



# Notes from the Icehouse

## Building Environmental History Around the World

*This is the second in a series organised by the International Consortium of Environmental History Organisations (ICEHO), looking at stories of the different ways environmental history has developed around the world. The essays are paired with similar ones by younger scholars from those same places, published later on the ICEHO webpage and the White Horse Press blog. Here, Libby Robin writes of her scholarly journey in universities and museums in Australia and beyond... Her essay will be responded to by Harry Croft and Margaret Cook.*

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**Figure 1. Border between Little Desert (Victoria, left) and South Australia in 1969 where clearing made way for wheatfields.**



Photo: Peter Attiwill Archive.

## **Ecology and The Nation. How One Australian Scholar came to Environmental History**

Libby Robin

### *The Little Desert*

I began my doctoral work in the history of science at the University of Melbourne in 1989, documenting a conservation dispute that had occurred twenty years earlier in the Little Desert, a remote bushland area extending for about 100 kilometres some five hours drive north-west of Melbourne. It is called a ‘desert’ because, although it is surrounded by wheat and sheep farms, its soils are unsuitable for agriculture. Like many Australian deserts it has sandy soil, but it is diverse and well vegetated, with woodland, heathland and pink lakes. Many of those who fought for ‘land for wildlife’ rather than

**Figure 2. The Malleefowl is the signature bird of the Little Desert. It is called the ‘incubator bird’ because it builds mounds of sand to in which to incubate its eggs. Rather than sitting on the eggs, it uses its big feet (it is a *Megapode*) to heap and scrape away leaf matter to create heat (compost) or cool the eggs, maintaining a steady 33° C temperature until they hatch. The first reservation for conservation in the Little Desert was in 1955, a small sanctuary on the edge between woodland and heathland country reserved as farms increasingly encroached on malleefowl breeding grounds in 1955.**



Photo: Geoff Park, *Natural Newstead*

for the proposed agricultural development lived in Melbourne and joined the Save Our Bushland Action Committee.

As a historian of science and a keen bushwalker, I had a particular

**Figure 3. Newspaper clipping (*The Age*, 31 October 1969) showing Sir William McDonald, architect and chief advocate of Little Desert development, touring with Parliamentary colleagues.**



Photo: Libby Robin.

interest in the role of the science of ecology in shaping a new aesthetic of public land management. Ecologists had explained the importance of ‘biological diversity’ in 1969 at the parliamentary inquiry into the proposed agricultural development for the Little Desert. This was long before biodiversity had become a catchphrase internationally. It was striking that a small, local dispute had anticipated the value of this much bigger global concept so long before Conservation Biology had officially emerged as a theoretical and practical discipline, a science of crisis, as they called it by 1985.

Although I was interested in the theoretical and conceptual dimensions of the project and needed to explore them in my thesis, the Little Desert appealed to many who, like me, just loved the bush. I wrote *Defending the Little Desert: The Rise of Ecological Consciousness in Australia* (1998) for that broader audience.

**Figure 4. Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) Picnic 1991, where Libby Robin met Little Desert activists, who came together after 22 years to reminisce. Back (L-R): Geoff Durham, Budg Bleakley, Malcolm Calder, Stephen Johnston, Dick Johnson. Front (L-R): Gwynnyth Taylor (President SOBAC), Ros Garnet (Secretary VNPA), Joan Lindros (President of VNPA in 1991).**



Photo: Courtesy of VNPA.

The needs of children were high in my mind when I began. My preschoolers loved bush places where they could watch birds and find wildflowers and bugs. The Little Desert's activists valued these things too and expressed their passions with science and rational arguments. They were 'conservationists' but, in interviews with me, distanced themselves from the later environmentalism of the 1980s, especially

the methods of ‘greenies’, activists who locked their bodies to logging machines and sat in trees. They were mostly a generation older than I was, often grandparents. Their conversations with me focused on the philosophical question of ‘what should be saved’ rather than on radical interventions. They recognised that places needed *people* not just fences. Local towns needed children to fill district schools threatened with closure because of declining numbers. However, the agricultural scheme was proposed for a place with soils too poor for farming and unreliable rainfall. Any development was going to be useful only to ‘Collins Street farmers’ (Melbourne-based investors) who simply sought to benefit from Australia’s generous tax subsidies for farming. The bushland was better left as habitat, rather than cleared, likely causing soil erosion for the surrounding farms, they said.

