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Did they Really Hate Trees? Attitudes of Farmers, Tourists and Naturalists towards Nature in the Rainforests of Eastern Australia

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ABSTRACT

Feelings of hatred, fear and alienation towards the Australian environment have been amongst the major themes of Australian history. Farmers especially have been characterised as hating trees, particularly in the densely treed, difficult to clear rainforests of eastern Australia. In contrast, in recent years there has been consideration of nineteenth and early twentieth century tourists, naturalists and artists taking delight in these same rainforests. Generally characterised as having urban sentiments, they have been portrayed as in stark opposition to their rural counterparts.

Such a clear-cut division seems too absolute. This paper presents evidence of farmers who greatly appreciated the rainforests. Attempting to preserve rainforests, they failed in some cases, but in others were successful. In some instances, farmers were keen naturalists and in others they gradually evolved into tourism operators.

KEY WORDS

Rainforests, agriculture, tourism, naturalists, nationalparks

THE FARMER AND THE SCIENTIST

Between 1929 and 1931, Francis Ratcliffe, a young English biologist with the Australian Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, was engaged in a study of fruit bats (or flying foxes) in sub-tropical Australia. Orchardists had complained that the bats were destroying their crops. Ratcliffe's tasks were to gain

information about their numbers and life-cycle and recommend what action should be taken to control them.¹

As the first scientist to systematically study the fruit bats, Ratcliffe needed to observe them in a range of locations and to obtain specimens. The gregarious bats tended to gather in semi-permanent colonies, known as *camps*. To find these camps Ratcliffe turned to local farmers for help.

Ratcliffe and a friend visited a rainforest on Tamborine Mountain, about 100 kilometres south of Brisbane. Their guide was a farmer's wife, Mrs Curtis, aged somewhere in her twenties,

My friend had been a naturalist since his schooldays, and I had spent a year in the bush as a professional biologist: but in her company we could only listen and learn. She had spent her whole life on the mountain, and knew it as a man knows his own golf course. She knew the habits of every bird and beast that lived there, and where the rare ferns and orchids could be found. The bird kind, I think, were her favourites. She had made friends with them, studied them, photographed them, her infinite patience outweighing the deficiencies of her apparatus.²

Ratcliffe wished to shoot some fruit bats as specimens. Mrs Curtis excused herself and walked some distance away. She disapproved of the shooting of wildlife. She was upset and in turn Ratcliffe became upset and embarrassed that he had so disturbed her tranquil piece of rainforest.

CLEARING AUSTRALIA'S RAINFORESTS

Tamborine Mountain was a part of the long thin line of rainforests which ran down Australia's east coast for 4,000 kilometres or so from Cape York to southern Tasmania.³ Their clearance, primarily for farming, began in the late eighteenth century, but peaked between the 1870s and the 1930s. While it is not possible to exactly say how much rainforest was cleared, as official statistics were not collected, a reasonable estimate is two to five million hectares, but it could easily be argued as higher.⁴ In some instances, such as the sub-tropical Big Scrub and the mixed eucalypt-temperate rainforest Great Forest of South Gippsland, the rainforest was nearly completely cleared. The farmers were *selectors*, family farmers buying uncleared land from the government. They were attracted to the high rainfall of these forests, which ranged upwards from 1,000 millimetres (40 inches) per year. However to utilise that rainfall for agricultural purposes, the farmers had to clear the immense forests quickly. This was done through a process of cutting, drying and burning, universally known by settlers as *The Burn*.⁵

Clearing the tall dense forests was hard, dirty, dangerous work. One selector described cutting rainforest as, 'no matter where or how you hit anything it invariably falls on top of you, and every damn thing has spikes on it'.⁶ Another

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recorded how ‘thousands of little hooks and needle-points wait for the slightest contact of the unwary, tearing the clothes to ribbons, and lacerating hands and arms’.⁷ Deaths and injuries resulted from falling trees and limbs and axes skidding and slipping.⁸ Picking up half-burnt logs to restack and burn again, ‘was hard, rough work, and only strong men could stand it; the charcoal on the logs when wet would wear the skin off the hands until they bled’.⁹ The farmers were frustrated by their underestimation of the task they had undertaken, their chronic lack of capital and the rapidity of forest regrowth. Clearing the forests was hard, dangerous and frustrating. Many gave up and abandoned their farms.¹⁰

HATRED, FEAR AND ALIENATION: THE FARMERS’ PERSPECTIVE

Settlers’ feelings of hatred, fear and alienation towards the Australian environment have been amongst the major themes of Australian history. Given the difficulties and expense involved in clearing the rainforests, it is not surprising that such feelings have been painted as being at their strongest amongst the farmers in the rainforests of the east coast. Four major works are considered here as examples of how farmers’ attitudes towards rainforests (and more generally the Australian environment) have been represented.

