

Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 3

January 2009

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Recommended Citation

Wilson, T. (2009). Introduction to the Post-Pastoral in Australian Poetry. *Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language*, 3(1).

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INTRODUCTION TO THE POST-PASTORAL IN AUSTRALIAN POETRY

Tom Wilson

‘Christmas Day. 1696.
Came to the Southland...

Walked northwards. Lizards,
Reptiles. A rat-like creature
Hunching its back; droppings
Like loathsome birds eggs.
Spiky bracken. Limestone.
No signs of habitation.

Returned to the ship after
Three days. The Southland
Hazy in the morning sun.
Set sail.’

A few lines from Nicholas Hasluck’s poem ‘Rottnest Island’ (*New Oxford Book of Australian Verse*, 327-8) imaginatively recreate the early Dutch encounter with the Western half of Australia, an encounter accurately characterized by disdain and disinterest on behalf of the visitors. As late as the 1950s Euro-centric Australians were turning their back on the idea of living in their country. Having emigrated to England, Peter Porter wrote of his own metropolitan bias from his base in London: ‘I still seek/ The permanently upright city where/ Speech is nature and plants conceive in pots’ (*New Oxford Book of Australian Verse*, 263). As we will see, not all those who have put a pen to paper have been inhibited to inhabit the Southland. In what follows I reflect on the notion of a progressive imaginative vision of Australians living with their land, along the way considering a range of Australian poems and literary figures. I am seeking realistic, celebratory visions of contemporary Australians living in their home. Specifically, I am seeking the post-pastoral in Australian poetry.

Firstly we should be clear on what is meant by the term ‘pastoral’. Peter Marinelli’s definition of pastoral is ‘literature which deals with the complexities of human life against a background of simplicity’, that simplicity usually being a ‘country landscape’ (3). Pastorals often remember or imagine an innocent past that has recently been encroached upon by advancing technology. Pastoral appears in many forms, for example drama, as in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* and *The Winter’s Tale*, and epic, as in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. In Matthew Arnold’s poem ‘The Scholar-Gipsy’ we find a stanza which usefully exemplifies the pastoral impulse:

O born in days when wits were fresh and clear,
And life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames;
 Before this strange disease of modern life,
With its sick hurry, its divided aims. (366)

Arnold's poem is a celebration of a world of lost innocence and the simplicity of a life lived amidst nature. This is all very easy to poke fun at or to simply deny as an author. Things are more complex than that. Life isn't always so easy. Nature isn't always so simple. The anti-pastoral, in the next step of the critical dialectic, is the work of literature that cuts through the conventional illusions on which such Arcadias are based (Gifford, *Pastoral*, 120). From William Blake, to John Clare, to Ted Hughes, to the contemporary novels of Cormac McCarthy and many of the poems of John Kinsella, anti-pastoral constructions envisage nature as a place devoid of the easy comforts of a benign Arcadia (Gifford, *Pastoral*, 120).

In searching for a 'term to refer to literature that is aware of the anti-pastoral and of the conventional illusions upon which Arcadia is premised, *but which finds a language to outflank those dangers with a vision of accommodated humans*' [my italics], Terry Gifford decides upon 'post-pastoral' (Gifford, *Pastoral*, 149). The post-pastoral would be a 'discourse that can both celebrate and take responsibility for nature without false consciousness'. Gifford aligns it with the 'mature environmental aesthetics' sought by modern ecocritics such as Lawrence Buell (Gifford, *Pastoral*, 148). Gifford's post-pastoral is a poetry or pattern of narrative which escapes the closed circuit of pastoral and reactive anti-pastoral, and 'take[s] responsibility for our problematic responsibility with our natural homeground, from slugs to our solar system, from genes to galaxies, or as Marvell puts it, all that can be encompassed by 'a green Thought in a green Shade'.' (Gifford, 'Towards a Post-Pastoral...', 57). While the numinous beauty of the living creation will lie under the protectorate of this green Shade, so too will representations of the environmental impacts of over-consumption in the contemporary West. The film *Rivers and Tides* (2001) about the ecologically attuned art of the English artist Andy Goldsworthy gives us, I believe, a good instance of post-pastoral. In the film the artist and his work celebrate the beauty and patina of various British bioregions, but also go so far as to highlight, for example, the destructive nature of sheep farming on the Scottish landscape.

But what of a green thought in the green shade of a eucalyptus tree? Does Australia have a tradition of pastoral literature? Even though the play is supposed to be set outside Athens, the setting for Shakespeare's *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* sounds very much like an English wood. A character confides:

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where ox-lips and the nodding violet grows
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine (186)

Ironically this description of a pastoral English country landscape has been uttered in the heat of countless Australian classrooms. One can imagine blowflies providing an ironic chorus in the background of such classroom scenes. The biota represented in the verse is, of course, alien to the Australian continent. In looking for an Australian pastoral we would perhaps do better to look to the songs safe-guarded by Alexander 'Sandy' Brown. Brown is an Aboriginal who grew up in the Pilbara region of North Western Australia in the 1930s, learning by heart a large number of the songs and customs of his people, the Ngarla people. Here is one, supposedly very old, song of the Ngarla:

'Yamparna'

yamparna karta

pangkayingu wurla-wurlangura
yiliyirrikarta ngayirrimani, ngapurlarnu

kartarnpula warilnguntunta
ngananykura-ngananykura!

