handwriting on the cover of the folder that the comics are stored in, box 5, bag 3, Acc 02/280, Papers of Flexmore Hudson, circa 1939-1960, NLA, Canberra.


70 Hudson, interview.


73 See letters in box 1, Acc 02/280, Papers of Flexmore Hudson, circa 1939-1960, NLA, Canberra.
*Discovery* and *Poetry* were clearly quite different, and Hudson certainly valued them differently. *Discovery* was ‘hackwork’, *Poetry* was ‘firstrate’. However, all of Hudson’s work, from the lowbrow to the highbrow, and from his own poetry to his work as an educator, was connected by his interest in world-mindedness. Hudson was even able to articulate his world-minded stance as a part of the overtly nationalist literary community of Jindyworobak poets.

**Jindyworobak**

Hudson met Rex Ingamells during his short stint at Adelaide University in 1931 and the two became, and remained, close friends. In 1938, assisted by poets Ian Tilbrook and Max Harris, Ingamells established the poetry-focused Jindyworobak Club in Adelaide and published the movement’s manifesto *Conditional Culture*. As explored in chapter five, Jindyworobak was concerned with an ‘authentic’ Australian literature inspired by the Australian landscape and Aboriginal history and mythology. Ingamells argued that continued cultural dependence on Britain threatened the development of a ‘genuine’ Australian literature. He advocated the use of ‘appropriate’ language to describe the unique ‘environmental values’ of the Australian scene, and promoted literary engagement with the spiritual and environmental legacy of Aboriginal Australia. While critic and poet A.D. Hope called Australia a land ‘without songs, architecture, history’, the Jindyworobaks attempted to appropriate an Aboriginal sense of place in order to claim continuity with a deeper Australian history. Hudson broadly agreed with most Jindyworobak aims. However, like many contemporary critics of the group, he took issue with both the narrow nationalism of the Jindyworobak program and with the emphasis it placed on Aboriginal Australia. I will consider Hudson’s objection to the group’s use of Aboriginal culture shortly, but first want to reflect on his concerns about Jindyworobak nationalism, which were amplified when Ingamells and Ian Mudie became closely associated with W.J. Miles and P.R. Stephensen’s Australia First movement.

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74 Hudson, interview.


77 For other contemporary criticism of Jindyworobak see A.D. Hope, ‘Culture Corroboree’, *Southerly* 2, no. 3 (1941): 28-31; Max Harris, ‘Dance Little Wombat’, *Meanjin Papers* 2, no. 2 (1943): 33-35.
Australia First, explored in more detail in chapter five, was Miles and Stephensen’s Sydney-based political pressure group that advocated extreme nationalism as well as anti-democratic ideas. From 1937 Mudie regularly contributed poetry to the pairs’ magazine *The Publicist* and joined their Australia First movement in 1941. Mudie’s enthusiasm for Australia First contributed to Ingamells’ decision to apply for membership in December 1941, drawing the Jindyworobaks closer to the controversial group. Despite his reservations about this recent political association, Hudson agreed to guest edit the 1943 Jindyworobak anthology. In his editorial note, Hudson declared that ‘until Jindyworobak shows itself xenophobically nationalistic . . . I shall support it and persuade others to support it’. However, he was also eager to add: ‘I do not consider myself a member of the Jindyworobak School. Nor do many of the writers represented here’ (original emphasis). Regardless, Hudson contributed to all but three of the Jindyworobak annual anthologies that ran between 1938 and 1953, and even wrote a letter of protest in 1942 to Senator Joe Collings when Stephensen and fifteen other members and associates of Australia First were interned and held without trial.

How and why did Hudson continue to associate himself, though sometimes uncomfortable, with the Jindyworobaks, some of whom were increasingly drawn to right-wing politics? In part, the answer lies in the necessary pragmatism involved in negotiating a literary career in this period.

Like Ingamells, Hudson believed that there was little appreciation of Australian poetry and was therefore glad to support a group whose objective was to publish, circulate and support Australian writing. In 1940 he told Ingamells:

> you are wrong in many of your Jindyworobak aims. However, you *do* produce an anthology of *some* Australian poetry, you *do* achieve *something* for a cause dear to all Australian writers. Therefore I shall continue to enrol members . . . and my work will be yours to use.

*(original emphasis)*

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80 Flexmore Hudson to Joe Collings, 19 July 1942, box 4, bag 2, Acc 02/280, Papers of Flexmore Hudson, circa 1939-1960, NLA, Canberra.

81 Flexmore Hudson to Rex Ingamells, 23 March 1940, box 1, bag 1, Acc 02/280, Papers of Flexmore Hudson, circa 1939-1960, NLA, Canberra.

82 Ibid.
Moreover, Kevin Pearson and Christine Churches argue that ‘Jindyworobak ideology was important not just as a set of rules but as a common meeting ground for discussion’. Mudie explained that, as a resident of Adelaide, relationships with other Jindyworobaks provided him with a network of friends and peers to stave off a sense of literary isolation. Even Max Harris, who though a founding member of Jindyworobak went on to attack the movement and establish the avant-garde Angry Penguins journal, emphasised the important role Jindyworobak played in his early literary networking:

The early days of Jindyworobak were to me, a process of establishing contact, contact with poetic outlooks . . . This interchange of viewpoints, to which Ingamells’ controversial theory gave rise, caused a feeling of coherence between various individuals.

This sense of coherence was important to many Australian writers who felt ignored by the Australian public and under attack from the academy. When Mudie edited the Jindyworobak anthology in 1946 he decided to include one of Hudson’s poems even though he didn’t think it very good. Mudie told Hudson that he did not want to be seen as anti-leftist by excluding Hudson from the anthology and argued that ‘there are too many knockers around trying to make bad blood between poets for me to give them even an imaginary triumph’. Although her views did not always align with Jindyworobak, Nettie Palmer told Ingamells that she was impressed that he had ‘done what some of us ought to have attempted much earlier: you’ve brought people together, sifted them, held to a literary credo and be-damned’. Jindyworobak provided opportunities for contact, conversation, support and friendship, which was probably more important than the political differences Hudson had with many members. Although the pragmatic advantages of a relationship with Jindyworobak are clear, Hudson remained doubtful about the Jindyworobak emphasis on Aboriginal culture.

