



Trajectories

Romancing the grindstone on Gunningbland Creek: a reflective essay

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*Look here! Nguril did this!
That is what Nguril did.
Look here! Nguril did this.
Plain after plain, with flowing creeks,
To the River's water.*

‘song sung by a man named Pound who came from the Lachlan River area of New South Wales.’ [27]

1. Introduction: a love story

The days are lengthening, crops are ripening, and the air is sweet with Spring as I write. For the first time in years of drought there are pools of muddy water in Gunningbland Creek, the ephemeral stream that meanders across our farm towards its river, the Lachlan, in south-eastern Australia; and a brood of grey teal ducklings is dabbling in the sparse rushes and nardoo, a native aquatic fern, now miraculously regenerating after the recent rain. I nearly trod on the teals as I walked along the creek the other day: three tiny brown beings trying to be invisible in the drying grass, and further along, their parents pretending to be clods of dirt or speckled rocks. I stopped and pretended to be a Casuarina tree, but the teals weren't fooled! One adult flew a few metres away to perform her innate defensive strategy—*look at me, I've got a broken wing, catch me if you can and stay away from my young*—while the other took off upstream to gracefully disappear around a bend. I moved,

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and the hatchlings rose as one, dashed into the muddy water, paddled furiously and scrambled up the opposite bank to become invisible balls of fluff again, but in safer, more distant grass.

I love this creek, even in its now denuded and degraded state, and even in this drought when it has not flowed for three and a half years. Periods of droughts, or El Nino events [3], are normal in Australia, and ecological communities have adapted to the regular cycles of dearth and plenty, as we human inhabitants of the inland must too. But, like bushfires and floods, the dry years hurt. Some of my saddest childhood memories are of pulling thirsty, drought-weakened sheep out of the mud in the creek bed just before it turns to dust, for example; while some of my happiest are of catching yabbies, or freshwater crayfish, with a piece of meat tied to a string, and of hooking native catfish and yellowbelly (golden perch) in the same place in the times of plenty.

2. The Wiradjuri grindstone: ‘being-affected by’ the future

Women not so different from me have been catching yabbies, catfish and yellowbelly in this creek in the years of plenty since ‘time immemorial’, for two, even three thousand generations before my forebears arrived [26,31,34]. I’ve found material traces of their presence in the creek bed behind our farmhouse: a portable grinding stone, for example, a small worn and pitted water-washed rock which, I imagine, Wiradjuri women once used to grind native grass seeds into flour [13,28]. It was buried in the silt, a lone palm-sized stone in a stoneless stream, on a flat and stoneless plain. This women’s tool has become a ‘material memory’ [22] for me. Whenever I hold it, even think about it, I viscerally experience what Ricouer calls a state of ‘being-affected by the past’ [45]. I think of the women who abandoned the grindstone, why they might have left it behind, and what this creek might have meant to them. But I also experience a sense of what might also be called ‘being-affected by the future’, especially when I walk along what we now call Gunningbland Creek to witness the consequences of the ecocidal narratives that have been enacted along it over the last 170 years since British ‘Squatters’ first drove their sheep and cattle onto its floodplain.

3. Ancestral narratives inscribed upon the land

The grindstone challenges me, demands of me new ways of thinking about this creek, new narratives about the relationships between people and the ecological communities the ducklings, yabbies, catfish and yellowbelly are part of. As historian William Cronon has pointed out,

narratives remain our chief moral compass in the world. Because we use them to motivate and explain our actions, the stories we tell change the way we act in the world [12].

The ancestral narratives the Wiradjuri women told and enacted as they ground their grass seeds into flour, fished, or collected native fruit, vegetables and freshwater mussels

along our creek linked them with the entire universe. The creek marked the track of Wawi, the Rainbow Serpent, for example [51], and the ducks, catfish and yellowbelly were their kin. The women were obliged to propitiate and nurture these species with what anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose has called ‘rituals of well being’ [47]. For the Wiradjuri women, as I imagine them now, the land, their Country, was sentient, responsive and deeply storied: ‘a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness and a will toward life’. [48]