(English translation)

‘Manta Rays and Humpbacks’

Manta rays come up into sight
In the turbulent water
Lines of spray, upheaval!

Humpback whales breaking
And splashing thunderously
Here, there and everywhere! (101)

If the native song writers of the British isles thirteen thousand kilometres to my north-east sang of nodding violet and luscious woodbine, then the literature of north-west Australia traditionally spoke of very different matters such as migratory whales and breaching Manta rays.

Clearly the first Australians had rich and environmentally inflected oral literatures. For example, in the ‘Song Cycle of the Moon-Bone’ of the Wonguri-Mandjigai people of North-Eastern Arnhem Land we hear of the people living on cycad-nut bread, and collectively harvesting the roots a lily plant, under the slender bone of the new moon (*New Oxford Book of Australian Verse*, 241). However the animistic world-view of these Australians produced cyclical and aetiological song-narratives in which spirits frequently are pictured as inhering in the surrounding natural world. Despite the efforts of writers such as Xavier Herbert and Alexis Wright, much of this oral literature is arguably difficult to fully comprehend by a white settler society largely transplanted from a post-Enlightenment Western Europe.

More recent Australian Aboriginals have written of their identification with the earth in ways that might be easier for white Australians to understand. For example in Jack Davis’ poem ‘Forest Giant’:

‘You have stood there for centuries
arms gaunt reaching for the sky
your roots in cadence
with the heart beat of the soil
High on the hill, you missed
The faller’s axe and saw
But they destroyed the others
Down the slope
And on the valley floor
Now you and I’ (63)

Davis represents the plight of the Aboriginal people of south-west Australia as a fate parallel to the destruction of an ancient grove and the consequent loneliness of a remnant old forest giant. Many have gone, few remain. When Davis wrote this poem in the 1990s the clear-fell logging of old-growth karri and tingle forest in the wet sclerophyll forests of the south-west of Australia was still in process. Davis' sad and honest poetic image of gaunt and lonely survival amid widespread destruction of ancient communities, human and natural, is well characterized as anti-pastoral.

However in what follows I will not be focusing on Aboriginal literature. Rather I am here seeking the white Australian pastoral. What can pastoral criticism make of European Australian literature? We have had our share of disinterest in inhabitation of this part of the earth, as I mentioned at the start of this essay. But as counter to this disinterest many members of the contemporary Australian public, if asked, might adduce the unreconstructed pastoral that Sydney-based folk-poets and scribes celebrated in the journal *The Bulletin* in the 1890s. To quote the grand-sounding words of a journalist in a recent edition of *National Geographic* magazine: 'Banjo Paterson celebrated shearers, drovers, and life in the outback with poetry that still defines how Australians see themselves—and how the world sees Australia' (50).

This all-encompassing summary statement of a bush-based national identity is deeply problematic for a number of reasons. Although the criticism of this national mythology as being politically lamentable in its exclusion of women and those of non-European ethnicity has often been made (for example Jeanette Hoorn has recently shown how early Australian visual artists used the framework of the pastoral to deny black sovereignty over the land), I am going to bring up additional reasons for questioning it. The first is the simple one that these days Australians are not the most agrarian folk you'll find. We have gone, in two or three human lifetimes placed back to back, from being bush pioneers to city slickers. When surveyed in 2000, 91 per cent of Australians lived in urban areas. The concentration of the population in the urban cities of the continental coast has not reversed since 2000. In the context of the democratic West, Australia is the second most urbanized country after Belgium (Tiffen and Gittins, 14). If contemporary Australian culture sees itself in the mirror of Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson then it is delusional.

This need not shock us. Pastoral is generally thought to have had its birth in the 'Grecian song' or *Idyll* of Theocritus (c.316-260). These *Idylls* were based upon the song competitions of shepherds in the author's native Sicily and envisioned the simplicity of life in contact with nature, but they were written from the vantage point of an Alexandrian scholar. The anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake makes the point that 'only the most "civilized" or artificial groups and societies glorify nature, as did the members of the French nobility in the eighteenth century, who dressed rustically as shepherds and milkmaids' (*Homo Aestheticus*, 136). Terry Gifford updates this notion that 'shepherds do not write pastorals' with his argument that Charles Frazier's novel *Cold Mountain* sold so many copies in bookshops in London, New York and Sydney because it was a pastoral and pastorals speak to us at this time in history of increasingly urban patterns of habitation ('Terrain...', 89). The enthusiasm of today's urban Australians for a tradition of folk poetry that celebrates the life of pioneering pastoralists in the nineteenth century is easily understandable as a nostalgia for a way of life which has been lost. John Kinsella considers the nineteenth-century bush ballad 'Click Go the Shears' to be a classic pastoral in which the shearers take the place of Theocritus' singing herdsmen and the shearing shed 'becomes the ecologic space' (*Contrary Rhetoric*, 148). Kinsella makes the point that actual working shearers do sing this song, but the widespread knowledge of the opening lines of the chorus of this verse amongst urban Australians – 'Click go the shears, boys, Click! Click! Click!/ Wide is his blow, and his hands move

quick' – suggests that, despite most Australians never having visited a shearing shed, many deracinated citizens still yearn for an ecologic space.

