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A return to the land

Abstract:

In his 2002 Australia Day address, author and ecologist Tim Flannery said Australians could only become a 'true people' by developing 'deep, sustaining roots in the land'. He said the land was 'the only thing that we all, uniquely, share in common. It is at once our inheritance, our sustenance, and the only force ubiquitous and powerful enough to craft a truly Australian people.'

This paper will explore how landscape in Australian literature has moved from being a source of anxiety and distrust into one of redemption. By examining themes within the popular novels *Dirt Music* (2001) by Tim Winton, *The Broken Shore* (2005) by Peter Temple, *The World Beneath* (2009) by Cate Kennedy and referencing early writers Barbara Baynton and Henry Lawson, I will discuss how this shift is taking place and what it means for the rediscovery of Australian literature through the lens of landscape and Flannery's vision.

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In 1790 Watkin Tench, first officer with the first fleet and a member of the fledgling British colony wrote of his experience in Sydney:

Here on the summit of the hill, every morning from daylight until sun sunk, did we sweep the horizon in hope of seeing a sail. At every fleeting speck which arose from the bosom of the sea, the heart pounded and a telescope lifted to the eye... (n.p.).

This yearning for the mother country, this palpable homesickness, is evident in Tench's account from the very beginning of settlement. Two years earlier, after watching the remaining fleet leave for supplies he lamented, 'sequestered and cut off as we were from the rest of civilised nature, their [the ships] absence carried the effect of desolation' (Tench 2009/1803).

For over 200 years this sentiment of anxiety has pervaded Australian literature in varying degrees. In *Seven Little Australians* (Turner 2003/1894) the heroine Judy is killed by a falling gum, Clarke's 'Pretty Dick' (Clarke in Pierce 1999/1869) dies a pitiful death in the bush, three school girls go mysteriously missing in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Lindsay 2009/1967) a girl's potential is thwarted in the mind numbing bush in *My brilliant career* (Franklin 2011/1901), the beloved Maluka dies in *We of the Never Never* (Gunn 2008/1908) and The Missus returns to the city broken hearted.

'The bush is sad, heavy, despairing; delightful for a month, perhaps, but terrible for a year' writes Edward Dyson in his 1898 short story, '*The Conquering Bush*' (Dyson, as cited in Cantrell 1977). Australian authors Henry Lawson and Barbara Baynton captured this vision of fatality and powerlessness of the white Australian population through a series of stories that still resonate today. But despite the enduring power of their works, there has been a change in the last 20 years, a subtle shift in contemporary Australian writing toward a more accepting and appreciative attitude toward the Australian landscape. Tim Flannery called for this change in his 2002 address as Australian of the Year when he stressed the urgent need for Australians to develop 'deep and sustaining roots in the land'. This was the only way, he claimed, that Australians could only become a 'true people' (2002).

I suggest that this shift had already begun in our literature. The Australian landscape in literature has not changed. Despite the settler's best efforts, Australia has not yet become Shropshire or Kent. Still wild and unpredictable, the land can be as cruel and mundane as it was in Baynton's or Lawson's world. However, the key characters who inhibit this landscape have changed and their attitudes demonstrate a greater respect for 'the bush'.

It is as if in contemporary Australian literature, we are beginning to glimpse what it is about the land that Indigenous people have known for thousands of years, that 'great Aboriginal tenant...that the land does not belong to you but that you belong to the land' (Winton 2004).

In this paper, I take the novels *Dirt Music* (2001) by Tim Winton, *The World Beneath* (2009) by Cate Kennedy and the *Broken Shore* (2005) by Peter Temple to demonstrate how this shift is taking place, but first it is necessary to revisit earlier

Australian literature to examine how the themes of anxiety and distrust existed and how this narrative has shifted to a vision that is closer to the one raised by Flannery.

'Few have equalled him: none has yet excelled him. His achievement remains unique' (Franklin 1942). When Miles Franklin paid tribute to the memory of her fellow writer, Henry Lawson, her praise was absolute. But like Franklin herself, the bush of Henry Lawson's Australia was no romantic fancy. Lawson's unique achievement, was perhaps most wholly to portray the country as it was: harsh and dry, 'barren', raw', 'parched' and scenery that 'looks better when the darkness hides it', 'everything damp, dark and unspeakably dreary' (Lawson 1990/1888-1922), ravaged by devastating floods, droughts, fire and populated by a people who were fighting and failing.