The tributary we now know as Gunningbland Creek was healthy and cared for then. It was rimmed with rushes, reeds and sedges, with nardoo and waving swathes of Warrego summer grass. It was lined with grey and yellow box (*Eucalyptus microcarpa* and *E. melliodora*), belahs (*Casuarina cristate*) and an understorey of acacias and shrubs; and in the lighter country, with scattered white Cyprus pines (*Callistrix glaucophylla*) [4]. In wet years, and after every rain, it throbbed with the mating calls of frogs; buzzed with native bees and dragon flies, the twitterings of small birds, the screeches of cockatoos and the laughter of kookaburras. It rippled with native fish, crustaceans, and tortoises, and spilled across the plain into ephemeral swamps and lagoons, the nesting sites and feeding grounds for more waterfowl and other aquatic birds than I have ever seen: even for mobs of now-endangered broilgas, Australia’s dancing cranes, [16] which I remember from my childhood but have not seen on our farm for decades.

Beyond the wetlands and riparian vegetation the floodplain opened out into a ‘dynamic mosaic of ecosystems’ [58] created over hundreds of generations by Wiradjuri land managers using a controlled burning regime now known as ‘firestick farming’, along with judicious seeding, transplanting and husbanding of dietary staples, such as yam daisies (*Microseris scapigera*), as well as medicinal plants and fibre species used in the construction of nets and baskets [1,23,49,50]. Fire-stick farming created conditions that attracted the game the Wiradjuri hunted, including kangaroos, wallabies, emus and bustards, as well as for other useful species, such as native bees, which provided natural sugar and a range of ‘ecological services’.

4. The invasion of new stories

But fire-stick farming also produced perfect conditions for cattle and sheep. In 1813, when settlers Gregory Blaxland, William Lawson and William Charles Wentworth finally bush-bashed their way across the Blue Mountains, the rugged ‘sandstone curtain’ dividing Australia’s eastern coast from the inland plains, all they could see were forests and temperate grasslands ‘sufficient ... to support the stock of the colony for the next 30 years’, as Blaxland later reported [8].

The colony’s governor, Lachlan Macquarie, despatched his Assistant Surveyor of Lands, George Evans, to formally inspect the ‘new’ territory, and the following January was able to report to Lord Bathurst, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, that ‘a beautiful and champaign [sic] country of very considerable extent and great fertility’ had been discovered, which ‘will at no distant period prove a source of infinite benefit to this colony’ [43]. The Governor commissioned settler William Cox to oversee construction of a four metre wide dirt track across the mountains into this ‘champaign country’ and, upon

its completion, proclaimed the colony's first inland town, which he named for his imperial boss, the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies [33,44]. Over the next few years Cox's road became a busy stock route as land-hungry pastoralists, or 'Squatters', drove their cattle and sheep into Wiradjuri territory to occupy hundreds of thousands of hectares of prime grazing land.

When Surveyor-General John Oxley led the first government-sponsored expedition beyond the frontier depot at Bathurst in 1817 he found already-old cattle tracks some 80–90 miles further inland [56], in country he evocatively described as 'diversified pleasure grounds irregularly laid out and planted' [41].

Although Oxley didn't connect the many fires he saw with the indigenous land management strategies with which these 'diversified pleasure grounds' had been created, he did meet the indigenous land managers themselves; indeed, he depended on the Wiradjuri for their knowledge of the country he was passing through and, like other explorers, he documented his encounters in much the same way that the functionaries of the Roman conquest of Europe described the Celtic and Germanic tribes. On May 5, for example, somewhere near the Lachlan River, his expedition

... fell in with a small tribe of natives, consisting of eight men; their women we did not see. They did not appear any way alarmed at the sight of us, but came boldly up: they were covered with cloaks made of opossum skins; their faces daubed with a red and yellow pigment, with neatly worked nets bound round their hair: the front tooth in the upper row was wanting in them all: they were unarmed, having nothing with them but their stone hatchets. It appeared from their conduct that they had either seen or heard of white people before, and were anxious to depart, accompanying the motion of going with a wave of their hand [42].

Oxley followed the Lachlan River and explored some of its tributaries, including Gunningbland Creek, but not far from the site of our farm he encountered impenetrable wetlands and was forced to retreat [6]. By the time his successor, Major Thomas Livingston Mitchell, surveyed the same general territory in March 1835 the Lachlan and its tributaries, including our little creek, were fully colonised. Mitchell reported that 'In no district have I seen cattle so numerous as all along the Lachlan; and notwithstanding the very dry season, they were nearly all in good condition' [37].

