

An inch of rain and what it means: landscapes of the northern plains of victoria 1836-1930

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Introduction

The northern plains of Victoria, Australia, defined in this study as the bioregion of the Victorian Riverine Plain that lies west of the Campaspe River (see Figure 1), are a place of both scarcity and abundance. They experience a median annual rainfall of 420 mm. But to speak in terms of medians does not describe the rain that falls to double this figure, or the rain that falls to halve it. The northern plains are not a place of norms or averages and, like other semi-arid places marked by changeable conditions, the country has shaped varied responses. Crafted by individual motivations, political, economic and social imperatives, and the seasonal shifts of the country itself, settlers reacted to it as a place of promise, others viewed it as a place of disappointment. In analysing the landscape of the northern plains as an outcome of cultural interaction with an unpredictable environment, my thesis investigates the theme of water management in a semi-arid climate.



Figure 1: showing the study area, the Victorian Riverine Plain west of the Campaspe River.

Objectives

How we understand our environment determines the way we govern it. Within the context of the current period of climatic uncertainty, an historical analysis of how the dynamic forces of culture and

nature have come to inform our attitudes toward water use is essential in informing public debate and policy making. Yet this historical analysis is seldom embarked upon. My thesis undertakes such an investigation and thus makes an important contribution to the increasingly critical area of sustainable water management.

Essentially the thesis analyses how people and the environment have interacted *together* and confronted *each other* to settle, both imaginatively and physically, the country of the northern plains. It does this by closely examining the existing evidence - the material traces, local memory, and the documentary record - within the landscape of the semi-arid northern plains of Victoria from the year of the first recorded white incursion into the area in 1836, through to 1930 by which time images of the plains were entrenched. In investigating how dominant visions for the plains were developed, the thesis answers three main questions.

- What were the cultural and natural forces that informed settlement narratives for the plains?
 - What were the voices and events that challenged official settlement visions?
 - What was the impact of settlement visions on the country and the people who lived there?
- Finally, within the context of the current period of climatic uncertainty, the thesis asks what a study of this kind can contribute to the imagining of future visions.

Findings

Today's signs in the landscape trace past and present reactions to uncertainty. They testify to the conflict between human dreams and environmental actualities. Interpretations of an inch of rain have reflected the physical abundance and scarcity brought to the country by a variable rainfall, but just as importantly have encapsulated the potency of mental landscapes that imagine abundance and scarcity. The actualities of an inch of rain are determined by a combination of factors that affect the capacity of meteorological conditions to supply rainfall to an area. On the other hand, as populations in Australia have increased their vulnerability to climatic variation by moving 'further down the rainfall gradient'ⁱ into semi-arid regions, mental landscapes have envisaged the abundance and scarcity associated with an inch of rain and judged the country itself as defective. For much of the period of white settlement the northern plains have been viewed as 'outside country' – a place which lies 'beyond the limits of established settlement, a land as yet unredeemed by the hopefully advancing frontier, and therefore full of the freedom, promise and danger of such liminality'.ⁱⁱ In order to make certain an uncertain environment, this view, consolidated around natural features of the northern plains that typify semi-arid country (variable rainfall and frequent dry periods extended by El Nino events), instigated the introduction of a number of settlement programmes that aimed to ameliorate the unpredictability of the plains by peopling and watering them.

The playing out of official settlement visions has had far reaching consequences for the country and the people who live there. The once abundant northern plains have been cultivated, grazed, and irrigated almost out of existence. Today, the vegetation is one of the most depleted in the state. Only 1.8 percent of native plants remain, growing mostly on the public land of stock routes, cemeteries, aerodromes, roadsides, and rail reserves. Of this, eight percent is deemed vulnerable, and 45 percent endangered.ⁱⁱⁱ The drastic changes brought to the hydrology of the plains (see Figure 2) are evidenced by decreasing water quality, increasing wind and soil erosion, and rising salinity. In the current dry period, irrigators who depend on a regular water supply over the summer growing months are unable to realise the financial return on which their livelihoods depend. Consequently, the proposed piping of precious water supplies from the region to the city of Melbourne has raised heated protest from northern plains' communities (see Figure 3). Human changes to the ecosystem have made it more difficult for farmers to maintain levels of production when faced with fluctuations in rainfall. Paradoxically, by seeking to bring certainty to the northern plains by introducing settlement programmes, human populations have been made more vulnerable, the country made more uncertain, and its reputation as a place of capriciousness entrenched.



Figure 2. Bendigo Creek from Prairie-Rochester Road 2008.



Figure 3. Protest sign 2008.

Historical responses continue to control contemporary policies that direct access to and usage of water. To this day, water supply projects in northern Victoria rely on large engineering solutions that are informed by visions developed around the idea of a place found wanting. Pipeline projects are

integral to sustaining human life, however sole reliance on them as a solution is problematic. In 2008 a new vision is needed, one which embraces local memory and experience, connects people to their waterscapes, moderates cultural divides, encourages people to come to terms with increased environmental uncertainty, decreases stress on the environment, and heightens a sense of personal responsibility.

Conclusion

Historically, visions developed around an inch of rain have relied on *imagining* the country for what it can become, rather than seeing it for what it actually *is*. In Australia, a realistic assessment of the potential of a water supply impacted on by climate change is only possible through coming to terms with the actualities of living in a semi-arid place. If the future is to be imagined in any meaningful way, our role as makers of landscapes needs to be recognised and understood by coming to know the difference between the actualities of the country, and the country inside our heads.

References

ⁱ R. L. Heathcote, "Drought Mitigation in Australia: Reducing the Losses but Not Removing the Hazard," *Great Plains Quarterly* 6 (1986): 227.

ⁱⁱ Tom Griffiths, "The Outside Country," in *Words for Country: Landscape and Language in Australia*, ed. Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2002), 223.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Draft North Central Native Vegetation Plan." Huntly: North Central Catchment Management Authority, 2003.