Brought up in a poor family on the goldfields of Grenfell, NSW, Lawson's early observations of hardened characters eking out a living on the land served him well for the remainder of his career. Lawson's central character in *The Selector's daughter* (2004/1901) wails, 'Oh if only I could go away from the bush!' but instead she is forced to remain there by a drunken father and an abusive stepmother. In the end, succumbing to despair, she leaps to her death from a granite cliff. In *the Union Buries its dead* (1990/1893) Lawson imagines a town of drunkards, thieves and no hopers who try in vain to pull themselves together for the funeral of a young man, an unknown Union member. But in this, like everything, they fail. Humanity escapes them and the landscape offers no respite, the dry clods of Darling River earth rebound and knock against the coffin and the funeral takes place 'exactly at midday' under the blinding, relentless Australian sun. There is no evidence of mateship or unity here. No evidence of beauty, 'I have left out the wattle – because it wasn't there' (Lawson 1990/1893: 28) and no evidence of hope, 'It didn't matter much – nothing does' (Lawson 1990/1893: 29).

The Bush Undertaker (Lawson 1990/1892) reveals a Shepard gone mad in the bush. After digging up the bones of an Aboriginal with little remorse or respect, he finds the body of his old mate 'Brummy', another shepherd and he goes about trying to bury him. In his addled mind he forgets his prayers and tries in vain to remember what the purpose of life is, 'nothin matters now – nothing did ever matter, nor – nor don't' (Lawson 1990/1892: 17). There is no room for spirituality in Lawson's land.

In *The Drover's Wife* (1990/1892) later inspired by artwork by Russel Drysdale and parodied by Murray Bail, Lawson writes for every Australian woman left by herself in the bush. It is a hard fate, a battle that the worn out wife and mother, despite her efforts against the elements and opportunistic swagmen, is doomed to fail. The pitiless image of her and the children taking a 'Sunday walk' in the bush to try to capture some element of normalcy and the civilisation she yearns for is pathetic. Stewart (as cited by Pierce 2014) points to 'the hardness of things' in Lawson's writing and vision of Australia. This hardness extends not only to the land, with its harsh light and useless soil but to the failing characters who inhabit it.

Lawson's fondness for the eccentric minds, the weird and 'much that is different from things in other lands' does not extend to the bush. The land offers his 'eccentric minds' no respite from the 'maddening sameness'.

In *The Chosen Vessel* (2012/1902) Barbara Baynton offers an alternative story to the Drover's Wife. In this story the itinerant tramp is a rapist who stalks and murders her. The bush takes on a sinister character in Baynton's stories. Like the men who inhabit it, it is unfamiliar and frightening. In desperation, the young mother flees with her child into the bush to try to escape but she is caught there and brutally killed. A passing religious man mistakes her for a holy apparition and rides on, leaving her to her fate. Once again, like Lawson, the land and spirituality offers no respite.

In *Squeaker's Mate* (2012/1902) a gum tree renders the mate, a woman (nameless, like the Drover's Wife) crippled. She is then left at the mercy of her partner, the cowardly Squeaker. In dying, Moore (1986) claims that the crippled woman grows closer to the bush as a vehicle for understanding her doomed plight. But the knowledge provides her no comfort. She dies a pitiless and lonely death.

The contemporary landscapes in Cate Kennedy's *The World Beneath* (2009), Peter Temple's *The Broken Shore* (2005) and Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* (2001) are just as harsh as the bush that Lawson and Baynton paint. Kennedy's 'World Beneath' is Tasmania, and the wilderness of the Cradle mountain national park. Even with its duckboards, its signposting and the presence of rangers the bush walk remains a treacherous proposition for the vain Richard and his estranged daughter Sophie.

Temple's landscape is the wild coast of South Western Victoria. Jagged cliffs and an icy sea are the alternate settings of suicide and teenage longing. Vicious winds batter the countryside and force trees sideways. It is '...a lonely and melancholy place that encapsulates the nature and spirit of those broken souls who eke out their existence in its shadow' (West-Sooby 2014). The parallels here between Temple and Lawson are obvious.

Western Australia from the South West Coast to the Kimberley is the setting for Winton's *Dirt Music*. The land is untamed, uncaring and oblivious to its characters hopes and fears. Time nor human intervention has tamed the land. 'The ground is hot and stony and the spinifex sharp. The country is riven with washouts and escarpments. Trees are sparse and their shade miserly' (Winton 2001: 423).

The characters too, while more modernised and educated are still in despair and prone to violence. Like those depicted by Baynton and Lawson, Australian contemporary literature is filled with damaged characters, relationship breakdowns, mental illness, inertia, injured and grieving, the Australian characters exude as much pain and anxiety as those in earlier times. Bennett (2002) goes so far as to suggest that that Winton's characters are to some degree 'the legatees of Lawson's bush men and women.' Certainly, the inhabitants of Port Munro and White Point, Temple and Winton's depressed sea side towns are not unlike that town depicted in Lawson's *The Union Buries its dead*. These towns are on the brink of social disintegration. Thieves, drunkards, sexism, greed and the undercurrent of violence abound. 'Surfers, dope heads, deviants, dreamers – even lobster molls like herself – sensed that the town was a dog' (Winton 2001: 18).

