

Victorian Environmental Nightmares

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“Tragic ring-barked forests” and the “Wicked Wood”: haunting environmental anxiety in late nineteenth-century Australian literature.

This chapter considers fictional and poetic representations of land use and land clearing in Australia in the “long” Victorian period. It focuses particularly on the recurring trope of the “ringbarked forest” and the way this stark visual reminder generated increasing anxiety around the meaning, nature, and outcome of wholesale clearing of the landscape. This anxiety became increasingly acute as the results of poor land management began to impact on the environment, and understandings of Indigenous land-use practices and the physical effects of the loss of indigenous culture and knowledge were dimly perceived.

Ringbarking, also known as “girdling” or “ringing” was the practice of completely removing an entire layer of bark, including the cambium layer, from around the trunk of a tree. This prevents the movement of water and nutrients and, in effect, starves the tree. It was a common method of clearing (Stubbs 145-6; Garden, 87-8; Griffiths, *Forests of Ash* 2001, 34). It became a routine, if increasingly-controversial, practice across Australia as settlers moved into forested areas which they wished to convert to pasture or arable farm land although as Quite often areas were left at the first stage of the clearing process with ringbarked, dead, blanched trees standing as a grim reminder of the live forests that had been destroyed (Rickard 2017, 60). This was because “grubbing out” the roots of the trees in order to

cultivate the land was difficult and labour-intensive work (Bonyhady *Colonial Earth*, 80), and often the trees were left to rot for some time before it was attempted, or the damaged forest or bush was abandoned. By 1896 the volume *New South Wales: The Mother Colony of the Australias* proudly claimed that in the then colony of New South Wales, “26,080,814 acres have been ring-barked [...] in order to encourage growth of grass for grazing purposes” (Thompson “Agriculture” 112)

Ringbarked trees were represented in settler literature as evidence of positive colonial endeavor, even as they embodied the destructive impulses behind the conversion of land from ‘empty’ space to cultivated place. This chapter traces attitudes to the practice of ringbarking as land clearance across the long nineteenth century in Australia, arguing that its representation in both fiction and poetry bore the marks of ambivalence and anxiety, which were often ecological in origin and nature. Highlighting the recurring trope of spectral haunting, the latter part of the chapter pays particular attention to the ways in which nineteenth-century fiction represented the plight of landscapes under colonization as aligned with the ‘fate’ of Indigenous people. However this concern and these representations could also work to erase or displace indigenous loss (and continued occupation) in various ways – through replacing cultural loss as a kind of natural loss, or reiterating a trope of absence and destruction that denied Aboriginal survival and presence.

Australia was settled, or invaded, by British colonists in the late eighteenth century and across the nineteenth century. The establishment of colonial settlement is not generally prefaced or accompanied by concerns about the destruction of the physical environment. In fact, in the case of Australia settlement was explicitly based on the legal fiction of *Terra Nullius*: the idea that the land was waste, or unused, and therefore available for, even requiring, use. Under these terms, settlement meant the alteration of the land. *Terra Nullius* was a falsehood, as legally proven much later, in the 1990s (*Mabo v State of Queensland* (No 2); *Wik Peoples v Queensland* 1996: Stevenson), but this was evident even to the earliest arrivals, who could identify Aboriginal occupation, dwellings and use and care of land, even though their own settlement and ownership rested on disregarding and overturning this prior occupation and sovereignty.

Early colonial writing perpetuated and revealed the fiction of *terra nullius*. In *First Fruits of Australian Poetry* (1819, by the interestingly-named Barron Field, the first poem, “Botany Bay Flowers” asserts the land is empty and deserted in both senses:

What desert forests and what barren plains,
Lie unexplor’d by European eye (Field, 489).

While Field’s other poems in this small collection acknowledge the presence of the Aboriginal population, it was typically, and unpleasantly, as a part of the natural environment:

Except the native maidens and the flowers,
The Sky that bends o’er all, and southern stars,
A ship’s the only poetry we see (Field, “On Reading the Controversy...” (Field 1819/1825, 497).

While regret or concern about the effects of wholesale clearing, and the laying waste of beautiful forests, is expressed even in some of the early literature, generally the fiction and poetry of this period was triumphalist in tone, celebrating land clearance as the

transformation of “waste” land into productive land. This was consistent with a “settler imperialist” ideology which relied on expansion and incidental ecological destruction (Finzsch 2017). A “classic” Australian novel, Henry Kingsley’s *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn* (1859) lays out the idealised progress of civilisation into wilderness as a Biblically-underwritten colonial British enterprise. Geoffry Hamlyn and his friend, settlers in Gippsland in what is now Victoria in south eastern Australia, see cattle in the valley below them, and conclude that they are witnessing a band of new settlers moving into the district:

we could hear the rapid detonation of the stockwhips loud above the lowing of the cattle; so we sat and watched them debouche from the forest into the broad river meadows in the gathering gloom: saw the scene so venerable and ancient, so seldom seen in the Old World — the patriarchs moving into the desert with all their wealth, to find new pasture-ground. A simple primitive action, the first and simplest act of colonization, yet producing such great results on the history of the world, as did the parting of Lot and Abraham in times gone by. (151).