The environment became a national issue much later, at the 1983 election that the Australian Labor Party won after promising to use federal constitutional powers to save Tasmania’s ‘wild’ river, the Franklin, from being dammed for hydroelectricity. This campaign grew out of earlier environmental conflicts in the state. The powerful Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission had drowned the wild white quartzite beaches of Lake Pedder in the early 1970s, despite strong opposition. Losing Pedder channelled political support for environmental causes and led to the formation of the United Tasmania Party (later called the Tasmanian Greens) to contest the 1972 state election. The Tasmanian Greens are often called the first green party in the world, but it was another two decades before the emergence of the Australian Greens, a national environmental party. One of the movement’s most prominent figures, Bob Brown (b. 1944), campaigned against the Franklin Dam in the 1980s and was jailed for peaceful protest, but then served as a senator for Tasmania (1996–2012) and became the first parliamentary leader of the Australian Greens (2005–2012).

### *Ecology and Empire*

After the Little Desert project, as the Greens gained national influence, my life took me to London in 1995. I had won an Australian Research Council postdoctoral research fellowship as a historian

of science, which I took up at the Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies at the University of London's Institute of Commonwealth Studies, then in Russell Square near the British Museum. My husband Tom Griffiths had been appointed Deputy Director of the Menzies Centre and we proposed a conference on Ecology and Empire in 1996, bringing together our research interests. This was something new for the Menzies Centre which had traditions in Australian literature, film and political history.

Tom had come to environmental history through his work in public history and heritage, museums, a state government department of conservation, and as field historian collecting for the State Library of Victoria. He had taught a Master of Arts in Public History programme at Monash University and had written a history of the tall mountain ash (*Eucalyptus regnans*) forests that burned in the tragic Black Friday bushfires in 1939 (*Secrets of the Forest*, 1992). Tom's major book *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*, published the year of our conference, included a history of natural history collectors and writers and drew strongly on his work in museums and archives over the previous decade.

Our base in London enabled us to put together a conference and book with many leading environmental historians from beyond Australia, although, as Tom wrote in the first chapter, the book imagined an 'Australian history of the world'. It was strongly framed by the concerns of settler colonists developing agricultural projects for Metropolitan markets, dominant concerns in Australian Studies at the time. Tom's chapter explored the central role of 'biological invasion' in such projects, drawing on Alfred Crosby's thesis of *Ecological Imperialism* (1986). Tim Flannery, a prominent ecologist, writer and museum curator, came to London with insights from his new book *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People* (1994). Other environmental historians who came to the conference included farmer-historian, Eric Rolls, whose book *A Million Wild Acres* (1981) remains a 'classic' of Australian environmental history, and academic historian Geoffrey Bolton, author of the pioneering *Spoils and Spoilers: Australians Make their Environment 1788—1980* (1981). International authors included Jane

Carruthers from South Africa (later ICEHO's founding president) and American fire historian, Stephen J. Pyne, whose book *Burning Bush: A Fire History of Australia* (1991) continues to be influential in practical fire management in Australia.

*Ecology and Empire* brought together new ideas on the social history of settler science. In his analysis of the imperial structure of science, the Manchester-based historian Michael Worboys commented that the biggest employer of British biologists was the Colonial Office (1854–1947). They found positions abroad, often through the Empire Marketing Board, the arm of the Colonial Office that sponsored the practical scientific work of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR, later CSIRO) in Australia, and parallel organisations in South Africa, Canada and New Zealand. Francis Ratcliffe, trained in the Oxford lab of ecologist Charles Elton, was chosen by the Empire Marketing Board to undertake research in Australia. His reports on invasive species and soil erosion led to his important book, *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand: The Adventures of a Biologist in Australia* (1938). In retirement in 1965, Ratcliffe became the inaugural secretary of the Australian Conservation Foundation, Australia's first national conservation organisation. Many other British-trained biologists ended up finding their careers in Australia.

The history of agricultural science proved a useful bridge between the ecology and empire threads of the 1996 conference. Australia's steadfast focus on agriculture in service of empire, at the expense of building science that might serve it better, was bemoaned by David Rivett, Chair of CSIR in 1942. He suggested that, as part of post-war reconstruction, Australians should give up 'our addiction to the plough' and build 'a rampart of scientific research and knowledge', by which he meant offering better local higher education in sciences useful to building agriculture.<sup>1</sup> Fifty years later, when we were speaking in London, Australian universities had expanded greatly and were regarded as world leaders in scientific education. American environmental historian, Tom Dunlap, who was just beginning

<sup>1</sup> S. Garton, 'When universities mattered: Higher education in a country addicted to the plough', *Australian Book Review*, 484 (March 2026).

the comparative work that became *Nature and the English Diaspora: Environment and History in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (1999), was another speaker at the Ecology and Empire conference. Both Dunlap and I chose the work of CSIR, and later CSIRO, for analysis at this event. CSIRO's Alice Springs Lab, established to serve the UNESCO Arid Zone program in 1953, continued as a leader in rangelands science and social sciences until 2018. In its final decade it also developed a Desert Knowledge precinct that supported Indigenous cultural and business initiatives, and the social and environmental needs of remote communities.

