



## The Eco-humanities as Literature: A New Genre?

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**W**E have recently entered a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. There is now considerable evidence that humanity has altered the biophysical systems of Earth, not just the carbon cycle which has been the focus of much recent politics, but also the nitrogen cycle and ultimately the atmosphere and climate of the whole globe. It was Paul Crutzen, a Nobel Prize-winning chemist, who coined the term ‘Anthropocene’, somewhat to the surprise of geologists, who had not considered humans as an ‘epoch-defining’ biophysical force. Ice core evidence showed dramatic changes in carbon outputs since the time of the industrial revolution, so Crutzen chose 1784 – the date of James Watt’s steam engine – as the beginning of the Anthropocene, (Crutzen 23). Some have argued that human-driven change dated further back, to the agricultural revolution (5,000–8,000 years ago), but evidence for this is equivocal. What is generally agreed is that human influence on biophysical systems has increased markedly in the past half century or so. During the ‘Great Acceleration’ (1945–2015?), sometimes called the Anthropocene Stage II, humans have emerged as clearly the most dominant species on Earth (Steffen et al. 615–16). We humans are no longer just biological creatures amongst others, but potent physical agents for change on Earth.

The rise of new ecological and environmental concerns demands a holistic engagement with knowledge, simultaneous understanding of science and politics, and perhaps, above all, a sense of human engagement with the natural world. The ideas of ‘world literature’, ‘world history’ and ‘global change’ are interrelated, and increasingly recurrent themes in public intellectual initiatives (Robin and Steffen 1695–96; Allardyce 23). In this essay, I want to consider the ways in which we write the literature of humans and nature in a world where these are more interdependent than ever before. I began with the global because global concerns drive political pressure and many of the big stories of our times. Those of us with expertise in the humanities – in the issues that make human life matter – have an interest in a literary genre that works on the human scale, but is also inclusive of both the global and the local.

We need a literature that enhances understanding of relations between people and nature, of how we notice change personally, and how such global changes affect places we know intimately.

Global frameworks, whether they frame literary theory or climate science, challenge national, transnational and postcolonial paradigms. A global scale favours the physical sciences, which specialise in the rules of 'everywhere', but nature-writing is more akin to the biological sciences in being fundamentally contextual. Ecology is often (still) described as a 'young' science, because its powers to generalise are perceived as being weaker than those of physics. Yet ecology is a much more useful tool for writing about 'place in time' (human scale and sensibilities of place) because it takes context into account, including evolutionary history and local environment. Particular clusters of physical factors such as climate, topography, aridity and so forth are much more likely to emerge in a biological analysis than a physical one, and there is natural parity of scale between ecology and the literature of the environmental humanities.

This essay reviews historically the poetics of literary writings about the Australian environment. It discusses the rise of rationalism in the late nineteenth century and the privileging of the scientific 'voice of nature' since Federation in Australia. It also considers the new politics of global climate change and the science that is privileged by this crisis, and how such science and politics might engage more closely with the 'regional' literature of the Australian environment.

Writing about nature in a deeply local sense demands more than general scientific principles. Local places demand literary sensitivities to the layers of nature-in-place, contrasting with the *universal* principles favoured by the stories of Big Science. Although 'nature' has not been the speciality of the humanities and social sciences, the current crisis of nature fits into a long tradition of public intellectualism, and there is a growing set of ecologically nuanced fiction and non-fiction writing that engages with the natural world. The literary ecological humanities are interdisciplinary in style, but they share the goal of foregrounding nature, and the relations between people and environments. Sometimes this may be intertwined in fiction. For example, Janette Turner Hospital in her novel *Orpheus Lost* uses the Daintree forest of Queensland as part of the set for her drama; her motif of 'quandongs and parrots' inflects this international story with an Australian sensibility. The rich, calm sanctuary of the Daintree contrasts sharply with the disappointing Promised Land of the southern United States, the other 'home' in the story. Most of the action is set in places of horror and terror, places without nature – indeed morally unnatural places that demand the humanising and civilising forces offered by quandongs and parrots (as well as by the music of the violin and oud). In this work, the ecological is on the (geographical) edge of the novel, but central to its moral fibre.