This is one of the many literary reiterations of the British Imperial legal fiction of *terra nullius*, on which Australian settlement rested. Like Barron Field’s use of “desert”, the reference to “moving into the desert” in this passage implies a move into deserted lands, at the same time as it uncovers the falsity of this idea. Kingsley’s novel, like many others of its time and place, narrates the prior occupation of supposedly empty spaces, and notes the traces of the prior cultivation of the environment through Indigenous Australian cool burning practices and care for country, even though these practices were not recognised as use or cultivation. As Catherine Hall has noted, Kingsley’s background as the son and descendant of West Indian slave owners predisposed him to propound a certain understanding of righteous white access and settlement, and racial theories (Hall, 41-45). Hall, like Gelder and Weaver in a later discussion, traces the understanding and reinforcement of the idea that Aboriginal peoples in Australia would die out in the face of a “superior” race, although Gelder and Weaver identify some unevenness in the pastoral ideology in this and Kingsley’s later fiction (39-43)

Just before the comparison to the ancient Christian Patriarchs, the narrator Hamlyn has commented that he and his companion, “were beginning to get comfortable and contented. We had had but little trouble with the blacks [sic], and, having taken possession of a fine piece of country, were flourishing and well to do.” The phrasing of “taken possession”, like the reference to the possibility of conflict with the Indigenous population, uncovers the contested nature of the settlement of these “desert”ed lands. When Hamlyn later goes to visit the Buckleys, the family introduced in the passage above, at their new station, the station is described with approval. “They had, with good taste, left such trees as stood near the house — a few deep-shadowed lightwoods and black wattles, which formed pretty groups in what I could see was marked out for a garden. Behind, the land began to rise, at first, in park-like timbered forest glades, and further back, closing into dense deep Woodlands” (166).

It has been frequently noted that the park-like appearance of parts of the landscape when settlers first moved into it was due to thousands of years of Aboriginal curation, in which the inhabitants managed the undergrowth, and established open clearings to encourage animals for hunting (Gammage *Biggest Estate 1-17*; Finzsch). This interpretation of the environs as

“park-like” is also a classed observation. Here, as elsewhere, the aspiring squatters see in the environment the kind of gentleman’s park which will confirm their ownership and elevate their status as wealthy landowners. It imagines the landscape as passively waiting for them to take up residence. Some Colonial settlers understood this configuration to be natural landscape, but quite a few understood that they were looking at a shaped landscape, as Finzsch points out in relation to the explorer and surveyor Thomas Mitchell’s assessment in his *Journal of an Expedition into the Interior of Tropical Australia* (1848). Mitchell correctly identified the clearings and open landscape as the product of Aboriginal labour, and the arrival of cattle on these lands as devastating to Aboriginal culture and existence (Finzsch 169-70).

Ironically, in many cases the devastation or displacement of the indigenous population meant that this traditional maintenance was lost, regrowth took place in cleared areas, and white settlers were faced with additional clearing tasks. Pragmatic desires for cleared agricultural and grazing land battled with aesthetic commentary informed by the language of the picturesque and the sublime, and while more of this was played out in prose discussions than in literary ones, clearing and ringbarking received regular mention in colonial literature.

One of the most famous Australian poems about the Australian landscape and environment bears a reference to ringbarking. This is Dorothea Mackellar’s “My Country”, which was written after the end of the Victorian era - about 1904 - and first published in 1908 as “Core of My Heart” (Mackellar; SLNSW). Mackellar was writing at the beginning of the period following the Federation of the Australian states into “Australia” in 1901, a period (beginning, arguably, in the 1880s ()) in which national understandings were being explored and constructed in literature, in contradistinction to a colonial British identity. This poem of celebration and devastation was widely disseminated through the twentieth century in newspaper reprints (AUSTLIT), and due to its ubiquity in school magazines and popularity as a poetry-memorising exercise for children. Its rehearsal and rejection of British Colonial “Victorian” understandings of place, which also harnesses some of the colonial understandings of Australia as a wilderness, and a place dominated by rural experience, is still one of the most readily-recalled iterations of the settler relationship to the Australian environment. Its opening stanza, is often deleted or not recalled in reiterations. It refers to the “love of field and coppice”, i.e. the British environs, which is rejected in the poem although also set up as though this was, or had been the nostalgic desire of the Anglo-Australian population – constantly missing and seeking to recreate a lost green land. “Field and coppice” was precisely the type of landscape for which the early writers were yearning when they described parts of the Australian bush as “park-like”, and which settlers sought to recreate by clearing that same bush away in order to create pasture land.

Most Australians have encountered at least part of the second stanza of Mackellar’s poem, which completes the repudiation of the mild landscapes of England described in the first stanza (which ends, “My love is otherwise”), and begins,

I love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains ...