However the second major problem with the old Australian pastoral tradition is that it isn't Australian. Banjo Paterson's poem 'The Man from Snowy River' is a nationally celebrated pastoral which narrates the horse-back pursuit of an escaped colt through mountainous terrain. It is presumed to be so quintessentially 'Australian' a verse that the federal government has seen fit to have the text printed on each and every Australian ten dollar note in micro-script, viewable using a magnifying glass. However, Paterson's rider is not a uniquely Australian motif. As Tim Flannery points out:

Seated astride American megafauna (a horse) that had been introduced to the continent just a century before, chasing other introduced megafauna, [The Man from Snowy River] is a figure of a much larger history – the global cattle frontier. Exchange his Akubra for a ten-gallon hat and he becomes a cowboy. Give him chaps and mate and he is transformed into an Argentinian *vaquero* (*An Explorer's Notebook*, 112).

In a significant addition to Australia's cultural repertoire Peter Carey has comparatively recently revived the legend of Ned Kelly in his great Australian novel *The True History of the Kelly Gang*. However Flannery also takes issue with the idea that Kelly was a uniquely Australian figure: 'At heart he was an Irishman struggling with his Old World oppressors in a drama transplanted to the Antipodes, the khaki backdrop of the Australian bush making little difference (*An Explorer's Notebook*, 111).'

These are strong words, ones that might offend many Australians, but they are worth considering. Australia has been geographically isolated for the past 45 million years (Flannery, *An Explorer's Notebook*, 112). It has been geologically comatose during this time, and the soils of this continent have been leached of their nutrients. Most of the continent has low and variable rainfall. This has created a very harsh environment for organisms that demand much energetically from the land, such as our own species. Australian plants, animals and indigenous human cultures have adapted to local conditions, and are generally very energy efficient as a result. We have a plethora of reptile species, animals which don't need to eat much as they are cold blooded and have no need to warm their bodies internally. We have wallabies that can drink salt water. We have Aboriginal cultures that worked out long ago that soaking flowers in water and drinking the sweet liquid could provide a needed source of glucose. But when the British arrived en masse in Port Jackson in 1788 they started a process of colonization in which foreign invaders tried to remake Australia in the image of England. They imported foxes, rabbits, sheep and cows. As farmers they replaced water-efficient native perennial plants with water-wasteful annuals. They chopped down vast swathes of trees, allowing groundwater to rise and bring poisonous salt to the surface. They did not understand the unique geological, hydrological and biological nature of the country they were emigrating to, and they did not understand that their land use changes and animal introductions would cause biological havoc. The soft paws of macropods always trod lightly on the soil. You can see the land eroding under the sharp hooves of foreign organisms in Tom Roberts' 1891 painting 'A break-away!', an iconic painting of Australian droving history, but can the apparently clear-sighted Tom Roberts see it? (South Australian Museum of Art)

In *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* Judith Wright writes that: 'Australia has from the beginning of its short history meant something more to its new inhabitants than mere environment and mere land to be occupied, ploughed and brought into subjection. It has been the outer equivalent of an inner reality; first, and persistently, the reality of exile; second, though perhaps we now tend to forget this, the reality of newness and freedom (xi).' Early British immigrants might have been confronted by

‘the reality of newness’, but did they really see this newness? Since the beginning the colonists, apart from a few enlightened botanists, have shown a remarkable blindness to the native flora and fauna of this land. Amongst the abundance of bizarre life forms such as quokkas and goannas, the founders of Perth, my own city, chose the black swan as the city’s emblem. While they had the opportunity to celebrate any of the more unique species of life in this place, they preferred to choose a bird that was only different in colour to the swans of the British Isles. In our cultural repertoire of animal symbols the choosing of for example a monitor lizard – and Australia has one of the greatest diversity of species of reptile on earth - would have required too great a receptivity to the newness of the environment our ancestors found themselves in.

With visions of Wordsworth, deep top soil and European pastoralism foremost in their consciousness, early white Australian artists often managed to miss seeing the anatomy of the country before their eyes. The Eurocentric vision that fails to comprehend Australia is well satirized in Ian North’s more contemporary painting *The Japanese Footbridge and Water Garden, Giverny*. In this painting Monet’s luminous painting of his lily pond is placed at the centre of the pastoral scene, while the duller colours of an Australian forest ring and merge into the edges of the canvas. Australia is the greater reality and the softness of a European pastoral can only be superimposed on the centre of a recalcitrant land with glaring incongruity (from the series *Pseudo-panorama Australia IV*, Conrad, 54).

Australian pastoral literature can’t be satirized as being quite so wilfully blind. However it still failed to comprehend the biological idiosyncrasy of the land. Mile Franklin’s novel *My Brilliant Career* was published soon after federation in 1901. This work does not brush over the drudgery and hardship of life in the Australian bush in the way that traditional retreats to an Arcadian Golden Age might. In Franklin’s novel cows lie on the dusty ground in fly-blown lassitude, too dehydrated to raise themselves to their feet, and Franklin’s female protagonist laments the draught-strained conditions she and her dairy farming family are forced to endure. This is, again, pastoral premised on the farming of introduced mega-fauna in a unique and surprising corner of the earth. We now know that because of the El Nino-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) periodic drought has become part of the very ecological fabric of much of the Eastern side of Australia. With modern knowledge we can see Franklin’s languishing cattle as fundamentally ill suited to Australia’s nutrient-poor and ENSO-effected environments.