What does the Australian context bring to global environmental issues and how can we write the Australian environment into literature? Bruce Bennett, in his introductory lecture to the Association for the Study of Australian Literature conference in 2007, advocated more emphasis on literatures of place and local understandings of environment, a theme that echoed throughout this stimulating event.<sup>1</sup> Regional writing is often sharply environmentally attuned, and has the potential to offer universal insights in very particular ways. Deborah Bird Rose's *Reports from a Wild Country*, for example, draws on stories from Northern Australia to expose the tropes of colonialism, as much as place itself. Rose uses 'wild' in a very different way from the North Americans: in North Australia 'wild' is unkempt, uncultured, unloved in very much the Aboriginal sense, very far from the heroic and picturesque wild of 'high art' nature writing in the other hemisphere. Similarly George Main's *Heartland* uses his home in the rural south-west slopes of New South Wales to critique the myth that industrial agriculture is good for a place, and to develop a language for healing ecological damage. Neither of these books is strictly regional – yet they are driven by powerful regional sensibilities.

A 'local' place' may potentially have very different geographical scales for different individuals, according to how they dwell in place. A bioregion (or ecoregion) is generally defined as an area constituting a natural ecological community with characteristic flora, fauna, and environmental conditions that is bounded by natural borders (such as watersheds). But there is also a politics of bioregionalism that recognises political, cultural, and issue-based dimensions to the establishment of borders. Nature and culture entwine in the concept of a bioregion where the politics of place depends on how you live there. The bioregionalists speak of a 'terrain of consciousness', and a literature of place that is created and shared by local populations and communities (Berg). This American idea has influenced natural resource management in Australia, where the geography of place is imagined through a bioregional framework. The Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation for Australia (IBRA) divides the Australian continent into 85 bioregions and 403 sub-regions, defined more by major geomorphic features than by political boundaries, but increasingly catchment-based local committees are also required to make political and environmental decisions for their bioregion.<sup>2</sup>

Each person has a different sense of where their country, their watershed, their valley, their street or their neighbourhood begins and ends. A literary geography of place is something slightly different again. As Pat Buckridge, co-editor of a new literary history of Queensland, put it at a recent conference: 'What size is a literary entity?

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1 ASAL07, The Colonial Present, University of Queensland, 1–4 July 2007.

2 <http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/nrs/science/bioregion-framework/ibra/index.html> (accessed 13 March 2008).

What sort of a place has sufficient gravitas to be literary about?<sup>3</sup> Buckridge noted that the challenge for editors like himself and Bennett, who edited a literary history of Western Australia, was to select from the 'fine sieve' scale of regional writing the writers whose work is fully 'literary', without demanding that their work be 'universal'. There is a long history of American literary nature writing that has both universal and local qualities. For example, Walden Pond, made famous by the writer Henry Thoreau, is small enough to be walked around in less than an hour. It is a model 'wild place' in North American terms but it is just a short walk away from Concord, Massachusetts, a town renowned for its early American settler history (personal observation; Thoreau). It is not size but rather the literary quality of its writing that can vest a small place with such 'universal' significance. In a mobile, global world, focusing on a small place seems an indulgence, but place is where important things happen, and a failure to attend to place can diminish the literary quality of events recounted. The knack of reading 'heaven in a grain of sand' that regional literary history writing fosters is one of the skills needed to make global issues immediate and personal, to ensure that there is *meaning* as well as universality in understandings of the environment.

