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Katie Holmes

Making Masculinity: Land, Body, Image in Australia's Mallee Country¹

The relationship between masculinity and the environment is an area to which sociologists and cultural geographers have been more attentive than historians. But understanding the gendered identities of men plays an important part in helping us think through the ways in which they shaped and were shaped by the environments in which they lived and laboured. This is particularly true in rural contexts. The entangled relationships between men's bodies, animals, machines, and the land they worked are in turn connected to broader understandings about nationhood, settlement, and the Judeo-Christian imperative to subdue the wilderness. In Australia these ideas developed in tandem with modernity and one of the most ubiquitous ways of capturing the change: the camera.

In this paper I explore these ideas through a selection of photographs taken by Bill Boyd, a young man living on his family's farm near Sea Lake in the Victorian Mallee in the 1920s (figure 1). Bill was 19 when he began taking photos using a mail-ordered Kodak camera. He bought it with money earned from rabbit catching and, captivated by the technology, taught himself how to take, develop and print his photos. The farm's four-foot square grain-stripper doubled as his dark-room—surely a first—and Bill became a prolific recorder of Mallee life. The modern technology of the camera stands in sharp contrast to the subject of Bill's photographs: a pre-industrial world, where machinery was horse-powered, physical labour was unrelenting and exacting, and daily life was devoid of luxury or even ordinary comforts.²

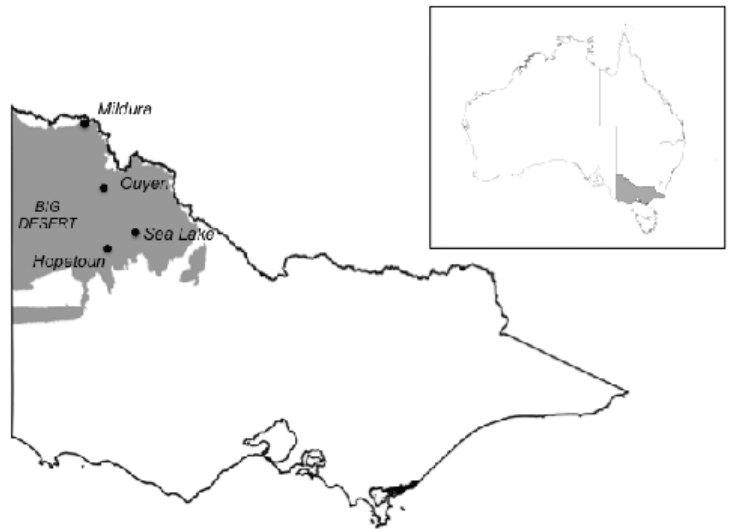


Figure 1:
Map of the Victorian
Mallee. Courtesy of
Andrew Butt.

- 1 Special thanks to Liz Conor and Tasha Weir for their helpful suggestions on this paper and to the Melbourne Life Writers group for their critical engagement with it.
- 2 All photographs in this essay are taken from the Bill Boyd Photographic Collection, Museums Victoria. Photographer: William (Bill) Boyd.

The 4.5 million hectares of the Victorian Mallee comprises about one fifth of the state's total land mass. It is mostly flat, sandy country, the legacy of the land's ancient inundation by the sea during the Paleozoic age. Summers in the Mallee are hot and dry, winter rainfall is modest, and droughts are recurrent. The Victorian Mallee is part of a broader mallee ecosystem that encompasses disparate parts of South Australia, Western Australia, and New South Wales. Prior to European clearing, the mallee lands in Victoria were once a forest of the unique *Eucalyptus dumosa*, or mallee as the original owners called it. The mallee tree can reach five to eight metres in height, and have up to six stems growing from lignotubers—a woody root crown containing starch and moisture—under or just above the ground. Indigenous people used these lignotubers as a water source in an otherwise predominantly dry landscape. From the earliest European descriptions of the area, the landscape was portrayed as actively hostile to European incursion. In spite of this, intensive European settlement of the Mallee began in the 1880s. Bill Boyd's family was amongst the second wave of settlers to the Mallee when his father took a lease on a 360-acre block in 1912.