5. Song of the future: the man on the ten dollar note

Decades later the man whose face now adorns Australia's ten dollar note, bush poet, solicitor, journalist and grazier, A.B. 'Banjo' Patterson, who was himself raised on a pastoral property in Wiradjuri country, piously eulogised the 'hardy pioneers' who drove their stock across the Blue Mountains in the first half of the nineteenth century:

Upon the Western slope they stood
 And saw—a wide expanse of plain
 As far as eye could stretch or see
 Go rolling westward endlessly.

The native grasses, tall as grain,
 Were waved and rippled in the breeze;
 From boughs of blossom-laden trees
 The parrots answered back again.
 They saw the land that it was good,
 A land of fatness all untrod,
 And gave their silent thanks to God [2].

But what actually happened in the ‘land of fatness’ along Gunningbland Creek in the years between Oxley and Mitchell’s visits remains generally undocumented. The Wiradjuri most certainly resisted the Squatters’ invasion with ‘sporadic guerrilla attacks’ [29], as they did elsewhere in what have since become known as the Wiradjuri Wars [39], and the Squatters and their stockmen and shepherds would have responded with retaliatory and punitive violence, as they did elsewhere in the colony. Many of the Wiradjuri may also have succumbed to introduced diseases, such as smallpox, measles, influenza and syphilis, even before the pastoralists arrived with their livestock [30]. Not all the Squatters were violent, however, and many Wiradjuri, including women, negotiated accommodating relationships with the invaders to become part of the pastoral industry themselves, although, given the racist narratives that defined Britain’s imperial project in New South Wales, as in other parts of the former empire, those relationships remained profoundly unequal.

6. A pardoned convict and his cattle run

By the mid-1830s the Squatters, who were by now the wealthiest and most powerful group in colonial society, were demanding security of tenure over the vast tracts of the inland they had illegally occupied. The colonial legislature responded with the *Crown Lands Unauthorized Occupation Acts* 1836–1838, also known as the Squatters’ Acts, which instituted a form of licensing of pastoral runs [10,46]. The land my family now occupies formally entered the historic record at this time. It was part of Burrawang Run licensed by the colonial government on behalf of Britain’s Queen Victoria to a Thomas Kite, a man who arrived in the colony in chains.

Kite was transported to the penal colony of New South Wales in 1813 having been convicted the previous year of stealing five pounds from his employer in London. He was conditionally pardoned in 1818 by Governor Lachlan Macquarie and awarded one of the earliest land grants west of the Blue Mountains: 50 acres of river frontage near Bathurst, plus one convict servant, one cow, four bushels of seed wheat, and a town allotment of two acres. Kite acquired many pastoral holdings in inland New South Wales, as well as valuable real estate in Bathurst and Sydney, and at the time of his death in 1876 he was one of the wealthiest men in the colony [21,36,57,60].

7. Inscribing ‘Progress’ upon the land

Despite the colonial government’s best efforts to break the power of Squatters by ‘throwing open’ the land they had ‘locked up’ to smaller investors Burrawang Station still

covered 520,000 acres (227,000 hectares) north of the Lachlan River in 1866. The property remained relatively undeveloped until 1873 when it was purchased by Thomas Edols, however. Over the next few decades the new owner inscribed Burrawang with all his favourite Enlightenment narratives of ‘Progress’ and domination. Edols’ workers cleared the native vegetation, drained the wetlands, put up fences, sunk wells, excavated dams, constructed one of the colony’s largest shearing sheds and a wool-wash, dug irrigation channels and ‘landscaped’ Gunningbland Creek to create an ornamental lake, beside which they built their boss a magnificent homestead and gardens, along with a self-contained village for (white?) station staff and their families [17]. Somewhere out of site there would also have been camps for the Chinese workers who ring-barked 50,000 acres of ‘virgin’ woodland on Burrawang, as well as a ‘blacks’ camp’, a collection of bark and corrugated iron ‘humpies’ where the station’s Wiradjuri workers would have lived [24], although the Wiradjuri and their ‘humpies’ have since been ‘whited-out’ of the station’s history.

