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Editorial

There is an urgency and a fracture to Australian environmental history. Great areas of the continent are racked by dryland salinity, threats to endangered species – some are already extinct, polluted rivers, and many other problems. This is the white tale of pioneering and development, conservation and preservation, and of finding place and identity in a new land. If we can understand it better, perhaps we can be reconciled with the past and walk forward with a lighter and more companionable step, or so the hope is.

On the other side of the colonial fracture, ‘Australia has a black history’ as the slogan put it 200 years after Governor Arthur Phillip landed his slew of convicts, soldiers and settlers at Port Jackson (Sydney) in 1788. This other history evolved over 40-50,000 or more years during which the climate cooled and warmed, the seas rose and fell, vast inland lakes filled and disappeared, and ancient land bridges were lost leaving Tasmania on its own. The ecosystems shifted their boundaries and their species continued to evolve, creating the present high degree of endemism, and the people adapted to the changes. For about 10,000 years, a mega-fauna of giant kangaroos and emus coexisted with the people but became extinct, we do not really know why. The black environmental history is one in which the features of the landscape, its plants, birds, animals and humans are seen as the creations of the beings of the ‘dreamtime’. Place, ecology, identity and spirituality coincide.

The new settlers encountered ‘more a new planet than a new continent’, as Eric Rolls put it, but they energetically transformed the landscape for grass, grain and gold. By the end of the nineteenth century there were 3.7 million people with one of the highest standards of living and health in the world. By contrast, the indigenous population had fallen from an estimated 314,000 people – although there may well have been more than double that number – to an estimated 94,000 due to murder, introduced diseases, depression and despair. Now there are 17.8 million people in Australia of whom 353,000 are recorded as Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders.

Five papers in this issue tell the white story. Warwick Frost starts the tale with his account of farming, not on the ‘the sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains’ where the pastoralists grazed their sheep and cattle, but on the highly sought-after country with good rainfall and soils. Brett Stubbs continues the colonial tale of getting rid of the trees and shows how, in the 1880s, conservation concerns started about the waste of timber and later as part of desiccationist arguments. ‘The case for forest conservancy’ as it was put, led to an imperial model of managing state forest reserves. John Dargavel tells how tree age was thought about from early colonial science, through the periods of state forest management, to the current concern to preserve ‘old-growth’ forests from logging. The obverse of the imperial model was that forests and woodlands outside the state forests were virtually ignored by the forest authorities. Libby

Robin shows how this started to break down in the 1950s when the need to protect alpine catchments from summer grazing became apparent to ecological scientists. They proved the damage and sought, with eventual success, to have it stopped.

The conservation ideal was challenged in Australia, as elsewhere, in the 1970s by the new social movement of environmentalism holding a more radical preservation ideal. The stormy 'new politics' which resulted were accompanied by cultural changes. Whereas the conservation history up to the 1970s had been largely, but not exclusively, one of utilitarian concerns, the subsequent history became one of which embraced not only resource and ecological values but also human values, perceptions, moods and feelings in a way which would have received scant sympathy before. The reach of environmental history has had to be greatly enlarged into the domain of cultural history. Nicholas Brown continues the Australian story in this way with an account of people, place and identity in the south coast of New South Wales. His is a tale of many and changing meanings and of differences between social groups in their relationships to their environments.

The perspective of one social group, the environmentalists, is taken up in a personal note by Peter Herbst with a tale of a small environmental group battling to 'save' a patch of forest in southern New South Wales. It is, of course, only one of the many views which are taken in Australia. Ian Watson has shown in a perceptive analysis of such conflicts in northern New South Wales how closely the preservationist values held by the environmentalists are related to their primarily urban bases and their general reliance on professional skills and intellectual labour for their livelihoods.¹ Notably, these are often provided directly or indirectly by the state. Watson contrasts this situation with the way the productivist values held by loggers and farmers are related to their rural base and to their reliance on practical skills and physical labour for their livelihoods. Much of the tension in rural Australia, which Herbst reports, is attributable to the arrogation of superior moral position by the environmentalists, which rankles with many. Herbst recounts his group's difficulties; but with their urban and educated background, Australian environmentalists have proved very deft at dealing with the state in all its modern complexities. Other social groups have greater difficulties.

JOHN DARGAVEL

Note

¹ Watson, I. 1990. *Fighting for the Forests*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.