In the late nineteenth century, the development of specific technological inventions designed to enable the relatively cheap and efficient clearing of the mallee, namely the "Mallee roller" and the stump-jump plough, helped fuel a fantasy that the Mallee could be "tamed." But the realities of droughts, the absence of a reliable water supply, and the nutrient-poor soil proved insurmountable obstacles to many would-be farmers. A distinct Mallee identity was attributed to those who stayed and persevered. The Mallee-made man was shaped by the landscape and the climate; by the work he did and the privations he endured; by stiff work, failure, success, monotony, heat, and rain. While many of his characteristics were exaggerated features of the nation-making pioneers who battled hardship to triumph over a hostile land, he was endowed with further qualities that were seen as products of the distinctive Mallee environment and the work he performed there. The key features of this were clearing the land, battling with Mallee roots ("scrubbing"), the sowing and harvesting of wheat, and coping with drought. Mallee farming required "wise judgement, great foresight, boundless financial and physical resources, and infinite adaptability."³

3 *Mildura Cultivator*, 6 January 1912, 4.

The 1920s was a decade of intensive settlement in the Mallee. The Australian government was keen to populate the interior and through the Empire Settlement Scheme and the Soldier Settlement Scheme leased small blocks of newly released farmland to returned servicemen. No deposit was required, leaseholders were exempt from payments for three years, and cash advances were charged at lower interest rates than the government paid to borrow money. Settlers needed to demonstrate “improvements” to be eligible to continue the leasehold arrangement: clearing, fencing, digging dams, building a house. The activities of clearing, scrubbing, sowing, and harvesting progressed apace.

As the Mallee became peopled with white settlers, Bill Boyd set out to document their presence and their labour. He was an astute observer. There are many images of families and children, sporting and community events, but particularly striking is his careful documentation of men at work and at leisure. The images are a paean of praise to Mallee masculinity. The masculinity being recorded and created here is one of an intense relationship between men, their animals, machines, and the landscape they inhabited. While there are elements of a “frontier-pastoral picture of masculinity—good tough men growing from a tough, remote, rural environment,”⁴ the men’s engagement with agriculture and with the closer settlement project reflects a different understanding of masculinity. These were family men growing the civilizing food of wheat. But their families only enter the frame in portraits or when firmly attached to the domestic sphere. In Boyd’s images, women are completely excluded from the working fraternity of Mallee men who engaged in a shared endeavour to transform the mallee scrub into productive fields of wheat. In this, Boyd’s images also speak to a broader legend of the nation-making pioneers—the settlers who battled a hostile environment to ultimately triumph over nature.⁵

Boyd’s images naturalised white men’s relationship with the land, with farming, and with animals. It was an embodied relationship, reflected and created through the photograph. The images reinforced several understandings of Mallee masculinity: that men had power and control over the natural environment; that men not women worked the land and operated farm machinery; and, by implication, men’s rather than women’s labour was central to the nation-making activity of agricultural settlement.

4 Raewyn Connell, “Country/City Men,” in *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life*, ed. Hugh Campbell, Michael Bell, and Margaret Finny (London: Penn State University Press, 2006), 258.

5 J. B. Hirst, “The Pioneer Legend,” *Historical Studies* 18, no. 71 (1978), 316–37.



Figure 2:
Mallee scrub with
cleared track 1921.

Clearing was one of the key activities of Mallee settlers. Figure 2 depicts a newly grubbed road through the mallee scrub, with Bill's bike leant against a tree to provide a sense of scale. The initial work of clearing this scrub, or "rolling down the mallee," is depicted in figure 3. Bill's father used a team of bullocks and a Mallee roller to flatten the mallee bush. The foregrounded machinery, constructed from a tree stump, is crude, but it was devastating in its power. From a vantage point of power and mastery, Bill Boyd senior surveys the trees, now reduced to sticks on the ground. The Mallee would be subdued, and stockwhip in hand, the bullocks controlled. The work of clearing is repeatedly referred to in descriptions of Mallee men; it was a defining

activity of settlement and mastery. But such control was transitory. The distinctive nature of the mallee tree made clearing difficult and protracted. Roots that were not cleared, or "grubbed," would continue to sprout. This too was the work of men and boys, as another image of Boyd's father and younger brother at work slashing mallee roots as