The conference culminated in the publication of *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies* (1997), which drew together comparative environmental histories across several settler societies. Tom and I completed the editing in Canberra. After the London job, Tom was appointed to a position in the History Program of the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, the research school once led by Commonwealth historian W. Keith Hancock, whose *Discovering Monaro: A Study of Man's Impact on the Environment* (1972) was regarded as another early classic in Australian environmental history. When Hancock moved to the ANU in 1956, one of his first initiatives was to establish an interdisciplinary Wool Seminar, a space for conversations between sciences and social sciences that also involved CSIRO. I took the final year of my Australian Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship to the Humanities Research Centre at ANU. One of my tasks there was, with Geoff Bolton, to study the 1950s Hancock Wool seminar, for what became a book, *Keith Hancock: The Legacies of an Historian* (2001), edited by D. Anthony Low.

Environmental history was still very much about land development when I moved in 1998 to join the curatorial team developing an 'environmental history' gallery for the new National Museum of Australia, to be opened in Canberra in 2001 to celebrate the centenary of the Federation of Australia. Its three themes, environmental history, social history and Indigenous history, were drawn from its original mission, laid out in 1975. By the time the museum opened, the themes had been transformed into galleries of Land, Nation and



**Figure 5. Libby's *Flight of the Emu* wins inaugural Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Science Writing 2003. Media Portrait, Melbourne, 9 Nov.**

Photographer: Susan Gordon-Brown.

People. Settler history had become the focus for the museum, in accordance with the wishes of the conservative Prime Minister of the day, John Howard, who both encouraged the building of the museum and sought to control its content. Environment for him was the struggle of 'pioneers' to tame the land. Curatorial efforts to balance the old trope of 'living off the sheep's back' with newer ideas about Indigenous management of Country were strenuously resisted in the Howard era. Even the original title of the Land gallery, *Tangled Destinies*, did not survive a review of the museum soon after it opened.<sup>2</sup>

However, 'environmental' and 'Indigenous' history, separated in the museum's brief, were converging even as the museum was being built. In 1996, anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose was commissioned by the Australian Heritage Commission to explain the idea of Country (with a capital C) for heritage professionals. Her important book *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (1996) described Country as a nourishing place that

<sup>2</sup> L. Robin, 'The love-hate relationship with land in Australia: Presenting "Exploitation and Sustainability" in Museums', *Nova Acta Leopoldina Neue Folge* (NAL) 114 (390) (2013): 47–63.

sustains health and wellbeing for Indigenous peoples over generations. Rose's exploration of Country was built from careful listening to Hobbles Danayarri, her Mudburri teacher, and many other Aboriginal elders. It created a touchstone for cultural and natural heritage managers, enabling them to work more closely together. Nature and culture had been separated by the silos of government and disciplinary practice forged in the intellectual traditions of western philosophy.

Further efforts brought these spheres together. Questions of how the learned academies – humanities, science, social science, and technological sciences and engineering – might work together better to serve 'the nation' were raised at a forum in Canberra in 2003, attended by both parliamentarians and academics. Tom Griffiths, representing the Australian Academy of the Humanities, argued that the environment was an important project for all four academies, and that the humanities could take a leadership role in framing 'an ecologically sustainable Australia', one of four Australian Research Council priorities.<sup>3</sup> This was followed by a public event at the museum, *Climate and Culture in Australia*, jointly hosted with the four academies. The papers were later published as *A Change in the Weather: Climate and Culture in Australia* (2005), a book edited by Tim Sherratt, Tom Griffiths and me.

Deborah Rose, one of the speakers representing the Academy of Social Sciences at *Climate and Culture*, was also a pioneer in the ecological humanities at this time. The 'ecological humanities corner' of the *Australian Humanities Review* was launched by Deborah and me in 2004 to sponsor scholarly work and to foster action-research in museums and other cultural institutions, in government practice and in communities beyond universities.<sup>4</sup> The term 'ecological humanities' struck a note among historians and ecologists in Australia where ecological history and historical ecology were frequently discussed,

<sup>3</sup>T. Griffiths, 'The humanities and an ecologically sustainable Australia', republished 2007, *Australian Humanities Review*: <https://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2007/03/01/the-humanities-and-an-environmentally-sustainable-australia>

<sup>4</sup>D.B. Rose and L. Robin 'The ecological humanities in action: An invitation', *Australian Humanities Review*, April 2004: <https://australianhumanitiesreview.org/04/01/the-ecological-humanities-in-action-an-invitation>

often by scholars from different domains working in isolation. In 2012, the Ecological Humanities Corner became a full journal, *Environmental Humanities*, now published by Duke University Press. The founding editors were Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren.

