Our colonial forbears were invaders blind to the nature of their new land, antagonistic to its plants and animals, unable to represent the landscape in their art other than by imitation of Europe, and determined to extract wealth without regard for environmental cost. We, by contrast, are enlightened by environmental awareness, armed with the tools of modern science to put matters right, and uplifted by the beauty of our home. Environmental concerns are a recent development, with few if any precedents that promise to direct us to sustainable land uses and protection of our environment. This mythological view of our past and present is in many ways comforting, for it allows us the conceit to view the past as full of mistakes and the future as full of promise. It is a view held by many scientists and others, reflected in recent accounts of our environmental history.

Tim Bonyhady challenges this comforting view in a wonderful book that is at once disturbing and deeply enlightening. As environmental analysis and history carried out by scholars who properly embed people and human culture in the natural world, gain followers of the skill and ability of Bonyhady, we are finding a much richer view of our past. The contrast between those who argue that the past was a time of exploitation and despoliation, and the more complex view of parallel and competing protection and exploitation, is most succinctly seen in a few sentences of Bonyhady’s introduction:

The work of Bill Lines and Tim Flannery overshadowed the more subtle, reliable environmental histories written by Joe Powell, Geoffrey Bolton and others. In Taming the Great South Land, Lines maintained that ‘Australia’s pioneers felt no emotional ties to the land’ but saw it simply as ‘potential wealth’ to be exploited… Flannery went further in The Future Eaters. Blind even to the existence of the critics identified by Lines, he claimed nineteenth-century settlers showed ‘no concern at all about wastage of timber’ so confident were they that Australia’s forests were superabundant.(p. 3).

Bonyhady demonstrates otherwise, in a beautifully written and illustrated account of the period up to about 1900. Drawing upon his two fields of particular expertise, art history and the law and using the tools of the historian with a deep understanding of
culture and society, he lays bare the superficial and downright wrong views of the likes of Lines and Flannery. He does not refer to their works again after the introduction.

In twelve essays, each a chapter, Bonyhady demonstrates parallel views among the colonists of alienation, delight, exploitation, conservation and largely unsuccessful policy, law, regulation and practice of natural resource and environmental protection and husbanding. This book shows us that our past is just like our present, with tensions and countervailing forces between the widely divergent opinions and urges of our country’s people. It is not an unexpected outcome, for humanity has always contained these tensions: this is why we invented politics.

Not only does Bonyhady show that European environmental awareness came with the First Fleet, and that the first legal attempt at environmental protection was in 1788, he demonstrates that to bring about change is a matter for human society, politics and attitudes. The simple view, adopted by so many scientists who in good faith wish to make matters better, that good science should lead directly and inexorably to good policy and therefore sound environmental and natural resource management, is shown to be one-dimensional in Bonyhady’s account. He does not achieve this conclusion by proselytising but by telling the historical stories of the nineteenth and late eighteenth centuries. He allows readers to draw their own conclusions, through powerful and perspicacious examples.

There is so much in this book that I can only give a taste of the twelve essays. Every page is full of detail, of fascinating stories of people and places, and it is full of humanity. This is not a dry history of dates and events. It is rich in the everyday frailties of people struggling with complexity, survival, uncertainty, and their cultural and environmental inheritance. There is little here to assign blame and every reason to believe that we will continue to struggle like our forbears, and will get much of it wrong. A sobering but realistic message.

The twelve essays treat birds, forests, the aesthetic of the bush through the eyes of artists, floods, survival, irrigation, coal, and much more. I was particularly struck by two essays.

In Birds of Providence (Chapter 1), Bonyhady largely explains one of the great mysteries of human behaviour: the apparent wilful destruction of entire species by hunting. The Mount Pitt Bird (Providence Petrel) of Norfolk Island was the subject of colonial painters’ enthusiasm. It was also to be the saviour of the convicts, marines
and officers on Norfolk Island. In 1790 the newcomers to the island had to find food over and above that which they brought with them, to tide them over until they could establish crops. The Mount Pitt Birds laid eggs on the island, and were easily caught in huge numbers at night after they returned from feeding at sea. From April to July in 1720, Bonyhady estimates that at least 300,000 birds were caught. There were only 498 people on the Island, and they caught up to 16 birds for each person on some nights. The birds were the size of a plucked pigeon, and were eaten along with flour, rice and salted beef and pork brought from Sydney. While hinting at waste and perhaps sport, Bonyhady does not resolve the paradox of this apparent overabundance of food.

