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## Introduction to the 2009 ICLL Symposium 'Hydrobotanica'

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## Introduction to the 2009 ICLL Symposium 'Hydrobotanica'

By Glen Phillips, ICLL Director

I have been thinking about what it is like to be an Australian. From my earliest memories it seems that water and plants dominated the spaces in which I lived. In the town where I was born, Southern Cross, water was almost impossible to find when that place in the desert was first discovered to be a rich source of gold. Sometimes a gallon of water would almost be worth its weight in gold. Later, living in the Wheatbelt, we had no water supply other than the rainwater tanks collecting the winter run-off from the roof of our house. So we conserved water by every means possible if we were to survive the summer without having to buy a tankful from the Railways Department. But some of the precious water from dishwashing, clothes washing and even from our weekly baths was used to keep my mother's menagerie of pot plants surviving grouped in the shade of the tankstands. Cool drinking water came tasting of canvas from the waterbag hanging from the verandah. And waking early on bush mornings I would hear the scrape scraping of a gumtree or acacia on the weatherboards or windows of our bedroom.

Water and plants, hydrobotanics are an essential background to life in this country. And therefore it seemed an appropriate topic for our International Centre for Landscape and Language's Symposium this year when associate of the Centre and ECU PhD student John Ryan suggested this theme earlier in the year. I must also thank John for being the brains and brawn behind the wonderfully efficient organisation of this Symposium. Likewise I must thank the Director of ECU's CREATEC, Dr Rod Giblett for his enthusiastic support for this Symposium and for providing the funds that have made it possible. I welcome all participants and especially our galaxy of distinguished keynote speakers and panelists. I am sure we are going to have an unforgettable day of immersing ourselves in the hydro and flourishing with the botanical.

But back to my childhood reminiscences for a moment, with your kind indulgence. When I look at the poems I have written about earlier times in my life I am struck by the frequency of mention of both water and plants. Yet perhaps I should not be surprised because even on our coastal plain of the Metropolitan Region, where the annual average rainfall is actually higher than London's, our population growth already has taxed the water supplies so severely that we have resorted to desalination of sea water to get through the summer—borrowing against the natural supply as my family did in many a country town. But long before European colonisation in 1829 or the arrival of the first indigenous Australians more than fifty thousand years ago, the trees and plants of the well watered coastal plain had been forced to develop elaborate means of coping with high rates of transpiration in the long summers. As the late George Seddon (a foundation member of the ICLL Board) remarked in his seminal study of this area, *Sense of Place*:

It is of great scientific interest to learn how the plants of the Swan Coastal Plain survive the summer...Research on the sclerophylls of the Swan Coastal Plain shows that most of them restrict transpiration during the summer months, partly by closing the stomates and partly by the operation of a protoplasmic factor not yet fully understood...'

I wonder if that factor has been discovered since George wrote that in 1972. Maybe Dr Barbara York Main, Dr Greg Pryor or Dr Hugo Bekle can enlighten us about that.

But it does permit me, maybe, to quote from my own poem which gave the title to one of my first books of poetry, "Sacrificing the Leaves"—this is a poem in which I am contrasting the deciduous trees of Europe and North America with the evergreen Australian sclerophytes. The former of course dump their spent leaves in the 'fall' to endure the freezing winter. The Australian eucalypts, acacias, casuarinas, melaleucas, banksias and other species discard their 'burned out' leaves slowly all through the year—just as the nose cone of a returning satellite is designed to burn away and so protect the astronauts—and so the evergreen tree survives by this slow sacrifice:

### **Sacrificing the Leaves**

They say here the world's upside down,  
and in summer it is true I find  
all the green lawn covered in the morning  
with this close pattern of what seem autumn leaves.  
The eucalypts, wiser than the trees of the old world,  
ancient in sacrificing to the sun what is its due  
this way will find new strength to put out afresh  
tawny young leaf-sprays when the first autumn rains come.

In the night I dreamed the nuclear sun  
radiated me with its fatal kiss  
and burning with this god's impress  
I could not make no patient sacrifice  
and it seemed water even for dry lips  
would not ease my torment unto death.