This stanza, and its connection to environmental protection, was further embedded for Australians by a 1972 Advertising campaign which featured a white child standing in rural Australia reciting the poem while garbage was dumped on and around him (Don’t Rubbish Australia). The third stanza, also less remembered, commemorates Anglo-Australian environmental destruction:

The tragic ring-barked forests
Stark white beneath the moon (“My Country”).¹

As Mackellar’s poem, and other writing from earlier in the Victorian era before it makes clear, the visual and environmental impact of widespread land clearing, and particularly of ringbarking, was striking and distinctive – a marker of “advancement” which became a lasting reminder of destruction and regression. “Stark white beneath the moon” is a late iteration of the odd trope of these dead white forests representing the ghostly present/absence of the Indigenous population, re-placed or dis-placed by white settlement and white environmental destruction, but ever present.

As noted the trope of the dead white forest occurs in Australian poetry and fiction across the Victorian period, and well into the twentieth century. An early occurrence of the ringbarked forest is in the well-known poet, Charles Harpur’s, poem, “The Bush Fire”, the second number of his self-styled series “Wild Bee of Australia”, published in the *Argus* newspaper in 1851. In the poem a settler household awakens to discover they are surrounded by fire. They escape to an open hilltop, which had been cleared but presumably not by settlers, considering the context:

In safety now upon that hill’s bald top,
Egremont and his household, looked abroad,
Astonished at the terrors of the time!
Soon sunk their roof-tree in the fiery surge;
Which entering next a high-grassed bottom, thick
With bark-ringed trees, all standing bleak and leafless,
Tenfold more terrible in its ravage grew!
Up-climbing to their very tops! As when
Upon some day of national festival,
From the tall spars of the ship-crowded port,
Innumerable flags, in one direction all,
Tongue outward, writhing in the wind; even so,
From those dry boles, where still the dead bark clings,
And from their multifarious mass above
Of leafless boughs, myriads of flaming tongues
Lick upward, or aloft in narrowing flakes
Stream out, and so, upon the tortured blast,
Bicker and flap in one inconstant blaze!

In this poem, the (naturally?) clear hilltop is the only refuge for the terrified family; the ringbarked forest, rather than providing clearing, literally feeds the flames (which are described as licking tongues). Their house is a “roof-tree” which goes up in flames, and dead and live trees increase the intensity of the fire. The burning trees are still ghostly:

... Mighty sapless gums,
Amid their living kindred, stood all fire,
Boles, branches, all! like flaming ghosts of trees,
Come from the past within the whiteman’s pale —

¹ The poem was published under the more familiar form in 1911.

To typify their doom...

The mention of “whiteman” here makes the common connection; that between these stark dead ringbarked, or in this case “bark-ringed” trees, and the absence of their former carers. In the same manoeuvre, in many texts, it implies or insists on an absence or loss which has not actually happened, a form of double erasure. This ghosting recurs across the literature. The “doom” referenced in this poem is potentially white doom rather than black doom – an anxiety about the success and validity of the colonial project which emerges in some earlier Australian settler literature. Harpur elsewhere depicts massacres of Indigenous people, as in his poem, “An Aboriginal Mother’s Lament”, where, as in “The Bush Fire”, it is the loss of home that is central to the grief of the protagonist. However the holocaust which has devastated the woman’s home is white violence, not environmental fire. In “The Bush-Fire”, ringbarking and clearing, which were supposed to reduce fire danger and enforce civilisation, are represented as having produced the reverse effects. Tim Bonyhady notes that the alignment between environmental destruction, or change, and the paralleling of this with Indigenous “loss”. Bonyhady notes painters including Eugene von Guérard and Robert Dowling aligning images of dead trees with Aboriginal figures, making explicit reference to the “widely held belief that the Aborigines were on the verge of extinction” and using the visual trope to compare “the prospects of the Aborigines and the eucalypts of surviving European settlement” as equally low (*Images in Opposition* 126). This comparison is perhaps not as explicit in much of the literature, but it remains implicit: it literally and metaphorically ghosts these representations of loss.

In Australian fiction and poetry throughout the nineteenth-century there is ambivalence around the practices of land clearing generally. Ringbarking, which was both visually evident and symbolically significant, was a locus of this ambiguity. At the centre of this ambivalence was the relationship between improvement and destruction that ringbarking represented. The alignment of forest clearing or destruction with progress, civilisation of the continent, and notions of suitable labour, meant that ringbarking as part of land clearing was frequently identified as act and signifier of proper and positive behaviour, and identified with settler virtue. However, at the same time it produced a vision of destruction and loss which was lasting, and difficult to ignore. According to the historian, Brett Stubbs, the main attention on ringbarking was not focused on environmental concerns or movements, but on the “effective operation” of the land alienation policy of free selection. Later fiction and poetry, as noted, often identified ringbarked forests as ghostly remnants of destruction. However, according to Stubbs, “ringbarking achieved legal status as a form of land improvement when the Supreme Court ruled it so in terms of the Lands Acts Further Amendment Act 1880 ... This was the first legislation to establish that ringbarking was an ‘improvement’ under the provisions of the lands Acts” (Stubbs, 146). This tension between the language of improvement, reinforced by political and administrative language and narratives, and the language of destruction remained central to the literary representations of ringbarking and its associated patterns of land use and occupation, as well as to the political discussions. The dramatic representations of striking visual encounters with a ghostly, haunted landscape or ringbarked trees contrasted with administrative, and some fictional pastoral narratives, of improvement.

