

The Lore of the Land: Australian Natural Histories

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I am writing a book about the literature of nature and the environment in Australia since the late nineteenth century. I hope to discern the origins of a distinctive tradition of Australian nature writing and thus to evoke and reclaim a forgotten source of modern environmental history. Australians (unlike Americans and Britons) have been slow to recognize a popular canon of home-grown environmental writing, a literary lineage of ideas about local ecology and landscape that wrestles with environmental legacies and futures. Academic definitions of environmental history in Australia (which emerged from the 1970s) have tended to overlook this popular stream of writing. The book I plan will be a journey of discovery on land and in the library, breathing the dust of both earth and archive. Each chapter will weave a story around a key book, its author, and the place out of which the text grew. Thus, the study will also investigate the relationship between literature and landscape, and the making and afterlife of books.

Although the focus of my book is very much Australian, it is set in the context of a comparative and international inquiry into the origins of environmental history and the literature of nature. One of the reasons why Australians have often neglected their own literature has been the power and influence of overseas models and traditions. Australians may know about *Silent Spring* and *The Natural History of Selborne*, but they are less familiar with *The Red Centre* (H. H. Finlayson, 1934), *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand* (Francis Ratcliffe, 1938), *Speak to the Earth* (Elyne Mitchell, 1945), or *The Great Extermination* (Jock Marshall, 1966). To strengthen their contribution to an international discourse, Australians need to know more about their own land and literature. And such a study will also introduce non-Australians to a continent with a very different ecology and history.

The book begins in the late nineteenth century at a time when the Australian continent was tipping into a prolonged drought. It was a time when colonial optimism literally bit the dust. At the turn of the century, as Australians came to value the distinctiveness of their land and to draw their emerging national identity from it, they began to discover just how much they were damaging it. It seemed as if, after a century and more of European settlement, the land was fighting back. The long economic boom and sustained good seasons of the nineteenth century appeared to have evaporated, and the decades leading up to the second world war saw a growing and vigorous debate about the developmental potential of Australia—and about the environmental impact of settlement. This was a time of reckoning. By studying the literature of place and nature across this period and up to the present, I hope to offer an unusual history of environmental ideas and sensibilities in Australia, and one which illuminates the making of intellectual traditions and the relationship between politics, culture, and the land. Current scientific debates about sustainability and environmental management will benefit from a complex grounding in the humanities.