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Oceans, Droughts and Flooding Rains

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Working paper only—not to be quoted.

The tyranny of distance that has dominated Australian history has been driven by the power of water and its absence.

The rivers and waterholes that were sacred sites for the first dwellers determined the patterns of their habitations and journeyings, and through the millennia the expanses of the oceans surrounding their continent kept them apart from foreign intrusions as they adapted a dry land to their economic needs and developed a culture responsive to its demands. . . Some 12 000 years ago the rising of these oceans set the Tasmanians still further apart, and 600 years ago the northern seas brought them contact with traders and fishers from Asia and its islands, shortly before sailors and, later, settlers, began to arrive from Europe.

These latecomers were the latest produces of the agricultural revolution that had begun in the river valleys of Asia and North Africa in the millennia after the rising of the seas. As the resulting cultures spread, they set out from the rivers and coasts, and the Mediterranean and the Baltic seas and the Indian Ocean became their highways. At the same time, other settlers spread through the Americas and the islands to the north of Australia, as far as New Guinea, and through the Pacific as far as New Zealand. Anthropologists may unravel for us the patterns of trade across Torres Strait. History shrouds the location of the Maori homeland of Hawai'i in mystery, but geographers and oceanographers may one day be able to tell us why they did not make the further voyages that would have brought them to Australia.

The oceans that carried the new settlers to Australia carried with them new plants and beasts, new tools and new dreams. These dreams rested on a free and prosperous rural citizenry, but this depended on plenitude of water. Instead of an inland sea that would generate a bounteous climate, the explorers found a dry inland, a dead heart, the settlers on the intermediate plains encountered a frequency of drought. These geographic facts have shaped Australia's economic development. But as well as being geographic facts, oceans, seas and rivers are cultural constructs that determine the way we perceive and use or live with our material and human environment.

Seas and Oceans

For centuries, Europeans saw the world as a mass of land with the Mediterranean Sea at its centre and the Ocean marking its boundaries. The Mediterranean and the Euxine, and the rivers flowing into them, were their highways. Then, from the time of the Norse invasions, they extended their highways first through the the Baltic and then across the whaleroads of the Ocean itself. The Ocean became plural, as Viking kingdoms were established in the North Atlantic, saints, possibly, and fishermen, almost certainly, crossed to America, and soldiers, traders and slavers crept around the coasts of Africa. These seafarers had first sailed in search of a new way to Jerusalem, but found instead a whole new Ocean that gave them way to the wealth and cultural splendours of the Indies, China and Japan. When at last they stumbled on the shores of Australia, they proved barren, but the vision of wealth the oceans had discovered for them in the east never quite dropped away. Camoens wrote of gold and luxury abounding in Irian South, and after Magellan opened the Pacific to European eyes his successors sought through its islands for the Great Southland of the Holy Spirit. The pragmatic James Cook and the scientific rationalist Joseph Banks replaced these rumours with a pastoral vision of a curious country fit for reformatory and pastoral settlement.

Kenneth Slessor later described the momentous nature of Cook's decision, unlike his precursors, to choose "a passage into the Dark" and sail west rather than north from New Zealand.

... "Choose now!"

The winds roared, blowing home, blowing home,
Over the Coral Sea. "Choose now! The trades
Cried once to Tasman, throwing him for choice
Thir teeth or shoujlders, and the Dutchman chose
The wind's way, turning north, "Choose Bougainville!"
The wind cried once, and Bougainville had hear
The voice of God, calling him prudently
Out of the dead lee shore, and chose the north,
The wind's way. So, too, Cook made choice,
Over the brink, into the devil's mouth,
With four month's food, and sailors wild with dreams
Of English beer, and smoking barns of home.
So Cook made choice, so Cook sailed westabout,
So men write poems in Australia.

But Slessor, writing in the 1930s, was deliberately producing for Australia a foundation myth that would give it a place among the cultures of the west that, with Norman Lindsay, he had earlier tried to recreate in the southland. The leering satyrs and roistering knaves they enlisted lost their life as they crossed the ocean, a cultural as well as a physical barrier. Only by making the ocean itself a protagonist could Australia recover the missing dimennion of its imaginative life.