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84 Ian Mudie, interview by Hazel de Burg, 27 October 1966, ORAL TRC 1/187-188, NLA.
86 Ian Mudie to Flexmore Hudson, 28 August 1946, box 1, bag 2, Acc 02/280, Papers of Flexmore Hudson, circa 1939-1960, NLA, Canberra.
Brian Elliott argues that ‘passionately as he was attached, strongly as he felt the peculiar uniqueness of being Australian, Hudson believed that to be committed too deeply to the Dreamtime was to accept too narrow a philosophy’. Yet Hudson’s aversion to the Jindyworobak aim of drawing on Aboriginal Australia for inspiration seemed to stem from a more ordinary, pervasive racism. As already mentioned, in *Discovery* Hudson relied on typical racial stereotypes of Aboriginal Australia. *Discovery* also repeated many common beliefs about the degeneration of people in tropical climates; according to Hudson, settlement on Pacific islands teeming with resources ‘made most of the Polynesians lazy and less adventurous’ than their ancestors who had colonised the region. He admitted that he found the Jindyworobak emphasis on Aboriginal myths ‘unpalatable and unprofitable’ and judged it a form of ‘escapism’. He objected to Ingamells’ suggestion that Aboriginal art and song could teach modern poets and artists new creative techniques; Hudson could not be persuaded ‘that our poets are going to learn much of technique from a backward people who are without written language’. For Hudson, Aboriginal culture had no place in modern Australian literature; he told Ingamells that ‘a cultured scientific twentieth century outlook’ was more appropriate. To modern sensibilities Hudson’s attitude toward Aboriginal Australia seems at odds with his call for ‘goodwill to all peoples, regardless of their colour, race or religion’. However, Hudson’s continued support of both world-mindedness and Jindyworobak nationalism complicates any sense of an ideological dichotomy between them.

Glenda Sluga points out that ‘late nineteenth-century conceptions of race and empire remained uneasily at the heart of cosmopolitanism and internationalism’. Imperialism and eugenics were central to Julian Huxley’s plans to reduce ‘psychological distances between peoples and nations’. Nationalism was not incompatible either; Huxley specifically called on nations to preserve their cultural heritage and encourage ‘the

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90 Hudson, ‘A Prophet in His Own Country’, 84 and 88.
91 Ingamells, *Conditional Culture*, 86.
92 Flexmore Hudson to Rex Ingamells, 23 March 1940.
creative artist, whether in painting or music, in literature or drama, to express the spirit of his country’. World-mindedness did not necessarily preclude racism, imperialism or nationalism. Australian nationalism in this period was similarly fluid. For example, there was more room for Aboriginal Australia within the ‘savage nationalism’ of P.R. Stephensen, than in Hudson’s world-minded outlook. Stephensen provided financial backing for the Abo Call newspaper and the Aborigines Progressive Association and was involved with both the Aboriginal Citizenship Committee and organising the Day of Mourning protest held on Australia Day 1938. Aboriginal Australia was an essential element of Stephensen’s nationalist program. Further, Peter Kirkpatrick urges that Jindyworobak be seen outside the ‘limiting context of a parochial nationalism’. According to Kirkpatrick, the Jindyworobak appropriation of Aboriginal culture placed the group within transnational modernist movements such as primitivism and the European avant-garde, despite this being the very antithesis of Jindyworobak’s stated aims.

In Conditional Culture, Ingamells argued that one Jindyworobak aim was to achieve, through literature, ‘an understanding of Australia’s history and traditions, primaeval, colonial, and modern’. That the group had a manifesto and a ‘clear aesthetic agenda’ signals the modernity of the movement. Moreover, an interest in Australia’s ‘primaeval’ history accorded, to an extent, with Wells’ emphasis on the need for longer biological and archaeological histories of humanity. In addition, Ingamells’ emphasis on the modern suggests that the Jindyworobaks were not simply the escapists Hudson accused them of being. The Jindyworobak interest in appropriating Aboriginal culture and language indicated strong connections with primitivist art movements around the world; Kirkpatrick even draws connections between Jindyworobak and both Picasso

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95 Huxley, ‘Valedictory Address by Dr. Julian Huxley’, 8.
97 Bird, Nazi Dreamtime, 70-71.
99 Ibid., 112.
100 Ingamells, Conditional Culture, 5.
and Dadaist sound poems. In 1944 Nettie Palmer also recognised these international parallels, and wrote to Ingamells to tell him that she had discovered a literary movement in South America analogous with Jindyworobak, ‘only its Jindys try to go to a period of the Incas’.

Much Jindyworobak poetry also reflected a growing modernist interest in the stark landscapes of Australia’s interior. According to Mudie, Jindyworobak ‘poets found their original inspiration for the birth of a truly national poetry in the spirit centres of the lonely and unspoiled Centre’. That Ingamells, Mudie and Hudson all hailed from Adelaide – a city not far removed from the country’s arid regions – is significant. These three principal Jindyworobaks all included positive descriptions of Australia’s arid and semi-arid landscapes in their poetry. They were especially interested in representing South Australia’s Mallee, an ecological region of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, roughly defined by the distribution of mallee eucalypts. Katie Holmes and Kylie Mirmohamadi show that colonial accounts of Victorian Mallee landscapes emphasised alienation and desolation and provoked a desire to transform the region into more aesthetically pleasing – and economically productive – ‘golden fields’. This vision was dealt a harsh setback when delicate Mallee soils proved particularly vulnerable to the Federation Drought. By the 1930s and 1940s a new and importantly modernist and scientific vision of Australian aridity was beginning to emerge. Roslynn Haynes argues that the Jindyworobaks were among the first Australians to ‘attempt to introduce the desert as a national image’. They were likely influenced by emerging scientific descriptions of Australia’s varied arid ecosystems. For example, in his 1935 book The Red Centre: Man and Beast in the Heart of Australia, mammalogist H.H. Finlayson offered a detailed description of the plants, animals and people – black and white – that inhabited the interior of Australia.

