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The Transformative Craft of Environmental History: Perspectives on Australian Scholarship

I want to draw out some of the distinctive qualities of Australian environmental history, but first I will reflect on the field of environmental history in general as well as on the radical practice of history itself.

Transforming History

Environmental history emerged in the 1960s and 70s as an intervention in an established discipline, as one of a series of intellectual and political movements that swept through historical practice in the second half of the twentieth century—along with social history, "history from below," indigenous history, and feminist history. Nature joined class, race, and gender as fundamental, and also disruptive, categories of historical analysis. Nature, declared environmental historians, could no longer be seen as just the passive backdrop to human action; it was no longer the stable stage on which the human drama played out.

But nature hadn't always been outside history. The tension between nature and humanity, between civilisation and the wild, was part of classical literature and lore. And in the modern era, we could say that geologists have been doing environmental history since James Hutton and Charles Lyell; biologists have been doing it since Darwin; and physicists since Einstein. In the early and mid-twentieth century, "environmental history" was a term often used by geologists, palaeobotanists, and archaeologists in their analyses of environmental change in the quaternary period. In the same decades, historical and cultural geographers were major players in a field that was belatedly colonised by historians.

Something happened to history in the West in the nineteenth century that defined it against nature. Professional history became aligned with the rise of the nation state and the creation of state archives. As Christof Mauch has argued, the material progress and technological development of industrial societies probably cultivated a cultural blind-

ness to the force and changeability of the natural world. Economics and technology were seen to drive change forward; they were the engines of progress and the sinews of the state. Political history came to the fore and nature was its servant. Paradoxically, just as a historical perspective came to permeate the natural sciences, history as a discipline increasingly focused on humans as above and outside nature.

Thus history became professional and academic by attending to empire, nation, politics, bureaucracy, and the systematic analysis of documents. This focus on literacy and nationalism enforced a rupture not only between history and prehistory, but also between the civilised and the primitive, humans and animals, and culture and nature. So it was not just nature that was placed outside of history, but also hunter-gatherers and most of the history of humanity itself. The Australian historian David Christian and the American historian Daniel Lord Smail have studied the marginalisation of "deep history" from the late nineteenth century. The rise of civilisation came to be defined against nature—indeed, as the acquisition of mastery over nature—and history was the story of the exceptionality of humans.

An example of how entrenched was this view of history is the work of R. G. Collingwood, one of the most influential twentieth-century philosophers of history. Collingwood regarded nature as outside history because nature has no "inside" that we can recognise, no thought or agency for the historian to discern. "Thus *the least true thing that can be said about a man* is that he is a product of nature," concluded Collingwood. He argued for a distinction between historical and non-historical human actions: "So far as man's conduct is determined by what may be called his animal nature, his impulses and appetites, it is non-historical; the process of those activities is a natural process." Thus, declared Collingwood, "the historian is not interested in the fact that men eat and sleep and make love and thus satisfy their natural appetites."[1] So the "animality" of humanity lay outside history, and the moral and biological worlds were separate.

In the Anthropocene, that separation is no longer tenable, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has eloquently argued.[2] Environmental history has turned out to be far more radical than

1 Quoted in W. J. van der Dussen, *History as a Science: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (New York: Springer, 2002), 46 (italics in the original); see also R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 216.

2 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Humanities in the Anthropocene: The Crisis of an Enduring Kantian Fable," *New Literary History* 47 (2016): 377–97.

we thought four decades ago, when it aimed modestly to add nature to the fundamental categories of historical analysis. We have stepped beyond the binary that Collingwood saw as the foundation of history and now accept that the fate of humanity is bound up with that of nature and the Earth.

Historical Thinking

Environmental historians often work in an interdisciplinary setting; thus, they represent not only a transformation within their own discipline but also the radical perspective of history more broadly in debates that tend to be dominated by the natural and social sciences. Environmental historians often speak across the science-humanities divide and, in that conversation, they bring historical thinking to the table. It is a surprisingly unusual perspective in environmental and social policy debates. I don't mean the casual, superficial plundering of "history" for lessons from the past; rather, I mean the demanding discipline of leaving the present behind for a time so that the full strangeness of past worlds might be inhabited and comprehended. It is this "letting go" that is sometimes difficult for our colleagues in other disciplines. Archaeologist and historian John Mulvaney bravely advocated "the wisdom of non-relevance."[3] Contemporary society's fatal embrace of relevance impoverishes our archive of future possibilities, which good history can enrich.