Ecocritics seeking an abstracted nature – a wilderness without humans or society – will be disappointed by Australia's offerings. The niche provided by North American 'woodsmanship' is lacking; this was not part of the identity of settler Australians, nor their literature. There is, however, a distinctive way to appreciate Australian places and the writing about them, and the first thing we need to do is rid ourselves of the expectations of elsewhere. One of Australia's greatest poet-activists, Judith Wright (1915–2000), grappled all her life with writing prose and poetry that captured the poetics of Australia's nature, particularly the 'otherness' of an adopted place. Australia is a new nation in an old continent. Some 98 percent of its citizens have arrived from elsewhere, either in their own lifetime or within the last few generations. Only the two percent of Australians who have Aboriginal heritage can claim a culture deeply enmeshed in Australia's natural environment.

Literary forms for ecocriticism may be rather different: for example, in *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living*, the Wimmera-Mallee environment is a major character created by Carrie Tiffany as a counterpoint to the universal 'science' manifest in the doctrine of progressive development. In this novel, science is 'culture' but nature (the Mallee) has the upper hand. The action is all about battling the land. In a quirky way, the human characters are in the middle ground, while the relentless cycles of nature and the unsubstantiated optimism of the scientific method are fore-grounded in the telling. Tiffany's novel is the fictional version of my own (historical) quest to consider the way science and

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3 Patrick Buckridge (Chair), Panel: Regional Literary Histories in Australia (2 July 2007) with Belinda McKay, Cheryl Taylor and Bruce Bennett.

nation are co-constructed notions at odds with the ecological realities of Australia (Robin, *How a Continent*).

The historical difficulty in writing the landscape, in representing Australian creatures as 'normal' – or indeed fitted for their environment – has been an impediment to the development of nature writing traditions. Wright wrote about Charles Harpur, one of the earliest recognised Australian poets, not as a great poet but as one who seriously engaged with the Australian environment on its own terms. Unlike the better known Henry Kendall, who wrote considerably later, Harpur strove for an Australian sensibility. He did not try to stretch Australian nature to fit a poetic style from elsewhere as Kendall did with Romanticism. Wright consciously tried to do the same, more than a century later, when poetry, settler sensibilities and science were each in their own ways seeking to understand the Australian environment in its own terms. The dilemma for settler Australians, was, as Wright put it, that

The country itself was of a wholly alien character, not yet grasped or accepted; and the eyes which saw it were possessed of a kind of double vision – their expectations, as it were, were English: but what was presented to them was something very different from any English landscape, and different in ways that had not yet been isolated and interpreted. ('Romanticism' 59)

Because Australian nature is 'strange', its poetics focus on difference and exceptionalism. This was true of the language of science as well. Taxonomy, founded in Europe, was written in a Eurocentric language, as Stephen Jay Gould has observed: Prototheria (monotremes) were 'pre-mammals'; Metatheria (marsupials) were 'middle mammals – not quite there'; and 'Eutheria' (the warm-blooded animals of the North) were the 'true mammals' (241–42). George Seddon observed the same for plants: the grass-tree was initially Australia's only 'lily' ('Eurocentrism'; 'Zerophytes'). Later, it was reclassified in a family of its own, the *Xanthorrhoeaceae*, rescuing it from its status as a failed lily. If the Linnaean system of classification was Eurocentric, and therefore a problem in a post-Linnaean colony, the language of poetry was even more precisely national. As Wright commented, the only poetry to which Australian poets had access was English – and in the early nineteenth century, this meant the romantic revival, a style entirely alien to the country ('Romanticism' 60). The other great poetic tradition from England was the pastoral, but this depended on a strong sense of being 'at home'. In a country where farmers typically 'battled' the elements, and as Henry Lawson suggested, gained their identity from heroically controlling 'mongrel country', the pastoral offered little literary traction. Australia had post-industrial pastoralism without Arcadia.