My central claim in this essay is that contemporary Australians are misguided to try to found a uniquely Australian cultural identity in songs, poems and stories that are associated with an imported and inappropriate system of pastoralism and agriculture. Such works almost necessarily lack a biocentric complexity and scientifically-informed realism which makes them suited to the title naïvely destructive pastoral, or embittered anti-pastoral (more on this term later). Should we be content with such pastorals as readers in twenty-first century Australia, should we be content with a literary tradition which has come to present humans living with the land in corrosive and inappropriate ways? And, following Gifford’s critical dialectic, does this country have a literature which goes beyond pastoral on the one hand and disillusioned anti-pastoral on the other, and presents us with a mature vision of accommodated humans? Is there a mature ‘post-pastoral’ aesthetic to be found in the wealth of Australian writings?

John Kinsella begins his collection of poems *The silo: A Pastoral Symphony* with the ominously titled, ‘On Arriving At A Deserted House Deep in The Country After Running Over A Rabbit On A Gravel Road, At Night’. The poem begins with the lines:

The flywire door slams ominously
As the Fluorescent starter cracks

And light suggests company
That evaporates, fails

To materialize.

We know that this is Kinsella's home ground, so we are placed in a large area of farm land known as the Wheat Belt, a few hundred kilometres east of Perth, in Western Australia. With this knowledge we also know that we are in a severely degraded land of rising salt and massively disrupted natural ecosystems. The light is on in the house of white settlement of this land, however we soon see that the 'company' has 'evaporated', that the farming communities of this place are being forced to leave the country in line with progressive environmental degradation, and in line with the evaporation of water from their lands (decreasing rainfall in the south-west of Australia puts this part of the world on the front line of the effects of global climate change). The company does not just 'fail', but fails to 'materialize', hinting towards the shoddy ethos that has led to so much destruction of nature in this place: materialism fails. As has been often noted, the 'eco' in ecology comes from the Greek word *oikos* meaning house. Later in the poem we learn that there are mice in the kitchen of this delicate ecology, and an old sofa with busted springs, both details further deepening the poem's mood of disreputable and worn-out materialism. The visitor has arrived with blood on his tires, so that even he is not guiltless of trespass against nonhuman nature. The final line of the poem has the poet hearing voices, voices which are 'tackling the distance, calling/ fluorescence into darkness'. If the voices of white men and women are here represented as fluorescent – they are 'calling fluorescence into darkness' – their consciousness is suggested to be highly artificial, flickering with a lack of continuity, and unable to comprehend the land beyond an immediate and short-term purview.

This poem is clearly anti-pastoral in theme rather than post-pastoral. It is a sad if clear-eyed anti-pastoral debunking of a naïve and uncomplicated pastoral. We are not presented with Western Australian wheat farmers walking tall and content amongst their golden crops of annual plants. But Kinsella's deserted house with a banging fly-wire door is not a vision of accommodated humans.

Barbara York Main is another voice of Western Australia's Wheat Belt. York Main is primarily a scientist, however, in 1971 she published a collection of literary vignettes of agrarian life in this area, the area where she grew up as a child. A sadly neglected book of occasional lyrical power, *Twice Trodden Ground* gets its title from the author's return to the area as an adult, over ground which she had trodden as a young girl. During York Main's lifetime massive clearing of the original vegetation of the area took place – a million acres a year during the 1960s - and the work is infused with a sense of loss as the result.

In a chapter entitled 'The Betrayal' we read of a farmer who decides to clear the last patch of bush on his land to extract the maximum economic gain from it. The narrative details his hard work clearing the plants and trees. At the end of the chapter the farmer sees the rise of a silver scum to the surface of the ground after the last season's rains. The account ends with a paradoxical image of whiteness: 'He had betrayed the land for silver – but the silver was ground gone salt (34).' Very little can live in salt, which is why British surgeons in early white Australian history saw themselves as benevolent when they rubbed salt into the wounds of freshly flogged convicts. Again, the image of the wheat farmer standing amongst a field of silver, the prelude to death on the starkly flayed back of biological life, positions this story as a savagely honest and Australian anti-pastoral work.

The last chapter in *Twice Trodden Ground* comes the closest in the book to a vision of accommodated humans on the earth. York Main muses on the historical relics of early white settlement

in the area, finally turning to recount an experience of reconciliation she had had with this European presence on (and in) the land. I will quote at length from *Twice Trodden Ground*:

Near Hines Hill, upslope from the lake-string and below a tumbled granite pile, I came abruptly one day, in a scrubby copse, to a barbed-wire fence. But it was not just another paddock through the fence. The old gnarled York gums and jam trees and melaleuca did not shelter a flock of sheep but a cluster of gravestones! Wind-wielded rock oak brushes swept the grasses over the graves. Tussock grasses and capeweed and *Dianella* softened the old mounds, weather had rusted the iron railings, termites fretted the wooden head-boards. There it was, enclosed by farmlands yet transcending them. Mist-thin rain sponged the granite boulders and fragile nameless headstones; it left a spangled net in pendulous rock oak and drooping jam tree. I heard the strident cries of the plovers as they swooped out over the green squares of paddocks, over the salt lakes and samphire flats.

Writing of these past Western Australians and their bond to their landscape, York Main's ultimate words in the book sound ambiguously:

The gravestones in the bush copses are the seals to the covenant (94-5).