While not directly linking the two, Bonyhady adds a story from the United States where the passenger pigeon was slaughtered to extinction after the Civil War as a matter of choice, not necessity. Bonyhady describes the situation on Norfolk Island as one of necessity, but he includes some clues suggesting choice. There appears to have been some attempt to protect the birds, despite the dominant trend to overkilling. Australia’s first environmental law, passed by Philip Gidley King on Norfolk Island, was designed to protect the banana trees, while Ralph Ross, second commandant of the island, attempted to stop the overexploitation of the Mount Pitt bird. Ross proclaimed a new regime to which all colonists on the Island agreed by passing under ‘the King’s colours at the flagstaff, and between the colours of the detachment’. But on an island of 3450 hectares, in a penal colony of only 498 people, the law was flouted by everyone. Ross’ concern was to secure a continuing supply of birds in the face of agricultural uncertainty on the Island. He eventually relented and allowed the taking of a fixed number of birds per person, coupled with a reduction in store rations. The nightly slaughter and havoc increased and the birds were once more under assault. Ross also attempted to preserve the birds’ habitat by banning unapproved removal of trees, having previously prided himself on the success of clearing for cultivation.

The El Niño of 1790–91 brought a new dimension to the colonists’ problems. Their crops failed and there was no hope of re-supply from Sydney where the drought was also severe. Further recourse to the law by King when he returned to Norfolk Island to succeed Ross, also failed. The birds continued to supplement the diminished store rations. After the drought, the island’s crops thrrove to the point of a substantial excess of maize, much of which was used to increase the island’s pig population.
Thus the Birds of Providence became irrelevant to the survival of the colonists. Pigs escaped and helped to destroy the birds’ remaining habitat. By 1910, neither bird nor, fascinatingly, burrow could be found. What happened to the burrows? Bonyhady is silent.

Here is a study of exploitation of nature driven by survival, of attempted conservation, of failed law in a tiny population, and of the interaction of climate, agriculture, conservation and law, about 160 years before the post Second World War period when such concerns are thought to have begun.

Chapter 10 also caught my attention. It begins with W.C. Piguenit, artist, cartographer, conservationist and entrepreneur. His evocative painting *Out West During the Floods of 1890* depicted the picturesque prospect of a flood in a dry land. But he also clearly wanted to convey the moral of the floods, that is, the wasted opportunity to conserve flood water for use in dry times. The huge loss of stock during the drought of the late 1880s, and during the flood of 1890, sparked concern for the plight of tens of thousands of animals, and of the people whose livelihoods depended upon them. The flood damage to Bourke, and the high cost of meat in Sydney, also drew the attention of city dwellers to land and water management in the west; just as reportage by the metropolitan press in the early 1990s revived interest in blue-green algae. And so began a serious push for dams and irrigation, to control floods and reduce the impact of drought. The drought of 1895, a rabbit plague and falling wool prices created economic havoc among the pastoralists. In Victoria, some clerics turned to prayer. But James Moorhouse, the Anglican Bishop of Melbourne from 1877 to 1886, disagreed. Water should be conserved, and prayer to change the ‘natural laws’ was inappropriate. The bush poets, Lawson and Paterson, during a literary battle in the 1890s saw irrigation as an answer to the plight of those in the ‘Out Back Hell’. ‘Let us irrigate’ – or forget ‘talk of settling people on the land’ was Lawson’s view. When Burrinjuck Dam on the Murrumbidgee was authorized, Lawson was delighted:

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And now the glorious scheme’s afoot,
Our country to deliver
From drought and earth on blazing waste,
By long neglected river.
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Lawson became the government publicist for the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area.
Edward Millen, a pastoralist, journalist and politician wrote in 1897–1900 about the massive soil and vegetation degradation that had occurred in western New South Wales as a result of the long drought. He saw radical reduction of stock numbers as the solution. He retreated from his previous support of water conservation, which he recognized was useless in extended droughts. To Millen, the west was a place of drought punctuated with occasional moist seasons rather than fair seasons punctuated with occasional drought, a view that is still not widely accepted.

Once again, Bonyhady has woven together art, politics, journalism, and recorded observations of nature to tell the same kind of story as occurred on Norfolk Island. People learning about the land, but coming to sophisticated judgements earlier in our history than many realize. The usual view of the history of irrigation in New South Wales and Victoria is a simple plea for irrigation to create wealth without regard for consequences. Bonyhady reminds us of early calls for conservation of water and fodder to alleviate stress on stock and land, complex responses that sometimes history forgot.

If you harbour any doubts, about the utility of environmental history to inform our current concerns, read this book. If you want a sophisticated and subtle view of the interplay of human and natural forces that created our natural resource and environmental management, read this book. If you would prefer to be comforted by the myths created by so many prominent recent authors about our environmental history, do not touch this book. But I suggest that if we have any hope of creating a biologically healthy and economically robust rural land use in Australia, Bonyhady must be read widely.

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