'Home-coming' depended on a cyclical element, a returning to source. The regular seasons of northern Europe had a natural circularity that followed the sun in annual cycles. This was lacking in Australia, particularly in the semi-arid country at the heart of the wool industry, where climate is often unpredictable and unreliable. Nothing can be taken for granted about the cycle of the seasons in a place of boom and bust, of pulses and responses, spaced unpredictably in both time and space. Much of the interior is dry all year around and rain, if it comes at all, can come from the north in summer or the south in winter, or from neither or both. Where unpredictability rules, relations between rain and temperature are uncoupled. There is no basis for the annual 'homecoming' rituals of Harvest Festival in Europe and Thanksgiving in north America. There are other things – but not seasonality. Instead Australia inspires what Nicolas Rothwell refers to as 'a mood of nostalgia, a yearning, a desire so strong' that 'highlights a primary distance between writers and subject'. The landscape evokes a sense of loss; Australians miss the seasonality of elsewhere. And there are cultural absences too. The Aboriginal presence 'in the outback, the inland and the remote north defines the landscape ... and their absence in other parts of the continent communicates a tone as well' (20). The landscape and the original people are coupled in different ways when 'we' are not the original people of the place.

Australian literary writing seldom celebrates 'home-coming' in nature as in European pastoral poetic traditions. Neither is there a transcendent poetry that exalts the otherness of non-human nature, as in North American wilderness traditions. Romanticism based on the fulfilment of individual aspirations inspired by a picturesque of high mountains is missing in the world's flattest continent. Even where the escarpment is wild and bold (as in the Blue Mountains that prevented the early settlers at Sydney Cove from crossing into the interior), the 'mountain glory' tended to be represented, not as a source of uplifting fulfilment, but rather as yet another obstacle to overcome. Disappointment was the overwhelming mood, and Wright argues that this 'worked against the development of individualism as Americans had known it' ('Romanticism' 60).

Australian nature writing has seldom been regarded as 'high art'. Earthy and sometimes popular, but rarely transcendental, Australian nature writings were *for the people*. They most commonly appeared in daily newspapers rather than leather-bound tomes. While Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, John Elder, Barry Lopez and other North American nature writers are part of a canon, known both in their home countries and internationally, the chroniclers of Australian places and nature were known in their day as popular newspaper columnists, and have been largely forgotten since.

In 1996, Tom Griffiths reconstructed 'The Natural History of Melbourne' (echoing Gilbert White's famous *Natural History of Selborne* [1789]). He explored

the distinctive voices of Donald Macdonald (1859?–1932), Charles Barrett (1879–1959) and Alexander Hugh Chisholm (1890–1977), nature writers who have not received much other scholarly attention in recent years. In their own time they were very popular and valued their links with literary figures such as Henry Lawson, ‘Banjo’ Paterson, C.E.W. Bean and C.J. Dennis. For example, Chisholm, long serving editor of the *Australian Encyclopaedia* as well as a nature writer, asked C.J. Dennis to introduce his 1922 book *Mateship with Birds* (Griffiths 135). Charles Barrett’s reflective book *In Australian Wilds: The Gleanings of a Naturalist* (1919), was written as literary nourishment for Australian soldiers returning home after the war. Barrett was himself a returned soldier, and worked alongside war historian C.E.W. Bean at Tuggeranong homestead developing a literary form that met the needs of soldiers damaged by the horrors of war (Griffiths 137). These writers began with a close and practical observation of nature, emphasising the action and movement that can be gathered on ‘Australian hills and plains’. Occasionally nature served a higher purpose, but most commonly only in a playful aside: ‘The hare has a weakness for following a beaten track, and in that respect resembles slightly some especially orthodox divine’ (Macdonald 193). Perhaps the ecological purists of the present era would be surprised that such writers failed to draw a distinction between indigenous Australian and imported nature, but their writing evokes rambles in the bush near cities, not ‘wilderness’, and is above all popular and inclusive.