But it is hard to think one's way out of the thin, captivating moment of "now." The American historian and educationist Sam Wineburg wrote an important book with a great title, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, in which he argued that historical thinking goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think. He warned against "the seduction of coming to know people in the past by relying on the dimensions of our 'lived experience.'" Ethnographic historians Greg Dening and Inga Clendinnen, like Wineburg, argued that the discipline of history is required to help us discover what we cannot instinctively feel or see.[4]

3 John Mulvaney, *The Wisdom of Non-Relevance: The Humanities and Australia's Cultural Heritage*, The Kenneth Myer Lecture (Canberra: Friends of the National Library of Australia, 1994).

4 Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), chap. 1; Greg Dening, *Readings/Writings* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998), 209; Inga Clendinnen, "Understanding the Heathen at Home: E. P. Thompson and his School," *Historical Studies* 18, no. 72 (1979): 435–41.

Curiously, we can more readily find historical thinking among our colleagues in the natural sciences than among our more closely related social scientists. In the natural sciences, historical thinking—which often operates on timespans of thousands or millions of years—tends to ignore the human or to underestimate the cultural dimensions of natural history. In the social sciences, although they *do* consider the human, historical thinking may operate only over very short timespans or even be entirely absent. Thus historical thinking—with its focus on century-scale change over time, its search for contextual meaning, its commitment to contingency and particularity, and its respect for the integrity of the past—has much to offer a multidisciplinary environmental inquiry.

Furthermore, the art of historical narrative should not be misunderstood as easy and inherent. Story is the most powerful educational tool we possess; it is learning distilled in a common language. It is also a privileged carrier of truth, a way of allowing for multiplicity and complexity at the same time as being memorable. In the words of the American environmental writer Barry Lopez, "Story creates an atmosphere in which truth becomes discernible as a pattern."[5] And so I would argue that narrative is not just a means; it is a method—and a rigorous and demanding one. The conventional scientific method separates causes from one another; it isolates each one and tests them individually in turn. Narrative, by contrast, carries along multiple causes together and tests and enacts connectivity. We need both methods.

Let me now turn to three distinctive dimensions of Australian environmental scholarship.

Travelling in Deep Time

The experience of the Anthropocene and the rapprochement of scientific and historical narratives have demanded that we learn to think across much greater timescales, both human and natural. Australians today live on a precipice of deep time. It is a stunning discovery of the last half-century that the human history of the continent goes back not just a few thousand years, but about 60,000. Modern Australia—once regarded as "the timeless land"—has actually been forged in a time revolution. In the two hundred years following the European invasion of Australia, the known age of the

5 Barry Lopez, "The Literature of Place," *Heat* 2 (1996): 52–53.

Earth increased from about 6,000 years to 4.6 billion. And in the second half of the twentieth century, the timescale of Australia's own human history increased tenfold in thirty years. Even the best northern hemisphere scholars struggle to digest the implications of the Australian time revolution. For example, Dan Smail makes two assumptions an Australian scholar would argue with: that "civilisation" is a term associated with agriculture, and that 50,000 years is a possible horizon for modern humanity.

There is a vertiginous edge in our historical consciousness that comes from a strengthening awareness of that abyss of time. Greg Dening saw that Australians "live in and with deep time."[6] The challenge to scholars is to piece together a complex, contoured history of social and environmental change from the arrival of people in Australia to the present. A nuanced narrative of change through millennia ultimately conveys depth better than dates can. Indigenous societies once dismissed as "primordial" and "stone-age" are now understood to have been diverse, innovative, and dynamic. When British colonists encountered Australia's Indigenous peoples, most of the learning was done by the invaded. It was not just because of the power relationship; it was also because Aboriginal peoples were used to change and encounter, and they were at home. They lived in a land with hundreds of languages, where travel involved cultural sensitivity, ritual, and exchange, and where the Dreaming sanctioned a constant, adaptive renaissance. It turns out that the classic settler ethnographies of a "timeless" people actually described societies that had been transformed by an environmental rollercoaster and which, at the moment of contact with Europeans, were undergoing accelerating cultural change. Archaeologist Mike Smith concludes in *The Archaeology of Australia's Deserts* that the foraging landscapes of Central Australia that explorer Ernest Giles described in 1872 and the elaborate ritual and ceremonial life recorded by Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen in 1896 "appear to be products of historical changes within the last millennium."