[Improvement ? use headers to identify]

In the newspaper-serialized novel, *Adelaide’s Conspiracy*, by “Ixion” ([Carrington Thomas], 1891) the protagonist, Charles Stratford, is recommended by his friend John Ruthven to steer

away from drink and inappropriate love, and cure his insomnia, by taking up hard work and personally clearing his own property.

‘I should find the remedy in physical toil, and not in paralization of the senses by that accursed stuff. Work man—fell your own timber, ring-bark your land, dig your own drains. Sleep will soon come back to your pillows. It is the blest reward of the labor of the poor.’”

This productive labour of (tree-destroying) ringbarking is set against the unproductive cultivation metaphors used in the description of drinking: laying “the seeds of a life of dishonour and digging for yourself an untimely grave” (6).

Cleared land, particularly cleared land replaced by productive garden and crops, was regarded, in this context, as good and virtuous. The interesting point in *Adelaide’s Conspiracy* is the alignment between temperance and the clean physical labor of clearing, versus the dissipation and waste of drinking. ‘Improvement’ of land was, in such fiction, associated with and an agent of moral improvement. The awkward twist which might strike a modern reader, between laying waste the environment on the one hand and a productive properly used and “clean” mind and body on the other, did not register in the nineteenth century. The temperance and religious writer Maud Jean Franc aligned failures to convert cleared land into productive gardens to the sordid settler preoccupation with wealth, accumulation of worldly goods, and drink, in novels like *Marian, or the Light of Someone’s Home* where attention to the aesthetic over the lucrative is construed as spiritual and aesthetic elevation, and *Minnie’s Mission*, where the cleared but uncultivated land around the love interest’s house identifies him as morally lacking (Martin “Devout Domesticity”).

The naturalist and novelist Louisa Atkinson went further in her representation of cleared but unbeautified land as a sign of bad character, and a corresponding lack of proper religious and aesthetic sensibility. In *Gertrude the Emigrant* (1857) the heroine’s isolation and depression is increased by the effects of thoughtless clearing, which render the scene unwelcoming and deathlike.

It was a dull scene at the best; great stiff stringybark trees all round, or where they had fallen before the axe, the stumps remained, bleached white, or charred, by some bush fire, to a sombre hue; in fact just then Gertrude thought it looked not unlike a graveyard: the grass was brown and dry, and the trees, every hue but green; their scanty branches casting little shade. (Atkinson, Gertrude 1859, AD 153)

The stiff stringybarks have potentially been ringbarked here, and the middle stage of some ringbarking was a landscape full of dead bleached stumps, as in this passage – likened here to tombstones. In Atkinson’s 1871 newspaper-serialised novel about disinheritance and greed, *Tom Hellicar’s Children*, she describes a similar scene, in which the wholesale clearing and failure by the children’s uncle, Richard Hellicar, to properly beautify his land, is an indicator of his low moral character, and the fact that he has usurped ownership of the place:

Mount Hellicar, the residence of Richard Hellicar, a red brick house, on a bare mound, with extensive fields spreading around it — bleak open fields cleared of trees — and even the orchard sloped away, so that you did not see it but nature had been more kindly than art: there were some undulations not far off, and these were still wooded, though the sombre ironbark forest had as little cheerfulness as could be. (*Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser* 11 March 1871, page 59)

Nevertheless, even in *Gertrude*, despite Atkinson's non-fiction nature writing which expresses concern for the native flora and fauna (Lawson), Atkinson here seems to endorse the necessity of clearing as a central component of settlement. When Gertrude visits new settlers busily felling and burning the forest:

when one comes face to face with a high thick forest of standing trees, which have to disappear before the first idea of the Magic Lanthorn [of a productive future farm] can be realized, that the actual life of the farm presents itself. (Atkinson, *Gertrude AD* 168)

The easiest way to make forests "disappear", and become the desired "open fields" however bleak, was ringbarking. In the later nineteenth century, some fiction sought to address this conflict between forest and progress by naturalizing clearing in general and ringbarking in particular. In Ernest Favenc's 1893 story: "A Lucky Meeting", two brothers surveying a recently-acquired property examine real and false signs of prior white settlement, and discover,

a dead coolibah tree of some size, on which the marks they were trying to decipher had been deeply cut. It was the shore of a broad, shallow lake surrounded by a forest of similar dead trees— white skeletons, lifting heavenwards their writhing, bare limbs. A stranger, set down there suddenly, would say that the axe of the ring-barker had been at work, but the locality was away in the far interior, where the white man had only just intruded on the solitude. (151)

