UNSETTLED COUNTRY

HISTORY AND MEMORY IN AUSTRALIA’S WHEATLANDS

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The Australian National University

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This thesis contains no material which has previously been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution and, to the best of my knowledge, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Joy McCANN
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A family’s journey from England to Australia, and the experience of settling here, gave rise to this thesis. My father found his place in the raw landscapes of South Australia, and spent his last years exploring its subtle wonders. My mother loved the wild flowers and the hills, and showed me how it was possible to belong in two places at once. The home they made in Cherry Gardens still nourishes me to this day, even though the house has long-gone.

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ABSTRACT

At the end of the twentieth-century, two-thirds of Australians lived in cities and towns near the coastline, yet rural mythologies continued to shape contemporary discourses about national character and heritage. Meanwhile, Australia's wheatlands remained a powerful touchstone of settler history and identity, inscribed with a colonial narrative about the heroic occupation of a difficult environment. Spanning the inland slopes and plains of southern and eastern Australia, the wheatlands offer a graphic illustration of the processes of social and environmental change in a settler society, where agriculture has played an influential role in shaping the nation's economic fortunes and historical narratives. This thesis examines the interplay of history and social memory in Australia's wheatlands, focusing on a farming landscape in the Lachlan Valley of central western New South Wales. It explores this part of the wheatlands, both as a distinctive physical landscape and as a cultural idea, revealing the complex interplay of history and social memory within the context of recurring drought, ecological degradation, and social decline. In the process, it examines the concept of heritage and the part it plays in mythologising the wheatlands.
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AUSTRALIA'S WHEATLANDS
Plate 1: Wooyeo woolshed, near Lake Cargelligo, 2001. Photo: J McCann

Plate 2: On the road to Ootha, 2002. Photo: J McCann
This thesis involves a journey into Australia's wheatlands during the twentieth century. In the following chapters, I explore the interplay of landscape, history and social memory within the context of ecological crisis and rural social decline. Along the way, I move between concepts of culture and nature, settler and Indigenous history, progress and decline, investigating some of the tensions and ambiguities that characterise this 'deeply culturalised' farming region. I want to understand why the wheatlands seem to resonate so powerfully in the national psyche. I want to see how farming these semi-arid landscapes has come to have such cultural force in the Australian imagination, even as economic, social, and environmental dilemmas have continually destabilised the agrarian dream, and repeatedly demonstrated the folly of expanding agriculture ever further inland. When we are clearer about the cultural underpinnings of the wheatlands, we can begin to understand the powerful role that history and memory play in shaping rural agricultural landscapes in settler societies such as Australia.

The original impetus for this research was a Strategic Partnerships in Industry Research and Training (SPIRT) scholarship received from the University of Canberra and the Australian Heritage Commission in 1999 to examine the impact of global economic changes and industry restructuring on the physical heritage of rural Australia. The research grant had been sought by the Australian Heritage Commission because of its concern with developing a broader understanding of the nature of rural heritage, and how heritage policies and practices might be made more effective within the context of rural decline. My research gravitated to the social and environmental

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1 A term used by the Canadian anthropologist, Michele D. Dominy in Calling the Station Home: Place and Identity in New Zealand's High Country (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham, U.S, 2001), 3.

2 I focus on the actively-farmed landscapes rather than national parks and nature reserves. Although the history of nature conservation in the context of the wheatlands is a theme worthy of study in itself, it is beyond the limits of this thesis. Agriculture is defined as the science or practice of farming the land. In this thesis it is specifically used to mean the growing of both crops and animals on a commercial basis in order to produce food and fibre for human consumption.
history of Australia’s wheat-growing regions, driven by a long-standing interest in rural cultural landscapes and the social significance of landscape, oral history, rural community history and story-telling, and ways that the past inhabits the present.3

My approach was inspired by a growing conviction that the heritage movement had more to offer than techniques for preserving the physical traces of history in the rural landscape. I wanted to participate in the growing field of post-colonial scholarship about the settled inland regions of Australia, and contribute to a cross-disciplinary dialogue being carried out at the end of the twentieth century about the fraught history of settler Australians in the pastoral and agricultural regions. In focusing on working farming landscapes, I wanted to understand how settler and Indigenous Australians attribute significance and meaning in the context of social change, ecological degradation and the continuity of Indigenous occupation and belonging. I was also keen to see whether the heritage concept of social significance might have a role to play in providing a more didactic and reflexive approach to environmental and heritage policymaking.

This did not seem to be an area of study that had particularly concerned the heritage industry, in which I had been gainfully employed for the previous ten years. Those involved with the study of cultural heritage, I mused, ought to be well-placed to engage in contemporary discourses about the cultural and historical dimensions of land degradation, and the interwoven legacies of settler and Indigenous history in rural Australia. Yet most heritage landscape studies in rural regions were concerned with

national parks and nature reserves, or in preventing urban encroachment on scenic rural landscapes on the fringes of towns.⁴

I began my thesis with two convictions. First, that by the late twentieth century, Australia’s wheatlands were mired in debates about ecological and social decline in which history and memory were deemed irrelevant. Second, that the Australian heritage movement, itself a product of history and culture, had failed to critically engage with these discourses, or even to acknowledge tensions around issues of national identity, Indigenous dispossession, and the heroic narratives of colonisation. Does the concept of heritage even matter in the agricultural and pastoral regions of the twenty-first century, beyond preserving the physical landscape as the cradle of nationalistic settler mythology and a spectacle for urban-based tourism?⁵ In this

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⁴ The terminologies relating to the term ‘rural’ requires some explanation. The definition of ‘rural’ varies between different sources, but is the most common term to distinguish non-urban areas from towns or cities. W.S. Ramson (ed), The Australian National Dictionary: A Dictionary of Australianisms on Historical Principles (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, 174), identifies several meanings of ‘rural’ including ‘A rural land-holding; land suitable for this purpose’, suggesting that it has acquired a specific association in the Australian context with the selection and occupation of land. The Macquarie Dictionary edited by A. Delbridge, Jrl Bernard, D. Blair, S. Butler, Peters and C. Yallop (The Macquarie Library Pty Ltd, Macquarie University, NSW, 2001, Federation Edition, Volume 2, 1656) specifically links it to agriculture. ‘Bush’ is a popular term used in the contemporary discourse of rural decline, and generally relates to ‘country’ or those areas of Australia regarded as non-urban (Ramson, 112-119). In this thesis, and unless otherwise explained, the use of ‘rural’ is consistent with that used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, referring to an area characterised as non-metropolitan or non-urban, with a population of less than 200 people. This generally includes small settlements or ‘villages’ and surrounding properties, although the term ‘village’ is a European term that has not gained wide currency in Australia. Indeed, a writer in The Bulletin newspaper remarked in 1893 that ‘There are no “villages” in Australia – there are townships, and bush towns, and country towns, but the term “villages” is merely an atavistic paroxysm.’ (The Bulletin, 20(4), 19 August 1893).

Similarly, the term ‘countryside’ is widely used in Britain and Europe, but has generally declined as a vernacular term in Australia.

⁵ Recent papers illustrate a preoccupation with identifying the economic benefits of heritage conservation amongst heritage agencies, for example Peter King, ‘Revitalising rural regions: New opportunities through heritage’. Unpublished background paper presented to the Regional Australia Summit convened by the Hon. John Anderson, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services, October 1999. Australian Heritage Commission, Heritage Tourism: Bringing people to the bush, a plan to implement outcomes of the Regional Australia Summit (Canberra: February 2000). Bruce Leaver, ‘Cultural heritage: An economic value not fully realised’, and David Throsby, ‘Conceptualising heritage as cultural capital’. Unpublished papers presented to ISEE 2000 Pre-Conference Workshop ‘Heritage economics: Challenges for heritage conservation and sustainable development in the twenty-first century’, Australian
research I range back and forth across issues of cultural heritage, national identity, settler history, and the discourses of environmental and social decline in Australia’s wheatlands. In particular, I focus on the role that social memory plays in the context of social change, ecologically-degraded farmland and rivers, and Indigenous-settler relationships in these farming landscapes.

In keeping with my journeying metaphor, this thesis moves from the outer, observable landscape of the wheatlands to the inner, imagined landscape of memory and belief. Spatial concepts and geographical features characteristic of Australia’s wheatlands provide its organising structure. Each of the six parts move sequentially, from the panoramic (inland and wheatland) where national mythologies and histories are foregrounded, to close range (land, river, and farm) where the discursive elements of social decline, agriculture and ecological change intersect and converge with local memory and story-telling in a particular landscape. The concluding part (place) deals with the preoccupation of the heritage movement with conserving special places, as well as the concept of ‘place memory’ that underpins the thesis. My approach is best explained by using the metaphor of a lens through which I explore the wheatlands at different magnifications. The outer landscape is important because it orientates and offers a sense of being grounded. The inner landscape, however, is far more revealing of the complexities of people’s relationships with the agricultural landscape. It taps into the multiple cultural meanings embedded in the wheatlands, and allows them to be brought into sharper focus. The maps that introduce each section have been beautifully and fittingly hand-drawn by Emily Brissenden, who is both a graphic designer and a child of the central Lachlan, and whose heart and childhood memories continue to be nourished by the farming country around Forbes. The maps serve to orientate the reader and, in the process, offer a further layer of memory and meaning portrayed with the keen eye of an artist. I have also woven into the thesis my own

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National University, Canberra, 4 July 2000. The former Australian Heritage Commission was a promoter of heritage tourism as a solution to rural decline.

6 I evaluate the ‘inner landscape’ idea in Chapter 12.

7 Emily Brissenden, pers. comm. 2005. Her hand-drawn maps are based on a selection of cartographic maps that I collected and used during my research. The image introducing PART SIX – PLACE is Emily’s own ‘mental map’, painted from memory and depicting significant elements in her ‘home country’ viewed from a favourite spot on the family farm.

PART ONE – INLAND
fieldwork notes and images in order to record fragments of the story of my own journey into the central Lachlan landscape.

Two central themes thread through the thesis. The first theme represents a history of social and environmental change in the Lachlan Valley of central western New South Wales, within the broader context of the Australian wheatlands. This analysis focuses on the historical and contemporary characteristics of, and responses to, the changing physical and social dimensions of the rural landscape as they are represented in private- and corporate-owned farming properties, river and associated floodplains, and small (less than 500 people) rural towns and settlements that lie in the central Lachlan Valley. The central valley, which lies between Forbes in the east and Lake Cargelligo in the west, has been progressively absorbed into the New South Wales wheatlands during the twentieth century, with rainfall-reliant cereal farming now penetrating as far inland as Hillston on the lower Lachlan River. The Lachlan Valley demonstrates both typical and atypical characteristics of the Australian wheatlands. It is considered a valuable case study because it is associated with the history of colonisation from the earliest European attempts to occupy the inland. It was part of the transformation of the colonised landscape from expansive pastoralism to broadacre wheat and sheep farming that occurred throughout the older settled regions of the Australian wheatlands. It also reflects the fluctuating fortunes of farming families, and the continuing process of expansion in both dryland and irrigated agriculture since the 1980s. Its inhabitants are intimately engaged in the range of discourses that relate to the wheatlands, and have been closely associated with agricultural and environmental debates, research, and policy-making in New South Wales.

The second thread deals with past and present discourses of abundance and decline in the Australian wheatlands, focusing on ecological change and social significance in the agricultural landscape. My analysis draws on a wide range of historical and contemporary sources, including Government reports and documents, thematic and local histories, newspapers and journals, academic papers and commissioned reports, personal papers, and oral histories. When George Seddon grappled with choosing an organisational framework for his influential environmental history of the Snowy River, he concluded that the history of European occupation of
the Australian landscape is traditionally organised around its economic functions: ports, railways, roads, towns and villages. The landscape that formed the focus of his research was more commonly thought of as a collection of places, rather than as a river. In an attempt to create a more holistic environmental history, Seddon chose to weave the complex strands of land use and natural history with public and private observations of the river. There was, he concluded, no single river in his narrative because there could be no single view of it. This ‘polyphonic’ search for the Snowy provides a valuable model for my thesis, where the cultural nuances of people’s relationships with the agricultural landscape are examined within a broader environmental, political, and social context. Different constructions of the landscape filter to the surface when individual and collective memory and the social significance of landscape are taken into account. ‘[O]nce public and private myths are juxtaposed it becomes abundantly clear that they are inextricably bound in a continual exchange’.  

I began my interviews by identifying a range of people who were actively involved in farming, heritage, nature conservation and landscape studies. I initially focused my research in the Mallee region of north-western Victoria, interviewing several farmers with the intention of comparing official and personal perceptions of landscape change in that part of the wheatlands. As my ideas evolved, I shifted my focus to the Lachlan River where I knew farmers were intimately engaged in many of the debates about rural social decline and ecological degradation of farmland. I identified key individuals concerned with farming in the Lachlan Valley whom I thought might contribute valuable information about these issues, and through them I was introduced to a wider range of people and groups. Whilst I chose to privilege the

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8 George Seddon, *Searching for the Snowy: An Environmental History* (Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1994). The concept of rural landscape is, by its nature, a relative and fluid term that defies precise description. For the purposes of this thesis, I have considered definitions of ‘rural’ in a range of sources, and chosen to exclude more intensively-populated urban centres to focus on those parts of the valley occupied by farming properties, land reserved for public use as part of the Lachlan River system, and small towns and settlements within the valley.


voices of white farmers and Indigenous people, the views of others interviewed also enter the dialogue. These range from local history enthusiasts, members of Landcare\textsuperscript{11}, government officers in land and river management agencies and agricultural research institutes, to librarians, ecologists, and farm advisers. I recorded fragments of lives and world views as we sat in kitchens or wandered over paddocks and river banks.\textsuperscript{12} Common themes emerged as I analysed each interview, providing a central framework on which to hang the multiple strands of historical narrative, theoretical reflection, and story-telling that make up this thesis.\textsuperscript{13}

Taking drought and rural social decline as a starting point, Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the central concepts that underpin the thesis: landscape, history and memory, and examine the ideological underpinnings of Australia’s wheatlands. Chapters 3 and 4 consider the ties that bind people and place in the central Lachlan Valley, and the intersections between settler and Indigenous Australians in the farming landscape. Chapters 5 to 8 focus on the interweavings of ecological decline and social memory in the context of land and river in the central Lachlan Valley.

\textsuperscript{11} The Australian Landcare program was developed as an Australian government-funded initiative arising from a joint submission by the National Farmers Federation and Australian Conservation Foundation in February 1989. Its aim was to develop a national model for achieving environmentally sustainable development on all farms within 10 years. It was based on the first Landcare groups in Victoria pioneered by the Potter Farm Project in the Western District. The Victorian program was launched by the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands and the Victorian Farmers Federation in November 1986 at Winjellok, near St Arnaud in central Victoria. Lockie and Vanclay, \textit{Critical Landcare}, 155. A review of the program was published by its original architects, Phillip Toyne of the ACF and Rick Farley of the National Farmers Federation in \textit{The Decade of Landcare: Looking Backward - Looking Forward. Discussion Paper no 30, July 2000} (The Australia Institute Canberra, 2000).

\textsuperscript{12} The interviews included people on their own or with partners, parents and children, and several small focus groups. Each interview lasted about 2-3 hours. I considered different kinds of interview methods, including H. Russell Bernard, \textit{Research methods in anthropology: qualitative and quantitative approaches} (Sage Publications, Inc., California, 1994, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed.), 97-98; Robert Bogdan and Steven J. Taylor, \textit{Introduction to qualitative research methods: A phenomenological approach to the social sciences} (John Wiley & Sons, Inc, New York, 1975) I; C. Cassell and G. Symon, \textit{Qualitative methods in organisational research} (Sage Publications, London, 1994).

\textsuperscript{13} Shulamit Reinharz, \textit{Feminist methods in social research} (Oxford University Press, New York, 1992). See Appendix 1 for an analysis of interviews and an overview of interviewee characteristics by age, gender, type of farm, and geographical location. I have used pseudonyms where appropriate.

\textbf{PART ONE – INLAND}
during the twentieth century, highlighting particular tensions and contradictions within local stories and public discourses.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I move back and forth along the nature-culture divide, showing how tensions emerged during the twentieth century between social memory and historical narrative in the wheatlands over problems of drought, soil erosion and the removal of vegetation for agriculture. Chapter 7 examines how the waters of the Lachlan were caught up in the national quest for agricultural development of the inland plains, a drama in which the harnessing of rivers for irrigation was to play such a central role in the twentieth century. It shows how heightening tensions over river regulation, and the graphic deterioration of the river’s physical condition, became embedded in social memory in the Lachlan Valley. Chapter 8 shifts the focus from water to river, and the interplay of memory and history along the channels and floodplains of the Lachlan. Chapters 9 and 10 focus in on the relationship between farming families and their farms, examining notions of stewardship and agrarianism, as well as the social significance of the farming landscape. Chapter 11 reflects on the Australian heritage movement and its role in mythologising the wheatlands as a keeping place of national settler identity. Chapter 12 concludes with a discussion of how the wheatlands has evolved in the Australian imagination in the twentieth century, and considers how a closer understanding of history and social memory might offer environmental and heritage policymakers insights into the cultural complexities of working agricultural landscapes caught up in the processes of social and ecological change. 14

14 Parts of Chapters 3 and 4 appear as ‘History and memory in Australia’s wheatlands’, in Graeme Davison and Marc Brodie (eds), Struggle Country: The Rural Ideal in Twentieth Century Australia (Monash University ePress, Melbourne, 2005), 03.1-03.17. Parts of Chapters 4 and 5 appear as ‘The unsettled country: Landscape, history and memory in Australia’s wheatlands’, in Lindsay Proudfoot and Michael Roche (eds), (Dis)Placing Empire: Renegotiating British Colonial Geographies (Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Aldersot, 2005), 41-59.
PART 1 — INLAND

I drive westward, along a strip of red gravel. It glows blood-red between the long shadows of a setting sun. I have difficulty seeing ahead as the rays flare intermittently across my dusty windscreen. This is difficult country to see in any case. The greyish plains stretch out interminably in front and on either side, then slip away silently behind me in a blurt of bull-dust. I seem to be preoccupied with boundaries and edges. There are few features here to mark the distances or focus the eye, at least to my way of seeing — all too accustomed to the agreeably wooded landscapes of the coastal tablelands, and the eroded beauty of well-groomed pasture.

What draws me inland? I am a child of the southern coastal fringe, wet green dairy-smelling country, as close to England as my parents could get in the achingly-dry landscapes of South Australia. Yet, here I am, seeking out meaning in this bleak, elusive landscape in the central western plains of New South Wales. Driving westward, I feel out of my element. For me, the sun is in
ENTIRELY THE WRONG DIRECTION. I CHECK MY FUEL-GAUGE, MY WATCH. THESE INSTRUMENTS PROVIDE A CURIOUS SENSE OF GROUNDEDNESS IN THIS FLOATING PANORAMA OF GRAIN PADDOCKS AND MALLEE TREES. SOMEHOW, THEY CONNECT ME WITH A MEASURABLE WORLD, INSTILLING MY JOURNEY WITH PURPOSE.

I FEEL RELIEF, AS MY HASTILY-SKETCHED MUD-MAP SHOWS THAT I'M ONLY A FEW KILOMETRES FROM MY DESTINATION. THE DUST FROM MY TYRES REACHES THE HOUSE BEFORE I DO. IT'S DROUGHT COUNTRY, AND EVERY MOVEMENT IS ACCOMPANIED BY A BILLOW OF FINE POWDER. AFTER A WHILE, I REALISE THAT I'M TAKING ON THE SAME COLOUR AS THE SURROUNDING EARTH. THE THOUGHT OCCURS TO ME THAT PERHAPS I AM SLOWLY STARTING TO ABSORB THIS LANDSCAPE, THAT IT IS PENETRATING THE SKIN AS IT WERE, LAYER BY LAYER. WITH THAT THOUGHT IN MIND, I HASTEN INTO THE BACK YARD OF THE HOUSE WHERE ALL THE TYRE TRACKS SEEM TO LEAD ME. SUDDENLY, I FEEL LIKE AN INTRUDER.


Chapter 1. Peripheral visions

I have learned little from staring at things. I have learned much more from details that have appeared at the edges of my vision.¹

A new century dawns. Another drought unfolds in eastern Australia. This drought is shaping up to be as bad as they get. Comparisons are made with the last big ‘dry’ in the early 1990s, and the ones before that in living memory. One hundred years ago, the inland regions of Australia were in the terminal stages of a drought that lasted, with little relief, for six years. Drought and death are part of life in the semi-arid landscapes of Australia’s wheatlands. The wheatlands is an elongated crescent-shaped region that brackets the vast inland of the continent from Western Australia to southern Queensland. It is predominantly associated with the semi-arid inland slopes and plains of the mainland, although new varieties of wheat have enabled crops to be grown in a wide range of soil and climatic conditions. Indeed, the extent of commercial wheat-growing has increased markedly during the twentieth century, expanding northward into the summer rainfall regions in eastern Australia, and inland into increasingly lower rainfall areas in both eastern and western Australia.² In this region of slopes and plains, low hills rise suddenly then fold away into an indefinite horizon.

As dry conditions prevail, weather maps are scrutinized, crops germinate and falter in the paddocks, and stock and kangaroos compete for dwindling grasses. Dust storms whip ancient soils into life. The whole landscape seems to be on the move as westerly winds drive the lighter particles eastward, towards the densely populated

¹ Gerald Murnane, ‘At the edges of plains’, Foreword to Ashley Crawford, Wimmena: The work of Philip Hunter (Thames and Hudson Australia Pty Ltd, Fishermen’s Bend, Victoria, 2002), 9.

² High protein hard wheat is grown in the moister conditions of northern New South Wales and Queensland, while the southern states specialize in lower protein soft wheat. See National Farmers Federation, Australian Agriculture, 6th edition, 1997-8 (Morescope Publishing Pty Ltd, Hawthorn East, 1997), 239. As the most valuable grain to produce for export, wheat constitutes 90 per cent of total grain production in Australia. The other 10 per cent includes barley, oats, sorghum, lupins, rice, field peas, triticale, maize, peanuts, sunflower seeds, soy beans, cotton seed and other oilseeds such as canola.
coastal fringes. Perhaps city dwellers will taste the drought and contemplate the physical realities of the inland. Perhaps the dust storms are merely symbolic of a more general exodus, as people vacate their farms and towns and drift coastward, or resettle in regional centres offering greater social and economic opportunity. They may reflect on the fact that soil and population drift are simply a fact of life in the settled landscapes of the inland.

**Cultivating the wheatlands**

Despite being a settler society dependent upon growing food for survival, commercial wheat-growing only gained ground during the twentieth century. Australia’s wheat-growing industry had its genesis in Sydney, Hobart and Launceston, where wheat was planted for local consumption. Whilst small-scale farms in the temperate coastal areas around settlements met immediate needs, the moist conditions and poor soil quality were ultimately unsuited for growing grain on a commercial scale. A nascent wheat industry emerged in South Australia on the Adelaide Plains from 1843. The colony was endowed with red-brown soils, a temperate climate, relatively open plains easily cleared for cultivation, and ready access to a coastal port for exporting grain to the eastern colonies. Labour-saving methods of mechanical sowing and harvesting such as the horse-driven grain stripper were developed in South Australia from the 1840s, and the discovery of gold in the 1850s in New South Wales and Victoria generated a huge demand for grain. South Australia produced more than half of the wheat in Australia, at least in good years, until the end of the nineteenth century.

Wheat-farming enticed pastoralists and small landholders with the promise of prosperity and, between the 1870s and 1890s, the wheatlands extended into the Murray Mallee plains and across Spencer Gulf to Eyre Peninsula, eastward into the Wimmera, southern Mallee, and central plains of Victoria, and then northward to the slopes and plains of southern New South Wales. The grasslands and open

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5 The so-called Mallee ‘belt’ spans southern Australia, from southern New South Wales, through South Australia and Victoria, and into the Esperance region of Western Australia. It is characterised by dune systems, formed in the Late Holocene period, and stabilized by the
woodlands, colonised by settlers’ stock in the early nineteenth century, were progressively reshaped by the plough and, by 1901, New South Wales led Australia in the area of land under cultivation. By the early 1920s, wheat yields had increased to almost double those of the nineteenth century, primarily because of the introduction of new varieties of wheat better suited than imported breeds to the rainfall conditions of south-eastern Australia. By then, agriculture and pastoralism began to merge in the wheatlands. Farmers introduced sheep to graze in rotation with cropping, in order to allow cultivated paddocks to rest. Sheep, and in some cases cattle, also enabled farmers to be flexible in meeting the vagaries of the marketplace. In the sandy soils of south-west Western Australia, wheat-farming was a minor activity until the early twentieth century. By the end of that century, however, Western Australia had assumed the lead as Australia’s major wheat producer and, in the eastern states, the wheatlands reached into northern New South Wales and south-eastern Queensland. Although Tasmania had been part of the early wheat-growing industry in the Australian colonies, and continued to produce high yields proportional to the small area under cultivation, the moister island climate ultimately consigned the island state to become a net importer of wheat from the mainland.

The term ‘wheat belt’ was widely used in the early twentieth century to describe the introduction of wheat crops to pastoral land previously used for grazing stock. By the end of the twentieth century, as commercial wheat-growing became generally associated with more diversified land uses including mixed cereals and stock-grazing, the region was often referred to as the ‘wheat-sheep zone’. The term ‘wheat belt’, or ‘wheat-sheep zone’, implied a static, measurable, and above all, uncontested settler landscape. It naturalised the changes that settlers made to the environment to render it productive, and defined it as a predominantly economic space of agricultural

6 In 1999-2000, Western Australia produced 36 per cent (9,004,000 tonnes) of Australia’s wheat, compared with New South Wales (8,602,000 tonnes), Victoria (2,642,000 tonnes), South Australia (2,586,000 tonnes), Queensland (1,904,000 tonnes), and Tasmania (20,000 tonnes).

production. I prefer the term ‘wheatlands’, and I use the term throughout this thesis. It suggests that, whilst the region is predominantly known as an economic zone dedicated to the production of agricultural and pastoral commodities for world markets, it is also an inhabited and culturally defined landscape. Using the term wheatlands offers a constant reminder that these regions of Australia are neither static nor uncontested. They are the product of a settler society’s cultural and physical engagement with the Australian environment, and they are profoundly affected by changing global economic circumstances. Indeed, they are inherently unstable, subject to shifting climatic, ecological, social and economic circumstances, and constantly being reconstructed and redefined in both national and local memory and imagination.8

The geography of the wheatlands has largely been determined by environmental factors including seasonal rains, soils conducive to growing cereal crops, and the fact that large-scale cultivation requires expansive areas of flat or gently undulating terrain. The wheatlands, however, have proven to be far more elusive and uncertain than contemporary maps suggest. During the course of the twentieth century, the wheatlands edged inland, northward and westward, expanding and shrinking and expanding again in response to dramatic variations in climatic conditions, fluctuating markets, changing evaluations of the settlement potential of the semi-arid inland plains, and creative approaches to agricultural development. Indeed, from a cultural perspective, this constantly shifting definition of the wheatlands as an agricultural region represents one of the most poignant and instructive narratives in the history of rural settlement and land use in Australia.9 At its roots were the ideals and traditions of European agrarianism, and it flourished in Australia as a result of British imperial expansion propelled by the industrial and scientific revolutions of the nineteenth century.10

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8 I am grateful to Bill Gammage for suggesting the term ‘wheatlands’ as a way of making this point.

9 The inland expansion of wheat-growing into ‘marginal’ areas is discussed in Chapter 2.

10 Wheat is a cereal grain of the genus Triticum. According to the Australian Wheat Board, scientists have traced its origins to 7,000 BC in the Middle East region, particularly in the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys now part of Iraq. The Chinese recorded the cultivation of wheat in 2,700 BC. By the end of the twentieth century, wheat occupied more of the earth’s surface than any other grain crop, being the staple cereal for a significant proportion of the world’s people. See the Australian Wheat Board’s website, http://www.awb.com.au.
'Landscapes of hopes'

These cropped and grazed landscapes are culturally and geographically ambiguous. Neither mountainous, nor coastal, nor desert, the Australian geographer Joe Powell has called them Australia’s ‘landscapes of hopes’. ‘Perhaps’, Powell wrote in a history of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science published during Australia’s Bicentennial year, ‘the most salutary lessons of the postwar era are encountered in the intermediate spaces between the urban and outback or interior zones of Australia, and in the established farming districts of New Zealand’. They represent ‘our monuments to an economic impertinence, sometimes confirming our fretful estrangement from Nature’. These intermediate spaces loom large in the psyche of urban Australia. Many older Australians were nurtured on school and media images depicting a rural prosperity and abundance that flowed out to the coastal cities from the vast, swaying paddocks of the inland. In the 1950s and 1960s the crescent of wheat and sheep farming, sparsely-settled and infernally dry, was imagined as a tide of progressive agricultural and pastoral enterprise in an acquiescent, if not benign, landscape. This was an unruly country, progressively brought to heel by twentieth century technology and scientific know-how. The agricultural and pastoral landscapes represented the public face of the nation, portraying its true character and spirit. As Horne suggests, understanding the dominant cultural beliefs and ideologies of a society, and identifying whose interests they serve, is a crucial task in deciphering its culture.


In contemporary Australia, where two thirds of the population now lives in cities and towns near the coastline, the agricultural landscapes of the inland are deeply inscribed with a colonial narrative about the heroic occupation of a difficult environment. This ‘national rural myth’ memorialises the story of settlers who arrived in the first years of the colony and later became selectors of rural land from which they struggled to make a living. The ‘pioneer’ story acquired its particular mythological potency during the years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the process of federating the colonies set the scene for a flourish of nationalistic story-telling about colonial conquest. A related and equally robust rural myth also emerged at this time, celebrating qualities of mateship and egalitarianism attributed to itinerant male workers engaged in the Australian pastoral industry.

The ‘bush’ legend was first articulated and popularised in the 1890s by the nascent Australian trade union movement and, more widely, through the pages of the Bulletin journal by writers such as A.B. (Banjo) Paterson and Henry Lawson. It was later revived by historians such as Vance Palmer in The Legend of the Nineties and Russel Ward in his persuasive thesis, The Australian Legend. They argued that the itinerant rural workers who toiled in the isolation of the inland embodied the very essence of an Australian national identity. Caught up with the optimism of post-war

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16 Richard Waterhouse and John Rickard have both countered Ward’s thesis by demonstrating that there was no one type of Australian character, but a range of representations of rural people depicted in art, literature, drama, popular media, and travel writing. Waterhouse argues that the ‘bush’ legend emerged in the late nineteenth century as a result of the social, economic, and technological changes that were transforming the lives of rural inhabitants. He identifies its source as a ‘culture of nostalgia’ for the demise of the skilled, hard-working, distinctive ‘bush’ characters who had inhabited the ‘frontier’ of European settlement, and the paternal relationships that had existed between them and the pastoralists who employed them. See Richard Waterhouse, The Vision Splendid: A Social and Cultural History of Rural Australia (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 2005); idem, ‘Australian legends: Representations of the Bush: 1813-1913’, Australian Historical Studies, 31(115), October 2000, 201-21. John Rickard, ‘National character and the “typical Australian”: An alternative to Russel Ward’, in Journal of Australian Studies, 4, June 1979, 12-21. Graeme Davison also critiqued Ward’s thesis by suggesting that the Bulletin representations of rural workers was misleading because its writers were urban-based intellectuals espousing certain radical views about rural workers. See Graeme Davison, ‘Sydney and the Bush:
reconstruction, they tapped into a renewed sense of national unity in the face of adversity. They were, as Walter puts it, ‘impelled by a wish to overcome the despair and conflict of the 1930s’, envisioning a new social order in the rhetoric of the ‘bush’ legend.\textsuperscript{17} Kapferer observes that the image of the ‘bush’ as the epitome of Australia, and of Australians as embodying mythological virtues associated with the colonised rural landscape, ‘remains as fundamental to our understandings and mystifications of ourselves, in relation to each other and to outsiders, as it has ever been’.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Historical perspectives}

Edwin J. Brady’s \textit{Australia Unlimited} set the tone for historians of the wheatlands development in the dying years of the First World War, when he forged the view that Australia’s national destiny lay absolutely in the development of its lands.\textsuperscript{19} Edgars Dunsdorf\textsuperscript{s} focused on Australia’s changing economic fortunes in his classic history of farming between European settlement in 1788 and the immediate post-World War II period to 1948.\textsuperscript{20} Dunsdorf divided his history into five distinct periods: the establishment of a wheat market (1793-1824), the period of insufficient expansion (1825-1855), the period of declining yield (1855-1896), the period of rapid expansion (1896-1930), and the period of international domination and governmental intervention (1930-1948). But he relied predominantly on statistical reports for his analysis, and his main concern was to examine the economic history of the industry

\textsuperscript{17} James Walter, ‘Nation and narrative: The problem of general history’, in Brian Hocking (ed), \textit{Australia Towards 2000} (The Macmillan Press Ltd, Hampshire, 1990), 78. The origins and influence of the pioneer legend has been widely discussed. The \textit{Journal of Historical Studies}, for example, dedicated its October 1978 issue to papers on the ‘Australian Legend’. Recent major projects have sought to portray a shared national identity based on the pioneer legend, including segments used in the Sydney Olympic Games opening ceremony in 2000, the Shearers’ Hall of Fame opened in Hay, New South Wales, in 2001, and the Year of the Outback in 2002.

\textsuperscript{18} Judith L. Kapferer, ‘Rural myths and urban ideologies’, \textit{The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology}, 26 (1), March 1990, 91.


\textsuperscript{20} Edgars Dunsdorf\textsuperscript{s}, \textit{The Australian Wheat-Growing Industry, 1788-1948} (Melbourne University
and comment on the social and economic standing of wheat-growers in the community.21

Sir Samuel Wadham published his history of Australian farming in 1967, shortly after the release of the final edition of his joint study on land utilisation in Australia that had commenced in 1932.22 Wadham’s history charted the advance and retreat of the wheatlands in each of the Australian states. He concluded that the golden age of wheat-growing had been reached in the period between 1950 and 1965, when wheat yields doubled and the majority of wheat farmers achieved a prosperity ‘for which their forefathers had struggled but never achieved’.23 Wadham’s reports were profoundly influenced by his experience as a member of the Royal Commission on the Wheat, Flour and Bread Industries conducted in 1934. During the course of the inquiry, he had visited nearly every wheat-growing district in Australia, and witnessed first-hand the plight of farmers during that period of global economic depression. In his final analysis, Wadham hailed the remarkable transition that had occurred, from exploitative to intensive utilisation of land, pointing to the increases in productivity that resulted from improvements in scientific knowledge about soils, plants and animals.

In the midst of this ‘golden age’, A.R. Callaghan and A.J. Millington published a somewhat more critical account of the Australian wheat industry, in which they linked wheat-growing directly to the environmental consequences of farming practices. While charting the familiar territory of wheat-growing as a prodigy of British agricultural techniques and New World scientific innovation the authors, both university-based agronomists, argued that the Australian wheatlands was the product of ‘up to a century of exploitative agriculture’.24 Australian farming practices, they

argued, had relied upon the availability of ‘virgin’ soils, ignoring the principles of ‘permanent agriculture’ characteristic of British farming, and destroying soil structures and fertility without redress. Quoting Fairfield Osborn’s *Our Plundered Planet*\(^{25}\), they pointed to ‘man’s improvidence’ in exploiting the ancient farmlands of North Africa and the Mediterranean. The solution, they argued, lay in ‘balanced farming methods’ that required more efficient production techniques and a greater interventionist role for specialist agricultural advisory services (later known as ‘extension’ services), government agricultural agencies, and institutions promoting scientific agriculture.\(^{26}\) The promotion of scientific solutions to soil degradation helped to prepare the ground for the two powerful discourses that were to dominate agriculture in Western countries in the late twentieth century: agri-science and environmentalism.

By the late twentieth century, historians of the wheatlands were grappling more overtly with the dual themes of agricultural abundance and ecological decline, although they rarely strayed from the premise that Australia’s agricultural destiny would prevail. Writing in 1988, the year of Australia’s Bicentennial celebrations, Bruce Davidson portrayed the post-war wheatlands as a landscape of renewed abundance, rescued from the threat of oblivion by organic herbicides that had been developed to minimise the need for tilling, as well as the rotation of legume pasture and wheat crops to increase soil nitrogen.\(^{27}\) Whitwell and Sydenham, writing in association with the Australian Wheat Board in 1991, portrayed the history of the wheatlands between 1860 and 1939 as ‘a story of misplaced optimism’, whilst paying tribute to the ingenuity and determination of those who overcame geographic and climatic difficulties to create a wheat industry.\(^{28}\) World War II had marked a turning point, they declared, where more active government regulation stabilised the industry and introduced a more orderly system of wheat marketing. None of these national histories, however, sought to challenge the idea that a permanent wheatlands ought to

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\(^{26}\) Callaghan and Millington, *The Wheat Industry in Australia*, 444-452.


exist in the semi-arid inland plains at all. Indeed, as Heathcote observed as early as 1965, the notion of permanent agriculture, as distinct from the more nomadic practices of pastoralism, was never in question precisely because it epitomised permanent settlement and underpinned settler Australian identity.29

When historian John McCarty discussed the concept of an ‘Inland Corridor’ in 1987, he described an inland region flanked by the arid grasslands and deserts on one side, and the narrow coastal plains and forested ranges of eastern and southern Australia on the other. The defining characteristic of the Corridor was its natural resources that supported Australia’s ‘three great industries’: agriculture, pastoralism, and mining. The Inland Corridor, McCarty suggested, spans some 500-600 km and stretches 3,500 km from northern Queensland to Victoria, then west to St Vincent’s Gulf in South Australia.30 This fertile crescent was the ‘heartland’ of colonialism since the earliest occupation by pastoralists in the 1820s. By the mid-twentieth century, ‘golden wheat stretched to the horizon’.31 In this engine-room of Australia’s rural economic development, this so-called ‘big man’s frontier’, graziers and wheat-farmers initially competed for land and labour. During the twentieth century, the old distinctions between the two industries gradually dissolved as farmers and graziers increasingly diversified their activities and began to combine stock-raising, dry cereal farming, and even irrigated cropping. The Inland Corridor, McCarty observed, was a ‘world of movement and change, of social and economic tensions’, central to an understanding the history of European settlement in rural Australia.32


32 McCarty, ‘The social map’, 111-2. Brian Fitzpatrick, *Moving Frontiers: An American Theme and its Application to Australian History* (Melbourne, 1947). In Australia during the nineteenth century, those who grew crops gradually came to be distinguished from those who were mainly grazing stock. The distinction was essentially a social one, more relevant in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Writing in 1873, for example, Anthony Trollope described the farmer or ‘small man’ as opposed to the pastoralist, ‘who is a great man and an aristocrat’ (Anthony Trollope, *Australia and New Zealand*, 1, 1873, 33, cited in W.S. Ramson, *The Australian National Dictionary: A Dictionary Of Australianisms On Historical Principles* (Open University Press, Melbourne, 1988), 244. The distinction between agriculture and pastoralism diminished from the early twentieth century, as wheat farmers began to alternate sheep-grazing
But it was the emptying of the rural landscape that came to represent the face of the wheatlands in the late twentieth century. Census records, particularly after World War II, painted a graphic portrait of a steady, inexorable erosion of farm and small town populations, employment opportunities, and social infrastructure in inland Australia. The Australian Bureau of Agricultural Research and Economics (ABARE) calculated that the number of farming enterprises declined by an average of 3.5 per cent per annum over the second half of the century, from 205,000 in 1955 to 125,000 in 1995. In the mid-1950s, there were 485,000 farm workers in Australia, representing 15 per cent of the national workforce. By the mid-1990s that figure had fallen to 387,000 farm workers, or 5.1 per cent. The total population of people on farms in this period fell by about 32,000. These population changes were profoundly felt in the sparsely settled wheatlands of the central Lachlan Valley. In 2001, according to the Census data, there were 506 people less than in the previous ten years, representing a population decline of 6.6 per cent decline.

But whilst government inquiries and media debates emphasised the severity of rural population decline in the late twentieth century, the exodus of people from the inland to the major coastal cities was rarely discussed within the historical context of European settlement patterns since colonisation. About 75 per cent of settler Australians lived outside of capital cities in 1861 during the height of the gold boom. By 1891 this figure was 66 per cent, as widespread economic depression and drought

with crop-growing in order to rest or fallow their paddocks. Meanwhile, pastoralism became associated with those areas of the inland beyond the wheatlands that were unsuited to wheat-growing (John Hirst, ‘Agriculture’, in Davison et al, The Oxford Companion to Australian History, 19-20). Interestingly, the Australian National Dictionary equates the term ‘settler’ with ‘a small farmer, an immigrant’ (see Ramson, The Australian National Dictionary, 573).

33 Commonwealth of Australia, Characteristics of Australian Farms, 31 March 1991 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 1992) Catalogue No 7102.0; idem, Australian Rural Policy Papers, 5-6. The statistical definition of a farming enterprise was changed in 1986-87, when the Australian government increased the threshold annual value for farms from $5,000 to $20,000, effectively eliminating an additional 40,000 small farms where the farmers relied upon off-farm income.

34 Commonwealth of Australia, 2001 Census Basic Community Profile and Snapshot (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 2002), 140154600 Lachlan (A) Statistical Local Area, 17 June 2002. Interestingly, in this same ten year period, the population of Indigenous people in the Lachlan Statistical Local Area increased by 45%, from 278 in 1991 to 900 in 2001, although this may simply indicate that more people were willing to identify themselves as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.
set in across rural Australia. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the population was more or less evenly divided between city and country, with 43 per cent of the settler population living in rural areas or small towns outside metropolitan areas. By 1954, the rural population was virtually half that at the beginning of the century, with just 21 per cent living in rural areas.\(^{35}\) The rise of car ownership from the 1950s exacerbated rural population decline by increasing flexibility of movement. During the late twentieth century, people were willing to travel further afield to access a greater and more competitive range of services, and even basic services once located in local villages were increasingly likely to be concentrated in more distant regional centres. From the 1970s to the end of the twentieth century, the rural population remained relatively stable at around 14 per cent.\(^{36}\) By 1991, well into the most recent period of ‘rural decline’ debates, the number of people living in capital cities outnumbered those in rural and regional Australia by 2 to 1, making it one of the most urbanised nations in the world or, conversely, one of the least rurally-based.\(^{37}\)

Whilst the statistics show that the centripetal flow of people from rural to urban areas was a relatively constant phenomenon since the mid-nineteenth century gold rushes in Australia, the post-war statistics blandly catalogued the enormity of rural demographic change experienced within one generation. In 1999, the Federal Government conducted an inquiry into the impact of its National Competition Policy. The inquiry revealed the extent to which smaller towns were ‘withering’ across the inland.\(^{38}\) The ‘dying town’ syndrome was most dramatic and visible in the wheatlands and dryland grazing regions exposed to international agricultural commodity markets.


\(^{37}\) *ABS Social Indicators, No 5, 1992*, 16. In 1966, 83 per cent of the population lived in urban areas, increasing to 86 per cent in 1976 and remaining steady since then.

The regions most seriously affected were concentrated in the Mallee and Wimmera districts of western Victoria, the wheat-growing districts in the central and western regions of New South Wales, and in the south-west of Western Australia. Meanwhile, larger regional centres, so-called ‘sponge’ cities, were soaking up people relocating from the scattered farming settlements, strangling the life of small towns and villages.39

The problems of ‘population drift’ and the apparent disintegration of rural communities were matters of popular debate throughout the twentieth century, and public anxiety invariably increased during or immediately after times of drought or economic depression.40 Some observers argue that commercial agriculture is an intrinsically unstable activity anyway, given the dependence on environmental variations, global competition and market fluctuation in demand and supply. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Western farmers enjoyed a brief period in which agricultural development was seen as crucial to international post-war reconstruction. Governments, as Goodman and Redclift note, ‘willingly accepted the role of handmaiden to the new Prometheus’, setting in train a model of world agriculture dominated by national interests.41

Internationally, the expansionist policies inherent in agricultural markets during the twentieth century created enormous tensions between national interests and global markets. These tensions were heightened by advances in farm technology that greatly increased competition between nations, culminating in an international ‘farm crisis’ in the 1980s. Rural decline was therefore an experience shared by all Western countries caught up in international agricultural trade, with different nations seeking ways to shield their own markets from the effects of such instability. The European Community (EC), for example, actively pursued protectionist policies that would sustain rural populations in order to meet particular political and strategic goals in its

39 McKenzie, Regional Population Decline in Australia, 9-17.
40 Davison, ‘Fatal attraction?’, 43. Davison makes the point that this ‘drift’ represented the paradoxical connection between innovations in transport and communication, and the breakdown of rural communities.
region. The approach involved subsidising farmers to grow food and remain on the land. In the United States, farmers also grew accustomed to receiving generous subsidies to enable them to remain competitive in world markets, even though the US Census Bureau reported in 1993 that farming populations were now so low that they would no longer be included in census surveys.42

The Australian situation was also shaped by the circumstances of European colonisation and agricultural expansion, giving the rural decline debate in Australia its distinctive character and contours. In 1950-51, for example, rural exports (primarily from agricultural and pastoral commodities) made up 85.5 per cent of Australia’s total export market. Indeed, the average annual yield of wheat produced Australia-wide did not increase substantially between the 1920s and 1960s.43 By 1991-92, pastoral and agricultural commodities had fallen to 23.1 per cent of the export market, signalling a dramatic decline in the economic and political status of these industries.44 In response, the Australian government set about restructuring the domestic agricultural sector to make it more attractive in the international marketplace. During the 1980s, Australia’s economic sector was deregulated and the nation’s agricultural industries became increasingly vulnerable to global markets. In the face of lower international prices for farm goods and the escalating costs of producing them, farmers were under increasing pressure to become more efficient by reducing costs and adopting technological innovations, more productive by increasing farm size, or more viable by generating other sources of income, in order to remain on the farm.45 Improvements to the scale

42 New York Times report cited in Wendell Berry, ‘Conserving communities’, in William Vitek and Wes Jackson (eds), Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community And Place (Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 1996), 76. The article noted that many farm managers and workers no longer lived on farms they farmed. The issue of rural farm subsidies is mentioned in order to illustrate the situation in other countries, but is beyond the scope of this thesis and is not discussed in detail here.

43 In 1920-21 the yield was 16.1 bushels per acre, and in 1962-63 it was 18.3 bushels per acre Commonwealth of Australia, The Australian Wheat-growing Industry, 1959-60-1961-62 (Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Canberra, 1964), Appendix II.


45 Lawrence, Futures for Rural Australia, 3. Lawrence cites the National Farmers Federation calculation that, by 1993, Australia’s rural producers were losing $2 billion per year in export earnings as a result of governments in the European Community and the United States paying subsidies to their farmers that maintained artificially high prices for agricultural products.
of production depended in part upon using more efficient machinery to prepare, plough and harvest cropping land.

The increasing scale and sophistication of agricultural methods transformed farming within a single generation. Rural adjustment schemes, first introduced in Australia in 1935 to support farmers during the turbulent period of global economic depression, became a permanent feature of agricultural regions during the remainder of the twentieth century. They were the genesis of the Commonwealth’s Rural Reconstruction Scheme established in 1971, and its successor the Rural Adjustment School. But, by 1988, the Rural Adjustment School was engineering a policy change that would decisively move the Australian government away from welfare assistance to concentrate on supporting only those farmers most likely to succeed in the long-term. Struggling farming families, lured by the promise of re-establishment grants, were under increasing pressure to leave the land in order to free it up for their more productive neighbours.

This shift in agricultural policy was all the more galling for farmers because it went against the grain of a national ethos that celebrated their role as pioneers of the Australian economy. Until that time at least, agriculture was forcefully and successfully extolled by successive governments as the key to the nation’s future. Everyone’s prosperity, it seemed, depended on the prosperity of the farmer. Personal testimonials tendered to the Productivity Commission’s 1999 inquiry revealed the extent to which the shift in government policy during the 1980s still reverberated in the wheatlands at the end of the century. People living in rural areas experiencing population decline harboured great anxiety about the fragile state of their

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46 The Rural Adjustment School was established in 1977 as a key Commonwealth policy instrument to replace the Rural Reconstruction Scheme. Unlike the United States and nations in the European Community, Australian governments have preferred to provide direct assistance to farmers through ‘adjustment’ schemes rather than supporting local agricultural markets through subsidies and tariffs. An Industry Assistance Commission review conducted in 1984 defined ‘rural adjustment’ as serving to ‘encompass the numerous ways in which farmers respond to change in the economic, technical and institutional environment’ including changing agricultural commodity prices, investment opportunities, farm equipment and machinery, production techniques, climate and legislative restraints. Cited in Commonwealth of Australia, *Australian Rural Policy Papers*, 8.

communities. Many attributed the blame for the unravelling of their communities’ social fabric to government policies designed to restructure the agricultural and mining industries, and rationalise services in country areas. ‘A significant proportion of country people feel that they have been abandoned by governments’, the inquiry found. Other observers of rural affairs pointed to a growing sense of ‘cultural exclusion’. The National Farmers Federation portrayed the decline in farms and farm labourers as a rural crisis, although one critic suggested that the Federation was seeking to exaggerate the economic disparity between farmers and urban workers in order to revive the influence of rural producers in national politics, and further fuel tensions between city and country inhabitants.

‘The Big Smoke and the Bush’

The idea that country and city are divided by different interests and values derived from Europe, permeated Australian rural historiography throughout the twentieth century, and continues to inform public discourses about the nature and history of European settlement in rural Australia. In Europe, the study of twentieth century rural communities was defined by a structuralist model of society that evolved in response to the social upheavals of the industrial revolution. The model depicted

48 Productivity Commission, 11. The inquiry concluded that the Commonwealth’s National Competition Policy reforms, introduced to increase the competitiveness of Australian industries, had become linked in the minds of country people with the withdrawal of the businesses and services that had sustained their communities.


51 See for example Frank Vanclay and Luciano Mesiti (eds), Sustainability and Social Research, (Proceedings of the Conference of the Australian Association for Social Research, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, 1997). Evan Walker, ‘Does the country really matter? – A Victorian perspective’, Rural Crisis Or National Disaster: The Politics Of Australian Farming (Australian Institute of Political Science, Melbourne, 30 October 1986). John Anderson (as Minister for Transport and Regional Services), ‘One nation or two? Securing a future for rural and regional Australia’, address to the National Press Club, Canberra, 17 February 1999. Unpublished paper held by author. The media has also normalised the idea of a rift with articles such as ‘Bush-city divide growing: study’, Ross Peake, Political Correspondent, in The Canberra Times, Monday May 29, 2000, 3. The study, conducted by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling at the University of Canberra, focused on the increasing disparity between the incomes of metropolitan households and those of small rural towns in the five year period between 1991-1996. According to the newspaper correspondent, ‘...in the past year people in rural areas have
‘rural’ and ‘urban’ life at opposite ends of the spectrum of human relationships. Tonnies provided a convenient theoretical distinction for this polarisation, in which he attributed rural living with ‘organic’ qualities of emotional cohesion, continuity, and fulfilment for which he applied the German term Gemeinschaft (or community), and ‘mechanical’ life in the public sphere associated with impersonal, transient, and rational relationships characteristic of urban society, which he referred to as Gesellschaft (or society).

Raymond Williams examined this symbolic distinction between country and city life in the British context. He suggested that Western literature and art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries both reflected and reinforced prevailing anxieties about the moral evils of urban life compared with the innocence and simple virtue of rural life. According to the historian Geoffrey Blainey, the ideological and economic differences between urban and rural Australians were greater at the end of the twentieth century than at any other time since European settlement. Blainey’s perspective endorsed a view widely promoted in Australian newspapers and discussed in scholarly journals during the 1990s, that a gulf had opened up between the values and economic prosperity of rural and urban Australians, and was threatening to tear the nation apart.

52 Ferdinand Tonnies, Community and Association: Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft, translated and supplemented by C.P. Loomis (Routledge and K. Paul, London, 1974 [1955]). His key argument, originally formulated in the 1880s and published in German as Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft (Leipzig, 1887), is summarised in Ferdinand Tonnies, Community and Civil Society, Jose Harris (ed), Jose Harris and Margaret Hollis (transl), (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001), 17-21.


55 Indeed, some observers contend that Australia is splitting ideologically and economically into ‘two nations’. See Theo van Dugteren (ed), Rural Australia: The Other Nation (Australian Institute of Political Science (Hodder and Stoughton (Australia) Pty Limited, Lane Cove, 1978). John Anderson, ‘One nation or two? Securing a future for rural and regional Australia’. Address to the National Press Club, Canberra, 17 February 1999. Anderson, then the leader of the Australian National Party and Deputy Prime Minister, noted that when he was asked if he was afraid of the rise of the political party called One Nation, he replied that he was more afraid of Australia becoming two nations.
This view has attracted its critics. Kapferer, for example, argues that the rural-urban dichotomy has furnished city-based Australians with an idealised vision of rural life, providing them with a convenient and digestible touchstone of settler history and national identity.\(^{56}\) In critiquing Blainey, Davison raises some key issues about the history of rural decline in the context of technological change. This relationship, he argues, is ‘one of the great themes of Australian history’, steeped as it is in the mythology of the bush as the ‘true source of national ideals’.\(^ {57}\) Yet few historians have become engaged in debating its historical dimensions, or contesting its contemporary manifestation in discourses about rural decline. The old arguments about the alienating effects of technological change and modern life have gained new ground in rural Australia, finding their way into contemporary debates amongst farmers and other rural inhabitants about the moral dangers of allowing their local towns to succumb to the dissipating forces of rural decline.\(^ {58}\)

During the late twentieth century, rural decline became a powerful metaphor for the precarious nature of settler habitation outside the metropolis. The discourse permeated rural life throughout the century but, at its end, it was inextricably linked to the financial status of farm businesses and the productivity of the agricultural sector. It gained momentum from the ‘hard’ evidence contained in statistical research conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Bureau of Agricultural Research and Economics, while media reports served to heighten a prevailing sense of crisis. Rural decline was largely defined within the context of an industrialised model of agriculture, where the fate of rural communities was fundamentally tied to the economic performance of rural producers. As Stewart Lockie observes, ‘[v]irtually unquestioned is the assumption that agriculture is first and foremost an economic activity’.\(^ {59}\)

\(^{56}\) Kapferer, ‘Rural myths and urban ideologies’, 104-105.

\(^{57}\) Davison, ‘Fatal attraction?’, 41.

\(^{58}\) For example, the First National Conference on the Future of Australia’s Country Towns, held on 28-30 June 2000 in Bendigo, Victoria attracted participants from rural communities across Australia. Unpublished papers held by author.

\(^{59}\) Stewart Lockie, ‘Crisis and conflict: Shifting discourses of rural and regional Australia’, in Bill Pritchard and Phil McManus (eds), Land Of Discontent: The Dynamics Of Change In Rural And Regional Australia (University of New South Wales Press Ltd, Sydney, 2000), 23-25. Also see Frank Vanclay, ‘Actors and structures in agriculture: Reflections of an Australian in
Landscapes of rural decline

‘Landscape’ is a messy and culturally-loaded term, but one that is particularly useful in discussing the relationships that people have with their physical environments. Put simply, it represents a space on the earth’s surface. According to George Seddon, a landscape only becomes distinguishable from an environment ‘when it is so regarded by people, and especially when they begin to shape it in accord with their taste and needs’. The term landscape has a long ancestry during which it changed and developed into a concept with multiple and ambiguous meanings and uses. The term entered the English language sometime after the fifth century A.D., arriving with Germanic-speaking peoples from Europe. In Old English, people referred to landskipe or landscaef, amongst other terms. In German the word used was landschaft, and in Dutch, landschap. According to John Brinckerhoff Jackson, the Latin-based languages drew on the term pagus meaning a defined rural district, although it acquired different shades of meaning in each language. In England, for example, there were two kinds of landscapes, woodland and ‘champion’, meaning a countryside of fields.

By the late sixteenth century, Dutch artists were using the term landschap to mean to the visual or scenic characteristics of the earth’s surface. The Dutch were familiar with the German word landschaft, meaning a patch of cultivated ground or field distinguished from surrounding forest, ocean or swamp. In England, landschap was interpreted to mean simply painted landscapes. By the seventeenth century this visual emphasis prevailed and was widely used to describe large-scale rural vistas, particularly elevated views over forests and settlements, and gardens reflecting the aesthetic ideals inspired by the Renaissance. ‘Landscape’, in the English context, implied an orderly agricultural landscape denoting stability and traditional land use,

Wageningen’. in Vanclay, “With A Rural Focus”, 120.

60 George Seddon, Landprints: Reflections On Place And Landscape (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997), 111.

and it acquired particularly cogency during the industrial transformation of Great Britain beginning in the eighteenth century.  

The concept of landscape is different from the concept of geography. For much of the twentieth century, geographers specialised in the study of geological and geomorphological processes that formed distinctive types of landscapes. Since the 1970s, the concept of landscape has been increasingly used as an organising theme in the study of particular kinds of social and cultural environments. Edward Casey suggests that geography involves the objective representation of a physical place or region, but that we could only know the landscape by virtue of physically being there to experience it. The study of the cultural dimensions of the twentieth century landscape has included a broad spectrum of interests and applications. They range from conventional geographical and ecological studies emphasising the physical changes wrought by humans to the environment, to identifying the social processes at work in shaping the landscape, and the material culture that reflects those processes.

The study of landscape as a cultural construct attracts scholars from across the physical and social sciences, having entered the humanities through the disciplines of art history and literature studies. ‘The ways in which we read them, talk about them, perceive them, work them over, use them, evaluate them functionally, aesthetically, morally: these are all informed by our culture’. It has proved to be a fruitful area of intellectual inquiry during the late twentieth century, and generated a vast outpouring of books, dissertations, studies and journals on the subject of the cultural landscape. George Seddon suggests that ‘landscape’ is more of a perceptual term than any measure of reality. ‘A history of the Australian landscape is therefore a history of the


63 Edward Casey cited in note 24, Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (eds), Senses of Place (School of American Research Advanced Seminar Series, Santa Fe, 1996), 49.

64 Seddon, Landprints, xv, 1.

65 Influential texts in the historiography of landscape studies include D.W. Meinig, The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays (Oxford University Press, New York, 1979), John Brinckerhoff Jackson, Discovering the Vernacular Landscape (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1984), and Michael Williams, The Making of the South Australian Landscape: A Study in the Historical Geography of Australia (Academic Press, London and New York,
ways in which it has been perceived. The implication here is that the study of landscape is more subjective than objective. Indeed, the tension between these competing paradigms – the environment as cultural construct or as scientific fact – lies at the heart of twentieth century debates about ‘nature’ and ‘wilderness’. In the rural context, this dichotomy has been further complicated by changing and contested meanings of agricultural land – variously interpreted in discourses of Native Title, property rights, and ecological management.

*Landscape as environmental problem*

One of the most significant challenges to the prevailing economic assessment of the rural landscape is posed by mounting scientific evidence of ecological change in agricultural and pastoral regions. Criticisms of the effects of European land use practices on the quality of soils and vegetation were in circulation from the nineteenth century, and debates about whether they improved or degraded the environment continued, largely between the pages of journals and newspapers, throughout the twentieth century. The debates were at their most vitriolic when economic downturn in agricultural trade coincided with drought conditions. However, from the 1970s, environmental scientists began to focus on ecological degradation to construct compelling arguments about land use and landscape change.

The rise of ecological consciousness in Australia coincided with a period in which broadacre agriculture was becoming increasingly expansive. Public discontent with the physical manifestations of degraded agricultural and pastoral landscapes escalated amid increasingly politicised environmental debates. In the 40 years between 1955 and 1995, the total area of land being cropped grew by an average of

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67 This issue is discussed in more depth in Chapter 5.


6.4 per cent per annum, with the greatest increases occurring from the 1960s. By 1996, agriculture was the dominant form of land use, occupying 60.9 per cent of Australia’s land surface. Farmers were under financial pressure to increase their productivity, and this demanded the acquisition of more land for crops, and the adoption of new agricultural products and technologies to maximise yields. Australian Bureau of Statistics reports suggest the extent of the industry’s success. In 1994-95 Australia produced 8,961,000 tonnes of wheat. By 1999-2000 this had increased to 24,757,000 tonnes. New South Wales recorded the biggest increase in production, with a rise of 31 per cent between 1998-99 and 1999-2000. Australia was the fourth largest wheat exporter in the world, and the crop one of the five main primary export industries for Australia. Nevertheless, farmers consistently produced lower wheat yields per hectare than those of other wheat-exporting countries.

Critics of agricultural practices focused on the scale and techniques of modern farming as a significant factor in the degradation of arable land and inland rivers. For all its agricultural bounty generated during the twentieth century as the ‘food bowl’ of the nation, the Murray-Darling Basin had come to a decisive point in its physical and social history by the end of the century. The Basin represents an immense biophysical region, occupying much of eastern Australia and encompassing several extensive inland river systems, including the Lachlan. In 2002, the Murray-Darling Basin Commission observed that the Basin was not only central to the economic

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70 Commonwealth of Australia, Australian Rural Policy Papers 1990-95. Parliamentary Research Service Subject Collection No 5 (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1996). The area of land sown to crops calculated in the ABS Year Book 2002 shows that in 1949-50 the total was 8,546,000 ha. By 1969-70 that figure had increased to 15,728,000 ha, and by 1999-2000 the total was 23,769,000 hectares of which nearly half (12,168,000 ha) was sown to wheat for grain production. Wheat remained Australia’s largest crop, produced in all States but primarily on the mainland. In 1999-2000, Western Australia had the largest area of land devoted to wheat-growing (4,556,000 ha), closely followed by New South Wales (3,425,000 ha). ABS sources cited: Agriculture, Australia (7113.0), Agricultural Commodities, Australia (7121.0).


72 Western Australia was the biggest producer of wheat in 1999-2000 (9,004,000 tonnes), closely followed by New South Wales (8,602,000 tonnes). ABS Year Book 2002, Source: Agricultural Commodities, Australia (7121.0).

prosperity of rural Australia, but was also the stage upon which all the ecological dramas of intensive land use were being played out.\textsuperscript{74}

By the end of the twentieth century, there was a growing consensus amongst rural commentators that the inland agricultural and pastoral regions were experiencing environmental problems on an unprecedented scale.\textsuperscript{75} Indeed, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation predicted that half a million hectares of the wheatlands in the eastern states alone had less than 50 years of productive life remaining.\textsuperscript{76} In constructing the rural landscape as an ecosystem in crisis, the ecological sciences emerged as an influential voice in debates about the future of farming and the sustainability of agricultural and pastoral communities. David Carter suggests that the environmental discourse has kept rural Australia at the centre of national consciousness. ‘This discourse expresses a powerful, ambiguous myth of non-Aboriginal belonging to the land’.\textsuperscript{77} In this context, there is a compelling need to understand the cultural and historical dimensions of the wheatlands, an industrialised agricultural landscape increasingly characterised in terms of impoverished soils, denuded paddocks, and degraded river systems.

\textsuperscript{74} Roy Green, ‘Preface’. in Daniel Connell (ed), \textit{Unchartered Waters} (Murray-Darling Basin Commission, Canberra, 2002), vii. The Commission is responsible for co-ordinating natural resource management policies in the Basin. The Basin is Australia’s most important agricultural region. At the turn of the twenty-first century, it contained 42 per cent of all Australian farms, including half of the total cropping land, half of the sheep population, and three quarters of the nation’s irrigated crops and pastures. \textit{The Murray-Darling Basin} (Murray-Darling Basin Commission, no date).

\textsuperscript{75} Frank Vanclay and Geoffrey Lawrence, for example, listed the most significant environmental problems affecting land in agricultural regions as soil salinity, acidity, soil structure decline, soil nutrient decline, wind and water erosion, habitat destruction, and the escalation of ‘woody weeds’ in the grazing regions or rangelands. See \textit{The Environmental Imperative: Eco-Social Concerns For Australian Agriculture} (Central Queensland University Press, Rockhampton, Queensland, 1995), ix.


\textsuperscript{77} David Carter, ‘Future pasts’. in David Headon, Joy Hooton and Donald Horne (eds), \textit{The Abundant Culture: Meaning And Significance In Everyday Australia} (Allen and Unwin Australia Pty Ltd, St Leonards, NSW, 1994), 9.
Landscape as social setting

As debates about the future of Australian farming gained momentum in the 1990s, Professor Geoffrey Lawrence launched a new Centre for Rural Social and Economic Research at the Central Queensland University, pledging that it would work with local communities to ‘map the social contours’ of a sustainable rural society. The study of rural societies was a small but growing field of specialist academic inquiry in Australia in the 1980s. By then, rural sociology was a well-established discipline in western Europe and the United States, with its own distinctive theoretical traditions and interests. Australia’s rural sociologists initially concerned themselves with the study of social structures and change in rural communities, and the prediction of future trends and solutions to specific aspects of rural decline. But, whilst fluctuations in populations, climate and economic conditions had characterised Australian agriculture and pastoralism throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their studies tended to portray rural decline as a uniquely contemporary phenomenon. There was curiously little inclination to examine the longer-term patterns of change and undertake a detailed interpretation within a broader historical framework. Indeed, many of the studies conducted in the 1990s limited their inquiries to identifying characteristics of sustainable rural communities, and developing models based on structuralist modes of analysis. This ‘foreshortened historical framework’,

78 Geoffrey Lawrence, Futures for Rural Australia: From Agricultural Productivism to Community Sustainability. Inaugural address, Foundation Professor of Sociology (Central Queensland University, 1995).

79 The study of rural communities dates back to the early twentieth century, involving anthropological research into primitive and simple societies. See for example William F. Ogden (ed), A Study Of Rural Society (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1946, reprinted 1971). G.J. Lewis, Rural communities (London: David and Charles, 1979). Frank Vanclay, a prominent Australian rural sociologist, outlined the situation in Australia in his preface to With a Rural Focus, an edited and refereed collection of papers with a rural focus presented to the annual conference of The Australian Sociological Association Inc, held at Deakin University in December 1994 (Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University, May 1995): iv-vi. Vanclay, whose work has been largely concerned with the political economy of agriculture, claims that in the past sociologists were deterred from serious analysis of rural issues because of the legacy of the American approach, dominated by the functionalist study of innovations in agriculture. However, Australian rural sociology has tended to embrace the broader themes of contemporary sociology, ranging from gender issues to textual analysis, the social construction of knowledge, and the study of power and culture in society. He concludes that the question of ‘what is rural?’ is central to rural sociology, but the broad scope of the term means that it remains an elusive concept.