### *The Australian Environmental History Network*

In 1999, when I completed my curatorial contract at the National Museum, I returned to the ANU, where I took up a position at the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies (CRES). One of my colleagues, policy historian Steve Dovers, invited me to take over convening the fledgling Environmental History Network. Steve and others, mostly policy-minded social scientists at ANU, had set up the network in 1997, but it was still very small. Members of the Australian Forest History Society (which had been established in 1987) were important to the network but Steve hoped that I would encourage different people, particularly mainstream historians, into the environmental history fold.

The EHN (now the Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand Environmental History Network) was a founding partner in International Consortium of Environmental History Organizations, ICEHO, when it was established for the World Congress in Copenhagen in 2009. The Australian Forest History Society also joined ICEHO at this time. There was a third environmental history group, the Australian Garden History Society, established in 1980, to 'promote awareness and conservation of significant gardens and cultural landscapes', but for its first three decades gardens fell outside 'environmental history'. Later, Katie Holmes, well-known for her work in gender history, and Christina Dyson, a historian of landscape design, explored gardening connections with urban and domestic history. Environmental history's bias to national land projects and the strong male bias in Australia's science and policy areas had excluded 'women's work' (including gardens) from its purview.

Christina Dyson was one of many doctoral candidates who joined the Environmental History Network through membership of the National Environmental History Ph.D. Workshops hosted at

**Figure 6. National Environmental History Workshop, Canberra, 2016, with special guest, Jane Carruthers. L-R: Jackson Perry (USA), Liz Downes, Libby Robin, Heather Goodall, Lee Andrews, Daniel May, Robyn Curtis, Nicholas Hoare, Rachel Goldlust, Jane Carruthers (South Africa), Tom Griffiths, Lil Pearce, Kate Allan, Troy Street, Daniel Rothenburg (Germany), Jarrod Hore, Margaret Cook, Vanessa Finney, Chris Taylor, Jodie Stewart, Gretel Evans, Hannah Cutting-Jones (NZ), Penny Dunstan, David Salt.**



Photo: Centre for Environmental History, ANU.

ANU by History, CRES (later Fenner School of Science and Society) and the National Museum of Australia. Over two decades, from 2002 until 2018, nearly 200 doctoral scholars who self-identified as environmental historians – some from history, some from natural science and other social sciences – came together for a full week in Canberra developing and presenting ideas from their doctoral work in progress. Tom Griffiths, Heather Goodall (University of Technology Sydney), Mike Smith (National Museum of Australia, Research Centre) and I were mentors at all the workshops. We invited various international speakers to give a public lecture and join each workshop, including David Lowenthal (UK/USA, 2002), Tina Loo (Canada, 2006), John McNeill (USA, 2010), Sverker Sörlin

(Sweden, 2012), Alan McEachern (Canada, 2014), Jane Carruthers (South Africa, 2016) and Christof Mauch (Germany 2018). An increasing number of international doctoral candidates joined these programmes in later years.

The Australian Forest History Society and the Australian Garden History Society held conferences regularly, but the EHN neither held conferences nor charged membership fees. Its work included special events in Canberra associated with visiting scholars and smaller invitational gatherings that explored museum-university partnerships and policy themes. In 2016, Nancy Cushing and Jodi Frawley moved to address this lack by establishing a 'green stream' at the annual Australian Historical Association conference joined by Chris McConville the following year. This is now the mecca for the Environmental History Network, which is currently managed from the University of Tasmania by Alessandro Antonello, historian of Antarctica and the Southern Ocean, and Jessica Urwin, who writes environmental history of nuclear landscapes.

### *Planetary histories*

Australian environmental history has diversified greatly over the last quarter-century, as has the concept of 'the environment'. Even as late as 2004, when Tom Griffiths and I were commissioned to review the field of 'environmental history in Australasia' for the journal *Environment and History*, the brief we were given was to focus on the land and the enterprises of empire.<sup>5</sup> We struggled to write a singular 'Australasian' story that relied on British colonisation as a unifying theme when Australia's geology and ecology were so distinct from Aotearoa New Zealand's. Also, the deep-time histories of the Indigenous peoples could hardly have been more different. Maōri arrived in New Zealand from the Pacific 800 years ago. Aboriginal forebears arrived in Australia some 65 millennia earlier, via southeast Asia.