107 Ibid., 209-10.
Finlayson advocated the establishment of a national park to preserve some of the inland’s ecology and attempted to dispel ‘the many misconceptions which find a place in the popular estimate of Central Australia, the idea of its flatness, of its treelessness and its monotony’. 109 Aside from the Jindyworobaks, much of the literary and artistic interest in Australia’s arid and semi-arid regions around the mid-twentieth century, epitomised by the modernist works of Russell Drysdale and Sidney Nolan, did continue to emphasise the loneliness, desolation and flatness of the inland.110

The Jindyworobaks were clearly not the narrow nationalists that they themselves often claimed to be. Ellen Smith calls them ‘provincial modernists’ and claims that ‘nationalism and modernism do not here represent two opposite traditions or associations, but are in fact mutually enabled’.111 In straddling and experimenting with a variety of political and literary positions, Hudson demonstrates the ideological fluidity of the period. He did, however, worry at length about the implications of Jindyworobak’s extreme nationalism especially as European tensions escalated. Modjeska points out that:

by 1933 nationalism had been called into question with the triumph of Mussolini and Hitler. The relationship between fascism and nationalism had become clear . . . Writers were compelled by the political events of the thirties to question the nature and function of literature and the implications of a national culture.112

Hudson shared these anxieties about Australian nationalism, though he had certainly not condemned it entirely; after all, it was wartime patriotism that had prompted him to establish Poetry. In many ways this was a balancing act; neither world-mindedness nor Jindyworobak nationalism were static or inflexible, yet tension remained as a result of Hudson’s double allegiance. In writing about the South Australian environment, Hudson found a point of ideological overlap that helped him to paper over, though never completely eliminate, this tension. Hudson’s overtly ‘placed’ poetry resonated with the Jindyworobak call for literary attention to ‘environmental values’ and gave him a curious advantage as an adherent of world-mindedness.

110 Haynes, Seeking the Centre, 148.
The secret
In the 1940 poem ‘The Secret’, Hudson celebrated that he was ‘only a poet living in a mallee township / where the people never read my poems’.\(^{113}\) Between 1936 and 1946 Hudson taught in a handful of small primary schools in rural South Australia which bordered on the Mallee (see Figure 7.4). This period of rural teaching roughly coincided with the most productive period of Hudson’s literary career; he published five collections of his own poetry, produced the majority of Poetry magazine and probably wrote most of Discovery. Much of his poetry dealt with the details of the environment and of living and teaching in rural South Australia. Like fellow Jindyworobak Mudie, Hudson wrote a great deal of Mallee poetry. Both poets used Mallee imagery to suggest strength and versatility in hostile conditions. Mudie’s poetry tended to emphasise national character and bordered on a ‘volkisch sensibility of blood and soil’, while Hudson was more inclined to see the resilient landscape as personal or spiritual inspiration.\(^{114}\) In ‘Mallee Courage’ Hudson anthropomorphised the ‘mallee plain’ and hoped to absorb the ‘silent courage’ of the place that ‘still bears brittle leaves’ in times of drought.\(^{115}\) Despite his personal rather than national emphasis, as a Mallee poet Hudson satisfied the Jindyworobak call for attention to ‘environmental values’.

In Conditional Culture Ingamells defined ‘environmental values’, rather vaguely, as ‘the distinctive qualities of an environment which cannot be satisfactorily expressed in the conventional terms that suit other environments’.\(^{116}\) Ingamells argued that imitation, ‘pseudo-Europeanism’ and the ‘incongruous use of metaphors, similes, and adjectives’ hampered the ability of Australian writers to meaningfully engage with the Australian landscape.\(^{117}\) Appropriate use of language and the development of a distinctively Australian idiom would, according to Ingamells, enable writers to better capture what both D.H. Lawrence and Stephensen had described as the ‘spirit of the place’.\(^{118}\) Hudson saw worth in Ingamells’ call for close attention to the Australian environment. He supported what he called the ‘regionalism and localism of Jindyworobak’ and

\(^{114}\) Bird, Nazi Dreamtime, 282.
\(^{115}\) Flexmore Hudson, ‘Mallee Courage’, In The Wind’s Teeth, 64.
\(^{116}\) Ingamells, Conditional Culture, 11.
\(^{117}\) Ibid., 5-6.
\(^{118}\) Ingamells acknowledged the influence of both Lawrence and Stephensen, see Ingamells, Conditional Culture, 5 and 13.
believed that there was value in depicting specific localities in great detail and the ‘exact and intimate observation of nature’.\textsuperscript{119} Hudson’s time spent in rural South Australia seemed to provide him with the opportunity for such intimate observation.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{south_australia_map.png}
\caption{Map of South Australia showing the Mallee region and the towns Hudson resided in between 1936 and 1947. Map created by Jasmine Sarin, JS Koori Designs.}
\end{figure}

In a letter in June 1941, when Hudson was living in the Flinders Ranges town of Hammond, Ingamells expressed his jealousy that in rural Australia Hudson had apparently:

\begin{quote}
preserved a pretty sane detachment amid the modern break-up . . . I envy you that you rub shoulders with the elemental stupidity and perversity of a Flinders township rather than with the suave hypocritical self-deceit of city people.\textsuperscript{120}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{119} Hudson, ‘A Prophet in His Own Country,’ 84-85.