The scale of production Edols achieved was impressive. In 1884 Burrawang Station shore 270,000 merino sheep and sent a record 5000 bales of wool by bullock dray to the railhead at Bathurst, over 200 kilometres away, for example. From Bathurst the wool was hauled by steam train a further 200 kilometres across the Blue Mountains to the docks at Sydney for its long sea voyage to England’s woollen mills [9,18,19].

8. ‘Pioneer’ stories and their outcomes

Thomas Edols and his family resisted all attempts by colonial authorities to subdivide Burrawang for closer settlement, but by the early twentieth century the station’s half a million acres had been whittled down, and new generations of independent ‘yeoman farmers’ were fencing, clearing, ploughing and sowing their subdivided blocks, or ‘selections’, with cereal crops, and grazing their own small mobs of sheep and cattle. These ‘selectors’ are now celebrated in local narratives as ‘pioneers’, the people who developed the district and made it what it is today. But as a result of their efforts, and the ongoing labours of their descendants and more recent settlers, including my family, Gunningbland Creek, an insignificant seasonal stream in inland New South Wales, has become yet another Australian setting for the global holocaust biologists have designated ‘the sixth major extinction event in the history of life’ [5,59].

In the 170 years since the invasion and colonisation of the Wiradjuri homeland our creek, and the lowland river system it is part of, has become so degraded that, in 2004, the NSW Fisheries Scientific Committee [40] nominated ‘all natural rivers, creeks, streams and associated lagoons, billabongs, lakes, wetlands, paleochannels, floodrunners, effluent streams ... and the floodplains of the Lachlan River’ as an endangered aquatic ecological community under the NSW Fisheries Management Act 1994. In the Committee’s view this ecological community is ‘likely to become extinct in nature, unless the circumstances and factors threatening its survival cease to operate’ [14].

The ‘circumstances and factors’ threatening the survival of the indigenous biodiversity of our creek and its river system include land clearance; dams, levee banks and causeways; reduced seasonal inundation of wetlands; water extraction and regulation; nutrient

pollution; deterioration of water quality; grazing; loss of aquatic plants; removal of snags and other woody debris; and introduced species, such as the European carp [15]. And yes, my clan, with its long pastoral and agricultural heritage, has been complicit in all these processes—except, perhaps, the introduction of the European carp!

The threatened extinction of the aquatic ecological community of Gunningbland Creek and its river is only part of the cost we are all now paying for Thomas Kite's profits in the mid-nineteenth century, Thomas Edols' record-breaking 5000 bales of wool towards the end of that century, and for all the wheat, wool and other commodities that were produced on this floodplain in the twentieth century. Other 'externalities' include the loss of 90% of native vegetation in the central sheep/wheatbelt of New South Wales [20]; the extinction or decline of fauna species because of habitat destruction; the loss of topsoil (for every tonne of wheat produced, an estimated 13 tonnes of topsoil is lost [55]; and the extensive dryland salinity associated with land clearance and other Euro-Australian farming practices in the Murray-Darling Basin [54]. The pastoral and agricultural industries, as we now know them, threaten the evolutionary possibilities and survival of all but the most resilient of native species, like grey teal ducks; and therefore they threaten us, because, like the teals, we humans also depend on the 'services' healthy ecological communities provide. Unless we change the way we produce food and fibre the twenty-first century will be seen by future generations as one long extinction event.