Cook had no such concerns. He sailed west because his discoveries had already "reduced the only possible site of a continent in the southern hemisphere ... to so small a space that it would be a pity to leave that unexamined." His greater interest was in the pacific islands themselves. (Cook, p. 91).

Despite Slessor, and although Australia has always played a major role in Pacific affairs, the people and places of the Pacific have played little part in shaping its imagination. Australians became preoccupied with the problems of settlement. In contrast to New Zealanders, have looked to Neptune's inland realm, searching for a sea that did not exist, exploring, draining and polluting rivercourses, or paddling by the shores of the threatening ocean. When Louis Becke sailed forth, he found only islands in an ocean, not an ocean of islands, and brought back tales of cannibals, pirates and blackbirders. Even Slessor watches the sea-captains from the shore. The New Zealander Allen Curnow on the other hand sees Tasman's discovery of New Zdealand first through Tasman's eyes, and then through the eyes of those who were discovered:

Suddenly exhilaration
Went off like a gun ...
... There was the seascape
Crammed with coast, surprising
As new lands will, the sailor
Moving on the face of the waters,
Watching the earth take shape
Round the unearthly summits ...

The earth here belongs to the ocean, but for the islanders the ocean is not barrier but threat, as indeed it was to become to Australians: "Always to islanders danger Is what comes over the sea ...". The poem ends with the reminder that New Zealand is an island, and that its encounters with the sea have brought bloodshed they cannot turn their backs on. (Curnow, pp. 75-76). By contrast, Slessor's poem ends in Scotland, where the voyaging has become only a romantic memory.

Even when Australian writers turn to their shores, they avoid direct encounter, bloody or otherwise, with the sea. Vance a Palmer set a novel among fishermen in *The Passage*, but the estuary where his characters work is only a background to the lives they lead on shore. Thea Astley ventured into the Pacific in her *Beachmasters*, but in the book she kept to her island, and when she returned to Australia she had a deluge sweep her bolder characters out into the oceans, where they were heard of no more. Tim Winton took on Melville's whale and whalers, but again his action was confined to the shore, as it is in *Dirt Music*, another novel of a fisherman. The television series *Sea Change* replanted in a seaside town the pastoral realm of ruralinn ocnce resisting urban pace and greed. The poet Robert Adamson offers a different perspective as he chooses to inhabit the littoral as a place of refuge from the destructive violence of the city. The violence of humans and nature persist along Adamson's Hawkesbury, but his people learn to balance it in their lives. We see this also in the 2005 film *The Oyster Farmer*, which in its closing credits thanks Adamson for his assistance. Like Adamson, the film offers a sea-change which is more than escape.

A Dry Land

From the first, European settlement in Australia has been shaped by the presence or absence of water. The marshy conditions and lack of suitable streams led to the site of the first landing being shifted from Botany Bay to Sydney Harbour, "one of the finest harbours in the world, in which a thousand sail of the line might ride in perfect security," and where the Tank Stream provided "the finest spring of water, and ... ships can anchor close to the shore, that at very small expense the largest vessels may unload" (Phillip, 47-48). Yet early Sydney continued to suffer from inadequate water supplies, and the pressure for the settlement to break out of the barrier of then Blue Mountains. Roads and railways eventually bridged these mountains and brought from the inland plains the products that enabled Sydney to grow, but the lack of suitable water resources has continued to plague it. Had the first settlement been on the Hunter River, the shape of New South Wales would have been quite different.