\textsuperscript{120} Rex Ingamells to Flexmore Hudson, 27 June 1941, box 1, bag 1, Acc 02/280, Papers of Flexmore Hudson, circa 1939-1960, NLA, Canberra.
Ingamells articulated the common sentiment, heightened in this period of European war, that the city was a detrimental force that had the potential to cause degeneration amongst its inhabitants. Yet, surprisingly, Ingamells’ characterisation of rural Australia was ambiguous; the aesthetic heartland of Jindyworobak seemed to both repel and attract him. Perhaps Ingamells imagined that the supposedly primitive, elemental Australian environment, with its apparent power of regression, posed as much danger to white civilisation as decadent European modernity. Although Ingamells believed it was desirable to poetically capture the ‘spirit of the place’, he seemed to suggest this spirit was not benign. As in D.H. Lawrence’s Kangaroo the continent seemed to threaten its new white population with degeneration. In his Jindyworobak efforts to ‘annex’ and ‘join’ perhaps Ingamells was suggesting something beyond the annexation of Australian Aboriginality, and was attempting to balance two powerful and potentially dangerous forces – the city and the Bush – working on Australian culture. Hudson, to Ingamells’ envy, was immersed in the more authentic of the two extremes, boosting his credentials as a Jindyworobak. Hudson’s own assessment of his time spent in rural South Australia was remarkably different.

Rather than a confrontation with any primitive force or Australian place spirit, Hudson emphasised that his removal from the distractions of city life enabled him to read more widely, deeply and internationally than his cosmopolitan friends. Hudson reflected that his life:

in tiny, insignificant, little primary schools in the bush gave me something that is most precious to writers, it gave me leisure. It enabled me to do an enormous amount of reading and study, a variety of subjects, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, history, languages, linguistics, and I used to feel very inferior living up in tiny little places and thinking what wonderful opportunities my friends had down in the city, and to my astonishment, when I came down I found most of them hadn’t read the books I had read.121

In the Bush, Ingamells saw an opportunity for a confrontation with the Australian ‘spirit of the place’, while Hudson saw a chance to broaden his world-minded thinking. Physical removal from the cosmopolitan literary circles of Sydney, Melbourne and even Adelaide for the majority of the most prolific period of his career gave Hudson the time and space to develop intellectual connections with the rest of the world. This, however, was not just a matter of time and space; Hudson’s environmental experience

121 Hudson, interview.
and ‘placed’ poetry enabled him to develop – however unwittingly – an intellectual sympathy with emerging ecological ideas.

Across the world, and especially in settler societies, a new ecological perspective on the environment began to emerge in the interwar years. This was largely the product of the rise of institutionalised and government science and expertise. Thomas R. Dunlap identifies America as the primary site of the development of ecological thought; he argues that the ‘American scientific community was the largest, best organized, and most sympathetic to the kinds of investigation that would lead to an ecological comprehension of the land’. He highlights the contribution of forester and game-manager Aldo Leopold, whose ecological critique of American resource management emerged in the context of his work in national parks. The American Dust Bowl was another important catalyst in the development of ecological thinking; Susanne Stein and Klaus Gestwa argue that ‘the Dust Bowl was perhaps the first global media event concerning an ecological catastrophe, and it made clear that humans were responsible for this large-scale environmental degradation’.

During the post-World War Two years, world-mindedness and advances in ecology combined to create a ‘moment of change’ in environmental thinking. This was epitomised in 1948 in two American books; biologist and ornithologist William Vogt’s Road to Survival and conservationist Fairfield Osborn’s Our Plundered Planet. Environmental historian Donald Worster presents these two publications as leading examples of an emerging ‘planetary perspective’ on the environment. According to Worster, it was during this period that the word ‘environment’ began to imply ‘a set of interactive relationships between humans and the rest of nature’ on a global scale. Vogt argued that ‘few of our leaders have begun to understand that we live in one world in an ecological – an environmental – sense’. Similarly, Osborn emphasised that

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123 Ibid.
‘man, like all other living things, is a part of one great biological scheme’.

Demonstrating the influence of interwar soil erosion on early ecological thinking, Vogt initiated his book with an anecdote about the international implications of Australian soil erosion. Mounting environmental problems, especially obvious in settler societies, combined with the human disaster of World War Two – particularly the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – imbued emerging ecological debates with a sense of emergency. Libby Robin, Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde point out that ‘the idea of “the environment,” and the prediction of a whole global system falling into degradation, emerged together: co-determined, or bound in a kind of double helix’.

Both Vogt and Osborn warned about an approaching crisis of human civilisation in a world of limited resources and a rapidly increasing human population with ever-higher expectations with regard to standard of living. Osborn warned ‘another century like the last and civilization will be facing its final crisis’. Here, in the 1940s, is the origin of our contemporary popular understanding of the term environment, which often implies an environmental crisis with global ramifications brought on by poor human management of the earth.

It is no coincidence that world-mindedness and this new ecological perspective emerged simultaneously. Both concepts were a reaction against war and the other crises of the early and mid-twentieth century. World-mindedness emphasised the human cost of war, while the new ecological perspective emphasised the environmental cost, actual and potential, particularly in the wake of the detonation of atomic bombs. Both were future-oriented; world-minded thinkers sought to secure lasting world peace, new environmental thinkers attempted to avert or postpone an anticipated environmental cataclysm. Gary Clark has explored the influence the developing field of ecology had on mid-twentieth-century Australian literature, but I would like to emphasise that the cultural movement for world-mindedness also influenced ecology; in fact, a global ecological perspective was necessarily world-minded.