80 See, for example, Sharon Pepperdine, 2000, ‘Social Indicators of Rural Community Sustainability: An Example from the W้อย Yaloak Catchment’. Unpublished paper presented at the First
as Davison describes it, had the effect of heightening an unprecedented sense of crisis in rural areas.81

In the Australian context, rural sociologists constructed the rural landscape largely as a social problem in which the survival of agricultural and pastoral communities in general, and inland country towns in particular, was paramount. During the 1990s, a pioneering group of researchers at the Charles Sturt University’s Centre for Rural Social Research came to dominate scholarly debates about rural decline, staking a claim to particular expertise in the analysis of economic and social relationships in rural communities, and the links between industrialised agricultural societies and environmental change.82 Ironically, by establishing research centres devoted to the study of rural issues, the sociologists were effectively reinforcing the distinction between urban and rural concerns. They played an important role in defining the social experience of late twentieth century rural communities in

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Australia, although there was little attempt to ground these experiences in the context of the environmental and social histories of particular places.83

According to Lawrence, the emphasis of government policy on improving agricultural productivity had focused resources on the issue of ecological sustainability, with much less attention paid to the profound social and cultural changes occurring in farming communities. The whole notion of ‘rural’ as a social construct was undergoing radical changes under the influence of metropolitan values and interests.84 Indeed, Lawrence noted, many traditional farming communities were already shifting away from an exclusive preoccupation with agricultural production to embrace leisure and tourism activities as the basis for their economic well-being, appealing to the growing taste for ‘rural’ nostalgia amongst urban consumers. It was pointless, he observed in his inaugural speech at the new Centre for Rural Social and Economic Research, to work towards better land management practices when the very fabric of rural communities was being undermined by government policies narrowly focused on agricultural productivity. Whilst this re-conceptualising of the agricultural landscape from rural commodity to urban retreat echoed old themes of the countryside as ‘rural idyll’, it also suggested that farming communities were redefining themselves less as a place of production and more as a commodity for urban visitors.


84 Lawrence, Futures for Rural Australia: 18-22. Lawrence was previously a key member of the Centre for Rural Social Research at Charles Sturt University. See also Perry O'Brien Share, “‘Tickle it with a hoe and it will laugh with a harvest!’”, 252; idem, ‘Beyond “countrymindedness”’, 14. Lowenthal makes a similar point about the changing meanings of ‘countryside’ in the European context. See David Lowenthal, ‘Landscape transformations’, in Paul Groth and Todd W. Bress (ed), Understanding Ordinary Landscapes (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 180-188.
Landscape as contested terrain

The landscapes of rural Australia were, for much of the twentieth century, portrayed in settler terms as landscapes of Aboriginal dispossession, dispersal and disappearance. It was only during the last two decades of the century that a new wave of Aboriginal histories emerged to challenge conventional settler narratives and portray the rural landscape in terms of Aboriginal survival, connectedness, and spirituality.

Two landmark legal decisions by the High Court of Australia in the 1990s gave impetus to an Indigenous perspective of landscape. The ‘Mabo’ decision in 1992 and the subsequent ‘Wik’ decision in 1996 effectively gave legal recognition to the Indigenous ownership of traditional lands, and established ‘native title’ as a doctrine of Australian common law. These decisions deemed that native title persisted over any land not lawfully alienated by the Crown. This had particular significance for settlers who held land under leasehold tenure arrangements, since the High Court considered that ‘native title’ was not necessarily extinguished under such tenure. In recognising the pre-colonial presence of Aboriginal people, and the existence of traditional connections with particular tracts of land these reinterpretations of the rural landscape, together with the emergence of a new Aboriginal sensibility, gave rise to a radically different conception of the rural landscape as an Indigenous space with cultural and spiritual dimensions.

The legal recognition of the legitimacy of native title brought into question the whole moral and legal underpinnings of settler occupation. It also brought to the surface of public consciousness long-festering racial discourses about the relationship between Indigenous and settler Australians in the regions of inland Australia dominated by agricultural and pastoral interests, manifesting in emotionally-charged debates about the legitimacy of European colonisation and the emergence of the One Nation political movement. In particular, it cast the whole notion of an Australian ‘bush’ identity in a new light. How do settler Australians deal with the revision of a national identity that is still rooted in the colonised rural landscape? Is it the case, as Curthoys suggests, that ‘[t]he legacy of the colonial past is a continuing fear of
illegitimacy, and therefore an inability to develop the kind of pluralist inclusive account of the past that might form the basis for a coherent national community.’85

Landscape as historical artefact
During the 1950s, governments promoted the agricultural landscape as a place that had no history. In the post-war climate the wheatlands represented a blank slate, primed for a new phase of closer settlement and equipped with the new tools of technology and science from which the potential fruits of reconstruction would be reaped. The Land newspaper countered this by encouraging its rural readers to keep the past alive. Articles on the history and heritage of farming appeared regularly in its Farm and Station Annual during the 1940s and 1950s. In 1948, for example, Arnold G. Hudson exhorted farmers to immerse themselves in the subject of Australia’s agricultural history. ‘In the building of national character’, he suggested, ‘there should be knowledge and a deep understanding of our links with the past’, although the main links deemed worthy of preservation were those associated with pioneering settlers and ‘gracious rural homes’.86

During the 1970s and 1980s, a burgeoning interest in local history writing in rural communities across Australia opened a floodgate of local history publishing. By the end of the century, the rural landscape was rapidly in danger of overflowing with history, and a ‘sheer sense of Australia as a site of historical density’.87 When Manning Clark began his History of Australia series in 1962, he foreshadowed a dramatic shift in Australian history-writing. By the time Australia celebrated the 200th anniversary of British sovereignty, the ‘triumphalist march of history’ was being overtaken by a flood of histories about local places that sought to expose and redress the ‘wilful obscuring of the experience of most people’ since colonisation.88 The heritage conservation movement also emerged in this period. In 1972, the Whitlam government had won office in part through its appeal to the past as a unifying force in

86 Arnold G. Hudson, ‘The past is not dead’, The Land Farm and Station Annual, 20 October 1948, 2; idem, ‘Preserve our heritage!’ Land Annual, 10 October 1951, 4; idem, ‘Glories that are past’, and ‘The march of time brings changes’, Land Annual, 7 October 1959, 43 and 45 respectively.
88 Walter, Nation and Narrative, 80.
Australian society, and the heritage movement enthusiastically embraced the pioneering narrative as a key tenet of national identity. Representations of the Australian rural landscape mobilised popular images of the past and succeeded in turning them into a commodity for mass consumption.

For most Australians, the history of colonisation was neatly contained within a consensus of mainstream political and social narratives. In the wheatlands, the past represented a history of uncontested agricultural development and prosperity, derived from the achievements of enterprising pioneering settlers who battled and ultimately conquered a recalcitrant landscape, and succeeded in transforming it into a productive farming region. Even as the landscape repeatedly failed to measure up to expectations of easy abundance during the course of the century, the ‘mythological solution’ in the struggle to subdue and settle a recalcitrant environment was to recast the colonising enterprise as a spiritual triumph.\(^9\) The complexities of environmental change, and the experiences of marginalised groups, barely made a ripple on the expansive oceans of grain. The Australian heritage movement was instrumental in keeping this rural mythology alive, aided and abetted by a proliferation of community histories, tourist literature, and local history museums. Conserving the material culture of the past offered a sense of certainty and possession, even as ecological problems and declining communities destabilised the heroic settler narrative.

In the wheatlands, the stories of settler occupation were writ large in the physical evidence of this transformation. Farms, woolsheds, cemeteries, and the enterprises of rural town-building were lauded as evidence of a recalcitrant landscape transformed into the nation’s productive heartland.\(^9\) These were the monuments of a heroic past, a celebration of the resilience of the settler narrative.\(^9\) This preoccupation with documentation and conservation disguised the powerful role that the heritage conservation movement played in the late twentieth century in promoting the heritage of rural Australia as a static and largely uncritical history of pioneering. According to


\(^9\) The heritage of the wheatlands is discussed in more detail in Chapter 11.
the Tasmanian environmental scientist, Jim Russell, the Australian heritage movement remained embedded in the ‘primacy of the preserved artefact’, serving to sustain the discourses of settler heritage whilst silencing alternative narratives. Russell threw down the gauntlet to those engaged in the heritage conservation industry, challenging them to consider how heritage concerns intersected with contemporary environmental issues. In part, this thesis takes up that challenge by asking what relevance does the concept of heritage have for the wheatlands in the context of the discourse of rural decline. It also examines the role of heritage in marginalising the ‘negotiation of difference’ in the history of settler-Indigenous relationships in rural Australia.

_Landscape as memory_

During the 1990s, new ideas began circulating about alternative ways of understanding the cropped and grazed landscapes of inland Australia. While the fortunes of commercial agricultural producers and markets provided the core rationale for research and policymaking in the rural sector, some observers of rural affairs were discussing how these landscapes might also be defined as other than economic units of production. Many of the physical and social changes occurring in the wheatlands were associated with the unquestioning acceptance of ‘agri-science’, the science of improving agricultural yields. Yet, while agri-science effectively underpinned the ideology of land use in the late twentieth century, there was curiously little debate about the cultural and ecological issues, and the ways in which these are interwoven and embedded in the agricultural landscape.

Guy Fitzhardinge, a Lachlan Valley grazier and historian, voiced the sentiments of a particular alliance of progressive intellectuals, including land managers, artists, academics and landholders, who were calling on governments and communities to ‘recognise the importance people place on many of the non-economic values, and how these determine behaviour.’ Fitzhardinge argued that ‘we need to recognise that

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93 Ireland, ‘Excavating national identity’, 92-93. The role of the national heritage movement and rural landscapes is examined in Chapter 11.
there are other ways of knowing, apart from scientific ways'. Local knowledge gained over several generations of observation, he concluded, could play a role no less significant than that of scientists, most of whom had limited opportunity to witness physical changes occurring in the landscape over time. We needed to learn how to build on local knowledge and values to achieve changes in land use practices. Fitzhardinge’s ideas were based on the premise that the prevailing focus on the economic conditions in rural Australia had failed to solve the problems of land degradation.

One of the early commentators on the relationship between cultural attachments to place and agricultural practice was North American farmer and writer, Wendell Berry. In his 1972 book, A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural, Berry contemplated the implications of a trend towards farmers abandoning a nurturing approach to farming the land, and appealed for restoration of the ‘connections that join people, land, and community’. Elsewhere, a study amongst Cambridgeshire farmers in the United Kingdom indicated how economic returns were often less important for them than the social and emotional benefits. High on the agenda of farmers interviewed were values concerned with social standing, continuing traditional practices, and being part of a farming family and community. The main values were categorised as instrumental (income, conditions), social, expressive (pride, skills, creativity, personal growth), and intrinsic (way of life, value in hard work, independence).

The quest to render visible the invisible connections that exist between people and landscape has inspired a number of studies employing empirical techniques variously described as mental mapping, life stories, or landscape biography. They

96 Frost and Gasson cited in Fitzhardinge in Reading the Land, 43-44
are all concerned with how geography and memory coalesce in particular places. 98 A number of important Australian studies have examined this process in recent years, particularly in relation to pastoral landscapes. Damien Lucas and Heather Goodall, for example, have drawn on oral histories to examine how graziers, irrigators, and local Indigenous people in the 'black soil country' of northern New South Wales perceive the same landscapes in different ways, and how these ‘contested understandings’ underpin debates about the nature of ecological change. 99 Ruth Lane used oral histories to compare different local and professional knowledges about the Tumut landscape in the high country of New South Wales. She considered how these different perspectives might contribute to improving the management of natural resources. 100

Peter Read and Deborah Rose explored the 'country of memory' of several settler Australians to show how people were sustained by life sites as a result of having lived in ‘close emotional proximity’ to them. 101 Ruth Beilin used the term ‘biographical landscapes’ in her study of the connections between women’s life stories and their

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100 Ruth Lane, 'Remembering past environments: Identity, place and environmental knowledge in the Tumut region of New South Wales', Aboriginal History, 21, 1997, 148-161.

farms.  

Paul Sinclair drew on people’s personal stories to explore the cultural dimensions of river regulation and ecological change along the Murray River. Dave Collett analysed oral sources to learn how conflicts over land use in the Central Plateau were directly shaped by competing perceptions of the landscape held by different groups. George Main traced the interweaving of culture and history across the southwest slopes of New South Wales to reveal underlying beliefs and values that shape people's relationships with places in rural Australia.

In these studies, the process of eliciting and interpreting life stories is playing a crucial role in understanding how people experience and respond to the processes of social and ecological change. I use the term social memory to mean the way people remember past experiences and ideas in the present. Social memory is manifested as collective values, symbols, inscriptions, or beliefs about the past, and it lies ‘“in-between” the ideal and the material’. According to Maurice Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory, ‘[a]s soon as a historical fact or person has permeated social memory, it is transposed into a teaching, a notion, or a symbol and takes on meaning’ in the present. Whilst Halbwachs argues that all memory is social memory, I take the view that individual memory, whilst not exclusively social, contains much that is social in origin.

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105 George Main, Heartland: The Regeneration of Rural Place (University of New South Wales Press Ltd, Sydney, 2005), 9.


Hence, in this thesis, I extrapolate from a range of personal reminiscences in order to understand shared experiences and stories that inform social memory amongst a group of people who share a common history. This process also allows for the nuances of individual lives and perceptions to shine through. Drawing on theoretical notions of social or collective memory, I aim to show how people remember and tell stories about the wheatlands, how history and memory coalesce in these working agricultural landscapes, and how a particular part of the wheatlands has been invested with cultural meaning and significance.
Chapter 2. ‘the doubtful plains of the Lachlan’

From sickly marshes, and unhealthy plains
Where Lachlan’s turbid waters spread

The Lachlan River valley seemed a tantalising prospect for European settlement when, in 1815, the New South Wales Deputy Surveyor George Evans located a substantial but dry, pebbly river bed measuring about 70 feet wide near present-day Cowra township. Rising in the low-lying hills in the south-western slopes and plains of New South Wales, the Lachlan was the first of the westward-flowing rivers to attract serious attention by British colonists in their quest to inhabit the country beyond the sandstone mountains west of Sydney. Evans had entered Kalar territory. The Kalar (or Calare) were a distinctive group of Indigenous Wiradjuri-speaking people, whose tribal groups occupied an expansive area of low hills and plains centred on the Macquarie, Murrumbidgee and Lachlan Rivers.


Casting the name ‘Lachlan’ upon the waterless channel, Evans described the surrounding country as equal to that of the fertile Hawkesbury River region near Sydney. His favourable assessment of the landscape generated sufficient excitement to arouse Governor Lachlan Macquarie’s support for a more extensive survey of the valley two years later. Evans returned to the Lachlan region in 1817, this time as second-in-command to the Colonial Surveyor-General, John Oxley. His was to be the first official survey of the river valleys west of the Blue Mountains, and one of Oxley’s tasks was to examine whether the Lachlan River terminated in an inland lake or possibly an estuary on the coast. He was also required to accurately survey the route, and establish the ‘general face of the country, nature of the soil, woods and animal and natural productions...the nature of the climate and [of the] natives or aborigines’. But Oxley was to find little pleasure in his well-equipped but arduous expedition into the Lachlan Valley. His expedition journal, published in 1820, is heavy with frustration and weariness as a mosaic of swamps and soft black soils conspired to impede his route. Worrying incessantly about the flood conditions that hampered his party’s progress, then by a shortage of potable water once they strayed from its swampy banks, Oxley’s dour official reports conveyed images of an inland sea of monotonous plains, bounded by the horizon and broken only by occasional hills, ‘rising like islands from the ocean’. Near the present-day site of Forbes, he wrote ‘It is impossible to fancy a worse country than the one we were now travelling over, intersected by swamps and small lagoons in every direction; the soil a poor clay, and covered with stunted useless timber’.4 By the time his party reached the floodplain on the lower reaches, Oxley was positively despairing: ‘Nothing can be more melancholy and irksome than travelling over wilds which nature seems to have condemned to perpetual loneliness and desolation....The nature of the country renders it uninhabitable’.5 Even though the party had found a river teeming with fish, they were overwhelmed by the vast sweep of the surrounding plains, the foetid marshes, and the tortuous hopscotch of flooding channels and swamps.6

4 Oxley, Journals, 37-38.
5 Oxley, Journals, 44.
6 The expedition travelled westward from the Belubula River and turned south-west around the marshes at Bogan Gate to within a few miles of the Murrumbidgee River. The group rejoined the
The Lachlan Valley was in the grip of an extended drought when Major Thomas Mitchell retraced the hapless Oxley’s movements in 1836. ‘I beheld in the Lachlan all the features of the Darling, but on a somewhat smaller scale. The same sort of large gum trees, similar steep, soft, muddy banks; and even in this place, a margin with an outer bank. But its waters were gone, except in a few small ponds in the very deepest parts of its bed’. Mitchell continued his excruciating journey hauling boats and wagons along the muddy holes of the Lachlan, reaching the junction of the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee Rivers. En route he built up a detailed compendium of observations about the character of the valley landscape, recording the sameness of topography. A Wiradjuri man, whom Mitchell christened ‘Barney’, acted as a guide to the expeditioners for part of the journey. Mitchell marvelled at the guide’s intimate knowledge of the plains, especially his ability to find water during the extended drought. ‘For all that desolate region’, he wrote, ‘where neither a kangaroo or a bird was to be seen or heard, was poor Barney’s country, that lonely mountain, his home!’

Despite a mediocre report from Thomas Mitchell, the fickle nature of the inland-flowing Lachlan River proved little deterrent to settlers ambitious to claim grazing land. A somewhat haphazard process of occupation ensued in the decades following Evans’ initial sighting of the Lachlan River. In New South Wales, enthusiastic settlers were hard on the heels of exploring parties tracing the main river systems inland, claiming extensive tracts of watered country for grazing cattle well beyond the colonial government’s Limits of Location regulations promulgated in 1829. At the lower end of the Lachlan, near its junction with the Murrumbidgee River, settlers and stock edged into the so-called ‘back country’ on the northern side of the Lachlan, damming water courses and digging wells to support their stock.

By 1849 some fifty pastoral runs fronted the Lachlan River, and the scale of individual landholdings swelled. Oxley had thought there could be no more miserable

Lachlan River west of Condobolin, but they laboured through the floodplains and eventually returned to Bathurst on 29 August 1817. Oxley, *Journals*, 39.


country than that of the Lachlan, and testified as such before Commissioner Bigge in 1819 in an official inquiry into the state of agriculture in the colony. The valley, he submitted, ‘is uninhabitable and useless for all the purposes of agriculture and grazing; my opinion is based upon the extreme bareness of the soil and the want of water’. In 1836, Mitchell recorded finding numerous cattle all along the river, apparently in good condition despite the dry season. Thirty years later Bailliere’s Gazetteer pronounced that the Lachlan was ‘a magnificent and important river, watering with its numerous tributaries an immense tract of excellent pastoral country’.  

But beyond the reaches of the river system, the country was much less attractive. A map published in 1851, for example, described the landscape between the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee Rivers as ‘arid desert’. Colonial perceptions of the Lachlan plains seemed as unpredictable as the channels of the river itself. The largest station in the central Lachlan was Benjamin Boyd’s 60,000 acre Condobolin run. Thomas Kite held claim to another 60,000 acres in five separate runs straddling the river (Cobong and Burrawang on the north, and Wardry, WALLamundry and Bolamble on the south). The river valley that formed the focus for traditional Wiradjuri life was now inscribed on maps as an administrative divide under the colonial authority of the Wellington Pastoral District to the north, and the Lachlan Pastoral District to the south.

Frontier
Themes of isolation and impediment were common in the reports of explorers and colonial administrators, as they forayed into woodland forests and grassland plains beyond the coastal mountains in eastern Australia. Colonists’ perceptions of the inland gave rise to a lexicon of spatial metaphors encapsulating a sense that space and time evaporated beyond the geographical reach of settlement. This was the 

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9 Robert P. Whitworth, Bailliere’s New South Wales Gazetteer and Road Guide, containing the most recent and accurate information as to every place in the colony (F.F. Bailliere, Sydney, 1866), 307.


11 Tom Griffiths considers these metaphors and the way in which they distinguished the Australian and American experience of the ‘frontier’ in ‘“The outside country”’, in Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths (eds), Words For Country: Landscape And Language In Australia (University of New South Wales Press Ltd, Sydney, 2002), 223-224. Also see Jay Arthur, The Default Country: A
Beyond it lay the ‘outback’, the ‘Never-Never’, ‘no man’s land’ and, in New South Wales and Queensland, the ‘West’. Paul Carter, in his spatial history of Australia, *The Road to Botany Bay*, offered a new perspective of the inland plains as an important geographical threshold for colonists. The very flatness and openness of the plains, he suggested, provided a cultural reference point. Monotony aside, the visibility and accessibility of the landscape rendered it more accommodating to the processes of colonial possession than did the more heavily forested regions. During the twentieth century, issues of spatial identity came to ‘haunt the national consciousness’. Reference to being located ‘beyond the black stump’ invoked a vast and undifferentiated interior landscape pervaded by a ‘cultural darkness’. ‘Beyond the black stump’ became a common expression to mean an imaginary place that delineated the boundaries of permanent settlement. The idea of the wheatlands demarcating these boundaries gained momentum just as the major projects of inland exploration were coming to an end and new wheat-growing regions began straddling the margins of the ‘settled’ regions that were considered safely within the reach of law and order. Writing in 1930, Sir Keith Hancock’s analysis of the frontier was perhaps more accurate when he pinpointed economic ambitions as the main driving force for

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12 Graeme Davison notes that the term ‘frontier’ was used throughout the New World to mean areas outside settled country. More recently, whilst retaining its mythological potency amongst urban Australians, it has also been extended to studies of the urban frontier, the frontier of settler and Aboriginal relationships, and the female experience of early encounters with areas beyond settlements. See ‘Frontier’ entry in Davison et al, *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, 269-70. Similarly, Ramson’s *Australian National Dictionary* defines it as ‘an area of newly or sparsely settled country, remote from closely settled districts, especially as marking either the limit of settlement or habitable country’ (p. 264). In Australia, the term became popular after 1900 as a result of Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis on the frontier in the United States, although the Australian frontier acquired its own distinctive cultural connotations.


15 Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, 149.
settlement. ‘For six generations they have swarmed inland from the sea, pressing forward to their economic frontiers, which are the only frontiers Australians know’.  

The notion of a mythological ‘frontier’ had underpinned historical readings of the American West well into the twentieth century. In essence, it defined the prairies or Great Plains east of the Rocky Mountains, where European immigrants ‘collided’ with the Indigenous people of North America, creating a romantic narrative with the fortunes of the heroic settler at its centre. In Australia, In Russel Ward argued that the nomadic shearers and drovers of the pastoral industry, not the small farmers, were the true inhabitants of the Australian frontier. Their qualities of self-sufficiency and mateship defined the essence of a national, and exclusively masculine, character.

The concept of a ‘wheat frontier’ also gained currency early in the century, associated with the expansion of wheat-growing into marginal farming areas. However, as the wheatlands advanced and retreated and advanced again into the drier regions of the inland, such distinctions became blurred. During the course of the twentieth century, wheat-farming displaced pastoralism, or pastoralists turned to farming. In the 1930s, for example, the spread of skeleton-weed almost smothered the wheatlands of southern New South Wales, and farmers turned to raising sheep as a means of controlling the weed. Ultimately, the wheatlands became a mixture of farming and pastoral activities.

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But the inland margins of the wheatlands also constituted an imaginary environmental and cultural frontier with far more significant implications for national identity than the romanticised images of the ‘bush’ labourer. Farming carried all the trappings of permanent habitation – roads and railways, settlements and service towns, farm houses and buildings – in a way that the pastoral enterprises had not. As Davison notes, ‘[t]he frontier was always both an idea and a place’, with different interpretations and applications. The idea suggested here and explored further in later chapters is that the wheatlands constituted a key space of encounter and transformation involving settlers, Indigenous people, and land.

**Settling in**

Settler claims on vast tracts of land for pastoral use were to be the catalyst for controversial new land legislation. In an attempt to reduce the expansive hegemony of the early waves of squatters across inland Australia, each of the six colonies embarked on a course of legislative reform. Their implicit aim was to socialise the land with *bona fide* settler farmers rather than temporary landlords whose motive was short-term financial gain. In New South Wales, the alienation of Crown land for prospective settlers gathered momentum after the passing of the Crown Lands Alienation Act in 1861. The ‘selection movement’ as it became known, has long been the subject of interest to historians of colonial settlement, and is conventionally pitched as a battle to protect class interests between the relatively wealthy squattocracy on the one hand, and a struggling yeomanry of small farmers on the other. Attempts by the various state governments to resume Crown lands from

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21 Davison, ‘Frontier’, 270.
22 Land acts providing for ‘free selection’ were passed in Western Australia in 1850, 1860 and 1872, in Victoria in 1858, 1862 and 1869, in Queensland in 1860 and 1868, NSW in 1861, Tasmania in 1868 and South Australia 1869. Selection provided for men and women over 18 years to select Crown land and pay for it on a time-payment system. Selectors were required to take up residence, cultivate, and make improvements to the land that they selected. For a brief overview see, for example, J.C.R. Camm, *Australians, A Historical Atlas* (Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, Broadway, N.S.W., 1987), 83.
23 Known as the Robertson Land Act, the New South Wales legislation provided for an individual to select one area of land between 40 and 320 acres in size, in the ‘old settled’ and ‘intermediate’ country of NSW (roughly corresponding to the later administrative boundaries of the Eastern Division and Central Division respectively).
pastoral lease and establish small-scale farming families were driven, in part, by an idealised perception of English rural life dating from the Middle Ages.  

Stuart suggests that the selection or land settlement movement, effectively spanning more than 100 years, gained its momentum from this powerful emotional appeal of the ‘yeoman myth’ amongst settler Australians, a myth that had its roots in a ‘cult of domesticity’ prevailing in the Victorian era. The notion of creating a nation of small family farms was a powerful narrative about the ideal of domesticity and family life, representing the core of a morally strong and respectable society.  

It gained popular support in the late nineteenth century at a time when rural life seemed to offer an antidote to the problems of industrialisation and urban life, and it was to be remarkably durable. Indeed, the small-scale family farm became the defining characteristic of the wheatlands throughout the twentieth century. It also introduced a personal and powerfully emotional dimension to the economic activity of farming and public discourses about the sustainability of the wheatlands.  

The drier inland plains attracted increasing numbers of prospective settlers, many of whom had missed out on selecting land in more reliable rainfall country. Commercial wheat farms were already established in the Murrumbidgee River valley, and in the higher rainfall areas of the upper Lachlan around Cowra, when official reports suggested that the pine and box country of the central Lachlan plains would be

25 Iain Stuart, 'Squatting landscapes in South-Eastern Australia (1820-1895)'. PhD thesis, Department of Prehistoric and Historic Archaeology. University of Sydney, Sydney, 1999, 101-3. Stuart’s thesis provides an analysis of the ideological basis for the ‘yeoman myth’ in the Australian context, suggesting that both squatters or pastoralists, and farmers, drew on the same belief in the value of domesticity, but contested the process through which it should be achieved on the land.  
26 Perry O'Brien Share, "'Tickle it with a hoe and it will laugh with a harvest!' Discourses of closer settlement in Australia, 1898-1988", PhD thesis. School of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences. La Trobe University, Melbourne, 1994. Share’s thesis provides a useful discursive analysis of the various government, bureaucratic and academic texts associated with rural Australia and closer settlement policies, drawing on class theory and gender analysis, and focusing predominantly on Victoria and Western Australia. He notes that closer settlement played a significant role in the personal and community histories of people in many parts of Australia (1). See Chapter 9 for further discussion of the concept of agrarianism in the context of wheatlands communities.

PART ONE — INLAND
ideal for cultivation. Ideological preoccupations with increasing settlement and establishing small-scale farming on the land heightened, and gave a political and moral edge to the spread of the wheatlands in the state. A contributor to the first edition of the *Agricultural Gazette of New South Wales* in 1890 observed, ‘the agriculturalist must naturally take the place of the pure grazier’ as the population increases and spreads.\(^{27}\) Robertson, as architect of the New South Wales legislation, subsequently claimed that 17,000 settlers had taken up land within the first five years of the new law, and that the extent of cultivated land had nearly doubled. However, reviews of the effectiveness of the land reforms revealed that many pastoralists were managing to retain large tracts of land, principally through dummy selections, and coveted the best country by retaining control of strategic watering places and river crossings.\(^{28}\)

In a climate of continuing turmoil over the apparent failure of the free selection legislation, the Queensland, New South Wales and Victorian governments instituted aggressive new policies to resume extensive tracts of land already alienated for pastoralism and sell them as small farming blocks. The 1884 Acts initiated a period of wide-scale resumption of pastoral leases, and the old laissez-faire process of land selection gave way to a more closely-controlled settlement policy. Official use of the term ‘closer settlement’ seems to have been peculiar to Australia.\(^{29}\) It referred to the repurchase, subdivision, and sale of rural land previously alienated from the Crown, in order to simultaneously promote agriculture and communities of small-scale

\(^{27}\) R.L. Pudney, ‘Advantages of Bare Fallow’, in *NSW Agricultural Gazette*, 1(1), July 1890. The *NSW Agricultural Gazette*, launched in 1890, was the official publication of the new New South Wales Department of Agriculture, and was responsible for disseminating the results of Australian and international scientific research and technological advances of interest to farmers and graziers in NSW.


\(^{29}\) A similar imperative to intensify rural settlement existed in the expanding agricultural lands of North America. Edmund de S. Brunner, Professor of Rural Sociology, Columbia University in the United States, observed the intention of Australia’s closer settlement policies to fill the ‘vast empty spaces of the outback’, during his visit to the region in 1938. The United States, he reported, should take note of the Australian ‘experiment’ in boosting rural populations. See Edmund de S. Brunner, ‘Rural Australia and New Zealand: Some observations of current trends’, in *Studies of the Pacific, No 2* (American Council, Institute of Pacific Relations, 1938), 14.
farming families. The closer settlement ‘project’ combined the redistribution of land resources with social reform in rural Australia. Subsequent legislative amendments trimmed and refined the ambitious scope of the policy over time, but the concept of closer settlement had firmly taken root in the bureaucratic imagination. The official process of creating a mosaic of wheat farms began in earnest, and underpinned state land administration policies in Australia until at least the 1960s.\textsuperscript{30} However, the legacy of closer settlement continued to reverberate in subsequent decades, as small farms and farming settlements of the wheatlands that flourished during the main phases of closer settlement faced the ravages of economic and social change.

In New South Wales, the government initially resumed one half of each pastoral lease for selection by farmers. Within a few decades, closer settlement schemes were laying claim to large swaths of woodlands and grasslands previously populated by grazing stock. By the turn of the century, according to a writer in \textit{The Land Annual} in 1932, ‘the wheatfields of the State began to march down the slopes and across the plains’.\textsuperscript{31} In the east and south of the Lachlan Valley, for example, large-scale grazing enterprises were increasingly relegated to the ‘back’ blocks in the drier plains to the north and west. The State’s first Closer Settlement Act was passed in 1904, just two years after a devastating drought that lasted between 1896 and 1902. The New South Wales Closer Settlement Act was greeted with furious debate about whether the state had an agricultural destiny at all. In the Hay and Hillston Land Districts at the lower reaches of the Lachlan River, nearly two million acres of land lay abandoned by the time the drought had taken its toll. Laboriously cleared of ‘scrub’ and seeded with introduced pasture, farmers simply packed their belongings and left when the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{30} J.M. Powell, \textit{An Historical Geography Of Modern Australia: The Restive Fringe} (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988), 52. Share, ‘Tickle it with a hoe’, 1994, 207. Closer settlement was realised in many different forms in each state in different periods. Most schemes were state-sponsored, but some were private schemes. It included selection (legislated during the 1860s-1870s), closer settlement (legislated between the 1890s and 1920s and reaching its peak between 1901 and 1914), and soldier settlement (introduced after World War I and World War II respectively). In Western Australia, for example, closer settlement took the form of group settlement schemes in the 1920s. Closer settlement schemes included the establishment of wheat and dairy farms, as well as irrigation settlements such as the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area. The main aim of this chapter is to examine the physical and social construction of the wheatlands through the discourses of closer settlement, rather than to analyse particular schemes in detail.
\item \textsuperscript{31} W.R. Cameron, ‘From scrubland to wheat farm’, \textit{The Land Annual}, 1 July 1932, 31.
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conditions deteriorated.\textsuperscript{32} According to one supporter of closer settlement, the choicest farming country was still monopolised by pastoralists, while selectors had been forced to take up poorly watered land outside the ‘danger line [and] the unfortunate position of these selectors has been discreditable to the country ever since’.\textsuperscript{33} Opponents of closer settlement were keen to highlight the policy failures, pointing to the proliferation of abandoned farm buildings as proof that some parts of the central and western plains in New South Wales were simply not amenable to small-scale farming enterprises. Ironically, they were later to be proved right, although at the time critics of closer settlement were less concerned with fragile environments than with shoring up their rights to extensive pastoral landholdings.

Recurring drought and infestations of rabbits aside, some settlers in New South Wales reported sporadic success with small-scale wheat cultivation in areas of more variable rainfall as far west as Lake Cargelligo and Hillston during the 1890s. Official optimism about the quality of the central western plains for cultivation and closer settlement ran high. For Mr Eddy, the first Chief Commissioner of Railways in New South Wales, ‘the Lachlan Valley country from Cowra right down below Condobolin’ was the part of the state that most impressed him for its agricultural potential. All that it needed was ‘some comprehensive method by which the disastrous results from the meagre and uncertain rainfall of the district, or from seasons of drought, may be remedied’.\textsuperscript{34}

Scientific farming

‘Technical agriculture’, applying scientific research to farming, was already a feature of British farming in the 1850s, a period widely considered to be the golden age of British agriculture. With an expanding knowledge of plant physiology and soil composition, together with advances in farm machinery and the manufacture of


\textsuperscript{33} Sydney Morning Herald, 10 October 1904 cited in Weeding, ‘Land settlement in the Hillston District’.

superphosphate from rock phosphate in 1842, British farmers had begun to move from organic, subsistence agriculture to a more intensive and interventionist form of cultivation.\(^{35}\) Early attempts to establish wheat on the coastal plains of south-eastern Australia was foiled by a fungal condition called wheat rust. From the 1860s onwards, farmers began to establish crops in the drier inland regions where soils and climate were better suited to available wheat varieties.\(^{36}\) During the early 1890s, several conferences were devoted to addressing the rust problem. Agricultural science was emerging as a significant resource for farmers, and they were eager to learn about the development of rust and drought resistant varieties of wheat. On a property at Lambrigg on the Murrumbidgee River, William Farrer spent his retirement observing the peculiarities of a southern hemisphere climate that demanded wheat varieties that could be planted in autumn (English wheat was planted in spring), and could ripen in spring as daylight hours increased. Farrer’s experimental developments of hybrid wheat varieties between 1885-1898 effectively launched scientific crop farming in Australia, and provided the impetus for the wheatlands to edge further inland.

The development of scientific methods of farming forged a formidable alliance with the new closer settlement laws and a flurry of railway-building from the 1890s. Together, these forces began knitting the fabric of a new frontier in the phosphate-deficient red-brown soils of the savannah woodlands of eastern Australia. The early signs were encouraging. The area of land devoted to wheat farming increased rapidly in the wake of new railway networks. By the mid-1890s, the area around Parkes had become one of the main wheat-growing centres in the state, reaching as far west as Condobolin mid-way along the Lachlan River. Some of the state’s most productive wheat farms were established in the Riverina region to the south of the Lachlan.\(^{37}\) The New South Wales government made somewhat optimistic judgements about land suitable for subdivision and cultivation. Meanwhile, the Department of Agriculture


\(^{36}\) Governor Darling noted the dilemma of establishing a wheat industry in 1828, when he reported that wheat was better suited to the ‘Interior’ but, at that time, could not be grown profitably because of the expense of transporting grain to markets. See Darling to Huskisson, 10 April 1828, 139, cited in Dunsdorfs, *The Australian Wheat-Growing Industry*, 67.

\(^{37}\) The Department of Agriculture established some of its earliest demonstration farms in the Riverina, including the Wagga Experimental Farm in 1892 and Temora in 1913. A wheat research institute was established at Wagga Wagga in 1954.
advocated continuous cropping and deep ploughing to make full use of ‘all the rains that fell’, while liberally applying manure to maintain fertility.\textsuperscript{38}

By the early twentieth century, the extensive areas of virgin (or uncultivated) country available for farming in North America and Australia presented formidable competition to British agriculture. As the worst ravages of the long 1890s drought subsided across the inland plains, the governments of New South Wales and Victoria dismissed the environmental catastrophes as aberrant climatic conditions, and a mood of renewed optimism prevailed. The task at hand was populating rural lands and promoting rural industry. In South Australia, where wheat farmers had enjoyed early success in apparently favourable conditions close to coastal ports, wheat yields were now in decline as the soils began to show signs of depleted fertility from vigorous cultivation methods. At the same time, opportunities were expanding for small-scale farming under the closer settlement policies in Victoria and New South Wales, and the main focus of wheat farming drifted to the ‘fertile crescent’ of south-eastern Australia.\textsuperscript{39}

Ironically, it was the devastating effects of prolonged drought and rabbit plagues in semi-arid grazing land at the turn of the twentieth century that created opportunities for resuming and subdividing extensive areas for wheat farms. Attention had also turned to the agricultural possibilities of the sandy mallee country in central western New South Wales, north-western Victoria, and eastern South Australia. Agricultural observers were fond of citing early misgivings about the farming potential of land dominated by mallee trees. Michael Williams, for example, cited W. Mann in 1839 stating that mallee country was ‘horrid’, ‘valueless’, and ‘barren’.\textsuperscript{40} Frank Myers

\textsuperscript{38} Agricultural Gazette (NSW), 1890, 30-31.


\textsuperscript{40} Cited in Williams, The Making Of The South Australian Landscape, 15. The so-called ‘dry country mallee’ refers to several species of Eucalyptus trees indigenous to the lower rainfall areas of south-eastern Australia. It is characterised by distinctive scrubby growth from underground woody lignotubers. If the aerial parts of the plant are burnt or broken off, new shoots sprout from
reported for the Melbourne Argus that the Victorian Mallee region was ‘a wilderness of dull green leaves, of ragged brown stalks, seeming to afford nothing more nutritious or useful than the arid soil which produces them’. Promoters of closer settlement portrayed mallee as one of the greatest obstacles to agricultural development, and settlers were actively encouraged to remove the stunted mallee ‘scrub’ as a condition of their lease.

Large areas of dense mallee were rolled, burned and grubbed. A successful venture in the Pinnaroo region of South Australia in 1906 had drawn attention to the possibilities for colonising the whole of the Murray Mallee, north from Serviceton to Woort Woort on the River Murray. Across the state border in north-western Victoria, 1.3 million acres of mallee land was subdivided for wheat farms between 1908 and 1915, with a new cross-border railway link between Ouyen and Pinnaroo in South Australia built in 1908. Indeed, the Victorian Closer Settlement Board had capitalised on the expansion of the wheatlands into the mallee region, settling discharged soldiers and other settlers from 1917.

In a presentation to an international dry farming congress held in the United States in 1910, Australia’s recently established Commonwealth government made much of the ‘luxuriant natural pastures’ made available for growing wheat in Australia. The nation offered a ‘safe farming belt’, where former grazing lands needed only to be ring-barked in order to be cultivated and cropped. The desperate drought

42 Phil Taylor, A Mallee Shire History: Karkaroc 1896-1995 (Yarriamback Shire Council, Warracknabeal, 1996), 97. The trains were essential not only for wheat and passenger transport, but also for bringing water to the settlements during dry seasons. By 1915, the region also drew water from artesian bores for the 2,500 people settled along the Ouyen-Pinnaroo wheat-belt ‘corridor’.
conditions and recurring crop failures in many parts of the country since 1898\textsuperscript{45} were well buried for now beneath images of abundant and luxuriant grasses. Here, according to the government's promotional literature, was clear evidence of the inherent fertility of Australia's red-brown soils. They required neither chemical treatment nor manure. Indeed, some of the existing wheat country had already been cropped for 40 years. Whilst acknowledging that wheat yields were generally below those of Britain, the cost of production was also comparatively low. Indeed, a horse team and self-reliance were all that a farmer in Australia needed in order to transform this 'abundance of rich virgin soil' into wealth.\textsuperscript{46} Powell suggests that the extensive tracts of semi-arid country, previously considered too dry for agriculture, effectively became 'gigantic practical laboratories in which vernacular practices were established and transmitted'.\textsuperscript{47}

**The science of settlement**

As war raged in Europe, another battle was being waged over the merits of closer settlement in the semi-arid interior. The Commissioner of Railways Edmund Milne had weighed into the public debate on closer settlement in 1913. Enlisting images from European mythology, he depicted the Lachlan Valley as a landscape in a deep slumber, awaiting the flutter of 'steel ribbons' that would unravel as the expanding railway network stretched westward from 1886. Warming up to his allegory, he described how 'grim, gnarled old river gums lining the steep shelving banks of the Lachlan River were strangely stirred as the skirmishing line of the vanguard of civilisation obeyed the order to advance into the unknown and uncharted'.\textsuperscript{48} In Milne's narrative, closer settlement was a patriotic battle where both nature and those occupying vast tracts of land constituted an enemy to colonisation. His audience was invited to salute the 'vanguard of pioneers...the men who were forced back from the fighting line, broken in health, ruined in purse, crippled in hope, wounded to the death by the continued attack of cruel climate, of fire and flood, of cold, calculating,

\textsuperscript{45} In parts of the emerging NSW wheatlands, for example, crops had failed due to drought each year between 1898 and 1918 except for two years: 1902 and 1914.


\textsuperscript{47} Joe Powell, 'Protracted Reconciliation', 250.

\textsuperscript{48} Edward Milne, 'The awakening of the Lachlan Valley', in *Town and Country Journal*. Extracts from 30 July, 20 August, 3 September and 1 October 1913.
heartless capital’. Closer settlement of the Lachlan plains was to be the ultimate redemption of that ‘cruel land from which the first white men fled with bitter words and repellant prophecies’.\textsuperscript{49}

In 1917, the New South Wales government conducted an official inquiry into rural land development. Driven by political pressures to increase agricultural production by intensifying rural populations, the Commission plotted an ‘experience line of profitable wheatgrowing’, showing the expanding agricultural frontier between 1904 and 1912 creeping across the central west of New South Wales. By 1912, the official limit of wheat-growing was extended some 50 miles beyond the 1904 line.\textsuperscript{50} The inquiry, meanwhile, was confronted with some unwelcome testimonies about crop failures by disgruntled wheat farmers who were tackling country where variable rainfall and recurring drought were the norm. In one case at Tullamore in the central Lachlan a share farmer suggested that, as he had barely produced a single crop, his could not be considered a ‘safe’ wheat-growing district. The Commission was undeterred. It concluded that agricultural production ought to be encouraged ‘by means of increased settlement...which the undeveloped lands of our State calls for’.\textsuperscript{51} Other promoters of agricultural development praised this part of the central Lachlan, suggesting that the former pastoral empire of Burrawang Station between Condobolin, Bogan Gate and Trundle were ‘high-class wheat lands’.\textsuperscript{52} By 1920, the areas of New South Wales and Victoria dedicated to wheat edged inland by 60 per cent.

With a run of favourable seasons aided by early-maturing wheat varieties, superphosphate, the practice of long-fallowing, and frequent cultivation to keep weeds at bay, wheat yields were on the rise. In a climate of stable wheat prices, demand from Great Britain after the war, and increasing wheat yields, wheat farming seemed to have conquered the environmental odds. In the aftermath of World War I, the

\textsuperscript{49} Milne ‘The awakening of the Lachlan Valley’, 18.


\textsuperscript{52} ‘Burrawang’, in McLeod, \textit{Condobolin and District}, 36.
Commonwealth and state governments initiated a jointly funded rehabilitation program for returning soldiers. In a mood that embraced both patriotism and a desire for intensified settlement, soldier settlement schemes became official policy throughout the British Empire. These schemes provided for governments to resume and subdivide land for allocation to returning soldiers. Whilst many of the soldier settlement blocks were established within irrigation districts, many were allocated in poorly-watered country where ‘semi-virgin’ blocks were shaved from extensive pastoral landholdings. By 1929, 11 million hectares of land across Australia had been earmarked for returned servicemen. The nation’s former soldiers became the unwitting vanguard of intensified land settlement policies, but many of their farming experiences were to be short-lived.53

While each state introduced its own form of soldier settlement, the problems inherent in the schemes were soon tragically evident. John Evans recalls his father’s block in the Murray Mallee of South Australia. His father was one of the soldier settlers granted land after World War One. Most of them had never farmed before, nor even saw their blocks before settling on them. ‘They were told their land would be the new granary of their State. Within 20 years, most of them were beaten, gone’.54 By 1929, one-quarter of all soldier settlers in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia had left their blocks.55 Amongst the litany of failure submitted as evidence in a 1927 Commonwealth inquiry into soldier settlement, it was abundantly clear that allotments were generally too small and inadequately developed to sustain a family in the more marginal wheat-growing areas, and that the capacity of the land for small-scale farming had been assessed rather too optimistically. By 1943, the Rural Reconstruction Commission estimated losses to the Commonwealth

53 The history of soldier settlement in Australia has received limited critical attention by historians. Apart from a number of historical accounts of specific soldier settlement schemes, Marilyn Lake’s The Limits Of Hope: Soldier Settlement in Victoria, 1915-1938 (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1987), remains the most comprehensive account at a broader level, although her work has been subject to critical review. See for example, Share, “‘Tickle it with a hoe’”, 209-220. As Share notes, historians have generally failed to critically analyse Australia’s closer settlement schemes, remaining in the ‘thrall’ of the pioneer legend.


55 Camm, Australians: a historical atlas, 84.
Government from the New South Wales scheme alone to be in the order of 45 million pounds. 56

A snapshot of Australia’s wheatlands in 1938 shows that the process of decline was a long, drawn-out affair plagued by drought and depression, and shaped by the different environmental and economic conditions prevailing across the vast arc of wheat-growing country. In the arable lands of South Australia, the ‘cradle’ of Australia’s wheatlands, wheat had already given way to fodder and barley crops. Meanwhile, more than 1.4 million hectares were planted in Western Australia in 1938, and those in the ‘safe’ farming areas who had survived the depression were quietly optimistic. The lower-rainfall areas of WA still struggled, however, with places like Bencubbin and Muckinbin relying on farm relief, and hundreds of farmers handing over their blocks to the Agricultural Bank. 57

Meanwhile, American geographer Isaiah Bowman had emerged as an influential advocate of experimental farming in areas considered to be marginal for commercial agriculture. In the aftermath of the First World War, Bowman developed the view that territorial aggression could be counteracted by opening up ‘new’ land for cultivation. At its heart, Bowman’s philosophy was inspired by the image of pioneering and experimentation. It was the old frontier ideal of the American West, repackaged as a vehicle of economic and social progress for marginal farmlands across much of central Africa, eastern Europe and Australia. By 1931, Bowman refined his ideas into a concept called the ‘science of settlement’, a form of social planning reminiscent of Australia’s closer settlement schemes informed, not by trial and error, but by accurate scientific data about climate and soils, and the development of scientific farming methods to suit particular environments. 58

Even as Bowman’s ideas were being formulated and tested in North America, a debate raged about the capacity of Australia’s inland to support continued expansion

56 Callaghan and Millington, The Wheat Industry In Australia, 27.
57 Bill Gammage, Peter Spearritt and Louise Douglas (eds), Australians 1938. In Australians: A Historical Library (Fairfax, Syme and Weldon Associates, Broadway, NSW, 1987), Volume 4, 258-70. Many of those struggling in the expanding wheatlands of Western Australia were British immigrants settled under the Empire Resettlement Scheme.
of settlement and projected population increases. According to one argument, Australia’s ‘vast empty spaces’ constituted a potential natural resource awaiting development. As the effects of economic depression began to be felt in the wheatlands, even the churches began weighing into the argument. The Methodist Church, for example, drew attention to the recent movement of experienced farmers from the New South Wales Riverina, Victoria and South Australia to the land around Condobolin in the central Lachlan, keen to demonstrate what could be accomplished under the scientific principles of dry farming in an inland region with an average if erratic annual rainfall of 17 inches. As we have seen, the notion of a frontier was never as explicit nor as nationally-inspired as in North America, but the concept of an expansionist agricultural frontier had certainly fired the public imagination in Australia. It bore a potent sense of engagement with the semi-arid inland, where small-scale farmers were portrayed as storm-troopers for a protracted struggle with the elements.

Those opposed to expanding inland settlement invoked the failures already apparent amongst a generation of farmers settled in marginal country, and pointed to instances where eroded soils showed the strain of decades of intensive cultivation. T. Griffith Taylor (1880-1963), an Australian geographer, was at the centre of a vitriolic and very public debate about the capacity of Australia’s environment to accommodate projected population increases. During the 1920s, as soldier settlement schemes again brought the closer settlement ideology into sharp focus, Taylor submitted a series of weekly reports to the Sydney Morning Herald calling for settlement policies to be guided by scientific and geographical appraisals of land capability. Taylor branded wholesale expansion of settlement inland as irrational, maintaining that nature had already defined the limits of settlement. Taylor’s views drew stinging rebuke. Daisy Bates accused him of slandering the pioneer settlers who embodied the very essence of the Australian character. In her opinion, ‘empirical testing [of the land] and national character were indivisible’. Others rejected the environmental determinism implicit in his arguments. But Taylor remained adamant that there were very real

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geographical limitations to land use in Australia. 'By 1890', he claimed in a book introduced by Isiah Bowman, 'Australia ceased to be a pioneer country in the sense that good land awaited the discoverer'. Sir Keith Hancock weighed into the argument in his 1930 history of Australia when he suggested that the temperate zone, particularly the coastal cities, would be the place where British immigrants chose to settle. Settler Australians had gained little, Hancock quipped, from their 'premature and expansive attempts to settle the interior'. Indeed, they found there was 'little room for them in the vast open spaces'.

In 1934, as global economic depression swept into Australia's inland, a government review of the south-eastern Australian wheatlands found farmers in marginal areas in serious financial difficulties. By this time, areas receiving winter (April to October) rainfall of 7.5 inches were thought to be within the limits of 'safe' wheat-growing country. Only beyond that did farming become precarious. Some argued that even these areas were too marginal for settlement, and ought to be withdrawn from cultivation altogether. Nevertheless, even critics of 'frontier' farming recognised that the expanding wheat frontier had become as much a social phenomenon as an environmental one. In the view of one geographer, governments might consider subsidising unprofitable farmers during market downturns, rather than relocating families who had already established themselves as viable communities. The Rural Bank of New South Wales also weighed into the argument, concerned by the increasing incidence of financial crisis amongst its farming customers. In a public circular issued in 1936, the bank denounced the so-called 'land boosters' and supported Taylor's view that the limits of agricultural settlement had already been emphatically reached.

But the concept of the inland plains as a void awaiting development continued to hold powerful sway in the public imagination, and it was regularly invoked during the

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63 Hancock, Australia, 1930.
interwar years by those pressing for agricultural expansion. MacDonald Holmes suggested that the image was an outmoded nineteenth century perception. Australia’s wide open spaces, he wrote, were ‘only valuable as they suggest new horizons, breadth of vision, freedom of thought and a spiritual release from the exactions of city life’. Land was synonymous with productivity, ‘those areas which can be made to produce something, or can be turned to account for individual or national welfare’. Unproductive land was ‘mere space’. Even townships would only be necessary in so far as they provided a convenient space to accommodate those who worked on the land, while services such as roads were intrusions upon the precious land resource and ought to be kept to a minimum.66

**Margins of the good earth**

In the Lachlan Valley, a period of intensive land settlement in the decade after World War I began to reshape the landscape. New blocks were taken up for cultivation and tree-clearing began in earnest. The availability of mallee country south of the river attracted particular attention. Pastoralists were keen to offload the ‘scrub’ country that held little value for them, and mallee blocks were enthusiastically surveyed and subdivided for selection. Throughout the 1920s, a network of small settlements began to take shape along the tentacles of railway linking Lake Cargelligo, Rankin Springs and Narradhan. Many of them were little more than sidings for storing and transporting wheat, while the surrounding country became the focus of intensive settlement. The South-West Closer Settlement Scheme, as it was known, involved the resumption and subdivision of large pastoral holdings. The possibility of acquiring relatively cheap ‘new’ land lured many new settlers to the region. Some of the blocks were reserved for allocation to soldier settlers. Other settlers ventured from the wheatlands in South Australia and Victoria, bringing with them the experience of dry farming forged in the mallee country of those states. Indeed, the apparent mobility of wheat farmers gave lie to the belief that closer settlement would create permanent communities of family farms.

In 1922 a young Tom Glasgow arrived with his father, who was enticed by an old school friend to buy a cheap block in the sparsely-settled sheep-grazing country at

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Tullibigeal. Tom described his father as 'a pioneer sort of bloke' who had previously laboured to clear land for farming at Rutherford in northern Victoria. The New South Wales government was in the process of ‘breaking up’ many of the large grazing properties in the central west, and Bygalorie was typical of these new estates. When Tom arrived in 1922, Bygalorie was a 60,000 acre sheep station with its own bakery, butchery and store. As subdivision proceeded over the next few years, the population of the district began to swell. Tom’s father found his selection was a 900-acre block, one quarter of which comprised rocky outcrops unsuitable for farming. Tom’s father managed to hold on to his block, and gradually he acquired additional land here and there as surrounding settlers abandoned theirs. Tom recounts the art of pulling down trees with horses, and his stories mirror the dramatic reshaping of what he calls a landscape ‘in the raw’. Homestead blocks were eagerly sought. Prospective farmers from Victoria were going so far as to advertise in local newspapers to purchase mallee blocks. A senior researcher with the New South Wales Department of Agriculture was optimistic that ‘this once despised mallee country is at last receiving the attention its possibilities warrant’.

It took up to ten years to remove all traces of mallee stumps and the suckers that insisted on regrowing vigorously during periods of fallow. In addition, the red loamy mallee soils were light and deep, without the layer of compacted clay subsoil necessary for growing wheat. Deep cultivation over several years was the only way to compact the soil, so ‘green timber’ blocks were considered a long-term proposition, taking up to six years to be ready for sowing the first crops. Virgin mallee farms had to be especially efficient because of the short growing season, poor moisture retention, and long period necessary for soil preparation. Tom Glasgow well remembers the New South Wales government resuming the pastoral property of

69 Hillston Hall Committee, Where The River Divides (Hillston, NSW, 1985).
70 E.S. Clayton, Senior Experimentalist, NSW Dept of Agriculture, 1 May 1929 cited in Hillston Hall Committee, 30.
71 Joint Volume of Papers Presented to the Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly, and ordered to be printed, 'Report of Committee appointed to inquire into the position of wheat farmers in the South-West portion of NSW. Second session, 1935' (Alfred James Kent, Government Printer, Sydney, 1936), Volume 1, 1935-36, 46.
Forest Vale near Tullibigeal to create a new estate consisting of about twenty 800 acre blocks.

Well, there wasn’t an acre cleared, there wasn’t a fence, there wasn’t a thing. They put all the cockies out here on 800 acre blocks and you got no bloody hope in the world... Nearly everyone went broke.  

Selectors of Forest Vale blocks were required to crop 300 acres and fallow 300. One old-timer once remarked to Tom, ‘All this country can grow is debts and kids’. Most had abandoned their blocks within the first decade. For many, this was a quick battle and hasty retreat. For surviving families like Tom’s, the narrative assumed a mythic quality, and the 1920s became enshrined in the collective local imagination as a heroic era. The overwhelming failure of many settlers underscored the triumph of those who remained. Within a single generation land was claimed, cleared, fenced, farmed and abandoned in dizzying succession. Many of those trying to farm the mallee country sowed twice their normal crops in the tenuously good years of the 1920s and 30s, only to have unseasonal rains, drought and grasshoppers wreak havoc in the intervening seasons. Between 1926 and 1933, crops failed with monotonous regularity, and farmers struggled to clear more and more land. In that period, the area under cultivation trebled. Every available space was sown to wheat. In 1930, the government promoted a ‘Grow More Wheat’ campaign amid a spate of low prices and unpredictable rainfall. The results were disastrous and farmers’ debts soared. The erratic seasons continued and in 1935, another drought year, the settlers who had acquired land under the South West Scheme were receiving more government relief than anywhere else in the state. 

The scenario was repeated across the dry country mallee regions of south-eastern Australia, caught up in a diabolical combination of economic depression, drought, and inadequate landholdings. In northern Victoria, closer settlement policies in the 1920s

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72 Interview with Tom Glasgow, 16 June 2001.
73 Glasgow, ‘Tullibigeal’s early history’.
created a string of new wheatlands settlements along the Millewa railway line in the relatively isolated mallee region between Mildura and Renmark on the River Murray. Settlers migrated from southern Victoria and South Australia, and the Empire Settlement Migration Scheme enticed farmers from as far away as the United Kingdom. Seven hundred farm blocks averaging 750 acres each were subdivided from pastoral leases established in the 1870s. By the 1950s, just 200 farmers remained in this furthest reach of the wheatlands in Victoria.

Closer settlement schemes had flourished during the 1920s, but their demise came abruptly. Global economic depression, beginning in 1929 and exacerbated by a lingering drought during the 1930s, brought many to their knees. Prices for agricultural products plummeted, and the New South Wales government hastily introduced a series of financial measures to support those farmers struggling to stay afloat. The Farmers Relief Act (1932) provided for the creation of the Farmers Relief Board and the Rural Reconstruction Board that were to play a crucial role in sustaining many family farms in the New South Wales wheatlands during the crisis years of the 1930s. Despite financial assistance, however, the environmental limitations of closer settlement in the central western plains persisted.

In retrospect, the advance of the wheat frontier into mallee country in the 1920s seemed destined to fail. Robinson described the New South Wales experience as a ‘tentative groping to the fringes of the mallee country’.75 The New South Wales Rural Reconstruction Commission was more overt in its criticism:

...those [blocks] settled on the outer margins of the wheat country, were the fruits of an over-optimism, and a failure to understand the true significance of climatic data.76

76 Rural Reconstruction Commission 1943, cited in Callaghan and Millington, The wheat industry in Australia, 26-27.
The plight of settlers in the region reached desperate proportions. By 1939, the Farmers Relief Board was wrestling with the fact that many of the new settler blocks were simply too small to remain viable in an area of variable rainfall. Nevertheless, the Committee of Review concluded that the climatic conditions experienced during the previous decade were an aberration, and the South West Scheme ought not to be judged as the ‘colossal failure’ it appeared to be. ‘This district, above all other parts of the State, needs good farming’.77 The government’s response was to declare a ‘Marginal Wheat Area’, embracing more than four million acres of land in the Counties of Nicolson and Dowling, the northern portion of Cooper and Sturt Counties, and the western half of Gipps County.78 Under the aegis of the Rural Reconstruction Board, individual farms were evaluated within the marginal area. Some were judged to be viable and the Board assumed responsibility for outstanding debts while the farm operations became subject to the Board’s control. Farmers whose blocks were deemed too small or poorly established were offered financial incentives to voluntarily vacate their blocks. Vacated blocks were then offered to neighbours at a reduced price, in order to encourage the amalgamation of blocks into larger properties. In Gubbata, near Lake Cargelligo, the 38 Homestead blocks gazetted in 1929 were amalgamated into just seven by 1960. In the Committee’s words, the reconstruction was to be a ‘weeding-out of settlers’ judged to be failures, reallocating their holdings to those considered to be making the best use of the land they had. The ‘personal element’ was deemed to be far more important than financial or environmental factors. The criteria for weeding out would be simple. Those who sought protection under the Farmers’ Relief Act 1935 were the farmers likely to be the least efficient and self-reliant, and so ought to be eliminated. The ideal of the hard-working yeoman that prevailed in the late nineteenth century was replaced by the concept of the ‘efficient’ farmer, embracing the principles of rational land management and applying the new scientific knowledge available.79


78 C.V. Lawlor, All This Humbug (Halstead Press, Sydney, 1959), 36.

79 The 1929 Royal Commission into the failure of war service schemes led by Mr Justice Pike concluded that many of the returned servicemen were simply ‘temperamentally unsuited to the
The closer settlement philosophy was beginning to look distinctly ragged around the edges. Many small farmers simply abandoned their holdings. Prolonged drought, combined with the ravages of rabbit plagues, brought the environmental consequences of settlement directly into people’s homes. Local histories of the Lachlan region are suffused with stories of the dust storms that raged across the inland. Twenty years earlier, settlers in the South-West Scheme had launched a massive campaign to clear and cultivate and closely settle the landscape. As the government implemented its reconstruction plans, the original 1,970 wheat farms slowly consolidated into 960 mixed wheat and livestock properties. The New South Wales government reported that the failure of the South-West Closer Settlement Scheme was, in the final analysis, a failure of farming practices rather than government policy. With the money for financial relief coming from the Commonwealth purse, it seemed that the New South Wales government could afford to promote closer settlement in the marginal wheatlands without having to address the financial consequences. Government policies of closer settlement and agricultural expansion bequeathed Australia its own ‘dust bowl’ in the marginal country of the south-east. Meanwhile, official responses apportioned blame to farmers for failing to be properly armed to deal with the environmental conditions. In Heathcote’s analysis, it would have been ‘political suicide’ for the states to confess that their closer settlement schemes had failed in the ‘marginal wheat lands’, and ‘to subsidise that failure would have led to economic ruin’. 

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life’. Pike was subsequently commissioned by the Rural Reconstruction Commission in 1943 to investigate the future of Australia’s rural industries and to formulate a Commonwealth War Service Land Settlement Scheme for those returning from service in World War Two. See Commonwealth of Australia, *The Farmer was a Fighting Man: The Story of War Service Land Settlement* (Minister for Post-War Reconstruction, Canberra, 17 October 1949). In his analysis of closer settlement discourses of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Share concludes that successful narratives were virtually written out of government and academic accounts, while failure and blame ‘powerfully skewed’ debates over the intensification of land use. See Share, “‘Tickle it with a hoe’”, 215, 262-263.

If, as Whitwell and Sydenham suggest, the early history of the Australian wheatlands was characterised by ‘triumph and tragedy intermingled’, official discourses adopted a decidedly rationalistic tone in the second half of the twentieth century. Gone was the romanticism of the wheatlands ‘frontier’ narrative. The Australian Wheat Board, established by the Commonwealth Government in 1939, assumed the lead in wheat marketing, centralised grain-handling, and agricultural research. Agricultural statistics plotted spectacular increases in wheat, wool, dairy, sugar, rice and coarse grain production during the 1950s and 1960s. Wheat production doubled in response to an increased post-war demand in Europe and Asia, whilst wool prices soared, generating 56 per cent of the value of all agricultural production in 1950-51. From 1958 severe drought, the worst experienced since the turn of the twentieth century, interrupted these ‘golden years’ of agriculture and pastoralism. Initially affecting central and northern Australia, Queensland, South Australia, and New South Wales, drought conditions were declared in south-eastern Australia from 1964 and 1968. Paradoxically, the wheatlands also expanded dramatically in this period, with three million hectares of land in Western Australia brought under cultivation as the rest of the wheat-growing regions struggled to recover from drought.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, Australia’s wheatlands were characterised by increasingly sophisticated farm mechanisation, greater involvement of agricultural science, and aggressive new government agricultural policies and programs. Farmers embraced new cultivation practices including chemical weed control, direct drilling of crops, and minimum tillage to minimise the damage to soil structure wrought by dry farming methods. During the 1970s, world wheat prices remained relatively stable and new export markets to the United Soviet Socialist Republic and China again instigated expansion of wheat production and further extensions to the inland perimeters of the wheatlands, particularly in Western Australia, Queensland, and the

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83 In 1955-56, for example, Australia produced 5.4 million tonnes of wheat, which was 720,000 tonnes greater than the average yield for the ten years between 1929-30 and 1938-39. Australia’s competitiveness increased with the creation of a national marketing scheme, the Wheat Stabilisation Plan, established in 1948 to represent wheat-farmers on the international market. The number of sheep increased from 96 million in 1946 to 113 million in 1950.
drier western plains of New South Wales. The area of land dedicated to wheat production fluctuated during the late twentieth century in response to world market conditions. In 1970 wheat production occupied 9.4 million hectares, and in 1984 it increased to 12.9 million hectares. In 1994-95 it had shrunk to 7.8 million hectares, and in 1999-2000, risen to 12.1 million hectares. The Australian Wheat Board’s monopoly ended with the deregulation of the market in 1989, and farmers began to organise their own marketing arrangements. With this new era of the wheatlands came a new lexicon of managerialism drawn from bureaucratic, corporate and scientific cultures of the late twentieth century. Terms such as ‘sustainability’ peppered discourses about agricultural development and rural decline. North of the Lachlan, commercial wheat-growing crept steadily westward after 1980, well beyond Condobolin. The town that had once marked the inland edge of the wheatlands was now at the centre of an expansive new wheat-growing area that had no apparent end in sight. In 2000, the silos at Condobolin received 216,000 tonnes, the largest grain receiveal ever recorded in the eastern states of Australia in a single season. Drought years aside, the central Lachlan seemed to have finally fulfilled its agricultural destiny.


Older wheat growing areas
New wheat growing areas
Native vegetation reserves

WHEATLAND
PART 2 — WHEATLAND

I walk out along a red earth track edging the grey floodplain. In this vast wheat paddock trees have been swept aside leaving a stout, elegant Kurrajong in silent contemplation - drought fodder, its browse lines clipped with neat precision by dust-hungry cattle. Trees make quite an impression in the wheat country. On indistinct horizons, the dark green blur of a tree-lined watercourse marks the separation of land from sky, tracing an ancient floodplain and paying no heed to neat fence-lines. A farmer tells me that, as long as there are trees on his horizon, he feels reassured that the country is in good shape. A line from Michael Meehan's novel about Victoria's Mallee comes to mind: 'The country shaved and broken and submitted to the square.' In the paddock to my left, freshly ploughed furrows gape open, blood-red throats waiting for rains that won't come. On my right, stunted Mallee trees line up to break the wind with feeble limbs, clinging obstinately to ancient dunes. Rolled and crushed and

Burnt, the indestructible mallee holds obstinately to the earth and sprouts eternal. Trees and settlers have had a volatile marriage, their relationship born of bare necessity, their destinies inevitably entwined. Now both are tentatively rooted in the fate of this landscape.