Here as elsewhere in Favenc's fiction, even unsettled land is marked for settlement. In the same manoeuvre the use of "Park-like" recurs, as usual designating the landscape as ready and destined for European occupation (Martin "Writing a Native Garden"; Gammage *Biggest Estate*, 5-15). The false appearance here of ringbarking, actually caused by flooding, tacitly affirms right of occupation, as if clearing had been begun by nature for the occupying brothers. To reinforce this notion, the story is a lost will narrative, in which the brothers find a British "Lunch Case" containing a will which ultimately confers another property on a deserving, if fallen, young white man they encounter. The land in Ernest Favenc's fiction is always already marked by and for white ownership, in this case by signs of settlement which mimic the environmental destruction of the advancing settlers, but also exonerate them by representing it as existing prior to invasive ringbarking. Favenc's fiction was largely historical, nostalgically harking back to a previous frontier settlement period, and celebrating invasion, violence, and transformation of the landscape.

Other fictions from the same period took a somewhat different historical stance. A passage in George Ranken's 1895 novel *Windabyne* appears to identify the lack of regular burning, the introduction of wholesale clearing, and the arrival of stock, as responsible for the degradation of once beautiful and bountiful country. Ringbarking is included here as an active agent of the ecological decline caused by the (mis)management of the colonial administration. The hero travels into an area formerly well-known to him and discovers it transformed by poor practice:

[T]he stocking of the Australian bush with sheep and cattle will transfigure a countryside in the knowledge of a generation. Tracts that I remembered as beautiful park-like open forest had now become scrubby bush, and much of this was being ring-barked and fenced in. Many of the prairielike open plains that I had galloped over were now

encroached upon by the extension of the myall and other acacia scrubs, — all from the same cause, the cessation of the annual bush fires.

He identifies the loss of this fire activity as responsible for regrowth, and for the increase in Kangaroos, “the great marsupial plague”. He also, probably incorrectly, identifies the Aboriginal people and dingos as recently departed from the area, and thus, “the balance of nature is disturbed, and, in many districts, marsupials in flocks are destroying the grasses.” Lastly he sees destruction due to overstocking so that “a blade of grass was hardly to be seen” and “Chinamen [sic] were cutting down the shrubs of myall and oak to feed the starving flocks” (249-50).

In the novel Ranken goes on to blame this destruction on the ‘agrarian policies’ of the New South Wales Selection Acts of 1861, also known as the Robertson Acts (251-2). Like Favenc, and many earlier writers already noted, he mentions the park-like appearance of the landscape settlers first encountered in parts of South Eastern Australia. Unlike Favenc he seems on the verge of properly attributing this feature of the landscape to the active maintenance of the bush by the indigenous population: the ‘annual bush fires’ he mentions were the cool burning practices of Aboriginal inhabitants, which prevented less regular, more destructive hot fires, and maintained balance and fertility across many areas, until white incursions drastically disrupted their annual routines, although they did not “disappear” in the way implied in this passage (*Biggest Estate* 1-17; Finzsch) The representation of the Park is, arguably, the same – parks are there for genteel settlers (known as squatters) with the means to take up large leaseholdings, on which to establish estates. Squatters and pastoralists like the author and his great uncle (also George Ranken), took up large tracts of land for grazing and agriculture (Long; Denholm and Gibbney). George Ranken junior was a surveyor as well as a pastoralist, and in 1883 was commissioned, along with Augustus Morris, to run an inquiry into the outcomes of the 1861 Selection Acts (Gammage *Historical Reconsiderations VIII*). These Acts, designed to introduce a more egalitarian mode of land distribution (Gammage; Robertson), and influenced by pastoral fantasies (Hoorn *Australian Pastoral, 1-115*: Gelder and Weaver, 29-51) in some areas did result in worse environmental impact than the larger scale land sequestration. Certainly Morris and Ranken’s findings suggested that they resulted in moral corruption and decay, and corruption caused much of the land to ultimately fall back into the hands of the squatters. Ranken’s representations in his novel seem far more pro-squatter than his 1883 Inquiry report. Ranken’s fiction is political, but also allegorical in its production of both the indigenous animals and the introduced selectors as “vermin” on land which ostensibly belongs to another white class. As Ken Gelder and Rachel Weaver point out in their discussion of squatter fiction from this era, this classed battle for land was distinct in different states in Australia and sometimes shaded into Gothic language which disputed the pastoral ideology. They identify William Howitt’s description of the vampiric “land-shark”, although they do not here discuss the specifically environmental devastation implied in the description of him “walking over the southern world like a new Frankenstein, producing stagnation, distortion, death-in-life, and desolation” (Howitt, quoted Gelder and Weaver, 39)

Ranken’s depiction also serves to replace the actual caretakers of the land, the “disappeared” Indigenous people, with the Squatters who had taken over their managed land, under at least dubious circumstances. As in most of the fictions discussed, the presence of the Indigenous owners haunts the background of these texts.