Environmental history has continued to take distinct trajectories in different places, as shown in two books I co-edited with

<sup>5</sup> L. Robin and T. Griffiths, 'Environmental History in Australasia', *Environment and History* **10** (4) (2004): 439–74

Paul Warde and Sverker Sörlin, *The Environment: A History of The Idea* (2018) and *The Future of Nature: Documents of Global Change* (2013). I was involved in the planning of the first World Congress of Environmental History, as Tom and I were again working internationally in Australian Studies, this time at the University of Copenhagen in 2008, when planning was under way. Paul, Sverker and I met the following year in Copenhagen at the Congress and discussed the differences between environmental history in the United States, where its oldest journal was established, and our experiences in the UK, Sweden and Australia. Our comparative environmental history project lasted a decade and generated a number of conferences and workshops as well as the two books mentioned above. Its international dimensions were supported by my Guest Professorship at the Division of History of Technology at the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) in Stockholm (2011–2014), and a subsequent associateship there (2015–2017). Comparative environmental history and ‘world history’ are important dimensions of scholarship nurtured by ICEHO, of which I was president between 2014 and 2016.

As we now consider restoring ecological and social connections for an Earth that is carrying some three billion more people than when I began writing environmental history in 1989, we are coming to terms with planetary history. Wherever we live, we confront the new challenges of living on a planet where human activities can have geological effects. Australians have been well represented in exploring Anthropocene stories of the world. Will Steffen, who was with Paul Crutzen in Mexico when he declared the Holocene had ended, was responsible for ensuring the Anthropocene idea would endure beyond that technical Earth System Science meeting. He encouraged an immediate publication in *Ambio* in 2000, and co-wrote many subsequent papers on the Great Acceleration and Anthropocene with Crutzen and others. Will also encouraged historians to engage with the Anthropocene moment, co-writing with me one of the earliest papers on the importance of the Anthropocene to history.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> L. Robin and W. Steffen, ‘History for the Anthropocene’, *History Compass* 5 (5) (2007): 1694–1719.

**Figure 7. Barengi Gadjin Land Council, representing the Wotjobaluk Nations, after more than 30 years working towards this, begins formal negotiations in Little Desert Country for a Traditional Owner Treaty under Victoria’s new legal framework in 2026.**



Image: ABC News 16 Feb. 2026, Grace Marshall.

Thinking on a planetary scale is essential, but local stories continue to be vital. Microstories as well as macrostories shape lived experience and history-writing. Australia’s very different ecological constraints, its remoteness from the ‘default’ worlds of North America and Europe, and its regional position in Asia and the Pacific create challenging stories and new tensions. While Australia has megacities, rural areas are depopulating rapidly. What happens in desert regions is often distinct from what is happening elsewhere on the planet, where more and more of Earth’s ‘natural resources’ are harnessed to industrial-scale futures. Australia’s arid zone is still a rare place where you can find dark night skies and camp beyond industrial noise, al-

**Figure 8. Libby discusses water management with the new generation, 2026.**



Photo: author.

though expanding mineral exploration has taken big industry's noise and lights deep into rural, desert and forest landscapes.

Local environmental microhistories and cultural and ecological understandings of place have never been more important. Accepting the local as a frame for understanding the world does not mean ignoring the planetary, but the challenges of scaling up and down are considerable, especially when in Australia the span of what is

recognised as 'history' has jumped from 200 years to over 65,000 years in just a few decades. Australians are now coming to terms with these deep-time stories. Our continent was not an empty 'new land' awaiting colonial invasion, but rather an old and deeply cultural place. It is no longer 'a continent for a nation', the trope of Federation in 1901, but the unceded home of hundreds of First Nations. It is a rich megadiverse constellation of places. Its diversity is both ecological and cultural. The infamous 'poverty' of Australia's old soils can grow plants that live nowhere else on Earth. Australia's complex environmental history demands ecological, cultural and social nuance all at once.

My children now have their own children, reminding me again of the joy that nature gives to the very young. The entangled worlds of bush-care, human health and ecological restoration appear more prominently in my next book, *Threadbare Earth*, which grapples with living in a continent stressed by the pressures of the Great Acceleration of social and ecological change. Conservation still gathers together people from all walks of life, who want to do practical things. There will never be enough money for any elected government in Australia or anywhere else to 'save biodiversity' in the polycrisis of Anthropocene times, so conservationists are practical people who roll up their sleeves and volunteer their efforts. They share a love of nature in all its places, not just in national parks far from where people live. Environmental history is for *all* people. It is truly 'public history'. Its creative expression reaches beyond scholarly audiences to engage all who care about the environment and the moral future of the people and places we love.