Part Two — Wheatland
Chapter 3. Ties that bind

Memories link us to place, to time and to nation: they enable us to place value on our individual and our social experiences, and they enable us to inhabit our own country.\(^2\)

Dorothy Press vividly remembers the small communities that populated the pastoral landscape.\(^3\) When her grandfather selected 10,000 acres of land fronting the Lachlan River in 1890, prospective landholders were eagerly rallying to claim the fruits of closer settlement laws. At this time, the colonial government was progressively dissecting the pastoral empires and advertising them for occupancy under a system of conditional purchase or leasehold. In 1911, Dorothy’s grandfather took up the lease for Micabil, subdivided from the old Micybil Station, and another 30,000 acres cut from Melrose Station. Kiakatoo Station was located a few kilometres along the river from her family’s property. She can recall when Kiakatoo had up to eight permanent employees and their families living in their own houses on the property. It functioned as a small, self-sufficient community providing basic goods and services.

The pastoral legacy of the central Lachlan resonates strongly in this part of the wheatlands. Dorothy catalogues some of the big stations in the area.

There’s a big one on the Parkes Road at Yarabandi, I think they used to have 40 or 50 stands at one stage. Then there was old Burrawong woolshed. That was one of the early properties here. I think it’s gone now, but that had 100 stands and there would be probably 400 people employed there at shearing times.\(^4\)

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4. Interview with Dorothy Press, 4 April 2001. The history of Burrawong is discussed in Chapter 10.
The local pastoral empires are fondly remembered by older farmers. The pastoral industry generated a huge demand for labour, typically employing and accommodating a core group of permanent workers and their families, and the stations were the nucleus of social and working life for many settlers. Amongst the older generation of farmers in the central Lachlan, where social memory reaches back to the early twentieth century, farming is merely a more recent phase of a longer story. Many of these older farmers pioneered wheat-growing. Some are the children of those who took up grazing blocks in the late nineteenth century, and introduced cropping in the early twentieth century. Others still migrated from older, nutritionally-exhausted areas of the wheatlands to start afresh on less favourable, but cheaper land. In their stories the sparsely settled pastoral landscape seemed even more vibrant and populated than the closely-settled farming blocks that succeeded them. Long after their demise as places of work, they remain central characters in local stories.

The pastoral landscape of the Lachlan Valley has acquired legendary status amongst aficionados of Australian folk music. Bob Small recounts how Wooyeo was the main station in the district around Lake Cargelligo in the nineteenth century, before it was ‘totally cut up’. He can picture the Wooyeo homestead in the 1950s: a huge sturdy building constructed almost entirely of shingleback logs, boasting some thirty rooms. The woolshed was on a similar scale, with its 51 shearing stands, a few of which were still in use during the early 1960s. ‘When I was a lad’, he recalls, ‘many of the older generation spoke of the great woolshed dances that were held in the Wooyeo woolshed’. It was immortalised in Australian folklore with a song written in 1888:

O, who hasn’t heard of Euabalong Ball,
Where the lads of the Lachlan, the great and the small,
Come bent on diversion from far and from near
To shake off their troubles for just once a year?

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5 Jane Ellis, Canberra, pers. comm. 2003.
7 First verse from ‘Euabalong Ball’ in J.S. Manifold (compiler), The Penguin Australian Song Book (Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, 1964), 99. The song was also known as the ‘Wooyeo Ball’, and a focus group of farmers interviewed in Lake Cargelligo confirmed that it
James Cowan and Colin Beard travelled the length of the Lachlan River just to find it so that they could know the feeling of standing on the board of that grand old woolshed. ‘For us, it would be a chance to discover something about ourselves as well. Something, we believed, that would allow us to renew contact with our origins.’ They found the old woolshed in the midst of a wheat paddock of blood-red earth, ‘a derelict Parthenon of split timber, galvanized iron and rotting fence-posts’ bearing mute witness to the slow inland waltz of closer settlement and the shifting inner margins of the wheatlands. The building assumed mythological proportions and, in local memory at least, it still echoes with sounds of the Euabalong Ball.

When Rodney Harrison analysed statutory heritage listings associated with the history of Australia’s pastoral industry, he condemned what he called the ‘woolsheds and homesteads’ approach by heritage management agencies. This model, he argued, focused on the prominent built structures of pastoralism, and ignored the lives of Aboriginal people and non-Indigenous pastoral workers and their families. It reflected the emphasis given by heritage agencies to conserving fabric, rather than recognising the ‘wider social and labour histories’ of pastoralism. Harrison’s main concern was to explicitly address Aboriginal people’s attachment to the ‘historic heritage of the pastoral industry’. But, whilst his criticism of the ‘woolsheds and homesteads’ approach is valued and long overdue, it is an inescapable fact that these ageing icons of the wheatlands are held in high esteem by local farmers and Indigenous people.

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was indeed the inspiration for the song. Euabalong is a nearby settlement on the Lachlan River. The surrounding district was known for a time as the Whoey Shire. See Douglas Stewart and Nancy Keesing (eds), *Old Bush Songs And Rhymes Of Colonial Times*. Enlarged and revised from the collection of A.B. Paterson (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1976 [1957]).


9 Cowan and Beard, *The River People*, 263.

10 Discussion with Lake Cargelligo focus group, 12 December 2001. See Plate 1.

This affection has heightened as the old buildings are made redundant with the changing scale, techniques, and standards of modern wool production.\(^\text{12}\)

Dorothy Press remembers the familiar sights and sounds of the woolshed on her family’s property:

I used to spend a lot of time out there waiting to take sheep away, and that had a special feeling too. Just as though you belonged there...the smell of it, and the noise of the machinery, and the men shouting at one another, and the cook coming over with a cup of tea.\(^\text{13}\)

Whilst the heritage management agencies might, as Harrison suggests, emphasise their architectural value, the woolsheds are valued in social memory as the symbol of a past era of social life and ‘community’ centred on the old pastoral stations. In a century in which the landscapes and social organisation of the wheatlands have been undergoing constant change, such places serve to anchor people in time and place.

**A place like Yaddra**

On a winter’s evening in 2002 ten friends, all local farmers, settled in for a reflective post-dinner conversation about the landscape they call home. Most of the group were related by blood or marriage. Some had attended the same one-roomed schoolhouse at Yaddra in the central Lachlan Valley, part of the wheatlands of New South Wales. Settlement and farming activity had intensified in the first decades of the twentieth century, enclosing the pastoral landscapes of the Lachlan Valley into wheat paddocks and weaving new threads into the social fabric. The forms of transport available in the years before World War Two limited the distances that farming families could travel for social events, and consolidated the small wheatlands settlements as the nucleus of community life. Railway lines knitted across the central western plains of New South Wales, creating a network of tiny settlements in their wake. Typical of the wheatlands across southern Australia, many were little more than grain receival centres dotted at regular intervals along the line, their presence signalled by a cluster of cylindrical

\(^{12}\) See Chapter 4, Silent Country, for reference to Aboriginal pastoral workers in the central Lachlan.
grain silos and a few modest cottages. At its peak in the 1960s, the Yaddra schoolhouse boasted up to 17 pupils. It drew children from a nine-mile radius, and the local families used to get together for bonfires in June, a concert and tree at Christmas time. Parents taught children to swim at the weir in Booberoi Creek. They would play tennis on Sundays. Then there were sports days, cricket games, community picnics, dances at local halls. Places like Yaddra seemed to be everywhere then, the fruits of closer settlement policies that had been sown by successive state governments since the turn of the century.

In the aftermath of World War Two, the Rural Reconstruction Commission embarked on a national program of agricultural expansion. Agricultural communities had been dissipated by two decades of economic depression, war and drought, and the fate of the nation seemed to rest with their well-being. The Australian Government was keen to instil a sense of confidence in the nation’s economic fortunes, and the wheatlands were to be part of the solution. Even as the Second World War raged, it was assumed that agriculture would be central to the economic and emotional revitalisation of the nation. The government’s strategy involved a variety of subsidies and bounties to assist farmers. The strategy coincided with an escalating demand for wool and wheat on international markets. It was a period in which technological and scientific advances offered farmers the means of increasing productivity and overcoming environmental problems, including rabbit plagues and soil deficiencies that had so troubled them before the war. It was also a period in which climatic conditions became more amenable to agriculture in south-eastern Australia.  

The post-war years provided the nation with a renewed sense of agricultural destiny. Indeed, farmers in Western nations generally emerged from the Second World War in a ‘state of grace’, linking their own survival with national interests.  

By 1950, wool and wheat combined accounted for nearly half of Australia’s rural

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13 Interview with Dorothy Press, 4 April 2001.
economy, and provided up to 90 per cent of Australia’s rural exports. Market prices and farmer incomes soared. Rural social reform was central to the government’s strategy. Social reforms focused on modernisation, decentralisation, and civic progress, and the social calendars of local farming communities began to swell with civic events and celebrations. Institutions like the agricultural show and the Country Women’s Association became the hallmarks of community cohesiveness and stability. Indeed, one of the CWA’s objectives was to arrest rural population drift to the city and make country life more attractive.16 Almost every farm owned a wireless by then, and families tuned in daily for news and entertainment.17 The Australian Broadcasting Commission obliged them with shows such as the ‘Country Hour’, launched on 3 December 1945. It provided up-to-date information dedicated to farmers and graziers, including weather, market reports, and local and international developments in agriculture to help ‘the man on the land’. They were televised at lunch-time to enable farmers to tune in. Long-running serials such as The Lawsons, then Blue Hills, not only entertained but also helped to promote cultural values and stereotypes about rural life.18 Farm journals came into their own, with feature pages on everything from agricultural machinery to recipes. In Western Australia, The Farmers’ Weekly championed farming as a way of life for young people, devoting a weekly page to the Junior Farmers Federation bearing the motto ‘The Earth is Ours’. In 1952, the former Director of Agriculture in Western Australia, Dr G.L. Sutton, published a history of the western wheat belt, exhorting farmers to fulfil their moral duty to produce food for the world. He praised the early settlers who had turned the ‘forest wilderness’ into ‘well-ordered farms and gardens’.19 In an address to the Junior Farmers Federation, he


17 Ken Inglis observed that the wireless became part of everyday life in Australia between 1924 and 1928. K.S. Inglis, assisted by Jan Brazier, This is the ABC: the Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1932-1983 (Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1983), 9.

18 Inglis, This is the ABC, 154. The Country Hour also promoted agricultural education, in consultation with the ABC’s Rural Department.

suggested that those present ‘adopt the same spirit, with the determination to use your land to serve Australia and the world anxious for food – more food. In that way you will serve yourselves also, and carry on the torch of glorious progress, which your parents have lit for you.’

When the acclaimed Australian poet and author, Judith Wright, penned an essay on ‘Country Towns’ in the 1960s she invoked life in an imaginary country town. ‘As you drive along the country roads through Australia’s country towns, you may sometimes wonder why they were built where they are, what people do for a living…’. Hers was a vibrant community. Full employment, diverse rural industries, and sociable sale days prevailed. According to Wright, it was ‘a prosperous and cheerful place to live in’. Local inhabitants were ‘enterprising and friendly, or retiring and quiet’ and, above all, resourceful and satisfied. Their town was small enough to know everyone. Wright’s cheerful account formed part of a series of articles published by Oxford University Press under the banner, ‘Life in Australia’. The series was undoubtedly pitched at prospective post-war migrants, Wright’s contribution serving to promote the image of post-war Australia as an agricultural idyll and to illustrate the pivotal role that the countryside still played in the life of its inhabitants. It also mirrored a prevailing sense of abundance and social status in rural communities during the post-war era.

In reality, however, extended drought and severe economic stress were never very far beneath the surface of rural life. ‘Rural decline’ had shadowed rural development since the end of the nineteenth century, when governments realised that

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21 Judith Wright, *Country Towns* (Oxford University Press, London, 1963). I am distinguishing here between ‘town’ as the main centre of population, commerce and services of a district, and rural area meaning the non-urban landscape, including small settlements and farms, generally having a population of less than 200 people. See footnote 3 in Chapter 1. I am not concerned here with examining rural towns in any detail, other than to draw on historical references as a means of deciphering the often less explicit social changes occurring in the surrounding farming areas.

22 Wright, *Country Towns*, 10-24, 32.
they would have to become more actively involved if Australia was to achieve a ‘permanent prosperity’ in the countryside. Indeed, an historical perspective reveals that the ‘rural crisis’ of the 1990s was merely another phase in a century-long struggle to establish sustainable rural communities in inland Australia.\(^{23}\) Certainly, as successive government inquiries revealed during the 20\(^{th}\) century, wheatlands communities were never convinced that their destiny was permanent prosperity. Even as the Commonwealth Government was aggressively promoting agricultural development as the elixir of national prosperity, an undercurrent of anxiety persisted in the southern agricultural regions of inland Australia. In the 1930s and 1940s, a diabolical combination of drought and economic depression had ravaged wheatlands communities. In the early 1930s, the Commonwealth Government’s Royal Commission on the wheat, flour and bread industries dealt at length on the ‘conditions of adversity’ amongst Australia’s 70,000 wheat farmers, and the role of government relief in keeping them on the land.\(^{24}\)

In the midst of World War Two, The University of Melbourne’s School of Agriculture conducted two surveys of social conditions and attitudes in rural Victoria. One focused on country towns, and the other on farms.\(^{25}\) These wartime studies offered a raw snapshot of daily life in towns and farms across the wheatlands in mid-twentieth century Australia. People worried about whether their town or district would have a function once the war ended, and they felt keenly the centralisation of administrative powers. Civic progress associations and closer settlement schemes were on fertile ground here. The McIntyres, for example, highlighted the nexus between the fate of the towns and the farms that surrounded them. ‘The two interact on one another’, they observed. ‘Failure of agriculture means, ultimately, failure of the towns dependent on it’. Conversely, the failure of a town as a social centre

\(^{23}\) Graeme Davison, ‘Rural sustainability in historical perspective’, in Chris Cocklin and Jacqui Dibden (eds), *Sustainability and Change in Rural Australia* (University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2005), 38-55.


impacted on the ‘mental attitude of farming families’. Rural farming regions were socially divided, conservative, and culturally impoverished. And if the inhabitants of country towns were isolated, the social prospects for families living on farming blocks were positively bleak. Holt described how farming families were suspicious of town people. They even preferred to use the telephone to talk to their neighbours who, by now, were more widely dispersed as farmers acquired more land to remain economically viable. Women living on farms were, he concluded, virtually ‘social hermits’. ‘One cannot be other than impressed by the isolation which smudges with a dirty finger almost all the fabric of the social organisation of the wheat areas’. Notwithstanding that 83 per cent of those interviewed expressed satisfaction with farm life, Holt concluded that isolation aggravated the social divisions between town and farm inhabitants.

Similarly in New South Wales, a sociological study of dairy farming communities in the same period found ‘mental isolation and narrowness of outlook’ prevailed amongst the poorer communities that were still to catch up with modern forms of communication and transport. This isolation had created a ‘cultural stagnation’ amongst these communities, manifesting not only in a conservative outlook but also in a lack of interest shown in the past and in the community’s history. Indeed one of the distinguishing factors between the social classes, according to the author, was a tendency for the more prosperous families to preserve and be conscious of historical sites and stories as ‘the most powerful means of maintaining separate identity’ and a sense of continuity and belonging.

Don Aitken later used the term ‘countrymindedness’ to refer to a heightened sense of solidarity and common struggle amongst rural people in the face of economic

26 McIntrye, Country Towns of Victoria, v-vi.
27 Holt, Wheat Farms of Victoria, 175-6. In his recommendations, Holt cited the success of the European village model, and urged the Victorian government to actively encourage farmers to ‘agglomerate’ into towns where urban amenities and social opportunities already existed. The recommendation was not pursued as a policy, although improved roads and motor transport did eventually have the same effect in some areas.
28 Jean I. Craig, ‘Some Aspects of Life in Selected Areas of Rural New South Wales’, M.A. Thesis, The University of Sydney, 1944, 14. Craig concluded from Census data that rural villages and small towns had stagnated in rural New South Wales between 1911 and 1933, contrasting with the growth experienced in larger towns (45).
uncertainties and social change. Countrymindedness, he suggested, provided the impetus for the formation of the Country Party in 1925. At its core was the belief that rural policies ought to be concerned with agricultural development and prosperity. It carried the message that agricultural workers (specifically male, Anglo-Saxon workers) were noble and virtuous, helping to create prosperity for all Australians through their efforts to render the land productive. The concept of countrymindedness provided a perfect extension of the pioneer legend into the twentieth century, perpetuating the myth that Australia’s true national character was nurtured in the struggle to colonise the land and reap its bounty.

The agricultural boom of the 1950s and 1960s seemed all the sweeter for the difficulties of the preceding decades. For farmers who grew up in this period, it certainly seemed like a ‘golden age’ reflecting the full flowering of the closer settlement ideology and the pioneer legend. The difficulties and failures of the 1930s and 1940s were deeply etched into the memories of farmers, but the solutions offered by technology and science empowered them to reinvent the heroic pioneering narrative as their own. The idealised image of the technically-skilled, hard-working and, above all, independent farmer was central to the rhetoric of decentralisation and rural development. The image was grounded in the knowledge that the independent farming family would be ably assisted, not by workers, but by improved farming technology and the application of scientific research to increase productivity and prosperity.

It developed into a powerful touchstone for social memory, looming out of a dark period in which drought and soil erosion had quite literally blackened the inland skies.

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and stirred up vitriolic debates about whether Australia had an agricultural destiny at all. The mid-twentieth century crystallised in local memory as the period in which the normative state of Australian agriculture was achieved. Nevertheless, even as governments continued to resume swathes of pastoral land for resettlement of returning servicemen and their families on small-scale farming blocks, the doctrines of closer settlement were starting to unravel. ‘The irony’ notes Nicholas Brown ‘was that, despite the relative rural prosperity of the fifties, the self-employed farmer and his civic-minded wife presided over a highly mechanised (and often generously subsidised) enterprise at the beginning of a steady decline in both the rural labour force... and in the commercial infrastructure of rural society... coupled to a gradual increase in farm size’.32

In the central Lachlan wheatlands, nostalgia for the apparently easy comforts of the post-war decades is palpable. Farmers wistfully recall shorter working hours, and especially more time and opportunity for social gatherings. Most of the places that people value are intimately connected with extended family and neighbours, born of the shared legacy of creating a farm in ‘new’ country. They locate their identity in small-scale farming and an intimate sense of community, the epitome of closer settlement ideology. Local histories lovingly detail the evolution of civic organisations, and the importance of cultural activities.33 Sporting activities were one of the most important forms of regular social gatherings, at a time when vehicles were more likely to be the old farm truck or bicycle. Indeed, sporting teams distinguished these close-knit communities from one another, and sporting events were hotly contested. With rough roads and long distances between towns, the amenities of closer settlement provided the opportunity for social interaction.

32 Brown, Governing Prosperity, 150.
Vermont Hill, Melrose, they had little tennis days, every 20 miles or so there’d be a little tennis court, and they were as active as anything. Kiakatoo, they were all over the place.\textsuperscript{34}

Kiakatoo reflects the nature of social change occurring across the wheatlands during the twentieth century. It began as a pastoral run called Kyagarthur, established under The Waste Lands Act in 1846. It passed to the Commercial Banking Company in 1879.\textsuperscript{35} Following further subdivision, a 13,000 acre block called Kiakatoo was taken up by John Brewer who built the homestead. By 1889 the run was again taken over by the Commercial Banking Company, and the Kiakatoo Pastoral Holding embraced Kyagarthur, North Kyagarthur, Mickabill, North Mickybill and Flanagan’s Swamp East Runs.\textsuperscript{36} In 1902 it was subdivided into five 16,296 acre blocks known as the Kiacatoo Leasehold Area and passed through several ownerships including, by the 1990s, the Kidman Corporation established as a pastoral dynasty by Sir Sydney Kidman. Just after the Second World War, the local community around the Kiacatoo railway siding built themselves a hall. It was a humble tin shed surrounded by sheep pasture, but it became the focus of community events. At the end of the twentieth century, it still provided a meeting place for local groups such as the Country Women’s Association. Dorothy Press talks about the hall, just down the road from her family’s farm.

The shed on Kiakatoo was a dance hall...they used to be great, those. And they were special places because they were where everybody congregated. Quite a lot of the places used to have balls. These little communities used to have a hall and a tennis court. Somebody would give a bit of land, and then these things would be put up on it, because that was our only entertainment then.\textsuperscript{37}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{34} Interview with Allan Helyar, 5 April 2001.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Bayley, \textit{Down the Lachlan Years Ago}.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Kiakatoo Pastoral Holding, Leasehold Area 33, County of Cunningham.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Interview with Dorothy Press, 4 April 2001.
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The local hall was a social lifeline for local communities, a place where people separated by property fences could meet. Many were built by farmers using donated materials. These little halls gradually replaced ageing woolsheds as the twentieth century symbol of community spirit and connectedness. They provided the venue for local club meetings, rural celebrations, shows and, perhaps most memorable of all, local balls and dances. In the post-war decades, dances were ‘overwhelmingly the most popular form of social recreation in rural Australia’, and the very identity of a district could depend on their survival. O’Shea examined 12 examples of district halls, observing that all had the same general features: a dance floor and stage, supper room, kitchen and cloakrooms. Some were dedicated to local people who had served in the two World Wars. All served as the focus for community clubs and associations, concerts, school picnics, and dances, a place where people separated by property boundaries, could meet. Without them, as one of O’Shea’s interviewees put it, ‘you seem to lose your district’s identity somehow.’

In the wheatlands, the heartland of rural decline, memory illuminates the social significance, rather than the agricultural or commercial viability, of the farming landscape, and locates it in those places most closely associated with social interaction and a sense of community. ‘Suddenly’, David Lowenthal remarked when writing about similar processes of rural decline in Europe, ‘landscape seems to be everywhere... The locus of memory lies more readily in place than in time, in locale than in epoch. In the shift from centralised history toward dispersed patrimony, landscape seems the seat of collective memory, rooted as it is in specific sites and suffused with the quotidian and the communal’. Echoing through local stories in the central Lachlan is a sense of regret that such connections are eroding, not only materially, but in the collective memory of the district. Their decay underscores the

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38 Helen O’Shea, ‘Country Halls’, in Gwenda Beed Davey and Graham Seal (eds), The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore (Open University Press, Melbourne, 1993), 73. She has also written about the social history of particular district halls. See, for example, Helen O’Shea, ‘The Golspie Hall’, in Meanjin, 47(4), 1998, 701-8, and ‘Kylie does her deb’, in Meanjin, 51(1), 1992, 123-68.


40 David Lowenthal, ‘European landscape transformations: The rural residue’, in Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi (eds), Understanding Ordinary Landscapes (Yale University Press, New Haven
apparent erosion of things that were once valued, the sense of loss sharpened by a perceived weakening of community ties. It suggests that the unravelling of small settlements and closely settled farmland fractured any sense of a shared destiny, however illusory that may have been. As one of the Yaddra group remarks:

The people play a huge part in your association with the land, your neighbours, friends... they’re all doing the same thing, they’re farming, we’re all in the same boat. 41

Writing about American urban life, Dolores Hayden argued that the fracturing of the relationship between history and memory has generated a sense of disjunction between past and present. Social memory revealed through story-telling, she argues, serves an important function in making the past comprehensible, particularly for those groups that have been marginalised in dominant historical narratives. 42 By locating social memory in place, she suggests, we gain the greatest insights into the ‘human ability to connect with both the built and natural environments’, helping people to define their shared ‘public pasts’ and represent them to outsiders who seek to understand the physical and social history of an area. Edward Casey’s term, ‘place memory’, captures this idea. ‘It is the stabilising persistence of place as a container of experiences that contributes so powerfully to its intrinsic memorability. An alert and alive memory connects spontaneously with place, finding in it features that favour and parallel its own activities’. 43

In the rural landscape, particular places trigger social memory and assume a subtle, but heightened significance for the wider community. This is the essence of the heritage concept of social significance, as played out in the farming landscapes of Australia’s wheatlands. Links between people and place run deep, regardless of the temporal scale involved. In a landscape where the past is counted in two or three

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41 Robin Sanderson in interview with Anne Coffey and Robin Sanderson, 4 March 2001.
generations, the Yaddra group locate a sense of community in small-scale farming, intersecting interests and common destinies. The places most closely associated with a sense of community reverberate in local stories. Even as people relinquish their farms, social ties and a sense of community continue to play a crucial part in the farming landscape. Everyone in the group regrets that the stories, and the places they inhabit, are disappearing. Most of the places mentioned are intimately connected with extended family and neighbours. They render social differences and exclusions irrelevant to the more powerful myth of community cohesion and identity.

There are places like Yaddra all through the wheatlands. In the central and northern ‘wheatbelt’ of Western Australia, for example, the populations of Tammin, Kellerberrin and Trayning Shires declined dramatically from the 1970s. A study of social change in these western wheatlands found ‘the shrivelling of a sense of community’ amongst farmers. It seemed that, as agriculture became ever more productive, farming communities were becoming ever less viable. The result, concluded McKenzie, was a ‘tearing of the social fabric’ of the wheatlands, with particular implications for the nation’s economic and environmental well-being. When Arthur Williamson reflected on the growth of large-scale farming in his district around Quambatook in Victoria’s northern mallee wheatlands in the 1980s, he declared that the ‘dream-time that we’ve been through is past’.

Perhaps one reason for the emphatic referencing to a diminished sense of community, symbolised in derelict woolsheds and abandoned tennis courts of the central Lachlan, may be found in the mobility of farming life in Australia’s wheatlands. Migration stories figure prominently amongst the farmers of the central Lachlan. Indeed, the movement of farmers, from South Australia into the Wimmera

44 Main, ‘Social history and impact on landscape’, 53.
45 Fiona Haslam McKenzie, ‘Where do people fit in the rural equation?’, in Bill Pritchard and Phil McManus (eds), *Land of Discontent: The Dynamics of Change in Rural and Regional Australia* (University of New South Wales Press Ltd, Sydney, 2000), 81, 87. McKenzie conducted interviews amongst people in the Central Wheatbelt of Western Australia.
and Mallee regions of Victoria, and into southern New South Wales in the early twentieth century, was a defining characteristic of the expanding wheatlands ‘frontier’. For many of those who settled in the central Lachlan, family associations with the wheatlands began in another place, and the ties that bind people in this landscape offer a heightened sense of stability and belonging. Putting down roots is a recurring theme in historical accounts of land settlement, and it surfaces in local stories. As the Yaddra group ponders the experience of change, they talk as survivors of the ‘onslaught of economic, environmental and cultural transformations’. By the end of the century, young people had left the land in droves. City-based corporations occupied large tracts of country. Farming families enjoyed the increased mobility that comes with car ownership and regular bus services to the larger towns, previously considered too far away. Administrative and service centres such as Condobolin survived, but only at the expense of the smaller settlements. New methods of farming and marketing also play their part in a pervasive sense of irreversible change.

Around the table, the farmers move closer to the collective mud-map of their district, adding their individual place memories in fragmented stories. The Yaddra school site is now not much more than a group of stumps, a gate, trees, a flagpole. It still serves to give this group of farmers a potent sense of connection, with the past, with each other, and with the landscape. The American social theorist, Lucy Lippard, observed that people in small communities tend to know their places and see them in fragments, through stories and photographs, rather than within any larger historical framework. In their stories, even chores on the family farm embraced the notion of community. Neighbours and friends would gather to help someone clear a ‘back paddock’ or finish a harvest. Now, they see each other more often at agricultural training days, or the increasingly frequent property clearance sale. Dwindling town populations are more commonly cited as indicators of rural decline, but it is the

47 Kate Darian-Smith, ‘Up the country’, 99.
fragmentation of local community beyond the towns that touches the raw nerve for these farmers.

The Yaddra group mourns the loss of local gatherings, the diminished opportunities for socialising. As the locus of social memory, the relics of closer settlement have come to emphasise feelings of irreversible change and rural abandonment in the wheatlands. Each interview in this farming landscape yields a litany of lost places.

There’s the same sort of thing as what I’m talking about all through that country between Narromine and Tullamore and Tullamore and Condo. There’s old tennis courts and you look at them and you think, ‘Gee, people used to come out on Saturdays and Sundays in their whites and that court was immaculately groomed and with lines all on it’. Now the bloody fences are falling over and the net posts are there, but if you put a net on them it’d pull them down. I hate it. I absolutely hate it because it’s an era that’s finished.50

Places of belonging, often generated within just two or three generations, are powerful mediators between present and past. Within their own lifetimes, traces of early settlement have been ploughed under the paddocks, left to the elements, or dismantled, the materials reused for other more urgent or practical purposes. The material culture of settlement is rendered surprisingly ephemeral in working agricultural landscapes.51 Like the woolsheds of an earlier era, places like Yaddra are signifiers of social change, their demise sharpening local perceptions of eroded values and community. A former president of the Ootha Landcare group muses that people are now seeking alternative ways to maintain their social connections, the quest to stay on the land becoming the common bond.

50 Interview with Allan Helyar, 5 April 2001.
51 The opposite appears to be the case in the United States, where rural farmhouses, barns, and one-roomed schools are often better preserved as examples of rural vernacular architecture than urban buildings that are subject to greater developmental pressures. Hayden, The Power of Place, 30-1.
I always said that that was one of the reasons why the Landcare group went so well, because people were missing that tie with their neighbours.\(^52\)

The relics of closer settlement offer stark evidence of rural change. They also provide fertile ground for the mythological flourishing of a golden age, where social divisions melted away and a sense of community prevailed. The farmers of Yaddra demonstrate that links between places, people, and feelings of belonging run deep. With the death of each ‘old-timer’, the departure of another farming family, the disappearance of places like Yaddra, historical understanding has become embedded in the landscape, and mobilised through social memory.

**Place memory**

The relationship between local places and decline in rural Australia has been the subject of several important studies in recent years.\(^53\) In Australia, as in other Western countries, local place studies were common in the 1950s and 1960s. During the 1970s, however, scholars turned to more abstract analyses of local institutions and political structures as a way of approaching the study of social change.\(^54\) Historians and

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\(^52\) Robert Sanderson in interview with Robert and Kerry Sanderson 5 April 2001. Max Bourke has also made the point that Landcare was perhaps more successful in social terms than as a force for environmental repair in farming land. Max Bourke, pers. comm., 27 August 2004.


\(^54\) For much of the twentieth century, geographers were pre-eminent in research on how the physical geography of a place shaped its character and the people who inhabited it. John A. Agnew, 'The
sociologists, in particular, favoured the study of race, gender and social class, drawing on places as the setting or backdrop for social processes and relationships. This work paid little attention to the specificities of place, or the way in which people’s behaviour and perceptions were influenced by place. Read refers to a ‘sociological obsession’ with national identity, in which class and community were paramount, and local places and attachments to place were dismissed as parochial.\(^{55}\) In rural regions, the relevance of place research declined in line with shrinking rural town populations and the fragmentation of small farming settlements.\(^{56}\) By the 1980s, the study of social life in rural Australia had become emphatically empirical, drawing on statistical measurement and analysis to interpret models of human behaviour. These positivistic methods of research, and assumptions about the homogeneity of modern societies, down-played the cultural significance of place in everyday life. In particular, they dismissed personal experiences and meanings as subjective and not easily accommodated within scientific paradigms.\(^{57}\)

The pendulum moved again in the 1990s with new theories emerging about the devaluation of place in the modern world.\(^{58}\) Emphasis on global relationships rekindled interest in the plight of local communities, and the study of people’s connections to places emerged as an important key to understanding social behaviour and self-identity.\(^{59}\) Innovations in communication and transport technologies, for

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\(^{56}\) Agnew and Duncan, *The Power Of Place*, 4


example, had delivered enormous benefits to rural communities in the second half of
the twentieth century, but they also challenged people’s capacity to absorb rapid
social change. Massey and Jess referred to the ‘constant interconnections’ between
economics, culture and ecology in determining why people hold certain views about
their sense of place in the world. Various theories were suggested in order to explain
the complex relationships between people and the physical world. Phenomenology,
for example, represented a way of investigating the ‘lived world’ by means of
deciphering the spatial and physical aspects of place to reveal the underlying social
meanings, behaviour and experiences. The concept, developed by Edward Husserl,
was described by Martin Heidegger as ‘the process of letting things manifest
themselves’.

Edward Relph drew on such theoretical discourses to develop his thesis about the
eclipse of place and community in modern societies. He argued that this devaluation
of place had resulted in a ‘placeless geography’. Whilst Dolores Hayden criticised
Relph’s notion of placelessness because it failed to acknowledge the process of loss
and its consequences, both were concerned with the role of global communications
and technology in fragmenting people’s connections with places. Distinctive places,
suggested Relph, provided people with a sense of security and identity, a feeling of
‘rootedness’ or belonging that had significant implications for the well-being of
individuals and groups of people. Such theories represented a wider concern
amongst scholars in the social sciences and humanities to put people back into the
landscape, and to link physical locality with cognitive and emotional experience.


Doreen Massey and Pat Jess (eds), A Place In The World: Places, Cultures And Globalisation.

David Seamon and Robert Mugerauer (eds), Dwelling, Place And Environment: Towards A

Hayden, The Power Of Place, 18.

Relph, Place and placelessness, 56-8. Also see Rose in Massey and Jess, A Place In The World?,
88; Entrikin, ‘Place, region and modernity’, 34.

Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion Of Space In Critical Social Theory (Verso, London
and New York, 1989). David W. Black, Donald Kunze and John Pickles (eds), Commonplaces:
Essays On The Nature Of Place (University Press of America, Lanham, USA, 1989). Ching and
Creed, Knowing Your Place, 7-8.
Myths have evolved over time as a way of explaining particular circumstances. They feed into local narratives, and nurture a shared understanding of the past. According to psychologist Julian Rappaport, communities can be sustained by cultural narratives, although they can also be rendered impotent by them. Communities, he suggests, only become empowered when they ‘discover, or create or give voice to, a collective narrative that sustains their own personal life story in positive ways’. The myth of the autonomous, self-regulating farmer endures as one of the most powerful manifestations of the pioneer legend. It may serve an important role in creating a strong fellowship amongst small-scale settler farmers in the wheatlands, but it ignores historical realities. Enduring images of the stable countryside as an antidote to the metropolis mingle with the anxiety that pervades historical accounts of land settlement. Banks once controlled the fate of wheatlands farmers and, by the end of the twentieth century, they were also likely to be entangled in a web of statutory responsibilities and market alliances. In his history of the Narrandera Shire, part of the wheatlands straddling the Murrumbidgee River, Bill Gammage argued that settler Australians were rendered almost as powerless as the Indigenous Wiradjuri by Western ideals of progress and material wealth. Rural communities were ‘in the grip of centralisation and mechanisation’, he said, their affairs inextricably tied to national and international interests, and their fate ultimately shaped by factors beyond their control. Distinctive wheat settlements, given life by the railway lines, could just as easily be extinguished by a government decision to receive and transport grain more cheaply from another location. A study of Victorian rural communities in 1998, for example, suggested that the cumulative effects of government policies, intended to rationalise and centralise services, was undermining the morale of rural communities.

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67 Larry Schwartz, ‘When towns lose hope’, The Age, Melbourne, 20 July, 2000, 13. The study was conducted jointly by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and Deakin University. The Productivity Commission’s 1999 inquiry into the effects of the Australian Government’s competition policy on rural areas found a similar trend.
Gammage’s argument rings true in the central Lachlan. What emerges in farmers’ stories is a retelling of the pioneering settler narrative, adapted to the concerns of the late twentieth century. Epic battles with land and climate are no longer the central theme. The new foe is epitomized in the domination of farm affairs by city-based corporate interests, government land management policies, and global markets. The presence of ‘agri-businesses’, in particular, attracts suspicion if not downright hostility from local farmers. Amid this stronghold of second, third and fourth generation family farms, employees of corporation-owned enterprises are widely perceived as ‘outsiders’ who fail to put down roots in land or community. Margaret Doyle echoed the feelings of several other farmers interviewed when she observed that:

There’s always this borrowing thing and it keeps you together. The big corporate farms don’t have that...they don’t need the neighbourly thing to exist....they’ve only got managers and the managers really don’t ever become part of the community and it changes.

A perception amongst local farmers is that corporate-owned farms have little need to interact with neighbouring families, tending to operate as self-sufficient units responsible to shareholders. The managers are often brought in from elsewhere and, in many cases, have only temporary social and family ties to the district. Ironically

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68 Bill Gammage, *Narrandera Shire* (published by Bill Gammage for the Narrandera Shire Council, Griffin Press Ltd, Netherby, SA, 1986), 1, 229. This point was also made by farmers interviewed in the central Lachlan.

69 Lawrence and Gray defined agri-businesses as enterprises where agricultural production is carried out in association with the supply of fertilisers, insecticides, pesticides and seed. Most, they suggest, are based overseas and have no interest in the fate of Australian rural communities or environmental issues. Geoffrey Lawrence and Ian Gray, ‘The myths of modern agriculture: Australian rural production in the twenty-first century’, in Bill Pritchard and Phil McManus (eds), *Land of discontent: The Dynamics Of Change In Rural And Regional Australia* (University of New South Wales Press Ltd, Sydney, 2000), 33-51, 45. See also Geoffrey Lawrence, ‘Family farming and corporate capitalism: The uneasy alliance’, in *Regional Journal of Social Issues*, 19, December 1986, 1-17.

70 Margaret Watson in interview with Doug and Margaret Watson, 3 April 2001. Margaret and Doug Watson live on the Lachlan River at the Kiakato Bridge. Their land adjoins Kiagarthur, one of the largest corporate-owned properties in the central Lachlan. The recently-arrived managers at Kiagarthur, it must be said, expressed considerable interest in the property’s history,
perhaps, they invite comparison with the pastoral dynasties of the nineteenth century. Whilst the differences in their political and legal circumstances are significant, both are characterised by expansive landholdings attracting hostility from smaller-scale farmers, and both are characterised by financial, political, and social alliances that are predominantly metropolitan, national, and even international in focus. Indeed, the rise of corporate farming represents perhaps the greatest challenge to the rural myth of community cohesion. Richard Waterhouse points out that, with the introduction of advanced technology and communications in the twentieth century, came the industrialisation of agricultural production. ‘The incorporation of rural Australia held cultural as well as economic implications, because it allowed more frequent interchange between city and bush’. This exposure to urban culture, he argues, diminished the economic, social and cultural distinctiveness of rural people. Perhaps this also helps to explain the enduring affection in social memory for the old pastoral stations and their woolsheds in this part of the wheatlands. As places where landowners, permanent station employees, itinerant contractors, and small-scale farmers socialised and gained some sense of community, they came to represent far more than a workplace in the local imagination. Given the strong ideological legacy of domesticity and rootedness in the land implicit in the rise of family farming, the plight of the squattocracy offers a parable, or at least a valid historical context, for the cultural dissonance associated with modern corporate farming in Australia.

During the late twentieth century, the discourse of rural decline was dominated by images of the settled inland of Australia becoming progressively unsettled. The phenomenon of population 'drift' was vividly portrayed as the ‘dying town syndrome’, and underpinned by a narrative of social crisis in which geographically and socially isolated communities were crippled by chronic unemployment and the knowledge that the post-war promise of rural abundance had failed them. In this discourse, the settler

and were generous in providing me with whatever historical information they could locate. Fran Quigley, pers. comm., 21 October 2004.


72 I am grateful to Bill Gammage for suggesting the comparison between corporate farms and the squattocracy (pers.comm. 27 August 2004). The issues surrounding corporate farming are discussed further in Chapter 10, within the context of family farming and land stewardship.
mythologies associated with the triumphant settling of the inland plains in south-eastern Australia had become threaded through with ambivalence and contradiction, destabilised by economic and social changes, and undermined by heightened ecological and racial sensitivities. Fault-lines seemed to criss-cross the agricultural regions of the inland, creating ideological rifts and tremors in the national psyche. Images of rural abundance and decline jostled in the public imagination. Wheatlands settlements that had sprouted promisingly in the early twentieth century to form the hub of thriving farm communities were, at the end of it, more likely to host a cluster of abandoned houses and closed shops. Within just one generation, farming families that were enjoying the financial and social gains of a post-war economic boom in agricultural and pastoral commodities, found themselves at the end of the century in a rapidly transformed economic and social landscape. The arable inland had indeed been dramatically reshaped, both physically and ideologically, during the course of the twentieth century. This was no longer fertile ground for a simple historical narrative espousing masculine resilience and egalitarianism in the face of a harsh and unforgiving landscape.

Plate 4: Former mission house at Willow Bend, Condobolin, 2001. Photo: J McCann
Chapter 4. Silent country

I think it’s very hard for Aboriginals to be close to the land because they just don’t get to wander on it. It’s all been shut down, yes, they don’t get an opportunity to experience the land.¹

About half way along the Lachlan River, at a place called Gobothery Hill, a stone cairn stands forlornly amongst a dusty scattering of trees, not far from the main river channel. The rubble stone memorial was built in 1914 to commemorate a site where the colonial Surveyor-General John Oxley and his exploring party camped in 1817. The party had travelled from the Belubula River, through the sites of present-day Cowra and Forbes, detoured south-west around marshy country and returned north-west to rejoin the Lachlan River and explore it as far downstream as Booligal. On their return upstream, en route to Bathurst, they camped near a recently-constructed grave. According to Oxley’s journal, the grave was that of an important Wiradjuri man. Wiradjuri was one of the largest Indigenous ‘nations’ in Australia, involving more than 30 separate hordes or clans occupying territory from present day Lithgow in the Blue Mountains to the east, to the Hay plains in the west.² They occupied much of the southern and central plains of New South Wales, between the Wambool (renamed Macquarie by settlers), Kalar (Lachlan) and Murrumbidgerie (Murrumbidgee) rivers. The archaeologist, Ian White, speculates that the Kalar people maintained traditional communication routes between the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee Rivers, regularly gathering with other groups for ceremonial purposes by way of Bland Creek, the only significant watercourse extending across the plain between the two rivers.³ According to settler understandings of Wiradjuri culture, the different clans kept in touch through regular ceremonial gatherings known as ‘burbungs’,

¹ Interview with Robert Sanderson, 5 April 2001.
² Wiradjuri translates as Wirraay (‘no’) and Jurray (‘having’), the people who have the word wirraay for saying ‘no’. Iris Clayton and Alex Barlow, Wiradjuri of the Rivers and Plains (Heinemann, Port Melbourne, 1997), 27.
thought to have played an important role in maintaining a sense of tribal coherence across a large area.

The river systems of the Murray-Darling Basin flowing enticingly westward from the Great Dividing Range were giant conduits for European exploration, usually preceded by an advance party of foreign diseases. In these poorly-watered inland plains, the rivers became important frontiers of colonisation. Competition for river country made them central stage for Indigenous resistance as settlers expanded their domination over traditional land. In the Lachlan Valley, small bands of Wiradjuri people still maintained a largely traditional existence in the mid-nineteenth century, but were being increasingly drawn into contact with settlers who had claimed extensive tracts of pastoral land fronting the river. During this period, many Aboriginal family groups were actively encouraged to camp on the large pastoral properties and provide a pool of labourers. With the catastrophic effects of settler occupation unfolding amongst the Indigenous populations of inland New South Wales, the colonial government established the Aborigines Protection Board in 1883. The Board was charged with administering the ‘Indigenous problem’, and early policies were designed to house people deemed to be ‘full-blood’, frail or ill, into government-run reserves. The Board, however, came to wield considerable power over the lives of Aboriginal people, precipitating what Peter Read refers to as ‘a hundred years war’ lasting until the Board was finally abolished in 1969. The process of sub-dividing the large pastoral stations accelerated after the First World War, and the small family farming blocks offered limited opportunities for accommodating and employing Aboriginal family groups. Closer settlement, and the diminishing demand for Aboriginal labour on pastoral properties, exacerbated the process of dispossession.

**Gobothery Hill**

As Oxley's men and beasts trampled the ground to make camp on 29 July 1817 George Evans, Oxley's second-in-command, sketched the grave and nearby trees

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5 Read, *A Hundred Years War*. Read documents the policies of the Aborigines Protection Board of NSW and the history of the dislocation and resettlement of Wiradjuri family groups in the twentieth century.
featuring their intricate engravings. The grave site comprised a semi-circular tumulus, with three tiers of seats around one half of it. The two cypress pine trees, with designs carved into their trunks, stood guard to the west and north. Oxley did not feel it necessary to explain his choice of campsite, other than to express a passing apology before excavating the grave. Nevertheless the site became a potent marker of the colonial frontier between Wiradjuri and settler on this part of the Lachlan. When E.E. Milne, the District Railway Superintendent at Orange, located the grave site in 1913, one of the trees was intact and the carvings still visible on the stump of the other tree. The carved sections were cut and donated to the Australian Museum in Sydney, and the trees replaced by posts with replica carvings.

When Lindsay Black undertook a survey of 'burial trees' in 1941, several specimens of carved trees could still be found in farm paddocks at various points along the Lachlan River system, including Burra Holding at Fifield, on the former station of Thomas Edols at Mulgutherie, and on Yarrabundi Creek, west of Trundle. Black wrote admiringly about the customs of Aboriginal people, emphasising what he saw as their 'high moral code'. 'The contempt', wrote Black, 'in which the Australian aboriginal is held by some people is not justified'. They were 'uncontaminated', as A.S. Kenyon put in his introduction to Black's report, by contact with more civilised cultures, still possessing the universal wisdoms of 'primitive man – man as he began when leaving the brute world'. By this time, the artefacts of Indigenous cultures were avidly sought and studied by white collectors in the hope that they might reveal

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6 Oxley, Journals, 138-141.

7 According to one local history, Oxley climbed the 'Goobothery Range' and gave it the name 'Mount Byng Range'. The camp site was located near Pipers Hill, later renamed Bolo Mountain, although the area is also referred to as Gobothery Hill. See A.M. O'Connor, Where whirlwinds rise tall (April 1983), 19.

8 See Kathy Patrick and Samantha Simmons, Australian Museum's Aboriginal Collections: Wiradjuri (Division of Anthropology, Australian Museum, Sydney, 1994), 9.

9 Black, Burial trees, 13-14. Black described the carved trees or 'dendro glyphs' as 'monuments of the Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi Nations', They marked the graves of important men, the designs thought to represent personal totems. Carved trees were found as far west as Bourke, Cobar, Hillston and Balranald. While many were associated with burial sites (called tapoglyphs), some also marked ceremonial or bora grounds (called teleglyphs). See also Robert Etheridge, The Dendroglyphs, or "Carved Trees" of New South Wales (Government Printer, Sydney, 1918), 11 and 59.

insights into the evolution and nature of humans. As Tom Griffiths has shown, the passion for collecting Aboriginal cultural artefacts was not confined to anthropologists. Antiquarianism thrived in the Australian colonies amongst amateur collectors. Indeed, the practice of building up private collections of Aboriginal relics continued throughout the twentieth century. In 1974, for example, the *Forbes Advocate* featured an article on the importance of private collections in the Lachlan region, suggesting that they could be used to study Aboriginal culture. ‘Their empathy with the environment has lessons to teach western man’.11

On 8 August 1914, as a small group of men gathered around the cairn at Gobothery Hill for the unveiling ceremony, the Minister for Labour spoke of the ‘truly Australian national spirit’ that this site represented. ‘It was the bounden duty of all Australians’, he noted, ‘to search for and preserve the earliest links of the discovery and opening up of Australia’.12 By this time, the numbers of Wiradjuri people of the valley had been decimated, and many settlers were echoing official opinions that they were a dying race. According to the classic myth of Western colonialism, traditional Indigenous connections with land died out in the wake of European invasion and occupation.13 Sixty years later, the *Forbes Advocate* put forward a proposal that the grave, as one of the best known Indigenous sites in the whole of the Lachlan Valley, ought to be re-created in order to honour the traditional tribal customs of the Kalar.14 The Oxley memorial is one of the few widely-known and publicly-commemorated Wiradjuri sites in the central Lachlan. It features in tourist literature for the central Lachlan Valley as a place that speaks of a mysterious Indigenous past, transmuted into a site of European occupation. This overlay of European explorer campsite and Indigenous grave neatly underscores the prevailing

12 *Condobolin News*, 8 August 1914.
13 Deborah Bird Rose and Anne Clarke, *Tracking Knowledge in North Australian Landscapes: Studies in Indigenous and Settler Ecological Knowledge Systems* (Australian National University, North Australia Research Unit, Northern Territory, 1997), 25. As Rose points out, by the late twentieth many in the environmental movement had embraced this myth, resurrecting Aboriginal people as mythic ‘happy, carefree, environmentally sensitive founts of wisdom’.
14 *Forbes Advocate*, 20 August 1974, 19. The recreation work extended only to placing two carved replica cypress pine posts at the approximate site of the grave.
mythology about the severing of Indigenous connections with their traditional country. The Oxley expedition of ‘discovery’ and ‘pioneering’ becomes the beginning of historical time. Dominated by narratives of agricultural transformation, Wiradjuri country becomes a silent landscape.

When Australian champion tennis player Evonne Goolagong went in search of her family connections in the Condobolin area, she discovered a close-knit group of people whose stories were full of vitality and hope, despite their impoverishment ‘and the fact that they were Wiradjuri Kooris at a time when the conventional wisdom was that theirs was a dying race’. Published histories of the central Lachlan move swiftly through early European accounts of Indigenous tribal groups along the river as a preface to the main story of settler occupation. Where Indigenous experiences are recounted at all, they are portrayed in a narrative about their ‘passing away’, the precursor for the ‘more important drama of white settlement’. Meanwhile, contemporary Wiradjuri associations with the landscape continue to be invisible. Apart from some notable exceptions, Wiradjuri history is relegated to the pre-European past, any cultural connections considered to have been all but obliterated in the course of the twentieth century. Their physical marginalisation to the fringes of town contributes to the perception that they have been erased from the wheatlands. Meanwhile, the material relics of the dispossessed are stored in local museums and private collections, and any allusion to the authenticity of contemporary Wiradjuri as ‘real’ Aborigines, any meaningful connections between them and their ancestral country, are vigorously denied. W.E.H. Stanner called it ‘the great Australian

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15 Evonne Goolagong, Home! The Evonne Goolagong Story (Simon and Schuster, East Roseville, 1993), 34.
silence'.¹⁹ This ‘strategic forgetting’ became a way of remembering the past that legitimised and normalised the processes of European colonisation, rendering Aboriginal people invisible in the colonised landscape.²⁰ According to Ann Curthoys, ‘[t]he land and the Indigenous peoples become merged, the former foregrounded, the latter denied a place in history at all’.²¹

Country connections

One of the paradoxes of the Australian pastoral industry is that, whilst it represents a centrepiece of national settler mythology, many of the places steeped in the social history of pastoralism are better known and remembered by Aboriginal people. In the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory, for example, Deborah Rose and Darrell Lewis found that Aboriginal people had intimate knowledge of particular sites and stories associated with settler history. In such cases, the stories were passed on by Aboriginal people who had worked or spent time in places where settler houses or graves could be found. The meanings of such places, they suggested, were not


exclusively white or black domains but, rather, ‘resonate throughout the historical consciousness of both groups’.  

In the wheatlands of eastern and southern Australia, it might be reasonable to expect that the intensity of closer settlement, the enclosure of the landscape into family farms, and the concerted efforts of successive government policies to first annihilate, then assimilate Aboriginal people into white society, would have all but erased the strands of Indigenous social memory. My interviews in the central Lachlan suggest otherwise. The bonds of a shared history and memory are surprisingly resilient amongst Wiradjuri people. The notion that they might know, or even care, about settler history and sites of cultural heritage, however, is not grasped by most local farming families, despite childhood friendships and lives lived in close proximity. Paradoxically, given their marginalisation in settler society, many older Wiradjuri in the central Lachlan forged strong family ties with local settlers through their work on pastoral properties and wheat farms in the district. Some also found seasonal employment further afield, picking fruit in Young and Griffith in the Riverina to the south, or working for many years as domestic help with farming families or as shearsers and station hands. Working side by side with white families, they forged friendships outside of the social barriers imposed on the reserves. Peter Read documented stories of people who used to work their way around properties and towns in the region. ‘Condo Road’ outside the town of Griffith, for example, was a regular camping spot for Wiradjuri families from Condobolin during the picking season.  

Barbara Allen has lived most of her life at the old Condobolin Mission, now known as Willow Bend. She tells me about how she used to organise gangs of young Aboriginal people to undertake contract work on local wheat farms.

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23 Read, A Hundred Years War, 103.
24 The Reserve was gazetted on 13 April 1901, with an area of 16 acres. Reserve AR 32512, Parish of South Condobolin, County of Gipps, originally Reserve AR 5988, cited in A. McGuigan, Aboriginal Reserves in New South Wales: A Land Rights Research Aid, Occasional Paper No 4 (NSW Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, Sydney, undated).
I used to go out and do tractor driving, fencing, landmarking, stick-picking, burr-cutting, and all this and that. Whatever had to be done on the land, I’ve done it.

As she talks about her life, Barbara describes her relationship with local farming families and their properties:

I thank the lord for my grandmother and my mother, and for the other elders, because they were the ones that worked the land too. And with the farmers, a lot of farmers wouldn’t understand... how we feel about them running the land, and how much we hurt when we know that a farm’s getting sold, because we know the people...we’re part of it. You never tell the farmers that, and we should....You’ve got to understand the farmers, their battle, and you worked in with them....they’re the people that, because they love the land and [my] people love the land, you feel so close to them.

Barbara struggles to reconcile the intimacy of small town life where she experienced acceptance and friendship in people’s homes, with the racial hostilities that were regularly played out in public places. The country picture theatre, perhaps more than any other venue, was a space where racial differentiation was most explicit. Barbara recalls that Aboriginal people weren’t allowed in the front door of the picture theatre in Condobolin. They had to go in by the side door, and sit in the front rows separated from the rest of the theatre by a big chain. ‘All the white people sat at the back, and upstairs’.

I remember one night, Bill Haley came – ‘Rock around the Clock’. Well, all us Koori kids jumped up, we pulled all the chairs right back underneath the big chain, right where the white people were, and we took over the stage...rock n’

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25 Interview with Barbara Allen, 10 May 2001.
26 Interview with Barbara Allen, 10 May 2001.
...Before we knew where we was, the white kids were out to join us. And it was just like, that was a time, it broke the barriers.\textsuperscript{27}

The few sources of public entertainment available to people in the wheatlands — the picture theatre, the race track, the hotels — pepper stories and highlight the importance of these places of social interaction in local memory. Another Wiradjuri woman, Ethel Taylor, spent her childhood in the small river settlement of Euabalong, between Condobolin and Lake Cargelligo. Her memories are of a good life where Aboriginal and white families all went to the football matches, played tennis, and then there was the big outing, the Saturday night dance.

Then you had Euabalong West only seven miles away and they used to dance out there on the verandah at the freezing works, because there was a fella lived there at the railways who used to play a squeezebox. I mean you’d even ride the bike out there, and the horse, if anything was on out there.\textsuperscript{28}

Wiradjuri elder, Charlie King, was born on Murrami station where his father was a stockman. Charlie himself spent years working on Kiakatoo, Borambil, and Eremeran, some of the biggest pastoral stations of the central Lachlan. He also worked in the timber yards, employed on the cutting bench at the Black Range Mill that used to only employ local Aboriginal labour. His father always told him if you wanted something you had to work for it. Even as the large pastoral properties were relinquished for closer settlement farms after the First World War, properties such as Borambil continued to employ permanent stockmen and their families for the arduous farm tasks of cutting burrs, ‘emu bobbing’,\textsuperscript{29} trapping foxes, and hunting the exploding rabbit population before the introduction of the myxomatosis virus. Local Aboriginal families, he recalls, could always get a job on the farms or in the sawmills. Farmers would often organise a truck into town to pick up a contract team of Aboriginal workers for burr cutting or stick picking.

\textsuperscript{27} Interview with Barbara Allen, 10 May 2001
\textsuperscript{28} Interview with Ethel Taylor, 18 June 2001.
\textsuperscript{29} An Australian vernacular term for picking up stray sticks from the wheat paddocks that had been cleared of trees and other vegetation in readiness for ploughing.
The farming landscapes around Condobolin are also Harry Webber’s ‘country of memory’. Presented with a question about changes he has witnessed in the central Lachlan, Harry launches into a detailed narrative. He points to relevant sites along the way, moving easily between time periods.

I’ve seen it dry, up here at the Eight Mile – you could take a hind-tied sulky up there and drive across there and wouldn’t even make a mark in the river bed….Cobb and Co used to cross there, that’s before there was ever bridges there. There was twelve hotels here in Condobolin, twelve hotels and brewery. The brewery was up there where the high school is. The biggest hotel was there where the ambulance station is, that was the Tatts...The next building up, I’m going back a fair few years but I’ve studied the history of Condobolin, the next building up, that accountant, I put the sewer on there and I fell into one of those old pit toilets, you know, the hole in the ground. See, Condo, all this country here, all the main street and everything, was North Condobolin Station. I can show you where the first place was built in Condobolin, it was up on Officer’s Parade.

He notes where the North Condobolin homestead was located, and speculates on the reason for siting it there. Some parts of the old homestead are still standing. The park near the Railway Hotel was the site of the original Condobolin cemetery, he recalls, adding that he found the last headstone ‘from a step at the back of the butcher shop’. In his younger days, Harry worked on the big local pastoral stations and acquired an encyclopaedic knowledge of the district’s settler history along the way. He was head stockman on Kiakatoo, and lived there for 15 years. His wife was employed in the homestead.

Well, see, years ago in Kiakatoo, I can show you the spot, after the 1914 war they give a lot of that country of Kiakatoo to the returned diggers. I can show you a little stone plaque where there was houses. Go down the main road, back this way from Wardry Weir, there’s apple trees and quince trees and everything

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30 Read referred to ‘country of memory’ in ‘The look of the rocks and the grass and the hills’, 38.
31 Interview with Harry Webber, 19 June 2001.
where there used to be gardens along. There used to be a pub down there too...and there was a pub down there at the Eleven Mile.

Harry reflects how the Kiakatoo hall is interwoven with the history of his own family.

There’s a little sort of a shed there, that used to be the Kiakatoo School....That hall, that was the Country Women’s Association. They was the ones that backed Michael [Harry’s nephew] for his education.32

The old pubs that used to break the long distances between properties provide a useful reference for recalling localities and events in the district. Harry remembers an elderly woman coming to ask him about the history of Melrose Station where her family selected land after it was subdivided for closer settlement. He knows where to find the site of the family home, indicated by a large tree that now grows there.

Then you go out to ‘No Man’s Land’. I was out there looking for cattle in ‘No Man’s Land’, it’s pretty rough country, and I ran into a cemetery out there. It was all red marble headstone. Out in the scrub.

Harry recalls telling the owner of the property about the grave. It contained the remains of a boundary rider who broke his neck. Each story leads to another. There is a cluster of graves at Moonbie on the banks of the Lachlan, where a school teacher and group of children drowned trying the cross the river in flood. A swag of flood stories follow. Harry’s anecdotes are a raucously rich chronicle of local places and people, Wiradjuri and farmers and immigrants intermingled, recounted with much laughter and gusto.

Oh, mate, you never seen such bloody funny things, like if a bloke was carrying a camera with him he’d have got some good photos. Reggie’s with me and we had a fair mob of cattle and this mad steer jumped the fence. Well, he got his front feet over that side and he’s other feet and he’s balancing on the fence, he couldn’t get over. Reggie tied his horse up, ‘I’ll fix him’, he said, ‘You watch

32 Interview with Harry Webber, 19 June 2001.
this’. He’s got the antlers like this, charge, charge. The bloody bullock must have got his back feet down and he sprung over and he after him. Reggie’s going and I’m singing out, ‘Back here, seniore, olay, back here seniore’. I’ve seen some funny bloody things out there. When they was building the new shearing quarters there, this wog was digging the toilet hole, see, and I looked over and he’s down a fair way, about six foot, and I said, ‘Gidday old mate, how you going’. ‘Eight foot, eight foot, eight foot’, that’s all he could say, ‘Eight foot!’

As Harry talks, the silent Wiradjuri landscape swells into life. Any distinction between the post-colonial histories of settlers and Indigenous people evaporates. Harry used to live at the Murie, a camp on the fringes of Condobolin. After its establishment in 1882, the Aborigines Protection Board had gazetted a series of reserves extending along the Lachlan River from Condobolin through to Cowra, and along the Murrumbidgee River. Those who had formerly lived and worked on local pastoral stations ended up in camps on the edges of towns. In the 1920s, the Board succumbed to pressure from town residents and closed down fringe camps at Cowra, Hillston, and Euabalong. Many families relocated to Condobolin, considered at the time to be a ‘safe camp’.

Located near a dry creek channel and waterhole on the Lachlan floodplains, the Murie was part of a travelling stock route, made available by the Pastures Protection Board as a camp for poor white families during the 1930s depression. By the 1940s, Aboriginal families had begun to move in, gradually relocating there from the official Reserve or from surrounding properties. The Murie camp was home for some families for more than 20 years, until the local Shire Council eventually relocated residents to town houses in 1968 and cleared the site of huts. Charlie King lived at the Murie from the age of eight. He recalls how Murie families worked on surrounding

33 Interview with Harry Webber, 19 June 2001.
34 There were three reserves in the Condobolin area: AR80173/4 in Boona Road, gazetted on 29 November 1957 and revoked in 1970 leaving an area of 7 acres; AR84827 in Gordon and Station Streets, and AR32512 now known as Willow Bend, gazetted on 13 April 1901 comprising 16 acres (McGuigan, Aboriginal Reserves in New South Wales, 22). The Board was later renamed the Aboriginal Welfare Board.
35 By 1964, 348 Aboriginal people were recorded at the Murie and on the Condobolin Mission. Mathieson, Shire of Lachlan Community Profile, 13.
properties, built their houses as best they could on blocks claimed and measured out along the creek bed.

As an unofficial camp, the Murie was relatively free from the rigid rules and interference from police and welfare authorities that plagued families in the managed Reserves. Evonne Goolagong’s earliest memories were of the Murie. Some members of her family had chosen to live there in preference to the government Reserve. Her father was born in Condobolin in 1927. In her autobiography, she recalls listening to the adults playing guitars and singing by the campfire, and days spent playing on the muddy creek bank. 36 Road realignments, floods, and bulldozers have failed to erase the Murie entirely. The settlement itself is now little more than tracings of former hut sites, refuse, scarred trees, and fencing, but the Murie landscape remains a deeply significant place for the Wiradjuri families who called it home. A mere paddock to the casual eye, it is a place embedded with social memory, a place where former residents visit regularly to fish and to reflect. 37 Uncle Lylie took Evonne Goolagong there. “We still come down here sometimes” he said. “We caught a goanna and cooked him up right here just a month or so ago.” The recollection obviously pleased him. He wanted me to know that the old ways had not completely disappeared. 38 These complexities of intersecting histories, and the places where white and black people share cultural meanings, are rarely seen as part of the cultural heritage of the wheatlands. As Rose and Lewis observed in northern Australia, “[t]he ghosts of denied stories and forgotten places are the backdrop to all the congratulatory public representations of Australian history”. 39

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36 Evonne Goolagong, Home! The Evonne Goolagong Story, 28. She speculates that the family name came from the Wiradjuri word ‘gulagallang’ meaning a lot, or big mob. A camp existed at the settlement of Gooloogong, on the Lachlan River between Forbes and Cowra.

37 Kabaila’s record of his interview with Charlie King indicates that the ‘scarred’ trees were those that he cut to create surfaces to peg out water rat and fox skins, and to mark the line of fence that enclosed the settlement (Charlie King, interviewed April 1996, cited in Kabaila, Wiradjuri Places, 56). Kabaila’s research also indicated that the site contains some graves of former camp residents.

38 Goolagong, Home! The Evonne Goolagong Story, 371.

Severed strands

With a new wave of Aboriginal histories and two landmark legal decisions challenging the conventional view that Indigenous connections with land had been effectively erased by white settlement, a radically different construction of the rural landscape emerged. It could now be comprehended as a place of cultural continuity and belonging rather than one of cultural fragmentation and obliteration. Denis Byrne contends that the heritage movement in Australia was complicit in perpetuating the invisibility of Aboriginal people in rural regions, by treating Indigenous and settler Australian heritage as separate entities, and decoupling their entangled histories and experiences. The separation was perhaps nowhere more entrenched than in government heritage legislation and administrative arrangements. Since the first heritage legislation was passed in the mid-1970s, the complex history of racial relationships repeatedly fell between the cracks of the government systems designed for identifying and conserving significant heritage places. The systems tended to segregate along disciplinary lines that distinguished between Indigenous (generally meaning pre-colonial or ‘pre-history’) heritage and post-colonial (usually referred to as ‘historic’) heritage. The effect in settled agricultural regions like the wheatlands was to subordinate Aboriginal relationships with country to the mainstream settler narratives of colonisation, and to address them within the highly politicised discourses over native title.

In some land management bureaucracies, Indigenous cultural heritage place research seemed more comfortably enmeshed with ‘natural’ heritage and environmental conservation processes than with cultural matters. In the Lachlan Valley, government and community consultative networks such as the Lachlan Catchment Management Committee (established by the Murray Darling Basin Commission) and the Native Vegetation Advisory Council (established by the New South Wales Department of Land and Water under the Native Vegetation Conservation Act 1997) defined Indigenous cultural heritage as the physical relics

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40 Byrne, ‘The ethos of return’, 76-77. This was a particular issue for Indigenous heritage bureaucracies and other advocates for Indigenous heritage matters.

41 Notably, the State National Parks and Wildlife Service agencies responsible for management of nature parks and reserves on public land. The Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975 dealt with both ‘indigenous’ and ‘historic’ heritage places but, in practice, the identification and conservation of significant places were undertaken by separate groups of staff. See Chapter 11.
found in farm paddocks, and urged farmers to identify and protect them. The New South Wales government’s new Native Vegetation Plan for the mid-Lachlan region released in 2001 also ventured into the realm of cultural heritage. It required local farmers to learn how to identify and look after sites that might be of cultural significance to Aboriginal people. These matters were considered to properly fall within the category of contemporary land management and nature conservation policy. The Plan appeared to add weight to the prevailing view amongst white farmers, that the Indigenous landscape was located in the pre-colonial past.