In 1930 Keith Hancock wrote his history/commentary *Australia*. Provocatively he labelled the settlers as invaders and declared that, ‘the invaders hated trees ... [and] the greed of the pioneers caused them to devastate hundreds of thousands of acres of forest-land’.¹¹ Furthermore, ‘to the early settlers, the Bush was an unfriendly wilderness’, especially the coastal rainforests. The invaders wanted open spaces, ‘they were overjoyed when, pushing beyond the dense mountain forests of the belt of heavy rainfall, they found more manageable, more familiar country, “like a park and grounds laid out”’.¹²

A generation later, A.J. Marshall continued in this vein. Writing generally of Australia, he argued that, ‘the bush, to our great-grandfathers, was the enemy: it brooded sombrely outside their brave and often pathetic little attempts at civilization ... It, not they, was alien’.¹³

This notion of a hatred of trees arising from fear and alienation was taken up by Geoffrey Bolton in *Spoils and Spoilers* (1981), Australia’s first environmental history textbook. In a chapter titled ‘They hated trees’, Bolton wrote,

The first European arrivals in New South Wales may well have been oppressed by what they saw as the vastness of its forests. Many of the earliest drawings of the Australian bush tend to exaggerate the size of the trees and to dwarf the human figures among them, and this probably reflects the way the newcomers felt about their new surroundings.¹⁴

Finally, George Seddon argued that Australians developed a double standard towards rainforests. On the one hand they saw them as ‘satanic’ and ‘full of

menace', provoking an 'attitude of dread'. On the other hand they greatly appreciated them in botanic gardens and as street trees, but only 'drained of menace by their new context, safely suburban'.¹⁵

In addition, Australian historiography has been greatly influenced by accounts of farmers' experiences overseas, especially in similar regions of recent European settlement. Particularly influential was Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967). Nash argued that the American pioneers transferred Old World attitudes to the forests of the Atlantic coast. For those on the frontier, 'constant exposure to wilderness gave rise to fear and hatred on the part of those who had to fight it for survival and success'.¹⁶ Furthermore,

Wilderness not only frustrated the pioneers physically but also acquired significance as a dark and sinister symbol. They shared the long Western tradition of imagining wild country as a moral vacuum, a cursed and chronic wasteland.¹⁷

NATURALISTS AND ARTISTS

In recent years, there has been growing interest in those naturalists and artists who enjoyed and valued the Australian environment, particularly the rainforests. However, this is no major revisionism. Rather, these groups have been characterised as only a minority counterpart to the majority's perspective of the rainforests as alienating and intimidating. The views of these few groups are comfortingly familiar to a modern environmentally minded audience, but they have also been used to remind us that until quite recently, these were unusual attitudes and that most Australians hated the rainforests.

Natural history was one of the great genteel pastimes of the nineteenth century. Indeed it was popular amongst some of the officers of the early convict fleets.¹⁸ It seemingly developed almost exclusively amongst urban professional elites, such as lawyers, schoolteachers and doctors.¹⁹ Most of its enthusiasts were amateurs, its pursuit a respectable leisure pastime.²⁰ Their obsession was possession, they were a new type of *hunters and collectors*.²¹ Most importantly, their numbers were very small.

Rainforests were a favourite topic of many landscape artists in the nineteenth century.²² Prominent rainforest painters included Conrad Martens, Augustus Earle, John Skinner Prout, Eugene von Guerard, Nicholas Chevalier, Louis Buvelot, Isaac Whitehead and (in the early twentieth century) Arthur Streeton. In addition there was a group of prolific rainforest photographers, including Richard Daintree, J.W.Lindt and Nicholas Caire.²³

These works both fed off and stimulated further the fascination for rainforests. Von Guerard's *Ferntree Gully in the Dandenong Ranges* (1857) attracted tremendous interest and appreciation. Furthermore it encouraged large numbers to visit the site which it depicted, making Ferntree Gully an early tourist

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attraction and in time a National Park.²⁴ A conservation ethic was also promoted through the paintings of Arthur Streeton in the 1920s and 1930s. Streeton's work contained strong warnings of deforestation, as in his bluntly titled *Gippsland Forests for Paper Pulp* and *Our Vanishing Forests* and his apocalyptic *Silvan Dam and Donna Buang – AD 2000*.²⁵

TOURISTS AND THE CREATION OF NATIONAL PARKS

Naturalists and artists may be construed as a small and exclusive urban elite. However, rainforests also attracted a far wider audience. While in the nineteenth century, rainforest loving artists ensured that Australia's 'museums and art galleries are full of ferns', broad public tastes also meant that 'colonial buildings, from butchers' shops to ballrooms, were equally full of ferns'.²⁶ This fascination with ferns and their rainforest environment came from two sources. The first was an English craze for ferns (labelled *pteridomania*), transported to Australia as part of the colonists' *cultural baggage*.²⁷ The second was that rainforests represented coolness, shade and moisture, desirable qualities in a hot and dry climate.