9. Back to the grindstone: interrogating the present

That the ways we now produce food and fibre are reducing the evolutionary possibilities of life on Earth and threatening humanity's wellbeing is not a fresh revelation. The evidence has been accumulating for the past 50 years, the span of my life, and when I think of the blindness, greed and apathy that has allowed, and continues to allow, this ecocide to occur, I sometimes despair. But then I remember the grindstone I found embedded in Gunningbland Creek, the Wiradjuri women who left it there, and the 'rituals of well being' they enacted to propitiate and nurture the species that were part of their world. Their stone still glows with its 'afterlife' [25] for me and challenges me with new questions. Can we, in all humility, and in the spirit of reconciliation, learn now from the Wiradjuri women and their descendants to perform our own twenty-first century 'rituals of well being' with which we can restore the ecological communities of Gunningbland Creek to their former health? Can we connect with the native biodiversity of the creek and its floodplain, as the Wiradjuri women did, to transform the current oil-dependent grid of farms into a 'nourishing terrain', a 'dynamic mosaic of ecosystems'? Can we replace wheat, oats and barley with native perennials, such as the wallaby grasses (*Austrodanthonia* spp) or spear grasses (*Austrostipa*), for example, and 'farm' with fire-sticks and other appropriate technologies instead of ploughs, herbicides and insecticides; and can we raise kangaroos, bustards and emus, the species that have co-evolved with the grasslands, wetlands and woodlands of the inland, instead of exotic ruminants? Can we re-plant and 'de-fragment' remnant bushland into a continuous maze of habitat corridors to allow species to migrate in response to climate change? Can we revegetate the creek's riparian zone and restore the water channels? Can we rehabilitate wetlands with the full

complement of species the Wiradjuri women knew, those same wetlands John Oxley documented in 1817? Can the broader Australian society support rural people to do this on privately owned land, and can we do it quick enough, and in full acknowledgement that the path we have taken over the last 170 years leads only to further degradation, species extinction and the slow decline of rural towns and villages? Can we? And more importantly, will we?

10. New narratives, new possibilities

New stories acknowledging the impacts of the invasion and colonisation on both the indigenous peoples and on the land we settler-descendants now share with them are at last being told in rural Australia. As Phil Sullivan, a Nguyampaa man from the town of Bourke on the Darling River, west of the Wiradjuri homeland, says:

It's important for you and me to revisit the past together and learn from it. But we cannot go back, we must just learn and move on. We must all, black and white, look back together and learn [52].

Phil Sullivan is a yellowbelly man. The fish I used to catch as a kid in Gunningbland Creek is his *tingah* (roughly translated as 'totem'), and he draws deep spiritual sustenance from this relationship. He also acknowledges the great responsibility he bears for the wellbeing of the species and its habitat:

It's about looking after everything. Especially that's associated with ... the yellowbelly. I have to look after the fish, the water, the reeds, everything to do with that fish. [53]

Sullivan's holistic 'looking after everything' approach to his relationship with his *tingah* parallels some of the 'sustainability' narratives that are now being inscribed into the landscape along Gunningbland Creek and its river [7,32]. These new stories can be read from the eucalypts, casuarinas and myalls my brothers and I have planted in an attempt to restore the riparian vegetation, for example; from the trees that have regenerated naturally where land has been fenced off from livestock; and from the few precious still-uncleared paddocks that are now functioning as sanctuaries for the district's endangered and threatened species. 'Sustainability' narratives are also driving contemporary interest in native perennial grasses, bush foods, low-tillage farming, alley farming (growing crops in 'alleys' between stands of native vegetation); and mass plantings of native species as windbreaks and in areas affected by dryland salinity [11]. These new narratives are also driving the State government's land-clearance reforms.

11. The default scenario

But it's not enough. The rehabilitation and conservation attempted so far will not ensure the survival of the now-endangered ecological communities of Gunningbland Creek and other inland streams and rivers, let alone restore them to anything near what they once

were—which means that the future Stephen M. Meyer and others foresee might yet be fulfilled along Gunningbland Creek, as it will be elsewhere on the planet:

Nothing—not national or international laws, global bioreserves, local sustainability schemes, nor even “wildlands” fantasies—can change the current course. The path for biological evolution is now set for the next million years. And in this sense “the extinction crisis”—the race to save the composition, structure, and organization of biodiversity as it exists today—is over, and we have lost [38].

Call me Romantic, call me naïve, but, damn it, I don’t want to believe this scenario. I want to believe that future generations will be able to watch the sun rise over mosaic fields of native grasses, catch yabbies, yellowbelly and catfish in Gunningbland Creek for many thousands of years more. And I want to believe that we who live now will ensure that they can:

We live out our lives, both individually and in our relationships with each other, in the light of certain conceptions of a possible shared future in which certain possibilities beckon us forward and others repel us... There is no present which is not informed by some image of some future [35].

Or, as on Gunningbland Creek, also by some image of the past.

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