These Western Australians are represented as having formed the ultimate unity with the living earth. Native grasses grow on their mounds. Termites elaborate designs on their wooden headboards, seemingly in dumb praise of the long departed. The scene is described so as to evoke the serenity and beauty of nature: the soft rain creates 'spangled nets' in the trees, and the rock oaks sweep the grassed earth. The transcendent value of this pastoral scene is emphasized as the totemic plovers rise up and fly out over the surrounding farmlands. This is a pastoral scene, and in a sense it is a vision of humans accommodated on the earth. Robert Pogue Harrison writes that the international hegemony of institutions such as the 'metropolis, economy, media, [and] ideology – has led to an aggravated confusion about what it means to dwell on the earth', to the extent that 'for the first time in cultural memory an increasing proportion of people in Western societies are not sure where they will be buried, or where they should be buried, or even where they desire to be buried (198-9).' These farming men and women of the Western Australian Wheat Belt knew where they would be buried, and perhaps even more importantly, where they desired to be buried. These gravestones in bush copses are both the literal and metaphorical 'seals to the covenant' of their deep bond with their land.

However one might now ask, is a graveyard all that I can find of the post-pastoral in my home land? Is a cemetery really a truthful and celebratory vision of human accommodation on the earth? Surely, one might object, a vision of accommodated humans can't only inhere, literally, in the ground?

Judith Wright's poem 'Sanctuary' is, thematically, one of her most ecologically powerful works. Its title bodes well in our search for the post-pastoral. In the poem it is night and the driver of a car speeds along a wet road, passing a sign with the word 'Sanctuary' on it. Perhaps the sign designates a nature sanctuary, however Wright uses the moment to symbolize a spiritual rift between urban citizens and the calm of the forest. Off the side of the road there is:

The immense/ tower of antique forest and cliff, the rock
Where years accumulate like leaves, the tree
Where transient bird and mindless insect sing (*Human Pattern*, 82)

An awe at the deep-time perspective of natural processes of growth and decay is beautifully signaled in the line 'where years accumulate like leaves'. However the driver of the car sees nothing of this ancient pastoral scene. Behind the wheel of the car:

Only the road ahead is true.
It knows where it is going; we go too (*Human Pattern*, 82).

The irony here of course is that the road cannot know where it is going. To believe that the road to a future of fossil-fuel dependent infrastructure and technology should be confidently followed is to acquiesce to a range of communally held falsehoods that have not been the result of much sustained thought. The second stanza of the poem opens with brief expressions of incomprehension: 'Sanctuary, the sign said. Sanctuary - / trees, not houses; flat skins pinned to the road/ of possum and native-cat.' The urban driver tries to understand that trees and not houses might be considered sanctuary, while in the meantime those for whom the forest really is sanctuary are represented in anti-pastoral terms as mere carrion smeared across tarmac. The driver ultimately cannot understand the meaning of this sign for and from the natural world, for 'only the road has meaning here'. In this pastoral discourse the human figure is returning to the city even before they have retreated to Arcadia. The stanza ends with the most powerful line in Wright's whole oeuvre: the road 'leads into the world's cities like a long fuse laid.' The mentality of the driver towards wild Australia - incomprehension that nature might be our sanctuary - is connected to a more general urban neglect of the natural world. As the road is a fuse laid into the world's cities, we see that in having such 'road-mind' we have engineered a rapid-acting catalyst for collective self-destruction.

So Wright does not give me the post-pastoral I seek in her ostensibly promising title 'Sanctuary'. There are a few examples of more comforting sanctuary in Wright's oeuvre, however, as Rodney Hall notes, it is more often the dignity of Wright's anger which is memorable (402). In her ultimate display of such anger, from 'Australia 1970', Wright urges the country to resist us, and 'to die wild and dangerous like eagle hawk or tigersnake:

I praise the scoring drought, the flying dust,
The drying creek, the furious animal,
That they oppose us still;
That we are ruined by the thing we kill (quoted in Hall, 02).

This is clearly anti-pastoral of the most deliberate and determined variety. No vision for a sustainable future is hinted at in these lines.

In his contribution to the collection of essays *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and their Writer* (2007) Mark Tredinnick takes up what I am nominating as the single most important critical question for Australian ecocriticism: the place of the pastoral in our literature. In 'Journey: The North Coast' Robert Gray writes of being on a train going through the country, coming home. This poem tells of a landscape that is a pastoral of white gums, gums that are like 'descending nudes' coming down a staircase to the sea (quoted in Tredinnick, 133). Apart from the mention of gum trees however, Gray's landscape in this poem could be Europe in many ways, and Tredinnick rightly notes that this is pastoral in the traditional and nostalgically colonial sense of the genre. Later in his essay, with reference to 'A poem of not more than forty lines on the subject of nature' (2002), Tredinnick considers a much more

recent poem by Gray. This poem narrates the poet's awakening in a dark house at night. The house is beside a forest, and he hears rain falling softly and insects calling in the dark. As the poet awakens he knows that he is in a house that is not his own:

Lying here half awake I feel this shack is a room within some great
House that creaks and strains about me, an abandoned place. It seems
I am listening for someone who is responsible to come back. I have
To remember that no one needs to come – it is going on as it has
Always done.

This is a house, though, where I lie. I could find within it, through
Certain rooms, through many of the rooms, things that seem laid out
For me. It is a house we have inherited, but as though by default. A
Strange house, not made with hands (quoted in Tredinnick, 136).