This passion for rainforests is best seen in public tree plantings. Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens are dominated by nineteenth century rainforest plantings, including 600 palms, 110 tropical figs, 192 lillypillies and 164 rainforest conifers. In contrast there are only 75 elms, 100 oaks and 81 true pines.²⁸ Regional towns like Bendigo boasted public ferneries.²⁹ As early as 1866 the Adelaide Botanic Garden planted an avenue of over twenty Moreton Bay Figs. In the 1920s the Perth seaside suburb of Cottesloe planted hundreds of Norfolk Island Pines as street trees, creating a look which soon spread to most seaside areas. Bunya Pines and Moreton Bay Figs flourished in the manicured gardens of wealthy squatters in Victoria's Western District, an excellent example of Victorian era conspicuous consumption, given their high water requirements.

One better than bringing the rainforest to the city was for visitors to travel to and experience the rainforests in their natural setting. The geography of Australia's east coast made such tourism easily possible, even inevitable. All the capital cities of the east coast were very close to mountains and rainforests. Melbourne, for example, was only 40 kilometres from the rainforest gullies of the Dandenong Ranges.

Popular attractions for tourists included waterfalls, fern-gullies and individual large trees. Typical activities included picnicking, walks and games. Fern-collecting was a popular, though destructive activity.³⁰ The extension of railways into mountains increased the volume and pressure of tourism. A railway excursion to the forests of Mirboo North (Victoria) in 1908 by 100 American sailors from the visiting Great White Fleet was particularly illustrative of the widespread appeal of rainforests.³¹ Demand was especially high for Sunday

excursion trains, which allowed ordinary wage-earners the chance to see the rainforests.³²

The flow of tourists into the rainforests remained strong through to the 1920s and 1930s. Stays lengthened. Resorts with guest houses or holiday homes boomed. Famous holiday home users in the Dandenongs ranged from the Prime Minister Billy Hughes to the gangster ‘Squizzy’ Taylor. New trends amongst tourists in the 1920s and 1930s included the use of motor vehicles to reach rainforest attractions and the popular craze for *bushwalking*.³³

Whilst tourists could be destructive in rainforests,³⁴ they also contributed to their preservation. This was particularly so through the creation of National Parks to cater for their demands and protect the natural environment.³⁵ Many early National Parks were small patches of rainforest greatly popular amongst visitors, such as Witches’ Falls at Mount Tamborine, Queensland’s first National Park established in 1908.³⁶

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The literature provides a convenient division. Farmers, pioneers and settlers, it was argued, were alienated and intimidated by the dense dark rainforests and accordingly hated them and cut them down wherever they could. In contrast, there were small urban groups (naturalists, painters, tourists) who appreciated the rainforests, but were generally powerless to protect them. Such a simple model is attractive as it can easily be compared to today.

However, there are those who disagree. The agricultural scientists Neil Barr and John Cary in *Greening a Brown Land* (1992) argued that, ‘there has not been a total hatred of the trees as some commentators would have us believe’, rather there is ‘an historical tradition of native and exotic tree appreciation on Australian farms’.³⁷ Speaking on National Tree Day 2001, Ian Donges, President of the National Farmers’ Federation declared, ‘farmers deserve a solid pat on the back for their commitment to the environment and myths that they rape and pillage the land should not be nurtured’.³⁸

Is the division between the farmers on the one hand and the naturalists, artists and tourists on the other just too black and white? Were there not certain common values which they all shared? Were not farmers sometimes tourists? Were there not farmers who were naturalists (as John Muir was in the USA)? Ian Tyrrell has recently explored the environmental values of Californian farmers.³⁹ There needs to be a similar exploration of the attitudes towards nature of Australian farmers. This paper considers the evidence of some farmers (such as Mrs Curtis) who did enjoy and appreciate their rainforest surrounds.