On the eastern shores of Australia in the late eighteenth century, peoples of immensely long and intimate histories of habitation encountered the farthest-flung representatives of the world's most industrialised nation. Aboriginal people survived colonisation and many now live across at least two cultures. A deep, rich human past embedded in known country is one of the gifts of Indigenous people to the new Australians. Aboriginal leader and historian Noel Pearson wrote in 2015: "The songlines are also the heritage of non-Aboriginal Australians. It is this culture that is the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Australia. It is

6 Greg Dening, "Living In and With Deep Time," Journal of Historical Sociology 18, no. 4 (2005): 269–81.

these mythic stories that are Australia's Book of Genesis."[7] Australia has become one of the few countries in the world in which a conversation across deep time is truly possible—and it is also vitally necessary. All environmental history in Australia is thus also Aboriginal history, and vice versa.

Ecological Distinctiveness

Australia has a confrontingly different climate and ecology from that of Europe and was much more alien to Europeans than was North America. The strangeness of Australian nature was part of the narrative of European "discovery" from its beginnings. But because modern environmental history came into being through its alliance with ecology, it has gradually recast these imperial stories with biological insights. The well-worn metaphors that arose from the settler's encounter with a strange, southern land—a "land of contrarieties," of "droughts and flooding rains," and of "upside-down nature"—have, with an ecological perspective, been given new life and dignity. Now, instead of being a mere artefact of settler sensibility, the wide, brown land is also explicable as an ancient craton, a low-energy ecosystem, a boom-and-bust ecology, and an El Niño continent. The biological cringe about "monotonous gums," "songless birds," and "fossil animals" has been replaced by a deep historical narrative about the continent's Gondwanan inheritance, its long, isolated voyage north into drier latitudes, and its embrace by fire.[8] The cultural disdain with which colonists noticed that native flora and fauna generally gave way to imported exotics has become cultural pride in the evolutionary sophistication and fragility of a long-isolated biota. Instead of Australia's being cast as "the last of lands"—the left-over continent, the last to be discovered and to be humanised—it is Europe that is portrayed as the "new world," ecologically young, colonised by opportunistic weeds after the ending of the last ice age, and settled by *Homo sapiens* later than Australia.[9] Environmental history has emerged as a powerful tool in helping Australians understand their land, and also in enabling them to reimagine their continental nation as the jigsaw of bioregional countries that it had been for so long.

7 Noel Pearson, *A Rightful Place: Race, Recognition, and a More Complete Commonwealth* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2014), 36.

8 See for example Stephen J. Pyne, *Burning Bush: A Fire History of Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992).

9 The scientific and literary contributions of the Australian zoologist and palaeontologist Tim Flannery have been very influential, especially in *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People* (Sydney: Reed Books, 1994).

Several influences made science and ecology especially strong in the development of Australian environmental history. Science and government were closely aligned in the colonial settlement project: in the collection and classification of a strange new world, the acclimatisation of species from "home," the expansion of the mining frontier from the 1850s, the "improvement" of land for pasture and agriculture, and the biological control of insects, plants, and animals.[10] Ecological imperialism and the acclimatisation of exotic species have shaped settlement. The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (established as CSIR in 1926 and CSIRO from 1949) made a priority of research that assisted economic development and productivity, and its focus was on "pests and weeds" rather than indigenous plants in undisturbed habitats. The privileging of science (especially agricultural science) in environmental policy—a legacy of British imperialism—meant that science in Australia has often been aligned with the national project. Thus, "ecology" is a word that invokes "science" more strongly than it invokes "politics" or "activism" (which are its more common affiliations in Europe and the United States).[11] Australia not only has a distinctive ecology; it has also given the science itself an unusual centrality in policy-making.