Being popular is not the same thing as being simple or unscientific. Nature writing is an art that demands a balance between scientific and popular ways of knowing about the world. It is a practical and elegant celebration of the vernacular landscape. Each of these writers sought to appeal to their readers through transparent language, and not to obfuscate with science. Macdonald wrote in 1887 that popular names ‘serve quite as well as scientific terms for identification, and are generally more expressive and appropriate’. The title *Gum Boughs and Wattle Bloom* was, as Griffiths put it, ‘a manifesto bypassing the claims of the *Eucalyptus* and the *Acacia*’ (135). But even for the most popular writers, there was sometimes a need to be ‘technical’ as well, and this was awkward for literary style (Robin, *Flight of the Emu* 114). Charles Barrett wrote explicitly about the tension of introducing technical information into ‘popular’ writing:

It is not as easy as you might think to make a general article that keeps away from nomenclature, the historical aspect, and, above all, too detailed references to individual species ... With over twenty years of trying to keep the Emu a judicious blend of academic and popular, I feel I know something of the matter ... [E]ven though a book is popular and required to be popular by the publishers, due allowance must be made for sufficient of the other side to indicate that the man who is turning out the material ... knows a little bit

more about the subject than generally it indicates.<sup>4</sup>

Griffiths comments that their 'romanticism ... made them marginal to the history of science, and their practical, descriptive orientation ... placed them outside the study of literature and culture' (122). Yet what they achieved was a vernacular nature writing tradition that helped settler Australians (and visitors from abroad) feel at home with the strange Australian environments. Many of their works were published in books, but they were primarily known through their popular newspaper columns. Robert Zeller in a recent essay discusses Ernest Favenc (1845–1908) and E.J. Banfield (1852–1923) in similar ways (202). Favenc wrote for the *Bulletin*, and Banfield in regional newspapers (*North Queensland Register*, *Townsville Daily Bulletin*). These authors were all concerned with constructing, as Cheryl Taylor says of Favenc, 'the new nation's vision of itself' (xxvi).

In a sense, however, the urge to have a political stake in the heady years of Federation Australia interfered with the 'purity' of this kind of natural history writing. The legacy of Banfield, Favenc, Barrett, Macdonald and even the later Chisholm as *nature* writers has been complicated by nationalistic aspirations, their own and those of their readers. Disappointment and a mood of despair gave great power to the state around the time of Federation in particular, when state socialism, as some would call it, was a strong influence. Australian nature was more often described through science than poetry, and the emphasis was on the practical, the applied – not the perceived or the felt. The government sought 'experts' to build a nation. 'Progress' was all about a strong economy, and science was deemed essential to this task. The environment was placed in the service of economy, and good citizens worked to adapt the foibles of the continent to the needs of the favoured industries: wool, wheat and cattle, and mining (Robin, *How a Continent*).

In contrast to this kind of imperative, Indigenous writing often emphasises the interdependence of nature and culture. Among non-Indigenous readers and critics there is a tendency to read dreaming stories as 'high culture' and to ignore their ecological insights. The knowledge that 'goes with the river' in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* derives from spending days living with the river, not 'improving' or changing it. Growing up in country that is 'sometimes under water, sometimes bone-dry' means knowing 'when the trade winds blowing off the northern and southern hemispheres will merge in summer' (168). 'Trade wind' is carefully chosen here. Not a 'dreaming idea', it reflects the way in which Wright's characters live between Aboriginal law and whitefella law, juggling the two in tension. The novel invites non-Indigenous readers into the nature-culture of her place, but Wright is nonetheless read as an 'Indigenous' writer; her work is placed with Indigenous writing, not environment, in bookshops.

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4 C.E. Bryant to Charles Barrett, 15 February 1951. Charles Barrett Papers, Australian Manuscripts Collection SLV.