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FIRST IMPRESSIONS IN THE 1820S AND 1830S

The 1820s and 1830s saw a number of detailed accounts of visits to rainforests. Rather than being intimidated or frightened by the dense forests, these writers found them beautiful and invigorating. On his first visit to the Illawarra region of NSW around 1827, Alexander Harris told how he and his guide had to leave open ground and cut through the dense brush. Writing for the English reader, Harris could have been excused for spicing up his adventure by highlighting his fears. Instead he described 'the most novel and beautiful scenery', and throughout his account betrayed no notion of fear amongst him or his companions.⁴⁰ Harris often referred to the forest as 'gloomy', but he explicitly clarified that as meaning that light levels were lower under the canopy, not that it was depressing or scary. Indeed, he observed that while the constant shade left the cedar-cutters pallid they were generally very healthy.⁴¹

Peter Cunningham, another visitor to Illawarra in the 1820s, described the forests as 'beautiful, fertile and romantic'.⁴² In 1826, James Atkinson described the rainforests of NSW as 'magnificent', the sassafras tree as 'elegant', the tree fern as 'very beautiful' and that there were 'many other beautiful plants and trees'.⁴³ In the 1830s James Backhouse described north-west Tasmania as 'one of the most magnificent of forests', the crowns of the eucalypts as 'elegant' and the tree ferns as 'splendid'.⁴⁴

These were the comments of some of the earliest visitors to the rainforests. Their accounts were intended for publication in England and they were clearly striving to convey the immensity and exoticness of the forests to an unfamiliar English audience. Did they represent a view commonly held by European settlers in Australia at that time? Certainly these four authors gave no indication that their views were contrary or unusual.

A LOVE OF NATURE (SOUTH GIPPSLAND)

In the 1870s and 1880s South Gippsland in Victoria was flooded by settlers. A Mrs Williams was initially distraught, but quickly came to love her forest surroundings,

Oh! how I used to love the early mornings, when everything awoke to new life; I would just stand and feast on the beauty and glory of it all. There was a spot down by the river which I never tired of looking at, the tall tree ferns, with their graceful spreading plumes, the bracken, the swordgrass, clematis, maiden-hair fern, and Xmas [sic] trees, etc., made a picture impossible for me to describe.⁴⁵

Her neighbour, Miss Elms, came to be housekeeper for her bachelor brother. Travelling to his selection for the first time, 'I was charmed by the beauty of the

surrounding scrub and the song of the birds, especially the beautiful clear note of the lyre bird, which I had not heard before.’ She made a garden around their log hut, using flowering plants transplanted from the nearby bush, such as fireweed and supplejack, as ornamental flowers. She recorded that some visitors were highly amused to see what they thought of as being weeds cultivated. It is notable that the only exotics she recorded as in her garden were of practical value, such as parsnips and hops.⁴⁶

In summer Miss Elms ‘used to love riding along the pretty tracks looking like beautiful avenues with the supplejacks’ lovely blossoms wreathing and festooning the trees’. A favourite spot was ‘a glorious mass of tree ferns and blackwoods in a gully that we admired very much, and which my brother tried to reserve as a beauty spot, but the ruthless fires swept through it all when burning other scrub’.⁴⁷

Niels Petersen recalled her childhood in the 1880s at Poowong East in South Gippsland,

On a bright, sunny morning the forest was not lonely, all around was the song of the brightly coloured birds ... There were some very beautiful trees in the forest, such as the Pittosporum, Blanket Wood, Hazel, Wattle, Mintwood (or Christmas Tree) the Musk with its beautiful scent and white and yellow dotted flowers, and sometimes a tree fern was seen with a green creeper growing over it, the latter having lovely snow white bell shaped flowers.⁴⁸

Charles Barrett, a noted naturalist and journalist, came often to Poowong to observe the Giant Earthworm and the Lyrebird and on an unsuccessful search for Leadbeater’s Possum. He recorded his guide as Lou Cook, a local dairy farmer. Indeed Barrett, who rarely named his guides, gave much of the credit for their work to Cook.⁴⁹ Other nearby farmers whose writings qualified them as naturalists were T.J. Coverdale and F.P. Elms.⁵⁰

Two small rainforest gullies in South Gippsland were reserved as National Parks. They were Bulga (1904) and Tarra Valley (1909). Both were initially used by local farmers as picnic sites. In sparsely populated frontier settlements such sites were especially important for the community to get together. The reservation of these National Parks was due to the efforts of the local shire council, particularly the Shire Engineer, Frank Corrigan. As well as walking tracks and picnic facilities, in 1938 the council constructed a suspension footbridge over the gully at Bulga.⁵¹

THE ATHERTON TABLELAND

The Atherton Tableland in Northern Queensland was settled from the 1880s onwards. One selector, Charles Bryde, was like Mrs Williams in that his initial dismay turned to wonder and joy. He wrote that,