Meanwhile, the secrecy surrounding the location of old Wiradjuri sites, whilst perhaps a necessary precaution to protect them from inappropriate use or destruction, also served to reinforce the rights of private land ownership and underscore a sense cultural fragility. Drawing traditional Indigenous land management into the ecological discourse, the Plan presented the Wiradjuri as responsible land managers who had ‘understood the subtle variations in environmental impacts on ecosystems through firestick farming’. Wiradjuri ancestors, it argued without a hint of irony, deserved the same respect as settler ancestor heroes. They had, after all, successfully adapted to the same environment as the pioneers. ‘Each relic tells its own story of how Wiradjuri people interacted with the environment’. As a result of their intimate knowledge of the land, the Plan concluded, Wiradjuri ancestors had achieved the ideal balance between vegetation and clearing in the colonial landscape.

Farmers of the central Lachlan wheatlands are not without feeling for the experiences of local Aboriginal people. When asked about perceptions of Indigenous connections and affinity with the land, some expressed empathy for the effects of dispossession and cultural fragmentation. Robert Sanderson sees it as a human dilemma rather than a racial issue:

42 In 1997, for example, the Murray Darling Basin Commission provided funds under the Cultural Heritage Strategy to preserve the history of Aboriginal habitation in the Lachlan Valley by documenting and photographing trees that had been used as a source of raw materials, as well as the dendroglyph trees that have become increasingly rare in Wiradjuri country as land-clearing and age take their toll.

43 Department of Land and Water Conservation, Native Vegetation Resource Package for the Mid-Lachlan Region: Mid-Lachlan Regional Vegetation Management Plan and Strategy (Sydney, 2001), 53.
I think it doesn’t matter if you’re Aboriginal or who you are, you need to have some sort of understanding of your past and the reason for being….you have to have some sort of sense of ownership and being owned.44

Nevertheless, when they plough up bones or stone implements in their paddocks, farmers tended to contemplate the unearthed objects with a mixture of fascination and foreboding. Their responses to physical manifestations of Wiradjuri culture in their paddocks suggest that they are still deeply imbued with racial anxieties born out of the frontier myth. The colonised landscape remains a ‘zone of racial separation and standoff’.45 Doug Watson remembers the thrill of excitement as a child, always digging up axe heads and polished stones on his family’s farm and taking them to show his father. He recalls how he virtually grew up with the son of an Aboriginal couple who worked on Kiakatoo Station, and they became good friends over the years. While farmers such as Doug reflect warmly on early friendships forged with the children of Aboriginal workers, the question of whether this continues to be Wiradjuri country invariably elicits a guarded response. Even here, in the implacably settled and cultivated landscapes of the wheatlands, farmers reveal nothing for fear of being ‘Maboed’.46 The concept of ‘native title’ sits uneasily in a landscape where a variety of leasehold and freehold tenure arrangements co-exist.47 A selection of comments from different farmers makes the point:

If I found a skull here I’d be terrified. I’d just bury it, say nothing. It is more trouble than it is worth.48

I suppose nowadays you’d say it fell off the back of a truck!49

45 Byrne, ‘The ethos of return’, 81.
46 Griffiths, Hunters and Collectors, 231.
47 A controversial debate has raged over several years at Lake Cowal, where a Canadian company’s plan to establish a cyanide-leach gold mine on ‘the “Heartland” of the Wiradjuri Nation’ has been countered by a native title claim by traditional owners.
48 Interview with John Sutherland, 6 April 2001.
49 Interview with Lesley Ridley, 11 May 2001.
People very often won’t even mention the word Aboriginal sites at all because they’re fearful if someone hears of something they could suddenly have a land claim.\textsuperscript{50}

There’s a really sad situation where people are fearful of disclosing anything that might be of interest, but the sad part of it is that the Aborigines are missing out because they’re not aware of where a lot of the culture sites are.\textsuperscript{51}

In some areas of the central Lachlan Valley, away from the river system, farmers reported finding little evidence of permanent Wiradjuri occupation. Indeed, the paucity of ‘sites’ such as burials or carved trees, seemed to support a general view that only the rivers and streams were important to Wiradjuri. North of the river on ‘Penshurst’, for example, Judy Doyle argues:

This was basically a transit route for Aboriginals moving between the Darling and Lachlan. They didn’t actually live here as such but they passed through, they moved from one river to the other.\textsuperscript{52}

Andrew Buttenshaw, whose grandfather took up a pastoral lease at Lake Cowal in 1898, noted that the sandy outcrops around the semi-permanent lake would have been obvious places for burials, but

…as for the Aborigines around the lake, I don’t think the water would’ve been nearly permanent enough for them.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{50} Judy Doyle in interview with Martin and Judy Doyle, 7 May 2001.
\textsuperscript{51} Neil McDonald in interview with Neil and Ros McDonald, 30 May 2002.
\textsuperscript{52} Judy Doyle in interview with Martin and Judy Doyle, 7 May 2001.
\textsuperscript{53} Interview with Andrew Buttenshaw, 15 June 2001. At the time of the interview, the Lake Cowal community was caught up in a dispute over plans to open a gold-mine in the area, and much of the argument about its environmental impact centred on the existence of Aboriginal sacred sites. See New South Wales Commissioners of Inquiry for Environment and Planning, \textit{Lake Cowal Gold Project Bland Shire, Forbes Shire proposed by North Gold (WA) Limited}. Report to Honourable Craig Knowles, Minister for Urban Affairs and Planning and Minister for Housing by William Simpson, Chairman, Kevin Cleland, Deputy Chairman (1996).
Similarly, the ephemeral nature of the river system further downstream around Lake Cargelligo, convinced Bruce Overell that the Aboriginal people would not have ventured south into the mallee country because of a lack of water.\textsuperscript{54}

Another strand of the settler narrative about the fate of the Wiradjuri is equally effective in silencing the Indigenous landscape. In virtually every interview farmers conclude that the ‘real’ Wiradjuri people died out within their own living memory. Those who can still recall Aboriginal families living on surrounding stations, and later working in contract teams on wheat farms, allude to them as the last of the generation of Wiradjuri who had, as one farmer put it, a ‘natural affinity to the land’.\textsuperscript{55} Their willingness to work on farms is considered to be a sign of respectability and, somewhat ironically, racial purity. The demise of Aboriginal farm labour is an indication, not of a shrinking demand for labour, but that their cultural integrity has dissipated. The reasons are variously attributed to inter-marriage and government welfare policies, rather than changing farm employment patterns. This denial of cultural authenticity seemed to go hand in hand with the observation that local Wiradjuri people no longer have any ties to the farming landscape. The fact that local Aboriginal people have also been actively engaged in farming and farm work seems to have been all but forgotten. As one farmer observed:

...as far as empathy for the land, for the most part it’s just emotional blackmail. There’s no real empathy, and the dinkum ones will tell you that....The further north you go the more they have a connection with the land, but not around here, not now.\textsuperscript{56}

Anna Haebich’s account of the effects of closer settlement on Aboriginal people in south-west Western Australia provides a salutary reminder of how the histories of Indigenous and settler Australians have intersected in the cultivated landscapes of the

\textsuperscript{54} Interview with Bruce Overell and Bill Lander, 17 June 2001.
\textsuperscript{55} Interview with John Raven, 4 April 2001.
\textsuperscript{56} Interview with Allan Helyar, 5 April 2001.
expanding wheatlands.\textsuperscript{57} Drawing on documentary records and eye-witness accounts, she shows how Aboriginal people drew on their bush skills and intimate knowledge of their traditional home territory to become valued stock workers from the earliest period of pastoralism in the mid-1840s. By the time of Federation, however, some 75 per cent of Aboriginal people in the south of the new State were living in the Avon, Midlands and Great Southern Districts, the very areas that the Western Australian Government was resuming for subdivision and closer settlement. For a brief period in the early twentieth century, paternalistic schemes were devised by missionaries and local farming communities to train Aboriginal men, women and children in farm work. Many of the children who had been relocated to the New Norcia Benedictine Mission from Aboriginal camps on surrounding pastoral stations, for example, were trained and set up on small farms of their own. Haebich describes instances where Aboriginal families took up leases and established farms in the face of considerable opposition from local white settlers.

Many of those who established farms had to contend with temporary tenure conditions, racial intolerance amongst the local settler population, and increasing pressure for land from an influx of unemployed immigrants. According to Haebich’s argument, it was the very success of the new settlers in building a strong sense of local community and ties to the land that most profoundly disrupted and displaced local Aboriginal people. Ultimately, many Aboriginal farmers simply walked away from their land and the improvements they had made. Increasingly, even seasonal work such as land-clearing became hard to find as more white labourers arrived. This, combined with fewer opportunities for hunting and camping on cultivated land, and recurring drought conditions in 1911 and 1914, effectively pauperised Aboriginal communities and forced many to move from the surrounding farmland into wheat towns such as Katanning and Moora.\textsuperscript{58} A similar process seems to have occurred in the eastern states about this time. In the Yass region to the south of the Lachlan, for example, a group of Aboriginal people took up leases granted by the Aborigines Protection Board specifically for farming. The farms provided for an estimated fifty

\textsuperscript{57} Anna Haebich, \textit{For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the South West of Western Australia, 1900-1940} (University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1992 [1988]). I am grateful to Tim Rowse for alerting me to this research.

\textsuperscript{58} Haebich, \textit{For Their Own Good}, 28-35. Haebich describes the social effects of this migration into towns and the subsequent formation of government ‘native settlements’ during the mid-twentieth century.
people between 1883 and about 1900, but their tenure appears to have been short-lived in a region attracting increasing numbers of settlers.\(^{59}\)

In the central Lachlan wheatlands, the expansion of small-scale farming, cultivation, and fencing underscores the settler narrative that Aboriginal people were never really part of the history of closer settlement and farming in the twentieth century wheatlands.\(^{60}\) The pastoral era that preceded it, as Harry Webber’s experiences indicate, embraced the local Wiradjuri in the rural settler landscape. The transformation of the landscape into wheat farms and towns increasingly marginalised them. The weakening of Wiradjuri memory, stories and language has served to reinforce local farmers’ perceptions that the settled landscape is now populated only by archaeological sites. Certainly, this weakening has forced the local Wiradjuri people to focus their claims for cultural authenticity on the physical evidence of occupation. Sites containing the remains of pre-mission life are highly valued by older Wiradjuri. However, they are rarely inanimate. When I ask Wiradjuri elder, Barbara Allen, about special places, she tells me a story about her son running home from school one day to tell her that the children had been raking out some sand delivered to the school. They found it contained human remains from an old burial ground. Tracing the source of the sand to a private landholding, Barbara looked down into the pit and saw the remains of her people, exposed by the sand digging operations.

They had the skulls, all smashed with bullet holes, and there was hundreds, all around embedded, all around the walls....I sat there, and you know I went down on my knees, I cried for them, and this wind come. And it was just like all of them was howling at the same time.\(^{61}\)

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\(^{59}\) Peter Read, ‘A double headed coin: protection and assimilation in Yass 1900-1960’, in Bill Gammage and Andrew Markus (eds), All That Dirt: Aborigines 1938, An Australia 1938 Monograph (History Project Incorporated, ANU, Canberra, 1982), 10. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, the history of Aboriginal farms and farm workers in Australia’s wheatlands is a subject that certainly demands more detailed attention, particularly given the way in which research into the entangled histories of Indigenous and settler Australians in the pastoral industry has illuminated the complexities of cross-cultural relationships in rural Australia.

\(^{60}\) Tim Rowse, pers. comm., October 2005.

\(^{61}\) Interview with Barbara Allen, 10 May 2001.
This site became the subject of a legal case to halt the sandmining, and it was subsequently fenced and officially recognised as an Indigenous burial ground. A portion of the Condobolin General Cemetery was set aside for the reburial of the remains. Other graves have been accidentally uncovered in the area from time to time, usually as a result of commercial sand mining operations. Traditionally, the soft sand hills along the rivers and creeks of the Lachlan were favoured for burials. The cultural significance of such sites is recognised by farmers as well as Wiradjuri. For farmers, the presence of the dead seems to imply a more powerful assertion of Indigenous occupancy than stone tools.

Barbara mentions a mountain, a local landmark that looks like a ‘dead mountain’ but, if you walked up and looked over the other side, you would find ten rocks at the bottom, ‘ten rocks, where the ten different tribes met all the time. And they sat there, the elders, they sat there and they discussed’. There is a potent sense of engagement with the past in the stories of Wiradjuri people. Whilst Western archaeologists have been preoccupied with collecting and preserving the physical artefacts of the past, older Wiradjuri harbour vivid stories of new relationships formed with this ‘dead’ country of their ancestors, and they express a deep sense of connection in ways that belie the settler narratives of dispossession. The imperative is to regain a sense of locatedness, particularly for the younger Aboriginal people steeped in settler history and the stories of the Wiradjuri’s cultural demise. Young people without a knowledge of their own history, writes Deborah Bird Rose, are like trees without roots. Long after family groups were dislocated and dispersed in the central Lachlan, they continue to resurrect the sanctity of old places and weave new stories to repair a

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fractured history. The stories give emphasis to continuity rather than separation, living social and spiritual connections rather than antiquity.65

It’s a connection I’d never known. They took me out to this farm, and when we got out there I got out the door, and I couldn’t move. And [my daughter] said, ‘Mum what’s wrong?’ And I said, ah, daughter’, and I just stood there and I started crying. And I said ‘can’t you feel them?’ And she stood with me for a minute, and I said ‘this is where my people were. They lived on this land.’ I didn’t know that, I’d never been there. I felt it.66

Ironically, whilst the settler stories of old places are infused with nostalgia and regret for eroded values and lost community, Wiradjuri stories about old places convey a sense of vitality and immediacy in the present. In their telling, the stories reactivate an emotional intimacy with past people and events. As Peter Read found in his study of Wiradjuri history, ‘the present and the past were the same country’.67 The Wiradjuri experience suggests that, even in these fragmented landscapes, stories of connection still move lightly amongst the orderly grid of fenced paddocks. Margaret Somerville, who calls herself a ‘collector of place stories’, highlights the importance of Aboriginal social memory. In the small town of Coonabarabran, on the north-west slopes and plains of New South Wales, she talks about the intertwining of time and space that has enabled local Aboriginal people to continually ‘read themselves back’ into the landscape through their stories. Story-telling gives expression to the continuity of culture. Places are given new life each time the stories about them are told. ‘Like the songlines which connect the dreamings of the past, the land is criss-crossed with invisible webs of connection. It is a net which holds me afloat in the

66 Interview with Barbara Allen, 10 May 2001.
67 Peter Read, A Hundred Years War, 77. Maria Nugent speculates that ‘the discourses and practices of heritage’ have tended to focus on the significance of ‘place’ rather than story, to the extent that the relationship between Aborigines and place...has come to function as an [almost absolute] ‘marker’ of Aboriginality in late twentieth century Australia’, Maria Nugent, ‘Aboriginality, place and memory in cultural heritage work’. Unpublished paper presented to the History, Memory and Cross-Cultural Research Visiting Scholars Program, 15 October 2002, 3. This distinction between space and time is discussed further in Chapter 11.
Australian landscape, a map of belonging'. Such stories, drawn from fragmented memories, photographs, and marks on the landscape, counteract the absences and silences in written local histories. Indeed, as Somerville suggests, the process of writing acts to ossify the past, and underscores the distinction between past and present. In the central Lachlan, Wiradjuri history is literally written into the past whilst, all the time, the act of remembering enables Wiradjuri people to work against the grain of the dominant settler narratives.

On Manna Mountain, south of the Lachlan, waterholes and grooves made from rubbing stone against stone are gouged into the rock. Rock pools were important water sources for earlier generations of Wiradjuri in this riverine environment. During the wetter months, they could rely on fish supplemented by mammals, birds and plants. The rocky hill outcrops cutting across the plain became crucial water sources during dry times. Water holes were generally cut into rock on drainage lines, utilising depressions naturally eroded by rushing water. According to stories from the Cobar area in central northern New South Wales, fires were lit in larger holes to force the rock sides to crack away. Subsequent visitors would remove the broken rock, and repeat the process. Jim Kelton’s study of Aboriginal scarred trees in the Lachlan Valley in 1996 noted that the Wiradjuri communities at Condobolin, West Wyalong, Lake Cargelligo and Forbes talked about the ‘unexplained significance’ attached to Manna Mountain. Charlie King, a Wiradjuri elder, regularly takes school groups to Manna Mountain as a way of demonstrating how such places restore a powerful sense of Wiradjuri identity. They may now be as close as Wiradjuri descendants get to connecting with ancestral places and stories, but their significance lies as much in contesting the settler narrative of colonisation that relegated Wiradjuri to a silent past, as in the cultural meanings of the sites themselves. In other words, Aboriginal people

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69 Somerville, ‘The Sun Dancin’, xvi. Tom Griffiths, ‘The language of conflict’, in Attwood and Foster, Frontier conflict, 142, makes the point that local histories have, until recently, been more attentive to the Aboriginal past than academic histories.


71 Interview with Charlie King, 20 June 2002.
concerned with preserving tangible evidence of the past have subtly drawn the conventional settler ‘discourse of heritage’ into a contemporary discourse about land and belonging.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{72} Byrne, ‘The ethos of return’, 77-79.
PART THREE — LAND
PART 3 — LAND

At this point, the road roughly traces the sinuous curves of the river. I stop to boil a cup of tea, alone in the quiet greyness of a remnant woodland of grey box. Precious island in a milling ocean of grain. Ecologist Dave Rowman talks about 'message trees' in his northern landscape in the dry tropics. Altered burning regimes have been the death knell for the once dense stands of cypress pine. The trees are now burnt too frequently, too fiercely. Reduced to a forest of matchsticks. They are Rowman's message trees, and they spark an awakening, a reassessment, of how far things have been changed.

Trees are the genealogists of this place too. I jot down 'story trees' in my journal, and begin to see trees everywhere in the denuded farming landscape. They link the generations, witness human catastrophes, hold the sounds of the river in their veins. Redgerebong. As legend has it, the name of this tiny hamlet was adapted from the Wiradjuri word Rudgeera Bong, 'old man tree by the water hole'. The tree in question is a giant river red
GUM, GROWING ON THE BANKS OF THE LACHLAN DOWNSTREAM FROM FORBES. THE FOREBEARS OF LOCAL FARMING FAMILIES MOVED THEIR STOCK INTO THIS RIVER COUNTRY IN THE 1850S. GENERATIONS HAVE BEEN NURTURED ON ITS STORIES. THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE OF THE ROGAN RIVER TO THE NORTH USED TO MEET NEAR THE TREE FOR CEREMONIAL GATHERINGS. IT IS THE COMMUNITY'S 'LIVING LEGEND'. WHEN A BUSHFIRE THREATENED TO DESTROY THE TREE, LOCAL PEOPLE TURNED OUT TO HELP SAVE THEIR VILLAGE NAMESAKE. A THOUSAND YEARS OLD, ITS GIANT ROOTS ARE CRUelly EXPOSED BY THE RavAGES OF THE RIVER. Now THEY FLOW RIGHT DOWN THE BANK LIKE SOLIDIFIED LAVA. RECENT FIRES HAVE ALL BUT DESTROYED THE CANOPY, BUT THE TRACK TO THE TREE IS WELL-WORN. LONGEVITY COMMANDS RESPECT IN THIS LANDSCAPE OF CHANGING ECOLOGIES AND SHIFTING LIVES.
Chapter 5. Ecological narratives

I hold myself to soil –
it promises that life
will shoot again, although
earth and stalk of wheat
crumble in my fingers.¹

Agriculture is intimately associated with landscape change. The question of whether such change is beneficial or destructive, however, has been the subject of ongoing debate in the wheatlands throughout the twentieth century, reflecting different and competing narratives about ecological health and decline. On the one hand, landscape change represented a powerful symbol of pioneering and colonisation, mirroring the doctrine of improvement that underpins the history of land settlement in Australia. On the other hand, European agricultural and land use practices, adapted to Australian conditions, were seen to be deeply implicated in widespread environmental degradation on farmland, the sheer speed and scale of which constituted an ecological crisis in the wheatlands. These competing ecological narratives convey deep-seated historical tensions in public discourses about agriculture and environmental management.

Typical of expanding settler societies like Canada and the United States, land in Australia was regarded as an abundant and inexhaustible resource.² Between 1900 and 1930, the area of land sown to wheat in Australia expanded threefold, involving a massive land-clearing process. According to George Seddon, the creation of the wheatlands created a ‘biological instability on a scale that the world has rarely seen’.³ Nevertheless, apart from the more dramatic episodes of drought, rabbit plagues and dust storms, the deepening ecological crisis went largely unheeded amongst most

¹ Paul Hetherington, Blood And Old Belief: A Verse Novel (Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, 2003), 29.
proponents of agriculture. According to some, however, this ‘quiet crisis’ was a feature of twentieth century agriculture not just in Australia, but throughout the world. From the 1970s, the wheatlands became the focus of a growing number of scientific surveys evaluating the ecological health of settled rural areas. The surveys adopted an increasingly sophisticated framework for measuring landscape changes, and they put names to the phenomenon of environmental degradation: salinity, acidity and the decline of structure and nutrients in soils, wind and water erosion, loss of biodiversity and fauna habitats, and vegetation regrowth or ‘woody weeds’. The surveys drew heavily on statistical measurements, and they revealed an alarming rate of ecological change in agricultural regions. The continuing inland expansion of cropping since the 1950s, for example, was described in one assessment as the most significant episode of landscape change since European occupation.

In the Western Australian ‘wheatbelt’, vegetation clearance on farmland was progressing at a frenetic pace, with over 90 per cent of the native vegetation present before settlement gone by the 1980s. Salinisation was emerging as the number one problem, but many farmers continued clearing remnant vegetation in order to overcome the decline in productivity as a result of salinisation. Even as the lessons of over-zealous land-clearing in the mallee regions of eastern Australia were being reaped, cropping in the west moved progressively into the light sandplain country previously regarded as fit only for kangaroos. Scientific reports drew a direct correlation between the indicators of ecological decline and agricultural sustainability, predicting that much of the land would be useless for agricultural purposes within 30 years.

The statistics were equally grim for eastern Australia. An Australian Government report suggested that two thirds of New South Wales had

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been covered by forest or woodland prior to settlement. By 1995, 40 per cent was left. In the Central Division, dominated by broadacre cropping and grazing, only 10 per cent of the original vegetation cover remained. By 1995, 40 per cent was left. In the Central Division, dominated by broadacre cropping and grazing, only 10 per cent of the original vegetation cover remained. Some scientists were predicting that the wheatlands of southern and eastern Australia, the heart of Australia’s ‘bread basket’, were likely to have less than 50 years of productive life because of declining soil structure and fertility.

Between the 1970s and 1990s, no less than 16 official inquiries called for a national policy on land use to address the highly-politicised issue of land degradation in Australia’s farming and grazing regions. Whilst it had long been ‘common wisdom’ that most native vegetation clearing occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these surveys suggested that just as much clearing had occurred in the half century since World War II as in the previous 150 years. Subsequent State government environmental reports reserved their condemnation for poor land management practices in agricultural regions, especially excessive clearing for cultivation and the fragmentation of vegetation cover, and the neglect of remaining stands of trees and shrubs.

The Commonwealth and State governments signed up to a National Conservation Strategy for Australia, declaring a commitment to ecologically sustainable development. Its central thrust was to recognise the fundamental interdependence of conservation and development, and to work towards a consensus between them. In this way, Commonwealth and State governments were seeking to strike a balance between developing the nation’s resources, on the one hand, and maintaining the nation’s ‘essential’ ecological processes and qualities on the other.

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PART THREE — LAND
The national strategy signalled a sense of urgency amongst Australia’s governments about the ecological problems becoming apparent in agricultural regions. The Director-General of the New South Wales Department of Agriculture went so far as to dismiss past land and river management policies as narrowly focused. The nexus between agricultural production and ecological systems, he concluded, could no longer be ignored and local people ought to see themselves as part of the equation: ‘People in both rural and urban environments are now acknowledging that they are not above nature but part of it’. A more sophisticated approach was necessary to deal with land and river degradation.\textsuperscript{12} The New South Wales government was ready to flex its constitutional muscle over land and river management, promoting itself as a leader in addressing sustainable land use policy and emphasising its allegiance to the ‘new environmentalism’. In the process, it attempted to draw a line in the sand by distinguishing its own land use policies from those of earlier regimes implicated in what the Director-General of Agriculture described as the ‘continued misuse’ of the natural environment. By releasing a suite of draft environmental policies, the Department of Agriculture seized the opportunity to present the government’s credentials for ‘strong and decisive’ leadership in environmental management. What the environment needed, Premier Greiner maintained, was more management not less.\textsuperscript{13} This new approach to resource management, he argued, involved the development of better-informed scientific understandings about the symptoms and causes of environmental problems.

By the 1990s, the debate over land degradation crystallised around the sustainability of farming and grazing in the wheatlands. In 1990 the Chairman of the Australian Wheat Board spelt out the economic implications of land degradation. Australia’s wheat export market, worth S2 billion, was in jeopardy as a result of depleted soils. Farmers, he said, needed to radically re-evaluate their farming practices.\textsuperscript{14} Australian farmers were confronted with environmental problems on an unprecedented scale. But while ecological decline was being debated in terms of

\textsuperscript{11} The concept of ecologically sustainable development was first given formal definition by the IUCN, UN Environmental Program and World Wildlife Fund in a World Conservation Strategy in March 1980.

\textsuperscript{12} NSW Agriculture, \textit{Draft Conservation Strategy: Key Planning And Environmental Issues}, 1.

\textsuperscript{13} Nick Greiner, cited in NSW Agriculture, 1.

physical causes and effects, the cultural dimensions of agricultural land use were largely ignored.  

‘the big drooth’

South of the Lachlan, in the small wheatlands settlement of Tullibigeal, retired farmer Tom Glasgow closes his eyes and remembers the dust storms that raged in the 1940s.

At four o’clock in the evening nearly every evening there’d be a black dust storm come from out here. You had to light the lights about four o’clock in the evening, your kerosene light, that’s all you had. We put the kids to bed on the western verandah... When you got up in the morning there’d be a ring of mud around their head.

In his mind’s eye, the dust always came out of the west. It rolled in from overstocked, rabbit-ravaged pastures around Hay on the lower Lachlan, immortalised in A.B. Paterson’s poem, ‘Hay and Hell and Booligool’. Stories of dust storms in the central Lachlan are invariably dramatic. Graphic images of buried fence lines and obliterated crops abound. Allan Helyar was farming south of the Lachlan when drought came in 1982. He remembers seeing

...six inches of silt go on a fence in one day, one afternoon, and it wasn’t a big wind. It was just that the top of the paddock was just moving. It was just dead bare and flat and that’s just the way the land is.

15 Frank Vanclay and Geoffrey Lawrence, The Environmental Imperative: Eco-Social Concerns For Australian Agriculture (Central Queensland University Press, Rockhampton, Queensland, 1995), ix, 161.


17 Interview with Tom Glasgow, 16 June 2001.

18 ‘And people have an awful down
Upon the district and the town
Which worse than hell itself they call:
In fact, the saying far and wide
Along the Riverina side
Is “Hay and Hell and Booligal”.’

Ted Tomlinson recalls the 1950s, when he reckons the land was in a ‘lot worse shape’ than today.

Dust storms. They had fences on top of fences, that’s how much it built up. Now, that was possibly because of the rabbits, but that’s what happened. So it was far worse than what it is now. That’s probably a good example of the way that things can be reversed and set right again.\(^\text{20}\)

He speculates that the dust probably originated from the sort of country he now farms, where the soils are deep and soft. Many stories of dust storms focused on the experiences of women and children. Indeed, the storms are often cast as characters in the domestic life of farming families, rather than as environmental events in the farming landscape. In dust storms, the landscape seeped into farmhouses, and infiltrated people’s lives in the most intimate way.

We were getting dust storms in at Yarrabandi that my grandmother had to shovel dust into a wheelbarrow and take it outside. The houses weren’t built like they are today, but that was a fact. That’s what she had to do.\(^\text{21}\)

Alison Hope also has vivid recollections of the 1982 drought.

In the ’80s it just rolled in. You’d nearly cry. That’s a very old home out there, and the dust would just come in under the windows and through cracks, and you couldn’t see and everything was gritty. Oh, it’s horrible, and that’s in the ’80s.\(^\text{22}\)

The dust storms that darken the day and encrust pillows have long been the familiar calling card of drought in these inland plains. Settlers began recording drought conditions in 1789, one year after colonisation. It was after recurring dry conditions in the first decade of the nineteenth century that official European

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\(^{19}\) Interview with Allan Helyar, 5 April 2001.

\(^{20}\) Interview with Ted Tomlinson.

\(^{21}\) Interview with Ted Tomlinson.
exploration parties were encouraged to search beyond the Great Dividing Range in New South Wales for grasslands to graze stock. One of the worst droughts by far since European occupation in eastern Australia began in 1896 and lasted, almost without relief, until 1902. The so-called ‘Federation Drought’ is considered to be one of the most severe experienced in Australia since European occupation. In the five years leading up to Federation in 1901, most of the country experienced intermittent dry spells. By February 1902, however, dry conditions had set in across eastern Australia, and the New South Wales Government declared 26 February a day of ‘humility and prayer’ for rain. But things only got worse. Rivers in western Queensland dried up completely, and the Darling River at Bourke was dry. The nation’s wheat crops were all but lost and, in New South Wales alone, nearly half of the state’s 60 million sheep died.²³

‘A zone of possibilities’²⁴
Dry farming techniques, developed in the United States during the late nineteenth century, were widely promoted in the developing wheatlands of south-eastern Australia. They represented a scientific system of soil cultivation and moisture conservation, heralded as the solution to developing agriculture in the semi-arid soils of the plains. According to the theory of dry farming, moisture was thought to move to the surface of the soil by capillary action, the soil particles acting as a kind of wick for moisture. In south-eastern Australia, dry farming took the form of bare fallow, where pasture was ploughed in autumn and kept bare of weeds until a crop was planted in the following autumn. Over the year, according to the theory, rainfall would be stored in the lower root zone and taken up by the wheat crop after sowing. Dry farming, together with new varieties of wheat and the introduction of superphosphate fertiliser, were to breathe new life into the Australian wheatlands in the early twentieth century. Farmers in the older-established wheatlands of South Australia and Victoria had been practising continuous cropping in order to shore up

²² Interview with Doug and Alison Hope. The Hope’s family farm was located north of the river. They retired to live in Condobolin.


their wheat production. But declining yields in nutrition-depleted soils encouraged many to move from their ‘grain sick’ farms to take up promising new agricultural land in areas previously used for grazing stock. Bare fallow proved to be a phenomenal success in the Victorian Wimmera region in the late nineteenth century, and was widely promoted to increase wheat yields and reduce weeds and root diseases. The New South Wales Department of Agriculture followed suit, organising fallow competitions where a farmer’s success could be judged according to the ‘cleanliness’ and thoroughness of his cultivation techniques.

By the 1920s, agricultural advisers in Victoria and New South Wales were advocating more regular ploughing to further reduce evaporation as well as longer periods of fallow. Long falls promised to transform deserts into productive fields, able to support intensive settlement. According to prevailing wisdom, extending the period of fallow increased the amount of moisture available to the wheat crop, permitting cultivation to extend into areas receiving annual rainfall as low as 10 inches. ‘Careful farmers’, noted Samuel Wadham in 1967, ‘would go over their falls with harrows ten or more times during the six months between ploughing and seeding’. Long-fallowing appeared to be custom-made for keeping the weeds at bay in the drier regions. When combined with improved wheat varieties and superphosphate, however, it served to disguise the insidious process of soil degeneration in farmland subject to erosion.

Soil erosion and declining fertility were not new problems in Australia. Indeed, early indications of eroding soils along rivers and creeks cleared of vegetation were publicly reported shortly after settlement. However, prevailing settler myths about the capacity of the inland for pastoralism and agriculture effectively diverted attention

from the scale and severity of soil erosion in farming regions. In 1876, for example, the Premier of New South Wales and future Prime Minister, G.H. Reid, published an essay highlighting the benefits of grazing livestock in improving the natural resources of the inland plains.

The soil of the plains is loose, and in very dry weather the grass nearly disappears; but as the country becomes stocked the tread of the animal binds the surface; the grass acquires closeness and strength, and the saltbush gives way to the characteristics of the slopes. As a consequence, the rain that falls begins to form watercourses, waterholes become creeks, and the streams increase in volume.\(^{30}\)

A similar idea was aired in *The Parkes Examiner* in 1899. It declared that sheep were a valuable addition to the wheat farm, because they would ‘clean the ground’ of weeds, and assist in retaining moisture by pulverising the soil with their hooves.\(^{31}\)

Soil erosion also accompanied early experiments in farming the light mallee soils of South Australia from 1860s, and Victoria in the 1890s. When mallee farming techniques were employed in south-western New South Wales in the 1920s, the problems associated with widespread vegetation clearance and soil cultivation came too. But, even with increasing incidences of severe dust storms from the western plains, the problems of drifting topsoil were not given serious attention until the 1930s.

In 1930 Samuel Clayton, the Chief Experimentalist with the New South Wales Department of Agriculture, conducted the first soil conservation field day in Australia. Clayton played a crucial role in focusing government and public attention on soil erosion in the developing wheatlands, publishing the first technical paper on the subject in the *Agricultural Gazette of New South Wales* in 1931.\(^{32}\) The *Gazette* was an important avenue for discussion about the issue of soil degradation, with one


\(^{32}\) Samuel Clayton, ‘The control of soil erosion on wheat lands’, *NSW Agricultural Gazette*, XLII(ii), 1 November 1931.
contributor observing that soil and its fertility had to be preserved as a matter of heritage for posterity. A decade of political debate ensued over the need for government intervention in soil erosion, and the imperative for agriculture to develop unimpeded by such measures. Nevertheless, an ‘erosion committee’ was finally established to coordinate a State-wide ‘assault on this insidious enemy of New South Wales farming’, and it became the vehicle for the State’s first Soil Conservation Act.

When the Deputy Premier of New South Wales, Colonel Bruxner, opened the nation’s first Soil Conservation Research Station at Cowra on the Lachlan River in 1941, he decreed that ‘soil preservation was second in importance only to Australia’s war effort’. A series of similar stations were planned to ‘form a protective girdle around the farmlands of New South Wales’. Clayton went on to become the first Director of the State’s new Soil Conservation Service, advocating that farmers change their ways and adopt a new vision for the farming landscape. ‘We must get away from the ugly, ravished farms we see in almost every district if our land occupation is to be permanent’. After 150 years, unease about Australia’s capacity for permanent agriculture lay surprisingly close to the surface of settler discourses about the land.

Prolonged drought and dust storms in the late 1930s and early 1940s wrought environmental and social havoc. Beginning in 1937, dry conditions prevailed over New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and parts of Western Australia, with record low rainfalls in the central west of New South Wales. The drought spread to eastern South Australia, and by 1938 Australia’s wheat yields fell to their lowest level since 1914.

35 Cited in The Land, 28 February 1941, 4.
36 The Land, 28 February 1941, 6.
37 E.S. Clayton, cited in The Land, 28 February 1941, 4.
38 Commonwealth of Australia, Drought, Dust and Deluge, 34-35.
In New South Wales, Clayton’s state-wide erosion survey completed in 1943 revealed that almost half of both the Eastern and Central Divisions of New South Wales, containing nearly all of the State’s crops and 90 per cent of the State’s livestock, were seriously degraded. In Victoria’s Mallee region, wheat fields, irrigation channels, and farming families all succumbed to the ‘Dust Monster’. Between 1939 and 1944 the Mallee Research Station at Walpeup, at the centre of the Victorian Mallee, registered only 10 of the 56 months as dust free, while in the eastern Mallee residents experienced 146 dust storms and many more dusty days over a seven-year period. The problem rapidly escalated to a national crisis. In 1941, as Australian military involvement in World War II escalated, the Commonwealth Minister for Commerce, Sir Earle Page, announced a national fodder conservation scheme to combat soil erosion. Summoning images of military battle, he denounced drought as an ‘insidious foe’ that had begun its ‘operations the moment the first settler put foot on Australian soil’. ‘It is hoped’, Page declared, ‘to make every landholder a storm-trooper against drought.’ Drought would be defeated by an army of farmers, armed with scientific knowledge and methods, and alert to the expectation of attack by this ‘known and certain foe’.

After the war, increasing wool prices provided the first tangible evidence that the fortunes of the wheatlands might be changing. In 1943, members of the Rural Reconstruction Commission had travelled widely across rural Australia, observing the scale of environmental problems in farming regions as a result of declining soil infertility, climatic variability, unviable farm sizes, and the exploitation of land and forests. They witnessed widespread land degradation, mirrored in a ‘psychological change’ amongst farmers as the ‘realities of the interior’ had set in over the previous decade. Land use, they concluded, needed stronger government control, whilst those who misused the land ought to attract greater penalty. Nevertheless, within a few

40 Alan J. Holt, Wheat Farms of Victoria: A Sociological Study (The School of Agriculture, University of Melbourne, Carlton, 1947), Table 71, 146.
41 Earle Page in The Land, 31 January 1941, 5.
short years of the Commission’s first report, the ‘dustbowl’ of the 1940s was being swept away by promotional images of a new type of farming landscape to match the optimism and political ideals of post-war reconstruction. In public discourses the farming landscape was represented as a new kind of heroic landscape of settler occupation, where advances in scientific knowledge and the technology of cultivating would put paid to the environmental catastrophes of earlier decades. Labourers were in demand, not only on farms but for building the neglected infrastructure of a nation. Scientific knowledge was widely promoted as the means to realising the enormous potential for food and fibre production. The outbreak of hostilities in Korea and the United States had increased demand for wool, and Australia was in a good position to capitalise on rising prices on international markets.

In this period the relationship between climate and agricultural development assumed a heightened focus, with Australia’s national and state governments collaborating in a new decentralised meteorological service to assist the states in their post-war agricultural settlement schemes. In 1947, the Commonwealth Meteorological Bureau produced the second in a series of reports on climate in Australia’s wheatlands, focusing on the ‘South West Wheat Belt of New South Wales’. In a foreword to the second study, H.N. Warren, the Director of the Bureau, noted that the future of Australia’s economic development demanded a systematic study of rainfall, temperature, and other weather elements for successful cultivation and animal husbandry.

Hounam’s report plotted the extent of commercial wheat farming, spanning the central western slopes and plains and Riverina districts of New South Wales, from the Lachlan River in the north to the Murray River in the south. The spread of the wheatlands in this region, he observed, was limited only by extremely low rainfall west of Condobolin and Deniliquin (averaging 16.5 inches and 15.5 inches respectively), and extremely high rainfall of more than 30 inches per year in the capital cities, and conducted 202 sessions. Professor Samuel Wadham was one of the four commissioners.

C.E. Hounam, *Climate of the South West Wheat Belt of New South Wales with Special Reference to Rainfall over Marginal Areas*. Commonwealth of Australia Commonwealth Meteorological Bureau, Studies in Applied Climatology, New South Wales – Pamphlet No 2, 1947. The first study focused on the Western Australian ‘wheat belt’,

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mountainous terrain to the south-east. The critical period for wheat production, he noted, fell between the beginning of October and the beginning of November. If one or two inches of rain were not received during this month, then crop yields would suffer accordingly. Rainfall, however, was only one of the factors influencing productivity. Whilst ‘broadly speaking’ the whole of the Central Western and South West Slopes and eastern half of the Riverina were climatically suited to commercial-scale wheat production, some areas experienced greater variability of rainfall and temperature conducive to growing the varieties of wheat then available. According to his criteria for determining the marginal limits of wheat-growing, the area between Condobolin and Ungarie was the least-suited to economic wheat production.45

Such systematic studies of climatic conditions were, however, an inexact science. After the drought years of the early 1940s, parts of Australia began to experience higher rainfall averages than at any other time since European settlement.46 Indeed, the wheatlands had two growth spurts over a century, in 1881-1910 and again in 1946-74, and these coincided exactly with the periods in which average rainfall was generally higher in Australia.47 As a result, the wheatlands in New South Wales gradually extended into the western Riverina, north of the Lachlan from Condobolin to Hillston, and as far north as Walgett, well beyond Hounam’s marginal limits. Farm mechanisation was also dramatically changing the wheatlands. Between 1950 and 1956, for example, the number of tractors on farms doubled in New South Wales.48 The rhetoric of post-war growth found fresh inspiration in the familiar pioneering narrative of the Australian inland ‘as a zone of

45 Hounam, Climate of the South West, 5-16.
47 Heathcote notes that Commonwealth drought relief policies were initially developed during the intervening drier period in the 1930s and 1940s, suggesting that these drought decades were inevitably perceived more as aberrations than as normal environmental variations. R. Les Heathcote, ‘Drought’, in Michael H. Glantz (ed), Drought Follows The Plough: Cultivating Marginal Areas (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994), 100.
48 Rob Linn, Battling The Land: 200 Years Of Rural Australia (Allen & Unwin, St Leonards NSW, 1999), 154.
possibilities...where emptiness could be converted to fullness, where undreamed of potential could be realised, and where distance was symbolically banished'.

Following another severe drought in 1956, the first serious official attempt was made to understand the place of drought in Australia’s agricultural fortunes. In 1967, J.C. Foley conducted a survey of newspaper reports and rainfall data before and during drought periods since the mid-nineteenth century. His analysis revealed what closer settlement advocates had failed to grasp. Between 1855 and 1955, there were no less than seven major droughts covering much of Australia, while other more localised droughts had also substantially affected some states. In Foley’s definition, drought was generally accepted as a rural phenomenon. It represented a ‘period of rainfall deficiency, extending over months or years, of such a nature that crops and pasturage for stock are seriously affected, if not completely burnt up and destroyed, water supplies are seriously depleted or dried up, and sheep and cattle perish’.

The severity of drought was judged in terms of its economic impact on settled areas. Hence, droughts were generally measured in terms of declining stock numbers, crop yields, and farmer incomes. Indeed, drought acquired a range of meteorological, hydrological, agricultural and socio-economic meanings during the twentieth century. In a provocative essay published in 1969, Les Heathcote argued that settler Australians perceived drought as an inconvenient quirk, rather than a permanent feature of the Australian environment. They exhibited a lingering reluctance to acknowledge either the fragility of the Australian environment, or the limitations of European-derived farming techniques and systems of land-use. In the settler Australian imagination, drought was a phenomenon of settlement and the onset of drought generally greeted with ‘indignant surprise’. As good seasons returned, faith

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49 Tom O’Regan analysed the iconography of the post-war inland landscape in the film The Overlanders made in 1946. O’Regan, ‘Australian film in the 1950s’.

50 J.C. Foley, Droughts in Australia: Review of records from the earliest years of settlement to 1955 (Commonwealth Bureau of Meteorology, Melbourne, 1957), Bulletin 43. The droughts Foley referred to occurred in 1864-66, 1880-86, 1888, 1895-1903, 1911-16, 1918-20, and 1934-45. Since then there have been periodic droughts affecting some areas more than others. The drought declared in 2002 was widely regarded as the worst drought in 100 years.

51 Foley, Droughts in Australia.

in the essential fecundity of the land was restored.\textsuperscript{53} The science of drought was still a taboo subject for serious research. Ignoring it was simply ‘misplaced patriotism’, he concluded, recalling earlier debates over Griffith Taylor’s proposition that Australia’s environment limited the capacity for intensive settlement and agriculture.\textsuperscript{54}

Nevertheless, farmers enjoyed a run of good seasons in the 1960s, and wheat prices were making further expansion of the wheatlands financially worthwhile. In this period, large areas of land in the Western Division beyond Condobolin were cleared for cultivation. But even as the limitations of the wheatlands were being redefined, the government’s attitude to drought and drought assistance for farmers was undergoing a radical shift. One of the catalysts for policy change came from increasing attention by scientists to the recorded patterns of drought conditions. In 1990, the Commonwealth Government’s Drought Policy Task Force successfully argued that drought should be formally redefined, and adopted a working definition: ‘Drought represents the risk that existing agricultural activity may not be sustainable, given spatial and temporal variation in rainfall and other climatic conditions’.\textsuperscript{55}

According to the Task Force, drought could no longer be regarded as an unnatural phenomenon, or natural disaster. It was a predictable climatic event, part of Australia’s environmental history.

This idea was repeated in the Commonwealth’s Rural Policy Papers published in 1996, adding that the 1991 drought in eastern Australia was the most recent in a succession of nine major droughts identified by the Bureau of Meteorology since records began in the 1860s.\textsuperscript{56} Drought was redefined to become ‘part of the farmer’s normal operating environment’,\textsuperscript{57} and managed as for any other aspect of the farming enterprise. Drought relief was removed forthwith from the Natural Disaster Relief

\textsuperscript{54} Heathcote, ‘Drought in Australia’, 175, 194.
Arrangements. The Commonwealth’s new National Drought Policy introduced strict eligibility criteria for rural welfare assistance to struggling farming families. In turn, farmers were required to be ‘self-reliant in managing drought’.\textsuperscript{58} The policy focus shifted decisively away from farmer welfare to supporting farming enterprises that were considered most likely to succeed in the longer term.\textsuperscript{59}

\textit{‘millions and trillions of bloody rabbits’}\textsuperscript{60}

Drought also had another cohort. Devastating and highly visible plagues of rabbits, more common in the early-twentieth century, are still vivid in the stories of the wheatlands. With their introduction to Australia in the 1850s, rabbits colonised the mainland with diabolical ease. Within 30 years, they had assumed plague proportions. In 1887, for example 10 million creatures were destroyed within eight months in New South Wales alone.\textsuperscript{61} In the developing wheatlands, farmers found themselves engaged in protracted and very personal battles with rabbit plagues. Stories abound of the grey mists that moved across the landscape and piled up against paddock fences.\textsuperscript{62} According to Allan Helyar, the proliferation of rabbits in the central Lachlan was ‘the greatest degenerating thing that ever happened here’.\textsuperscript{63} Many family stories single out the first sighting of rabbits on their properties, and calibrate changes in the landscape according to the rise and decline of rabbit populations.

But hunting rabbits was also a popular childhood entertainment and a staple part of the family diet. Allan’s family employed a greyhound and a couple of sheepdogs to help catch rabbits for killing and skinning. Further west, Bill Lander remembers

\textsuperscript{58} Commonwealth of Australia, \textit{Australian Rural Policy Papers}, 68-9.

\textsuperscript{59} Although, as Botterill points out, even in this climate of economic rationalism drought has remained a highly emotive issue. The plight of drought-stricken farming families inevitably draws public sympathies and political responses, and drought has been shown to be not only cultural but also highly political. Botterill, ‘Uncertain climate’, 73.

\textsuperscript{60} Interview with Tom Glasgow, 16 June 2001.

\textsuperscript{61} Australia’s rabbit population is thought to have originated with the release of twenty-four rabbits at Barwon Park near Winchelsea, Victoria for hunting purposes. Roland Breckwoldt, \textit{The Dirt Doctors: A Jubilee History of the Soil Conservation Service of NSW} (Soil Conservation Service of NSW, 1988), 11.

\textsuperscript{62} Linn, \textit{Battling the Land}, 156.

\textsuperscript{63} Interview with Allan Helyar, 5 April 2001.
how farmers used to flood the burrows to flush them out and make a bit of money from the skins. Many farms in the central Lachlan employed rabbiters, and Alison and Doug Hope reflect on the demise of the old trappers that used to make a living from killing rabbits.

That’s another thing that’s changed too from when we were first married out at Redloom....out in Bright you used to have a trapper to try and keep the rabbits down, and they were loners, a lot of them were loners, and they’d camp there for ages....the way they lived was as rough as rough but that’s how they made their living and people’d come round and they’d fill the chillers up, pay them. But see all that’s gone now, real characters.64

Between 1950 and 1956, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation released a virus that made short work of rabbit populations, dispensing with up to 99 per cent in the first few years. Farmers invariably cite the myxomatosis virus as a momentous event in Australian agriculture. Tom Glasgow is in no doubt about the impact of the virus in the central Lachlan wheatlands. ‘When the myxo come through’, he says, ‘there’s never been a [black] dust storm since.65 The virus was phenomenally effective in addressing an environmental problem that had besieged farmers for nearly a century. Science emerged triumphant.

The decimation of rabbit populations seemed to bring an end to the most severe dust storms. Rabbit plagues undoubtedly exacerbated the impact of drought conditions. In the social memory of older farmers in the central Lachlan, however, they were held to account for causing the so-called ‘rabbit droughts’.66 Indeed, many farmers draw an explicit link between declining rabbit populations and diminishing severity of droughts and dust storms in the late twentieth century. Bert Vagg, now in his 80s, was farming further west near Hillston when the 1944 drought hit. He remembers it as the worst drought he’d ever seen, and puts it down to the rabbit plagues.

64 Interview with Alison and Doug Hope, 19 June 2001.
66 Interview with Bill Lander and Bruce Overell, 17 June 2001.
I don’t think we get the same droughts now because they’ve got control of rabbits...you go back to about ’92, that the rabbits came through here and the rabbits are what really done the damage.67

Local farming practices not only exonerated farmers from involvement in these environmental disasters, they are perceived as having contributed to making the landscape more stable. The key was pasture improvement, the introduction of legumes to bind the soil and provide nutritional vegetation for grazing stock.

It’s got better, because in the early days that I remember as early days, there were a lot of dust storms...There was a lot of lack of food. There was very little pasture improvement and the fences, everyone’s fences had drift on them.68

Our brilliant city friends, they said it was all caused by the farmers clearing the land and working up the ground to cause all the dust storms. There wasn’t a bloody acre cleared at Hay where it come off. Black stuff. You know what done it? Millions and trillions of bloody rabbits.69

They [droughts] were really bad then — not so bad in the last few years because they’ve got rid of the rabbits out back. There’s more lucerne and that sort of thing.70

Drought, dust storms, and plagues of rabbits are deeply ingrained in social memory in the wheatlands. They are remembered as interrelated events, each compounding the other, their severity judged on their impact on individual farms and families. In local stories, they are remembered as the real agents of landscape change, masking the more subtle processes of ecological decline. In the drought-stricken 1940s, human intervention was seen as the key to achieving a proper balance of nature and agriculture. Similarly, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the agency of nature was often portrayed in farmers’ stories as unhealthy and destructive. A combination of science and good farming practices could ameliorate the more severe

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68 Interview with Allan Helyar, 5 April 2001.
69 Interview with Tom Glasgow, 16 June 2001.
70 Interview with Lesley Ridley, 11 May 2001.
episodes. Indeed, they were crucial in stabilising the landscape and rendering it productive. The landscape needed to be managed. As Tom Griffiths has noted, the effects of land degradation during the twentieth century seemed to call for more human intervention not less, in order to assert positive control over the detrimental effects of drought, over-grazing and poor farming practices. In the process, the heroic pioneer was transmuted into environmental manager.

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Plate 5: Mural in Condobolin’s main street, 2002. Photo: J McCann

Plate 6: Shifting evaluations of the wheatlands, 1871-1980s.
Chapter 6. The scrub terror

The work of scrub destroying must not be intermittent, but as constant as eating, if the earth is to yield her increase in the shape of herbage and grain instead of gum trees.¹

In 1890, Neil McDonald’s grandfather travelled from northern Victoria to take up a selection of 3,000 acres in the central Lachlan. The property, called Mogandale, is still owned by the McDonalds. It was typical of blocks sub-divided from former grazing runs. It was extensively ring-barked by gangs of Chinese labourers in the previous decade, in order to encourage the growth of native grasses. By the time the McDonalds arrived, the landscape was a skeleton forest of ring-barked trees, and dense scrub or regrowth proliferated instead. Whilst most selectors in the region were grazing sheep and cattle, Neil’s grandfather favoured wheat-growing. Over the next 60 years, he just ‘worked away on it’. The property was laboriously cleared for cropping with horse teams, until the first tractor was acquired in about 1939. By then, according to Neil, Mogandale was a typical wheat farm of the Depression era, overstocked and ‘pretty well flogged’.²

Grimm’s dictionary of the German language defined land as ploughed land, ‘the plot of ground or the furrows in a field that were annually rotated’, whilst in English dictionaries land generally meant a space defined by boundaries.³ In the United States, observes John Stilgoe, land originally meant a grassy glade or clearing within a forest, an area made ready for planting or grazing and then maintained to keep it clear. ‘Land is not natural but artificial’.⁴ In settler societies of the New World, the

¹ ‘A homestead selection’, The Parkes Examiner, 4 April 1900.
² Neil McDonald in interview with Neil and Ros McDonald, 30 May 2002.
⁴ John Stilgoe, Common Landscape of America, 1580-1845 (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1982), 170. Stilgoe notes that the old meaning of land was related to ‘launde’ or ‘launyer’, to make clean and useful. The Concise Oxford Dictionary now simply describes it as a part of the earth’s surface not covered by water.

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need for clearing land on a large scale presented new challenges. By the time Britain expanded its empire to Australia, memory of the vast land-clearing exercises that had transformed the forests of western Europe and the United Kingdom into arable land by the late sixteenth century, was all but lost. Indeed, the agricultural fields that characterised much of Europe were considered to be ‘natural’.

In the New World, however, cleared land required constant vigilance against ‘ecological succession’. In the new colonies of south-eastern Australia, particular species were especially prone to regenerate in dense concentrations in land that had been cleared. Regeneration impeded cultivation, and effectively reduced the amount of grass available for grazing stock. Fire, traditionally used by Indigenous Australians, was not welcome in the fenced and stocked colonial landscape. When Major Thomas Mitchell recorded the transformation of open forest lands to ‘scrub’ near Sydney in 1848, he noted how the suspension of traditional Indigenous burning practices by settlers had allowed the proliferation of forests of trees and grasslands ‘choked by underwood’.

**Making land**

In the central Lachlan, ring-barking was a favoured method for removing trees. Older farmers tell stories about the gangs of Chinese men employed to ring-bark local properties. Some had worked on the goldfields before becoming labourers on pastoral stations. Dorothy Press remembers how they would sink a dam and establish an orchard or vegetable garden wherever they went. Many became hawkers, selling their produce to the settlers, and were familiar figures in rural towns and settlements.

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7 Ring-barking was an early form of silviculture used from the late nineteenth century, involving cutting into the bark around the tree to prevent nutrients reaching the branches. Ring-barking is thought to have been an Australian innovation, although some attribute it to Californian immigrants to the Australian goldfields and their practice of ‘girdling’. Breckwoldt, The Dirt Doctors, 14. Stilgoe, Common Landscape of America, 173, notes that the practice of girdling was first promoted in North America by John Smith in 1625, but it fell out of favour with American farmers who preferred the much faster process of felling and burning.

8 Interview with Dorothy Press, 4 April 2001. A settlement at Goobang Creek is commemorated as ‘Chinaman’s Bridge’, and several graves have been recorded in Condobolin cemetery. Most of
Chinese ring-barking gangs gradually disappeared from pastoral regions in the early twentieth century, but they left a profoundly different landscape. In Australia, landclearing was a powerful statement of European colonisation but, by the end of the first century of European occupation, the process of ‘making land’ was attracting vigorous public debate. Much of the early debate about widespread destruction of native vegetation focused on private or leasehold land used for grazing stock, particularly in the western plains of New South Wales. By 1892, an estimated 9.5 million hectares of land had been ring-barked across New South Wales. Some observers argued that trees played a role in promoting rain, suggesting that accelerated tree clearing caused the onset of drought. Others pointed to the effects of tree removal on the soil. In 1896, an article appeared in the Agricultural Gazette of New South Wales exhorting farmers and graziers to value the vegetation on their landholdings.

Now the hills are more or less completely denuded of the despised scrub, the ground firm and hard, the surface bare...The rain or thunderstorm descends; down it rushes unobstructed from the hillsides, carrying with it part of the still remaining fertile soil. We have ruined our country by denuding hills and plains of all trees and shrubs under the idea of improving pastures and fields, and have destroyed their fertility by overlooking the fact that trees and shrubs are not only in the world for firewood, timber, for shade, or ornament, at our convenience, but to create and maintain the conditions permitting man to exist.¹⁰

Four years later, in the midst of the 1890s drought, The Parkes Examiner reported on progress with land selection in the central Lachlan. Describing the scene on a newly selected block of 1,280 acres, the article noted approvingly that the land had been enclosed, tanks dug, and 300 acres cleared for the plough. A large solidly-built homestead of pine and pise had been established, and the whole ‘give the visitor the impression that the owner is one who really intends to make the land his home’, unlike the dozens of selectors in the past who had merely grazed a few sheep on their conditional purchases. Hundreds of acres had been ‘either rung or re-rung, and scrub-

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9 Breckwoldt, The Dirt Doctors, 14.
cutting is a daily occupation’. The ‘germs’ of a forest of box seedlings, the readers were reassured, would soon be replaced by the plough and a crop of wheat.11

Over the next 100 years, successive legislation and agricultural policies continued to promote and reward land-clearing, aided by scientific and technical advances and water conservation measures. In the ‘golden age’ of agriculture during the 1950s, for example, Departments of Agriculture across Australia were promoting and advising farmers on clearing, ring-barking, and poisoning trees.12 Lake Cargelligo farmer, Greg Johnson, remembers them as ‘the golden years’.

...when I come home from school in ’48 and we bought another property next to this one at that stage, and in 1950 the wool boomed and the seasons changed...and, you know, things were pretty rosy’.13

Nevertheless, concerns about unfettered land-clearing were never far beneath the surface of farming discourses.14 In 1941, a series of articles by Arthur E. Heath appeared in The Land newspaper, highlighting the problems of soil loss through erosion by wind and water that was devastating farms across New South Wales.15 While war raged in Europe and the Pacific, he wrote, settler Australians on the home front were at war with their own countryside. Native flora and fauna were widely condemned as ‘Public Enemy No 1’, and many of the closely settled districts had

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11 ‘A homestead selection’, The Parkes Examiner, 4 April 1900.
15 The Land: The Countryman’s Weekly, The official organ of the Farmers and Settlers Association, is a New South Wales newspaper aimed at providing information on recent research and technology, domestic articles and market news of interest to farmers. It began publication in 1911 and was published weekly throughout the twentieth century. During the 1940s and 1950s, The Land regularly ran articles featuring places of ‘natural’ beauty and advocated nature conservation on farms. These were often juxtaposed with articles promoting progressive farming methods.

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been reduced to ‘barren, treeless wastes’ by indiscriminate use of the axe and firestick.\(^{16}\)

Given the aesthetic preferences of early settlers for lightly-timbered farmscapes, the heroic status afforded those who settled and cleared the land, and the imperative to clear trees to farm small selection blocks, it is perhaps not surprising that farmers have inherited an ambivalent relationship with trees in their landscape. Advocates of conserving native vegetation on farmland failed to sway those predisposed towards land-clearing, and removal of vegetation continued unabated in the emerging wheatlands. ‘Improving’ the land entailed clearing indigenous vegetation and replacing it with introduced species considered better suited to agriculture, a point made by W.K. Hancock in his environmental history of the Monaro region of New South Wales.\(^{17}\)

**Story trees**

The transformation of the landscape from grassland plains to broadacre cropping has been an ongoing process in the central Lachlan. Bill Lander has seen the local landscape around Euabalong transform since the 1960s.

I’ve seen all the changes that went on out our way. No farming at all on the western side of the Lachlan River, down this end of the Cobar Shire, until about 1965….It spread out further and further every year. People started clearing and growing crops.\(^{18}\)

When farmers talk about ‘scrub’ in the central and western plains of New South Wales, they generally mean dense tree and shrub regrowth on previously cleared Box and Pine woodlands (predominantly Bimble Box (*Eucalyptus populnea*), White Cypress Pine (*Callitris glaucophylla*) and Black Cypress Pine (*Callitris endlicheri*).
Recent studies of trees in central New South Wales suggest that most woodlands were dominated by eucalypts at the time of European settlement, but that these are now far denser and dominated by cypress pine.\(^{19}\) Local farmers who cleared their land to establish crops recall a particular loathing for mallee trees (*Eucalyptus socialis* and *E. dumosa*) that knitted across the undulating plains. Their stories are peppered with the mixed emotions that accompanied what Tom Griffiths has called the ‘heroic pioneering labour of clearing’.\(^{20}\) Tom Glasgow reflects on how the mallee country around Tullibigeal ‘wouldn’t feed a goat’. Only by knocking it down and planting clovers could it be rendered useful.\(^{21}\) Allan Helyar remembers the mallee as having proliferated since his parents’ day. He calls it a ‘selfish scrub’, useless except perhaps as wildlife habitat.\(^{22}\) The availability of new tractors and techniques after World War II meant that mallee trees were removed even more easily than with a team of horses. Robin Sanderson remembers his father clearing mallee trees on his selection north of the Lachlan River, but he is now uncertain about that legacy.

I sometimes sit up the paddock, and look back to where we’ve cleared the country, and you think, you can hardly remember what it was like before. Everyone that comes past says “gee, you’ve done a good job with that”. Then, because we’re involved in this native vegetation planning and committees and so forth, you go there and come home and say, I don’t know what to think.\(^{23}\)

The tension between a desire to conserve the continent’s natural resources and the pressure to develop and exploit them are persistent themes in Australia’s ecological narratives since the earliest European encounters.\(^{24}\) Native vegetation legislation has merely served to crystallise the century-long conflict over the value of Australian indigenous flora and fauna. Meanwhile, land management agencies and


\(^{21}\) Interview with Tom Glasgow, 16 June 2001.

\(^{22}\) Interview with Allan Helyar.

\(^{23}\) Robin Sanderson in interview with Anne Coffey and Robin Sanderson, 4 March 2001.

\(^{24}\) Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth*, 85; Griffiths, ‘How many trees make a forest?’, 375.
local communities wrestle with shifting and contested evaluations of the wheatlands. Depending on the values attributed to indigenous vegetation, extensive land-clearing for grazing and cropping during the twentieth century has either been extolled as evidence of scientific and technological prowess over an unforgiving environment, or condemned for causing degradation of the soils and waterways.

In the mid-1990s, the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service published the results of a project to map native vegetation remaining in the New South Wales wheatlands, and plot the rate of land-clearing over a 15-year period. The report revealed that, in the central Lachlan Valley around Condobolin, more than half of the native vegetation that existed in 1974 had been removed by 1989. While tree logging operations in the rainforests of South East Asia, the Pacific, South America, and southern Australia’s temperate old growth forests were attracting widespread criticism, the fate of native vegetation in Australia’s wheatlands had simply ‘not been in the public eye’. On current trends, native vegetation in the wheatlands would be ‘negligible’ by the end of the twentieth century. Land-clearing was deeply entrenched in the agrarian culture of the wheatlands. ‘At the heart of this issue is the notion that the Australian bush is inferior and unproductive’.

It was in this context that the New South Wales government introduced the first of a suite of regulations in 1996 to control clearing of native vegetation particularly on privately-managed farmland. The State Environmental Planning Control 46 (generally referred to as SEPC 46), created enormous resentment amongst farmers opposed to the government controls on their farming activities, particularly at a time of increased economic uncertainty. However, government agencies implementing vegetation clearing controls were also confronting a powerful belief amongst farmers that the indigenous vegetation had already been cleared by earlier generations, and what remained was merely ‘scrub’. The farmers of the central Lachlan found themselves at the front line of the native vegetation debate in New South Wales, when the

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27 Nadolny et al, in Socio-economic Aspects of Maintaining Native Vegetation on Agricultural Land, 34.
government introduced the *Native Vegetation Conservation Act 1997*. With a history of extensive land-clearing, the central wheatlands of New South Wales covering the shires of Bland, Forbes, Lachlan (south of the Lachlan River), Parkes and Weddin, were selected for the first Regional Vegetation Management Plan under the new Act. The plan aimed to improve and enhance native vegetation, and relied heavily on scientific evidence that the rate of vegetation clearing was exacerbating problems such as soil erosion and salting, and diminishing numbers of indigenous flora and fauna on agricultural land.

When Neil McDonald volunteered to serve on the North Lachlan-Bogan Regional Vegetation Committee, he felt deeply uneasy about the political ascendancy of natural resource management, and the apparent alienation of farmers in decisions made about their land. Neil recalls being ‘at sea’ in the early stages of the committee. ‘I thought, oh no, they’re scientists, they’re just going to put it all over us’. He recalls how he gradually came to distinguish between what he calls ‘the true scientists’ and the ‘pedantic idealists’. The Native Vegetation Plans were predicated on the heritage concept of conserving ‘remnant’ vegetation in order to replicate an earlier, and arguably more desirable state at the time of European occupation. The legislative definition of native vegetation was all-encompassing, including trees, understorey plants, groundcover and wetland vegetation, comprising species ‘that existed in the State before European settlement’. Conserving remnant native vegetation, then, required the committee to ‘unearth a lot of history’, as Neil puts it, in order to determine what constituted pre-European vegetation.

Neil acquainted himself with the testimonies of explorers such as Mitchell and Evans, records of early grazing runs such as the Overflow Station, and authoritative published accounts of the New South Wales inland such as Bean’s *On the Wool Track* written about the Darling River region. These sources enabled him to challenge

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29 Department of Land and Water Conservation, *Native Vegetation Resource Package.*
30 Neil McDonald in interview with Neil and Ros McDonald, 30 May 2002.
31 *Native Vegetation Conservation Act 1997*: Section 6.
32 Located north of the Lachlan River, and made famous in Banjo Paterson’s poem ‘Clancy of the Overflow’.
what he saw as ‘stereotypical concepts of what things might have been like when Captain Cook got here’, and convinced him ‘that Australia was more of a grassland than a forest land’ prior to settlement. According to Neil, when intensive cropping gave way to a mixture of grazing and cereal farming, the pine trees returned with a vengeance. The proliferation of dense pine at the expense of other tree species had ‘really spoilt the balance’ of the landscape. After a lifetime dedicated to removing vegetation, farmers were having difficulty accepting the arguments for retaining it.\(^34\) By the 1990s, the ‘scrub terror’ was once again at the centre of a political battle over vegetation management in the agricultural landscape.