Aesthetic concerns combined with environmental theories to cast ring-barking and clearing in a negative light in colonial fiction by the 1890s. The environmental theories which circulated

throughout the popular press were also creatively examined, discussed, and allegorised in fiction and poetry. Opposing theories about the impact of clearing on climate and soil quality ranged from arguments for the beneficial effects on soil and climate of introducing pasture animals, to the contention that injudicious clearfelling reduces rainfall. (“Notes on Ringbarking and sapping” 1894.). Debates raged across the prolific local newspapers of the period as well as in agricultural and scholarly forums. Some settlers and farmers were having misgivings about the wisdom of wholesale clearing. A correspondent signing himself “Immigrant” writing to the *West Australian Newspaper* in 1891 commented that there was greater trouble from ring-barked fallen trees than from live shade trees, and added: “my advice is, “Don't kill a tree until you can put some-thing better in its place.” (Saturday 6 June 1891, 4)

Fiction writers took up these theories in various ways. At the very end of the century Joseph Furphy's unreliable narrator, Tom Collins, in the Australian classic picaresque novel *Such is Life*, written in the 1890s, although not published in its final form until 1904, holds forth on the associated theories of deforestation and stocking, and the impact of the introduction of sheep on the landscape:

‘a physical revolution was already in progress: that the introduction of sheep meant the ultimate extirpation of all trees and scrubs, except the inedible pine’, and that the perpetual trampling of those sharp little hoofs would in time caulk the spongy, absorbent surface’ so that these fluffy, scrub-clad expanses would become a country of rich and spacious plains, variegated by lakes and forests, and probably enjoying a fairly equable rainfall.’ (Chapter 2, 80).

Tom then goes on to recall the European Explorer Sturt's description of the Old Man Plain as “hopeless and forbidding”, describing it as having turned into a “pastoral paradise”. In fact even in *Such is Life* this does not appear to be the case, and certainly by the mid twentieth century, excessive clearing and unwise farming practices had ensured that only parts of this area offered any reliable agricultural returns (Andrews, 1936, 118; XX). Tom's theories are frequently disproved in this novel, and his observations are revealed to the reader to be unreliable down to his inability to detect direction and locate himself – as he confesses when he can't tell which side of the Murray River he is on, in Chapter 4, and therefore which State he is in (See also Croft, 3, Barnes). The novel is full of concealed narratives which illustrate Tom's blindness or misdirection – one of the most famous his wilful misreading of the story around the “man” called Nosy Alf. Under these circumstances, the reliability of the narrator's reading and predictions about the landscape and environment are also progressively thrown into doubt.

In the final chapter of the novel, Tom is caught in a howling dust-storm in the Riverina region, of the sort that began to increasingly affect the Mallee and surrounding regions by the turn of the century. The Mallee and Riverina are overlapping bioregions in contemporary understandings, across the northern eastern corner of the state of Victoria, southern New South Wales, and South Australia. Environmental scientist Stephen R Cattle notes that a 1901 report on the region identified, “periods of aridity, over-stocking of sheep, grazing pressure brought about by rabbit plagues and the devastating effects of calamitous sand storms [with the result that] ...[m]ore than 5 million acres (~2 million ha) of pastoral leases were abandoned between 1891 and 1901 as drought, vegetation removal and wind erosion took hold” (Cattle 5). In the case of the Mallee, the vegetation (Mallee trees and scrub) was

removed by giant scrub rollers and burning rather than ringbarking.² Wholesale removal of vegetation, particularly the Mallee shield roots, left nothing to retain the topsoil in times of low rainfall (Andrews, 117; XX). Duststorms like the one which nearly kills Tom and others, began early in the century, according to Cattle, who points out the introduction of language into the vernacular and the literary production of the continent which might be seen to presage large scale environmental change. Increasing dust storm activity, Cattle claims, is evident in the fact that place names began to be used, “in conjunction with the word ‘shower’ (e.g. Darling shower, Bedourie shower) to indicate a dust storm with an assumed source area.” He goes on to note that “These terms were used occasionally in newspaper reports of dust storm events, but also in works of poetry and fiction describing Australian country life. The terms ‘red rain’, ‘blood rain’ and ‘mud rain’”, which registered displaced topsoil falling in precipitation, also appeared (7). It seems likely that the dust storm in *Such is Life* is based on dust storms Furphy experienced in the area in the “Federation Drought” (XX). There were huge events in December 1896 and January 1897 (Cattle 7). These dust storms became a common phenomenon in early twentieth century Australia, as they were in the Dust Bowl region of the Southern Plains of the United States, and for similar reasons of inappropriate clearing and cropping. Narrator Collins’ failure to make the connection between these storms and the clear evidence of parched cattle and poor farming practices recounted in the novel, suggests that the messages from the author about the promising “virgin continent” he celebrates elsewhere in the novel are mixed with warning.