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The spirit of the romance of pioneering took possession of us. We were the only inhabitants of a new-found beautiful world; we were shipwrecked on an unspoiled pre-Adamite island; we were well – just a couple of enthusiastic bush-lovers, with some ability to appreciate the beauty of old mother Nature.⁵²

As in South Gippsland, local settlers tried to save small portions of the rainforests from clearance, and in time some were developed as much loved beauty spots and picnic grounds. One particular noteworthy battle concerned Lakes Barrine and Eacham. In 1912 Charles Bryde was thankful to be one of a party of twenty settlers who took a much needed break from clearing to enjoy a Christmas picnic at Lake Barrine.⁵³ Earlier six 40 acre freehold lots had been released around Lake Eacham and the shores partly cleared. A proposal for a similar release around Lake Barrine galvanised locals into action. The 1897 Royal Commission on Land Settlement heard pleas from John Byers (Crown Land Ranger), William Kelly (storekeeper and farmer) and Robert Ringrose (Secretary, Herberton Chamber of Commerce) for the conservation of the lakes. Ringrose exclaimed that the untouched Barrine was ‘a most wonderful lake’, which ‘has such a quiet peacefulness buried in the scrub’.⁵⁴ As a result Barrine was saved and the freehold land around Eacham resumed.

GREEN MOUNTAINS

In 1911 five O’Reilly brothers and their three cousins selected land on the Lamington Plateau in Southern Queensland. The Plateau was actually the remains of a giant *caldera* (or volcanic cone). Its rich soil and high rainfall supported lush sub-tropical rainforest, with some temperate rainforest on the highest parts. However, its forbidding steeply cliffed sides had caused settlement to by-pass the Plateau. Only a shortage of unsettled land had convinced the Queensland Lands Department to open it for selection.

The commencement of clearing caused an outcry. The area had been proposed as a National Park in 1896, by Robert Collins, a wealthy farmer and Member of the Queensland Parliament. Collins’ interest in National Parks stemmed from a world tour he had undertaken in 1878. He was particularly impressed by Yellowstone National Park and Yosemite, and he believed that parts of Queensland should be similarly protected.⁵⁵ Combining lobbying by the Queensland Royal Society and guided tours for influential persons (including Queensland Governor Lord Lamington and visiting writer Arthur Conan Doyle), Collins and his supporters advanced the case for National Parks.⁵⁶ Following Collins’ death in 1913 leadership of this movement passed to Romeo Lahey, the son of a wealthy timber family.⁵⁷ Grabbing the opportunity of a close state election, Lahey also enlisted the patriotic zeal for World War One, arguing that, ‘I want to get away to Europe to my next duty, but cannot leave this one

unfulfilled'.⁵⁸ Lahey's campaign struck a chord with the public, for, 'Queensland, after an orgy of [rainforest] destruction, had reached a stage where it could well begin to think of conservation'.⁵⁹ Public support was demonstrated by a petition of 521 voters from mainly rural southern Queensland, who called on the Queensland Government to declare a National Park.⁶⁰ Ironically, the O'Reillys climbed the plateau by following tracks made by advocates of a National Park.⁶¹

In 1915 a National Park was declared and all available Crown land on the Plateau was withdrawn from selection. Plans for the government to build a road were shelved, the O'Reillys eventually making their own. However, they remained alone and isolated, without the schools or dairy factories which other settlers would have brought. There were lengthy discussions regarding their farms being resumed and added to the National Park.⁶² However, while the Government offered a land exchange, the O'Reillys countered that they also wanted compensation of 6,000 pounds for seven years of clearing and other improvements.⁶³ Wishing neither to pay that amount of cash, nor to cause alarm by forcing the O'Reillys out, the Government adopted a waiting strategy, confident that the O'Reillys could not make farming pay on the isolated Plateau.

However, the O'Reillys did not fail. On the doorstep of the new National Park, they found a steady stream of visitors wishing to purchase supplies and guiding services from them. Lodging was provided at first in 'various slab humpies'.⁶⁴ These visitors were typical urban naturalists, such as Archibald Meston, a Queensland journalist whom they guided in 1918.⁶⁵ The O'Reillys found themselves suited to such work. Their farmer father had been a keen naturalist – 'never once did he return [from droving] without his saddle bags stuffed with seeds, cuttings and roots'⁶⁶ – and the boys were keenly interested in birds and had excelled at Nature Studies at school.⁶⁷

Gradually the O'Reillys began to see the potential of mixing tourism with farming. The claim that they chose the Lamington Plateau because its scenery excelled the Blue Mountains⁶⁸ needs to be approached with caution, given it was made over 30 years later. However, by 1919 the idea was established. Putting the case for their remaining to the Minister of Lands, they argued, 'the few hundred acres of [our] settlement will prove an asset to the National Park in its development as a health and pleasure resort'.⁶⁹ In turn their critics argued that the O'Reillys were hanging on with the view to 'subdivide and sell as building lots for summer cottages'.⁷⁰