Considered as a whole, the sense of threat, the sounds of the dark sounds of the night, and the complicated and troubled sense of European habitation in an ancient and many-storied Australian land mark this poem as, according to the critic, having a more mature pastoral aesthetic than the earlier mentioned poem from thirty years earlier. In considering this poem I would add to Tredinnick's analysis the point I made earlier in my discussion of Kinsella's verse: that the 'eco' in ecology comes from the Greek word *oikos* meaning house. If this poem is significantly ecological in its imagining of Australian ecosystem as a house, then its thought that 'no one needs to come' back to inhabit the house seems misguided. Australian Aboriginals have managed much of their continent through regular small-scale burnings of the flora for roughly the past 46000 years, and for many Australian ecosystems to be healthy they do indeed need somebody to come back into the house (to return fire regimes to the pre-European frequency that many of these ecosystems have become adapted to). Whatever the case I think Tredinnick is right to nominate this poem by Robert Gray as an important work of Australian pastoral literature. It is a richer poem than, for example, the thematically quite similar 'The Cradle' by Roland Robinson from many years earlier in Australian literary history (*New Oxford Book of Australian Verse*, 174). And yet, despite Gray's poem's intriguing ambivalence and complexity, one still wants to pose the question, how does this recent poem by Gray present us with a sustainable vision of Australians living on the land? Tredinnick's nomination of Robert Gray as the pastoral Australian poet we've all been waiting for is not, in my reading of the critic's essay, persuasive.

Now I've mentioned Roland Robinson I should continue by mentioning the poet Rex Ingamells. Ingamells was the leading figure in what became known as the Jindyworoback movement, of which Robinson was also a part. The Jindyworoback movement was a literary movement, active between the 1930s and 1950s, that sought to promote indigenous ideas and customs in Australian poetry. Like other members of the movement Ingamells lamented the lack of identification with the land in culturally Eurocentric 1940s Australian society, writing that 'Australia will rebut a hundred races/ if such envision only alien places/ as source of truth' (*Selected Poems*, 40).

Thousands of miles of stern Australian coast
Will front the main when it is angered most,
Smash moving mountains when they thunder in,
And stand the sunlit conquerors of the din...

Thousands of miles of seaweed beach will sigh
Contentedly as gulls are screaming high,
Silvered in sun glare...

Australia's long, lone coastline will preserve
An unassailable, secret soul, observe
Its own communion (*Selected Poems*, 40).

Ingamells represented the land as abiding, waiting in its by turns sublime and peaceful glory, till white society was ready to make communion with such wild places, be they on the beach or in the centre. Ingamells awe in his attention to the natural world is frequently apparent and is one appealing aspect of his poetry. The two problems for the poetry associated with the Jindyworobak movement is that much of it is of forgettable quality, and that much of it does not really deserve the title of post-pastoral. As an example of the quality of the verse take an excerpt from Ingamells poem 'Sun-Freedom':

When shall I tread brown bark beneath my feet,
And, through grey branches, hear the magpie's call
Ring down a valley in the midday heat,
Like the cool, strong voice of a waterfall?
When shall I walk neck-open to the breeze,
And know again the friendliness of trees? (*Selected Poems*, 21).

The 'friendliness of trees' is an embarrassingly jejune trope which unintentionally parodies itself. Beyond the uneven quality of the verse, the urge to retreat from the din of the city to an unsullied natural environment places this particular poem 'Sun-Freedom' firmly within the tradition of the pastoral. However, as in much of the movement's poetry, little mention is made of a permanent human ecology, unless it is a nostalgically simplistic imaginative recreation of past Aboriginal societies (see for example Ingamells poem 'Forgotten People'). The poet longs for a retreat to a wilderness realm, but never gives the reader a representation of white society co-existing harmoniously with the natural world.

The British ecocritic Jonathan Bate sees some of Les Murray's work as a 'song of the earth', the kind of poem we should be attentive to if we wish to dwell on the land in a sustainable manner. However, although Murray is a self-proclaimed champion of Boeotia rather than Athens, of the country rather than the city, in general I find his work overly conservative in its veneration of European agricultural practices to echo Bate's verdict. Murray's poem 'Noonday Axeman', however, perhaps comes closer to the kind of pastoral we might want for Australia than some of his other poems. In the poem the speaker chops down a tree at noon on a piece of rural Australia that was owned by his ancestors. What could be post-pastoral about such an anti-environmental image, you might ask? The repeated refrain of the poem – 'Axe-fall, echo and silence – is that of the sound of the chopping against the overwhelming backdrop of silent nature. The poet says that a hundred years of splitting, sawing and singing old songs have 'made this silence human and familiar', but only to where 'the farms rise into the foothills'. Much silence remains and it has sent many haters of silence to their graves or too the cities, the poem intimates. The sound of the chopping of the tree and the countervailing silence continue their dance, now coming to signify in our understanding of the poem humanization and human absence more generally. The poet ends by declaring his allegiance to the side of silent nature, saying that he will:

Forever
 Be coming back here to walk, knee-deep in ferns,
 Up and away from this metropolitan century (*Collected Poems*, 5)

However the poet is also the ‘axeman’ of the poems title. This is not a contradiction, as the harvesting of timber, at least when practiced using the concepts of a sustainable yield and selective logging, is an environmentally benign profession. Wood locks carbon out of the atmosphere. What is more, the production of a steel girder uses twelve times the amount of energy as would be needed to produce a functionally equivalent wooden beam, leading some commentators such as Colin Tudge to nominate wood as the building material of the future (384). Despite the intuitively malevolent image for nature of a man chopping down a eucalyptus tree, Murray in this poem presents us with a figure who is on the side of silent nature. Unlike a pastoral that focuses on introduced and energy hungry mega-fauna, such a literary figure makes sense environmentally, forestry in its best guise being one example of a benign human interaction with the natural world in Australia. Murray was one of the Australian writers who contributed to *Gone Bush*, Roger McDonald’s collection of ‘walks’ in the bush by well known Australian writers, and in his contribution he chose to focus on the forestry practices of his ancestors in logging trees near where he lives in Northern NSW. The treatment of logging by Murray’s short poem is perhaps an example of an Australian post-pastoral, at least if we take the leap of extending the notion of sustainable harvest to the unidentified axeman and his activities.