As Robert Dixon notes, the period around Federation in Australia was one when there was an “imaginative projection” of cultural nationalism aligning “literature, land and nation” (141), but as he also notes their “cartographic imaginaries,” or “imagining of geosocial space... is often threatened with uncertainty, ambiguity, and dissolution.” (146). This dissolution, arguably, is based not just on the unstable ideal of the unity of states, but the instability of the projected environmental fantasy on which it is also founded – that the continent is somehow homogenous, and is capable of sustaining the kinds of endeavours projected for its future prosperity.

In Catherine Martin’s novel, *An Australian Girl* (1890), some of the most important action takes place in and around “one of the tracts of dead trees that in Australian scenery make up so weird a picture of desolation. It was known as the Wicked Wood”. The name comes from “some unknown aboriginal tradition” ([sic] 160). In the novel the Wicked Wood is called “spectral in its bareness” (192). The most likely cause of such a mass of dead trees in the latter half of the nineteenth-century in Australia is ringbarking, but, as in Favenc’s story, the cause of the destruction is not directly identified.

In Martin’s novel, as in some of the literature already discussed, the dead forest is a haunting figure of loss oddly intertwined with other ideas of loss and decline. In particular, obliquely-expressed concerns about environmental loss are again aligned but not clearly connected with ideas about the supposed loss of the Indigenous inhabitants. They occur in parallel, but the connection is not made explicit, perhaps because this conjunction had become an accepted one for colonial readers. In *An Australian Girl* the trees of the bush garden at the home-station, which is named Lullaboolagana, as well as the forest, are haunted by the marks of absent Aboriginal owners. An odd and racist observation likens the eucalypts which “never

² Mallee is not a species name but a description of growing habit which covers over half the 800 plus species of Eucalypts (although, confusingly, it is also used to refer to the geographical area of South Eastern Inland Australia where Mallees are prolific. Instead of a single stem, Mallees have multiple stems growing from an extensive solid root, usually known as a Mallee root. See also Holmes and Mirmohamadi (2015, 191-2)

attain their finest development except by running water; and yet ...have to live through centuries in waterless wastes” to the “curious contradiction that we find between the complex social etiquette of the aborigines and their very primitive state of savagedom” (161-2). One of the bridges between the house and the and the fields, spanning the Oolooloo creek, was “an enormous gum-tree, which from time immemorial had lain across the creek as it fell”. On this, “were marks all along the upper side...made by the stone axe of the aborigine, who had climbed it in quest of opossums, or to place his bark-enclosed dead among the boughs, or perhaps to scan the surrounding country ... [for] the presence of a tribal foe”. (162). Not only the bush but the trees in the garden are marked with indigenous occupation and use. In this novel, as in many others, and in the real-life models the place names, and the appropriated station names (Lullaboolagana: Oolooloo) also register Aboriginal presence, while at the same time as potentially displacing or (mis)appropriating this naming, its context and epistemology and the accompanying understandings of ownership, in Paul Carter’s interpretation of these usages (Carter 332-339). Martin’s are apparently invented names, so they displace actual language and occupation with a linguistic haunting and incomprehension. As

Stella and her romantic interest Langdale stand and look at the Wicked Wood and discuss hauntings:

‘I could believe the air is full of unseen presences—’

Stella comments:

‘At this very moment the air is drenched with ghosts. Ghosts of days to come—lean and gray, when youth is left far behind—when those that look out at the window are darkened, and the daughters of music are laid low.’

And Langdale replies,

I think the vast solitudes of your Australia have got into your [Stella’s] disposition.

Throughout the novel Stella is identified as being imbued with some sort of Australian melancholy born of her origins: ‘the fascination which the unique scenery of her native land exercised upon her’ (A S E 61).³ Her description of the Wicked Wood aligns with representations of ringbarked forests in other fiction and literature:

Some of the great old trees in the Wicked Wood have through all these years, kept their tiniest twigs in extraordinary completeness. Wandering under them and looking upward, they look more like delicate carving in ivory, like marvellous etching in silky-gray and pure white against a deep blue background, rather than the corpse of what was once dense foliage. ...even in death they stand upright.

The wood,

Seems to stretch out unseen arms and compel you to stand and look from tree to tree, and try to draw in the secret of its strange fascination...(227-8)

³ Most references are to the 1891 abridged edition of this novel, but a couple are taken from the much longer, more philosophical 1890 edition as reproduced in the UNSW Scholarly Press edition.