While the government delayed its decision one of the brothers, Mick O'Reilly, a returned serviceman, was appointed Working Overseer (effectively Park Ranger) of the National Park. The other brothers were appointed Honorary Rangers.⁷¹ Eventually, as it became clear that the Government would not resume the land, the O'Reillys moved further into tourism, in 1926 opening a guest house under the name 'Green Mountains' to service the growing number of visitors to the National Park.⁷² Their venture was an immediate success, 'the people who had for many years enjoyed the shelter of our humpy were only too glad to

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recommend us to their friends ... [and it] put the plateau within the reach of many more people'.⁷³ A tremendous boom at the time in nature-based tourism, especially in mountains and forests, ensured their popularity.⁷⁴

One early guest was Charles Chauvel. Significantly, he was the son of dairy farmers in nearby Fassifern, which had been settled and cleared of rainforests in the 1880s. However, Chauvel chose film-making over farming and he used the Lamington Plateau for three films. The first was *Heritage* (1934), in which he filmed a pioneer's bullock dray struggling up the impossibly steep road to the Plateau.⁷⁵ Chauvel returned a decade later to use the rainforest as a substitute for the jungles of New Guinea in his war film *The Rats of Tobruk*.⁷⁶

On this visit Chauvel read the newly published *Green Mountains* by Bernard O'Reilly, a younger brother of the five original O'Reillys. Bernard had achieved fame in 1937 by rescuing the survivors of an aeroplane which had crashed on the Lamington Plateau. Public interest in the rescue led to him writing of it and the broader story of the O'Reillys. Chauvel bought the film rights and made *The Sons of Matthew* (1949), a fictionalised account of the O'Reillys efforts at farming the rainforests.⁷⁷ It is important to note that Chauvel did not demonise the rainforest. Instead the pioneers are shown as being enchanted with their new environment.

CONCLUSION

Farming in the rainforests of eastern Australia was extremely difficult. To the settlers the rainforests were exotic, unlike anything they had experienced in Britain or the wheatbelt of the inland plains of Australia. The rainforests were difficult, dangerous and expensive to clear. The settlers consistently underestimated the magnitude of the task, only to realise their mistake when well-committed. To farm successfully, to recoup their investment and to create a home for their families, the farmers had to remove the rainforest. Farming, whether dairying or cropping, could not take place *in* the rainforest. Rainforest was an obstacle to farming.

Many farmers, perhaps the majority, demonised that obstacle. For them, rainforest became an enemy, hated, intimidating, frightening. However, not *all* farmers shared these feelings. Some found the rainforests beautiful, magical and enchanting. They still had to clear large sections in order to succeed as farmers, but many tried to preserve parts of the rainforests.

This article provides a number of instances of farmers who loved the rainforest. It is perhaps open to criticism in that it is only a small sample and the cases are drawn from a limited range of rainforest regions. However, it must be understood that there were many significant rainforest regions (for example the Big Scrub of NSW) where there were few accounts left by farmers. The regions covered in this article tend to be those where we have the most number of accounts. Analysis is also limited by the large numbers of farmers who did not

write down their stories, or if they did, then did not record their feelings towards nature. An interesting example of this is provided by Mrs Williams of South Gippsland. She recorded her attitudes in detail, while her husband also wrote his account, which was longer, but did not discuss his feelings.⁷⁸ Unfortunately we cannot tell whether or not he shared his wife's feelings. In addition, in looking at farmers' writings we must always be wary, measuring any complaints against the possibility of Tuchman's Law, 'a greater hazard, built into the very nature of recorded history, is overload of the negative'.⁷⁹

It is impossible to tell whether or not this small sample is typical of the majority of farmers, simply because the majority left no relevant records. However, it is particularly telling that 521 voters, most of whom were farmers, signed a petition in favour of the Lamington National Park.

Bearing these limitations in mind some interesting patterns emerge. The observations range from the 1820s to the 1940s, from Northern Queensland 3,000 kilometres south to Gippsland. They were made by both men and women. Only one was made by someone (the former sailor Bryde) who clearly had no previous farming experience. On the other hand the O'Reillys and Kelly in Queensland and the Williams and Petersens in South Gippsland were farmers before coming to the rainforests. All the evidence points to the farmers referred to here as hard-working and pragmatic.