In Australia the categories of our literary markets reflect the need to come to terms with a physical country that is very different from the places where our literary forms originated. There is seldom a 'nature writing' section in Australian bookshops (unlike British and North American ones). The reader and eco-critic needs to cast a wide net and look in eclectic places to find the literature of the Australian environment. Newspapers continue to be important sources of such writing. Another place to look is the large and prominent 'popular science' section of the bookshop where one will find books like Timothy Flannery's *The Future Eaters* or Tim Low's *New Nature*. Increasingly, there are also sections in bookshops for 'environment', where one might find Eric Rolls's luminous *A Million Wild Acres* or George Seddon's wry *The Old Country* tucked in among turgid tomes on hydrology and pest control. The twentieth-century settler project wrested an impressive income from 'developing' the driest inhabited continent with the world's most unpredictable and variable climate. The project also ennobled the idea of 'battling' and honoured the battlers, working their soldier-settler blocks against the odds. Such national rhetoric underpinned the economy of the nation and the science working in its service. Since 1926, when the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) was established (and in the era of post-war expansion when CSIR became CSIRO), science too has 'battled'. It has appeared most commonly in Australian history as a lone foot-soldier in a hostile place (Robin, 'Ecology').

As romanticism turned rational (both in literary England and in Australia), the idea that nature might have its own internal logic became increasingly unfashionable. The materialism that emerged in the later nineteenth century severed the fundamental creativity in the relationship between people and nature that had dominated eighteenth-century English literature. 'Facts' became preferred over spiritual relations with nature. Thereby, 'the most fruitful elements' for poets were lost with that relationship, as Judith Wright has observed ('Romanticism' 65). Nature became other, not human, and therefore not part of the work of the humanities. What C.P. Snow later termed 'the great divide' set in, and 'the environment' became the subject of science, while poetry explored the soul, without contending with the natural world.

The Romantic view had allowed for the possibility that the ways of seeing and knowing the world were part of the individual's personal relation with nature, and that nature and the individual were, in some primitive sense, indivisible. The scientific/rational focused, by contrast, on 'improving' nature, an enterprise independent of the (impersonal) perpetrator. The rise and rise of the rational and scientific were integral to the 'progressive' philosophies of the first half of the twentieth century (Roe). If scientific observation is done properly, all an observer can write is a *report*, not a literary embellishment that engages with the human-

in-nature. Some poetry took this moral position too; Wright cites the work of the poet Rosetti, who reduced nature to the impersonal or simply the 'decorative and ornamental' in such phrases as 'the woodspurge has a cup of three' ('Romanticism' 66). What is lost from this literal representation is the possibility of nature's creative agency in the human imagination; a poetry of counting, just like an 'objective scientific report', excludes the idea that people and nature can construct each other. As Wright puts it:

Nature [is] a living and creative force, capable of arousing, not merely passively receiving, the human imagination ... even if only man can confer meaning, nature – the unknown and unassimilated other term in the equation – is not by any means to be thought of as wholly passive, as mere 'material' to be acted upon. As man's task, she woos him to perform it; as man's eternal opposite, she is finally unknowable. ('Romanticism' 71, 76)

If we are to take nature seriously, there must be a poetic of nature as subject that counterbalances the overwhelming 'objective' voice favoured by science.

### **Science, the Arts, and Writing Nature**

A poetic of nature has to be sensitive to the particular – both the literal detail, and the mood of the country. English language has its origins in other places, and is not always the most apt for Australian conditions, as Nicolas Rothwell explores in his essay on 'The Outsiders':

deep-rooted attitudes to colour nature and landscapes ... reflect [ ] ... European ideals of country ... The ... rich, dominant European-derived vocabulary of the Western tradition, with its sense of the romantic sublime in nature [does not always serve the purposes of] the softer, less emphatic word map brought forth by Australian country, with its ragged, hollowed, scrubby trees, its exiguous plains of mallee and mulga, its patterns that rely on reduplication and variation rather than grandeur for their tonal effect. (15, 20)