It’s what they think [nature] should be and we are trying to create something that’s not natural. You can’t just lock something up, put a fence around it which is artificial anyway, and just let it go and see what happens. Everything has some form of management, and Australia had it before the white man got here. It was a form of management, partly by nature, partly by the Aboriginal.\(^35\)

The idea that Aboriginal people had burnt and transformed the landscape over thousands of years became the subject of many scholarly discussions, including Rhys Jones who first applied the term ‘firestick farming’ to Aboriginal burning practices. The idea dramatically confronted the prevailing doctrine of *terra nullius* that had effectively denied Indigenous people legal rights to their land under British law.\(^36\) ‘Firestick farming’ gained influential support from public figures such as author and scientist, Tim Flannery, and formed a narrative that told how early pastoralists were attracted to a lightly treed woodland landscape created by traditional Aboriginal land management practices. Nevertheless, the narrative has also attracted its critics, notably the archaeologist and farmer David Horton, who suspected that the emphasis


\(^{35}\) Neil McDonald in interview with Neil and Ros McDonald, 30 May 2002.

on traditional Aboriginal burning practices was rather too simplistic and convenient for those whose interests were served by it.\textsuperscript{37}

The farming landscape had become a battleground of competing ecological narratives, in which differing or selective interpretations of the past were embraced in order to frame a story that is coherent to the world view of its proponents. In the central Lachlan, the New South Wales Department of Land and Water promoted the new native vegetation plans as a vision for the wheatlands that would achieve an ecological ‘balance’ of indigenous vegetation species with cultivation and grazing. The Department was keen to diffuse fears amongst local farmers that the native vegetation legislation was the dead hand of government policy, putting unnecessary and unworkable constraints on their livelihood. They argued that the fate of the central wheatlands was ultimately linked to the fate of native vegetation on farmland. It became known amongst local farmers as the ‘1770’ policy. The government’s objective to restore elements of a pre-European landscape confronted and destabilised the settler narrative that held tree clearing to be not only a physical necessity, but a moral imperative, to occupy and utilise the land.

According to Neil McDonald’s reading of historical sources, the combined forces of Aboriginal fires and lightning strikes would have created a mosaic of burnt and unburnt patches, maintaining the diversity of plant species and overcoming problems of uncontrollable wildfires. Such revelations convinced Neil that farmers have a case to argue for continuing some form of vegetation management. John Sutherland agrees.

My impression of this Native Vegetation Act is that the pristine world is a forest of pine trees and red gums. It’s a city bureaucratic society view that keeps on coming out at me all the time with every issue. Through the whole report was a perception [about the pre-European landscape] and everything was measured against that.\textsuperscript{38}


\textsuperscript{38} Interview with John Sutherland, 6 April 2001.
A similar argument was aired by Ian McClintock, Chair of the New South Wales Farmer’s Association Conservation Committee, during the launch of a report commissioned by the Farmers’ Association.\(^{39}\) The report drew on explorer and early settler descriptions of the inland plains to argue the case against native vegetation clearing controls. As Damien Lucas observed in his incisive review of the report, it sought to use historical evidence to show that modifying the landscape was not only following on from traditional Indigenous management of the land, but was an essential aspect of human existence in the Australian environment.\(^{40}\) Such arguments borrowed heavily from the farmer and author, Eric Rolls, whose book *A Million Wild Acres* offered a convincing thesis that the grasslands and open woodlands observed by early colonists were the result of traditional Indigenous burning practices, while the dense forests had proliferated after European settlement. In response to this interpretation of his ideas, Rolls himself was obliged to point out that he advocated valuing and conserving these ‘phoenix forests’, not removing them.\(^{41}\)

In response to the farmers’ interpretation of historical sources, the New South Wales Native Vegetation Advisory Council presented its own historical trump card. In a public brochure promoting the conservation of native vegetation, the people of New South Wales were urged to value the physical and spiritual significance of ‘the bush’ as ‘part of our national psyche’ and identity.\(^{42}\) Linking the potent cultural symbolism of the ‘bush’ with native vegetation conservation seemed to offer some hope of shifting entrenched beliefs. A New South Wales Historic Houses Trust initiative, for example, pointed to case studies of pastoralists in western New South Wales showing the enduring significance of the bush heritage legacy in the cultural identity of both


\(^{41}\) Eric Rolls, *A Million Wild Acres: 200 Years Of Man And An Australian Forest* (Nelson, Melbourne, 1981), 399. Tom Griffiths, ‘How many trees make a forest?’, 382-3. Griffiths notes that Rolls’ argument had originally been cast as a result of concerns over logging in rainforests and old growth forests during the 1980s, but that it assumed a new relevance in the debates about native vegetation on farmland.

settler and Indigenous Australians, and the interconnectedness of the natural environment and culture.\(^{43}\) The Council also produced its own analysis of the social and historical significance of native vegetation, emphasising the role of cultural values in shaping settler and Indigenous people’s interactions with the biophysical aspects of the landscape. Australians, according to the authors, needed a shared vision of the rural landscape, a definition of ‘what we want the “bush” to look like’.\(^{44}\) They advocated recognising local landscape knowledge and building local pride in native vegetation as a crucial part of that vision. However, they also acknowledged that, with few Australians now having any direct links with agriculture, such a shared vision would have to accommodate the competing priorities of groups that do not necessarily share the experiences and values of farmers.

Government environmental agencies and individuals concerned with promoting the conservation of native vegetation have had to acknowledge that there are deeply entrenched, culturally-powerful moral narratives about improving the land.\(^{45}\) The idea of maintaining a balance between productivity and natural processes has been central to the debate about agricultural sustainability in the wheatlands. As Allan Helyar observed,

> You have to put something back in for what you’re taking out...you’ve got to keep a balance.\(^{46}\)

Many farmers argue that modern farming practices have improved the ecological health of the land, the proof of which is to be observed in the resilience and sophistication of agricultural production. Productivity is cited as proof of ecological health. Farming the land is essential to achieving it.

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\(^{44}\) Judy Lambert and Jane Elix, ‘Social values of the native vegetation of New South Wales: A background paper of the Native Vegetation Advisory Council of NSW’, Background paper no 3, November 2000, 23.


\(^{46}\) Interview with Allan Helyar, 5 April 2001.
You had to improve the country because it was all wire grass, what we call ‘wire grass no 9’, which is a useless sort of thing….But you have to farm it to get rid of this wire grass and stuff to improve it, and sow down pastures of some description, or even ploughing got rid of it after two or three years.\(^{47}\)

I don’t think it would [recover by itself] because I think we’ve done too much damage to nature for nature to take over.\(^{48}\)

It’s all pasture improvement. See the clover, that improves the soil and consolidates everything.\(^{49}\)

The country is in far better shape now than it was in 1948. It’s just unreal, and it’s still improving, partly because of what we’re doing and a fair bit in spite of what we’re doing.\(^{50}\)

In cultural terms, what emerges is a more complex response to ecological decline in the wheatlands than recent studies of farmers and natural resource management suggest. By drawing on historical interpretations, scientific research, and local mythologies about landscape change, farmers seem to have recast themselves in the heroic settler tradition, and adapted it to accommodate present circumstances. The dominant narrative amongst farmers entails a story of how they inherited a degraded landscape wrought by rabbit plagues, poor farming practices, and over-grazing, culminating in the ‘dust bowl’ days of the 1940s. They illustrate how they have succeeded in restoring it to productive health, presenting themselves as modern-day inheritors of a much older legacy of Aboriginal land management. William Cronon’s analysis of the historiography of the ‘Dust Bowl’ era in the Great Plains of North America offers a salutary point about competing interests that underpin the history of land use and ecological change in agricultural regions.\(^{51}\) If, as Cronon argues, the history of colonising the Great Plains is told as a narrative of progress in which

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\(^{47}\) Interview with John Raven, 4 April 2001.


\(^{49}\) Interview with Tom Glasgow, 16 June 2001.

\(^{50}\) Neil McDonald in interview with Neil and Ros McDonald, 30 May 2002.


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PART THREE — LAND
settlers struggled and ultimately triumphed over nature, then the story assumes that the landscape confronting the settlers was in need of improvement, and the struggle was justified because in the end it was happily transformed into a productive wheatfield, the wild places banished to the edges of paddocks and roadways.

The implication that farmers are not managing the land responsibly is perhaps the most contested aspect of the current native vegetation debate. As Neil admits, ‘It’s all very emotional. A lot of the ideas are imported from other countries, green groups’.\(^{52}\) Native vegetation conservation is linked in the minds of local farmers with a bureaucratic approach to land management that denies their local knowledge and expertise. Land-clearing controls go to the heart of tensions between city-based environmental agencies and farmers over notions of rurality, and the economic and cultural worth of rural life and work. The concept of land degradation invokes deeply emotional but often ambiguous responses. Some see it as a political campaign driven by urban ‘greenies’ antagonistic to farming communities and ill-informed about the nature of farming and farmers’ intimate relationships with their land. Others harbour a sense of growing alienation from a familiar landscape, no longer trusting the old ways of assessing its condition, nor fully embracing the environmental vision of land management agencies. For many, there is a strong desire to fix the landscape in an earlier time within living memory, when the financial, social and ecological health of the wheatlands seemed unassailable.

Ted Tomlinson identifies himself as one of the largest wheat producers in the district. This northern side of the river feels different to the southern farmland around West Wyalong. There, the land has been cropped for nearly a century, and the tree cover is sparse. His grandfather rode a bicycle up from Victoria in the 1890s, and selected a block of land called Yarrabandi. The family fanned out across the central western plains, selecting and farming a succession of properties. By the 1980s, Ted and his sons owned Eulandool, on the northern side of the Lachlan River and near an earlier family farm carved out of the former Wardrey run. He marvels at the rapid evolution of technology used to change the land, from the axe and horse teams in his grandfather’s era, to satellite-guided tractors his sons now use to deftly plough and

\(^{52}\) Neil McDonald in interview with Neil and Ros McDonald, 30 May 2002.
harvest from the Eulandool earth with pin-point accuracy. Ted subscribes to the view that humans, whether settler or Indigenous Australians, have no option but to produce something from the land. Then in the midst of a conversation about how farming is crucial to maintaining landscape health, he suddenly ponders those areas on his property that are still ‘untouched’ by the plough. These are places reserved for reflection and emotional sustenance.

I always loved the spaces, I always loved the freedom of the land. So that never leaves you, once you get that into your blood it just never leaves. I like to touch things, I like to feel it, I like to experience it, and that’s something that a lot of people just walk straight past.

The way that Ted talks about this landscape conveys some of the dualities of the farming experience, a feeling for the land that conflates the utilitarian and the aesthetic. Like his neighbours, he goes on to argue that leaving the land ‘with nothing on it’ is detrimental to the health of the land, because it allows one species to dominate and produces an unhealthy environment, a monoculture. Human management is crucial in maintaining the biological diversity of the land, keeping it in ‘balance’.

I think we’ve got to learn to live with [the land] rather than try to get away from it. That’s what seems to be some people’s attitude is to just get away and leave

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54 Interview with Ted Tomlinson, 30 May 2002.

55 Tom Griffiths notes that testimonies to the 1901 Royal Commission about conditions in western New South Wales revealed how settlers were already aware of their role in creating significant environmental changes in the arid environment, and were arguing that ‘the land needed people as much as people needed the land’ (Griffiths, ‘How many trees make a forest?’, 386).
it, but the land, the whole thing’s got to be used, it’s just got to be used. I don’t think you can leave it unused, whether you give it back to the Aboriginals, they use it, they’ve put a match in it and it burns, renews itself. 56

Ted’s reflections also illustrate a recurring contradiction between a ‘nature’ that restores itself, and a ‘nature’ that needs to be managed. While the ‘woody weed’ problem in the drier country has taken centre stage in the native vegetation management debate, those living in close proximity to the Lachlan River still marvel at the restorative power of the occasional floods that flush the black soil country, although these are less frequent now that the river’s flow has been regulated. Floodwaters may have created physical and personal difficulties for farmers and graziers, but they also produced conditions ripe for regeneration of the box and red gum trees along the banks. John Sutherland points to the creek beneath his lounge room window.

Nature’s responded [to regulated creeks] and we’ve now got a riparian zone that’s thick red gum and box forest that was never there. You can see the dead trees. There’s four or five in the creek. They grew in the bed of the creek because the water only came there now and again. So although we’ve changed the land, who says it’s bad, for Christ’s sake? We’ve now got water, we’ve got corridors of permanent water for wildlife. 58

Dorothy Press remembers how the natural vegetation preserved the land during periods of drought, particularly the kurrajong trees that always provided reliable fodder for stock when other sources of feed were depleted. Across the river her neighbour, Allan Helyar, expresses a similar view about the regeneration of native grasses. Recently converted from wheat to cotton farming, Allan has observed over many years that native grasses ‘choke out the introduced species’ in the absence of

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56 Interview with Ted Tomlinson, 30 May 2002.
57 The Mid-Lachlan Regional Vegetation Management Plan specifically addressed the problem by allowing for permits to be issued to clear regrowth under certain circumstances, in order to maintain the productive potential of agricultural land (Department of Land Water Conservation, Native Vegetation Resource Package, 45).
58 Interview with John Sutherland, 6 April 2001.
grazing animals and cultivation. Introduced pasture and exotic weeds are patently excluded from the world of ‘nature’.

You can’t destroy nature. Nature will regenerate itself, it doesn’t matter a damn what we do to it.\textsuperscript{59}

Nature’s restorative power is a recurring theme in local stories about landscape change in the central Lachlan. It hints that human impacts on the landscape may be only temporary after all. It suggests that nature could heal itself if human intervention was withdrawn. In 1948, for example, Noel Beadle’s survey of vegetation in New South Wales was introduced by the New South Wales Minister for Conservation with the opinion that the erosion of the western plains could be remedied if stock and rabbits were removed to allow the land to restore itself. It echoed a long-held view that Australia’s vegetation was in a ‘state of balance’ before settlement, and that environmental degradation was the result of human actions.\textsuperscript{60} According to this view of nature, the passing of time could obliterate even the catastrophes of human mismanagement. As we see in Chapter 9, farmers may be deeply implicated in landscape change, but they are far from clear about their role as ‘stewards of the soil’ in a landscape where nature exercises its own dynamic. The situation is compounded by the slow and incremental changes that have occurred in this landscape.\textsuperscript{61} As one farmer put it,

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{59} Interview with Allan Helyar, 5 April 2001.
\item\textsuperscript{61} Gary M. Howling, \textit{Remnant Vegetation Strategy For The Central West Catchment} (Central West Catchment Management Committee, Orange, NSW, 1997), 38.
\end{itemize}
Change happens so slowly that it's just part of your life.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{62} Doug Watson in interview with Doug and Margaret Watson, 3 April 2001.
average yearly rainfall (mm)
flood areas

RIVER
EIGHTEEN LARGE NATIVE FISH IN A SINGLE HOUR. A MASSIVE SPLASH NEAR A HALF-SUBMERGED GUM SIGNALS THE CHURNINGS OF A LARGE FISH. MAYBE THE FABLED MURRAY COD. MAYBE A BUMP.
Chapter 7.  Muddy waters

For men with years had learned
wisdom, and my waters they used with care,
And the wilderness bloomed like a
Garden with flowers rich and rare.\(^1\)

Steve Doyle’s family has occupied the river country of the central Lachlan for three generations. His association with the river reflects a pragmatism born of farming a landscape where rainfall is unreliable, and surface water scarce.\(^2\) In these semi-arid plains, where less than 550 mm of rain falls in a year, water is a precious commodity. He contemplates the river below his house, and searches for the words to describe his feelings for it.

It’s just a peaceful thing really. It gives you security and all that. It has a lot to do with land values. A property that’s got a river and irrigation, that potential gives you bigger value. [It’s] a symbol, yes, that’s what the property’s about.\(^3\)

Steve knows that river country is a good financial investment, a buffer for times when the rains fail to come. Nevertheless, Steve’s assessment of the Lachlan belies a far more complex and unsettled history. The Lachlan is an elusive river. Seventy-five per cent of its valley is officially flat, and much of its course is really a complex braiding of channels, creeks, anabranches, and ephemeral lakes.\(^4\) John Chappell describes it

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2. The river system and farm dams are the main sources of surface water. In some areas of the lower river valley dryland farmers access underground or artesian water through bores.

3. Interview with Steve Doyle, 3 April 2001.

4. ‘Flat’ is defined as having slopes of less than three degrees. Billabongs are pools of water outside the main channel forming waterholes. Anabranches are channels that leave the main stream and rejoin it further downstream. Department of Water Resources, Water Resources of the Lachlan Valley (Sydney, 1989), 2. Jane Roberts and Geoff Sainty, Listening to the Lachlan (Sainty and Associates Pty Ltd, Potts Point, 1996), 1, 98-100.
from the air as ‘a quilted plain festooned with broad loops and scrolls, through which a brown winding thread makes its way….the remains of not one, but several series of ancient channels’.

The source of this lowland river lies in sheep paddocks on the undulating western slopes of the Great Dividing Range near Gunning. The main channel meanders for 1,370 km across New South Wales and, unlike the snow-fed streams of the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers, relies for momentum on the modest contributions of the Abercrombie, Crookwell, Boorowa and Belubula Rivers upstream of Forbes. Downstream, it flattens out into the semi-arid plains of the inland. Tell-tale grey-black sediments hint at how far countless floods have etched themselves into the red-brown soils of the surrounding plains. At Hillston, the Lachlan branches out wilfully after heavy rains, tracing westward along the lines of ancient creek beds to a series of shallow salt-lakes in the arid western plains. The main channel continues southerly through the black soils of the Hay Plains, its volume gradually shrinking from evaporation as it spreads out across the flat country. Below the village of Oxley, it enters a sea of cumbungi grass and quietly merges with the Murrumbidgee River. Here, the fifth-longest river in New South Wales peters out in the reed beds of the Great Cumbung Swamp.

For all its incongruities, the Lachlan River is an integral part of the agricultural landscapes of central New South Wales. It traverses more than half of the state, from the western slopes of the Great Dividing Range in the east, to the Riverine Plains in the west. Its catchment covers some 84,700 square kilometres or nearly one-eighth of

5 John Chappell, ‘A river in time’, in Mandy Martin and Sarah Ryan (eds), The Lachlan: Blue-Gold (Environment Studio, National Institute of the Arts, Australian National University, 2003), 5-7. Chappell is Professor of Environmental Geoscience at the ANU Research School of Earth Sciences.

6 Cumbungi is a common name for the species Typha orientalis and Typha domingensis, also known as ‘bulrush’. Roberts and Sainty, Listening to the Lachlan, 78.

the state. About 14 per cent of the State’s agricultural wealth is produced here. For much of the twentieth century, the Lachlan River was imagined as a river of empire, a key to national prosperity in which the inland deserts would be made to bloom. The ‘conquest of water’, as Donald Worster puts it, was one of the hallmarks of western colonialism in the arid territories of America, Africa, Asia, and Australia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It signified not only territorial domination, but also the power of modern technology and human ingenuity to subordinate nature itself by means of large-scale water conservation schemes. In the mallee country of north-western Victoria, it was the monotony of the wheat district and the impoverishment of the sparsely settled wheatlands that bothered Henry Gullett. Irrigation and closer settlement, he argued, would provide an antidote to ‘that unlovely, dusty, sparsely-planted town that you meet from one end of the wheatbelt to the other’.

‘This imperfect of nature’

In Australia, the early quest to trace the inland-flowing rivers to a mythical inland sea had inspired the colonial governments to finance exploratory expeditions along the river systems. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the notion had long given way to colonial ambitions for harnessing them for agricultural settlement. To

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8 Lachlan Catchment Management Board, Lachlan Catchment Blueprint 2002-2012 (Department of Conservation and Land Management, October 2001), 3. According to the New South Wales Irrigation Council, nearly one third (29.1 per cent) of agricultural production in the State depends on irrigation. By comparison, an estimated 70 per cent of the world’s available freshwater is used for irrigating agricultural crops, and one third of the world’s food is produced on irrigated land. Donald Worster, ‘Water as a tool of empire’, in An unsettled country: Changing landscapes of the American West (University of Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1994), 32.

9 From Elwood Mead’s article, ‘Making the deserts bloom’, in Current History, 31, 1929. Cited in Donald Worster, Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West (Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1985), 332. Mead was the Commissioner of the United States Bureau of Reclamation between 1924 and 1936, and his ideas on scientific farming, closer settlement and hydrology were hugely influential in the development of irrigated agriculture. He had earlier served as Director of the Victorian State Rivers and Water Commission in Australia between 1907 and 1915, promoting ‘scientific colonisation’ of former pastoral estates.


the European way of thinking rivers were nature’s bounty, reliable and abundant streams gushing from mountain to sea. The meandering, land-locked inland rivers of Australia were far from this ideal. ‘A river’, wrote Henry Lawson in 1893, ‘is not a broad, shining stream with green banks and tall, dense eucalypti walls; it is more often a string of muddy waterholes’. The Australian river, wrote Paul Carter nearly 100 years later, is ‘unlettered, undramatic, [and] drops with an inarticulate exclamation into sullen silence’. Unruly and unpredictable, the western-flowing rivers were liable to flood in one year and shrink to a chain of muddy water holes in the next. Indeed, they could hardly be called rivers ‘in the polite, reliable European sense’. When Charles Bean ventured into the back country of northern New South Wales in the early years of the twentieth century, he was struck by the peculiar character of the great inland river systems that flowed from the Great Dividing Range and emptied into the vast interior of the continent.

In the next decade, Bean would become a war correspondent and, ultimately, the official historian of Australia’s involvement in World War I. For now, he worked as a barrister’s assistant, travelling widely across western New South Wales. In his spare time, he wrote a series of essays that captured the essence of his experience in this ‘back country’. Bean was a passenger on the paddlesteamer, the ‘Dreadnought’, travelling along the Darling River. As the boat chugged sluggishly between low banks, he observed how the water churned and swirled in giant eddies, and the channel became increasingly wider and shallower. ‘It was the old age’, he wrote, ‘the heavy, shrivelled relic of a great river, the last scant, ebbing, disappearing dregs of its life-blood’. On another journey, he encountered the Paroo River straddling the border between New South Wales and Queensland. The Paroo seldom flowed at all. Indeed,

15 Asa Wahlquist, ‘Reflections on Uncharted Waters’, in Daniel Connell, Uncharted Waters (Murray-Darling Basin Commission, Canberra, c2002), 111. Tom Griffiths vividly portrays the vagaries of the inland or arid-zone rivers in “The outside country”, in Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths (eds), Words for country: Landscape and language in Australia (University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2002), 224-228.
16 They appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald under the by-line ‘CW’, and were subsequently published as C.E.W. Bean, The Dreadnought of the Darling (Angus and Robertson, Sydney 1956
a coach route had been established along the dry channel and, when it did flow, the water simply ‘wandered over the paddocks... in search of a bed’. ‘It is a tragedy of the inland rivers’, wrote Bean, ‘that their mouths are really their death – seeing that so little water gets there’.17 In his classic description of the inland, Bean predicted that the ‘half desert country’ would have as profound effect on the Australian imagination as the sea had had on that of the English.18

Thomas Mitchell found similar qualities during his forays into central New South Wales. The Macquarie River, he noted, ‘spread out into a network of reservoirs that serve to irrigate vast plains’.

The fluvatile process seemed to be reversed here, the tendency of this river being, not to carry surface waters off, but rather to spread, over land where none could otherwise be found, those brought from a great distance.19

The Australian poet, A.D. Hope, was somewhat less charitable in his classic poem ‘Australia’ published in 1939, when he wrote:

Her rivers of water drown among inland sands,
The river of her immense stupidity
Floods her monotonous tribes from Cairns to Perth’.20

Nevertheless, in the early years of the twentieth century, the promise of an irrigation scheme to transform the drought- and flood-prone inland plains of eastern Australia into rich farmland held powerful sway in the public imagination.21 Plans evolved for a ‘great national scheme of water conservation’ focusing on an ambitious

[1911]).

17 Bean, The Dreadnought of the Darling, 33.
21 McLeod, Condobolin and district, 5.
proposal to tap the giant interconnecting waters of the Murray, Murrumbidgee and Lachlan Rivers of New South Wales. By the late nineteenth century, populating the inland plains of eastern Australia with a nation of yeoman farmers was not just a political vision, but a moral imperative. In the ‘vast empty spaces’ that lay beyond the coastal ranges, F.B. Gipps declared to the Royal Society of New South Wales in 1881, there was ‘every inducement, nay, it behoves us as a duty to futurity, to elaborate a comprehensive scheme of water storage and distribution’. Indeed, the country between the Lachlan and Darling Rivers could support 100 million people, such was its fertility. A water conservation scheme with a network of canals and storage lakes would render the great rivers of this region suitable for the establishment of a ‘sturdy independent class of yeomanry farmers, for which England is so justly celebrated, and who are the very backbone of any nation’. 22 Thirty years later, J.H. Carruthers argued a similar case, citing the first Chief Commissioner of Railways in New South Wales. The Lachlan Valley, from Cowra to below Condobolin, had the greatest potential for agricultural development of all the State. Indeed, Major-General Edward Hutton had told him that the inland slopes and plains were far superior to the irrigated basins of the Nile and would support a ‘teeming population. How strange it is’, he mused, ‘that we always cling to old ideas and to practices of the past, that seem to engrave themselves on our mind’. 23

But the Lachlan, with its low-lying catchment, submerged trees, and unpredictable flow, was never going to be an easy river to colonise. It foiled early navigation by boat, and missed out entirely on the paddle-steamer trade that characterised its more voluminous neighbours like the Murray and Darling Rivers. In these drought-prone plains, land that afforded access to river was highly prized. Those claiming land with river frontage were principally interested in its capacity for grazing sheep on native grasses, supplemented by small amounts of lucerne that could be grown on the flood-prone river flats. Frequent dry seasons meant that sheep were often hand-fed with lucerne bought from other areas, or stock had to be moved to


areas where pasture was more plentiful. Downstream of Condobolin, the land was still primarily held under licence for grazing, and the New South Wales government was mindful that it was reaping little financial benefit from this vast expanse of river plains country. With irrigation, speculated a reporter for the Australasian, the ‘wasted’ water and land of the inland might be saved and the Lachlan River might surpass even the Murray or Murrumbidgee Rivers. In 1915, as the central Lachlan was in the grip of a severe drought, the Condobolin District Advance Association issued a booklet promoting the area for agriculture. ‘In ordinary seasons there is no richer nor more profitable soil to be found in such large areas in any part of the world, and though drought seasons will bring great losses, nature has provided the remedy if man will only utilise the running waters of the Lachlan River.’ By 1915 Borambil, one of the early pastoral stations along the Lachlan, had been transformed ‘into a closely settled district dotted over with the homesteads of hundreds of settlers’. This landscape may have no permanent water, but water conservation could change all that. ‘It now remains for man to rectify this imperfect of nature, by impounding in the Wyangala basin’ to make the Condobolin district one of the most flourishing in New South Wales.

The lakes of the Lachlan were also caught up in the enthusiasm for water conservation in the early years of Federation. Lake Cargelligo, the largest of them, became the focal point of a small township of the same name. This shallow ephemeral lake, named Regency Lake in 1826 by the Surveyor-General Thomas Mitchell, was in fact a complex network of shallow creeks and swamps capturing floodwaters from the Lachlan during extremely wet seasons. When water was scarce, the drying lake bed provided an abundant source of food for native fauna and settlers’ stock. It also provided a convenient racetrack for the local community, most of whom were living

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24 Cited in McLeod, Condobolin and District, 44-46.
25 According to the Australian Bureau of Meteorology in 2004, the 1914-15 drought, though short-lived, was the driest such period on record in large areas of southern Australia, causing widespread failure of wheat crops across Australia. Australian Bureau of Meteorology, Drought, Dust and Deluge: A Century of Climate Extremes in Australia (Australian Bureau of Meteorology, Canberra, 1994), 34.
26 ‘Burrawang’, in McLeod, Condobolin and District, 36.
27 ‘Borambil’, in McLeod, Condobolin and District, 44-6.
and working on pastoral stations dotted along the lower river and stretching into the backblocks. In 1902, one of the first water conservation projects to be established by the newly-established State Government opened at Lake Cargelligo. The scheme involved a channel cut from the main river channel to access the lake via a series of smaller lakes known as Sheet of Water and Curlew Lake. The local newspaper waxed lyrical about this new venture in water conservation. It was a thing of beauty and efficiency, it announced, putting an end to the regular inundation of surrounding pasture and allowing local farmers to reclaim the ‘many thousand acres of erstwhile marshy land’.  

In the early years of the twentieth century, the New South Wales Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works examined several proposals for a water conservation scheme on the Lachlan, a river ‘remarkable for the variability of its flow’.  

The options included damming the upper reaches, increasing the storage capacity of Lake Cargelligo, and developing the series of low weirs in the central and lower Lachlan between Goolagong and Booligal. In 1925 they finally opted for the hydraulic engineering option. It involved building a dam and an associated railway line linking the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area to the south with good grazing land to the north. The Wyangala dam scheme was designed to regulate the highly variable natural flow of the Lachlan along 767 miles of river channel. It would ensure a year-round supply of water for stock and domestic use to towns and landholders along the valley, and reduce the river’s natural propensity to flood over the plains along the lower river. It would also flush water along the ephemeral streams of the lower river, and disperse water to the back country properties via a system of gravity channels and pumps. In the process, Crown lands would be rendered suitable for sub-division and agricultural expansion, creating higher values and an increased financial return to the

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30 A conference had earlier been held in Forbes in 1923 to consider a dam proposal, and referred the matter to the New South Wales Public Works Committee in 1923. Walker, ‘Irrigation in New South Wales’, 222-3.

government. Wyangala promised the predictability that agricultural prosperity and closer settlement of the inland plains demanded. More importantly, it would contribute substantially to the development of the State and the nation.

Over the next 30 years, while stock-grazing and wheat-growing defined the valley’s agricultural industries away from the river, sorghum, soy beans, safflower, maize, sweet corn, and cotton crops transformed the river flats into a patchwork of intensive irrigated agriculture. In 1938, the New South Wales government built the Lachlan’s first and largest irrigation scheme between Forbes and Condobolin. The Jemalong and Wylde’s Plains Irrigation Districts scheme provided irrigation licenses for 150 properties. An estimated 1,357,000 acres of landholdings were to be supplied with water along the valley, including 35-40,000 acres of irrigated farms between Cowra and Condobolin. Another weir at Jemalong in 1940 diverted water to the new irrigation district. The area of the valley dedicated to irrigated agriculture doubled in the 1960s, and doubled again in the following decade.

The semi-arid plains flourished even more wildly in the imagination. J.G. Youll, Manager of the most successful irrigation settlement scheme on the Murrumbidgee River, told the Interstate Conference on Water Conservation and Irrigation in 1939 that irrigation ought to be developed in the marginal wheat-growing areas further west, well beyond the present boundaries of the wheatlands. By irrigating the drier western plains, he claimed, rainfall would be increased in the older established wheat-growing areas in the east and south-east. ‘There is an old saying amongst wheat-farmers’, he told the conference, ‘rain follows the plough’. Like many other such beliefs of the man on the land this opinion is perhaps based on sounder scientific principles than the average farmer is aware of.’ Conference participants preferred to

32 Development and Migration Commission, ‘Summary of report’, 6, 8. The dam was designed by the Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission and built between 1928 and 1935 using labourers employed under a Migration Agreement with Great Britain.

33 Walker, ‘Irrigation in New South Wales, 227. By 1941, the flow of nearly every river in New South Wales had been diverted for irrigating pasture, crops, orchards and market gardens, and under the Water Act 1912-1936 the Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission had issued 2,666 private irrigation licenses to landholders across the state.


leave such matters to the ‘true scientist’ for the time being. Nevertheless, as the New South Wales Minister for Agriculture declared in his opening speech, conserving the waters of our rivers for irrigation was the only way to develop Australia.36

Steve Doyle’s father was one of the first farmers downstream of Condobolin to start irrigating. He set up a massive old gas pump and burnt his own charcoal-gas. It was an ideal way to ensure that there was sufficient fodder for stock during drought periods, although Steve distinguishes this type of small-scale irrigation to supplement stock fodder or domestic gardens from the large-scale irrigators who moved into the valley in the 1980s.37 Margaret Watson remembers how the area around her house near Kiakatoo used to be ‘like an oasis’. Her husband’s grandfather had set up pumps on the river nearby and created a flourishing garden. Doug recalls that ‘we were growing just about anything you could think of...with varying success.’38 Most of the farmers with river frontage were utilizing river water for small-scale irrigation and domestic purposes. He remembers how the river levels were still erratic, even after the first dam wall was built. When the wall was enlarged in the 1960s, the Lachlan became a fully-regulated river.

The river was always up and down, very low or there’d be rain in the catchment and then it would be three-quarters of the way up the banks and semi-flood. That’s had a marked impact, the new wall, making the dam much larger. The flow has now been more regulated. The river has had more of a flow all the time, until this year [when] the bureaucrats made a big mistake and the flow became extremely low.39

Between 1944 and 1971, irrigated farmland along the Lachlan Valley increased five-fold.40 Lake Brewster was developed to provide additional off-river storage. By enlarging the Wyangala dam wall in the 1960s, the dam’s storage capacity was

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36 Opening address by the Honourable A.D. Reid, Minister for Agriculture, NSW, and Chairman, NSW Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission to Interstate Conference on Water Conservation and Irrigation, 3.
37 Interview with Steve Doyle, 3 April 2001.
38 Interview with Doug and Margaret Watson, 3 April 2001.
39 Interview with Doug and Margaret Watson, 3 April 2001.
40 The average irrigation licence on the Lachlan covered 95 to 100 acres.
effectively tripled to cope with increasing demands for water from irrigators. Water conservation had transformed John Oxley’s plains of ‘barrenness and desolation’ into a landscape of agricultural abundance. The unpredictable waters of the Lachlan were now harnessed to 'stabilise' agricultural production in the valley, and its ‘great potential’ was limited only by the imagination. But the regulation of the Lachlan was not without its critics. A poem published in the *Lachlander* in 1900 and reprinted in 1929, blamed Condobolin’s ‘liquid mud’ on the local Council’s new weir.

An engine great and pipes they laid  
How the money they did slaughter  
On ratepayers backs they put a tax  
To pay for mud not water.  

In the 1930s, the renowned Australian poet and writer, Mary Gilmore wrote in her memoirs how the diversion of the Lachlan for irrigation had had a catastrophic effect on bird and fish life. ‘Among the sins to be one day repented of in this Australia of ours’, she said, ‘is the diversion of waters from the great fish and bird sources.’ She recalls that the creeks, waterholes, marshes and billabongs of the Riverina were teeming with life when she was a child. Once, when travelling by horse and cart from Lake Cargelligo to Bollongough with relatives, she camped on the banks of Lake Cowal. ‘I shall never forget it. The stillness and the sounds of which there were so many, yet each solitary and distinguished… the boom, boom, boom of the frogs, the horn of the bittern; the cry of the curlew; the whistle of the plover’.

In the late 1960s, the Lachlan Region Development Committee was still examining ways for the region to develop its water resources for longer-term


economic prosperity. Prospects for continuing growth in the local sheep industry were on the wane, and a report commissioned by the Committee urged that the river valley be fully utilised for public and private agricultural investment. In 1974, the New South Wales Minister for Agriculture announced that the Condobolin Agricultural Research Station would be equipped with an irrigation research unit. When the Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission conducted a survey of the valley’s potential for agriculture in 1972, it concluded that there were still extensive tracts of land along the river ripe for development. Agricultural expansion, the Commission argued, simply awaited the discovery of better water conservation techniques and farming practices in order to make the valley flourish. Irrigated crop land alone could easily be expanded to cover 200,000 acres over the next 50 years, and water could even be piped from the adjacent coastal valley. Lake Cargelligo was ‘the West’s best kept secret’, its unique water conservation scheme ‘a true indication that the pioneering spirit still exists in Australia in the 1980s...a credit to the men who achieved it’.

Water had made inland rivers like the Lachlan bloom, but water conservation was becoming increasingly mired in controversy. By the late 1980s, the spiralling cost of water licences on the Lachlan was putting large-scale water use out of reach of all but the largest farming enterprises. Even as the demands of irrigated agriculture were escalating, rifts began to appear over the social and ecological costs associated with the ‘conquest’ of the Lachlan. In this politically-charged climate, the New South Wales Department of Water Resources held a seminar to discuss environmental concerns with local people in the Lachlan Valley. A picture emerged of a river in crisis. Paper after paper laid blame on official policies that for decades had overseen ad hoc land-clearing, river regulation, extractive industries such as sand-mining, the

48 ‘Lake Cargelligo: Nature’s playground and the West’s best kept secret’, Royal Australian Historical Society Collection, Sydney. Pamphlet VF991.7LAK.
introduction of exotic fish species to the Murray-Darling river system, the application of pesticides and herbicides to pasture and crops, and irrigation-induced salinity.\(^{50}\)

High on the list of the ecological ailments affecting the river system was the poor condition of the wetlands. These extensive areas of marshy ground cover some 400,000 hectares, mostly along the flood-prone lower Lachlan. They include the Great Cumbung Swamp and the fish-rich natural depression known as Lake Cowal near Wyalong. Once dismissed as unproductive marshes, the importance of the wetlands to the river’s health was only just becoming clear. Environmental scientists concluded that the artificial release of water from Wyangala was having a negative effect on native flora and fauna dependent upon seasonal flooding and drought in order to thrive, particularly in the lakes and swamps in the lower reaches of the river. In the enthusiasm for preventing damaging floods upstream and harnessing water for agricultural development, water authorities had unwittingly compromised this lowland river’s ecological health. Environmental scientists reasoned that, if water was released from Wyangala Dam to mimic the seasonal flows that had occurred before regulation of the river, the ephemeral creeks, anabranches, lakes and wetlands could be restored to a healthier state. Nevertheless, the government’s decision to release water for the sake of the river’s native flora and fauna generated a tug of war over water ‘rights’. When government water policy shifted emphasis, from water licences for drought-proofing farms, to water allocations for the ‘environment’, irrigators found themselves competing with environmental advocates for the river’s precious cargo. Suddenly, as John Sutherland put it, the river became ‘real estate’.

Ensuring a predicable and regulated water supply had been a central tenet of government agricultural and land settlement policies since Federation, so any change in the way water was allocated was bound to attract the scrutiny of water licence-holders. By the late 1990s, the New South Wales government began to focus on the ecological health of the State’s unregulated waterways, including the creeks of the


\(^{51}\) Interview with John Sutherland, 6 April 2001. John claimed that 15 or 20 years ago a water licence had no commercial value, but would now be worth $350,000.
Lachlan River system. The assessment of these so-called ‘stressed rivers’ was intended to provide baseline information for future river management policies. It involved measuring selected physical aspects of the river’s health including the structural stability of the river banks, river bed and sand or gravel bars, the condition of riparian and aquatic vegetation, and the effect of structures such as weirs on water flow. In the case of the Lachlan, license-holders were reputedly sapping the river system dry at a rate that was inhibiting natural recovery, and many of the creeks were showing evidence of environmental stress as a result.

For years, landholders along the ‘naturally ephemeral’ creeks in the Lachlan region had been granted licenses to tap them during period of drought. Many areas in the Lachlan Valley were now overused during dry times. According to the stressed rivers report, the practice of extracting water required greater government intervention to protect the river environment from continuing degradation. Furthermore, there was a lack of scientific information about the river and ‘limited community knowledge of these important environmental issues’. Water reform, the government concluded, could only be achieved by engaging local people in river management. The 1987 seminar provided the groundwork for a closer examination of the Lachlan’s natural resources, and a very different picture began to emerge to that presented by the Hunter Valley Research Foundation some twenty years earlier.

The Environmental Protection Agency attempted to overcome local opposition by arranging community meetings and inviting written submissions. The agency was keen to involve local farmers in the process of developing a river management plan, under the auspices of the Department of Land and Water Conservation. The farmers responded. They demanded a clean and healthy river. Their livelihoods, and those of future generations, depended on it. Quite simply, they said, the river was their heritage. Water quality had deteriorated, trees were collapsing more frequently, native

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56 The meetings were held at Cowra on 10 March 1998, Condobolin on 11 March 1998 and Hillston on 12 March 1998.
fish were disappearing. Everyone agreed that the river had to be nursed back from the brink of extinction. The reasons for river’s demise, however, were far from clear.\textsuperscript{57}

The State government shifted to a whole-of-catchment approach to managing rivers in the late 1990s, forming local catchment committees to address the problem of river decline. The Lachlan Catchment Management Committee was one of the first to be formed.\textsuperscript{58} Bill Sheafe joined the catchment committee because of his concerns that decisions were being made to suit water users upstream at the expense of those on the lower river. He had observed how a ‘knee-jerk reaction’ to the seasonal drying of the wetlands near Booligal had led to a decision by the water authorities to release an ‘environmental flow’ in order to save dying chicks in the ibis rookery. The effect on the rookery was catastrophic. ‘I think’, Bill concluded, ‘they killed a lot more birds out of kindness than nature would’ve ever done’. Sending water down the channel between October and March was ‘just flying in the face of nature’.\textsuperscript{59} Others blamed the river’s decline on a century of land-clearing that had increased sedimentation in the river. Some pointed to the introduction of large-scale irrigation and rising salinity levels in the rivers and creeks. Harry Webber put it this way:

See, this river always had plenty of water in it. And now with the cotton-growing they’re just sucking the river dry....See, you’re talking about this river. She was one of the greatest rivers we ever had, you know.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{58} Lachlan Catchment Management Committee, ‘A community strategy for natural resources management in the Lachlan Catchment Region’, May 1993, 5. The NSW government introduced the concept of Total Catchment Management in the 1980s. It was intended to resolve the bureaucratic separation of river and land policy, and to ‘balance resource utilisation and conservation’. The Lachlan Catchment Management Committee included six government representatives (regional managers of their department or agency), and 12 community members (comprising 10 landholders or land users, and 2 people with environmental interests), together with 2 representatives of local government.
\textsuperscript{59} Interview with Bill Sheaffe, 11 December 2001.
\textsuperscript{60} Interview with Harry Webber, 19 June 2001.
But everyone agreed that the greatest damage to the Lachlan had been wrought, not by regulation of the river’s flow, irrigation or land-clearing, but by a fish.

‘Rabbits of the river’61

Dorothy Press gazes at the muddy channel outside her window, and talks about the impact of the European carp fish on her part of the river.

I’ve lived with it and I’ve seen it every day of my life changing....It used to be clear, and green, almost that clear green, and when you were swimming underneath you could see weed and stuff underneath....And the fish, and all that – a lot of the fish have been destroyed by these others.62

_Cyprinus carpio_, the European carp fish, was introduced to Australia in 1872 by the Geelong and Western District Acclimatisation Society. Prior to 1960, the species was thought to have been restricted to ponds in the Melbourne Botanical Gardens, and to a reservoir in Sydney.63 Sometime during the 1960s, however, specimens were released into the waterways of the Murray-Darling river system, and they proliferated with alarming ease. During the floods of 1973-4, the extent of their colonisation and the devastating impact on native fish species became abundantly clear. At the same time, people across the Murray-Darling Basin began to observe that catches of the giant native Murray cod and other indigenous fish were becoming increasingly rare. The proliferation of carp and the decline of native fish confirmed that a crisis was occurring in the inland rivers of south-eastern Australia.64

Along the length of the Lachlan, carp are portrayed as the central players in the river’s demise. People talk about how the waters of the Lachlan churn with the creatures, as they burrow into the river banks and sabotage the old river red gums that

62 Interview with Dorothy Press, 4 April 2001.
struggle to hold the soft sandy soils in place. Andrew Buttenshaw remembers the last time Lake Cowal was in flood.

We were down rolling our fences up...and the carp coming in from the river were so big that they couldn’t get through the fence, they had to swim down around the end where we rolled it up. We’re driving along in a little tractor through two feet of water, and it’s like herding a mob of sheep in front of you.  

Stories of the river invariably begin with clear water and the pleasures of fishing and swimming, and end with the carp. Ted Tomlinson’s recalls how his family used to live on the river at Wardrey. It was a different river then, the water teeming with native fish.

In the late ‘60s, early ‘70s, the fishing was fantastic. I caught a 48-pound cod in there just right near the house and we used to catch catfish and yellowbelly in there like that. I used to go snorkeling in the river, in the Lachlan. You couldn’t snorkel now, you wouldn’t be able to see. But it was that clear.

Childhood memories make the river and its decline a deeply personal matter.

When I was a kid you could see the bottom of the river. You’ll never see it again. You know, you could walk over a log or something and see clear right to the bottom. But you know, it’s all murky all the time now with carp, and you could go and catch a fish nearly any time you want, now you can’t. Catch a carp, that’s about all.

Local members of the Lachlan Catchment Management Committee tell the story of how winter flows used to flush down to the end of the river. In summer, the river and creeks would dry up. These creeks and swamps were meant to be ephemeral. With the enlargement of the dam and the growth of large-scale irrigation, however, smaller, more frequent releases delivered water to the lower reaches of the river, even

65 Interview with Andrew Buttenshaw, 15 June 2001.
66 Interview with Ted Tomlinson, 30 May 2002.
67 Doug Hope in interview with Doug and Alison Hope, 19 June 2002.
in summer.\textsuperscript{68} This had the effect of immersing lower trunks of riverbank trees. John Sutherland speculates that the Lachlan normally reached its peak flow after the heaviest rains fall in winter and spring. As a result, the river was used mainly for irrigating winter cereal crops and lucerne pasture. The introduction of large-scale cotton-growing demanded large amounts of water in summer, but no one had thought to examine the implications of transforming the Lachlan into a summer-flowing river.\textsuperscript{69} Summer is the time when the European carp are at their most active, and trees and banks alike were becoming unstable as a result of their burrowing habits. With the explosion of European carp in the 1970s, people reported increasing incidences of collapsing river-banks and trees. John argues the carp virtually took over the river. ‘Every farmer you talk to says carp are the number one issue in the river. Yet’, he says, ‘all you hear from the politicians is that it’s irrigators pumping the water out’.\textsuperscript{70} Amongst people of the Lachlan, the devastating impact of carp on the river is part of local mythology.

...it was a pretty clean river when I was young. We used to swim in it and catch yabbies in it. You’d catch a yabby with a bit of string and a piece of meat tied on the end and an old colander. You’d look down four or five feet into the water and when you saw a yabby hanging onto your string you’d pull it up gently...If you got onto the bridge...or at Booligal and look down you could see to the bottom of the river, you could see the ribbon weed and stuff. It was ’74 when we first noticed carp in the river, and that was a very big flood. That was one of the years in which the Lachlan and the ‘bidgee waters would have merged....I certainly believe that half our problems in this river, down this end of the river, are caused by the carp....I could take you down there and show you the little bastards chewing away at the riverbank now. But if I tell people that, that haven’t actually witnessed it and seen it....\textsuperscript{71}

We used to have drums of water. An old fella used to cart it from the river with a horse and cart and this drum tied on it. That was five shillings a drum for that

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{68} Roberts and Dainty, \textit{Listening to the Lachlan}, 100.
  \item \textsuperscript{69} Interviews with John Sutherland, 6 April 2001; Peter MacPhillamy, 2 August 2005.
  \item \textsuperscript{70} Interview with John Sutherland, 6 April 2001.
  \item \textsuperscript{71} Interview with Bill Sheaffe, 11 December 2001.
\end{itemize}
water, straight from the river, but it wasn’t as dirty and muddy and as horrible as it is now. The muddiness only came in later years. Carp and the irrigation’s done it. The carp mainly gets the blame.\textsuperscript{72}

Actually, the carp, I think from a personal observation, not scientific, it’s a far bigger problem than most people realise. It’s as shocking problem, and not just the Lachlan.\textsuperscript{73}

When I came here in ’63 we were able to catch fish and actually that’s how John impressed my parents. He’d bring the odd yellowbelly into my parents. They thought he was, you know, a bit of all right!\textsuperscript{74}

The water has definitely downgraded. When we were kids we used to drink it and swim in it and it was beautiful, and there weren’t the carp in it. You’d catch nice fish, you know, but now you wouldn’t think of drinking it. It’s polluted. The carp have stirred it up. Underwater rabbits they call them. They undermine the banks and the trees are falling in...the rivers used to have reeds and things in them, all those reeds are now gone and they used to purify the water. The carp have eaten that all out and now you haven’t got the filtering system....It’s terrible.\textsuperscript{75}

The river itself has changed. No doubt about that. When we were kids we’d go fishing, it was full of ribbon weed and there was different sorts of weed, and the river was clean. You could see down through the weeds a bit, you know. The riverbanks have fallen in since then. Really you’ve only got to blame the carp. They’ve destroyed the riverbank.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{72} Interview with Ethel Taylor, 18 June 2001. Ethel grew up in Euabalong, on the Lachlan between Condobolin and Lake Cargelligo.

\textsuperscript{73} Judy Doyle in interview with Martin and Judy Doyle, 7 May 2001.

\textsuperscript{74} Kerry Raven. Interview with John and Kerry Raven, 4 April 2001.

\textsuperscript{75} Martin Doyle in interview with Martin and Judy Doyle, 7 May 2001.

\textsuperscript{76} Interview with Steve Doyle, 3 April 2001.
I could take you out to Booberoi Creek, where we’ve taken a lot of photos. The creek was 20 feet wide. It’s now 40 feet wide, and the trees have just all fallen in. They’ve burrowed right underneath the bank. You can see right in, and when the water comes up it all falls down again and they go again. They’ve really done a lot of damage to our river.\[77\]

When carp invaded Lake Cargelligo in the 1960s, the voracious fish ate the ‘ribbon weed’ that regularly fouled fishing lines and stalled motor boats, but it was a mixed blessing. The demise of the weed was to become the death-sentence for the lake’s native fish and birdlife.\[78\] By the end of the century the alliance of irrigation and carp fish had created mayhem in the rivers, creeks and lakes. When Robert Sanderson went down to the main channel adjacent to his farm to take some photographs for his daughter’s school project, he got the shock of his life.

I didn’t realize that it looked as poor as it actually was. It’s flattened out, it’s not running as quickly as it was and, then, of course you get the flushes through for the irrigators and it runs too quickly, and all the trees fall down. It’s just a mess, it really is a mess, what we’re doing to the river system in particular... You don’t necessarily notice [the changes] as they’re happening.\[79\]

In imposing predictability and order for agriculture and settlement, regulation of the river’s flow had yielded ecological disorder, and a sense of things being out of control. As Doug Hope put it

[political or not political, it’s just something that’s got out of hand and I don’t think anyone’s got any control over it. You know, it’s just started and there’s weeds and stuff ruining all the country that’s been where the flood waters come out. [The weed] was brought out here to put in irrigation banks and things. Well, it’s got completely out of control, and it’s the same with the carp. They brought

\[78\] Lake Cargelligo focus group, 12 December 2001.
them and put them in irrigation channels to clear things out of it and they’ve got completely out of control.\textsuperscript{80}

Increasing sedimentation, collapsing trees and river banks, the preponderance of carp, the decline of native fish species, and the disappearance of ribbon weed constitute a graphic image of physical decline. The deterioration of the river has been a profound experience for some. Dorothy Press ponders the river below her house, and tries to explain the impact of the changes that confront her daily.

I must say, it’s affected me in a way in my association with the land, the river being part of that — probably a big part of it — this decline in my river, right here, this part.\textsuperscript{81}

When Jane Roberts and Robert Sainty undertook a study of ecological change on the Lachlan River for the CSIRO in the mid-1990s, they drew on similar stories of deteriorating water quality, and the proliferation of carp. Roberts and Sainty were interested in recording the observations of local people, especially given the paucity of scientific data before the 1970s. Indeed, little was known about the ecological history of Australia’s inland rivers at all. In the absence of any long-term studies to draw from, they decided to reconstruct a picture of ecological change in the Lachlan River prior to 1970. Through interviews with local people, they hoped to yield not only ‘anecdotal’ observations about the river’s flora and fauna’, but to fill the ‘knowledge gap’ by revealing how the river had changed over time. Interspersing individual observations with historical sources, the authors aimed to introduce a ‘language of experience’ into the river’s environmental history.\textsuperscript{82} The results,

\textsuperscript{80} Interview with Doug And Alison Hope, 19 June 2002.

\textsuperscript{81} Interview with Dorothy Press, 4 April 2001.

presented in *Listening to the Lachlan* as a ‘book of memories’, revealed aspects of the ecological history of the river that were not otherwise available.

Nevertheless, Roberts and Sainty were cautious about using memory to chart the history of ecological change. As ecologists trained in scientific methods, they wrestled openly with its ‘language of experience’. Memory, they remarked, was ‘difficult to accommodate...within a rigorous scientific approach’. The problem lay with the ‘potentially distorting and selective role of memory’. Their interviews uncovered new information about local changes in the distribution of fish and river plants, but they remained uneasy with its anecdotal nature. The study, they concluded, produced ‘a hypothesised largely unproven story of environmental change for the last 80 years’. They argued that oral history was more useful to scientists as a means of opening up a channel of communication with local communities for the purpose of ‘implementing environmental policy or attitudinal change’. It offered an ‘interface between science and people’ that might help to change local people’s environmental attitudes and behaviour, and smooth the way for local acceptance of the government’s environmental agenda. Social memory had found a place, albeit a limited one, in the environmental history of the Lachlan.

In practice, the interviews revealed much more about how local people remember and tell stories of the river in their lives than about changes in river ecology. As Damien Lucas has commented of Roberts’ and Dainty’s work, people’s stories of ecological change in the river intertwine personal and ecological information. The stories offer a means to understanding how people make sense of changing conditions within the context of their own lives. Roberts’ and Sainty’s interviews were capturing not ‘facts’ about the changing river, but ‘broader systems of environmental knowledge’ that gave some insight into how people had experienced and remembered it. To grasp this, however, Roberts and Sainty needed to embed people’s fragmented

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83 Sainty and Roberts, ‘Oral history, ecological knowledge, and river management’, 139
84 Sainty and Roberts, ‘Oral history, ecological knowledge, and river management’, 137.
86 Roberts and Sainty, ‘Oral history, ecological knowledge, and river management’, 120-140.
87 Damien Lucas, ‘Growing a ‘useful’ history: Narrative, ecology and resource management’, in *Public History Review*, 5/6, 1996-7, 205-207. Also see Margaret Robertson, Pam Nichols, Pierre
memories within a larger historical framework. They had been ‘listening to the Lachlan’, but the deeper cultural meanings of the river remained out of earshot.

The tension between water control and the deterioration of the river lies at the heart of the Lachlan’s development during the twentieth century. The great colonial quest to harness water for agricultural settlement was being played out in this inland river until at least the 1980s, even as halting the ecological decline of the river had become a matter of government policy. Irrigation was still touted as a cornerstone of national growth and prosperity, and the fruits of river regulation were being reaped in an increasingly diverse agricultural landscape. But, for all the grand designs to transform of the inland plains with irrigation schemes, water conservation on the Lachlan never amounted to much. In 2001, irrigated agriculture accounted for just 17 per cent of the Lachlan’s flow, the rest returned to the river as ‘environmental flows’.88 Meanwhile, debates over water licences, cotton-growing and ecological decline had come to the surface, exposing the tensions that surrounded claims of privilege over water, and revealing how far rivers like the Lachlan had become contested ground.

For all the efforts to impose order and control on its flow, the Lachlan has always been more than a source of water for agriculture. It is also a place of history and memory, a lived-in place. Humans, Donald Worster observes, have an inherently complex relationship with water. Yet the cultural history of water is commonly overlooked by those writing about past and modern societies.89 Australia’s rivers are commonly portrayed as having no history at all, only a future involving ‘fulfilling society’s economic destiny’.90 However, in this driest inhabited continent on earth, water has a cultural resonance that not only underpins, but explains Indigenous and settler relationships with the inland. The ‘conquest’ of water in Australia is a largely a

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88 Horwitz, Keith Bradby and David Mackintosh, ‘Environmental narratives and the need for multiple perspectives to restore degraded landscapes in Australia’, Ecosystem Health, 6(2), June 2000, 119-133.

89 Donald Worster, An unsettled country: Changing landscapes of the American West (University of Mexico Press, Albuquerque), 31.

90 Sinclair, The Murray, 162.

PART FOUR — RIVER
history of colonial visions for harnessing the wasted waters of the inland, populating the arid interior, creating agricultural wealth in arid country. These were the images that drove schemes for water conservation in the late nineteenth century, and continue to do so today. Even in its absence, notes Tom Griffiths, water ‘is the primary elemental force to have shaped this land’ and its human history.\textsuperscript{91}

In local memory, the story of the Lachlan begins with a pristine and bountiful river and a deep sense of connection. It ends with a degraded, muddy river and a sense of loss and alienation. The power of that shared memory lies not in its accuracy, but in its experience. The story resonates strongly with that of the surrounding wheatlands in which farmers remember a golden age of agriculture and its economic, social, and environmental decline in the late twentieth century.\textsuperscript{92} Both are embedded in a past of promise and abundance. Both end with a landscape in decline amid heightened environmental and political sensibilities about the future of agriculture and settlement in the semi-arid inland regions of Australia. Landscape, according to William Lines, is ‘either a resource or sacred; it cannot be both’.\textsuperscript{93} But cultural and utilitarian values are often entwined in more complex ways than Lines allows. Rivers, as Paul Sinclair found on the Murray, are replete with powerful cultural meanings and memories that go beyond people’s relationships with water. Indeed, water is only part of the story.

\textsuperscript{91} Tom Griffiths, "The outside country", in Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths (eds), \textit{Words For Country: Landscape And Language In Australia} (University of New South Wales Press Ltd, Sydney, 2002), 224.

\textsuperscript{92} See Chapter 3.

Plate 7: The Lachlan below the Jemalong Weir, 2005.  Photo: J McCann
Plate 8: Old man tree by the waterhole, Bedgerebong, 2005. Photo: J McCann
Plate 9: The last of the river, Hillston circa 1900. Source: Janet McKay Collection, Hillston Library

Plate 10: Return of the river to Hillston, May 1903. Source: Janet McKay Collection, Hillston Library
Chapter 8. ‘I always remember the river’

I’m off to the Lachlan Side,
Where the bright lagoons are wide,
I long for river and grass and tree,
And someone dearer than all to me,
Far out on the Lachlan Side.

The Lachlan, with its multitude of ephemeral creeks and lakes, is an elusive place. River merges into land. Land merges into river. Boundaries blur so that no one can tell quite where river ends and land begins. It makes a mockery of administrative divisions that employ the river as a border between environmental regions or local government areas. John Oxley despaired of the Lachlan. On 8 May 1817, his exhausted expedition party rested after negotiating a channel three times the length of that traversed by the horses. Progress along the main channel was slow and tortuous, the boats constantly waylaid by fallen trees. Even by land, swamps and lagoons impeded movement. When the waters began to rise on 10 May, Oxley feared losing the river entirely. ‘There is every chance that the river may be lost in a multitude of branches, among those marshy flats’, he recorded in his journal. A week later, the party hauled their boats out of the main channel and turned south-west towards Mount Maude. There they found the landscape parched as though in drought. Another fortnight, and the plains near Mount Disappointment were turned to mud after a fall of rain. The group turned back northward to the Lachlan, but ran out of water at Mount

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1 Interview with Dorothy Press, 4 April 2001.
3 John Oxley, Journals of Two Expeditions into the Interior of New South Wales. Undertaken by Order of the British Government in the Years 1817-18 (John Murray, Albemarle-Street, London, 1820), 32.
4 Manna Mountain near Burcher, south of the river.
5 Mount Disappointment is now called McPerson’s Range, north of Mirrol Creek near present-day Griffith.
Barrow, even though it was raining. Most of the water simply soaked away into the soft red sandy loam. The river yielded abundant fish for the eating but the plains of the Lachlan, Oxley concluded, were simply uninhabitable. As the expedition prepared to retrace its steps and return to Sydney, Oxley blazed a tree on two sides and penned a poem ‘on quitting Lachlan Swamps’:

From sickly marshes, and unhealthy plains
Where Lachlan’s turbid waters spread
From silence death, and desolation dread
While hope our guide, sweet soother of our pains
Springs in each breath and lightens every fear
The path to happier times, in light hope tread
To where old ocean spreads its bosom bare
And breathes smiles to dissipate our cares.

Settler Australians developed a new lexicon for the flooding rivers of the inland. Terms such as ‘coming down a banker’ described the swollen river as water swelled down the channel. Flooding created billabongs, anabranches and swamps, while alternating floods and drought carved the floodplains into a mosaic of holes and mounds, a feature that Oxley knew only too well. Most floods on the Lachlan, according to Roberts and Sainty, are not so much a vast body of moving water as fingers of river flooding from the main channel or joining with high flows from a tributary. As they move downstream, the floodwaters slow down and spread out. Floodwaters might reach Cowra within hours, but they can take eight days to travel from Forbes to Condobolin, and 24 days from Euabalong to Booligool. ‘Long travel

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6 Mount Barrow is now Womba Peak, east of the Lachlan Range.
times mean a winter flood at Forbes can become a spring flood in the lower reaches. Below Hillston, the floodplain expands to occupy most of the lower valley.9 Geoff Nixon can recall the river in the 1950s floods stretching to 20 or 25 miles wide.10 In 1870 the river rose to 52 feet above normal seasonal levels. When the ‘Federation drought’ reached the Lachlan plains in 1896, the riverbed at Condobolin was dry for 291 consecutive days. The river flooded in 1916 and 1917, but in 1919-20 the river was dry for 207 days at Euabalong and 255 days at Booligal Weir.11 By any measure, it was an uncertain candidate for agricultural development and closer settlement. ‘The frequency of damaging floods’, observed the authors of a review of water resources in 1979, ‘on average about one per year at Forbes prior to 1970, the poor flows in the lower Lachlan between floods and the recurrent severe droughts have constituted the hydrological setting in which rural life in the valley has developed’.12

Flood stories

Nevertheless, this unpredictable river has been a powerful agent in shaping both landscape and memory along the Lachlan. Ask about floods and the stories tumble out then gradually sort themselves into strata of remembered experiences, located precisely in time and place. If the 1940s was the decade of drought and dust, the 1950s was the decade of water. Some of the biggest floods in living memory engulfed south-eastern Australian in the early 1950s.13 In 1952, every river in south-eastern Victoria and the south coast of New South Wales was in flood. Along the Lachlan, the Belubula River was also in flood, and its swollen waters joined forces with the Lachlan to create havoc downstream. Floodwaters divided the town of Forbes into

9 Jane Roberts and Geoff Sainty, Listening to the Lachlan (Sainty and Associates Pty Ltd, Potts Point, 1996),100. They attribute this decreasing speed of floodwater to the length of the river and the low gradients. Also see Department of Water Resources, Water Resources of the Lachlan Valley, 1989, 2.
10 Lake Cargelligo focus group, 12 December 2001.
three separate islands, and the water rose to two metres up the inside walls of the Commercial Hotel.\textsuperscript{14} The lower end of the valley resembled an inland sea.

Floods! Oh [we’ve had] plenty of them! Yes, we had a 1950 flood. But I remember the first flood – my mother and father, just after they were married in 1916, they had a flood, and they were flood-bound. The big flood in 1930 was the first one I can remember, and [the property] was all covered. Oh, another flash one came up one time from what they call the Humbug Creek [to the south between the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee Rivers], and it used to flood rapidly, come down overnight. Mum had the washing out and Dad was out on the horse, and the flood came down and he had to bring the washing in off the old prop line, he had to gather the washing on the horse. Then the ‘50s floods were the ones, from ’50 to ’56 they were off and on.\textsuperscript{15}

Dorothy vividly remembers those 1950s floods, and how neighbouring families rallied to help stack furniture and belongings on the roof of their house before taking to higher ground. Paradoxically, for all the government’s efforts to control the river’s flow and mitigate the severity of floods along the Lachlan, local farmers welcomed their healing powers. In this drought-prone region, people are acutely aware of the restorative power of water. Dorothy tells a story of how as a teenager she used to gallop her horse flat out along the miles of ‘scalded’ plains, where no grass grew at all. Scalding was the result of land-clearing and the subsequent erosion of top soil. With each flood, the topsoil would gradually build up again.

Then over the years the floods – I think the floods are what saved that. See, the floods spread more soil, and the fertile soil came of top of the other. Now that’s all covered now.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} Bureau of Meteorology, \textit{Drought, Dust and Deluge}, 25.

\textsuperscript{15} Interview with Dorothy Press, 4 April 2001.

\textsuperscript{16} Interview with Dorothy Press, 4 April 2001. The term ‘scalded’ refers to patches of land where the vegetation and debris have been eroded by wind, leaving behind what one soil erosion expert described as a ‘hard pavement’, J. Macdonald Holmes, \textit{Soil Erosion in Australia and New Zealand} (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1946), 18. William English’s local history of the Lake Cowal district notes that the first organised sports day to be held at the newly opened Blow Clear closer settlement area in 1915 was held on a scalded flat on Albert Gladman’s farm. It included
Steve Doyle agrees. 'When the flood goes', he says, 'everything's good, like a cleansing thing. I feel that if we have a couple of good floods cross your land, it really does tend to make it better'. In the red loam country away from the river, black silts map the course of the big floods that have occasionally smothered Steve's paddocks.

When we had the big flood [in 1990], we were flooded in for nearly eight months. Half of this place went under water, and I had a 360 degree panoramic water view!17

All along the Lachlan, pictures of the river in flood take pride of place on lounge room walls, while out in the paddocks flood levels are etched into trees. Doug Watson recalls four big ones between 1950 and 1990. As a child in the 1950s, he can remember paddling in water up to his tummy and being taken off the farm by tractor then by special train.

If you stay in an area or stay on the land, things like that – those sorts of memories and experiences – really cement your relationship a bit. You sort of become more part [of] the land because of those experiences.18

His wife remembers the 1990 flood. Coming from the northern coast of New South Wales, she thought she knew all about floods, but this inland river behaved very differently to sub-tropical rivers. The Lachlan had flooded in April of that year, and the water authorities diverted it at the Jemalong Weir, sending some of the excess water out to Lake Cowal. With further rainfall upstream at Cowra in August, the floodwaters spread out from Lake Cowal, filling dry creeks and swamps to rejoin the river just below their house.

We had two lots of floods enter the river just below our place....People just came. A stack of people just all landed here. I don’t know how they got to horse races, athletic events, and ‘tossing the caber’, William J. English, Around the Cowal (Bland District Historical Society, n.d.), 45.

17 Interview with Steve Doyle, 3 April 2001. Roberts and Sainty note that, in ecological terms, flooding rejuvenates the alluvial soils and the ecological cycle of the river.