Vincent Buckley writes that the Australian land has never captured the love of its settlers. They may be grateful to the country for the freedom or opportunity it has given them, but the land remains no more than a resource to be exploited. Although the landscape of Buckley's poems is generally well-watered, the dryness of the inland has become a metonym for the hostility to humans of the landscape, and often a metaphor for the spiritual condition of its settlers. Buckley identifies the empty land in the work Lawson Furphy, a place that could hold or enrich the imagination. AD Hope gives this land its metaphoric force as he writes of its people huddled on the coasts, abandoning the dreams of rural plenitude, building instead "five teeming sores ... Where second-hand Europeans pullulate Timidly on the edge of alien shores." Yet Hope values the oceans that beat on these shores, keeping at bay the "lush jungle of modern thought" and leaving us to hope that "still from deserts prophets come". This poem captures two elements of white Australian dreaming: the feeling of exile from the centres of life, and the belief in the transforming power of the deserts that may enable us to make a new beginning. But while Patrick

White in *Voss* was to show a similar sense of the desert itself breeding prophets, for most writers it was a place of despair:

Out on the wastes of the Never Never—
That's where the dead men lie!
There where the heat-waves dance for ever—
That's where the dead men lie!
That's where the Earth's loved sons are keeping
Endless tryst: not the west winds sweeping
Feverish pinions can wake their sleeping—
Out where the dead men lie!

Barcroft Boake finishes his ballad with by opposing the bush to the city, where r Moneygrub in his city club sips his profits, and recks not that every link of his gold watch-chain is stamped with
Names of men whose limbs are cramped with
Too long lying in grave mound, camped with
Death where the dead men lie.

While Boake joins money to his image of the bush destroying those who work in it, Henry Lawson gives us images of a bush unrelenting in its imprisonment and destruction of the human spirit:

Bush all around—bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten native apple trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few she-oaks which are signing against the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilisation—a shanty on the main road.

The dry bush is a main actor in this story, as it is in most of Lawson's bush yarns. In his major work, the Joe Wilson sequence, this waterless isolation destroys the Wilsons' neighbour, Mrs Slater, in an episode that overshadows all the positive hopes of their marriage and home-making. Yet Lawson wrote these stories at the same time that Arthur Streeton was working on the series of paintings that celebrate the light of Australia glinting on rich pastures and waters. While Lawson wrote of disheartening experience, Streeton painted the dream.

Creeks and flooded Rivers

It did not take long for the language the settlers brought with them to change to accommodate the new reality. Rivers retained their currency, even when they were reduced to strings of muddy puddles or to dry watercourses. Thomas Mitchell inscribed grandiose names on the dry inland plains, conjuring up visions of lofty mountains and well-watered valleys, thus reinforcing the myth of inland fertility. Squatters named their stations after glens in Scotland, but gullies, waterholes, and creeks replaced the vales and fountains, pools, rivulets, streams and brooks of England. The creeks were often designated with such terms as Homestead, Dry or Deadman's, or the matter-of-fact Seven Mile. Even when they flowed with water after sudden rains, they offered an impediment rather than a path to progress.

In a dismal bloody mood
The bloody stockman bloody stood
The bloody creek's a bloody flood,
This bloody moke's no bloody good,
It's bloody me or bloody him,

He'll have to sink or bloody swim,
Bloody, bloody, bloody.

(Anon.)

Although their surveyor attached the names of Greek myth to Victorian rivers, none attracted the numinous and pastoral connotations of the Scamander or the Rhine or the Thames. A few, such as the Murray in the southeast or the reaches of the Swan in the west, retained the grandeur or sublimity that eighteenth century Europe had attached to its rivers. By the end of the twentieth century, the interest in wines had associated the names of the Hunter, the Clare and the Margaret Rivers with the nurture of quality, but through the earlier periods of settlement rivers were no more than adjuncts of industry. The lower reaches of the Brisbane River retained their mangroves, and further up were lined with fine houses whose owners could watch passenger ships travelling to their berths in the centre of the city. In Sydney, water traffic was concentrated on the harbour, and the Tank Stream that had watered the first settlement was built over. In Melbourne, the Yarra was straightened and confined, its lower reaches used for docks, its upper reaches as a sewer and a channel of industrial waste. The Maribyrnong was known more commonly as the Saltwater, a name that suggested sterility, and became a noisome drain of blood and offal from the abattoirs. The wetlands it had watered were drained and its course confined to make way for horses and houses. Lesser Melbourne waterways, like the Gardiner's and Moonee Ponds Creeks, were ordered in concrete to make them more aesthetically pleasing to the tidiers of the Board of Works.