Worster describes Osborn as a ‘citizen of the world’ and Vogt as ‘an

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130 Robin et al., “The Environment”: How Did the Idea Emerge?”, 158.
131 Osborn, Our Plundered Planet, 44.
internationalist’, recognising that they represented a break with Progressive-era conservationists who generally worked within a national framework. In encouraging countries and states to ‘pool their resources’ in order to manage the global ecosystem, Vogt suggested that a culturally world-minded approach was essential to averting ecological disaster. Moreover, Vogt used terms such as ‘earth company’ and ‘world community’ in an ecological sense, but such phrases also resonated with Hudson’s call to educate children as ‘world citizens’ and Wells’ desire to achieve a ‘Cosmopolis’.

There is no evidence to suggest that Hudson had read either Vogt’s or Osborn’s book, yet his poetry contained an echo of their emerging world-minded ecology. An excerpt from his 1943 poem ‘With the First Soft Rain’ best illustrates this:

That strutting magpie joins us, that shadow, ants on the wall,
the saltbush, trees, the wire-weed, and the larvae of the
borer-beetle sapping the life of the gum.
So long as I can know the earth, I shall never feel alone;
for there, I know, not only is my spirit
but all men’s spirits;
and they are in mine, and I am in theirs . . .
Here on a saltbush plain I lie in the sun:
Nearly seven million other Australians are warmed by that sun
– They squint in its glare, love it, find it beautiful; so do Papuans, Thibetans, Javanese, Chinese, Germans, Russians, Eskimoes – they shout and wave harpoons as it rises over the ice; fruit-pickers of the Amazon and the Congo, emerging from the dark gloom, are glad of its light and warmth.

. . .
The sun, and the stars that will chill this plain to-night,
the moon that will climb the black hills,
are links with all humanity.

Here Hudson evoked the South Australian rural landscape with which he was so familiar, yet demonstrated that placed poetry did not have to be limiting or nationalistic. Hudson’s technique of listing environmental features, animals and various groups of people has a levelling effect; all seem to have an equal right to the earth. Although Hudson emphasised the spiritual connections between distant people,

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probably explained by his interest in Theravada Buddhism, there is also a sense of tangible environmental connection in the poem.\textsuperscript{136} The physical environment – the sun, earth and even the life on a South Australian saltbush plain – seem to offer both spiritual and ecological connections between people the world over. The poem echoed Wells who, in 1939, urged his readers to recognise that ‘what happens in Russia, Germany or South Carolina is as much the concern of the Englishman as what happens in Cardiff or Nairobi’.\textsuperscript{137} But the poem also anticipated Vogt’s sentiment in 1948 when he argued that ‘if we are to escape the crash we must abandon all thought of living unto ourselves. We form an earth-company, and the lot of the Indiana farmer can no longer be isolated from that of the Bantu’. Eager to emphasise the scientific nature of his claims, Vogt explicitly made clear that he meant this ‘in a direct, physical sense’, not a mystical sense.\textsuperscript{138} Hudson preferred to combine the mystical and the ecological.\textsuperscript{139}

In 1940, when he mused on ‘the faultless design of the simplest living creature / of the perfect symmetry of animals, of the serenity of trees, and of / the insatiable will of man’, Hudson captured poetically much of what disturbed Osborn and Vogt.\textsuperscript{140} Moreover, Hudson’s 1946 poem ‘To A Cuttlefish Found on Christie’s Beach’ pondered the evolutionary relationship between humanity and a beached cuttlefish:

long ago, in the hot Azoic shallows
we had the same nativity, you and I;
and though our looks have changed, the same desires
tentacle all my depths of tortured mind:
so you shall be saved from the gulls and the lethal air.

Perhaps . . .
a billion years from now some storm will strand
a peculiar descendant of mine, and one of yours
will carry him back to his home in the crimson sea.\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{136} Depasquale, \textit{Flexmore Hudson}, 14.

\textsuperscript{137} Wells, \textit{Travels of a Republican Radical}, 41.

\textsuperscript{138} Vogt, \textit{Road to Survival}, 285.

\textsuperscript{139} Elyne Mitchell similarly combined an ecological and spiritual perspective in the mid-1940s when she argued that ‘an awareness of unity with all the universe – soil and plant, river and mountain, climate, planetary pattern, ocean and moon’ was ‘a way to a source of imponderable energy’. Elyne Mitchell, \textit{Sail and Civilization} (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1946), 46.

\textsuperscript{140} Flexmore Hudson, ‘The Problem’, \textit{In The Wind’s Teeth}, 56.

The poem recognised humanity’s primeval origins, satisfying Wells’ call for an emphasis on a history of the ‘longer biological adventure’. It also offered a sense of humanity’s close, ecological relationship with and dependence on the natural world. Hudson perhaps even gestured toward crisis with the prediction that some imagined future storm might strand humanity’s descendants. In this embellished but ultimately very simple scene on an Adelaide beach, Hudson demonstrated that he could adhere to the Jindyworobak call for attention to environmental values without restricting his ability to engage with emerging international ideas. In fact, environmental localism was crucial to Hudson’s version of world-mindedness.

In his careful poetic evocation of various South Australian landscapes, Hudson found ‘the secret’ to navigating, though not necessarily resolving, the tension between his Jindyworobak nationalism and world-mindedness. He took advantage of the ideological intersection that saw the environment become crucial to both Australian nationalism and new world-minded thinking. In this, Hudson is representative of all the writers highlighted in this thesis; throughout the 1930s and 1940s the Australian literary community strove to produce writing that was both nationalist and cosmopolitan. Moreover, Hudson’s poetry, comics and teaching philosophy demonstrate the sense of globalism that began to characterise political – and even environmental – thought across the 1940s. We might even identify in his work an embryonic ecological sensibility such as underpinned the environmental movement of the late twentieth century.
Conclusion

What is the human value of this last Continent, which stepped straight into the age of industry, world-communications, world-wars, and accepted them all?¹

Nettie Palmer posed this question in the pages of *Meanjin Papers* in 1944, neatly evoking many of the anxieties that plagued the Australian literary community in the 1930s and 1940s. This thesis has focused on the environmental imaginations of a range of writers across these decades, and here Palmer makes it clear that the physical continent did indeed figure as a concern for writers. However, it is important to acknowledge that, even with regard to the Australian environment, writers’ interests were primarily anthropocentric. For the cohort studied here, the continent was a place of cultural transformation and they sought in the environment answers to their political, social and cultural problems. Palmer’s question, posed in an article titled ‘Australia—An International Unit’, also demonstrates that her interests were simultaneously national and international. Although sometimes dismissed as parochial and narrowly nationalistic, the concerns of the Australian literary community, especially after the mid-1930s, were profoundly influenced by international political, social and economic events. Finally, anxieties around ‘value’ were at the heart of Australian literary culture in this period. Writers attempted to quantify and justify the value of their own literary output and the broader cultural contribution Australia might make to an increasingly integrated international community.