18 Doug Watson in interview with Margaret and Doug Watson, 3 April 2001.
know, but all these people just came....Fridges, everything that could be lifted up went up and was put on tables, up on bricks and up on boards.\textsuperscript{19}

The river has always been a powerful presence for Dorothy. Her mother did all the family washing in it when the tank ran dry. Her first memories are of the river. At some level she recognises its cultural significance and the opportunities it has provided for social interaction in this landscape of fences and boundaries. For all its transgressions, the flood-prone river has created strong social bonds amongst the river people.

The river had quite a big part in our lives then, in our entertainment, because in those days it was all family, it wasn’t like it is now, you couldn’t hop in a car and run off to Parkes or somewhere like that, you just had to entertain yourselves. We used to come over to the river for picnics, and further down there were some very nice sandy spots, you know, little sandy banks....there was a lovely big swimming place, with a sand bank, and every boxing day and new year’s day all the neighbours used to congregate down there and have a picnic, and we’d go swimming and that sort of thing.\textsuperscript{20}

Newly-married, Dorothy and her husband built a house on the river’s edge in the 1950s, the back garden mingling with river red gums with on a sinuous curve of the channel. Early settlers claiming grazing land fronting the river and creeks of the Lachlan built private weirs to hold back water for diverting to the house and stockyards. The \textit{Town and Country Journal} noted in 1886, for example, that numerous weirs were being constructed across the Lachlan to ‘throw back the waters’. One of these, built by Charles McPhillammy at Warroo homestead, involved excavating a trench measuring across the river bed, and constructing the wall using tongue-and-groove boards and ramming it with clay.\textsuperscript{21} Micabil weir was one of the early ones, a familiar landmark on this central part of the river. Dorothy recalls that the Lachlan was fairly shallow then, and the stony bed would be exposed in drier months.

\textsuperscript{19} Margaret Watson in interview with Margaret and Doug Watson, 3 April 2001.
\textsuperscript{20} Margaret Watson in interview with Margaret and Doug Watson, 3 April 2001.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Town and Country Journal}, 8 May, 1886. Many of these private weirs remain in use.
Neighbouring families normally separated by the river would rendezvous at the weir. Just as cleared land was a metaphor for colonisation, the weirs were a measure of closer settlement. Unregulated, the Lachlan was characteristically slow-moving and quiet, the water mapping the channel bottom in giant circles and eddies. Weirs broke its flow and imposed their own rhythm, noisily announcing ‘we are here; we have changed things’. The weirs, however, did more than simply create a pool of water for stock and domestic use. They were, and remain, important social spaces. As Dorothy explains,

... after the weir was built people from the north, you know, that didn’t have the river, they used to come over for picnics, and I used to ride the horse down and go across the weir and join them on the other side. You could cross, but not when the water was flowing. Other times you could just walk across the top of the weir and of course below it was a bit shallower.

Even in drought, the river has assumed a place in local mythology. At the lower end of the river, people would anticipate the return of the Lachlan after a dry spell. Word would spread downstream from Forbes, about two weeks ahead of the river itself, and people would wait for the first swell of water to arrive. There was always a great sense of anticipation as the river found its way amongst the debris of the parched riverbed. John Parr remembers a family story about the annual pilgrimage to meet the river at Hillston.

When my father was a boy the river dried up virtually every year. He lived at Hillston. Eventually in the winter a bit of rain came along and the river started to run again, and that was a bigger celebration than Christmas! All the town’s people walked up the river and met the wall of water coming down, and they walked down with it. They had water again.

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23 Interview with Dorothy Press, 4 April 2001. Her father acquired the leasehold in 1911 and Dorothy purchased it in about 1990. It was subsequently subdivided for her children, and she now occupies a 600 acre block on the river.

24 Lake Cargelligo focus group, 12 December 2001.
The returning river always heralded another event too. Locals talk about the ‘muddy rise’ that brought all manner of fish to the surface. It is a common phenomenon in these inland rivers. Farmer and writer, Eric Rolls, describes the Namoi River before it became ‘little but an irrigation canal’. Heavy storms upstream had washed ploughed land into the river. By the time the rising river arrived at his farm, Rolls could see a bank of water ‘as thick as cream, sliding along rather than flowing’. Suspended in the wave of water were yabbies and shrimps, turtles and water rats, and then came the fish. ‘They lined up shoulder to shoulder: catfish, yellowbelly, silver perch, Murray cod, mouths poking out of the water behind the shrimps, and sucking air in audible gulps.’ This was an opportunity not to be missed. Rolls watched as people arrived in their cars and parked on the opposite bank, emerging with rakes and pitchforks. ‘The fish are coming up.’

Throughout the twentieth century, flooding posed one of the greatest challenges to agricultural development along the Lachlan. Agriculture and closer settlement demanded an orderly river. When the Minister for Regional Services, Territories and Local Government announced a regional flood mitigation plan for the Lachlan in 1999, he noted the benefits of flooding for the ecological health of the floodplain, but condemned the catastrophic effects on industry and communities. The floods of the 1950s were particularly devastating, coinciding with the ‘height of the heroic age of river regulation’ and agricultural development in Australia’s inland regions. On the Murray River, the development of improved road and rail networks in the 1950s had diverted traffic away from the flood-prone river, and townspeople became increasingly alienated from it. In turn, parts of the river that flowed through towns gradually degenerated into rubbish- and weed-infested backwaters. Typically, towns located along inland rivers constructed levee banks to protect themselves from flooding. From the 1920s, as populations grew, they also installed water treatment plants to protect themselves from disease. In 1915, the local council at Condobolin

built a spring-board, trapezes and accommodation shed on the Lachlan below the town bridge, but the deep water holes and town weirs that once served as popular swimming spots were abandoned once the local council built a municipal swimming pool. Away from the towns of the Lachlan, the attraction of swimming in the river seemed to diminish from the 1970s, particularly as the river grew increasingly muddy. Unlike the towns, however, the river’s channels meandering through farmland along the valley were never entirely abandoned by those living within its reaches.

‘The Lachlan flows through their veins’

Barbara Allen has spent a lifetime within the sight and smell of the Lachlan River near Condobolin. She reflects on her life lived at the old Aboriginal Reserve on the banks of the Lachlan. She tells a family story of how her grandparents sought refuge in at Condobolin in the 1920s, after being expelled from their home about 150 km upriver. Peter Read’s close study of the relationships between Wiradjuri and European settlers spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries traces the history of the Aborigines Protection Board from its establishment in 1883. Read observed the progressive unsettling of Wiradjuri people along the central Lachlan by a government authority ‘very largely devoted to the destruction of Aboriginal society in New South Wales’. His main focus, however, is to show how the Aboriginal people of the Lachlan resisted this destruction and achieved the gradual revival of Wiradjuri identity and culture during the twentieth century.

In the 1920s, at perhaps the lowest ebb in the difficult relationship between settler and Indigenous Australians, white townspeople were actively campaigning local authorities to close down the Aboriginal Missions and Reserves that had been established along the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee Rivers, and to move Aboriginal ‘fringe-dwellers’ away from their towns. By 1926 Condobolin on the Lachlan, and Narrandera Sandhills on the Murrumbidgee, were the ‘last of the “safe” towns’ for

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28 K.H. McLeod (compiler), Condobolin And District: The Centre Of NSW – 1915 (‘Australia as it really is’ series, Condobolin District Advance Association, Young, 1915), 32.
29 Interview with Barbara Allen, 10 May 2001.
Wiradjuri families expelled from other Reserves. In this period, Condobolin was a small service town for the surrounding farming region, and just beginning to reap the benefits of closer agricultural settlement in the expanding wheatlands. Read notes that Aboriginal families from other areas were also coming to Condobolin looking for work around this time. By 1925, there were 200 Wiradjuri living in fringe-camps and Reserves around Condobolin. As the numbers of Aboriginal people arriving at the Condobolin Reserve swelled, their day-to-day lives and movements were increasingly regulated and their living conditions deteriorated. Mounting hostility amongst white town residents culminated in a protest to the Aborigines Protection Board by the local Council, first proposing that the people should be relocated, and finally threatening to simply close the Reserve down. ‘It was in this dusty little wheat town in 1926’, Read argues, ‘that the Board’s deficiencies in common sense and common humanity finally came home to roost.’

For the displaced Wiradjuri, the Lachlan River served as a fragile line of communication between members of extended family networks throughout these years of turmoil. Barbara recalls the significance of the Lachlan for her family over the years, its banks providing sanctuary from the gaze of welfare authorities and police.

Living over here, growing up on the river, you had a lot of respect for the river....It was — swimming, our drinking water, our bath water. Everything was taken from the Lachlan River....The fish you’d catch out of the river, you’d just put them in the coals with the clay over them, and when they’d cooked and the clay started cracking up, you’d just take the clay off and all the scales come off on the plate. And they were ready for your salt and pepper. Everything was done on the riverbank. Even my kids today, they always remember the river bank more than going to Wonderland, or anything like that. Luna Park. Their

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32 Read, A Hundred Years War, 71-74.
33 They came from Euabalong, Ivanhoe and Hillston further west, from Waragesda to the south, and Cowra to the east. Read, A Hundred Years War, 71.
34 Read, A Hundred Years War, 72.
memories are of the Lachlan River.\textsuperscript{35}

In stark contrast to the constraints of Mission life, Barbara remembers the relative freedom of the banks of the river. They were important domestic and community spaces, where family groups spent much of their time fishing, cooking, playing, finding relief in hot weather.\textsuperscript{36} She has vivid memories of the river of her youth.

...we’d camp out, and you’d have fun. Tides would clean the river out. You’d dive and you’d swim underneath the water, you’re going along the bottom, bring the mussels up and any sticks or broken bottles. Yes, you’d bring it all up. Until everything was clean. Ah, yes, it was beautiful. You could just lay on your belly and drink the water out the river.\textsuperscript{37}

Barbara laughs as she recalls the 1956 flood. Waking up one morning, her family found their house surrounded by a big lake. The army had been called in to rescue stranded families using an amphibian vehicle left over from the war. She can still hear her grandmother saying to the Army captain, ‘I’m not getting in no boat. I’m not going that way, I’ll go any way that I know the road is!’\textsuperscript{38} The Aborigines Protection Board was dismantled in 1969, and the old Mission was redeveloped as an Aboriginal housing estate and renamed Willow Bend. It remains a place apart from the town, yet its history is inextricably tied up with the town’s history. Meanwhile, the river remains the focus of local memory and storytelling.

And the old people, when they sit down and tell you their stories...I sit down and try to tell my grandkids about the brooms that we used to make off the trees, and you see any broken bottles on the river bank, or anything else, or tins,

\textsuperscript{35} Interview with Barbara Allen, 10 May 2001.

\textsuperscript{36} In their study of the black soil plains of northern New South Wales, Lucas and Goodall also observed the significance of the river banks to be a place of refuge for Aboriginal people. See Damian Lucas and Heather Goodall, "Country" stories: Oral history and sustainability research’, in Frank Vanclay and Luciano Mesiti (ed), Sustainability and Social Research. Proceedings of the Conference of the Australian Association for Social Research (Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, 1997), 183-200.

\textsuperscript{37} Interview with Barbara Allen, 10 May 2001.
you’d never leave anything dirty or broken on the river banks. They’re sacred to us, see. And they’d say, “go away nan, you wouldn’t sweep up with things like that.” “And guess what, you know what our mop was?” “What nan?” “We’d go and cut a stick off the tree, if you had an old blanket you didn’t want anymore, you’d just put that on the bottom with an older jumper, and then you’d get the wire and you’d wire it up, and that’s your mop!”...You enjoy telling them, because you know you’re passing the story down, you lived it, and you helped them to live it with you.39

Fishing and camping in the bush have also remained a big part of the lives of many Wiradjuri, although the older people mourn the decline of bush skills amongst the young. Charlie King still takes his grandchildren to a local property on the river to fish. His brother and a mate built a hut there, and regular fishers have been given permission to access the river’s edge by the landowner. Charlie caught a 50-pound Murray cod there once. Murray cod, one of the world’s largest species of freshwater fish, is native to the Murray-Darling rivers. Early settler stories testify to the once-prolific native fish populations and the fabled Murray cod, the biggest fish of them all, became part of the mythology of the inland rivers for settlers and Indigenous communities. On the Lachlan each person had favourite spots, especially the deep holes in the channel where Murray cod might be found. When any of the local children got into trouble, Charlie recalls how he used to take them into the bush to camp and teach them about looking after themselves, learning how to fish, trap water rats, and hunt for rabbits. The old camping places along the river — the ‘Three Mile, the ‘Five Mile’, the ‘Eight Mile’ — are part of the river’s folklore, their precise locations never appearing on any map.40 Barbara mentions places from her childhood that are still favourite haunts for local children. Each bend in this part of the river channel has special associations.

...the river was very — and still is — very very important. You see kids now up here. Old Billy Lee’s paddock — he was an old Chinaman. That’s been years ago. It’s still Billy Lee’s Creek. And they still go there....they’ve got different

38 Interview with Barbara Allen, 10 May 2001.
39 Interview with Barbara Allen, 10 May 2001.
40 Interview with Charlie King, 20 June 2002.
little spots all around the river. You’ve got the Coogee, you’ve got Billy Lee’s, you’ve got the swimming hole, you’ve got the rapids.

...just behind us a bit now there’s a big tree that fell, so it’s nearly washed all the banks away, so they keep on bringing the fence back to the house because it’s washing all the banks away. We look at that tree, we used to call that our ‘snottygobble tree’. The big tree down there is the ‘swimming hole tree’. It’s gone, it fell into the river. Me and my sister used to sit down and talk about this on the river banks, you know.41

The inland is steeped in the stories of close encounters with river-dwelling creatures that were reputed to inhabit the deepest holes. There are still many adults who regard swimming in certain parts of the Lachlan with trepidation, recalling stories from childhood about bunyips that lurked in deep holes, lying in wait for unsuspecting children. The bunyip has become part of the mythology of inland rivers for settler and Indigenous descendants alike, and vividly written accounts have served to excite fertile imaginations. In the early 1850s, George Hobler recorded that a boy milking cows for James Tyson saw a ‘kine pratie’ in the Lachlan near a large reed bed. It was ‘about as big as a calf — of a dark colour with a long neck and long head, it had large ears which it pricked up when it saw him, he noticed that it had a long mane and no tail….his account in most respects agrees with the account given by the blacks of it’.42 Harry Webber recalls the ‘Murie-man’, a small, hairy creature that was never seen but whose presence terrorised children who lived on the Murie. It certainly kept them away from the waterhole at night.43 Growing up in Euabalong, Ethel Taylor remembers how she was never allowed near the Marngie waterhole because of the bunyip that lived in it.44 Her son Michael laughs as he shows me a deep waterhole in the river at Condobolin. The brown water swirls around some snags and it looks menacing.

41 Interview with Barbara Allen, 10 May 2001.
43 Interview in Kabaila, Wiraduri Places, 56.
There's a big bunyip down there. Just down here on the bend, they reckon if you throw your line in, it goes three quarters of the way past the width of the river. They reckon the bunyip will bring the line right back to your feet! I'm not going in there!  

Irrigation schemes with their dams and hydraulic works evoke the powerful ecological and social transformations of the inland plains but, as Worster reminds us, the conquest of water has never been a one-way process of 'humans recreating nature'. The rivers of the inland are deeply ingrained in people's life stories. Rivers, after all, are deeply symbolic places with the power to both create and destroy life. Local stories attest to the role of the river during the twentieth century as a lifeline for those along its banks. It is where the histories of Indigenous and settler Australians intersect. It concentrates and distils the settler-Indigenous frontier, yet it is also a space in which settler and Indigenous Australians share a sense of connection and belonging. Life stories have taken root amongst these flood-prone plains. The experiences of Barbara and Dorothy could not have been more different, but the river has profoundly shaped the experiences of both women. Each holds a detailed map of her part of the river and its history in her mind. For each, the meandering channels have been instrumental in forging a shared sense of coherence and belonging in this unsettled and contested river country.

Social memory rarely surfaces in environmental and agricultural discourses of the wheatlands, but it offers important insights into how rivers like the Lachlan, usually described in agricultural terms, are also places of deep cultural significance. For both settler and Indigenous Australians, the river is a space for family and community interaction, a place of mythological and spiritual association, a place of drama and refuge, a link between past and present, a place where floods and droughts generate strong bonds between people, and a place that resonates with social and

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ecological change. Undistinguished as it may be as an agricultural resource and indistinct as a river, the Lachlan is nevertheless a powerful and enduring well-spring of history and memory.

PART 5 — FARM

SADNESS SEEPS FROM THE JOINTS OF THE OLD FARMHOUSE. A SETTLER'S BLOCK, CLAIMED AND TREASURED AND FARmed, ONLY TO FIND THAT IT IS 'NO MAN'S LAND' AFTER ALL. AND NOW THE HOUSE SILENTLY WEEPS. A LIGHT FICKERS ON THE PORCH. AMONGST THE SCATTER OF ABANDONED FARM TOOLS, I DETECT A MANGY DOG. JOHN COMES OUT TO GREET ME. THE OLD MAN'S FRAILTY IS PAINFUL TO WATCH. HE INVITES ME INTO HIS HOUSE, THE ONE HE AND HIS BROTHER SHARED FOR ALL THOSE YEARS. HE PUTS ON THE KETTLE, KEEPING HIS EYES AVERTED. HE KNOWS WHAT I HAVE COME FOR. HIS LIFE STORY, SUCH AS IT IS. HE HAS A PILE OF AERIAL PHOTOS AND FARM PLANS BALANCED ON THE ARM OF THE SOFA, AND HE GENTLY MOVES THEM ASIDE SO I CAN SIT DOWN. WE BEGIN WITH THE AWKWARDNESS OF THE TAPE RECORDER BETWEEN US. HE STILL HASN'T LOOKED AT ME DIRECTLY, BUT I THINK HE IS JUST SHY. NOT TOO MANY STRANGERS COME INTO HIS HOUSE TO ASK HIM QUESTIONS AND SIT IN HIS CHAIRS. THAT'S ALL ANCIENT HISTORY, HE SAYS. BUT HE WAITS FOR THE NEXT QUESTION.

I CAN SMELL THE DUST AND THE RAIN IN HIS STORIES. HE CONTEMPLATES MY QUESTION ABOUT THE LANDSCAPE HE CALLS
HOME, WHILE GALAHS SHRIEK AMONGST THE BIG SUMS ON THE RIVER, AND THE LAST COLOURS DRAIN FROM THE WESTERN SKY. I CATCH A GLIMPSE OF HIS TROUSERS. MY DAD USED TO WEAR WORK TROUSERS LIKE THAT, HITCHED UP WITH A PIECE OF ROPE. JOHN SHIFTS UNCOMFORTABLY. HE'S TELLING ME THAT PEOPLE IN THE DISTRICT KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR HIM. HIS BROTHER DIED LAST YEAR, AND THE BANKS WANT HIS FARM. THE BLOODY GOVERNMENT KEEPS TRYING TO STOP HIM FROM PUMPING WATER FROM THE RIVER. WHAT BLOODY GOOD IS THE RIVER TO ANYONE IF YOU CAN'T USE THE WATER. WE'VE ALWAYS HAD THE WATER. THAT'S WHY WE CHOSE THIS LAND IN THE FIRST PLACE, MY BROTHER AND ME. IT'S KEPT US GOING PRETTY WELL OVER THE YEARS.

JOHN SPREADS A MAP OF THE FARM ON THE TABLE AT HIS KNEES, AND I TRY TO READ PADDOCK NAMES IN THE FADED LIGHT. HE IS SURPRISINGLY LUCID. I EXPECT HIM TO BE FRAIL IN HIS MIND, BUT HIS MEMORY IS SHARP AND HE CAN STILL TELL A STORY. HIS BLUE EYES FIX ON ME MOMENTARILY, THEN HE RETURNS TO THE MAP. I'M WORKING UP THIS PADDOCK HERE AT THE MOMENT. THE DROUGHT'S HIT US HARD, BUT IF WE GET THE RAIN AT THE RIGHT TIME WE'LL BRING IN THAT CROP FOR SURE.

WE'VE GOT SOME FENCES TO MEND, BUT OTHERWISE WE'RE
PRETTY RIGHT. I HESITATE. IS HE STILL THINKING THAT HIS BROTHER IS AROUND, OR PERHAPS THERE'S A SON OR SOMEONE ELSE HELPING OUT? I CHECK WHAT HE MEANS. WHAT WILL HE DO NOW HIS BROTHER HAS GONE? I CAN'T WORK THE FARM ON MY OWN NOW, HE SAYS. I'M EIGHTY, AND IT'S TOO HARD. TOO MANY CITY-SLICKERS TELLING ME WHAT I CAN AND CAN'T DO. NOT LIKE IT USED TO BE. AND I CAN SUDDENLY SEE THIS MAN IN HIS YOUTH. I WANT TO ASK WHY HE DIDN'T MARRY, BUT THEN I THINK PERHAPS HE WAS MARRIED IN HIS OWN WAY, TO THE FARM. PERHAPS A WOMAN WOULD HAVE COMPLICATED THINGS BETWEEN THEM.

THE SMALL LOUNGE ROOM IS PLEASANTLY WARM. A REFRIGERATOR HUMS IN THE DOORWAY, AND THE SOUND BOUNCES OFF THE DELICATE FLORAL PATTERNS OF THE LINOLEUM. THE ROOM IS CROWDED WITH THE SMELL OF YEARS. THIS IS A MAN'S HOUSE. THINGS ARE WITHIN EASY REACH, AND NOT MUCH GETS PUT AWAY. THE CR RADIO HAS PRIDE OF PLACE NEAR THE WINDOW. IT IS A LIFELINE FOR FARMERS WORKING OUT IN THE BACK PADDocks. IN THIS REGION, HOUSE AND PADDock MIGHT BE 20 KILOMETRES APART. I WONDER HOW OFTEN JOHN VENTURES TO THE BACK PADDock THESE DAYS, AND WHO IS IN
THE HOUSE TO HEAR HIM WHEN HE CALLS. LONELINESS SITS IN EVERY CHAIR.
Chapter 9. Stewards of the soil

It is a wondrous thing to create a farm. One works in consultation with the land.¹

As Eric Rolls prepared to leave farming life in central New South Wales for a new home by the coast, he wrote a moving eulogy to his farm of more than 20 years. The property was located at Boggabri, on the floodplains of the Namoi River in northern New South Wales. It had been granted to him as a reward for war service. Rolls wrote in loving detail of the years spent establishing paddocks on unsurveyed, unknown ground, building a hayshed, silos, machinery shed, fowl yard, and homestead. His memoir deftly threaded close observation of soil characteristics and seasonal changes in the river’s flow with the labours of creating a farm, the delight of buying increasingly more sophisticated farm machinery, and the pleasures of watching the seasons of his growing family. In the end, Rolls had come to understand that his lifelong experience of the soil was deeply etched with the physicality of the landscape. A life lived in close proximity to the soil acquired meaning and texture and a sense of wonder. His leaving enriched his understanding of the way the soil had provided both sustenance and substance, and he concluded that the land was neither friend nor foe. ‘It merely demands that we be attentive’. Rolls observed that he could not write that he had ‘knowledge’ of the land that he had farmed. Rather, he had experience of it. ‘One cannot know the soil’, he concluded.²

With the publication of his classic environmental history A Million Wild Acres, Eric Rolls became influential in bringing the emotive issues of farming and settler attachments to land to the surface of discourses about agriculture and ecological change in Australia. Rewarded by successive governments since the Second World War to develop the land and contribute to national prosperity, farmers in Australia’s

¹ Eric Rolls in George Papaellinas (ed), Homeland (Allen and Unwin for Carnivale, NSW Multicultural Festival, North Sydney, 1991), 204.
² Rolls in Homeland, 200, 211.
wheatlands found themselves vulnerable to charges that they and their forebears had contributed to massive environmental damage. In the late twentieth century, even as the full benefits of sophisticated mechanisation, agricultural science, and chemical farming were being reaped in escalating crop yields, farmers in Australia and elsewhere in the West were attracting sustained public scrutiny and an increasingly complex web of environmental regulation.

Like Rolls, some of the more attentive observers of industrialised farming in Western countries emerged from the ranks of farmers themselves. In 1977 Wendell Berry, a North American farmer, poet and philosopher, published a book asserting that American agriculture was in a state of crisis. Berry’s warning provided an eerie rejoinder to the Department of Post-war Reconstruction’s vision for Australian farming, announced in the 1940s. According to Berry, mechanised farming had sown the seeds of its own demise. Heralding the triumph of technology, he said, agricultural experts had become ‘entranced...by the glamour of bigness’. Farmers were becoming experts in productivity and efficiency, but forsaking the traditional values of husbandry. “Agricultural power”... is not measured by the fertility or health of the soil, or the health, wisdom, thrift, or stewardship of the farming community’, he said.

Under modern farming conditions, it is measured by the dollars ploughed into the farm to increase production. The farm was evolving into a factory. In the process, the small farmer was being dispossessed of traditional skills and knowledge. Agriculture, Berry reminded his readers, could only exist within nature. In agriculture, scientific knowledge and moral responsibility could not be separated. He advocated a system of permanent agriculture based on the philosophy of ‘kindly use’ of the land. Kindly use depended upon intimate knowledge, sensitivity, and personal responsibility, all the hallmarks of good husbandry. The problem of industrialised farming, he argued, lay in ‘the generalisation of the relationship between people and land’. Berry’s criticism

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5 Berry, The Unsettling of America, 31-3, 47. In a testimony to the Australian Royal Commission into Wheat, Flour and Bread Industries in 1934, one farmer referred to his farm as ‘The Bloody
of modern agriculture harks back to a vision of agriculture that prevailed in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, when the farm was widely accepted as ‘the perfect objectification of the perfect life’, and farmers were amongst those closest to divinity. This vision offered urban dwellers a link with the traditional, unmechanised agricultural landscape in which farming represented an antidote to industrialisation and rapid urban social and environmental change. John Brinckerhoff Jackson’s analysis of the landscape concept helps to clarify the significance of this vision for those facing such changes. Drawing on the origins of the terms land and scape, Jackson concluded that a landscape is essentially a space constructed to serve a community. A landscape is therefore a ‘space deliberately created to speed up or slow down the process of nature…man taking upon himself the role of time’.

Similar sentiments can be found in Australia’s wheatlands in the mid-twentieth century. Holt’s survey of Victorian wheat farms in 1947 revealed that older farmers had mixed feelings about mechanisation, preferring horses to the tractors that were beginning to make their presence felt in the wheatlands after the war. They were concerned that some farmers were inclined to work the tractors around the clock and put pressure on their land to produce more. ‘Land is torn up and a crop slapped in without due regard to safe agricultural practices’, Holt reported. On the other hand, mechanisation was helping to alleviate the pressure on the farmer who was struggling to manage 960 acres.

Twenty-five years later, Berry was still proclaiming the need for agrarian, as opposed to industrial, land use. Far from questioning the validity of farming, he sought to defend ‘good farming’ as ‘the complex accomplishment of knowledge,


Stilgoe, Common landscape of America, 206-7.


Alan J. Holt, Wheat Farms of Victoria: A Sociological Study (The School of Agriculture, University of Melbourne, Carlton, 1947), 155.
Industrialism prescribed an economy of ‘placelessness’, the condition of modernity described by Edward Relph in the 1970s. If Berry’s distinction is to be accepted, industrial agriculture is the very antithesis of agrarian farming. In a telling article published in 2003, Berry made the point that supporters of global industrialism had no patience with ‘the local love, local loyalty, and local knowledge that make people truly native to their places and therefore good caretakers’. The essence of agrarianism lies in understanding the limits of available resources. ‘This is the understanding that induces thrift, family coherence, neighbourliness, local economies.’ Meanwhile, the thrust of industrialism was to overcome such limitations.  

**Landscape change and social memory**

The Canadian anthropologist, Michele Dominy, dedicated 15 years to an ethnographic study of pastoralists in New Zealand’s high country. She concluded that these settler-descendants, or Pakeha, saw the inheritance of land as more about the inheritance of opportunity than material resources. Through inheritance practices and the labour of stock-raising, grazing families had become linked to land, and the land to them. In her assessment, the family became ‘the vehicle for nurturing country’. Cultural identity was ‘rooted in the specificity of place’, in intimate knowledge of the landscape, and in the ethos of resilience in the face of environmental and economic adversity. ‘In this way, landscape becomes encoded in character’.

Dominy’s assessment of the New Zealand experience resonates strongly with the settler farmer identification with the Australian pioneer legend. In settler societies such as these, close knowledge of a particular landscape, combined with a family

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12 The Maori term for white people.
13 Michele D. Dominy, ‘Hearing grass, thinking grass: Postcolonialism and ecology in Aotearoa-New Zealand, in David Trigger and Gareth Griffiths (eds), *Disputed Territories: Land, Culture And Identity In Settler Societies* (Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2003), 63-4.
history of resilience, is likely to manifest in a powerful sense of attachment and entitlement. In the central Lachlan wheatlands, farming families certainly emphasise their deep engagement with the farming landscape. For many, their farm embodies their livelihood, their family history, and their sense of cultural identity. In some instances, they talk about a general love of working with the soil no matter where. Indeed, their farm may be one of a succession of properties that have passed through the family’s tenure. Universally, they take great pride in their accumulated and intensely personal knowledge of the features, if not the history, of the land they farm.

Nevertheless, as we saw in Chapter 6, unearthing cultural beliefs embedded within discourses about farming and ecological decline exposes considerable angst amongst settler Australians generally about their spiritual engagement with the colonised rural landscape. Peter Read has made a close reading of this sense of insecurity about belonging amongst settler Australians who have inherited a cultural legacy of abuses of both environments and Indigenous peoples. He has previously suggested that the angst about belonging has become more pronounced with a heightened awareness of Aboriginal people’s attachment to country, as well as from the realisation that settlers have damaged the very land they care about. Indeed, he has argued, a national identity based on rural industries is bound to be fragile when the unsustainability of those industries is made apparent. In his earlier work, Read posed perhaps one of the most challenging questions confronting people in agricultural and pastoral regions. How can settler Australians reconcile the ecological destruction wrought by their pioneering history with their attachment to the settled land?  

Read recently offered an answer to this conundrum. ‘I think’, he said in a radio interview, ‘we need to separate what we do on the land from what we feel about the land’. We need to find a fit between ‘what we’ve inherited culturally...what we carry in our heads...with what actually is possible and desirable’ in using the land for agricultural purposes. Certainly, he argued, there is no question that settler Australians have profound spiritual attachments to land, regardless of longevity or type of

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association. Indeed, ‘the human capacity to belong to land is very deep, it’s one of the most profound elements of our human psyche. And it’s going to take many forms.’ He urged a wider acknowledgement that there are multiple ways of belonging for both settler and Aboriginal people. Indeed, this acknowledgement would go some way, he suggests, to overcoming the distinction commonly made between Aboriginal and settler capacities for a spiritual engagement with the land.  

Paul Sinclair detected a similar phenomenon during his time at Calperum Station in the South Australian mallee country north of the Murray River.  

‘There is an apparently contradictory attitude of care and exploitation found amongst fishermen, hunters, foresters, and farmers alike, explains Sinclair. When people who exploit the land become involved with conservation programs, they draw on their memories, skills, and love of the land, rather than from a deep-seated conservation ethic. The key to successful stewardship, he argued, is to acknowledge Australians’ diverse attachments and knowledge of the landscape, if there is any hope of evolving ‘a culture capable of living with our country’.”

How do these arguments fit with farmers in the central Lachlan wheatlands? Doug Watson reflects on how the land has grown with him. Although he stops short of identifying any particular place on his land that represents a sense of attachment, the greenness and order of it signify the beauty of an arable landscape shaped through years of labour and sacrifice. Aesthetic appreciation and the love that comes with long-term nurturing are woven into his sense of rootedness in the farm.

If you’ve looked after a certain patch of land, whatever it is, for twenty years - I mean there’s part of you then in that land. It’s all that type of small stuff, you can’t even see it. It’s the way you’ve looked after the land all your life. My father taught me that because he was like that. The best thing for me every day, I used to always try and come home in the daylight in a drought because you’d

16 Calperum Station was a sheep property from 1846. In 1993 the pastoral lease was sold to the Commonwealth Government, and the Station incorporated into the Bookmark Biosphere Reserve under the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Program, and is aimed at restoring the ecological health of this degraded landscape. Paul Sinclair, ‘Hard country to love’, Meanjin, 60(3), 2001, 89-101.
17 Sinclair, ‘Hard country to love’, 101.
come home and it was green, there was green lawn and grapevines...this little oasis.\textsuperscript{18}

Those who inherited property from their forebears are eager to emphasise their own labour and ingenuity in transforming the indigenous landscape into a productive one. Work plays a crucial role in human environmental relationships. Indeed work, as Nick Gill has shown in the context of the Australian pastoral industry, ‘embeds us in nature’. ‘Pastoralists’ everyday life working on their properties creates a nature in which is inscribed their labour, their sweat, their plans and their past and future’.\textsuperscript{19}

Conservation and improvement of the farming landscape emerge as dual themes in many stories. Indeed, as Joe Powell suggested in the 1970s, the whole ethic of nature conservation in Australia was infused with the idea of ‘improvement’ from an early stage in the history of environmental management.\textsuperscript{20} In the 1990s, the New South Wales Department of Agriculture issued a brochure promoting the marriage of ‘responsible environmental management with the development of a strong, sustainable economy’. The role of farmers, it suggested, was to manage and improve the natural resources they depended on for their livelihood. In the wheatlands, the idea of ‘improvement’ has strong moral and aesthetic overtones.

When we first came here, there was nothing here at all. That was in 1951.

We’ve built this little place and things sort of grew up around it. My husband bought an old blacksmith’s shop that was in Condobolin, and made stables out of it. Then they put up yards, everything that’s on this place we’ve put here.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{18} Interview with Doug and Marjorie Watson, 3 April 2001.


\textsuperscript{21} Interview with Dorothy Press, 4 April 2001.
I suppose I can see paddocks that I saw when they were in their natural state and have been taken from there to productive land, and you know that when you do that in a sense you’re making history….developing land from scratch is something that really is unique.  

You’re turning the soil over…clearing a country and fencing it, dividing the paddocks with more fences, and watering them…I did it all myself.

It’s just a pleasure to work with the land…watch it turn into something quite beautiful.

I do like going and getting up on the hill and looking back over a lot of the country on both sides – the river, and back this way. It’s a nice view looking back over and all the crops have just come up and all the kurrajong trees are shining. And looking back to the river, you can see the river. It gives you fulfilment of ambition.

As a child, Chester Eagles would wander over his family’s farm near Finley, in the Riverina region of southern New South Wales. He remembers how he once decided to map the lines traced by the sheep in the hard red earth of the paddocks in summer, convinced that there was some important pattern to be discovered in their tracks as they radiated out from water troughs into the surrounding pasture. The paddocks represented his family’s achievement in making the land produce. By comparison, he recalls his parents’ derisive use of the term ‘Blackfeller country’, to refer to parts of the property that they had failed to make productive. Eagles wrote that they really meant ‘useless places fit only, by implication, for useless people; thus contempt for what couldn’t be turned to advantage underlay the possession by my parents’ community of the land they worked’.  

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22 Interview with Ted Tomlinson, 30 May 2002.
23 Interview with John Raven, 4 April 2001.
25 Interview with Steve Doyle, 3 April 2001.
26 Chester Eagle, Mapping the Paddocks (McPhee Gribble Publishers Pty Ltd and Penguin Books, Australia Ltd, Fitzroy and Ringwood, 1985), 1, 96. Herbert Guthrie-Smith called sheep the ‘chartographers of the station’ in his 1921 history of his property in New Zealand. He recorded in
The conservation ethic combines utilitarian, aesthetic and ethical meanings. But how do spiritual connections manage to survive when drought and degraded landscapes defy this strong ethic for improving the land? Around the town of Parkes, 100 kilometres east of Condobolin, Allan Draper offers a graphic account of how four years of drought in the central western wheatlands has taken its toll, not only on his land and stock, but on his very body.

I didn’t realize it at the time beforehand, but unbeknown to me I had a pretty close connection with the dirt, it was like another appendage on my body. And this severe drought came, it was two-and-a-half or three years drought here. And to sum it up and put it bluntly: the farm was dead. This part of me had died.

As the interviewer, David Rutledge observed, the spiritual dimension of people’s attachment to land is brought home during times of crisis. In the case of the shared crisis of extended drought in the wheatlands, people are not only drawn closer together, but they are also brought ‘to a closer awareness of the connection they have with the soil’. They are becoming, in the words of a local Baptist pastor and counselor, more ‘spiritually attuned’.

But while working closely with the physical landscape may have engendered a sense of intimacy, knowledge, and spiritual connection over time, it offers no guarantee that these associations are valued by others. I am not convinced that the separation of feeling for the land from ways of exploiting the land for productive purposes is as clear-cut as Read implies. There is a strong adherence, for example, to


Powell, Environmental management in Australia, 71.

Allan Draper interviewed by David Rutledge for Encounter, ABC Radio National, 19 December 2004, 1, 8, (http://www.abc.net.au/m/relig/enc/stories/s1261533.htm). Allan is the third generation to work on his family’s farm.

Interviewer David Rutledge, Encounter, 2.
the tenets of agrarianism and stewardship, as articulated by Rolls. But farmers are also deeply enmeshed within an industrialised market economy, and this generates tensions in their stories. Reflections about feelings of attachment and belonging are tinged with anxiety and defensiveness. How are the labours of their families and earlier generations of settlers perceived by ‘outsiders’? Clearing, fencing, building houses, ‘improvements’ – these were prerequisites for land entitlement and tax concessions as recently as the 1960s. Within one generation the winds had changed. As public awareness of ecological decline in agricultural farmland has heightened, farmers are increasingly discredited as ‘stewards of the soil’.  

Meanwhile, some environmentalists are suggesting that the concept of stewardship offers a means of achieving sustainability in agricultural land use. Critics of agricultural practices have argued that Australia needs a new land ethic, one based on respect for land and acknowledgement of the limits to sustainable land use. The proponents of sustainability have advocated different solutions, ranging from a better balance of agriculture and natural resources, to limiting agriculture in certain areas. However, these arguments tend not to engage with the historical and cultural processes that have shaped and reshaped environmental beliefs and values over the course of the twentieth century. According to the Australian poet and environmentalist, Judith Wright, ‘if we are ever to move from economic values to a reassertion of ecological values, our feelings and sympathies must be engaged first’.

31 Lawrence and Gray, ‘The myths of modern agriculture’, 36.
32 Professor Brian Roberts, for example, has been a long-standing advocate for an Australian land ethic. See B. Roberts, *The Quest for Sustainable Agriculture and Land Use* (University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1995); idem, ‘A case for an Australian land ethic study’, in *Regional Journal of Social Issues*, No 18, May 1986, 37-43; and his collection of essays in *Ground Rules: Perspectives on Land Stewardship*, compiled by Marie Schulz (University of Southern Queensland Press, Toowoomba, 1993). The notion of an Australian land ethic was first officially articulated in the National Soil Conservation Program in 1983.
Nature with a small ‘n’

Even as agricultural expansion was being promoted by national and state governments in the mid-twentieth century, the moral consequence of ecological degradation was a matter of public concern. When The Land newspaper was launched in 1911, its motto was: ‘Nations may battle and the world rock with revolution, but the land will care for him who cares for it’. According to T.H. Bath, writing in The Land Farm and Station Annual in 1949, ‘most sons of the soil think of Nature as something apart from themselves: Man with a capital “M”; nature with a small “n”’. Bath was a farmer in the West Australian wheatlands, and a State Member of Parliament. He was likely to have been familiar with the North American writer and former expert on game management, Aldo Leopold. Leopold’s book The Sand Almanac, first published in 1949, became essential reading for adherents to the emerging environmental movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Both Leopold and Bath had witnessed the graphic culmination of drought, economic depression, and land-clearing: Leopold in the Great Plains of the United States, and Bath in the marginal wheatlands of south-western Australia. Leopold was inspired by George Perkins Marsh’s book, Man and Nature, in which Marsh had controversially described the destructive power of human agency in nature in an era when Christian teachings widely promoted the God-given right of humans to prevail over the natural world. Leopold, however, advocated a new land ethic based on a combination of ecological and humanistic philosophies, wherein humans might better care for the land if we saw ourselves as part of a ‘community of interdependent parts’. ‘We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us’, he said. ‘When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect’.

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34 Cited in B. Roberts, Ground Rules: Perspectives on Land Stewardship (University of Southern Queensland Press, Darling Heights, 1993), 47.
35 T.H. Bath, ‘In tune with nature’, The Land Farm and Station Annual, 26 October 1949, 37-38.
39 Leopold, Sand Country Almanac, 204.
In retirement, Bath had found time to reflect on the ‘higher intrinsic pleasures of communion with nature on the farm’. He urged farmers to get ‘in tune with nature’, to experience the

... intoxicating fragrance of damp earth from the first good shower after the drought of summer; the sight of birds flying through the outer foliage of trees to drench their plumage, in a like exuberant delight; the sense of well-being in watching the long furrows of red or brown earth heeling over from the stroke of the plough shares; the morning and evening carols of the magpies from the treelots conserved by the wise farmer...these are only some of the exquisite joys reserved for a more select few.\(^40\)

In the West Australian wheatlands that was Bath’s country, settler farmers were still enthusiastically carving fields from grassy woodlands in the 1940s, a practice that continued across the Australian wheatlands until well into the 1970s. Bath’s article highlighted one of the defining conundrums for farmers by the mid-twentieth century. On the one hand, progressive farming methods required increasingly extensive areas of land to be denuded of trees and shrubs in order to grow crops on a large scale. On the other hand widespread vegetation clearance, particularly in combination with drought and overstocking, had yielded disastrous environmental and social consequences.

Bath’s vision for the wheatlands was of farmers working in harmony with nature, where the ‘original inhabitants’ (meaning animals, birds and insects) would continue to ‘reign with native assurance’ as long as belts of trees and shrubs were allowed to remain. Drawing on stories from Classical mythology, he warned of nature’s powerful agency, predicting that retribution would come to those who transgress its laws, urging farmers to embrace nature rather than to assert themselves over it. His vision was of nature taking vengeance on those responsible for what he saw as indiscriminate vegetation removal through burning, overstocking and ring-barking. It carried a strong message to post-war readers of *The Land* journal, who were more accustomed to articles on rising agricultural markets and the moral virtues of farming

\(^{40}\) Bath, ‘In tune with nature’, 37-38.
life. ‘Only the land-miner who used the firestick with indiscriminating fury, and erected structures of wood and iron in a dust-plagued vacuum is left to the companionship of ants and flies and the harmful bugs and grubs that raid his crops’. Such warnings about how the health of humankind is ultimately reflected in the ecological health of the land still reverberate in the wheatlands. As Martin Doyle observes, ‘I’ve always said if you look after nature she’ll look after you, and you cross nature she’ll kick you, and she certainly will’.

The seeds of the belief that nature is separate to culture lie in the history of Western ideas. In Classical Greek history, a cosmological view of the natural world as a living organism and divine dwelling prevailed. During the scientific revolution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the idea emerged that the world was comprised of dead matter in motion, governed by universal laws, a fundamental departure from the cosmological view. The insights that followed laid the foundations for modern scientific assumptions about nature. If the laws that governed nature could be unravelled, then the forces of nature itself could be controlled. Under the influence of the Romantic movement in the late eighteenth century, this perception of the natural world was refined into a dichotomy of Man, on the one hand, and Nature (including all other living things) on the other. The word ‘culture’ derives from the Latin colere, relating to inhabiting, cultivating and protecting, and the Greek kyklos, meaning cyclical. ‘Culture’, therefore, was closely connected with the idea of caring for land and the cyclical processes of nature. In classical texts agriculture represented a stage of human evolution in which people realised the potential of the soil and of themselves through a close relationship with nature.

Such assumptions helped to shape the attitudes of colonists in their efforts to understand the Australian environment. The enthusiasm of nineteenth century settlers for collecting and classifying specimens of nature exemplified this desire to

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41 Bath, ‘In tune with nature’, 38.
42 Martin Doyle in interview with Martin and Judy Doyle, 7 May 2001.
44 Kenneth Robert Olwig, ‘Sexual cosmology: Nation and landscape at the conceptual interstices of nature and culture; or, what does landscape really mean?’, in Barbara Bender (ed), Landscape Politics and Perspectives (Berg Publishers, Providence and Oxford, 1993), 313.
objectively study the physical world, and continues to define the scientific approach to understanding landscape change. The nature-culture dualism emerged as a matter of particular interest in the study of landscape by social sciences and humanities scholars during the late twentieth century. Social scientists Bech, Giddens and Lash, for example, suggest that nature was no longer seen as external to human life but as ‘thoroughly penetrated and reordered by it’. The division of nature and culture has been a concern of feminist scholars, who point to the emergence of a masculinist world view that valued nature over culture. The anthropologist Deborah Rose, who has written widely on Indigenous ecological knowledge, argues that the ecological crisis confronting rural Australia in the late twentieth century straddles the nature-culture divide. To a lesser extent perhaps, natural scientists have also engaged with cultural issues. The field of human ecology, for example, explicitly includes the study of humans as a species participating in ecological systems. In this field of research, cultural beliefs and behaviour are considered as relevant to degraded land and river systems as ecological systems and economic imperatives. In part, scholars who work along the seams of the culture-nature dichotomy have sought to understand the cultural assumptions that prevail about the natural world and people’s relationships with it. They argue that ecological knowledge alone cannot properly address the problems of ecological decline, since they are predominantly the

49 Deborah Rose ‘Connecting with ecological futures’, in Rose and Clark, Tracking Knowledge In North Australian Landscapes, 35. Also see idem, ‘Exploring an Aboriginal land ethic’, Meanjin, 47(3), Spring 1988, 378-87. In her research, Rose explores the kin-like relationships of responsibility and consciousness between people, plants, seasons and animals amongst Aboriginal people.
result of cultural beliefs and practices. Some critics of land management practices go so far as to suggest that the separation of humans from nature reflects the estrangement of the human spirit from the external, material world.\textsuperscript{51}

The concept of stewardship encapsulates the nature of these tensions between culture and nature in the wheatlands. Stewardship is a recurring theme in conversations about ecological decline and agricultural land use. The notion of stewardship echoes Christian tenets of moral obligations, including a responsibility for preserving ‘nature’ from exploitation. Stewardship implies that the natural world has intrinsic value, and it carries powerful emotional overtones. Amongst central Lachlan farmers, stewardship is associated with a strong sense of personal responsibility to continue working the land out of respect for their forebears. Indeed, a sense of continuity and responsibility are integral to their sense of identity. David Goodman suggests that farming, or more specifically the cultivation of the soil for growing crops, acquired its cultural potency in Australia during the 1850s. The gold rushes had rudely disrupted the vision of Victoria as a colonial society built on an agrarian ideology that ‘real wealth came from the soil, that the destiny of the colony was agricultural, that there was an almost moral responsibility to cultivate the soil of so beneficent an environment, and that the small cultivator was liable to be among the most virtuous and useful of citizens’.\textsuperscript{52} The agrarian vision of stability and order gained greater currency when compared with the transience and disorder of the gold diggings.

The concept of stewardship, with its moral underpinnings, provided the philosophical basis for the Australian Landcare movement that emerged in the 1990s resulting in a nationally-funded Landcare program. The program promoted a partnership between government and community, where local landowners were encouraged to take responsibility for addressing local problems of ecological degradation, and to develop a sustainable approach to rural land use. The Australian Government’s support for the program signalled a significant shift in public attitudes towards land management in rural Australia. It acknowledged that a ‘top-down’ approach to reforming farming practices was failing to deal effectively with

ecological decline in agricultural regions. Nevertheless, the national Landcare program was still found to have limited impact on the problems of ecological decline, and it was also falling far short of the Leopold concept of a land ethic. A review of the National Landcare Program conducted by the Australian National Audit Office in 1997 was critical of the inability of the Australian Government to detail any measurable improvements in land use practices as a result of the Program, whilst one of the originators of the landcare concept, the Australian Conservation Foundation, was concerned that it was more focused on sustaining agricultural productivity than the environment.53

Farmers in the central Lachlan are fretful about the concept of stewardship. Anne Coffey, for example, reflects on the tension between farming, attachment to land, and ecological decline.

The whole pride in developing the land and clearing it, and making it productive and so on, and to come to a point now when you sort of feel bad about that almost. That whole striving to own your own piece of land, to carve out your own, and the feelings that you have about the land....That’s been eroded now by the whole [message that] farmers have degraded the land.54

Andrew Buttenshaw, whose grandfather selected land on Lake Cowal, doesn’t like to use the word stewardship because it suggests that his priority is other than earning a living from the land. Even so, he is proud of the knowledge he has built up of the land he farms.

As far as the land goes, I know where every pothole, puddle, stock, stone, stump is on this place. It annoys me intensely when, because we live on the lake and we get a few tourists and people down there, if they go out and drive into the reserve and then they’ll go over and find a tree and use it as a toilet in my

54 Anne Coffey in interview with Anne Coffey and Robin Sanderson, 4 March 2001.
paddock. Now that upsets me because they think they’re out in the bush, but I know where everything is on this place and it’s like my backyard.\textsuperscript{55}

Similar sentiments were expressed by different farmers, suggesting that the rising tensions over environmental legislation and regulation of land use stem from a conviction that farmers know their own land intimately, and certainly better than non-resident agricultural or environmental experts. Landcare aside, they are often inclined to resist interference from non-farmers because they value their own intuitive and practical knowledge and the right to apply it as they see fit.

Herbert Guthrie-Smith’s environmental history of a New Zealand sheep station, first published in 1921, is an eloquent and intimate chronicle of a farming landscape. In the preface to the third edition of his book, published in 1999, Guthrie-Smith reflected on the way in which his sense of the landscape had transformed over time. In youth, he recalled his feeling of ownership and possession. In later life, however, he felt that the land had come to possess him.\textsuperscript{56} Studies of attachment to land in Australia’s farming regions suggest a similar shift in sensibility, a subtle change of emphasis from land owner to caretaker. In Sharon Veale’s study of Towarri National Park, for example, Beverlee Adams reconstructed her life, not as a farmer, but as a custodian of a landscape in which the Indigenous presence was ‘palpable’.\textsuperscript{57} In Australia, the term ‘custodianship’ is often used to describe the sense of spiritual responsibility that Aboriginal people have to care for their traditional country.

The Aboriginal concept of ‘caring for country’ has attracted considerable public and scholarly attention in Australia. Some environmentalists advocate it as the cornerstone upon which a new settler land ethic could be developed, suggesting that it...
would help to promote a spiritual engagement with the land amongst settler Australians. \(^58\) In 2001, the authors of a report prepared for the Native Vegetation Advisory Committee of New South Wales drew on such anthropological research in order to illustrate how Indigenous and European cultural relationships with land are fundamentally opposed. Indigenous management, they argued, represented close spiritual and physical association with the land, whilst settler management was irredeemably hostile to it. The Indigenous meaning of ‘country’ entailed the ‘ultimate sense of place’ and ability to ‘read’ the land. \(^59\) Such arguments have a bitter irony in the enclosed and privatised farming landscapes of the central Lachlan, where Wiradjuri knowledge of and moral authority for their traditional country has long been repressed or denied. \(^60\)

Amongst settler Australians grappling with competing requirements for land and water resources, the concept of stewardship has acquired different and contradictory meanings. Goodall and Lucas, for example, have shown how irrigators and graziers in the Black Soil country of northern New South Wales describe their ‘good stewardship’ in terms of their children inheriting the abundance they had created, even as it is ‘relentlessly aimed at change and expansion’ to derive profit from the land. Custodianship, on the other hand, represents ‘a state of ownership which demands obligations as well as conferring rights’. \(^61\) In the central Lachlan wheatlands, Anne Coffey is an advocate of careful environmental management, but she is cautious about the way in which the notion of stewardship is employed by governments. Indeed, she argues, zealous stewardship policies have overpowered the present generation of farmers with responsibilities, and disempowered them in favour of future generations.

\(^{58}\) See, for example, D. Smyth, *Understanding Country: The Importance Of Land And Sea In Aboriginal And Torres Straight Islander Societies*. Report to the Aboriginal Reconciliation Council (Canberra, 1994). In her study of the Gulf Country of Far North Queensland, Veronica Strang argued that Western relationships with land were superficial, unemotional and materialistic, whilst Indigenous relationships were fundamentally spiritual and sacred. See Veronica Strang, *Uncommon Ground: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental Values* (Berg, Oxford, 1997).


\(^{60}\) See my discussion in Chapter 4.
They’re saying that we are responsible for it, that we’ve got stewardship of the land for future generations, that’s what they’re saying, that future generations are more important than the present generation. The guys are saying, ‘Enough! I can’t do any more, I’ve got to work my place.’

Amongst farmers, the idea of stewardship is associated with financial outlay, where future rather than present generations will reap the benefits. Indeed, farmers often prefer to describe themselves as ‘caretakers’ or ‘custodians’ of land, suggesting that the roots of attachment are located in the present rather than the future.

...we’re really only the caretakers of it, we only have it while we’re here.

I’m not connected [to this property]. I mean, that’s one thing I wouldn’t do is not sell the place.

Oh yeah, we don’t own it, we’re only custodians for this generation.

*Caretakers I’d say.*

Anybody that thinks they own it’s fooling themselves.

*You can’t take it with you.*

[You’re] a carer, and a watcher of the land you look after. You have a feeling for the land and you do things. Someone’s going to take over that land. You’re just caring for it, it’s not your land, you’re just a caretaker for the next generation, whoever that might be....The land will always be there. I think

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62 Anne Coffey in interview with Anne Coffey and Robin Sanderson, 4 March 2001.
63 Interview with Dorothy Press, 4 April 2001.
64 Martin Doyle in interview with Martin and Judy Doyle, 7 May 2001.
65 Interview with Judy and Martin Doyle. Martin’s words are in italics.
when you’re gone what you’ve left is your relationships with the people that are left.66

This seems to involve an implicit reversal of the Indigenous concept of ‘custodianship’. Indeed, rather than embracing a reciprocity of obligations and rights embedded in the Indigenous idea of custodian, farmers appear to draw on it as a metaphor for an intimate yet impermanent relationship with the land, imposing temporal and spatial limits on their responsibilities. Deborah Rose detects something similar amongst white pastoralists in northern Australia, calling it a paradox of time and space on the frontier. ‘Those white pastoralists who live in the north’, she writes, ‘who defend it so passionately and speak of it with such love, are unable to imagine a future that is anything like the present....they continue to see themselves in a transitive mode in which the work of today will not result in the reproduction of their way of life into the future.’67

Rose writes in the context of the rangelands, where issues of Native Title and pastoral leaseholds create a high level of uncertainty. What makes the central Lachlan farmers’ position so striking is that, even with freehold tenure and the grand narrative of closer settlement, there is a similar sense of unease, of settler mythologies undergoing transition. It underscores the ambiguity and tension entailed in sustaining the pioneer legend in an ecologically-degraded and contested landscape. On the one hand, the farmers of the central Lachlan feel a deep sense of entitlement and ownership flowing from family connections and close knowledge of a particular landscape. On the other, they are uncertain about extending it to a land ethic in which the very ground in which it is invested no longer seems as stable and uncomplicated as it once was.

Plate 11: Neil McDonald and daughter Ros, 2002.  
Photo: J McCann

Map: N McDonald
Plate 13: Tom Edols with a circa 1970 aerial photograph of his farm, 2005. Photo: J McCann

Plate 14: The Kiakatoo Hall on the Lachlan River, 2002. Photo: J McCann
Chapter 10. Mapping the paddocks

The country grows
into the image of the people,
and the people grow
into the likeness of the country
till the soul’s geographer
each becomes the symbol of the other

At the cessation of hostilities marking the end of the Second World War, the Commonwealth’s Department of Post-war Reconstruction issued a series of pamphlets for Australian farmers. In these brief notes, the Department alluded to the great promise of agriculture, as well as the enormous environmental and social problems facing farmers. Since the industrial revolution the world had witnessed the ‘tide of economic progress’ flowing away from farming and rural life, in favour of manufacturing and the city. The greatest challenge for industrialised countries, according to the Department, was to ensure that benefits of the economic revolution of the past century were shared by both city and country. The greatest threat was that the economic and social gaps between city and country would remain and fester. The land may be the farmer’s ‘tool of trade’, but small-scale farms were proving to be environmentally and economically disastrous in many parts of rural Australia. The Department predicted that mechanisation would provide the means to ‘accelerate the conversion of farming from a way of life into a commercial undertaking producing for a market rather than for the farm family’s own needs’. These notes reflected a significant departure from the ideals of closer settlement in the early twentieth century.

century, when land settlement schemes were developed on the premise that a farm should be sufficient to support a family unit.4

By the 1970s, as two decades of generous farm subsidies and robust export prices came to an end, the agricultural sector braced itself for the effects of market restructuring and a new national economic agenda. Exposed to the vagaries of international competition, and under pressure to increase productivity to keep pace with declining terms of trade, farmers began to embrace the tools and language of modern business corporations. They took on more land, diversified their products, sought off-farm employment, and acquired bigger and more sophisticated machinery to crop larger areas of land more efficiently. Towards the end of the century, they had access to agricultural consultants and specialised training, acquired new skills in business management, computing technology, and chemical farming, and participated in environmental research programs and catchment management committees. Farmers, in effect, had been obliged to transform themselves into modern-day multi-skilled business managers. When the Australian Bureau of Agricultural Research and Education conducted a survey of Australian farmers in 1999, they discovered that farmers felt under siege. A combination of market forces, complex environmental laws and changing social pressures had rendered them barely able to imagine a future for their landholding beyond their own lifetimes. One third of the farmers surveyed foreshadowed that increasing debt was likely to force them to abandon farming altogether.5 A century of land settlement policies firmly embedded the value of land ownership and family farming in the national psyche but, by the end of the century, property succession was in a state of flux in the wheatlands. Some farmers had even come to regard themselves as merely caretakers of the land they occupied, whilst others dismissed the very idea of their children inheriting the family farm at all.

4 In Victoria, for example, Home Maintenance Area Committees were set up in 1927 to monitor the capacity of farms to support family units in each agricultural industry. In 1933, the State Government’s Closer Settlement Scheme was based on a ‘living area’ for one man and his family. Holt, Wheat farms of Victoria, 1947, 172-3.

These sentiments suggest something of the ambivalence and tension that existed in the wheatlands by the late twentieth century. Throughout the century, the family farm had weathered a succession of environmental, social, and economic changes. It had gained ideological and political momentum in the late nineteenth century with the closer settlement movement, maintained a tenuous hold in the drifting years of depression and drought, bloomed in a favourable post-war climate, and remained a characteristic feature of the wheatlands despite diminishing terms of trade and declining social status. In 1996, the Australian Census revealed that 98 per cent of Australia’s ‘broadacre’ farms were still owned and operated by family businesses. The family farm was no longer the key to national prosperity predicted in the 1940s, but it was still a resilient and highly emotive symbol of settler entitlement and attachment to land. Indeed, the perseverance of small family farming has had more to do with its cultural potency than economic and social viability. As rural sociologists Lawrence and Gray, put it, ‘[e]motional attachment to the land and the culture of agriculture are partial explanations for the continuation of family-based farming at a time when it has become economically marginalised’. Heritage has emerged as a

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6 ABARE analysis cited in Geoffrey Lawrence and Ian Gray, ‘The myths of modern agriculture: Australian rural production in the twenty-first century’, in Bill Pritchard and Phil McManus (ed), Land of Discontent: The Dynamics Of Change In Rural And Regional Australia (University of New South Wales Press Ltd, Sydney, 2000), 38-9. Broadacre farms are defined by the Commonwealth Government as those growing sheep, beef cattle and cereal crops. Commonwealth of Australia, ABS Census Report, 1996 (Canberra 1996). At the end of the twentieth century, the family farm was generally defined as depending on the members of one family for labour and income, sometimes assisted by seasonal contractors or, in rare cases, employees.

7 Gray, ‘The myths of modern agriculture’, 40. Recent Australian studies of family farming have given weight to the notion that powerful cultural, social, and emotional dynamics are at work in Australia’s inland agricultural and pastoral regions. When Heather Goodall and Damien Lucas examined the concept of family farming in a predominantly pastoral region in northern New South Wales, for example, they found that the European concept of the inherited family farm was still ‘a central iconic element in most people’s expression of hopes and goals’, See Lucas and Goodall, ‘Country’ stories’, 193-4. Their study considered settler and Indigenous relationships with pastoral land in the context of dramatic changes in land use and shifting alliances between pastoralists, Aboriginal people, and a new generation of irrigation farmers. They concluded, however, that the patriarchal notion of the nuclear family was being redefined in pastoral regions, as women assumed greater involvement in environmental affairs, farm management, and off-farm employment, and Aboriginal-owned farms presented alternative models of family-farming based on extended family networks.
way for struggling communities to confirm their identity and claim the land as their legacy. 8

Putting down roots

Settler stories of family farming in this part of the wheatlands invariably begin with a journey. For most, it was the journey of forebears to select land in the central Lachlan. Tom Glasgow recalls his father’s introduction to the area around Tullibigeal in 1921.

The old man was a pioneer sort of a bloke and he drew a block at Lockhart [in the Riverina] in about 1911, I think. He cleared all that. They reckoned he was an iron man. ... He had a saw mill. He used to work in the saw mill all day and clear the farm at night. Anyway, in 1921 he come up here. He went down to see his mother. He was born in Rutherford in Victoria, went out to see his mother and he met one of his old school mates just back from the 1914-18 war — very unsettled. He said, ‘I’ve got a block of land up at a place called Tullibigeal’. The old man said, ‘Where the bloody hell’s that?’ So they got a mud map and done it out. He said, ‘I owe 150 quid on it, rates. You give me 50 quid you can have it and pay the rates’. So the old bloke thought, ‘That’s all right’. So he hopped on the train at Corowa and got up here. In those days there was nothing and the train used to come out from Wyalong every day and bring all the food stuff, the bread and all that sort of thing. 9

For others, a family history of moving from one property to another belies a strong attachment to this part of the wheatlands. Ted Tomlinson attributes his sense of attachment to the land to a long family tradition of farming in Scotland. His father, Fin, recorded his family’s story of mobility spanning four generations and numerous

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9 Interview with Tom Glasgow, 16 June 2001. Mobility is also discussed in Chapter 3, in the context of nostalgia for lost places.
landholdings, ranging from Victoria to the central western plains of New South Wales.  

Our life has been Yarrabandi, and then you’ve got Forbes, Parkes, a place called Silverrow in the middle, and that’s just near Tichborne. That was a very nice place. I wouldn’t have minded staying there but you would have been broke if you had.... We sold it and then we came back out here and we have done pretty well since. We’ve bought Eulandool here, and we’ve bought Colindale next to it. So central New South Wales - that’s my area. The rest of the family’s in Queensland. But they’ve always looked back at me as being the one that’s held the fort, so I’m back at home, I’m central New South Wales and that’s sort of stuck. So I think in some ways the family is always pleased to have that link back here. Yeah, it is, it’s home.

In her study of ecological change in the alpine region of New South Wales, Ruth Lane suggests that ancestral stories, journey stories, and stories of labour and hardship play an important role in defining identity and claims to land ownership for both Indigenous and settler Australians. My interviews with settler farmers in the central Lachlan wheatlands elicited similar journey stories, but the implications for land ownership and place attachment are rarely so clearcut. Brothers Steve and Martin Doyle trace their family’s pastoral and farming connections in eastern Australia to the early nineteenth century. Their forebears took up grazing land in the central Lachlan in the early twentieth century. For the extended Doyle family, the connection with the original family farm finds resonance in places that are intensely personal and highly symbolic. Family stories serve to embed the history of the family in the history of this

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11 Interview with Ted Tomlinson, 30 May 2002.

12 Ruth Lane, ‘Remembering past environments: Identity, place and environmental knowledge in the Tumut region of New South Wales’, Aboriginal History, 21, 1997: 153. Lane focused her study in the alpine region of New South Wales, where pine plantations had supplanted native forests and grazing. She drew on local memories of environmental change to reveal the ways in which people invested knowledge and emotions in the local landscape.
landscape. Each family story is secreted into a specific place and time. Geographical places literally become part of the family genealogy.

Dad’s ashes are spread over Eulenborn, he’s got his favourite spot, that’s where his ashes are and he’s got a plaque and rock there — that’s dad. In the paddock down there, there’s a huge gum tree and I suppose he and mum thought, ‘oh well, that’s where we want to be when our ashes are spread with the soil’. I go past it all the time, drop in. The bulls pass there and they rub their heads on the block. It’s quite funny!\textsuperscript{13}

The practice of burying family members in the land where they laboured reinforces a sense of connection with it for surviving family members. Communal cemeteries seem to diminish the intimacy that people have built up with particular parts of the landscape.\textsuperscript{14}

Steve Doyle believes that his sense of belonging comes through the act of farming itself.

It’s generations of farming that it’s in your veins. Once you’ve got your ownership of land, it’s part and parcel of your heritage.\textsuperscript{15}

He describes a process of slowly become connected, alluding to a form of spiritual attachment that he sees in Indigenous people’s relationships with traditional country. Attachment represents a continuous process of being associated with the land.

\textsuperscript{13} Interview with Steve Doyle, 3 April 2001.

\textsuperscript{14} Ros McDonald in interview with Neil and Ros McDonald, 30 May 2002. Lane suggests that burial is one of the most powerful symbols of past connections with a place, and also acts to reinforce connections between past and present generations. Lane, ‘Remembering past environments’, 154.

\textsuperscript{15} Interview with Steve Doyle, 3 April 2001.
You’re sort of dragged to the love of the land, or your patch. The Aboriginals think the same sort of thing, they’re attached. If they’ve grown up in a particular area that’s where they’ll stay.\textsuperscript{16}

When Ernest Moll penned his impressions of the wheatlands during the 1930s, he described how the monotonous plains of the Wimmera had gradually metamorphosed over the years into a beloved friend. Fascinated with the seasonal changes of the wheat paddocks, Moll observed how ‘over the squares of fallow soil, some red, some black, heat-waves shimmer and dance and sudden little whirlwinds build up a spiral of dust, then race away with it…’

For him without love of them the plains with their flat monotony in time become unendurable or, if their victim must endure because he cannot escape, they will appear to him like an enemy gloating over his prisoner… So the plains appear to one who does not love them. Where love is, all this is changed. The monotony is a friend, there at one’s rising and at one’s sitting down, a companion whose speech is silence or the sound of wind in grasses or the song of a bird, and to whom one speaks without the trouble of framing words.\textsuperscript{17}

Martin and Judy Doyle, Steve’s brother and sister-in-law, farm the pine and belar country north of the Lachlan River. Martin reflects on the particularity of the local landscape, his sense of connection expressed as an ability to mentally ‘map’ the extent of his ‘country’, knowing where rainfall and soil characteristics mark the transition from one area to another. Local ecological knowledge assumes heightened significance in marginal agricultural landscapes. Megan Poore found a similar intuitive awareness of landscape amongst farmers in the wheatlands around Ceduna on South Australia’s far west coast. The process of sowing, growing and reaping in this marginal cropping country, she suggests, are conducive to a strong sense of the landscape and an affinity with it, demanding as it does a sound knowledge of seasonal

\textsuperscript{16} Interview with Steve Doyle, 3 April 2001.