And so today, awoken from that fevered dream  
I walk in the morning sun under the great trees  
and my shoes thrust aside the fallen leaves  
that lightly freckle the summer grass  
and I think of lovers making their own source of light  
and how, if they never learn the arts of sacrifice,  
love does not last a season; falls in the autumn days.

Finally, searching for some way to segue from botany to water itself (not only as a subject for scientific study but as a central symbol in the belief systems of nearly every one of the world's great cultures) I want to read a second poem about the water of the Great Western Plateau which arrives on the Swan Coastal Plain of Perth via the rivers and creeks of the Darling Range or, more correctly, the Darling Scarp.

As a schoolboy from the Wheatbelt, I swam for the first time in my life in fresh running water when I came to the city to go to high school. It was with other boys who showed me a pool in the then perennial channels of Wungong Brook where it flowed into Forestdale Lake. That lake, by the way is a favourite study site for our Director of CREATEC, Rod Giblett.

I mainly chose this poem however because it expresses something about that aforementioned sacred place that water holds in all our lives. Or should hold! And that is one other reason for the bringing together of the themes of plants and water in this Symposium.

### **The Eye of the Salamander** or *Reculer pour Mieux Sauter*,

#### Water for Repentance

*If the crystalline lens of a salamander's eye is removed, part of the iris re-differentiates and forms a vesicle, enters the cavity through the pupil, re-differentiates and forms a normal lens.* Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*.

In this milky water  
like spent semen  
the tiny freshwater fish  
flex and straighten flex again;  
ancient cuneiforms come alive  
in the slime of the clay  
to flex their flagellate tails.

Holding a hand to nose and mouth  
you lower your brown body  
into this river's warm drift  
and your hair blooms suddenly  
upward where you have passed  
through the membrane of this billabong.

*'Mi levigava come un suo sasso'*

Once again you plunge  
and the corona of your hair  
bursts like a dark flower  
floating from the green depths  
to mark on the surface  
your passing and your change.

This will not come again,  
this change, as the river  
imperceptibly flows on

and the wild ducks return  
to breast the water

in a hushing rush.

From forest shadows  
soft moping kangaroos limp  
to the long pool's inverted edge.

*'Mi levigava come un suo sasso'*

This rite of purification,  
rite of passage, putting away  
of the past; this change  
by immersion in the living waters,  
seeping from these xanthorrhoean hills,  
marks the budding of the limbs  
that deify the severing stroke  
to spread and grow afresh.

And as I gaze  
at the water's green deception  
of the distant ridge and sky  
you pass for the last time  
from my yearning sight. I see  
among the water creatures  
your body poised, limbs moving,  
balancing briefly as you go  
far back beyond your birth.

*'Mi levigava come un suo sasso'*

Dusty path among the paperbarks:  
valley heat dries river water  
from your smoking shoulder blades.  
I watch you walking on ahead  
in sandalled feet.  
This evening breath of air  
seen only as disturbance  
on the surface of a stream.

My eye is blinded by repentance  
for the future I have forgone,  
and the images I cannot know.  
Forgive me if, unlike the salamander,  
I have no power to cure my sightlessness

now that you go.

*'Mi levigava come un suo sasso'*

Thank you for your attention during this introduction but the real treats will come later when we hear the papers and discussions.

But first I am going to ask a member of the staff of our School of Indigenous and Islander Studies to remind us of the debt we owe to the original owners of the land on which the Mount Lawley Campus is situated.

Glen Phillips. Nov 17, 2009.

Born in Western Australia in 1936, in the remote gold-mining town of Southern Cross, Glen Phillips was brought up mainly in outback wheatbelt areas where he developed not only a strong identification with the Australian landscape but an early love of Australian literature. His poetry has been featured on national radio and television. Glen's short stories also have been published in Australia and overseas. Glen is an adjunct Associate Professor of English at Edith Cowan University, Perth and Director of the University's International Centre for Landscape and Language.