This sense that the world was becoming more interconnected and cosmopolitan reached a peak in the immediate post-World War Two years and helped generate a brief period of optimism for the possibility of world peace. The onset of the Cold War quickly overshadowed this positivity. In 1948 Miles Franklin, in correspondence with

Nettie Palmer, anticipated an ‘atomic age’ that had the potential to radically alter the world. She believed that this new era threatened to have an ‘obliterating’ effect on established ‘languages, peoples and nationalities’. Mass migration within and out of Europe, Soviet control of Eastern Europe, the meteoric rise to global power of the United States, and the internationalisation of science, communication and politics were the likely forces to which Franklin referred. As has been shown in this thesis, the belief that international crises had the potential to destabilise and damage Australia had pervaded Australian literary culture since the Depression; Franklin’s fears about atomic weaponry and the Cold War demonstrate continuity with the unrelenting crises of the preceding decades. But she also anticipated an unprecedented break with the past. That sense of rupture, combined with myriad changes – literary, political and generational – makes the late 1940s an appropriate moment to end this study.

Generational and personal changes meant that from the late 1940s the literary output of most of the writers considered in this thesis either declined or demonstrated a shift in their interests. Drake-Brockman’s writing career was probably the least affected by the transition into the 1950s; she remained a prolific contributor to newspapers and periodicals, edited anthologies of short stories and published drama and historical novels. Nettie Palmer continued to write criticism and reviews primarily geared toward promoting Australian literature, although ill health made this increasingly difficult from the mid-1950s. Hatfield’s output ceased suddenly in 1951 also due to ill health. In his last major publication, a children’s book titled *Wild Dog Frontier* (1951), he continued to champion inland irrigation. Aside from occasional reviews and criticism, Davison’s output decreased dramatically from the early 1950s; he spent nearly twenty years preoccupied with writing *The White Thorn Tree* (1968), a fictional study of human sexuality. Nicholls died in 1937, having never really realised his literary ambitions. In 1947, the financial failure of *Poetry* interrupted Hudson’s literary output; although he published some short stories and poetry in other periodicals he did not publish another collection of poetry until 1959. The Barnard Eldershaw collaboration ended in 1947 with the publication of *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*. Eldershaw, ill from the late 1940s, focused on paid work and produced only a handful of reviews and articles before her death in 1956. Barnard remained productive, although she largely abandoned fiction and turned to history and biography. Mudie continued to produce poetry for a wide

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2 Miles Franklin to Nettie Palmer, 10 November 1948, binder 61, item 7560, MS 1175, Papers of Vance and Nettie Palmer 1889-1964, NLA, Canberra.
range of periodicals, but, like Hudson, did not publish another collection until 1959. Like Barnard, he developed an interest in history and spent much of the 1950s researching Murray-Darling paddle steamers, which culminated in the publication of *Riverboats* (1961). The receding and changing literary output of these writers indicates that a generational shift was underway.

Susan McKernan and John McLaren have both investigated the political nature of writing in Australia in the two decades after World War Two. Tellingly, they focus on a cohort of writers almost completely different to that presented here. Australian literary culture was dominated in the 1950s by figures such as Douglas Stewart, Judith Wright, David Campbell, Patrick White, James McAuley, A.D. Hope, Alan Marshall, John Morrison, Dorothy Hewett, Eric Lambert and Randolph Stow. Not all of these writers were especially young and some had been contributing to Australian literature for some time, but their prominence indicates that the writers of the 1930s and 1940s – most of whom had by now reached their 50s – had largely been superseded by a new generation. Moreover, although political engagement remained central to the production of Australian literature, the collaborative atmosphere enjoyed by writers over the previous two decades was lost amidst polarising Cold War politics.

From the mid-1930s until the late 1940s many Australian writers rallied together in order to further literary and political causes; anti-fascism and anti-censorship were important movements around which a broad range of writers coalesced. The atmosphere of crisis meant that writers as politically diverse as Miles Franklin, Brian Penton, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Henrietta Drake-Brockman and Norman Lindsay contributed to the proposed FAW publication ‘Writers in Defence of Freedom’. Literary alliances and the shared desire to establish a strong Australian literary culture often trumped political differences. For example, Flexmore Hudson, a socialist, remained associated with Jindyworobak despite that movement’s right-wing political connections. As mentioned in chapter seven, Hudson even sprang to the defence of P.R. Stephensen when he was interned from 1942 on suspicion of ties to

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the Japanese government. During World War Two, the Popular Front activities that had united many writers in the 1930s disintegrated and much of the wartime energy that had driven writers to collaborate for political change dissipated in the early years of the Cold War. Len Fox argues that the polarisation of political perspectives was evident with the FAW in the 1950s, as the unity of the previous two decades was replaced by political infighting. The popularity of socialist realism – a Soviet movement in art and literature – among Australian communist writers in the 1940s and 1950s, served especially to distance them from more politically moderate writers who worried about the prescriptiveness of the movement.