\textsuperscript{17} Ernest G. Moll, \textit{Below These Hills: The Story of a Riverina Farm} (Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1957), 4-5. Moll moved from the Wimmera to a property on the Riverina called Strathdown.
variations, soils, and 'the idiosyncrasies of certain paddocks on a person’s property'. To be contemptuous of such an inhospitable landscape invites disaster, and Ceduna farmers have learnt to accept this paradox of loving a hostile landscape and fearing it. Indeed, Poore argues, it is this dialectic that keeps them going as a community. In the central Lachlan wheatlands, Martin Doyle argues that his day-to-day experience and a ‘lifetime study’ of individual paddocks is superior to the knowledge imparted by ‘experts’, most of whom are bound to have only a limited grasp of local conditions. Many farmers in the central Lachlan decry what they see as an unnecessary encroachment by government land management bureaucracies in farm affairs.

In my own mind, I can draw a good map here because I know the ranges and hills, and just in my mind I could draw the passages and the corridors, wild animal corridors. I’d just fit in the whole area, I could plan it. Well, I’m talking only just thousands of acres in the county of Blaxland which goes from the hill this side of Kiakatoo, crosses the Cobar boundary [into the Western Division] from the Lachlan Shire.

Many of the central Lachlan farmers I interviewed talked about this particularity of the local landscape in their sense of rootedness and belonging. Sue and Phil Wheatley described a particular kind of landscape memory shared by different generations of their family.

It’s the environment you’ve grown up with. It’s the first skill you’ve ever learnt, the trees that you’ve hugged, where you’ve had your fun. You’ve all identified that the bush and the trees and the landscape is your memory, because that’s where you had all your fun, that’s where you grew up. You didn’t live in a city block, you didn’t go to a local pre-school. You went out and you made your fun in the bush. It’s all part of the culture, this heritage.

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19 Interview with Martin and July Doyle, 7 May 2001.

20 Phil Wheatley, Yaddra focus group, 22 June 2002.
For us, it would be the trees and the bush and the scrub and the land and the dirt at home. I was more connected to the scrub than anything else, the scrub that was left…. [Even my] children would be connected to the scrub – anywhere, flat, red, hot scrub! The girl can’t get back quickly enough, just to go down and get lost in the bush.  

Further downstream, Bill Sheaffe talks about his affection for certain trees and paddocks, framing his discussion in terms of their ability to produce. Emotional, even spiritual, relationships are never entirely divorced from economic considerations on a farm.

It sounds stupid, but…you get to know individual trees and things. I have places that are bits of curios. Like there’s a couple of quandong trees out in one particular paddock which I’ll often go and have a bit of a yarn to, to see how they’re fruiting.

Place names are particularly revealing in this settler landscape. Place names serve to both convey ownership and render the landscape knowable. As early as 1823, John Dunmore Lang, the New South Wales colony’s first Presbyterian Minister, noted the importance of ‘colonial nomenclature’ in the political and ideological mission to settle Australia. The practice of ‘mapping’ settlements, properties and paddocks with particular names was the most common way of inscribing the central Lachlan wheatlands as a settler landscape. The local lexicon provides compelling insights into how it has been claimed, enclosed, and ascribed meaning over time. As George Seddon eloquently put it, ‘Good names celebrate places. They signal intimacy with places, a richness of human experience. They are the ligaments that tie us to places’. They simultaneously provide a geographical reference point and imbue certain places

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21 Sue Wheatley, Yaddra focus group, 22 June 2002.
22 Interview with Bill Sheaffe, 11 December 2001.
with cultural meanings. One of the defining features of the wheatlands is the grid of fenced paddocks. The vast network of farm paddocks represented the public face of settler entitlement, segregating the rural landscape into public and private spaces and encoding it with private meanings and histories. Over the century, paddocks mirrored changes in tenure, land use, shifting ideas about the capacity of particular areas for agriculture, as well as the dramatic increase in the scale of farm machinery. While surveyors’ maps gazetted the formal processes of colonisation, the proliferation of fence lines represented the definitive imprint of Western attitudes to demarcating territory on the seemingly endless plains of inland Australia. Fencing was first used in Australia to contain grazing stock in the 1860s, effectively replacing shepherds. The processes of closer settlement and the introduction of cropping to grazing land increased the importance of paddocks. They became a crucial element of farm management, allowing for different parts of the farm to be rotated for cropping, pasture, and fallow at different times. Ultimately, the paddocks of wheatlands farms were inscribed with Western ideas about nature and agriculture in the Australian environment, described by one writer as ‘[t]he invisible grid that in turn created the tens of thousands of hard and alien lines that dominate our thoughts today’. Even within the envelope of private farms, some named places do not appear on any official map but have become part of a local landscape lexicon, still plotted in the social memory of the district.

Farm plans are common in the wheatlands. They document how the land has been ‘mapped’, often over several generations of farming, and represent an important and largely unrecognised source of wheatlands history. With computerisation and

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26 Dominy, *Calling the station home*, 137.

27 The term ‘paddock’ is used in Australia and New Zealand to mean a ‘field or plot of land enclosed by fencing or defined by natural boundaries’, although its original meaning in English language relates to an area for keeping or exercising horses. Judy Pearsall (ed), *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 1023.


30 The site of the old Yaddra school is one example. See Chapter 3.
modern farm management techniques, property planning has reached new levels of sophistication but the names given to the farm, the paddocks, even the dams, give colour and texture to the anonymous agricultural landscape. Most farmers identify their paddocks by name, ranging from simple geographical or topographical references such as ‘North Paddock’ or ‘Stony Paddock’, to names commemorating significant events or people in the stories of local families. Paddocks acquired from former neighbours, for example, often record the Christian or family name of a previous owner. Bert Vagg, now retired and living in Hillston, remembers the building up of new paddocks added to his property as people moved out. He kept their family names, although one he called ‘Waterloo’ because there was a ‘big blue’ over whether he or the neighbour actually owned it!

There was a big fisticuff and all sort of thing. He finished up with the paddock, but I’ve got no doubt we should have it in ours.31

Paddock naming practices are idiosyncratic. Ted Tomlinson identifies the paddocks on his property plan by name, adding that he wasn’t told the original names when he bought the property a few years ago.

This one here’s the ‘orchard paddock’ because there were too many trees in it. This one here’s the ‘Sunshine paddock’ because it had a Sunshine header out in the middle of it. This one’s the ‘creek paddock’, this one’s the ‘700’ because it’s got 700 acres. This one’s the ‘1600’. This one here is the ‘powerline paddock’, for obvious reasons. That’s the ‘west scrub’, that’s the ‘east scrub’, that’s the Olympic paddock’…because it had Olympic wheat-growing in it a few years ago. That’s the ‘1900 acre’, that’s the ‘1500 acre’, that’s the ‘sheep yard paddock’, ‘round dam’, ‘airstrip’, ‘400 acre’, ‘front creek’, ‘front’. That’s about it!32

32 Interview with Ted Tomlinson, 30 May 2002.
Neil McDonald recalls with amusement how one neighbour had named all his paddocks after different countries. Whenever a visitor came, they would be told he could be found fixing the fence between France and Spain, or ploughing in India. On a more serious note, he reflects on paddocks acquired when another neighbour sold out. The departing family had allotted plots to family members who worked there. The paddocks are still named after them, their presence resonating through the landscape even as it empties of people.

You stop and think, you know, where all the old dwellings were and there’s still some relics left there and you think, you know, what sort of heartbreak and what sort of happiness did they have here.

Neil, and his daughter Ros, share anecdotes that have shaped their landscape mythology. Their property, Mogandale, has changed hands five times in 50 years. Nevertheless, they draw mental mud maps to navigate through their family’s place memories. They muse about how, in this landscape of distant horizons, small hills have come to have special importance. For the McDonalds, there is ‘Frannie’s Tree’, named after a beloved aunt who used to hold family picnics ‘under a great big spready tree’ on one of the hills, and who always asked to visit the spot each time she returned to the farm.

33 Interview with Neil and Ros McDonald, 30 May 2002.
34 Interview with Neil and Ros McDonald, 30 May 2002.
35 Interview with Neil and Ros McDonald, 30 May 2002. During interviews, I encouraged people to draw ‘mental mud maps’ where it seemed appropriate to help them to articulate their memories of particular places. It proved to be a valuable way of encouraging a conversation about the ways in which the physical landscape has been invested with certain meaning and significance. In other cases people were more comfortable taking photographs of special places or features in their landscape and writing about their feelings in their own time. The concept of mapping the invisible landscape that people carry in their heads, sometimes referred to as ‘cultural mapping’, has been used since the 1960s by geographers, landscape architects, urban planners, and others engaged in gathering territorial information and understanding people’s preferences for spatial qualities in their physical environment. See for example, Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (1960); Australian Capital Regional Cultural Map Project (http://www.capitalregion.org.au/harden/culturalmap/guidelines/guidelines.htm). Department of Communications and the Arts, *Mapping Culture: A Guide for Cultural and Economic Development in the Communities*. A report produced by Greg Young, PacRim Planning, and Ian Clark and Johanna Sutherland (AIATSIS) for DCA (Canberra, 1995).
Such special places are common in these farming landscapes. They seem to exist irrespective of the length of family connections with particular properties. Even though landholdings may have changed hands many times, or perhaps because of it, farming families are continuously engaged in the process of inscribing themselves into the wheatlands. Some farmers speculate that longevity is not as significant in forming attachment as day-to-day physical closeness to the landscape. Indeed, several of the farmers interviewed referred to their love of open spaces and a sense of freedom in this landscape of ‘all horizons’.  

I don’t know that the long length of time is that important. Some people develop those attachments very quickly.

On the other hand, Dorothy Press senses that the landscape of her third generation family farm is a vehicle for connecting with a deeper, more spiritual sense of the past.

I’d miss being able to walk on my own land….I think because it goes far back. I think that means a lot. And I can feel it goes beyond me.

Inheritance practices amongst farming families in the wheatlands have generally provided for sons to inherit the family farm, or portions of it. Meanwhile, women living on family farms have tended to uproot themselves from their childhood places in order to marry. This suggests that issues of family memory and place attachment are likely to be more complex for farm women. Ruth Beilin’s ethnographic research with farming women, for example, revealed that they are more engaged with the rural landscape as a ‘locus of relationships’, rather than as a productive space. As a feminist researcher, however, she is reluctant to subscribe to the view that women have a


37 Anne Coffey in interview with Anne Coffey and Robin Sanderson, 4 March 2001.

38 Interview with Dorothy Press, 4 April 2001.

39 My comments here are general observations only, as I did not specifically examine issues of gender during my interviews.
stronger affinity with ‘nature’ and land than do men. Maggie MacKellar has also considered the centrality of place for women who live on the land. ‘Place’, she argues, ‘is both inside and outside; it takes us beyond ourselves and exists outside of ourselves, yet allows us to make sense of ourselves’. Attachment to particular places is both ‘born into us’, and created through work, through movement, and through storytelling. Yet a sense of place eludes precise definition. It can just as easily come from learning to make connections with a new land so that it can be ‘imaginatively possessed’. As they go about their daily work of moving through and modifying the landscape, women have felt its potency and become physically, historically, and emotionally implicated in it. They point to the physical manifestation of their labours, as well as tell personal and family stories that have been generated in the process. As David Lowenthal put it, ‘[t]he beauty that we see in the vernacular landscape is the image of our common humanity: hard work, stubborn hope, and mutual forbearance striving to be love’. Few of the women I interviewed in the central Lachlan had actually inherited the family farm. Nevertheless, the landscape was a strong presence because of the way in which memories of their children’s growing years, of forging family relationships, were bound up with particular places. The emotional interweaving of family and land and daily life is a common thread in their stories, and they seem unable to disentangle places, family, work, and a sense of belonging. Significant places are often those connected with family activities, domestic and unremarkable. The depersonalised landscape of agricultural production becomes a domestic space of family memory. One woman talked about ‘family landmarks’.

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43 John Brickerhoff Jackson, Discovering the Vernacular Landscape (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1984), xii.

44 Dorothy Press married but remained on a portion of her parents’ property, while Lesley Ridley did not marry and stayed on to manage her family’s property.
We’ve got two little hills up there, and a trig station...When the children were growing up, the old fuel stove that used to be here, we had it on the hill and we used to go up every Sunday and have a barbecue and the kids would play hide and seek....So, they’ve become quite important in their own way.\(^{45}\)

Anne Coffey returned to the central Laachlan after many years pursuing a career in coastal cities. She reflects on the land that her grandfather and his brother selected in 1928, now farmed by her father and brother. She maintains a strong sense of connection with it, even after marrying and moving to her husband’s farm. Over time, the landscape has acquired a ‘lived-in’ quality, a familiar feel developed through childhood experiences and imprinted with family routines and occasions.

I remember as a kid, with mum and dad when we were really little — 3 and 4 — and not able to do much that was very helpful, mum and dad would be down the sheep yards and we’d be all under the trees — there were no babysitters. You couldn’t stay home, you had to go with them. We’d be driving around the yards with them mustering, and then we’d be over under the trees building stick houses waiting for mum and dad to finish the sheep work for hours on end. Our holidays were out stick picking, we’d take a barbecue lunch and we’d all help...Dad was on the tractor and mum was walking around putting the sticks on the fires and picking up all day....It was family, it was all intertwined with a sense of belonging and a sense of family.\(^{46}\)

For Anne, a crumbling pise building in a remnant mallee paddock conveys an acute sense of connection with earlier generations of settlers in the district. In a tangible way, the settler’s house also validates her own life in the region, and embodies the qualities that she values.

\(^{45}\) Interviews with John and Kerry Raven, 4 April 2001. Other farmers I interviewed also observed the significance of a particular hill or high point on their farm. Lesley Ridley, for example, talked about climbing her hill as a child, although there was little time to spare from the farm work. She still finds relics of that era – an old jar, a teapot – reinforcing her sense of connection with that place. Interview with Lesley Ridley, 11 May 2001.

\(^{46}\) Anne Coffey in interview with Anne Coffey and Robin Sanderson, 4 March 2001.
Even walking through Johnno’s house, we take a lot of visitors through there and people explain some of the stuff. It used to be where everybody in the district came to do their shearing. [There’s] a sense of connectivity with that place. And also you think of the big old Burrawong shearing shed and the old houses, it just seems to me terribly sad. It gives you a sense of connection to the past, and to the pioneers who came out here. So there is a strong sense of heritage in buildings...a sense of connection that that gives you is really important. That whole ethos that is part of heritage that is passed down. What is the right value and attitude that you should bring to these sorts of areas, and the toughness and the resilience, and the sense of being able to overcome the odds and doing an honest day’s work. All of those sorts of heritage values that come through, that are passed down through the family or through the area. Out here for example, there’s a real heritage in this area of neighbour helping neighbour. And that still exists today in this area.47

In the wheatlands, the investment of labour and materials is highly valued. Indeed, construction and maintenance of sound buildings and fences, weed-free paddocks and healthy stock translate as evidence of a healthy emotional investment in the land. Even disused town buildings are dismantled and relocated to the farm, materials and history recycled. Robin Sanderson, a second generation wheat farmer of the central Lachlan, values the old and abandoned on his farm. He likes to examine the different periods of development in buildings and machines, offering a chronological record of skills and workmanship. Ivor Sanderson, Robin’s father, was a veteran of the Second World War, moving here from the older-established wheatlands in Victoria. His selection was newly-subdivided land on the notorious ‘back-blocks’ of the Lachlan. According to Robin,

Dad’s people offered him their sympathy when they found he’d bought a place out on the Palisthan Road. The Palisthan Road! It was a goat track!48

47 Anne Coffey in interview with Anne Coffey and Robin Sanderson, 4 March 2001.
48 Robin Sanderson in interview with Anne Coffey and Robin Sanderson, 4 March 2001.
For much of the twentieth century, the Western Division represented the inland limits of wheat-growing. Mallee farming, in particular, is associated in the public imagination with social isolation and economic marginality. In part, this lingering stigma is a legacy of the failure of government-sponsored closer settlement schemes, beginning in the early 1900s and culminating in the abandonment of drought- and depression-scoured farmland in the 1930s and 1940s. The continuing westward expansion of agriculture, particularly during the post-war years, served to reinforce local perceptions that even land previously considered too dry for agriculture could be brought into productive use where groundwater was available.49

Ivor missed out on the ballot for a land grant under the Commonwealth-funded soldier settlement scheme, so he and his wife Joyce leased then bought an ‘unimproved’ block in mallee and pine country on the north side of the Lachlan River. It had earlier been declared unsuitable for cultivation, but Ivor drew from his experiences of wheat farming in the mallee country of north-western Victoria, and set about pushing down trees using a forked stick attached to the front of his tractor. He was to be one the first settlers to grow wheat in this western edge of the wheatlands. As Anne contributes to the telling of her father-in-law’s story, she reflects on the ways in which individual family histories feed into a larger narrative that underpins their existence.

[Ivor’s] story is only one story of many. But that story mirrors the whole settling of Australia, if you like, and the opening up of Australia...that farmers and settlers went out into this untamed wilderness and carved out their areas, they made it produce.50

Perceptions of life in a marginal agricultural landscape have as much to do with social and cultural viability as environmental and economic realities. Martin and Judy Doyle represent one branch of the Doyle family who were early settlers in the central Lachlan. They grow wheat and sheep on a property near the invisible line that

49 On the lower Lachlan below Lake Cargelligo, in the drier Western Division, farmers now grow drought-resistant wheat varieties. They have also followed the trend elsewhere in the Murray-Darling Basin by drawing on underground aquifers to establish intensive irrigation farms, growing everything from potatoes to grapes.

50 Anne Coffey in interview with Anne Coffey and Robin Sanderson, 4 March 2001.
separates the Central and Western Divisions, north west of Condobolin. Martin confides that the previous owner warned him the land here was just ‘miserable’, and predicted that he would never farm this country because it was simply too remote from markets and too poor for cultivation.

That’s what has been thrown at us all along, that’s been the negative all along. It’s marginal country. They even describe the soil as desert sands, desert loams, which it’s not. To my way of thinking a desert is something that doesn’t produce. This certainly produces, it’s not desert country. I mean, desert country is further out. I think it’s come from way back, from the turn of the century I’d say. When they did it tough.

Even now, with 5,000 acres of wheat grown in a rotating paddock system, Martin still hears remarks about how he must be doing it tough. He sees the size of his 30,000 acre farm, as the basis for being able to adopt a sustainable way of using the land for growing wheat. Those to the south on small acreages and more reliable rainfall have to ‘flog the land’ to make a living. His brother Steve, who farms on the south side of the river, agrees. What constitutes productive land has changed in his lifetime. Whereas 3,000 acres used to be regarded as an ideal farm size, the increasing pressure for higher productivity now means that 3,000 acres is considered to be a ‘starvation block’. For Martin’s wife Judy, the word marginal has bad connotations associated with desert and sand. ‘You can’t lump a whole heap of opinions and rules that covers everybody. They are getting a little bit away from that, but they still call it all marginal’. Judy contends that the family’s farming efforts have proved otherwise. She would like it remembered by future generations as both ‘natural country and productive’.

The idea of being located at the edge or fringe of civilisation first came into general use in the early twentieth century, just as the major projects of inland exploration were coming to an end. The central Lachlan straddled the margins of the ‘settled’ country, with closer settlement schemes claiming the east and south of the river valley, and large scale grazing enterprises increasingly relegated to the ‘back’

51 New South Wales was divided into three land divisions, Eastern, Central and Western.
blocks in the drier plains to the north and west. Near the village of Merriwagga, south of the Lachlan near Hillston, lies a roadside stop suggesting that the legendary ‘black stump’ story had its origins here. In Australian folklore and Australian English vocabulary, the black stump represents the point at which the known or civilised country gives way to the remote outback. In 1915, the Condobolin District Advance Association staked its claim in a publication called *Condobolin and district: the centre of NSW – 1915* (part of a series ‘Australia as it really is’). Meanwhile, to the north, Tottenham erected signs announcing to visitors by road that it lay at the true geographical centre of the State. Geographical identity invokes strong passions in the wheatlands of New South Wales. When Sarah Musgrave reflected on the idea of the New South Wales ‘outback’ in her memoirs, first published in 1926, she described it as starting at the edge of Sydney in the mid-nineteenth century. In her older years, she lamented that the idea of the outback had gradually receded inland ‘before the march of surveyors, squatters, and teamsters’. With colonisation, she observed, this unknown and mysterious place had been all but lost ‘out beyond the Sun. Now it has gone forever, and the West is no longer a secret bush to man’.

Doug Hope, a central Lachlan farmer, muses on the idea of the ‘outback’.

Oh, where’s the outback? When you hit the West Australian sea, isn’t it? You never get to the outback, it’s always further out.

Phil Wheatley agrees that the outback is more imaginary than real, defined by culture rather than geography. It is where farming families build on one another’s strengths. As you go east, he explains, people become more independent because they enjoy greater affluence and need each other less. His apprehension of this country implicitly reverses the steady inland gaze of historical discourses about the outback. From Phil’s ‘fringe’ country perspective, the wetter, mountainous, urbanised east

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52 Judy Doyle in interview with Martin and Judy Doyle, 7 May 2001.
constitutes a zone of social alienation and despair, whilst the inland draws people together.56 Megan Poore noticed a similar animosity towards all things eastward amongst the people of Ceduna in the South Australian wheatlands. ‘East’ represented the city, government, regulation and selfish societies, whilst ‘west’ symbolised the ‘bush’, community, nature and selflessness.57

Ted Tomlinson, whose farm is nestled amongst the ephemeral creeks of the Lachlan floodplain, is more prosaic about this marginal wheat country. The district is a ‘pretty civilised’ place at the edge of the outback. For him, the outback starts where land can’t be made to produce crops. Take a tractor and a seeder and just keep trying and when it won’t grow any more, that’s when you’re on the edge.58 Meanwhile, east of the ‘black stump’, the residents of Condobolin and Tottenham townships continue their neighbourly argument about the precise location of the state’s geographical centre. In the late 1990s, the Lachlan Shire Council suggested a more strategic approach, announcing that the whole Shire, including both townships, constituted the ‘heart’ of New South Wales.59 It seems that being at the centre of the State holds more appeal than being on the edge of the outback.

These fragments of different families’ lives serve to locate and expose the range of emotional nuances that exist between settler farmers and the rural landscape in the wheatlands. Given the centrality of family farming here since at least the 1920s, these ‘mapped’ landscapes have also become a major sphere of converging agricultural and environmental discourses. The intertwining of land as resource, and land as intimate place of belonging and cultural entitlement, is manifest in the wheatlands. Phil MacNaghten and John Urry allude to this relationship in their discussion of spatial practices in the English countryside. ‘To dwell on a farm is to participate in a pattern of life where productive and unproductive activities resonate with each other and with very particular tracts of land whose history and geography will often be known in

55 Interview with Doug And Alison Hope, 19 June 2002.
56 Yaddra focus group, 22 June 2002.
58 Interview with Ted Tomlinson, 30 May 2002.
59 Mount Tilga north of Condobolin is claimed to be the true geographical centre by the regional tourism authority (www.heartofnsw.com.au).
intimate detail’. In essence, the family farm is both a place of work and a place where people dwell. It involves an intimate engagement with the physical environment on a daily basis and, as such, offers a compelling picture of the cultural assumptions of agrarianism and constructions of ‘nature’ in the wheatlands. Nature is not a place to visit, it is home.

‘An archaeology of remembering’
Nevertheless, it is a home in which settler entitlement and belonging is threaded through with ambivalence. Tom Edols has lived on the land east of Forbes all his life. Now in his mid-70s, Tom lives in the house his mother built in 1949, on land that once formed part of the huge Waroo run east of Forbes. By Lachlan standards, Tom’s lineage is impressive. He is the great-grandson of Thomas Edols, a widely respected pastoralist in his day. Already in his 60s when he acquired Burrawong in about 1873, Edols made an indelible mark on this landscape. Commonly referred to as ‘Big Burrawong’, it is widely regarded as one of the most significant stations in the history of pastoralism in the central Lachlan. When Edols acquired the leasehold, Burrawong embraced a vast area of ‘unimproved’ land, from Trundle to Budgereebong on the Lachlan River, east to Gunning Gap and Gunningbland Station. Edols transformed this fertile river country, employing gangs of Chinese workers to clear the land of forest and ‘scrub’, constructing 100 miles of drains to convert the swampy land on the floodplains to pasture, and scooping 150 tanks to supply water. One of his tanks later became the water supply for the town of Trundle. He built a dam to contain the waters of an ephemeral lagoon created by floodwaters from Gunningbland Creek, and the lagoon became the heart of several generations of the Edols family homes, including the old Burrawong homestead itself. The station was renowned for its beautiful orchard and wine-grapes, and was the first property to use the Lachlan for

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60 Phil MacNaghten and John Urry, *Contested Natures* (Sage Publications, London, 1998), 200. See my discussion in Chapter 1 for comments on the origin and use of the term ‘landscape’.


62 The original Waroo run comprised 70,000 acres, and was divided into portions after his father’s death. He occupied 22,000 acres, but by the end of the century it was reduced to 2,500 acres. It is now the only land in the Waroo area occupied by descendants of the original settlers.

63 Edwin J. Brady included the Edols’ dynasty in his survey of the pastoral industry in *Australia Unlimited* (G. Robertson, Melbourne, 1918). The property is also referred to as Burrawang in historical sources.
irrigating paddocks. Edols built a small village on the property, including a store, office, cart-shed, blacksmith, carpenter’s shop, butcher’s shop and stables, arranged around a square with a big gum tree at its centre and a bell ringing out the working hours for the property’s labourers. But Edol’s main reputation came from the Burrawong woolshed he built in 1875, the largest in the State with 101 shearing stands at its peak in the 1890s. The building alone covered half an acre. By then the leasehold area occupied some 520,000 acres, and boasted a 40-mile frontage to the Lachlan River.\textsuperscript{64} The property passed to Edol’s sons, Frank and Hedley, who divided the property between them. When Frank’s wife recorded her memories of Burrawong Station in 1957 she recalled how, after Hedley’s death, it passed into ‘strange hands….and now no one of the name of Edols lives on that land, and so the old order changest giving place to new. That big estate with its enterprising founder has become but a fading memory.’\textsuperscript{65}

Across the river, Tom Edols ponders his place in this landscape. He was born nearby, in the original Waroo homestead on the Lachlan River, and grew up with the idea that belonging to the land was a very strong part of the farming psyche.\textsuperscript{66} He recalls his mother explaining how wrenching it was for his father to leave Burrawong and how, when he was young, people whose families had been employed there told him that his parents cried when the property was split up.

They talk about native title and the association of Indigenous people with the land. You never hear the association, in the spiritual sense, which exists in the white population to just as great a degree. Very strong bonds.\textsuperscript{67}

But the association is not as close now, he says. It just doesn’t seem to be the thing to do these days, but in his day the land was his horizon. ‘You never ventured far away

\textsuperscript{64} The earliest official record of Burrawong dates from 1844 when the Commissioner of Crown Lands granted a squatting lease beyond the ‘Limits of Location’ to Thomas Kite. A.M. O’Connor, \textit{Where Whirlwinds Rise Tall} (April 1983). A history of Burrawong featured in the \textit{Stockman’s Hall of Fame Newsletter}, December 1990, 12.

\textsuperscript{65} L.F. Edols, ‘A history of Burrawong Station, composed by Mrs L.F. Edols from her memories, and recorded in her 94th year, at her residence, Athol Place, Canterbury, E7, Victoria, Australia’, 14 March 1957. Unpublished notes courtesy of Tom Edols.

\textsuperscript{66} Waroo was one of the original nineteenth century pastoral runs in the Forbes district.

\textsuperscript{67} Interview with Tom Edols, 2 August 2005.
from home’. He remembers going rabbiting as a child, and helping out with the livestock. Caring for livestock since childhood has given him a deep affinity with the animals he farms. The inland expansion of wheat farms through this area traced along the railway corridors, and his neighbours were the first in this flood-prone part of the valley to grow wheat commercially.\(^{68}\) But Tom kept to grazing stock. His earliest memories of the area, in the 1940s and 1950s, embrace the flourishing of the soldier settlement scheme on irrigation blocks at Jemalong. Until recently, his own water supply came from the Jemalong scheme, but a change in government policy meant that he was no longer entitled to river water. Few of the soldier settlers who came to the area at that time remained on the irrigation blocks. Tom attributes their transience to rising land prices, and perhaps to a lack of attachment to this landscape.

Certainly, the people who grew up on land always expected to die on it. But the people who were introduced didn’t have that concept.

Even so, Tom speculates that the emphasis of life in the wheatlands has now shifted from land to people. With greater geographical mobility, land no longer seems to have the ‘status of being sacrosanct’, of belonging to people. Indeed, as he has grown older, his own attachment to this landscape has diminished. Emotionally, he feels closer to the cattle he now grows on his property, than to the land itself.

When I was younger, it wasn’t uncommon to hear the phrase ‘you should live as though you will die tomorrow, and farm as though you will live forever’. People based their lives…on that concept, but less and less now.\(^{69}\)

Tom is one of the few farmers in the area to have sold most of his inherited land and still remain living there. What Tom inherited, along with a portion of land, was a great sense of responsibility to manage it according to family traditions. This responsibility to forebears characterises family farming in the wheatlands but, according to Tom, it has come at great cost to the land itself and often actively inhibits good husbandry.

\(^{68}\) His neighbours, the Ridleys, had migrated from the Victorian wheatlands bringing the experience of wheat-farming with them.

\(^{69}\) Interview with Tom Edols, 2 August 2005.
Later, as we drive across Tom’s land, he takes me to a tree where his mother used to come for solace when she was feeling sad. When she died, Tom spread her ashes around its base. It is an unremarkable specimen, a box tree in a forest of box trees. Tom describes how his mother used to hug that tree and talk with it. There are plenty of better trees over in the ‘scrub paddock’, but this was the one that became special. For his part, he can no longer remember the spots he used to like spending time when he was younger. Paradoxically, belonging has become a ‘transitory thing’ for this fourth generation descendant of a Lachlan pioneer. After some decent winter rains, Tom’s landscape is a mosaic of greens. He shows me where dark traces of the original woodlands still line roadways along the edges of paddocks. His mother’s tree stands below a big sand hill in remnant woodland full of saplings that have written their own history of the 1990 flood on this landscape. Tom can remember coming home to see the landscape under water. It was the big flood in 1952, and the area had become a sea. ‘You could go for miles here, and never get out of water.’ During the 1990 flood, the farm was marooned for seven months. Now, after prolonged drought and some recent rains, rabbits have returned to the warrens on the sand hill.

Tom knows his trees by sight, and can read how the different species map the land and indicate the patterns of water and soil. We stop to examine some of the established pasture where lucerne blends through barley grass. Below the levee banks that Tom built, the well-drained red loam paddocks are good lucerne country. Elsewhere, the heavy clay soils in these floodplains can yield the best wheat crops, able to draw on moisture captured in the ground, although he prefers cattle to wheat. He points out some new growth in trees recovering from die-back, and then comments on how Major Mitchell cockatoos have starting appearing here in recent years. The idea of reading the land captures Tom’s imagination. As we motor through the paddocks, he recalls how different things were when they used to ride everywhere by

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70 The woodlands here comprise species of box (especially *Eucalyptus melliodora*), belah (*Casuarina cristata*) and Cypress-pine (*Callitris* species).

71 Die-back indicates a decline in tree health, usually related to changes in the surrounding environment. The Major Mitchell or Pink Cockatoo (*Cacatua leadbeateri*) is normally found west of Condobolin, although it is nomadic within 250-400 mm rainfall areas of southern Australia. See Leon Costermans, *Native Trees and Shrubs of South-Eastern Australia* (Rigby Publishers Limited, Adelaide, 1981), 142, 148 and 369. Peter, Pat and Raoul Slater, *The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds* (Lansdowne Publishing Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1986), 160.
horseback. On the back of a horse, you could be more observant of changes in the landscape.

Another one of those old sayings was that the best fertilizer you can have on any land is the footsteps of the owner. If you walked through the land, you wouldn’t neglect it.\textsuperscript{72}

The new language of industrialised agriculture reflects some of the tensions that pervade the wheatlands.\textsuperscript{73} In places such as the central Lachlan, local vernacular sits uncomfortably with the new lexicon of natural resource management. Farming has become sustainable development. The Lachlan is not just a river, but a hydrological system. The sparsely populated arid country to the west is part of the vast ‘rangelands’. What used to be called the balance of nature is now discussed in public forums as biological diversity. The ‘bush’ or ‘scrub’ has been rebadged as native vegetation, and concepts of stewardship and ‘duty of care’ replace the old adage of improving the land for future generations. This new lexicon of land management belies the cultural power and historical sensibilities of family farming in the wheatlands.

From the sand hill we survey a paddock newly sown with lucerne. For the past few years, the ground has been brown. The worst drought in living memory, everyone agrees. Almost overnight, it has transformed into a green that almost hurts the eyes. Such is the redemptive power of water in these inland plains. The lucerne stayed green right through the drought, Tom remarks. It pushes its roots down 30 or 40 feet into the sandy soil. We drive back to the homestead and its precious bore, past dry irrigation ditches and levee banks, pasture and woodland. This place is somewhere between land and river, past and present, settled and unsettled country. In the central western plains of New South Wales, the transformation from pastoral landscape to wheatlands has produced a coalescence of diverse images: an economic resource, a social space, a technological miracle, an ecological system, a place of history and

\textsuperscript{72} Interview with Tom Edols, 2 August 2005.

memory. Studies of farmer attitudes to land degradation tend to portray farmers as a group doggedly pursuing profitable returns, stirred to action on land degradation issues only when confronted with compelling signs of salinity or erosion that may affect their productivity.74 However, when farmers in the central Lachlan reflect on their lives in this landscape, their stories move restlessly back and forth across shifting economic fortunes, declining communities, the subtleties of environmental change, the highs and lows of farming as a way of life.

74 See, for example, Frank Vanclay and Alan Hely, Land Degradation and Land Management in Central New South Wales: Changes in Farmers' Perceptions, Knowledge and Practices. Report to NSW Department of Agriculture and Department of Land and Water Conservation (Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University, 1997).
PLACE - HOME COUNTRY
PART 6 — PLACE


THE DETRITUS OF RURAL CHANGE IS EVERYWHERE. I AM AMUSED BY THE IDEA OF MUD-MAPS TO NAVIGATE THROUGH THIS COUNTRY. IT HASN'T SEEN MUD FOR A COUPLE OF YEARS OR MORE, BUT MUD-MAPS ARE STILL PART OF THE LOCAL LINGO. THEY ARE STORIES IN THEMSELVES, THESE MAPS. THEY ARE ALL ABOUT JOURNEYS, AND LANDMARKS, AND THE FEAR OF GETTING
LOST. I SPECULATE THAT THEY MIGHT BE PRESERVED ONE DAY AS A KIND OF ANCIENT TEXT FOR THE INNER LANDSCAPES OF THE INLAND.
Chapter 11. Mythologising the wheatlands

That is the true test of a vital culture – to be able to sift through earlier achievements and rediscover new ways of seeing it, or us, or the world we live in, this ‘place’ that we all take as a map for our journeys.¹

In the mid-1990s, the New South Wales Department of Agriculture created a Certificate in Landcare course, featuring a unit on ‘Conserving our farming history’. The Department aimed to give land holders the knowledge and skills to ‘preserve and maintain items of heritage significance’ on their properties, so that future generations could learn ‘how things were, how people felt about things and what they valued’. One of the enticements to farmers to undertake this voluntary exercise was the promise that preserving the past would have economic benefits. ‘Rural heritage has become a tourist industry’.² In agricultural and pastoral regions, tourism was increasingly touted as the rationale for conserving the material remains of the past. According to the Australian Government’s State of the Environment Report published in 1996, heritage places could be treated like any other resource. Indeed, if used sustainably, they had the potential to yield financial rewards to their owners.³ Redundant buildings and machinery of the past had the potential to provide better returns than future crop yields.

Western notions of heritage as a cultural and economic resource derive from several intersecting modes of perception about the past and its uses and relevance in the present. New nation states emerging in Europe during the nineteenth century, for example, had sought to achieve a sense of legitimacy through the veneration of ancient sites, serving to inspire a sense of national unity and shared identity. During

the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the concept of heritage began to take divergent paths reflecting the duality of Western discourses about nature and culture. On the one hand, heritage was embraced by the national parks and nature conservation movements, drawing on cultural conceptions of ‘wilderness’ or natural landscapes untrammelled by human agency. In Australia, the idea that areas of natural beauty constituted the nation’s heritage gained currency from the late nineteenth century. On the other hand, the term heritage was also literally concerned with the inheritance of ancestral possessions and values, and the process of bequeathing them to the next generation.

With the rise of an international heritage movement after World War II, the heritage concept began to acquire a whole ‘new cluster of meanings’ and applications. It was an appealing concept in settler societies such as Australia where there was a strong imperative to establish a sense of history and belonging in a vast and recently colonised landscape. Indeed, the Australian heritage movement evolved at a time when Australians were engaging in sensitive and highly emotional debates about national identity. But while settler Australians looked to the past to legitimise the changes being wrought to land and people, Indigenous Australians began to utilise Western notions of heritage to expose and contest the silences and inherent racism of those histories. In May 1983, the Australian Academy of the Humanities sponsored a symposium posing the question: ‘who owns the past?’ The Symposium was held in the wake of a controversial and protracted public campaign to stop the damming of the Franklin and Gordon Rivers in Tasmania. It was also one month after new national legislation was passed to protect properties listed on the World Heritage List prepared by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

3 Commonwealth of Australia, State of the Environment 1996, 9-34. Members of the Reference Group responsible for the Natural and Cultural Heritage component were Rosemary Purdie, Jane Gilmour, Kieran Hotchin, Alex Marsden, Isabel McBrady and Ian Robertson.


(UNESCO). In this climate of heightened environmental awareness, the Symposium canvassed the issue of how perceptions of the past were manipulated to suit the political or nationalistic goals of the present. UNESCO had drawn up its new Convention on heritage in the 1960s, defining ‘cultural property’ as ‘the product and witness of the different traditions and of the spiritual achievements of the past’.7 A national government’s duty, it stated, was to protect and preserve these traditions and spiritual achievements as much as to promote social and economic development. UNESCO’s actions had significant international ramifications. They signalled that heritage could embrace both the physical remnants of the past and the cultural values they embodied.8 By the 1980s, the heritage discourse in Australia had shifted to the role of the state in defining a national vision of Australia’s past. ‘The past’, Isabel McBryde reminded the audience in her introduction to the Symposium, ‘is the possession of those in power; the past belongs to the victor’. Those who defined the nation’s heritage were the ‘gate-keepers of history’.9

The things we want to keep

When Whitlam’s Labor government made the first moves towards defining Australia’s heritage in legislative form in the 1970s, it did so at a time when the public mood was ripe for a nationalistic agenda. Whitlam’s ‘new nationalism’ held strong appeal for those who embraced the messages of the conservation movement emerging in Western nations during the 1960s. This rising nationalism involved wrestling control of Australia’s economic resources from foreign interests, rescuing its cities from the excesses of urban renewal, and appreciating its unique natural and

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8 Davison, The Use and Abuse Of Australian History, 113.

cultural assets.¹⁰ The political expression of this new nationalism took different forms. One of the most important in terms of national identity was the decision to establish a Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate in 1974.¹¹ The Commission, under the chairmanship of Mr Justice Hope, was charged with the task of examining and making recommendations on the nature and protection of Australia’s cultural and natural resources. Tracey Ireland argues that the inquiry was effectively charged with a mission to take Australia’s history of cultural division and conflict, and transform it into a vision of a unified past that was to be heralded as a national asset — the ‘national estate’. ‘In this way’, suggests Ireland, ‘an inclusive but comfortable definition of the national estate could be promoted.’¹² The resulting ‘Hope Report’, provided the blueprint for the Australian Government’s first national heritage legislation, the Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975. It was here that the distinctions between cultural and natural heritage, and between the histories of Indigenous and settler Australians, took shape. The Hope Report focused on the idea of heritage embodied in ‘place’. It considered how the heritage of the past was to be found in particular kinds of places, and how these places might be grouped into a suite of categories (natural, built, cultural property, and ‘special’ places valued as sites of research and education).

This compartmentalisation of the past into categories reflected the preference in Western societies to examine the world by breaking complex subjects down into smaller parts, so that ‘each can be thoroughly understood and separately manipulated’.¹³ It also provided the national and various state governments with a legislative solution to the problem of accommodating different and potentially divisive versions of the past within the concept of national heritage. First, it enabled

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¹¹ Commonwealth of Australia, Report of the National Estate: Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1974). Also known as the ‘Hope Inquiry’, the Commission was required to define the National Estate, survey the extent and condition of the national heritage, and identify methods to conserve and present it. It laid the groundwork for the Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975.

¹² Ireland, ‘Excavating national identity’, 96.

natural, Indigenous and settler (or 'non-Indigenous') histories to be separated into
different strands or 'environments'. Second, it ensured that the history of European
colonisation and settlement could remain intact without having to necessarily
reconcile it with the contested histories and experiences of Indigenous people.
Without the institutionalised power of such mythologies, observes Simon Schama,
national identity would lose much of its 'ferocious enchantment' .

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Third, it offered a

methodology for breaking down the complexities of culture and nature into discrete
types of places that could be measured and compared against a common set of
criteria.
The national heritage legislation described the national estate as 'those places,
being components of the natural environment of Australia or the cultural environment
of Australia, that have aesthetic, historic, scientific or social significance or other
special value for future generations as well as the present community' .

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Whilst the

Australian Constitution accorded jurisdiction of land management matters to state
governments, the Act was intended to be a 'moral constraint and educative influence'
on state and local governments, and on owners of places deemed to be part of the
national estate. 16 Some state governments followed suit, adopting variations on the
national heritage legisla~ion model in Victoria (Historic Buildings Act 1974), New
South Wales (New South Wales Heritage Act 1977) and South Australia (South

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Over the next decade, the protection and management of heritage places evolved
into a plethora of legal and administrative controls at national and state levels, with
varying degrees of relevance, effectiveness and complexity. The Australian Heritage

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Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory (Knopf, New York, 1995), 15.

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The Register of the National Estate is accessible in http://www.ahc.gov.au/register/. Its
compilation was the core task of the Australian Heritage Commission between 1976 and new
national heritage legislation passed in 2003, by which time it contained some 13,000 places.

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Sheryl Yelland, 'Heritage legislation in perspective', in Graeme Davison and Chris McConville

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The other states and territories were slower to act but state heritage legislation existed across
Australia, in different forms, by the 1990s. See the 1996 State of the Environment Report for an
overview of heritage legislation in the 1990s. The effectiveness of the national legislation was the
subject of considerable debate, particularly in the climate of a review of the national heritage
system in the late 1990s.

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Commission Act 1975 and the specific heritage and National Trust legislation in each state represented a type of regulatory listing process that served to publicly flag significant heritage places. Other types of legislation included land management Acts that provided legal protection for heritage-designated sites in national parks, forests and private properties, Aboriginal and historic site protection Acts (sometimes including the natural environment as part of their heritage significance), and planning legislation.\(^\text{18}\)

The history of rural Australia assumed a special place in these conceptions of Australia’s national identity. The Hope Inquiry ultimately settled on a range of themes centred on the formative roles of convicts and settlers, the expansion of rural settlement, and the pioneering efforts of those who had helped to build the nation.\(^\text{19}\) This early vision of the nation’s heritage was essentially located in the rural landscape, where the legends of European colonisation flourished, and the valued attributes of the Australian character were deemed to have been forged. This vision contained the essential ingredients of national identity that would underpin the concept of a national cultural heritage: the flourishing of an egalitarian, masculine ‘bush’ ethic in the face of isolation, the desire to introduce order and hope into a harsh environment, the creation of the ‘settler’ who continued the heroic struggle with a particular brand of stoicism and pragmatism so cherished in Australian rural imagery. The nationalistic mythology, as critics have subsequently argued, was steeped in masculine, non-Indigenous imagery, rendering women, Indigenous and ethnic groups as shadowy figures in the landscape.\(^\text{20}\) The mythology’s influence on constructions of Australia’s rural heritage was profound.

Australia’s post-war heritage movement was preoccupied with identifying and conserving significant places and material remains of the past before they disappeared. In Australia, as in other Western countries, the idea of heritage became a

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\(^{18}\) The most relevant at the national level was the Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975 and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Heritage Protection Act 1984. An overview of this legislative framework is given in Michael Pearson and Sharon Sullivan, Looking after heritage places: The basics of heritage planning for managers, landowners and administrators (Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Victoria, 1995), 34-48.

\(^{19}\) Ireland, ‘Excavating national identity’, 88.

\(^{20}\) Kay Schaffer, Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition
very public matter as local communities began to mount their opposition to urban renewal programs. Public protests were mounted as city landmarks were demolished, sometimes overnight, with little fanfare. When residents of the Rocks area in Sydney became aware of a proposal to demolish blocks of old workers’ housing, they mounted a spirited defence in a successful campaign that saw an unlikely alliance of women from one of Sydney’s most exclusive suburbs and members of the Builders Labourers Federation. It signified a new era of heritage activism, and provided an inspiration for other local communities seeking to defend their streets and landscapes from rampant redevelopment.21

The Australian government had embraced the concept of a national estate of heritage places, embodied in the phrase ‘the things we want to keep’.22 Whilst there was some ambiguity in the phrase, it was clearly open to interpretation as meaning both the physical remnants of the past and the ideals or values that they embodied. The development of heritage concepts and management practices were strongly influenced by members of the Australian chapter of the UNESCO International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), many of whom were actively involved with the international ICOMOS body. In 1979, members of Australia ICOMOS formulated the influential The Australia ICOMOS Charter for the conservation of places of cultural significance (known as the ‘Burra Charter’ after its birthplace at Burra Burra, South Australia).23

The Burra Charter drew on the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (Venice 1966), and the Resolutions of the 5th General Assembly of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) (Moscow 1978). According to Article 1 of the Venice Charter, ‘[t]he concept of an historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilisation, a significant development or an historic event. This applies not only to great works of art but also


21 See, for example, Kylie Tennant, The Battlers (Angus and Robertson, London, 1983).


23 It was subsequently revised in 1981, 1988, and 1999.
to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time.\textsuperscript{24}

From 1976, the concept of a national estate took shape with the wholesale transfer of places already identified by the National Trust of Australia into the new Register of the National Estate.\textsuperscript{25} The early Register of the National Estate was dominated by entries of prominent public buildings, homes of wealthy citizens, and historic ruins. Places selected for statutory listing and conservation as the embodiment of Australia’s national estate were afforded public recognition, if not statutory protection. According to the \textit{Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975}, Australia’s national estate was unambiguously located in ‘place’. The spiritual ideals that had been implicit in the concept of heritage were, temporarily at least, swept aside in the enthusiasm for preserving threatened places.\textsuperscript{26} Subsequent attempts to clarify the legislation defined the ‘things' to be conserved as places that best represented or demonstrated particular values. Meanwhile, movable objects or artefacts were relegated to separate legislation, to be administered by the museums sector.\textsuperscript{27} These early statutory arrangements were to define national heritage policy and practice in Australia for the next 28 years.\textsuperscript{28}

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s government heritage agencies were preoccupied with fulfilling statutory obligations — commissioning studies to identify the national estate, and developing and refining the criteria and procedures for assessing heritage

\textsuperscript{24} See http://www.international.icomos.org/e_venice.htm#preamble.

\textsuperscript{25} The first National Trust organisation in Australia was formed in New South Wales in 1947, followed by South Australia (1955), Victoria (1956), Western Australia (1959), Tasmania (1960) and Queensland (1963).

\textsuperscript{26} Davison, \textit{The Use and Abuse Of Australian History}, 119.


\textsuperscript{28} New national heritage legislation was introduced in an amendment to the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act in 2003. It replaced the \textit{Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975}, and limited the Australian Government’s heritage responsibilities to identifying and conserving places of Commonwealth and national heritage significance.
values. Each place was assessed by evaluating its attributes against a standard set of criteria. Heritage places were classified as possessing natural, Indigenous, or historic (meaning settler) heritage values, and assigned to assessors deemed to have relevant expertise. Heritage legislation enshrined these separate categories at both Commonwealth and state level. Heritage studies were also conducted along separate disciplinary lines and, until the 1990s at least, cross-disciplinary programs were a rarity. The assessment framework was designed to impose a degree of scientific objectivity into a process that was infused with the subjective task of dealing with the nebulous concept of ‘heritage value’. The legislative imperative, however, was to develop a Register that had ‘psychological resonance’ for Australians.

Whilst the methods of identifying and conserving heritage values preoccupied heritage bureaucracies it was the physical place, rather than its abstract values, that came to represent the idea of heritage amongst the wider community. This approach to the nation’s heritage, whilst providing a practical mechanism for meeting statutory requirements, also created significant conceptual problems. It assumed that heritage values were stable and conservable. The emphasis on listing and conserving places

29 Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths (eds), Words for Country: Landscape And Language In Australia (University of New South Wales Press Ltd, Sydney, 2002), 9.

30 The national heritage statutory powers were spread across the Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975 (natural and cultural heritage places in the Register of the National Estate), the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984 and related bills (Indigenous heritage sites), and the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 and related bills (World Heritage properties, Ramsar wetlands, listed threatened species and communities, listed migratory species, Commonwealth marine areas and protection of environment from nuclear matters).

31 During the 1990s, the Australian Heritage Commission engaged in several integrative, cross-disciplinary heritage conservation programs, including the Regional Forests Agreement process, and regional heritage studies in the Murray Mallee of Victoria and South Australia, and the Paroo River region of southern Queensland and northern New South Wales. However, these programs continued to be plagued by the separation of natural, Indigenous and historic heritage values in assessment procedures and in the jurisdictions responsible for managing them.

32 The National Estate values were defined in the Australian Heritage Commission Act as ‘aesthetic, historic, scientific, or social significance or other special value’ for present and future generations, including significant elements of the natural and cultural environment. The cultural environment was intended to include places of significance to all cultural groups, including Indigenous people and migrants.

33 Davison, The Use and Abuse Of Australian History, 115.

34 Griffiths, Hunters and Collectors, 243.
had generated a belief that the past could somehow be 'frozen' in time, that heritage was simply a window into the past rather than an expression of a society's dominant values undergoing constant challenge and revision. Ultimately, heritage bureaucracies were constrained by the need to work within a statutory and administrative framework, focusing on the specialised tasks of listing and protecting places but having little opportunity or incentive for re-evaluating rural history, much less participating in debates about environmental and social change.

The national model for heritage conservation was especially problematic in working agricultural landscapes like the wheatlands, where settler, Indigenous, and natural values coalesced in complex ways. The problem arose in part because of limited resources available for primary research in rural regions, and the fact that much heritage conservation work drew heavily on conventional regional and local histories. To some extent, it also reflected an antiquarian mindset amongst the predominantly urban-based heritage practitioners, for whom rural Australia was largely a repository of settler achievement, the site of Indigenous ‘pre-history’, a source of aesthetically-pleasing landscapes, or the source of ‘wilderness’.

**Heritage in the wheatlands**

In the public imagination, the cultural heritage of the wheatlands has been largely overshadowed by the history of pastoralism, epitomised in the imposing array of settler homesteads and woolsheds that remain from the pastoral dynasties of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the heritage of pastoralism acquired iconic status in the heritage movement during the 1980s and 1990s, perhaps because of its associations with the wealthy and powerful, and also because it imbued the colonised landscape with a sense of the permanency and legitimacy of European settlement. Meanwhile, the history of the wheatlands came to be signified by flour mills, distinctive concrete grain silos grouped around railway sidings, abandoned villages and cemeteries, and failed wheat-growing areas and pockets of land too steep or rocky for agriculture.

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35 See, for example, Peter Freeman, *The Woolshed: A Riverina Anthology* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1980).

36 Many of these were subsequently gazetted as nature reserves. The central western wheatlands of New South Wales, for example, feature a series of ‘island’ national parks or nature reserves, often highly visible for their elevation and tree cover within a predominantly flat and cleared agricultural landscape.
Even out in the paddocks where closer settlement had populated the rural landscape with farm buildings and structures during the early twentieth century, the tangible history of the wheatlands was curiously absent in official heritage listings.  

Paradoxically, much of the physical heritage of the wheatlands had been relocated into town. If those who defined the nation’s heritage were the ‘gate-keepers’ of Australia’s past, then local historical societies and museums assumed the role of its porters. Wheatlands museums were characterised by ubiquitous displays of agricultural equipment and the domestic minutiae of farming life. In countless small towns, the past was put on display as a historical project of nation-building, rich with the material culture of its industrious inhabitants. Here, the small-scale farmers were elevated into the nation-builders. As John Carroll noted in the early 1980s, popular rural history was still the history of pioneering, often reconstructed as pioneer settlements where primitive buildings and tangible representations of domestic life on small farms had replaced the story of the pioneer’s battle with the elements. It demonstrated a preoccupation with the movable artefacts of agricultural history, particularly the tools of working life.

The localisation and domestication of the past appears to have had several consequences in the wheatlands. The focus on local people, events and places suggests a potent sense of engagement with the vernacular, and perhaps even hints at a weakening enthusiasm for conserving and memorialising the iconic history of pastoralism. On the other hand, there is a cult of ‘fabricated remembrance’ where the history of conflict, contested meanings, and shifting interpretations of the past are

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37 See Appendix 3 for an overview of government heritage-listed places relating to the wheatlands in five local government areas in central western New South Wales. Emily Brissenden, who grew up on a central Lachlan farm near Forbes, suggests that social distinctions between pastoralism and wheat farming still prevail, and are reflected even now in the terms ‘property’ and ‘farm’ to describe landholdings. ‘Property’ implies wealth, access to the river system, social status, and a continuing association with pastoral dynasties through the raising of stock, especially stud stock. ‘Farm’ suggests a harsher existence, a focus on cropping, relative social isolation, and reliance on the family unit for survival when markets or rains fail. Emily Brissenden, pers. comm., 23 September 2005.

barely accommodated within the prevailing concept of heritage as a celebration of past achievements. The post-war heritage movement, after all, gained adherents precisely because it offered settler Australians a sense of groundedness and legitimacy in the midst of changing social and physical environments.\textsuperscript{39}

In local history museums in the central Lachlan, Indigenous dispossession is swiftly dealt with as the prelude to expansive stories of settler occupation. Collections of Aboriginal weapons, implements and photographs are often encased and contained in one area, representing the history of local Aboriginal people condensed into brief, touching tributes to colourful individuals, or encoded in perfunctory labels identifying the farmer on whose property the items were found.\textsuperscript{40} The history of the settler-Indigenous frontier is profoundly, if unwittingly, commemorated in such places.

In the Forbes Historical Museum, examples of Wiradjuri tree carvings lie amongst a jumble of settler history. Such trees, as we saw in Chapter 4, once marked the graves of respected clan members, carefully selected and inscribed with intricate designs. The carvings have been hacked away from dying trees and displayed here as specimens, categorised and labelled to indicate the settler farmers who ‘discovered’ them. Nevertheless, in the gloomy recesses of the museum building, they somehow manage to bestow a kind of quiet honour on an ancient Indigenous past. Nearby, an old fence post is propped incongruously between two cabinets. It bears the same delicate carvings, now skewered with wire holes. One of the few remaining stands of carved trees of the Lachlan region can still be found at Yuranigh’s grave, fenced off from grazing cattle on a property near Molong. The trees here seem to have acquired greater significance by virtue of Yuranigh’s role as the ‘guide and companion counselor[sic] and friend’ to Major Thomas Mitchell, the New South Wales Surveyor-

\textsuperscript{39} Ken Taylor, ‘Things we want to keep: Discovering Australia’s cultural heritage’, in David Headon, Joy Hooton and Donald Horne (eds), \textit{The Abundant Culture: Meaning And Significance In Everyday Australia} (Allen and Unwin Australia Pty Ltd, St Leonards, NSW, 1994), 26-33. Davison, \textit{The Use And Abuse of Australian History}, 116.

\textsuperscript{40} These observations were made during several visits in 2001-2003 to museums and ‘pioneer villages’ in the wheatlands of south-eastern Australia and Western Australia, including those at Forbes and Lake Cargelligo in the Lachlan Valley, Hopetoun, Swan Hill, and the Meringur Pioneer Village in the Victorian Mallee, and the Wyalkatchem CBH Agricultural Museum in Western Australia.
General. Yuranigh accompanied Mitchell on his fourth and final ‘expedition of discovery’ in 1846.41

The ‘gate-keepers of history’42

During the 1980s and 1990s, critics of the heritage movement increasingly questioned the limitations of institutionalised frameworks and methods. Whilst acknowledging the important role that heritage legislation had played in preventing the loss of vulnerable environments and significant historical features, they pointed to the increasingly dominant role of professionally-trained practitioners. This, they suggested, had led to a widening gap between professional judgements of what constituted Australia’s heritage, on the one hand, and the values, perceptions, and experiences of local communities on the other.

David Lowenthal, in his influential The Past is a Foreign Country, lamented the way in which the preservation movement had succeeded in distancing people from the past in its ‘rage to preserve’.43 Tom Griffiths highlighted this problem in a study of the rural town of Beechworth in north-eastern Victoria, where an urban-based heritage elite had imposed its own notions of heritage upon the rural inhabitants. City-dwellers, he remarked, were ‘ready to enter into debates about how the countryside looks, [but] there is less concern about disappearing lifestyles or about existing relationships or feelings in that town’.44 Statutory listing and conservation activities were not only alienating local people, he argued. They were effectively imposing a view of heritage that had little to do with the people for whom it held significance. Institutionalised heritage had objectified the past, creating a whole industry of professional practitioners and bureaucracies in the process.

41 From the epitaph on Yuranigh’s grave, near Molong.
Some observers argued for a broader, more anthropological, edge to heritage studies that would help to understand and interpret the cultural meanings and values that particular groups attributed to places. Graeme Davison, a professor of history and former Chairman of the Victorian Heritage Council, pointed out how the national heritage movement that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s virtually redefined the nineteenth century meaning of heritage. It had shifted from a private preoccupation with ancestral relationships and spiritual ideals, to ‘an essentially material concept’ concerned with preservation for the public good and the dissemination of shared political ideals. The national heritage movement, he suggested, needed to be more inspirational and concerned less with antiquarianism than with the cultural ideals and values that give places meaning. In 1991 John Mulvaney, the then Secretary of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, talked about the ‘heritage of inspiration’ in the alpine landscapes of Australia, and observed the distinction between natural and historical heritage in heritage management practices. ‘It is necessary to counter’, he said in his introduction to the symposium, ‘that cultural heritage encapsulates spiritual values which distinguish humanity from the natural world, despite the difficulty in providing them with legal or statutory definition’.

These criticisms came at a time when the Australian Heritage Commission and Australia ICOMOS were seeking to clarify the mystery of intangible social and spiritual values and develop appropriate methods for identifying places that might embody them. The resulting reports represented an attempt to acknowledge the

46 Graeme Davison, ‘The meanings of “heritage”’, 1, 7. Also see Griffiths, Hunters and Collectors, 195.
intangible meanings – the stories, the cultural practices, the religious and spiritual beliefs - invested in particular places by different groups. As early as the 1960s, UNESCO had introduced an anthropological interpretation of heritage to mean the traditions and spiritual achievements of the past, arguing that protecting such values was as much a duty of government as promoting economic and social development.49 In the following decades, Australian scholars and heritage practitioners began to play an increasingly influential role internationally, arguing that continuous cultural associations with land ought to be recognised as part of the heritage concept. Revisions made to the Burra Charter in 1999 reflected the view that heritage conservation principles also applied to social and spiritual associations, symbolic qualities and memories, and cultural responsibilities for a place.

These moves were in tune with wider concerns amongst industrialised settler societies about the perceived loss of Indigenous cultural associations with traditional lands as a result of rapid social and environmental changes. In 1992, for example, UNESCO endorsed a set of criteria for identifying and preserving significant ‘cultural’ landscapes to be inscribed onto the World Heritage List. The criteria specifically addressed associative cultural landscapes, recognising the powerful religious, artistic, spiritual and cultural meanings invested in ‘natural’ (as distinct from man-made) features by particular groups of people, even where no tangible evidence exists.50 As a conceptual tool, the concept of a cultural landscape was embraced with enthusiasm by heritage practitioners working in rural regions. It proved to be an enticing but elusive concept, and the subject of much debate as to its

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49 Davison and McConville, A heritage handbook, 2-3.
50 H. Cleere, ‘Cultural landscapes as world heritage’, Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites, 1, 1995, 63-8. The other categories addressed ‘clearly defined’ landscapes designed and created intentionally, and ‘organically evolved’ landscapes reflecting particular periods of human activity or processes of socio-economic change.
practical use in conserving significant landscapes. There is broad agreement, however, that the cultural landscape ultimately relates to the ‘interdependencies of humans and environment’. This definition suggests that a cultural landscape is less an artefact than a process, although its most common use has been to illustrate physical traces of settler history accumulated over time, or to describe Indigenous sacred geographies.

As we saw earlier, the rise of the international heritage movement in Western societies was a direct response to the social and environmental changes wrought by industrialisation in the mid-nineteenth century. The imperative to conserve social landmarks represented a form of social action in response to a threat, inherently political but also idealistic. According to Diane Barthel, early heritage conservationists fell into two main camps. On the one hand, there were those concerned with privileging the ideas and beliefs of elite or powerful groups and promoting them as the nation’s heritage, as occurred in the United Kingdom. On the other hand, there were those seeking to engage in a more didactic project of social change and address the human and environmental costs of industrialisation, as occurred to some extent in the United States. When Justice Hope began his inquiry into the concept of heritage in Australia in the early 1970s, he observed that the imperative for identifying a ‘national estate’ lay in the need to respond to a heightened ‘public interest in matters relating to the environment’. Australians needed to develop a ‘new respect and appreciation of the culture and way of life of Aboriginals’. Indeed, the ensuing legislative framework for conserving the nation’s heritage places

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51 See, for example, papers from the New South Wales conference on cultural landscapes, in Historic Environment, 13(3 and 4), 1997.


embraced the concept of social significance as a way of addressing the complex interplay between cultural values and particular places.\textsuperscript{55}

In 1996, the Australian government produced a State of the Environment report that included, for the first time, a chapter describing the nature and condition of the nation’s natural and cultural heritage. The report reflected many of the prevailing ideas about heritage conservation, seeking to present valued places as ‘central to the cultural identity of any nation and a source of spiritual well-being’.\textsuperscript{56} It gave official recognition to the fact that heritage values, represented in both tangible and intangible ways, constituted another dimension of the Australian ‘environment’. The legacies of Australia’s human history were no longer to be treated as separate from the tangible, observable environment. They were integral to it. Culture was indivisible from nature. Intangible values could not be treated as separate from the physical world.\textsuperscript{57} It was a significant shift in orientation at the national level. In effect, it constituted a restoration of the spiritual dimensions of the heritage idea. The report identified oral history as a critical tool for identifying the social and spiritual values of place, particularly in the case of Indigenous people whose folklore and traditions were generally not recorded in written form. As the authors of the report observed, the links between the physical landscape and its cultural meanings were poorly addressed in government heritage policies and practices.

A process for evaluating the social significance of places was first commissioned by the Australian Heritage Commission and developed by Chris Johnston in the early 1990s.\textsuperscript{58} It assumed that the primary reason for understanding social values was to identify and evaluate heritage significance in order to conserve them. The concept of

\textsuperscript{55} Committee of Inquiry, \textit{Report of the National Estate}, 35. It was subsequently defined by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, and adopted in the Australia ICOMOS \textit{Burra Charter}.


\textsuperscript{57} Commonwealth of Australia, \textit{Australia: State of the Environment}, 9-13. This approach, it might be said, was an astute move by the heritage bureaucracy to ensure that heritage conservation was given a berth in the Australian government’s budget for the higher profile environment portfolio.