The Settler Revolution

For much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Australian history was celebrated for its triumphant social and political continuities, as a "blank space on the map" redeemed by Britain, and as a relatively unproblematic footnote to empire. But from the mid-twentieth century, an environmental perspective began to conceive the new southern worlds of Australia and New Zealand as extreme kinds of ecological and social laboratories. In 1941, the New Zealand geographer Kenneth Cumberland observed that "what in Europe took 20 centuries and in North America four has been accomplished in New Zealand within a single century."[12] The Canadian historical geographer Andrew Hill Clark wrote about "revolutionary change" in *The Invasion of New Zealand by People, Plants, and Animals*, and United States historian Alfred Crosby devoted the longest

10 Libby Robin and Tom Griffiths, "Environmental History in Australasia," *Environment and History* 10, no. 4 (2004): 439–74.

11 Libby Robin, *How a Continent Created a Nation* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007). On ecological consciousness, see Libby Robin, *Defending the Little Desert: The Rise of Ecological Consciousness in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998).

12 Cited by Tom Brooking and Eric Pawson, "Editorial: New Zealand Environmental Histories," *Environment and History* 9, no. 4 (2003): 375.

chapter in his *Ecological Imperialism* to a case study of New Zealand.[13] New Zealand historian James Belich observed in *Paradise Reforged* that it is the speed, not the length, of New Zealand history that makes it remarkable—and traumatic.[14] It is because colonisation and industrialisation arrived nearly simultaneously in many parts of Australasia. Australian ecologist Steve Morton has described the rate of mammal extinctions in the Australian rangelands, which is the highest in the world, as "catastrophic." Morton declared that working as a CSIRO ecologist in Australia is akin to that of an ambulance driver arriving at the scene of a bad accident. As a result, he has reflected on the danger of pessimism in conducting his science in such a land.[15] The modern settler histories of Australasia are like giant experiments in ecological crisis and management, sometimes horrifying concentrations of environmental damage and cultural loss, and sometimes heartening parables of hope and learning. Such rollercoasters of environmental history mean that, in the Tasman worlds, we can never blithely assume the dominance of culture over nature, nor can we believe in the infinite resilience of the land.

Australian history—once the whitest history in the world—became dramatically cross-cultural in the second half of the twentieth century. "The Great Australian Silence," which veiled the dispossession and violence of the frontier, was finally broken, "settlement" was controversially re-envisaged as "invasion," and European colonists began to seem like the real "nomads." A new generation of historians found that the young nation that had invested so heavily in the Anzac legend of overseas war sacrifice was unable to recognise the traumatic war on its own grasslands. In the words of the great Australian historian of the frontier, Henry Reynolds, "Settled Australia . . . is a landscape of revolution."[16]

As well as a long, continuing conflict over land, resources, and freedom, there was also learning and accommodation between the original Australians and their dispossessors. But the loss of environmental knowledge about the continent—of its wildlife and ecosystems, its natural and cultural histories, its traditions of land management, its lore,

13 Andrew Hill Clark, *The Invasion of New Zealand by People, Plants, and Animals* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 1949); Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
14 James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Auckland: Penguin, 2001).
15 Stephen Morton, "European Settlement and the Mammals of Arid Australia," chap. 8 in *Australian Environmental History: Essays and Cases*, ed. Stephen Dovers (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994). Morton's musings on pessimism are to be found in "On Pessimism in Australian Ecology," *Austral Ecology* 41 (2016): 1–10.
16 Henry Reynolds, *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers, and Land* (Sydney, 1987), 192–93.

languages, and wisdom—was tragic. Understanding, retrieving, and renewing some of that knowledge—even just beginning to comprehend the immensity of that loss—have become major tasks for the environmental historians of Australia.

The craft of environmental history engages across the science-humanities divide and it challenges the anthropocentric, nationalistic, and documentary biases of conventional history. It asks us to work audaciously across time, space, and species and to link deep, evolutionary time with the human experience of daily, social time. It propels us to wonder what happens to the history we write if we recognise the non-human world, with its different timescales, as historical, dynamic, constantly changing, and as interactive with humanity in creative ways. It even destabilises our conventional assumptions about the proper domain of history.

The Australian experience, both ancient and modern, could not be more crucial or pertinent to this quest. Environmental history in Australia is shaped by a settler culture's slow and fitful adaptation to a unique ecology and a profoundly Aboriginal place. Indeed, we can argue that our unusual history and natural history have shaped an innovative environmental enquiry—one that has a peculiarly intimate relationship to deep time, approaches the last ice age as a human experience, engages with a very different ecology, and acknowledges the revolutionary character of Australia's settler history. Environmental history makes the Australian experience of vital interest to the rest of the world.

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