

Mallee Country: Land, People, History by Richard Broome, Charles Fahey, Andrea Gaynor and Katie Holmes, Monash University Publishing, 2019

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Launch speech, at the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, Melbourne
Saturday 16 November 2019

What happens to our history when we look carefully at the soil and the trees, the sun and the insects, the geology and the biota, the wildlife and the water, at the very air we breathe, *as well as* at the people and the politics, the parliament and the legislature, the selectors and the bailiffs, and (of course) the dear old stump-jump plough? Something very interesting happens. Our sense of history lengthens immeasurably and time both expands and telescopes. Events that happened thousands or millions of years ago, that we may not have previously seen as events, become vitally important here and now. Triumphant sagas that once dominated the entire canvas of the history we learned at school can suddenly present as brief, abrupt, violent and disturbing. The flicker of a bird wing or the scratch of a fowl might be of equal importance to the stroke of a pen. Lerp might have as much consequence as sheep. What it means to be human in this place becomes a deep ethical and philosophical conundrum that is part of the story. The scale and momentum of such a history propels us into a future of uncertainty and apprehension as well as of fragile hope. Instead of being lulled into celebratory complacency, we find ourselves exposed to an exhilarating, dizzying and sometimes terrifying roller-coaster ride through mutable spacetime. Expanding the vision to include the non-human paradoxically makes the humans *more* human. And what about the dear old stump-jump plough, which I once sketched carefully into my primary-school exercise book? Well, it seems both more significant and infinitely more trivial.

This de-stabilising historical transformation is part of the magic of environmental history and it is part of the allure of the book we launch today, a book that spans the continent and ranges across millennia, a book that takes an old foundational genre of settler history – the progressive saga of the agricultural frontier – and turns it into something much more humbling, much more worrying, much more captivating.

Whether we personally know the mallee regions or not, we all have a relationship with them. As the authors argue, ‘if we have eaten toast in Melbourne or udon noodles in Tokyo, or downed a Tsingtao beer in Shanghai, then we, too, have played a role in creating, and consuming, the mallee country as it is today.’ As a keen connoisseur of bread, noodles and beer, I’ve done my bit. I also feel that I’ve intimately known the mallee country from childhood, in my bones and against my skin. Growing up in the suburbs of Melbourne in the 1960s, I warmed myself happily beside an open fire of glowing mallee roots which in winter were delivered regularly to our ‘nature strip’, and in summer my mother lamented the red mallee dust on the clothes pegged to our hills hoist. ‘Mallee’ was an ineffable quality of my suburban upbringing – represented by red embers and red dust, and by grotesquely shaped roots; it was vaguely threatening, far away yet somehow under my nails.

My mother was born in the Wimmera, in St Arnaud, and the long, straight endless drives to visit Grandma are among my earliest memories. Yet the Mallee lay beyond, even further out, unreachable, flattened into nothingness. But when I first visited the mallee bush – exploring Wyperfeld and camping by Chalka Creek in the Hattah-Kulkyne – I was seduced by the warm, subtle beauty of the place. I’ve not yet been to the Mallee country of South Australia, which is well represented in this history, but two years ago I did visit the other

side of the continent and drove across the gothic acres of the Western Australian wheatbelt, discovered with surprise the existence of the Great Western Woodlands, and was gob-smacked with delight by the wildflowers of the Stirling Ranges and Fitzgerald River, where peaks named ‘the Barren mountains’ – West Mt Barren, Mid Mt Barren and East Mt Barren – lie at the heart of one of Earth’s biodiversity hotspots. Mallee country is paradoxical, enigmatic, mysterious, beyond our mastery, and this history acknowledges that, explains it, explores it, and reflects intelligently and compassionately upon its human consequences.

When you begin and end a history with the land, as this book does, and when that land is comprised of three regions across the continent that are linked ecologically, you begin to get an inside-out history of Australia. The droughts, the duststorms, the mouse plagues, the locusts and the floods are just as overwhelming, but they don’t come out of no-where; they come out of the history of the land itself, out of ancient environmental history and disturbed ecological complexity. One of the strengths of this book is that it folds the new histories into the old. It retains and deepens some of the qualities of traditional regional history-writing – the expansion of empire, the settler’s battle with the land, the power of the yeoman ideal, the detailed material and economic analysis of rural life, the evolving political context of land legislation in four states – but it does this at the same time as introducing new dimensions of narrative: a vertiginous excursion across geological time, sustained historical attention to the millenia of Aboriginal history, recognition of the tenacious continuity of Indigenous presence, a regional history that devotes the *majority* of its pages to the twentieth century and almost as much space to the twenty-first century as to the nineteenth. The parameters and proportions of this history are distinctive.