The fascination the wood exerts on Stella is dangerous. When she attempts to visit it, her horse throws her, and although this is the event which brings her together with the love interest, Langdale, the love in this novel is doomed. Love is interrupted by property interests and miscommunication, and, arguably the settled/unsettled landscape haunted by the dead. The novel closes with a very odd sequence around bones, destruction, haunting and settlement. Stella has been fooled into marrying her old neighbour and childhood friend, Ted Richie, by his avaricious sister. This is a satisfactory financial alliance, but not a spiritual one. In her attempt to make the best of it, Stella resolves to use some of her inheritance, inherited haunted land and landscape, to divide up into small farms – for selectors, basically. Kevin Gilding calls this a “scheme of privatized socialist welfare ...[w]hich is about right for the ending of an epic” (69). In the discussion between husband and wife of this idea, Stella says that Ted does not know the people she has in mind – German settlers primarily, and he recalls for her a story she told him when they were both children:

you said there was a ship sailing, sailing away, and at last it came to the strangest country. The people had such small souls that at the Day of Judgment they couldn't be found. The Lord sent squads of angels to look for them, but not one could they fossick out. And there the skeletons had to sit each on its own grave, and the moonlight playing through their bones. That was the only light, and not a blade of grass or a drop of water!

...

‘There was never a sound to be heard but when a big willy-willy went rushing over the valleys—it was all valleys, full of graves, with skeletons sitting on them, waiting for the souls that couldn't be found. When the storms blew, the air was thick with bones, driven here and there, and at last left in heaps, to get together as well as they could. They used to be so tired and bruised for a long time, they could not move. But at last they began to put themselves together. And that was the only time they could speak. “You have taken part of my backbone,” one would say to the other; “This rib doesn't belong to me;” “I am all here but my left leg;” “Who has got my skull?” That last was too much for me. I said, if the skull was missing, the skeleton couldn't speak. But you said I knew nothing about the country. I had never been there. ... (433-4)

This story is clearly open to many interpretations. Discussion of *An Australian Girl* has, amongst other things, examined the opposition between a sophisticated European intelligentsia and Australian settler sensibility which shuttles between innocence with earthiness and ignorance with greed (Gilding, Lee). Sharon Crozier-De Rosa sees it as a New World New Woman Utopia. In the context of the skeletal remains of the Wicked Wood, and the haunted landscapes of the novel one might read these skeletons in the closing pages as the displaced Indigenous inhabitants, whose white bones echo those of the Wicked Wood, in an Australia represented as a valley full of graves. In the context that is set up, however, of the people that Ted doesn't know, these whitened bones might as easily be the settlers, who have made empty valleys full of graves and bones of the landscape, but also fragmented themselves, and are left in a state of theft, of not belonging, of illegitimate speech.

*

This chapter has explored the figure of the ringbarked forest, the dying trees. It considers the ways in which this figure registers an increasing, if intermittent, anxiety about settler impact on the landscape, but also relates to an idea of an “absent” or damaged Indigenous population. It must be noted again that this is an increasingly problematic production – not

just because it aligns indigenous people with indigenous vegetation, but because of the ways in which it resorts to the elegiac, in place of acknowledging the continued presence, occupation, survival and resistance of Aboriginal peoples in Australia, despite damage. The haunting was, in fact, of problematic and insistent presence, in defiance of elegiac “loss”. These haunted white forests might be seen as the beginning of the end of the environmental Imperial fantasy of alteration as improvement in Australian fiction. The narrative arc begins with the sort of infinitely available space which appears in Henry Kingley’s *Geoffry Hamlyn* and begins to falter in the anxiety of the “nervous [18]90s” which is rife with anxious hauntings like Catherine Martin’s, and stories of drought, flood, failed farming and environmental pests in the stories of Henry Lawson, and the ultimate selector stories of Steele Rudd (*On Our Selection* 1899).

Colonial relations with indigenous peoples are articulated in a number of forms across the nineteenth-century. The Romantic elegiac mode dominates earlier poetry (McCann 2010) and continues across the nineteenth century, with its mixture of wish and guilt around the production of Aboriginal absence. Most of these novels acknowledge Aboriginal presence at the same time as they represent a landscape haunted by damaged trees and loss, and, by implication or explicit connection, damaged culture. There is also perhaps an inverse appropriation going on here, where the supposed decline of the Indigenous population is used to cast a shadow on the future of the natural environment.

In late twentieth and twenty-first century terms, this makes sense, as the extent to which the shaping, care and curation of the existing landscape was due to the Aboriginal population has now become clear (Gammage, Bird, et al.). This connection between First Nation people and what is known as “care for country” was seldom perceived or acknowledged in the nineteenth-century, however, though it was hinted at in accounts such as Ranken’s. More often, although this connection may be inherent, what manifests in colonial fiction is a more dubious metaphorical connection between indigenous people and indigenous plants and fauna – indigenous people with indigenous place. The fiction at its best, perhaps, discloses anxiety about the effects of colonisation on both, but the fiction more often displaces concern for people with concern for place. The effect of a determined campaign of ring-barking on the Australian forests – to turn them “stark white” stands as a haunting sign for the future of non-Indigenous people in the whited environment of Australia.

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