This same Board engineered the vast system of sewers that removed human faeces from the rivers, and built the dams and aqueducts that enabled Melbourne to boast that it had the world's purest household water. At the opening of the Upper Yarra Dam, the British Governor of Victoria, Sir Dallas Brooks, proclaimed that Melbourne's water was known as the champagne of waters. "Personally," he added, "I like to take mine with Scotch," thereby carefully removing it from the table culture of France to Britain. The next extension of the system of Melbourne's water led to a reverse of the Snowy River example by diverting water from the country to the coast. Like the Snowy Scheme, this had the effect of deny the rivers and lakes of Gippsland the flow of water needed to keep them alive.

The Snowy Mountains Scheme itself expressed a long-standing dream about Australian rivers. During the interwar years, such popular writers as William Halliday and Ion Idriess wrote about the huge waste of water flowing into the oceans from northern rivers, and suggested that it should be dammed and used to support close agricultural settlements. These would at once increase food production and the population, and so enhance our defence against the hordes now preparing to invade us from across the oceans. The schemes were thus a response to perceptions of both the perceived neglect of the north and the diminishing protection offered by the surrounding oceans. They changed their direction and reached their culmination in the ambitious Bradfield scheme. Bradfield, who had already built the bridge that removed the physical if not the social barrier of the harbour, now proposed bringing the northern waters to the south, so changing to wetlands the drylands of the interior.

At the end of the century the novelist Robert Drewe enlisted this dream as the basis of his novel, *The Drowner*. In *The Bodysurfers* (1983), Drewe had already drawn attention to the importance of the seaside in Australian culture, but his characters use the beach as a site of personal affairs rather than a place where they may live out their lives. In *The Drowner*, Drewe turns to two of the great myths of Australian culture: the dream of turning back the water and the tragedy of achievement. The opening chapters of the novel describe water-farming practices in

England that suggest the total co-operation of nature and technique that produces wealth and cultural harmony. But the harmony proves illusory, and social practices drive the drowner to Australia, where he follows the mining rush to Kalgoorlie. This is a frontier settlement made more violent by the lack of water. The eventual arrival of water costs the life of, O'Connell, the historical engineer who brought it and who commits suicide in despair at the attacks of his critics. The coming of water also signifies the coming of the law and order that ends the freedom as well as the violence of Kalgoorlie. Margaret Simon varies this theme in *Savage Garden*, set in the South Australian riverland. This novel brings together the narrator's attempts to make a productive garden in the harsh environment, and the attempts of an engineer to overcome salinity by draining the water to a lake. Both succeed, yet the one project almost cancels the other. While Drewe portrays a society governed by utilitarian responses to the environment, where humans strive to control nature, Simon adopts a more organic response, in which human and natural shape each other.

Conclusion

Water has always been a major factor in determining then patterns of human habitation and culture. As the above sketch indicates, the early European settlers to Australia brought a wetlands culture to a dry land. Later immigrants also largely came from wetlands cultures in Europe and Asia. Behind the barrier of the Ocean, we constructed an economy based on intense use of water. If we are to follow the example of the first people in the land and develop a sustainable culture and economy, we need to re-imagine ourselves as a drylands people. At the same time, we need to re-imagine the Ocean as a bridge rather than as a barrier or a threat.

Research

The examples given the role played by water and its absence in Australian culture, and the way these responses govern our ideas of what is possible and desirable, and therefore both our use of our immediate environment and our responses to the external world. These ideas need developing in themselves, but they also point to the need for linked research in history, sociology, the environmental sciences, technology, and the history of science and technology. An immediate task would be the development of two ARC proposals: one for a Discovery grant to investigate water in Australian history and culture, and the other a Linked grant, possibly with City West Water, to investigate sources, control, usages and expectations of water in Melbourne's west. Both of these would be multi-disciplinary projects. I would suggest employing consultants to develop proposals to be submitted in the next round of ARC applications.