A question of identity, of who has the right to speak for country, haunts the discussion. Some, like Rothwell, say that only an Australian can write the landscape. Critical of the current bevy of books by outsiders who have just discovered Australia's red centre and monsoon north, Rothwell challenges their right to turn their experience into 'packages of Australia' for armchair travellers from large markets elsewhere. He muses:

I suspect it is impossible for a writer on the Australian bush to sense [the significant presence or absence of Aboriginal people in country] unless he feels it as a matter of identity; unless it acts like a pressure, tangible inside the geometry of his own life. (20)

This seems an extreme view, yet it underscores the fact that the Australian identity has not developed a culture of 'pure nature' in the way the North Americans have done. The idea of a wilderness was a nationalistic and literary trope in the United States, and the politics of National Parks came from it (Nash, *Wilderness*). Despite the strong environmental politics of Lake Pedder, the Franklin and many other 'wilderness' battles of the era, and the aesthetic traditions developed by Olegas Truchanas, Peter Dombrovskis and others, Australian literary traditions and bush writings have strongly favoured the working landscape, the landscape of usefulness and social cohesion, not that of transcendental apartness (see Bonyhady). The Great American idealism embedded in National Parks was backed up by a long and strong literary Nature Writing tradition that predated the legislation either for the parks or the American-funded World Centennial of National Parks in 1972. National parks were an invention of the United States, deeply grounded in the wilderness literature of Thoreau and Muir. Roderick Nash argued that National Parks were a major 'contribution to world civilization' from the United States – along with others with less of a literary foundation such as 'Coca Cola, Mickey Mouse, basketball and rock 'n' roll' (Nash, 'Confusing' 216). That wilderness tradition was not part of Australia's literary heritage. Just as the international politics of 'romantic nature' came into focus in the 1970s and 1980s, Indigenous politics and the idea of *terra nullius* came to prominence in Australia. The two politics sometimes clashed here in concerns expressed – for example, that 'biodiversity is a whitefella word' (Head 7).<sup>5</sup> But they were inseparably entwined in much of the important literary tradition of Australian nature, not just in Aboriginal country, but also in places where erasure of Aboriginal traditions has been strongest (Rothwell).

Judith Wright has led the way in writing the ecology of Australia into literature, perhaps because she was so well known as a poet, an Indigenous rights activist and an environmentalist. Also important is the fact that her environmental concerns embraced pastoralism and country where Aboriginality confronted the yeoman ideal of nationalism. In CA Cranston and Robert Zeller's new book, *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and their Writers*, billed as 'the first collection of ecocritical essays devoted to Australian contexts and their writers', Wright's work provides the spine for Australian ecocriticism. Wright's oeuvre, both as a poet and a public intellectual, grapples with the pastoral livelihood and its costs, in displacing the Indigenous owners of the land and in damaging the land itself. Her work is explicitly mentioned in more than half the chapters, and while the guiding force of the book is the 'bioregion', Wright is the only ecocritical writer and poet to be accorded her own chapter. She is, in a very real sense, both bioregional and

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5 Another example is the presence of signs in many Aboriginal managed National Parks: for example, 'Nitmiluk is not a wilderness. It is a land managed by Aboriginal people, a human artefact, constructed through the ceremonies, kinship ties, fires and hunting of countless generations of Jawoyn people' (Nitmiluk Visitor Centre sign, August 1997, pers. obs.).

national – and the uniting voice in this book of many authors. Veronica Brady concentrates on her poetry and ‘ways of rejoicing in the world’, but in Ruth Blair’s chapter Wright provides the voice of Tamborine Mountain, a lush rainforest mountain so different from the dry steppes of the New England Tableland where she grew up. Blair reaches out from Tamborine to include some of Wright’s other places: the Great Barrier Reef, which she defended in *The Coral Battleground*, and Stradbroke Island. It was Wright’s Tamborine home where Oodgeroo Noonuccal wrote *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, a key text in CA Cranston’s chapter on Islands. Braidwood in the Canberra district was the place of Wright’s later years, and she is central to Kate Rigby’s elegant account of the lyricism of the Limestone Plains. Braidwood is now the place of the Two Fires festival that annually celebrates the driving forces in Wright’s life: Arts and Environmentalism. *The Littoral Zone* is not the only book that explores Wright’s crucial and exceptional leadership in writing Australian nature in bioregional literature. A new interdisciplinary study of land, people and memory in the New England region, *High Lean Country*, takes its title from Wright’s 1940 poem, ‘South of My Days’, which describes it as the ‘clean, lean, hungry country’ that also provides the prologue for the book (Atkinson et al.).