\textsuperscript{58} Johnston, \textit{What is Social Value}?
intangible heritage effectively created an opening for dialogue between those involved with environmental research and land management, and those concerned with deciphering the intangible cultural meanings and values invested in that environment. It offered insights into cultural beliefs, values and a sense of place developed over time, a valuable conceptual tool for exploring the cultural and historical dimensions of rural land use and landscape change. As Thomashaw observed, ‘it is the stories of environmental experience that link people together’.59 Similarly, in Australia, Bonyhady and Griffiths made the point that social value had become a critical matter in environmental debates.60

Projects were mounted by the national and state governments to develop systematic methods of identifying and assessing intangible heritage in the form of places with social significance. One of the aims of a study conducted by Rodney Harrison in 2003 for the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service was to elucidate the shared histories of Aboriginal and settler Australians who had worked in the pastoral industry.61 Almost the whole of the land managed by the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service had formerly been used for grazing purposes.62 Harrison was particularly concerned to demonstrate to heritage management agencies that the landscape heritage of the pastoral industry was far more expansive than the ‘woolsheds and homesteads’ approach which, he argued, rendered the lives of Indigenous and settler workers alike invisible. Indeed, identifying landscape heritage was a form of social action for local rural communities,

62 According to Harrison, former grazing land constituted more than 95 per cent of the NSW protected area system, much of it becoming available to the government about 1970 when it resumed large numbers of small soldier settler blocks that had proved unviable for farming.
ensuring that local conceptualisations of heritage and identity served to balance the standard portrayal of pastoralism as a theme in the nation’s economic history.\textsuperscript{63}

Nevertheless, the notion of social value, enshrined in the Federal and some State government heritage legislation since the mid-1970s, proved to be an elusive concept for those involved in the professionalised field of cultural heritage whose disciplinary training concentrated on the analysis of material culture. Its main appeal tended to rest with those interested in exploring Indigenous relationships with the physical world.\textsuperscript{64} It was also relevant for those concerned with managing landscape change although, when social values were examined as part of Australia’s Regional Forests Agreements in the early 1990s, forest managers were cautious about introducing ‘warm and fuzzy’ human values into what was otherwise intended as a scientific study of tangible natural and cultural resources in public forests.\textsuperscript{65} Social values were, after all, inherently dynamic, subjective, and highly contestable. They derived from unobservable processes in people’s relationships with place. And they were unstable, shifting over time in tune with changing cultural meanings and contexts.\textsuperscript{66}

Whilst the working through of the national estate concept involved concerted efforts by some to expose the interconnections between nature and culture, the heritage movement remained essentially conservative, focused on ‘dividing complex things into smaller, simpler parts’ to make the business of conserving them more manageable.\textsuperscript{67} Heritage conservation emerged as a poor relative of environmental management, and only tangentially relevant to rural social decline. Understanding the nature of social significance in the landscape depended upon the agency of social memory. In practice, however, social memory proved to be an awkward fit in the scientific model of heritage conservation adopted by heritage listing and conservation

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{63} Harrison, \textit{Shared Landscapes}, 7.
\item\textsuperscript{64} Marilyn C. Truscott, ‘‘Intangible Values’’ as heritage in Australia’, \textit{ICOMOS News}, 10(1), March 2000, 6.
\item\textsuperscript{65} Australian’ Heritage Commission, \textit{People’s Places: Identifying and Assessing Social Value for Communities}. Report of the Social Value Workshop held at the University of Melbourne, 1993 (Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra, 1994).
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agencies at the national and state levels. Indeed, memory tended to be treated as little more than local colour in the more serious business of identifying and conserving significant places, and was generally regarded as a somewhat esoteric specialty of oral historians, ethnographers and biographers. Nevertheless, as David Carment has observed, the new scholarship on memory was offering new inroads into the past for public historians engaged in the field of heritage interpretation and cultural resource management.⁶⁸

The issue was noted in the *Australian State of the Environment* report, in which the authors were pointedly critical of the deepening divide between natural and cultural heritage evident in environmental and heritage policymaking:

Integration of heritage values in any place is increasingly the way the community considers and treats heritage but still not the way government proceeds – a good example is the nationwide National Heritage Trust effort which mostly excludes historic and most Indigenous heritage. There is a growing understanding that every part of life is part of a larger system, each component interacts and changes accordingly. A practical way to protect those linkages is through identification of significant landscapes be they natural or cultural, rural or urban. The approach of listing individual places versus the recognition of those places in their broader context is yet to be widely advanced as an alternative approach.⁶⁹

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⁶⁹ Jane Lennon, one of the authors, was a former manager of the Historic Places Branch within the Victorian National Parks and Wildlife Service (and later Department of Conservation). She had written extensively on the concept of cultural landscapes in an effort to persuade her colleagues in natural resource management of the significance of cultural values in national parks and reserves. See, for example, Jane Lennon and Steve Matthews, *Cultural Landscape Management: Guidelines For Identifying, Assessing And Managing Cultural Landscapes In The Australian Alps National Parks* (Cultural Heritage Working Group, Australian Alps Liaison Committee, Canberra, 1996).
The old heritage formula was in need of an overhaul to reflect new approaches to the past. The tone of the national heritage movement was concerned with selective narratives that were resolutely celebratory and preservationist, and largely avoided the more complex and contentious themes of rural history. The focus on fabric and place remained dominant, and it served to normalise the agricultural landscape as an economic space inscribed with contemporary settler discourses about national identity. The post-war heritage movement was primarily concerned with ‘those valuable features of our environment which we seek to conserve from the ravages of development and decay’. The national estate was formulated on the belief that the nation’s heritage ought to represent a unifying force in Australian society. In the agricultural and pastoral landscapes of rural Australia, this translated into a commemoration of colonisation and national economic progress. In practice, it was never constructed to be a window into the shifting cultural evaluations of nation, nor to address the dilemmas of a society struggling with environmental and social change. Nevertheless, the underlying assumption of the Hope Report was that it might do so.

**Heritage and landscapes of rural decline**

In the late twentieth century, post-colonial discourses about national identity and heritage came under sustained challenge on a number of fronts. Social history, feminist history, Aboriginal history, studies of Aboriginal-settler relationships in the pastoral industry, cultural mapping projects, and studies exploring cultural diversity confronted old settler myths and posited new ideas about the history of colonisation. In particular, they challenged the racial exclusiveness of nationalist histories, and foregrounded the experiences and agency of groups who had been patently excluded from the heroic pioneering mythologies. The concept of heritage as the things we value and seek to keep for the future had little meaning in the context of these shifting ecological, social and historical constructions of the wheatlands.

Motives for wanting to conserve places as material culture are complex. One explanation commonly employed in heritage discourses is that people seek to retain or revive a ‘sense of place’, where familiar aspects of the environment are absorbed over

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70 Graeme Davison, ‘The meanings of heritage’, 1.

time into a sense of self and belonging. Heritage conservationists commonly refer to ‘sense of place’ to convey the distinctive character of a locality although, as Bonyhady and Griffiths suggest, it is often used to value local places ‘according to some external standard’. Environmental psychologists explain it as a process of linking people’s identity or ‘who we are’ to issues of place or ‘where we are’, with implications for people’s sense of well-being, continuity with the past, and connection with others. When changes in the physical environment are perceived in negative terms, people may experience a diminished sense of place, particularly when meaningful places or features are radically altered or destroyed. Loss or fragmentation of local places has particular resonance amongst rural people living with a landscape transformed by economic, technological and social changes. In Western literary and artistic traditions, landscapes are a powerful symbol of the emotional potency of lost places. They represent ‘a continuity between the shifting places of our lives’.

This issue has particularly cogency in the wheatlands. Ecological degradation is a slow and insidious process, with no respect for tenures and fence-lines. This, perhaps more than any other factor, compels settler Australians to reassess their relationships with the Australian landscape, and consider the tensions and contradictions that exist as a continuing legacy of its colonisation. But, as we have seen, issues of memory and place attachment do not easily conform to conventional scientific paradigms. Indeed, they raise complex moral and philosophical questions more at home in the humanities than in land and river management or in economic policy.

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73 Pierre Horwitz, Michael Lindsay and Moira O’Connor, ‘Biodiversity, endemism, sense of place, and public health: Inter-relationships for Australian inland aquatic systems’, Ecosystem Health, 7(4), December 2001, 256.

74 Margaret Drabble, A Writer’s Britain: Landscape In Literature (Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 1979), 270. Peter Read’s engaging work on lost or destroyed places in Returning to Nothing graphically illustrates the profound consequences that this loss can have at the personal level. Read considered responses to the loss of meaningful places as a result of processes such as urban development and the destructive forces of fire or water. Meredith Fletcher’s study of Yallourn in Victoria’s rural Latrobe Valley also examines the personal implications of lost places. See Meredith Fletcher, Digging People Up For Coal: A History Of Yallourn (Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2002).
When staff of the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service turned their attention to the marginalisation of cultural heritage in landscapes managed by their agency, they looked to recent scholarship on memory and attachment to place in the social sciences and humanities. Their aim was to sow the seeds of change in the agency’s approach to environmental management by highlighting the social dimensions of cultural heritage, and the importance of history and memory, in rural landscapes being managed for their ‘natural’ value and recreational amenity. In order to do this, they needed to engage in a cross-disciplinary dialogue within the agency. The resulting dialogue was based on the premise that national parks could be understood as both culturally constructed landscapes and ‘natural’ systems. With statutory responsibility for both cultural and natural resources, agencies such as the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service needed to incorporate dense, intangible, and often contradictory cultural constructions of landscape into nature conservation.  

In the wheatlands, the function and importance of social memory remains largely unrecognised, while the notion that heritage is a player in matters of environmental and social change is all but disregarded in environmental discourses. Heritage conservation has served to normalise and celebrate Australia’s wheatlands as a settler landscape, rendering it uncontested and unproblematic, a powerful narrative of nation-building and symbol of national unity. It continues to underpin settler identity in rural

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Australia, and legitimise the history of settler occupation and land use as a central tenet of national identity. This narrative may have equipped settler Australians with purpose and vitality in the colonising process, but it has also provided a powerful moral justification for sustained environmental damage and the institutionalisation of Indigenous dispossession during the twentieth century. It severely constrains the way the wheatlands are understood, and serves to privilege the ideas and beliefs of some groups over others. Scientific approaches to classifying and evaluating the significance of the past have carved separate territories for nature and culture, Indigenous and settler histories, environmental and social values. Complex relationships between people and people, and people and land, have inevitably been reduced to simple attributes. By compartmentalising social and physical environments, heritage legislation and institutions are unwittingly complicit in obscuring or trivialising alternative ‘ways of seeing’ rural working landscapes.

Such distinctions seem clumsy and irrelevant when applied to non-Western cultures, as Denis Byrne found during his doctoral research on archaeological heritage management in south-east Asia.\(^{76}\) In Thailand, for example, he found that spirit sites and shrines were never officially listed as heritage places. Indeed, Western notions of heritage management seemed to be incapable of dealing with ‘non-rational discourses by way of which most of the world’s population relate to old places and objects’. In the process of identifying ‘special’ or sacred sites as heritage places, he mused, Western heritage discourses had failed to provide legitimate ways for people to express the feelings that they have about them. ‘In the ever expanding arena of Environmental Impact Assessment heritage work it seems clear that this current of experience is considered to be ‘unmanageable’, unmeasurable, unamenable to objective analysis, and thus inadmissible’.\(^{77}\) This was clearly becoming a major issue for heritage practitioners internationally. When the International Council on Monuments and Sites declared that it was launching a debate on the subject of ‘intangible heritage’ in 2000 as a prelude to the forthcoming General Assembly in Zimbabwe, one executive member observed that heritage conservation was, after all, an attempt to preserve ‘the meaning, the embedded memory’ of people’s cultural heritage. He went on to discuss intangible heritage as the spirituality in sacred places,

\(^{76}\) Byrne, ‘Messages to Manila’, 53-62.

\(^{77}\) Byrne, ‘Messages to Manila’, 7-8.
as the knowledge and skills in traditional trades and crafts, and as memory carried by people, objects and places.\(^78\)

When Sharon Veale conducted a project in 1997 to record the social significance of the landscape that now forms Towarri National Park\(^79\) she found that, in focusing on the conservation of natural features, the agency was ignoring the ways in which the landscape was valued by people who were less vocal, but who inevitably had a vested interest in the Park’s management. Local Aboriginal women, for example, told stories that placed themselves at the centre of the history of the Towarri landscape. In this way, Veale sought to demonstrate how vernacular meanings of a landscape are likely to be multi-layered, and may even contest official interpretations. Eliciting local memories and stories also created the opportunity for ‘a more inclusive, ethical and visionary conception of heritage’. As Veale explained, history and memory would ‘assist us in understanding the physical traces of the past, [and] help us to understand the ways in which people implicate themselves across the landscape, how memory is spatialised and then how that intersects with history and other ways of seeing and being in the landscape’. In an agency where natural history was privileged over cultural heritage, Veale argued, there was a compelling ethical case for expanding ‘landscape consciousness’ to acknowledge the cultural associations.\(^80\)

The idea of landscape as the repository of history and memory has enormous potential, but to date it has had limited appeal for those concerned with landscape conservation. The heritage movement has the capacity to broaden the peripheral visions of rural Australia. Indeed, I would argue that there is a moral imperative to actively engage with contemporary debates about the future of agriculture, ecological decline, and national identity in Australia, and to ‘become more reflexive about its role in shaping collective memories of groups and nations’.\(^81\) Used as a medium for examining contemporary beliefs about the past, the idea of heritage can be a force that

\(^78\) Dinu Bumbaru, 'Tangible and intangible - the obligation and desire to remember', *ICOMOS News*, 10(1), March 2000, 26-27.


contributes to more ethical and sustainable relationships with rural landscapes and people. Providing it can draw back from an obsessive focus on place, it can open up a dialogue of reconciliation between different memories and meanings. As Byrne and others argue, heritage is a force for social action, perhaps even realising the democratic and ethical aims of the early conservationists. ‘Most of us’, as Chris Healy has noted, ‘do not spend most of our time expressing or enacting national heritage. On the contrary, our everyday senses of heritage are inherently vernacular – different but shared idioms connect us with friends and workmates, neighbours and family, correspondents and acquaintances and strangers.’ Susan Pearce suggested something similar when she discussed why cultural heritage was not playing a greater role in shaping social policy. The notion of cultural heritage is not only about celebrating human inventiveness and diversity, she argued, but also about the ‘continuing process of self-realisation’ amongst local communities.\(^82\) While national mythmaking and local histories are engaged in a ‘complex settling of accounts with the past’, it is the intimate stories of family and community that may offer the most valuable insights for ‘a national becoming’.\(^83\)

Meanwhile, the business of nature conservation has been neatly disengaged from the history and heritage of colonisation, and relegated to the realm of environmental management. As Burchard observed in the 1950s, the ‘desecrations of nature we have permitted...have taught us to be selective in our vision’.\(^84\) ‘[T]here is much to be achieved’, he argues, ‘in unravelling and explaining to Australians the historic influences on their perceptions [of nature]’.\(^85\) Far from being limited to ‘woolsheds and homesteads’, rural heritage is implicated in an important national discourse about values, history, and environmental and social change. These issues are central to land

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83 Graeme Davison, *Use and Abuse of Australian History*, 108.


management and farming practices, but environmental and social changes are seen as a hindrance to heritage conservation work, having the annoying habit of shifting the goalposts and making the business of preserving and celebrating the past messily complex and incomplete. Ecological change and the history of Indigenous interactions with settlers and land are largely footnotes to the main settler narratives from which official statements of significance are constructed. Matters of land degradation are assigned to experts in the ‘natural’ sciences, whilst Indigenous history is relegated to specialists drawn largely from the fields of archaeology and anthropology. The nexus between rural settler history, landscape change and Indigenous dispossession remains a muted discourse, but social memory has the potential to expose the interrelationships between culture and nature in a way that may make public policy-making more alert to the cultural forces at work.

There is certainly scope for a sustained dialogue between heritage and environmental policy-makers in Australia. The imperative exists for heritage policymakers to look closely at the role of heritage conservation in agricultural regions, where the future of farming practices and local communities is fraught with uncertainties and tensions. As we saw in Chapter 1, the environmental scientist Jim Russell is amongst those who have given thought to the matter. In the early 1990s, he wrote critically of the heritage movement’s focus on conserving ‘special’ heritage places, calling for new models of social and environmental relationships that are dedicated to reviving a sense of place and pride in cultural traditions, as well as promoting a belief in personal responsibility for the local landscape.

In some cases, projects have been developed on the premise that heritage is about sense of place and emotional attachments to particular landscapes. Common Ground in the United Kingdom, for example, advocates a more holistic way of dealing with heritage that represents ‘a community’s discovering and responding to its environment in the widest sense...including “place, people, land, wild life, history and

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Similar sentiments have been expressed in the United States. ‘We need to plug into the larger movement of studies of everyday life’ stated the President of the Vernacular Architecture Forum in the United States. ‘We’re in danger of falling into the antiquarian tradition we reacted against. We want to celebrate our past, not be bound by it’.

Closer to home, Sheridan Burke took great delight in bringing together an unlikely alliance of conservation themes in a travelling exhibition for the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. The exhibition featured the stories of eight families on grazing properties in western New South Wales, and attempted to illustrate how rural people are dealing with significant issues of ecological degradation and social decline in the late twentieth century. Their responses ranged from restoring farm buildings to eradicating feral animals in order to ‘stay on the land they love, and...share its heritage with traditional owners, tourists, school children or curious curators’.

Nevertheless, at the local level, most studies and debates about rural settler heritage continue to be narrowly prescribed. They focus on the artefacts of rural industry, working life, or domestic and community activities, and a cultural landscape to be ‘read’ and interpreted as a historical text. Whilst considerable emphasis is placed on matters of economic and environmental sustainability, there has been little attention to the question of how local people ascribe cultural meaning and significance to a landscape increasingly characterised in terms of impoverished soils, denuded paddocks, and degraded river systems. In spite of the enormous amount of literature dedicated to study of environmental change in the natural and social sciences, and increasing interest in the social significance of landscapes in heritage circles, there is still a long way to go to elicit the links between the two.

88 Common Ground, ‘Local distinctiveness’ (United Kingdom, n.d.).


Chapter 12. Unsettled country

I have always cherished local memories for the way they lead into a larger past. ¹

During World War II, as drought-ravaged, rabbit-loosened inland soils raged in giant dust storms across south-eastern Australia, a young Australian Army recruit took up his military post at Dimboola in the Wimmera wheatlands region of western Victoria. Nolan was an artist from the city, posted to guard emergency food stores in case of Japanese invasion. In this unlikely outpost of national defence, the artist from inner Melbourne encountered the ‘outside’ country of the semi-arid inland. In a series of paintings called ‘Wimmera’, Nolan focused on the environmental and social desolation wrought by intensive settlement and farming in the inland plains. He was concerned with portraying, in uncompromising detail, the harshness of rural life and the vulnerability of ordinary people whose lives were caught up in an unfolding environmental catastrophe. For Nolan, the impoverished agricultural landscape was the social reality of life in the expanding wheatlands, where the physical deterioration of the landscape was matched by the social degeneration of its inhabitants. The swirling dust storms of the 1940s were a powerful metaphor for the impermanence of European occupation, subverting any lingering images of a rural arcadia. It was a place where, as the Adelaide writer Max Harris put it, many would ‘die dreaming of the next good year’. ²


Harris had first encountered Nolan in the Wimmera in the 1940s. Both were artists, nurturing a desire to 'penetrate beyond surface appearances and to find apt ulterior meanings for an antipodean world that was fairly obviously all surface'. The Wimmera, in western Victoria, is a farming region bounded on the north by the semi-desert landscape of the Mallee region. 'The eye', wrote Harris, 'is uninspired by the endless defoliation of wheat-farming....There are poor lands in Australia into which the individual puts down roots and extracts from the soil grinding poverty, dignity, and that serio-comic existentialism which owes everything to the sense of impermanency and nothing to Camus'. Amid the 'endless defoliation', the few settlers that remained after the 1940s drought years, simply clung with an 'implacable occupancy' to an 'indifferent landscape'.

Faceless, loveless. The Wimmera is a part of Australia where one imagines a man would look out each morning into the white distances and listen to the inward desolation of his own soul....It's a country you don't come to love through seeing, but through becoming reconciled to it.

Six decades after Nolan's 'outsider' perspective of the wheatlands, Wimmera-born artist and scholar, Phillip Hunter, presented a series of paintings of the same landscape in an exhibition that juxtaposed Nolan's and Hunter's work. Peter Haynes, curator of The Plains exhibition, drew attention to the prevailing dualism in the minds of settler Australians between the external realities and the inner imaginings of the Australian landscape. Hunter's portrayal of the wheatlands was that of an 'insider', influenced by the heightened environmental and racial sensibilities of his generation. When Hunter went in search of the official mapped boundaries of the Wimmera region, he found that no one government department could agree on where it began and ended. It was an illusory landscape, he concluded, unable to be accurately mapped in geographical terms. It echoed the plight of settlers who had moved inland towards an imagined centre that repeatedly eluded them. He turned instead to memory and imagination. 'In the end', wrote Hunter, 'it is a very discreet land mass, it doesn’t

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4 Crawford notes that the Wimmera was originally gazetted to include what later became the Mallee region of north-western Victoria.
declare itself instantly. It’s not like the American experience, a movement westward towards paradise.\textsuperscript{5} Whilst acknowledging that many people experienced it as a bleak landscape, he found spiritual solace there. He drew on the wheatlands as a metaphor for the complex historical layering of ancient seabed, Indigenous history, and the imprint of colonisation. ‘This is the landscape of memory and recollection’ he observed, where the history of Aboriginal tradition and colonial occupation are inalienable parts of the same place.\textsuperscript{6} He was inspired by Gerald Murnane’s allusion to ‘the deceptive surfaces of the plains’ in the unsettling and highly-acclaimed novel set in an imaginary Australian landscape.\textsuperscript{7} For Hunter, the Wimmera landscape was a spiritually-potent space in which geological time, Indigenous time, and contemporary time existed simultaneously. He observed how processes of ecological change constantly subverted the orderly grids of settlement. The central character of the wheatlands was no longer the farmer, but the land itself. In droughted lakebeds, official signs declared the rules for regulating swimming and boating. Trees lay horizontal in eroded river banks, and clouds merged with dust, all suggesting that the wheatlands was a parody of settler attempts to define and dominate the landscape. The author of Hunter’s biography was herself perplexed by the landscape. ‘The average traveler’, she wrote, ‘would pass through the Wimmera, perhaps noting its monotony if noticing anything at all. Wide expanses of wheat and the occasional undulations of the land are all there is to see...unless you have the eyes to see.’\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{‘an ever-changing site of imagining’}\textsuperscript{9}

The idea that a landscape might be invested with powerful cognitive, emotional, or spiritual meaning is certainly not new. As we saw in Chapter 1, the notion of ‘landscape’ as a visual or pictorial phenomenon was in vogue in Europe for several


\textsuperscript{7} Gerald Murnane, \textit{The Plains} (The Text Publishing Co, Melbourne, 1982), 151. Murnane constructed an imaginary landscape from his perception of the Wimmera plains, to the north of his house in Bendigo, although he did not visit the Wimmera until after his novel was published. The novel’s narrator, a film-maker from the city, journeyed to the mythical plains, hoping to locate the source of the landscape’s spiritual meaning by immersing himself in its stories and people. In the end, however, the spiritual dimensions of the plains eluded him.

\textsuperscript{8} Crawford, \textit{Wimmera}, 106.
centuries, culminating in the genre of romantic landscape art in the nineteenth century. It represented a Western 'way of seeing' and relating to land. In settler societies such as Australia, it reflected a vastly different approach to that of Indigenous inhabitants, and it continued to dominate twentieth century geographical thinking until the notion that the landscape was also a culturally-constructed space became more widely accepted in the social sciences. These studies have taken many different forms of inquiry, including the analysis of iconic or symbolic representations in past landscapes, as well as the role of the landscape in power and class relationships, in expressing particular ideologies, and in memory and imagination.

Cultural analyses of landscape are closely related to the study of the role of 'place' in human society. Indeed, the distinctions between landscape and place are sometimes blurred in the literature. According to Meinig, whilst place and landscape are both concerned with human interactions with the physical world, the concept of place is more evocative of the personal experience of particular localities. In other words, the distinction may be considered a matter of scale and focus. The literature on

9 Crawford, Wimmera, 16.
10 Barbara Bender, 'Introduction: Landscape – meaning and action', in Barbara Bender (ed), Landscape Politics And Perspectives (Berg Publishers, Providence and Oxford, 1993), 2.
14 For example, Simon Schama, Landscape and memory (Harper Collins, London, 1995).
place and landscape suggests, however, that the most revealing insights about the relationship between people and their environments, between the cultural and the physical, have come from exploring the interactions between the publicly-observable or ‘outer’ landscape, on the one hand, and the personal or ‘inner’ landscape, on the other.

The inner landscape idea draws on these discourses as well as post-modernist philosophies about spatial practices and representations espoused by social theorists and philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, Derek Gregory and John Urry, Edward Casey, M. de Certeau, and Edward Soja. Soja’s argument for the idea of a ‘Thirdspace’, for example, builds on the study of spatial relationships and processes that has preoccupied human geographers since the 1960s. His argument offers some useful theoretical perspectives relevant to the notion of inner landscapes. In calling for a more balanced approach to the ontology of human existence, Soja argued that ‘[m]aking theoretical and practical sense of the world is best accomplished by studying the interaction of historical, social and spatial perspectives’.  

The dichotomies common to Western epistemology, such as the separation of phenomena into objective and measurable, on the one hand, and subjective and imagined on the other, represent a dualistic way of experiencing the world. The division of nature and culture, for example, represented one expression of this dualism. According to Soja, it denies the ‘experiential complexity, fullness and


17 Soja ‘Thirdspace’, 262.
perhaps unknowable mystery of actually lived space’. He described ‘Thirdspace’ as an ‘in-between’ space, traversing the physical and mental worlds. It is the space in which marginalised groups can struggle against oppression, a point taken up by Byrne, Brayshaw and Ireland as well as Harrison, in their studies of cultural heritage as ‘a form of social action for local communities’. Howard Morphy referred to ‘landscape’ as an in-between concept, ‘a place where value and emotion coincide’. M.M. Webber suggested that the in-between space was where ‘[t]he physical place becomes an extension of one’s ego. The outer worlds of...the physical neighbourhood place itself, seem to become internalized in inseparable aspects of one’s inner perception of self...’ Whilst Webber was writing about the urban context, his description would seem to be equally relevant to the rural landscape. David Lowenthal offered a theory of geographical knowledge, in which he speculated that the earth’s surface was not only perceived, but ordered and shaped by our experience, learning, imagination and memory. Simon Schama explored the way in which people experience a sense of connection to forests, plains, mountains, and rivers through memory. Denis Cosgrove suggested that the landscape idea in Western thinking has been dominated by an ‘outsider’ perspective, whilst the hidden personal associations remain hidden. The ‘look’ of a landscape, in other words, is deceptive. John Berger made the same point when he argued that the landscape is

...less a setting for the life of its inhabitants than a curtain behind which their struggles, achievements and accidents take place. For those who, with the

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18 Soja refers to these respectively as ‘Firstspace’ and ‘Secondspace’,
20 Byrne, Brayshaw and Ireland, Social Significance, 143. Harrison, Shared Landscapes, 13-4.
22 S. Schama, Landscape and Memory.
inhabitants, are behind the curtains, landmarks are no longer geographic [sic] but also biographical and personal.  

The point on which these different theorists agree is that the personal or inner landscape is far more multifaceted and fluid than it might seem. The Australian writer, Patrick White, alluded to this when he described ‘a country of the mind’ in the concluding paragraphs of his wonderfully evocative novel Voss.  

Similarly, David Malouf began an autobiographical portrait of his childhood home in Brisbane with the observation that it is the only place he knows ‘from inside, from my body outwards’. He aimed to show ‘how the elements of a place and our inner lives cross and illuminate one another’, how we interpret and map our reality and find our way into a culture. Writers and artists have long understood the inner landscape, in which the physical landscape becomes an arena of intense experience and memory. The experience of a landscape is far from passive, the landscape itself never inert. It is both topographical and intellectual, objective and subjective. People appropriate landscapes into their psyche, ‘weave them into fantasies…and landscape images’.  

A particular landscape may be ‘constantly engaged with and reworked, appropriated and contested’ as different groups of people define and defend their sense of identity and belonging invested in it. This process gives the landscape a sense of time and place, but also a sense of fluidity. David Tacey has described it as the ‘post-modern condition’ in which once-predictable boundaries had become fluid, dissolving old certainties and stereotypes. This cultural shift, he argues, has had a profound impact on perceptions of rural Australia. ‘The old comforting fiction we once called “the

“Bush” has distintegrated, leaving mystery, uncertainty, doubt in its wake’. 30 These attempts to elucidate the experiential complexity of geographical space offer valuable theoretical grounding for exploring the inner landscape idea in the context of Australia’s wheatlands.

When poets John Kinsella and Dorothy Hewett joined forces to publish a collection of their writings about the wheatlands of Western Australia, they were unable to separate the legacies of ecological change and settler angst about Aboriginal dispossession. As Kinsella wrote:

‘it’s a place of borrowed dreams  
where the marks of the spirit  
have been erased by dust –  
the restless topsoil’. 31

Kinsella’s family had regularly sought refuge from Perth in the 1960s by holidaying on a farm in the wheatlands. For Kinsella, the landscape was permeated with the violence of land-clearing, Indigenous dispossession, and the casual slaughter of wildlife. The farm became Kinsella’s ‘alternative reality’, a place where the desolation assumed mythological proportions. ‘It wasn’t mythology before settlement. The word is corrupt.’ He remembers the illusion of an abundant landscape in the green and yellow of the crops, where the real ‘language of the place’ had been stripped away with the scrub, giving rise to a poisonous salinity affecting large areas of the wheatlands. 32 His haunting images coalesced in ‘The Silo’, a poem in which the old rammed earth wheat silo, once an icon of agricultural prosperity, had become a portent of something far more sinister:

...with thunder  
echoing out over the bare paddocks  
towards the farmhouse where an old farmer


consoled his bitter wife on the fly-proof verandah, cursing the cockatoos, hands describing a prison from which neither could hope for parole, petition, release.33

These artistic and literary depictions of the external realities of the wheatlands, and imaginative responses to them, suggest how deeply the tensions of colonisation permeated the settler experience of the landscape during the twentieth century. Robert Riley has commented on the power of poetry, novels and autobiography to invoke the ‘intricate interweaving of the physical and social environment’.34 To this I would add visual art. Appropriately then, given the close association of the Western concept of landscape with the genre of landscape painting, it is in the fields of visual art and literature that we find some of the more evocative and challenging explorations of the inner landscape. In particular, they can offer points of entry into the complex interplay between the physical realities and cultural constructions of the wheatlands.

But, if themes of degraded landscapes and Indigenous dispossession created disturbing undercurrents in the work of non-Indigenous artists and writers in the twentieth century, they were central to Kevin Gilbert’s work. Gilbert was an author, playwright, visual artist and Wiradjuri man, born in 1933 on the Lachlan River at Condobolin. He wrote uncompromisingly and passionately about the ecological and spiritual desecration of his ‘homeland’ in a collection of edited writings around that theme. He drew poignant word pictures of the legacy of a ‘New World Order’. As if recalling a dream, he tells the story of a brown snake carving its way through dry leaves and stones, ‘the deep red dust carved with a master’s stroke’. Fragile artefacts of early settlers lay scattered near a dam which harboured spears and throwing sticks, carved from tree roots. The blue river gums lined the river with ‘arthritic greyness suffering impotence/from salination and the die-back curse’. The river fish and water-rats moved about in a daily routine, unaware of the ‘holocausts of spray descending hell’. Then, finally,

The dust encrusted land, the powdered trees

Shrub and scrub bewigged and trialed and tried
Sentenced to a poisoning for life
And all because the ‘good men’ only dreamed35

Paul Hetherington’s fictional verse-novel, Blood and Old Belief, echoes this slow demise of a settler farm and family in the same part of the Lachlan Valley that Kevin Gilbert knew. Hetherington traced the torment of Jack, his Italian-born wife Cecilia who grieved for the ‘rich Italian loam’ of her ancestors, and their daughter Katherine, who found solace in her lonely childhood walking over the land where she

...talked the world into its places –
as if our words and names made true
the lounging, jutting cliffs of rocks
and all the paddocks... 36

Jack attempted, unsuccessfully, to grow wheat, then he planed grape vines in his ‘latest, wildest dream’.37 In the end, the pain of a family fractured by prolonged drought and different cultural backgrounds spread like a poison in the land itself. This mirroring of ecological decline and a family’s emotional unravelling offers a powerful literary metaphor for the sense of anxiety and ‘tortured ambivalence’ that surfaced as a central theme in late twentieth century discourses on the legitimacy of settlement and settler identity in the Australian landscape.38

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36 Paul Hetherington, Blood and Old Belief: A Verse Novel (Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, ANU, Canberra, 2003), 37. The italics are used in Hetherington’s novel to distinguish his characters’ internal dialogue from the narrator.
37 Hetherington, Blood and Old Belief, 35.
Telling stories

Given the importance of the wheat industry and the closer settling of the inland plains in the history of colonisation, it is surprising that few historians have explored social memory and cultural meanings in the context of the wheatlands.\textsuperscript{39} Even as the inland plains continue to hold a distinctive even mystical presence in the settler Australian imagination, the wheatlands are largely consigned to the realm of socio-economic analysis. Those writing about the history of wheat on a national or regional scale have largely been content to chronicle its development as an economic and geographical phenomenon, from the experimental farms of First Fleet soldiers and convicts, to its part in the development of Australia's pastoral and agricultural wealth. Histories of the wheatlands, and land settlement in general, address the tensions inherent in agricultural practices only so far as they have inspired innovative technical solutions or wrought changes in agricultural research and policies. Some historians have turned their attentions to the environmental implications of farming but, unlike the pastoral industry, key historical questions about the wheatlands informed by recent developments in social theory and post-colonial historical discourses, mostly remain unasked. These questions concern Indigenous and settler Australian relationships with the rural landscape, and the nexus between rural settler mythology and national history on the one hand, and ecological and social decline on the other.

Recent scholarship, particularly in the fields of literature, history, and geography, has been concerned with the history of British imperial expansion and its impact on colonial landscapes and people. These ‘post-colonial’ studies offer a reassessment of Western knowledge and power in the colonisation process. Of particular interest here is the process by which Indigenous territory was appropriated by settler Australians, who in turn inscribed it with their own history and culture. Many of the studies in post-colonialism draw on theories of space and power, most notably by Michele Foucault. The study of the wheatlands as a post-colonial space enables it to be examined as a complex interplay of legal, political, and physical mechanisms, as well

\textsuperscript{39} A recent addition to this literature is George Main’s evocative \textit{Heartland: The Regeneration of Rural Place}, based on his thesis ‘Industrial earth: An ecology of rural place’, PhD thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, 2004.
as cultural practices such as naming, mapping, and story-telling.  

Nevertheless the wheatlands are the creation of, and continue to be sustained by, Western ideologies and colonial mythologies. In this agricultural zone of simplified ecologies, environmental and cultural factors converge to create a space of peculiar tension and complexity. David Malouf discussed this problem in his 1998 Boyer Lectures, when he spoke about the colonists’ vision of a ‘New World’ that was, in reality, the ‘old world translated’. Speaking from a settler Australian perspective, he observed that ‘[t]his has meant a greater tension, for us, between the environment or place, on the one hand, and on the other, all the complex associations of an inherited culture’. The creation of an agricultural zone suited to cultivating wheat crops on a large-scale commercial basis represents perhaps the most potent symbol of this inherited culture. In the established discourses about Australian agriculture, the construction of the wheatlands is most commonly depicted as a colonising narrative of spatial possession and transformation — from desolate plains, to expansive pastoral landscape, to a region of intensive agriculture based on small family units and, ultimately, to an industrial farming landscape increasingly controlled by national and global corporate interests. The narrative is periodically diverted by adverse

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environmental and economic conditions but, by placing agriculture as the central theme, it draws strength from such adversity to emerge triumphant.

The original purpose of my journey into the inner landscapes of the wheatlands was to discover how the agricultural landscape has been constructed and imagined, through history and social memory. I have discovered how local stories give voice to the silences in the history of Australia’s inland, and reveal the complex and ambivalent relationships that people have with this country. My research illustrates that social memory and storytelling are a powerful tool for exposing the complex ties that bind Indigenous and settler relationships to land, community, farm, and river. Through my interviews in the central Lachlan, I have drawn a picture of local places and people in Australia’s wheatlands caught up in the rhetoric of agricultural development and environmental sustainability. I show some of the ways in which changing landscapes, a river in decline, communities in retreat, are absorbed into local memory, and retold in the stories of settler and Indigenous Australians.

My journey has led, metaphorically, from the outer landscapes of the Australian inland, to the ‘inner landscapes’ of social memory and storytelling. I have tried to ‘mine the local ore’, as Frank Crowley suggests, although I have travelled well beyond my own places of belonging and memory. The work of the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service has been a valuable model for exploring these interwoven threads of social memory, history, heritage and landscape. However, I have chosen to work outside the boundaries of national parks and reserves and within the environmentally degraded, socially fragile, ‘lived-in’ agricultural landscapes of the wheatlands.

The idea of the wheatlands involves two assumptions. First, that this landscape is primarily known and defined according to its settler Australian history of land use.

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43 Cited in Carment, A Past Displayed, v.
Second, that this is a working agricultural landscape where matters of identity and heritage are played out on a daily basis. Heritage is a powerful vehicle of social memory. The process of conserving heritage places, after all, brings our constructions of the past into the present, and demonstrates that they are relevant to present concerns. By teasing out the narratives that are held to be truths about the past, we see that they offer insights into the present. In narratives, observes the writer Barry Lopez, ‘truth becomes discernible as a pattern’. Given the social and ecological dilemmas that prevail in the wheatlands, there is an urgent imperative to make explicit the cultural underpinnings and historical forces at work in working agricultural landscapes otherwise dominated by scientific, technological and economic visions. Recognising these forces may help to transcend the disciplinary boundaries that have prevailed for much of the twentieth century, and enable us to ask, finally, ‘social and moral questions as much as scientific ones’.

Social memory has a number of important qualities of particular relevance to issues of rural ecological and social decline. Rural life, as imagined in social memory, changed utterly during the twentieth century. Indeed, Australia’s wheatlands have never been the bastion of rural abundance and stability they were portrayed to be. Nevertheless, they remain ‘a compelling icon of national identity’. As the worst drought in 100 years rages in the early years of the twenty-first century, the Prime Minister announces financial relief for drought-stricken farmers, warding off critics of drought-relief by declaring that farming the land is part of our national identity.

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47 The Prime Minister, John Howard, interviewed for the 7.30 Report, ABC TV, 30 May 2005. In May 2005, the Prime Minister conducted a drought crisis summit at Parkes, then spent three days...
times of adversity, the symbolism of agricultural development in Australia’s inland plains continues to loom large.

Memory reveals how people interpret the past and make sense of changing landscapes and communities. Selected stories and observations help to tease out cultural meanings embedded in particular places, how the past is remembered and valued in the present. It privileges a humanistic perspective in the agricultural landscape, casting light on the ‘shimmering web’ of interconnectedness between people and landscape, culture and nature, past and present, settler and Indigenous Australians. In an article on the transformation of European rural landscapes in the late twentieth century, David Lowenthal observed that landscape and rural life were becoming ‘ominously disjoined’, as social and technological changes conspired to drive a wedge between them. Whilst there are obvious differences between the nature of rural life and landscapes in Europe and Australia, they share similar experiences of disjunction. ‘Bereft of social meaning [and memory], landscapes become vacant, vacuous, void of context’. J.B. Jackson said something similar in the context of rural landscapes in North America. Alluding to commonalities between landscapes in medieval Europe and modern America, he described the ‘cultural poverty’ that inhabits places where people are engaged in ‘an inexhaustible ingenuity in finding short-term solutions’ rather than ‘purposeful continuity’.

Social memory also offers an important means of addressing the fractured relationship between culture and nature that prevails in heritage and environmental management. It introduces historical depth and deeper cultural perspective to contemporary issues affecting rural communities. The process of eliciting social memory involves teasing out the larger narratives that reveal our complex relationships with land and water in Australia - and narratives, as William Cronon visiting some of the hardest hit farms in New South Wales, including those near Lake Cargelligo and Condobolin.


50 Jackson, Discovering the Vernacular Landscape, 151.
reminds us, are the bread and butter of historians. They are ‘our best and most compelling tool for searching out meaning in a conflicted and contradictory world’.\footnote{William Cronon, ‘A place for stories: Nature, history and narrative’, \textit{The Journal of American History}, 78(4), 1992, 1350.}

Memory accesses in precise ways the process by which people become attached to the landscape, the soil, and the river, enabling them to articulate their sense of belonging with great eloquence and emotional depth. It highlights the strengths as well as the contradictions that exist in people’s attachments to the physical environment, and casts light on the historical narratives that nurture people’s fragile and often complex relationships with ecologically degraded and socially fragmented landscapes. In the process of telling stories, the master narrative gives way to people’s fragmented, localised, transitory stories of place, what Kathleen Stewart refers to as the ‘space on the side of the road’.\footnote{Kathleen Stewart, \textit{A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an ‘Other’ America} (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1996), 107.}

In short, social memory invokes the stories that we choose to explain the changing landscape to ourselves. Just as crucially, social memory reveals the ‘multiple ways in which we can belong’.\footnote{Peter Read, interviewed by David Rutledge, for \textit{Encounter}, ABC Radio National, 19 December 2004 (http://www.abc.net.au/rn/reilig/enc/stories/s1261533.htm).} It reveals the range of personal, sometimes even contradictory stories and experiences shared by groups of people. Equally it can serve to expose and elucidate competing, contested, or ambivalent cultural meanings associated with a particular landscape. This is especially significant in the wheatlands, where Indigenous histories and attachments to land and river have been largely silenced, marginalised, or forgotten in settler memory. In the contours of memory and storytelling, old silences and erasures are laid bare. Social memory helps us to understand, as Paul Sinclair put it, how people ‘think themselves’ into the land, and tell the stories about our ambivalent relationships with it.\footnote{Sinclair, \textit{The Murray}, 27.} In ecologically degraded agricultural landscapes, it can also take us beyond the current obsession with scientific knowledge, and into the realm of contested or shared narratives about land and river. It may offer ways of accommodating the environmental and social issues that confront people in the wheatlands. This thesis is based on the assumption that
there is much in the rural farming landscape that eludes the steady gaze of the scientist and policymaker. The wheatlands is an elusive space in the Australian imagination, constantly in motion both physically and conceptually.

Early in my writing, I devised the metaphor of an ‘unsettled country’ to describe Australia’s wheatlands. It allowed me to explore the wheatlands on many different levels: as a frontier of colonisation in which Indigenous inhabitants were displaced from traditional country; as an agricultural landscape in which Indigenous people are continually rendered invisible even as they share its history; as a region promoted for its role in creating national prosperity and a sense of national unity and identity, even as its inhabitants struggle with fluctuating markets and climatic conditions to stay on the land; as a landscape shaped and reshaped by shifting ideological influences throughout the twentieth century; as an unpredictable landscape in which drought and flood are the final arbitrers; as a degrading landscape in which dust storms whip ancient soils into life and rivers lose their way; and, finally, as a landscape of memory where the imagination moves restlessly between past and present.

Having explored the multiple dimensions of this evocative and dialectical phrase, I discovered that Donald Worster, the astute environmental historian and scholar of American history, had already employed it in one of his studies of the American West! Nevertheless, the idea of the wheatlands as an ‘unsettled country’ had already yielded its riches for my research and, when applied in the Australian context, served to illuminate the particularities of Australia’s environment, culture and history.

My journey into the inner landscapes of Australia’s wheatlands has traversed the realms of ecology, history, myth and memory. It privileges the humanistic dimensions of the landscape to reveal how people invest it with spiritual, social and emotional meanings. This journey from the outer to the inner landscape has also highlighted the polarities that abound in Western ideas about people and environment in Australia: between the inland and the outback, the city and the ‘bush’, public and private historical narratives, nature and culture. The inner landscape is familiar territory for artists and writers seeking to explain their own spiritual insights and peripheral visions of the Australian environment.
In Part 1, I suggested that the wheatlands may be perceived in several significant ways. I argue that these different ‘ways of seeing’ offer different insights into the wheatlands. These cultural constructions of landscape — as environmental problem, as social setting, as contested terrain, as historical artefact, as the locus of memory and storytelling - have particular relevance for understanding the ecological and social dynamics underpinning rural social and ecological decline. The exploration of cultural constructions of landscape and attachments to place contributes to a vitally important discourse about the interconnections between culture, ecology and history in rural Australia. There is an urgent need to delve deeply into these aspects of the agricultural landscapes of the Australian wheatlands, where the cultural dimensions of landscape change, and the ties that bind people to place, have attracted little sustained attention.

I have sought here to elucidate the role of social memory in the context of social and ecological decline, using the perspective of those whose ‘country of memory’ flows out along the Lachlan River and over the dry paddocks of central western New South Wales. Here, I have found a place ripe with storytelling and myth, where social memory serves to both illuminate and inhibit new ways of understanding the rural landscape. Much of the current scholarship on this matter is located in regions where pastoralism dominates or is under challenge from new forms of industrialised agricultural land use, particularly irrigated cotton-growing. The semi-arid wheatlands, however, are largely neglected in this emerging field of scholarship. Yet, as I demonstrate in Part 2, the wheatlands represent a significant cultural idea as well as an economic and environmental phenomenon of the twentieth century. The history of the wheatlands embraces a dialogue between public and private narratives of the rural landscape. These narratives selectively promote and obfuscate present understandings expressed through social memory, and they are crucially important in determining how future communities choose to continue living in that environment. Narratives have the capacity to make transparent what we choose to believe and celebrate about the past, how the working agricultural landscape is remembered and understood.


56 Read, *Voices*, 38.
Cultural beliefs and experiences are articulated most eloquently through the spoken word. Since the 1970s, historians have enthusiastically adopted oral history as a way of accessing deeply personal memories about past events and experiences. With the rise of the heritage movement, oral history has also been increasingly employed as a way of accessing information not otherwise available about the social history and heritage significance of particular places.\(^57\) Oral history has attracted lively debate, largely concerned with the question of whether it constitutes a reliable source of information about the past. Critics focus on the lack of objective rigour in personal testimonies, demanding corroboration from other more credible sources. Whilst all forms of historical writing are biased representations of the past, oral history is particularly susceptible to criticism from those seeking objectivity and rigour. These criticisms, however, ignore one of the main qualities of oral history. In telling their life stories, people select, order and simplify their recollections to construct a narrative, usually by way of stories or parable. They locate themselves and others in the narrative, and convey their particular cultural values and beliefs. Indeed, they may often challenge dominant historical narratives.\(^58\) As Richard Baker argues,

Written history has often overly objectified the past in concentrating on the ‘facts’ and in the process has failed to recognise the interpretative, subjective nature of the past. Oral history has an important role to play in highlighting how records (be they written or oral) are not just people’s memories of events but also memories of human experiences...It is not what happened but what people perceive as having happened that shapes individual attitudes and, in turn, shapes actions.\(^59\)

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\(^59\) Richard Baker, *Land is Life: From Bush to Town: The Story of the Yanyuwa People* (Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1999), 36.
Whilst oral historians have been concerned with defending their craft as a serious form of history, the role of social memory in general has attracted less debate. Yet memory is the basis of oral history.\textsuperscript{60} Whilst all forms of historical inquiry are necessarily selective and biased, what distinguishes oral history from other forms of history is its reliance on memory. Social or collective memory offers deeply personal yet shared insights into the particularity of the landscape in a way that makes sense in the present. When people talk about the history of farming, they tell stories about themselves, their farm, the environment, social and technological changes, their relationships with land and people. The term ‘spatial memory’ is sometimes used to emphasise this nexus between geography and memory. Denis Byrne and Maria Nugent coined the term ‘geo-biographies’ to describe their method of recording autobiographical memories of Aboriginal people talking about local landscapes. Their concern was to elicit ‘the personalised landscape’, the geography of belonging to one’s biography’, allowing the narrators’ voices to stand alone without historical context or interpretation.\textsuperscript{61} In this thesis, my approach has been to embed and interpret memory and storytelling within historical and geographical contexts in order to elucidate the tensions as well as the harmonies that that might reveal.

Perhaps the most important aspect of memory is that it problematises the certainties of the past, particularly those embodied in the myth of progress.\textsuperscript{62} Memory is inherently unstable, always in the process of being constructed. ‘Memory’ as Nora puts it, ‘is life, always embodied in living societies and as such in permanent evolution’.\textsuperscript{63} Life stories produce far more than a collection of ‘soft’ data to help fill gaps in the scientific or historical record. They reveal what was experienced and felt, rather than what happened. They offer fragments of memory reconstructed as stories.

\textsuperscript{60} Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds), The Myths We Live By (Routledge, London, 1990), 8.

\textsuperscript{61} Denis Byrne and Maria Nugent, Mapping Attachment: A Spatial Approach to Aboriginal Post-Contact Heritage (Department of Environment and Conservation, NSW, Hurstville, 2004), 179.


Put simply, in telling their life stories, people select, order and simplify their recollections to construct a narrative, usually by way of stories or parables. They locate themselves and others in the narrative and, in the process, convey certain ideological beliefs and mores. Perhaps more importantly, they resist closure and stasis, offering meanings and inviting questions not only about the past, but also about the community that we might become.\textsuperscript{64}

The agricultural landscapes of the wheatlands are shaped by powerful and competing historical narratives that are made explicit through the processes of remembering and storytelling. Agriculture is perhaps the most powerful manifestation there is of the complex relationships that exist between people and their physical environment. Given that it involves humans actively exploiting the physical environment for their survival, agriculture is ‘unsurpassed as a cultural agent of environmental change’.\textsuperscript{65} On a commercial scale, agriculture is profoundly influenced by economic, social, and cultural circumstances. It requires extensive human intervention in the environment, radically transforming or mitigating the very ecological systems that it depends on. The continuing expansion of the wheatlands throughout the twentieth century illustrates just how persistent the cultural imperative has been in this settler society to ‘make the deserts bloom’, how compelling are our national rural mythologies that make us yearn for a golden age of agriculture.

Recurring droughts and degraded farming landscapes, perhaps more than any other factor, compel settler Australians to reassess their relationships with the Australian landscape, and consider the tensions and contradictions that exist as a continuing legacy of colonisation. As local populations diminish and community places are abandoned, social memory heightens awareness of the past. The golden age of the post-war agricultural boom represents a touchstone of memory and identity. For farmers whose lives have been spent working with the land, the physical legacies of early settlers and forebears are valued as symbols of community and family ties. But amongst agricultural and environmental policymakers, the contemporary farming landscape is a place that has lost its memory. Meanwhile, governments seek ever


\textsuperscript{65} A.M. Mannion, \textit{Agriculture and Environmental Change: Temporal And Spatial Dimensions} (John Wiley and Sons Ltd, Chichester, England, 1995), 1.
more urgently to understand the complexities of the Australian environment in order that it can be coaxed into producing its agricultural bounty into the future.

The quest to understand and address environmental problems has acquired a dual identity, at once both expansive and despairing. On the one hand, it demonstrates that we still nurture the same colonising instinct to apply human ingenuity in order to make this fragile landscape flourish. On the other hand, it suggests that a new kind of ‘ecological dreaming’ has seeped into public consciousness, demanding alternative visions of the environment and the place of humans in it. Rural sociologists have been perhaps the most persistent advocates for alternative visions of rural Australia. Stewart Lockie, for example, argues that ‘[c]hallenges to economic rationalist discourse must not only construct an alternative discourse that highlights human costs, they must construct an alternative knowledge base with which to inform alternative rationalities and strategies’. 66

The dominant mythologies of the wheatlands have undergone a transformation as significant as the landscape itself. From a nineteenth century frontier pastoral landscape defined by largely adversarial relationships with both Indigenous peoples and ecologies, the wheatlands have been continuously redefined during the course of the twentieth century. It was in the postwar period, when Australia’s wheat and sheep farmers were basking in an era of buoyant markets and government largesse, that powerful images of the wheatlands as a landscape of abundance were cemented in the public imagination and indelibly etched into farm folklore. Whilst shifting global economic conditions and heightened environmental sensibilities have dulled the exuberant postwar confidence, the narrative of abundance remains firmly rooted and sustained by an enduring faith in scientific knowledge and technological solutions.

This thesis was conceived in the belief that there is a compelling need to understand how rural Australia is culturally constructed, to examine the dominant narratives that permeate the historiography of the wheatlands, and to challenge the ways in which Australia’s rural heritage is represented. Seddon suggests that the ‘imaginative apprehension’ of our environment is as important as the physical shaping

of it. Multiple visions or ‘ways of seeing’ the rivers and slopes and plains of the inland may sit uncomfortably with old imaginings, but the stakes are high. Questions about the future of farming communities lie fermenting amongst the degraded soils and waters of the semi-arid inland. Here, in these ‘intermediate spaces’, the physical and emotional scars of the twentieth century run deep.

Graeme Davison has written that one of the challenges facing Australian historians is to ‘reaffirm the value of the past to the present, not in the misleading form of a predictive science, but as a study that illuminates the subtle interaction between environmental, social, political and personal forces in the process of historical change’. Rural Australia remains a ‘powerfully mythologised’ place, its stories capturing and sustaining intimate connections between land and people. Recovering them is fundamentally a heritage matter. Indeed, understanding the nature of the rural landscape involves understanding how we live inside our stories. We tell them to make sense of our lives, and to place our experiences in a wider context. ‘Stripped of the story, we lose track of understanding itself’. As the Australian writer Arnold Zable has put it:

Ultimately, we tell stories because we must. Stories are what make us human. Stories can reveal a forgotten past. Stories can uncover hidden injustices and record the contradictory impulses that drive us. And stories link us to the wisdom of our collective pasts.

As another drought unsettles the wheatlands, the legacy of transforming the drier zones of the Australian continent into productive farming landscapes is brought into sharp relief once again. In these colonised and cultivated landscapes, the stories of


68 Graeme Davison, The Use and Abuse of Australian History (Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 2000), 270.

69 Peter Read’s interview with Heather Goodall in Read, Belonging, 176.


71 Arnold Zable, The Fig Tree (Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2002), 5.
place and belonging lie embedded in river banks, and buried beneath sand drifts along old fence lines. Farming is part of Australia’s settler heritage and, inevitably, part of the nation’s future. But the concept of national heritage underpins many of the dramas being played out in Australia’s contemporary farming landscapes. The bones of tension and contradiction that lie at the heart of the settler Australian relationship with the inland are exposed in the desiccated soils. The difficulties that settler Australians have encountered in inhabiting this country compel us to return repeatedly to questions about our cultural preoccupations and relationships with the environment. The onset of drought serves to remind us that the ecological and the social dimensions of the inland have always been more closely entwined than contemporary discourses about rural Australia suggest. The settler mythology of the ‘bush’ continues to dominate our responses to the rural landscape, and that mythology perpetuates old silences, divisions, and tensions at the heart of our relationships with our physical environment and with each other.

EPILOGUE

This is not the country of my memory. I haven't held its stories close to my chest, sifted through its images, sensed that small surging thrill of recognition. Connection comes slowly, but it does surely come. This is a solitary landscape, these plains. They are restless and unsettled, but I find a curious resonance in them. Perhaps they are more a state of mind. After all, there is little 'scape' to this land, just horizon and occasional small hills that promise much but deliver little. Its history is all about opening up but, as I venture through it, I think that perhaps now it is all about closing down. Or maybe that is just how it seems as I drive eastward, back to family, reflecting on the silences and catastrophes.

It is a landscape of mirages, holding out the promise of abundance. Rains have come to this part of the wheatlands, and tractors are bursting out of their sheds and into the paddocks with nervous energy. I have an image of Tom's lucerne, its roots penetrating deep into the ground, working to hold the shifting sands in
PLACE. ON THE FLOODPLAINS, LEVEE BANKS VAINLY ATTEMPT TO MAKE THE RIVER FORGET IT'S OWN HISTORY. EVERYWHERE I LOOK, I SEE BOUNDARIES MERGING, EDGES BLURRING. TIME AND SPACE ANCHOR ME, BUT EVERYTHING ELSE SEEMS MUCH LESS CERTAIN. I HAVE MANY HOMELANDS, PLACES WHERE MY SOUL HAS BEEN NOURISHED, IF ONLY FLEETingly. I THINK THAT THIS UNSETTLED COUNTRY IS NOW ONE OF THEM.
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Interviews


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* pseudonym used

Allen, Barbara*
Briggs, Dr Sue
Buttenshaw, Andrew
Casey, John*
Condobolin Historical Society (6 people)
Curtis, Fred
Doug and Margaret Watson
Doyle, Martin and Judy
Doyle, Steve
Duncan, Bill
Edols, Tom
Fettell, Dr Neil
Francis, John
Glasgow, Tom
Gray, Des
Helyar, Allan, Colleen and Tanya
Hope, Doug and Alison
King, Charlie*
Kingdon, Kim
Kingdon, Laurie
Lake Cargelligo community group
Lander, Bill
Overell, Bruce
McDonald, Neil and Ros
McGufficke, Allan
McPhillamy, Peter
Milthorpe, Peter
Phillips, Brett
Press, Dorothy
Raven, John and Kerry*
Ridley, Lesley
Sanderson, Robert and Kerry
Sanderson, Robin and Anne Coffey
Sheafe, Bill
Sheldon, Anthony
Simmonds, Oliver and Ella
South Gipps Landcare Group (6 people)
Spencer, Peter
Sutherland, John and Anthea
Taylor, Ethel
Taylor, Michael
Tomlinson, Ted
Turvey, Don
Vagg, Bert
Webber, Harry
Wynne, Bob
Yaddra Farmers Group (10 people)

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The Murray-Darling Basin Statistics:
## INTERVIEWS

### 1. Lachlan Valley, New South Wales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Interviewed</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Type of farm</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Robin Sanderson, 'Tullinga'</td>
<td>4 March 2001</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>25-60</td>
<td>Wheat, sheep, cattle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anne Coffey</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Dr Sue Briggs, CSIRO</td>
<td>9 March 2001</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-60</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Steve Doyle, 'Wisterton'</td>
<td>3 April 2001</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-60</td>
<td>Wheat, sheep, cattle</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Douglas and Margaret Watson, 'Moorong'</td>
<td>3 April 2001</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>25-60</td>
<td>Wheat, sheep, cattle</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Dorothy Press, 'Micabil'</td>
<td>4 April 2001</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>&gt; 60</td>
<td>Sheep, cattle</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. John and Kerry Raven*</td>
<td>4 April 2001</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>&gt; 60</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>7. Allan Helyar, 'Wallaroi West' Colleen and Tanya Helyar</td>
<td>5 April 2001</td>
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<td>25-60</td>
<td>Irrigated cotton, sheep, formerly wheat</td>
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<td>8. Robert and Kerry Sanderson, 'Orchard Lea'</td>
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<td>25-60</td>
<td>Irrigated pasture, wheat, sheep</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. John and Anthea Sutherland, 'East Borambil'</td>
<td>6 April 2001</td>
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<td>25-60</td>
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<td>10. Peter Milthorpe, Condobolin Agricultural Research Station (Department of Agriculture)</td>
<td>7 May 2001</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Martin and Judy Doyle, 'Penshurst'</td>
<td>7 May 2001</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>25-60</td>
<td>Wheat, sheep</td>
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<td>12. Brett Phillips, Department of Land and Water Conservation</td>
<td>8 May 2001</td>
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<td>13. Peter Spencer, Department of Land and Water Conservation</td>
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<td>15. Allan McGufficke, Department of Land and Water Conservation</td>
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<td>16. Dr Neil Fettell, 'Myuna', Condobolin Agricultural Research Station, Department of Agriculture</td>
<td>10 May 2001</td>
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<td>25-60</td>
<td>Wheat, sheep</td>
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<td>17. Michael Taylor</td>
<td>10 May 2001</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-60</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>Interviewee</td>
<td>Interviewed</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age range</td>
<td>Type of farm</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>-------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. Barbara Allen*, Condobolin</td>
<td>10 May 2001</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. Andrew Buttenshaw, ‘Coniston’, Lake Cowal (West Wyalong area)</td>
<td>15 June 2001</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-60</td>
<td>Wheat, sheep</td>
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<tr>
<td>21. Tom Glasgow, Tullibigeal (retired)</td>
<td>16 June 2001</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>&gt; 60</td>
<td>Rural business (retired)</td>
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<tr>
<td>22. Bill Lander, Euabalong West Bruce Overell, Lake Cargelligo</td>
<td>17 June 2001</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-60</td>
<td>Sheep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-60</td>
<td>Sheep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Ethel Taylor, Condobolin</td>
<td>18 June 2001</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>&gt; 60</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Harry Webber*, Condobolin</td>
<td>19 June 2001</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>&gt; 60</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Bill Sheafe, Booligal</td>
<td>11 December 2001</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-60</td>
<td>Cattle</td>
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<tr>
<td>26. Lake Cargelligo focus group (7 people)</td>
<td>12 December 2001</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>&gt; 60</td>
<td>Various (retired)</td>
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<tr>
<td>27. Bert Vagg, Hillston</td>
<td>14 December 2001</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>&gt; 60</td>
<td>Sheep (retired)</td>
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<td>28. Ted Tomlinson</td>
<td>30 May 2002</td>
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<td>25-60</td>
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<td>29. John Francis</td>
<td>21 May 2002</td>
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<td>25-60</td>
<td>Agronomist, Condobolin Research Station</td>
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<td>31. Doug and Alison Hope</td>
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<td>Sheep, wheat (retired)</td>
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<td>32. John Casey*, Warroo</td>
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<td>33. Condobolin Historical Society (6 people)</td>
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<td>Mixed</td>
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<td>Various (retired)</td>
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<td>34. Charlie King*, Condobolin</td>
<td>20 June 2002</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>35. Yaddra Farmers Group (10 people)</td>
<td>22 June 2002</td>
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<td>25-60</td>
<td>Various</td>
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<tr>
<td>36. South Gipps Landcare Group (6 people)</td>
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<td>Various</td>
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<tr>
<td>37. Oliver and Ella Simmonds, ‘Crowfoot’</td>
<td>1 August 2005</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>&gt;60</td>
<td>Cattle, wheat</td>
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<td>38. Tom Edols, ‘Corinella’</td>
<td>2 August 2005</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>&gt;60</td>
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<tr>
<td>39. Peter McPhillamy, Forbes (retired)</td>
<td>2 August 2005</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>&gt;60</td>
<td>Cattle, wheat (retired)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* pseudonym used

APPENDICES

376
2. **Mallee region, Victoria**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Interviewed</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Type of farm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laurie Kingdon</td>
<td>&gt;60</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Bill Duncan, Millewa</td>
<td>3 September 2000</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-60</td>
<td>Wheat, sheep</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Fred Curtis, Millewa</td>
<td>3 September 2000</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-60</td>
<td>Wheat, sheep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Des Gray, Millewa</td>
<td>3 September 2000</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-60</td>
<td>Wheat, sheep</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Don Turvey, Millewa</td>
<td>3 September 2000</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-60</td>
<td>-</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**APPENDICES**

377
KEY THEMES IDENTIFIED IN INTERVIEWS

- Family
- Community
- Farming methods
- Irrigation
- Environmental change – river
- Environmental change – land
- Recreational activities
- Sense of place
- Special places
- Work
- Indigenous-settler relationships
- Other settlers
- Identity
- Drought
- Floods
- Managing the land
- Social change
- Grazing
### Town places (89)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Shire</th>
<th>List</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All saints Anglican Parish church, Condo</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Commercial Hotel, Condo</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courthouse, Condo</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>LEP, RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodwill and Manse, Condo</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Bank, Lake C</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>LEP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Royal Mail Hotel, Lake C</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>LEP</td>
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<tr>
<td>State Bank, Lake C</td>
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<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Bank</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>SHR, LEP</td>
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<tr>
<td>PO</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>SHR, RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courthouse group</td>
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<td>LEP, RNE</td>
</tr>
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<td>Peak Hill hospital</td>
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<td>LEP</td>
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<td>Peak Hill Gen cemetery</td>
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<td>RNE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Police station</td>
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<td>LEP</td>
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<td>Showground pavilion</td>
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<td>St George Anglican church</td>
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<td>LEP, RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St James RC church</td>
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<td>LEP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trundle hotel</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist school hall</td>
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<td>RNE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abernathy &amp; Co Stonemason’s lathe</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>RNE, SHR</td>
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<td>Albion hotel</td>
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<td>RNE</td>
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<td>ANZ bank</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBC bank</td>
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<td>RNE</td>
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<td>PO</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>RNE, SHR</td>
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<td>Railway station group</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>Town hall</td>
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<td>Wyalong central station building</td>
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<td>Wyalong courthouse</td>
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<td>RNE</td>
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<td>Barmedman hotel</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SHR, LEP</td>
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<td>Bank of NSW</td>
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<td>LEP</td>
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<td>Brick barns, West Wyalong</td>
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<td>Butcher shop and store, Blandford</td>
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<td>LEP</td>
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<td>CBC bank</td>
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<td>Constable quarters</td>
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<td>Council chambers, hall</td>
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<td>Courthouse and lockup group</td>
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<td>Fosseys store</td>
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<td>LEP</td>
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<td>Globe hotel</td>
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<td>Mirrool hotel</td>
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<td>Hotels group, Barmedman</td>
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<td>John Meagher and Co building</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Souden jewellers</td>
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<td>Linley</td>
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<td>Cobar courthouse</td>
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<td>LEP,RNE</td>
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<td>LEP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Church of England</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastoral and mining technological museum</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PO</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSIRO Soil reserve division</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 dwelling houses, Murray Street</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire station</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great western hotel</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP,RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council chambers</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police station, barracks</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lockup and cells</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional offices</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Railway station</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP,RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schoolmaster residence</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisters of Mercy convent and classrooms</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Lawrence O’Toole RC Church</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniting church</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water tower, Condo</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flour mill site</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grenfell Hill</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cemeteries, grave sites (18)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Shire</th>
<th>List</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alectown Gen cemetery</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goobang cemetery</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parkes general cemetery</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trundle general cemetery</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forbes general cemetery</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barmedman general cemetery</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>RNE,LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Wyalong general cemetery</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyalong gen cemetery</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morangarell gen cemetery</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private cemetery on Curra station</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Cunningham’s grave, Tottonham</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillview graves</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hodges family cemetery on The Elms</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bygoo Station burial sites group, lone grave of boundary rider’s wife, Stewart family cemetery</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake Cowal station graves</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone grave of Anne Woodhouse</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone graves (Wisman, Kerner)</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barmedman general cemetery</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>RNE</td>
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</table>
### Pastoral properties (7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Shire</th>
<th>List</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cadow homestead</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melrose Homestead and Outbuildings</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>LEP, RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barmedman Station and outbuildings</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolero</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cowal West homestead, quarters, shed and stables</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homestead and kitchen/laundry, Barmedman station</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stables, sheds, woolshed (Barmedman station)</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Extractive industries (4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Shire</th>
<th>List</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barmedman mining area and mineral pool</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herricks Brick kilns</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towser’s Huts, Fort Bourke Hill</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mines office</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>RNE</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Indigenous places (22)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place (locations withheld)</th>
<th>Shire</th>
<th>List</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 places</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 places</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 places</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 place</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 places</td>
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<td>RNE</td>
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</table>

### Nature reserves (15)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Shire</th>
<th>List</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bogandillon Swamp</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tollingo Mallee Area</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woggoon Nature Reserve</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>LEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curumbenya nature reserve</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton trig geological site</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eugowra nature reserve</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake Cowal</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddigower nature reserve</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gubbata nature reserve</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taleeban mallee</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charcoal tank nature reserve</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corinya Lake Area</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Capital geological site</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marma-Bulla sites complex</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matakana mallee</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>RNE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>