These accounts blur the distinctions between farmers on the one hand and naturalists and tourists on the other. The dairy farmer Lou Cook worked on three projects with the distinguished naturalist Charles Barrett and Barrett gave him equal credit. A group of 53 South Gippsland farmers called their reminiscences *The Land of the Lyrebird*, while Niels Petersen titled hers *Close to Nature's Heart*. Mrs Curtis volunteered to work with the scientist Ratcliffe. The O'Reillys worked with a range of scientists and once it seemed their title was clear, built a guesthouse for tourists. A group of leading citizens on the Atherton Tableland asked a Royal Commission into Land Settlement for assistance for agriculture, a government-built railway *and* the preservation of the rainforest around two lakes. At Tarra Valley, Bulga and Tamborine Mountain the locals campaigned for their picnic spots to be protected and promoted as National Parks.

Over the last two decades, there has been a great deal of research into Australia's environmental history. Much of this research has attempted to make sense of Australia's past in order to understand current environmental issues. However, with greater research, the past is being seen to be increasingly complex. A simple division between uncaring farmers and concerned urbanites is no more tenable for the past than it is today.

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NOTES

¹ In the end Ratcliffe argued that any widespread eradication campaign ‘would be a waste of both time and money’ (Ratcliffe 1938, 5). The fruit bats are a good example of how European settlement sometimes encouraged native plants and animals (Frost 1998). Generally found in sub-tropical Australia, since 1983 they have settled in Melbourne’s Royal Botanic Gardens. By the late 1990s their numbers had grown to over 8,000 and they were causing tremendous damage to many trees in the Gardens. A cull in 2001 has sparked much debate. Ratcliffe went on to be one of the founders of the Australian Conservation Foundation.

² Ratcliffe, 1938: 19–20.

³ Definitions of rainforest have been the subject of much debate, especially in Australia. The term rainforest was coined by Andreas Schimper in 1898 to cover what we now regard as tropical rainforest. Essentially it is an Eurocentric term, describing non-European forests which have characteristics different from European forests. Where the term has been applied to non-tropical forests it has led to controversy. The debate is not just about scientific nomenclature, for the term rainforest has acquired significant cultural and economic meaning. In Australia the debate has centered on whether or not dense wet eucalypt forest with rainforest understories and gullies can be defined as rainforest. For the purpose of this article I have used the broader definition, including most notably the forests of south Gippsland. For a more detailed consideration of the problems of defining rainforests see Figgis (1989), Cameron (1992) and Frost (2001).

⁴ For example, Figgis (1989: 28) argued that nearly eight million hectares have been cleared since European settlement.

⁵ Frost, 1997 and 1998.

⁶ Bryde, 1921: 59.

⁷ Sorenson, 1911: 187.

⁸ Bryde, 1921: 108–9; South Gippsland, 1972: 108–110 and 351; O’Reilly, 1944: 77–8.

⁹ South Gippsland, 1972: 283.

¹⁰ Frost, 1998: 140.

¹¹ Hancock, 1930: 33–4.

¹² Hancock, 1930: 56. Despite his great influence, some inconsistencies in Hancock have been commented upon. McIntyre (2001: 49) noted that having labelled settlers as invaders and raised issues of environmental degradation, Hancock stopped this discussion abruptly with, ‘and yet, if a balance could be struck, it would probably be reckoned that alien men and animals and vegetation have enriched the soil more than they have impoverished it’ (Hancock, 1930: 35)

¹³ Marshall, 1966: 2.

¹⁴ Bolton, 1992: 37.

¹⁵ Seddon, 1997: 91–2. The notion of settlers’ fears was occasionally reversed (perhaps even parodied) by environmentally sympathetic contemporaries. For example, in 1883 La Meslee warned, ‘there are parts of the bush ... which are really terrifying. There are areas, miles and miles in extent, where not a leaf or a piece of living bark is to be seen on the trees ... nothing can give any idea of the infinitely sad and desolate air of these dead forests ... it is a vision of Ezekiel: and the forest resembles a multitude of skeletons raising their long, fleshless arms to the sky’ (La Meslee, 1973: 30).

¹⁶ Nash, 1982: 43.