In the 1950s, Australia’s conservative Cold War political culture further divided writers. After the defeat of Robert Menzies’ recently established Liberal Party at the 1946 federal election, Katharine Susannah Prichard celebrated that ‘Menzies & Co. [were] on the scrap heap’ and told Franklin that had Menzies been successful ‘there’d have been some very uncomfortable times for all of us’. In late 1949, however, Menzies gained office, ushering in a long period of political conservatism. The Liberal’s 1949 campaign attacked the Chifley Labor government’s handling of recent coal strikes, bank nationalisation policies and ongoing petrol rationing, and, according to Frank Cain and Frank Farrell Menzies’ ‘underlying theme . . . was the immediate threat to Australian security posed by the communist menace at home and abroad’. The impact of those politics on public debate became clear when, between 1950 and 1951, Menzies attempted to ban the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), a move first overturned by the High Court and later defeated at a referendum. In 1954, Menzies also established the Royal Commission on Espionage to report on Soviet spying in Australia.

Although Australian anti-communism never reached the hysterical proportions of the

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5 See chapter 7, 239.


10 Ibid., 109-34.
McCarthy-era in the United States, the political conservatism of Menzies’ 1950s did, as Prichard predicted, prove ‘uncomfortable’ for many writers.

The Commonwealth Literary Fund (CLF) – which provided literary grants to many of the writers in this thesis – was targeted amid growing Cold War anti-communism. The CLF was established in 1908 and distributed a small number of literary pensions until, in 1939, the FAW successfully lobbied the Menzies-led UAP government to increase the funding available to writers. Eldershaw, Barnard, Davison and Franklin were prominent in this campaign.\(^{11}\) Although this increase was considered a victory for the literary community, a little over a decade later it was clear that increased government involvement in literary matters had come at a price. In parliamentary debates in 1947, former Country Party leader Earle Page questioned the ‘the extent to which the Commonwealth Literary Fund is being used to subsidize Communists and former Communists in the production of Australian literature’, foreshadowing the tenor of more prolonged attacks on the CLF in 1952.\(^{12}\)

In 1952, Labor member Stan Keon and Liberal member William Charles Wentworth incited debate around the supposed political motivations of the CLF. They suggested that the CLF Advisory Board – on which Flora Eldershaw and Vance Palmer served – gave preference to grant applicants who were communists and communist sympathisers. Wentworth claimed that having reviewed a full list of CLF grant recipients, ‘approximately one-third of those persons are either members of the Communist party or, most definitely, have connexions with Communist organizations’.\(^{13}\) Wentworth was a notoriously extreme anti-communist and not taken particularly seriously by the literary community. Franklin had, in the late 1940s, described Wentworth as a ‘museum specimen’ and claimed that ‘the most hrrumphing


[sic], moustached, barnacled Anglo-Indian of yesterday would be a bolshevist compared with’ him. Yet his largely unfounded attacks on the CLF, and Palmer, Eldershaw and Barnard in particular, were debated at length in parliament and given extensive press coverage. Menzies, along with a range of other politicians on both sides of politics, defended the CLF and the funding body survived the furore. But, in the aftermath of the debates, writers were politically polarised and less inclined to set aside political differences and work together.

Writers of the 1930s and 1940s were also sidelined by other changes in Australian literary culture in the postwar years. Australian literature finally entered university courses during the 1950s. This institutional recognition initiated the establishment of a long-desired official literary canon, but the socially-conscious fiction of the preceding two decades found little favour among academics preoccupied with formal literary value. In addition, confidence in the existence of an Australian ‘type’, allegedly forged on the colonial frontier, began to falter. The 1950s saw the publication of a trio of books that were the culmination of the previous decades’ literary preoccupation with Australia’s historical roots; Vance Palmer’s *The Legend of the Nineties* (1954), A.A. Phillips’ *The Australian Tradition: Studies in a Colonial Culture* (1958) and Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend* (1958). Graeme Davison argues that the left-wing nationalism espoused in these publications was primarily the product of the 1930s and 1940s, when the crises of the era prompted intellectuals to mine Australian history – in parallel with other nationalist movements across the globe – for a sense of tradition and continuity ‘in a world spinning out of control’. The ‘Australian Legend’ would have an enduring influence on Australian cultural history, but, in the 1950s when Palmer, Phillips and Ward published their books, the conditions which gave rise to this particular brand of nationalism were already in decline. Judith Wright indicated that the writers of the

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14 Miles Franklin to Katharine Susannah Prichard, 20 November 1947, in *As Good As A Yarn With You*, 179.
17 Graeme Davison, ‘Rethinking the Australian Legend’, *Australian Historical Studies* 43, no. 3 (2012): 448.
18 Ibid., 430; McKernan, *A Question of Commitment*, 12.
Cold War era sought a different emphasis to their predecessors. Rather than a preoccupation with remote landscapes and rural residents, they wanted to represent their increasingly urban, suburban and technologically advanced society; ‘the cry was for a new “city” poetry, to fit our new idea of ourselves’. This developing emphasis on the need to capture Australia’s urban life in literature, reveals that, while much was changing in the 1950s, there remained a sense that writers were yet to adequately and realistically represent Australian culture.

In 1950 A.A. Phillips famously diagnosed ‘a disease of the Australian mind’ which he termed the ‘Cultural Cringe’. Symptoms of the ‘Cringe’ were, according to Phillips, a propensity to compare Australian cultural products with those of Europe and to automatically assume that Australian creations would lack the quality and sophistication of imported literature, art and music. Although Phillips seemed to dismiss the idea of Australian inferiority, there remained embedded in his analysis an assumption that Australia had to endure a natural ‘cultural development’. He argued that ‘there is no short-cut to the gradual processes of national growth – which are already beginning to have their effect’. That Phillips was still anticipating an Australian cultural adulthood suggests that the writers in this thesis who often explicitly argued that it was their duty to usher in an era of cultural maturity in Australia had failed to do so. I do not wish to perpetuate the now much-discredited idea that cultural maturity is an achievable or desirable goal. Instead, I suggest that this unrealised ambition was a symptom of the colonial insecurities which continued to trouble Australians at mid-century. Taken together, the writers studied in this thesis demonstrate that these literary and cultural anxieties and aspirations were projected onto the Australian environment.