In her book *How a Continent Created a Nation* Libby Robin argues that due to the fact that Australia was settled by Europeans after the Linnaean scientific revolution the language of science interpenetrates the cultural in writings about nature in this country. Robin’s asserts that ‘science in Australia provides a primary, authoritative voice for nature’ (‘Problematic Pastoral’, online source without page number). Part of her reason for believing this is that, to a much greater extent than in Britain for example, science education has been historically prestigious in Australia since the 1930s and 1940s, resulting in a relatively scientifically literate public (*How a Continent Created a Nation*, 155). Whether or not the view that science provides the authoritative voice for nature in this country is correct, I do think that if we turn to one of Australia’s most well known scientists, Tim Flannery, we find material for consideration in the category of pastoral writings. Flannery provides us with a memorable post-pastoral vignette in his book *Chasing Kangaroos*. At this point in his memoir of a life spent studying Meganesia’s macropods Flannery has been discussing the phrase ‘kangaroo court’, a term that reinforced the idea that, in line with the bizarre and surprising anatomy of the fauna of the country, things get turned on their head in Australia and can’t be taken seriously. The author continues:

For anyone who has watched a red kangaroo with her joey in the dawn light of the Australian desert, such glosses are manifestly inadequate. The crisp air lends a gossamer-thin softness to the landscape whose pastel shades are all the more precious for the knowledge that in an hour or so they will be gone, and in its stillness wafts the delicate scent of dust and saltbush that is the essence of the outback. Not knowing that you are there she rests, the mother, her eyes half closed as the first weak rays of the sun warm her, while her offspring tries out his new legs in flailing investigations of every bush, insect and stone in his expanded world. They are frail living things in an awesome wideness of environment that, like the open ocean, offers no refuge from the forces of nature. Yet they will survive. They always have. Unless of course we disrupt the subtle web of relationships that life is attuned to in this country (*Chasing Kangaroos*, 56-7).

The author reflects on one cultural construction – the idea of a ‘kangaroo court’ as being something absurd and inverse in apparent function – of Australia’s leading group of mammals, and he finds such a construction to be a superficial misapprehension. Flannery has spent his life looking at kangaroos, especially the tree kangaroos of New Guinea, and as such he is ideally qualified to approach an art of writing which has a biocentric perspective. One of the first things to note about this extract is that the author focuses on a being which is uniquely Australian. Unlike the much eulogized merino sheep, on the back of which Australia was supposed to have ridden to prosperity, the red kangaroo is, after countless millennia of biological evolution, exquisitely adapted to the open spaces of the Australian continent. While the author’s vision is biocentric, his persona in this vignette is unobtrusive and attentive. He hides in the bushes. He senses the texture of the air and the light. The author ends by noting how we are the unavoidable stewards of a delicate ecological balancing act of life on an arid continent.

What we have here is not sure but wrong-footed pastoral such as Paterson’s galloping horseman. Neither are we confronted with bitter, angry and disappointed anti-pastoral, such as A. D. Hope’s vision of Australia: ‘Nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey/ In the field uniform of modern wars (100).’ Rather in Flannery’s vision we have intimations of the post-pastoral. The above extract is sober in its realism in presenting Australia: like the open ocean, this is an environment that ‘offers no refuge from the forces of nature’. Yet it is also an environment that is to be held dear: the pastel shades of the desert are ‘precious’, the scent of saltbush and dust are ‘delicate’, and the frail joey and his mother in their clearly awe-inspiring environment are observed with concentrated attention. This is exceptional in part in the sense that twentieth century Australian literature is usually guilty of perceiving the desert as a featureless void rather than a distinct bioregion (for example Myrtle Rose White’s *Beyond the Western Rivers*), and writings of nineteenth century desert travelers such as Ludwig Leichhardt more often than not depicts desert bioregions as obstacles to be overcome rather than intrinsically interesting ecosystems (Tom Lynch, 71-92). Finally, the vignette ends with the suggestion that we humans have the potential to disrupt this finely balanced, early-morning Australian scene. This is a beautifully wild Australian ecology, yet acknowledgement of its susceptibility to human-impacts comes quickly on the heels of a more celebratory key.