- ¹⁷ Nash, 1982: 24.
- ¹⁸ Bonyhady, 2000: 14–39.
- ¹⁹ Powell, 1976; Stevens, 1991; Finney, 1993; Griffiths, 1996.
- ²⁰ Ratcliffe's companion on Mount Tamborine was an amateur naturalist.
- ²¹ Griffiths, 1996.
- ²² Ritchie, 1989.
- ²³ The Daintree River and Rainforest of north Queensland was named after the photographer/ geologist.
- ²⁴ Bonyhady, 2000: 105–7.
- ²⁵ Bonyhady, 1993: 9–12. Ironically Streecon made his name as one of the Heidelberg School, which can be viewed as a reaction against the realist landscapes of the late nineteenth century. The political statements incorporated in his rainforest paintings have often been overlooked and many were dismissed as just ordinary rural landscapes.
- ²⁶ Bonyhady, 2000: 102–3.
- ²⁷ Ritchie, 1989: 133; Bonyhady, 2000: 103–4.
- ²⁸ Seddon, 1997: 90–1.
- ²⁹ Ritchie, 1989: 138.
- ³⁰ Ritchie, 1989: 135–41.
- ³¹ Murphy, 1994: 107–9. In 1869 the officers from a visiting English naval fleet had visited the Fern Tree Gully in the Dandenongs (Ritchie, 1989: 141).
- ³² Bonyhady, 2000: 116.
- ³³ Frost, 2000: 40–2.
- ³⁴ Ritchie, 1989: 135; Bonyhady, 2000: 116.
- ³⁵ There is an important ongoing debate over whether National Parks are primarily to protect the environment or to provide leisure and recreational experiences for visitors. Irrespective of that current debate, most national parks established in Australia before World War Two were primarily created in response to tourist demand.
- ³⁶ For this and others see Anderson, 2000; Hall, 2000: 32–4 and Ritchie, 1989: 138–50.
- ³⁷ Barr and Cary, 1992: 82.
- ³⁸ National Farmers' Federation, 2001.
- ³⁹ Tyrrell, 1999.
- ⁴⁰ Harris, 1964: 25.
- ⁴¹ Harris, 1964: 45.
- ⁴² Cunningham, 1966: 48.
- ⁴³ Atkinson, 1975: 3.
- ⁴⁴ Backhouse, 1967: 111.
- ⁴⁵ South Gippsland, 1972: 351.
- ⁴⁶ South Gippsland, 1972: 367–8.
- ⁴⁷ South Gippsland, 1972: 370.
- ⁴⁸ Petersen, 1951: 18–20.
- ⁴⁹ Barrett, 1940: 23 and 37.
- ⁵⁰ South Gippsland, 1972: 20–8, 34–8 and 103–5.
- ⁵¹ Anderson, 2000: 70–2. The suspension bridge was probably the first elevated viewing structure for a rainforest anywhere in the world. It is also notable that both National Parks were given Aboriginal names.
- ⁵² Bryde, 1921: 102.
- ⁵³ Bryde, 1921: 83–4.
- ⁵⁴ Queensland Royal Commission, 1897: Q. 4147–50, 4247 and 4301–6.

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- ⁵⁵ Groom, 1949: 58–63.
- ⁵⁶ A strategy identical to that used by John Muir with Theodore Roosevelt and Milo Dunphy with Prince Charles and NSW Premiers Neville Wran and Bob Carr.
- ⁵⁷ Hutton and Connors, 1999: 33–4, 62.
- ⁵⁸ quoted in Hutton and Connors, 1999: 34.
- ⁵⁹ O'Reilly, 1944: 87.
- ⁶⁰ Groom, 1949: 81–2.
- ⁶¹ Groom, 1949: 85.
- ⁶² O'Reilly, 1944: 87.
- ⁶³ Correspondence between O'Reillys and Lands Department, 14 April 1919 and 22 April 1919, *O'Reilly Papers*.
- ⁶⁴ O'Reilly, 1944: 116.
- ⁶⁵ O'Reilly, 1944: 19–20. See O'Reilly, 1944: 116, for a list of scientists who visited the Plateau. One not mentioned was Francis Ratcliffe who visited in the early 1930s.
- ⁶⁶ O'Reilly, 1944: 52.
- ⁶⁷ O'Reilly, 1944: 61–4.
- ⁶⁸ O'Reilly, 1944: 70.
- ⁶⁹ O'Reilly brothers to Minister of Lands, 8 April 1919, *O'Reilly Papers*.
- ⁷⁰ Land agent's memo., 10 April 1919, *O'Reilly Papers*.
- ⁷¹ O'Reilly 1944: 111–2, 115.
- ⁷² The name was chosen to both distinguish from, but also suggest something similar to the Blue Mountains.
- ⁷³ O'Reilly, 1944: 133–4.
- ⁷⁴ Frost, 2000.
- ⁷⁵ The road (built by the O'Reillys in 1915) was effectively a 'stand-in' for one in the Blue Mountains.
- ⁷⁶ Chauvel, 1973: 9–12, 67–8, 97.
- ⁷⁷ Chauvel, 1973: 97–9.
- ⁷⁸ South Gippsland, 1972: 289–95, 348–51.
- ⁷⁹ Tuchman, 1989: xx.

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