### **Australia’s literature for the world**

In this final section, I want to consider why Australian literature of the environment is important to the rest of the world; how it can be both nuanced in local ways and universally relevant. First, however, it is important to acknowledge that an Australian literary tradition will not be like an English contribution or an American one, even if we share a language. Nature here has a different agenda; it marches to the beat of a different drum. The environment is part of the difference, and this is accentuated by the different settler and frontier histories of Australia’s bioregions. Ecological literature is created in a crucible of physical and biological forces tempered by nationalist and cultural aspirations, so has a greater potential for diversity than other literary traditions.

Writing Australian nature demands fluency in scientific concepts and a literary sensibility that is finely tuned to the eccentricities and adaptations of a place far from the original source of the poetic language. Among twentieth-century Australian public intellectuals, Judith Wright and George Seddon have been nearly alone in having a strong appreciation of both the value of science and of poetry. As we enter the twenty-first century, there are signs that others are experimenting with the poetics of science, as part of the moral renaissance of science encouraged by climate change and fostered by the popularity of science communication in many media. In a recent performance, the group A Chorus of Women invoked the *oracle of a community of scientists*, actively accommodating the words of prominent scientists writing about climate change into a quasi Greek script. Science here

became poetic drama, if not poetry. Perhaps the Greek Chorus was just part of the 'DNA of western writing and art' that Rothwell critiques, but it was effective and adapted to Australian concerns in interesting ways. The implicit subject matter was not Australian nature on a local scale but rather the environmental ethics of the profligate and comfortable Australian life-style. But the wattle blossoms that performers used as they danced evoked a personal and distinctively Australian ownership of this particular global poetic. This was a dance that suggested a new identity politics, and perhaps subtended a new literary tradition.

The settler Australian experience of disappointment that has marked its relations, both literary and literal, with the environment is also an experience with the unexpected, with the variable and unpredictable. Right at the heart of this dismay is something increasingly universal: variability, unpredictability and extreme weather are now 'global' phenomena, central to the climate change discourse. The strangeness of our land is no longer just a local phenomenon: climate change makes Australia's experience with strange weather salutary for the rest of the world. If one begins with the perspective of the continent, as George Seddon does, you see the key historical moments as 46,000 years ago and 1788. Australia was a place that had 'a radically new technology imposed upon it, suddenly, twice' ('Man Modified' 10). The second transition, still unfolding, brought both agriculture and the industrial revolution, roughly simultaneously, and has been disastrous for a nation in a megadiverse continent, which now has the doubtful honour of leading the world in mammalian extinctions (Lindenmayer and Bergman 1). But it also offers a place where many of the local animals have adapted to boom and bust. As Steve Morton, one of Australia's leading arid-zone ecologists put it, 'the aquatic invertebrates of desert rivers experience the booms and busts of unpredictable flooding and drying more as a "system resetting" than as a "disturbance"' (282). Australian history demands flexibilities of scale that are different from places where the agricultural revolution preceded the industrial by thousands of years, and Australian nature has invented its own answers to the idea of disturbance (Robin and Griffiths). Such cases test the history and ecology of global change, and create a new space for writing about nature. Australia has the potential to become a 'literary entity' for the rest of the world. This will depend on our capacity to write Nature as a subject and to understand the Human as a physical force in the Earth's ecosystems.

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