In his recent literary history of the Western Australian wheatbelt, Tony Hughes-d’Aeth argues that writers are valuable ‘witnesses’ to both historical and environmental events; they offer personal, subjective and imaginative insights that often cannot be gained from other sources. Writers were alert and articulate ‘witnesses’ to changes in the Australian environment across the 1930s and 1940s: their writing registered changing

21 Ibid., 302.
approaches to closer settlement, the rise of institutionalised science, the environmental implications of new technologies and an emerging ecological consciousness. Their imaginative engagement with these processes – available to us in the books, poems, stories and letters they left behind – reveal the ways that contemporary environmental issues provoked and deepened literary concerns about white Australian belonging on the continent. Moreover, the testimony of these writers is valuable because they were conscious participants in the ongoing project to both physically and imaginatively settle Australia.

In their 1939 book *My Australia*, Barnard Eldershaw captured the attitude of many writers:

Man against the soil, the soil against man, the adjustment of one rhythm of life to the other, the going on together, which is the only final victory. There is the material issue and the spiritual issue. The material issue begins with sustenance and ends with profit, the spiritual is the interpenetration of the soil and the imagination of the people who inhabit it.23

Barnard Eldershaw suggested that any struggle to ‘adjust’ to the Australian environment had to take into consideration both material and spiritual dimensions of settlement. This thesis demonstrates that writers were interested in the extension and improvement of physical settlement; Brady, Drake-Brockman and Hatfield all advocated for a greater rural population and Davison and Nicholls argued that the aesthetics of Australian settlement required greater attention and care. On the other hand, Palmer, Lawrence, Mudie and Hudson were primarily interested in the different ways Australians might imaginatively possess the continent; Mudie saw Aboriginal history as the key, whereas Hudson used the South Australian landscape to imagine spiritual connections beyond Australian borders. The ‘Australian Legend’, defined in those three books of the 1950s, was another product of these attempts to spiritually occupy the country. It is also important to note that these categories of spiritual and material occupation were by no means mutually exclusive. In Canberra, Barnard Eldershaw explored what they perceived to be a disconnect between the physical and imaginative settlement of the land; Hatfield believed that residency in rural and remote Australia would lead to a happier, healthier population more at home in these environments; and Mudie saw soil conservation as a critical step in negotiating the

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spiritual relationship to place. A combination of imaginative and physical occupation of the continent was considered necessary to achieve the elusive sense of cultural maturity which writers regarded as critical to Australian survival in a hostile world.

The ‘Australian Legend’ was one way that writers tried to prove that Australia enjoyed a cultural tradition and history on which it was possible to build a modern nation-state. Drake-Brockman’s equation of Australian soldier settlers with the colonial bushman of the nineteenth century, exemplified this kind of attempt to bolster Australia’s historic credentials. Drawing on Aboriginal culture, or at least what they understood of it, the Jindyworobaks endeavoured to exploit an even longer Australian past; Mudie went so far as to imply the possibility of cultural continuity between black and white Australia. Of the writers studied here, Mudie offered the most explicit and extended engagement with Australia’s Aboriginal history. It was a theme that was often submerged or implicit in Australian literature, although novels such as Katharine Susannah Prichard’s Coonardoo (1929), Xavier Herbert’s Capricornia (1938) and Eleanor Dark’s The Timeless Land (1941) demonstrate that it was a subject garnering increasing literary attention. The history of Aboriginal dispossession was sometimes projected onto the environment; it likely influenced Lawrence’s representation of the Australian landscape as antagonistic and strange. But, for the most part, writers struggled to recognise the significance of Aboriginal cultural history and continued to promote the idea that white Australia needed to ‘domesticate’, ‘civilise’ and even ‘humanise’ the Australian continent.

Just as the boundary between spiritual and material occupation of Australia was blurred, the environmental imaginations of writers were often simultaneously nostalgic and historical and futuristic and modern. Despite all their attempts to promote – and sometimes even invent – Australian history, writers in the 1930s and 1940s were not simply backward-looking. They understood the Australian environment in distinctly modern ways. Drake-Brockman and Hatfield believed that large-scale engineering projects could help transform the continent and extend settlement. Embedded in these desires was an admiration for the aesthetics of enormous technological feats such as dams and the supposedly clean and well-organised rural settlements they would facilitate. A modern aesthetic was also central to the new view ‘through the windscreen’ increasingly available to Australians in the interwar years. For Barnard Eldershaw the clean and modern appearance of Canberra was a more sinister attempt to conceal a supposed lack of human history on the continent. Writers examined the country’s past
and imagined its future in their search for solutions to contemporary international catastrophes. The Australian environment was considered crucial to this process; writers believed that unlocking the supposedly untapped and elusive spiritual and material potential of the continent was a critical step toward both economic prosperity and national adulthood.

What, then, of Nettie Palmer’s question: ‘What is the human value of this last Continent’? In the 1930s and 1940s, Australians were more inclined than we perhaps are today to seek unifying and absolute resolutions to cultural questions such as this. However, many of the issues that troubled Australians then – especially regarding the ongoing implications of colonialism for both the environment and for Aboriginal Australia – remain with us today. By bringing together the perspectives of history, literature and the environment, this thesis has demonstrated how questions of literary, cultural and environmental value were asked and answered in the past, often together. Driven by a desire to be harbingers of a mature and resilient national culture, Australian writers attempted, in their fiction, poetry and non-fiction, to reconcile the nation’s colonial history with contemporary environmental problems and international political crises. Their work represents a significant moment in the ongoing history of a white settler society’s attempts to come to terms with the Australian continent.
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