Figure 3:
Bill Boyd senior
"rolling" the mallee

they grew amidst a crop of wheat, suggests. In time the mallee root would be used as a metaphor for the men and women of the Mallee: “tough, resilient, drought resistant and able to spring forth with new growth when times are good.”⁶



Figure 4:
Ploughing with a
stump-jump plough

Sociological work on rural masculinity suggests that its quintessential features position men as dominating nature and conquering the landscape. “Good” farmers tame the elements to produce crops and manage livestock. They overcome nature’s vagaries and uncertainties.⁷ In the Mallee, as in rural areas across the world, the introduction of technology was men’s business, aiding and abetting the physical work for which they were responsible. Men harnessed their horses to the plough, and to the harrow, stripper, and harvester (figure 4). While other versions of Australian rural masculinity stressed the need for excellent horsemanship, early Mallee farmers needed to be skilled at managing a team of horses and in “the manly art” of ploughing.⁸ Man, horse, and machine became harnessed to the ambition of controlling nature, transforming the land, and making the nation. As the *Ouyen Mail* put it in 1922: “Look at that team slowly swinging ahead of the gang-plough or the drill! Why, right here is a moving picture of the making of a nation. The Mallee is a

6 Culture Victoria, entry in “Women on Farms Gathering, Swan Hill, 1995,” accessed 30 August 2016, <http://www.cv.vic.gov.au/stories/land-and-ecology/women-on-farms-1/icons-mallee-root-grumpy-cap-stone-women-on-farms-gathering-swan-hill-1995/>.

7 Jo Little, “Embodiment and Rural Masculinity,” in *Country Boys*, 189.

8 Catharine Anne Wilson, “The Manly Art: Plowing, Plowing Matches, and Rural Masculinity in Ontario, 1800–1930,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 95, no.2, (2014), 172.



Figure 5:
The Boyd's wagon at
Nyarrin

big study in the story of Australian development.”⁹ Boyd’s farmers look comfortable and relaxed with their machines and their animals. Mostly the horses are photographed from behind, reinforcing the power of their bodies and the skill of the men who drove them. The images naturalised and celebrated the relationship between men, land, and machine and the transformational work they enacted. As mechanisation entered the Mallee, the power of the tractor became an extension of the man at its wheel.

Labour shaped men’s bodies in particular ways. Mallee men were wiry and fit. They developed broad shoulders and strong backs. Boyd’s images of men carting and stacking bags of wheat focus on this physical prowess, on what a male body can effect (figure 5). Wheat lumpers walk the plank, circus-like, to stack the wheat one bag at a time. Boyd captures the drama of this spectacle, men with muscle-bulging strength, so focused on a task that they don’t even lift their eyes to the camera. His images celebrate this masculinity at work and the bodies it builds. As Raewyn Connell argues, “The materiality of male bodies matters.”¹⁰ This is an earned masculinity, its status is not in dispute.

9 *Ouyen Mail*, 12 July 1922.

10 Raewyn Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 59.



Figure 6:
Harvest home

The physical strength of the men in Boyd's images conveys more than just the nature of their labour; it suggests their capability to work this land, their readiness to confront its challenges.

Boyd's men at leisure display a similar confidence. The pre-modern, arcadian feel of figure 6 depicts a fraternity of working men celebrating the "harvest-home." They share a homosocial space, a sense of connection and ease borne from shared endeavour. The wicker basket contains a demijohn of beer that they may have already opened. The frayed clothing and the worn boots of the central reclining man, Harold Down, hint at the poverty to which most of these men were accustomed. In another photograph, not reproduced here, Harold Down is also pictured standing in front of his stripper, his Turneresque haystack, and next season's seed. His stance is confident, alone, proud of the produce he has extracted from this otherwise featureless landscape.