Thinking back to my ancestors on my father’s side who arrived in Fremantle in Western Australia in 1830 I come upon mirco details which illuminate macro themes. These people arrived with servants and sugar cane, linen and wearing apparel. The zamia palms killed their sheep where they kept them out on Halls Head, but being good British subjects they practiced stoicism in the face of this inhospitable land. The laboratory of evolution in Australia has had countless millennia to come up with a huge suite of plants (some 25 thousand indeed) and animals perfectly adapted to the nutrient-poor soils and low rainfall that characterize much of this ancient land. For these plants and animals the soils are not ‘nutrient-poor’, they are perfect for life and growth. My English ancestors did not consider this fact, perhaps partly due to the fact that the theory of evolution was not proposed for nearly three decades after their arrival in *Terra Australis*! However, close to two centuries have passed since that time, and still most Australian’s cling unconsciously to destructive cultural baggage. Today most people where I live in Fremantle still eat polluting beef rather than environmentally benign kangaroo, although the later is easily available at local supermarkets and butchers.

I am warming to a theme. European agriculture relies on a climate and level of top-soil which are alien to the Australian experience. When practiced on a large scale such agriculture causes the diminishment of native biodiversity and the export of what little top-soil we have in the form of, mainly, cereal crops. The harvesting of native species of life for food and other uses is a potential solution to many of Australia’s environmental woes – this has been a major, and till now hidden, premise behind

the present essay. Irene Cunningham in *The Land of Flowers* provides a vision of what living well and producing food from the land would look like on the Swan Coastal Plain around Perth. Michael Archer and Bob Beale, the authors of *Going Native: Living in the Australian Environment*, have been my chief inspiration. In their book *Going Native* the two authors present a social and economic blue-print for bringing native plants and animals into the lives of all rural and urban Australians. Archer and Beale point the way forward for sustainable human habitation in this part of the world.

We non-Aboriginal folk have had three human lifetimes, back to back, to learn to become Australian. We have had three human lifetimes to learn to heal the divide between 'Australian' culture and Australian nature. It seems that this has not been enough. CSIRO researchers are 'calling for major changes to current practices, including commercially driven native tree and animal production systems to replace large parts of the current crop and pasture zones' (Archer and Beale, 16). If we are to move towards a sustainable Australia then gum trees and kangaroos will become a much more important part of the rural fabric of this nation. In the future Australian agriculture will have to learn to, to a large extent, go native. In the cities we also need to 'go native', with Australian marsupials being suitable as pets in some instances, and native trees becoming a greater part of the urban landscape. But we also need imaginative visions that will help to give us a sustainable sense of identity as a uniquely Australian people. Accepting the arguments of Archer and Beale we can say that we need more cultural representations of the harvesting and use of natives species of plant and animal in Australian literature.

Such an argument may have the appearance of a politically charged manifesto. However if I was primarily a sociologically informed environmental activist I would do better as a writer to turn away from poetry and written literature and instead confront the ability of the mass media to foster social norms in Australia, thus helping to pave the way for widespread adaptive behavioural change to environmental problems. While formal education is important, it has been found that soap operas on television can even more quickly change people's attitudes about environmental protection. (If you doubt this then look at the example of Iran in the early 1990s. At the start of the decade Iran Broadcasting was given responsibility for raising awareness of population issues: 70 percent of rural households had television sets and well-written television soap operas which implicitly endorsed small family size as a social good ultimately helped to halve Iran's population growth by 1994 (Brown, 138). A similar story of using serial dramas to influence family planning and reproductive health in a society has been repeated in Mexico and Ethiopia.) If all I wanted was to see Australian culture foster progressive social norms around environmental protection then, accepting the tenets of conservation through sustainable use, I should actually be barracking for the characters in the television serial *Neighbours* to throw some kangaroo on the BBQ. While this would undoubtedly be a good thing, I'm not primarily a sociologically informed environmental activist. I am a literary critic. I have a strong interest in seeing Australians live wisely within their local ecosystems, but I'm also profoundly interested in complex and aesthetically fulfilling works of the human imagination. It is for this reason that I have here turned my attention to examples of the pastoral genre in poems and written literature

As Gifford wrote of the term post-pastoral: 'such a term should enable should enable a 'mature environmental aesthetics' to sift the 'sentimental pastoral' from the 'complex pastoral' in a way which takes account of the urgent need for responsibility and, indeed, advocacy for the welfare of Arden, informed by our current and updated best judgments of what that should be (Gifford, *Pastoral*, 149).' Ecocriticism is interdisciplinary and I have drawn much on the natural sciences in the present essay to understand what advocacy for the natural world currently means. Our updated best judgment of how human accommodation in Australia should look includes actions well characterized as leaving Arden and going native. Once the lessons of conservation through sustainable use are assimilated in this

country we may start to properly inhabit our corner of the world, much as the first Australians have done for millennia. We will eat quandongs, acacia seeds, desert raisins and kangaroo meat, use locally produced eucalyptus oil, grow native plants in our gardens, perhaps even have quolls as pets. We will generally take indigenous lifeforms of this continent into our lifeworld. And if culture is the mirror within which we perceive ourselves as a people then poems, stories and narratives – even television soap operas - will be needed to reflect on these new ways in which we white Australians inhabit this land. Such literature, if it is any good, might more easily win the critical epithet ‘post-pastoral’ than complex and clear-eyed anti-pastorals such as those of Kinsella or Wright, or the interesting but consistently uneven Jindyworobak verse. In this brief foray I have had mixed success at finding works of poetry which imagine a sustainable accommodation on the earth in this country. Perhaps the kind of forestry represented in the verse of Les Murray is a candidate. Taking as a starting point Libby Robin’s view of science as a primary voice for nature, I have gone as far as to include the biocentric prose of Tim Flannery, a writer who is also a scientist, within my purview. Australian post-pastorals are not as common as red dirt.

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