Although the history begins 4.54 billion years ago, it still manages to give thoughtful and careful attention to the present. There is a wonderful final chapter on ‘Reinventing the Mallee’, which explores the exciting cultural work being done in sustaining communities and diversifying their economic base, turning them from ‘heartlands to artlands’ as is suggested here. And this is happening in the face of the dire influence of neoliberalism on rural economies, communities and environment. Furthermore, I wonder if *Mallee Country* might be one of the first general Australian histories to present climate change as part of historical experience – not as a prospect or a threat or a solely scientific discourse, but as ordinary lived experience. This reminds us of the transformative potential of good history-writing: an issue that has proven politically divisive is now settling into our histories as grim and attested reality.

‘In just over a hundred years,’ the book explains, ‘three-quarters of mallee country was flattened, burnt and cleared’. As conservationist Keith Bradby said of Western Australia, ‘fifty years of agriculture [undid] three billion years of evolution.’ Understanding the speed and violence of that momentous event requires a history that operates on both those timescales. Haunting this book and percolating constantly to its surface are the destruction and violence of that clearing, the environmental legacies of erosion and salinity unleashed, the ‘wildlife holocaust’ that was wrought, the moral and social disasters still unfolding. In the early and mid-twentieth century, settlers frequently walked off mallee lands with a feeling of failure and betrayal – their dismal, forced, often private departure is such a moving and compelling image of the dissonance between government visions and ecological reality. By denying nature, governments turned a predictable environmental disaster into a series of individual, moral failures.

But this is not a negative or depressing history. The respect for the power and integrity of nature that drives the authors is mostly shared by mallee people today, and increasingly underpins the new futures for these regions. One therefore finishes this book with a surprising sense of hope, and certainly with enormous admiration for mallee peoples and their capacity to learn and to change, often against the grain of the state, often conspicuously *without* leadership from government. This is the predicament we are all in now: how do we turn the world around without any national leadership? The answer given here, I think, is by valuing the social and ecological communities to which we intimately belong, by seeing ourselves as inextricably part of their history and their nature.

I think this book sits beside two other recent Australian histories I admire, both of which are invoked in the text: Tony Hughes d'Aeth's magisterial literary history of the WA wheatbelt, *Like Nothing on This Earth*, and Charles Massy's remarkable Anthropocene meditation, *Call of the Reed Warbler*. *Mallee Country* joins them in signalling a new way forward in Australian writing about the land.

This is a multi-species, multi-regional, multi-authored book. In it you will find three regions, four states, over 400 species of mallee-form eucalypts, and four authors. What marvellous chemistry there is between all these creatures and entities! The authors have produced that rare thing: a seamless literary collaboration. One can glimpse their individual historical sensibilities: Richard's deep commitment to telling the story of Aboriginal Australia, Charles's unparalleled knowledge of the wealth and poverty of farmers, Andrea's edgy activist environmental scholarship, and Katie's integrative vision of Australia's vast inland. Together they constitute an impressive team. They are all beloved leaders of our profession, mentors, teachers, scholars, writers,

true luminaries. I must say that a real highlight of the last few years on the conference circuit – at environmental history conferences and the Green Stream of the Australian Historical Association – has been the travelling caravan of Mallee scholars giving us their reports on this project. Thus we've got used to finding mallee in some surprising places, in Newcastle, Canberra, Toowoomba and other districts, thereby further extending the range of this adaptable eucalypt.

And in this book our impressive band of authors has teamed up with a brilliant publisher. I have so much regard for Monash University Publishing. Not only does it publish great books; it is also the impressive public face of its university, winning Monash enormous prestige and goodwill. At a time when the University of Western Australia is foolishly threatening to close its wonderful press and the University of Sydney has trashed its long-time Chair in Australian Literature, we commend Monash for its record in innovative scholarly publishing of the highest calibre. Let me also say what a pleasure it is to read a book with the footnotes actually at the foot of the page! A scholar's delight.

It's an honour to be invited to celebrate with you the publication of this great collaborative work, this pioneering portrait of country, of country within the continent. I congratulate the authors and the press, urge you all to buy, read and enjoy, and happily launch *Mallee Country*!