A gendered and racial apartheid is evident in Boyd's images. While there are many images of women, they are always attached in some way to the domestic sphere. The broader Mallee landscape was the place for men and masculine activity. Women and children enter this space to take morning tea to the working men. Theirs is a walk-on role and they are never photographed working the land. We know from oral and written evidence, however, that women and girls did sometimes work alongside



Figure 7:
John & Wally Holt

his disability is unknown, but his stance and gaze lack the direct confidence of his father's, standing on the left of the photo. In 1921, the year before this photo was taken, Wally's mother Mary wrote to the Closer Settlement Board of spending 13 years "struggling with droughts and bad years we have wourked [sic] the land hard the whole family of us has to work and both I and my husband is not young people and the work as ruined our health we never go away for a rest never no money to waste . . ."

The Holts were not alone. The poet John Shaw Neilson's family took up a selection in the Mallee in 1895. His autobiography provides a rare insight into the physical and mental toll that work in the Mallee exacted. The Neilson family was desperately poor and frequently worked as scrub clearers for money. A repeated thumb injury ultimately led Neilson to a breakdown. He spent five weeks in hospital and it was 18 months before he could work again. It became something of a pattern for Neilson. His brothers fared no better. One brother developed "dry pleurisy" which they attributed to the heavy axe work he had undertaken as a teenager. In 1915 another brother also had a nervous breakdown, caused, the family believed, by "the strenuous life he had been leading. The

their husbands and brothers in the fields and sometimes managed blocks on their own. The racial divide in Boyd's images is as stark as the gendered one. Aboriginal people, the traditional owners of the land, are not depicted in Boyd's images; the non-white men in Boyd's photos are almost exclusively photos of the Singh family and relatives, residents it seems, of the nearby town of Sea Lake. They feature in portraits, or within a town setting, and are never shown working the land, highlighting the highly racialised space of the Mallee.

Another of the gaps in Boyd's images of men at work in the Mallee is the terrible toll it could take on their bodies. Figure 7 is the only one that depicts a man with any physical disability; Wally Holt, standing on the right, holds a crutch. He had a "gammy leg." The cause of

hard work and worry brought about by the drought.”¹¹ Two sisters died of TB. In the postwar period, returned servicemen, many of them carrying physical and psychological injuries, joined the ranks of those struggling against the odds as they took up blocks under the government’s “soldier settlement” scheme. As the 1925 Royal Commission on Soldier Settlement observed: their war disabilities left hundreds of settlers “struggling to cope with work beyond their powers.”¹²

Boyd’s images celebrate the transformational impact of the labour of Mallee men. If he saw the impact on their health he looked away, just as he failed to capture women’s presence in the landscape. He did, however, produce some images of the emerging environmental impact of men’s labour. In one photograph he depicts a mallee tree, its roots exposed by the searing north winds that carried away the sandy soil once held in place by forests of mallee trees. As clearing continued, and over-cropping and over-cultivation became common, the dust storms became more frequent—a rolling black cloud that would plunge the land into darkness. The land became as exhausted and appeared as care-worn as the men—and women—who worked it.

In 1933 the *Horsham Times* celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Mallee for closer settlement. It documented the trials and tribulations involved in the taming of this wilderness: “With its huge production today and its wonderful future in embryo, the Mallee heritage stands as a country handed to us by the brave men who made its conquest.” This was the masculinity Boyd’s images revered: white Mallee men making their mark, shaping the landscape and environment into a vision of production and control. In subsequent decades, this undertaking intensified, interrupted only by some severe droughts that exposed the environmental limits of the land and the physical and financial resources of those who worked it. The idea of the Mallees as an environment that breeds resilience and is unmatched for toughness still resonates. It remains a gendered, racialised landscape, although today the hard physical labour of earlier years has been replaced by more technical and sedentary work inside air-conditioned tractors, the scale and power of which dwarfs their occupants. As in Boyd’s time, few women can be found at the wheel, but their work in managing farm

11 John Shaw Neilson, *The Autobiography of John Shaw Neilson* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1978), 85.

12 Quoted in Marilyn Lake, *The Limits of Hope: Soldier Settlement in Victoria, 1915–1935* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985), 60–1. See also the contribution by Ruth Ford in this volume.

and household activities and finances enables many a Mallee man to fill the shoes of the men who walked before him.

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