Temple describes the hard bitten characters of his South West town in *The Broken Shore*:

...but the year had turned, May had come, the ice-water rain, the winds that scoured skin, and just the hard-core left – the unemployed, under-employed, unemployable, the drunk and doped, the old age pensioners, people on all kinds of welfare, the halt, the lame (Temple 2005: 59).

Temple's 'Cashin' is a policeman recovering from a broken marriage and an horrific attack by Melbourne criminal Rai Sarris. His back and legs ache, his head pounds. He thinks he has a son, he grieves for him. His father committed suicide, his brother attempts. Cashin, is broken in every sense of the word (Knight 2011).

Kennedy, in *The World Beneath* (2009) chronicles the vain and superior attitudes of the middle class and the careless way they raise their children in the consequent breakdown of their relationships. 'Rich' is vain, shallow and depressed. A contract worker in advertorials, he picks up women carelessly and muses how easy his life has become: 'Men in their forties, Rich had decided, had never had it so good' (Kennedy 2009: 35).

But his life is a farce. Estranged from his daughter, lonely and a failure at photography, he dreams of the one place where he fantasised that he helped to make a difference, the wilds of Tasmania.

The main character in *Dirt Music*, Fox Luther is perhaps the most damaged of them all. The lone survivor among his family after an horrific car accident, he is vilified by the town as a bad luck curse and the thief he has become. Hounded from White Point by the menacing figure of Jim Buckridge, he flees to the wilderness of the Kimberley where he lives as close to nature as is possible in this age; his maps are burnt, he becomes lost, lives off the land, plays with sharks for company, almost starves, becomes lame and in his reconnection to the land, is healed.

And here is the real shift in literature, the damaged in contemporary Australian novels go to the land to heal. Unlike the 'Missus' in Gunn's autobiographical novel *We of the Never Never* (2008/1908), the Woolcot family in *Seven Little Australians* (Turner 2003/1894) and the schoolgirls and Lindsay's staff in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (2009/1967) Luther and Cashin do not move or return to the city and the safety of a manufactured landscape after trauma and in grief. It is instead, the land they turn to.

There is much evidence in medical research to show the link between contact with nature and wellness (Greenleaf, Bryant & Pollock 2013). What we know anecdotally is known to be based in fact; exposure to nature can help to minimise stress (Kaplan 1995; Hull & Michael 1994). What is more surprising perhaps, is that it can even reduce pain and accelerate healing (Lechtzin et al.2010; Ulrich 1984). In an era when human beings live increasingly urbanised and indoor lifestyles, the importance of contact with nature is increasingly being emphasised by those in the medical profession (Greenleaf, Bryant & Pollock 2013) as well as some of our most well-known authors in Australia.

Temple's Cashin returns to the South West of his childhood, the 'blue balls' (Temple 2005: 45) coast of biting winds and bare hills to heal, 'Cashin went home, along country roads' (62). He acknowledges the harshness of the land, but recognises its

beauty and is warmed by it, ‘...the hill was lost in morning mist, a damp silence on the land’ (34).

Luther travels up North, to the place where his lover Georgie Jutland dreams of. For Georgie, herself depressed, lonely and bordering on alcoholic – when she sees the place, it is like coming home.

...the moment she saw it Georgie felt that she'd seen it before. It was a great red rock skirted by rainforest.... Georgie couldn't understand this feeling of recognition. It was iconic Australian landscape but not even 20 years of nationalist advertising could account for this sensation. It even smelt right, as familiar as the back of her arm, like a place she came to every night in her sleep (Winton 2001: 208).

Rich returns to Tasmania, the scene of his imagined former glory when he was present at the protest of the Franklin Dam. But he finds no glory there. Instead he finds brutal conditions and in his growing exhaustion he is finally forced to recognise the vain and shallow man he has become.

Martin (2006) is conscious of the move toward a more positive response by Australian writers to the land. She cites (among others) Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus* (1998) and Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* (2000) and suggests that, with the emerging emphasis on the gum tree in Australian literature that there could be a growing shift from the traditional understanding of national identity into one more aligned with environmental and indigenous concerns. But while she swiftly rejects this assertion with the suggestion that ‘...the dominant current manifestation of the eucalypt is taxonomical’ (2006), it is evident that an emerging strain of Australian writers are focussing on landscape as a force for redemption rather than despair. Winton (2001) is conscious of this need for white naming as a reinforcement of colonial authority and addresses this by choosing to have his Aboriginal character Axle destroy the map that Luther relies on. ‘Go on the country’ says the boy, almost pacified now. Not on the map’ (Winton 2001: 301). ‘Going on the country’ no longer means a sure trail to despair as it once did in Australian literature.

It is, after all not the land’s fault that human beings suffer within it:

The bush itself was not absorbing, consuming or capricious. These are imaginary constructions for the landscape which attend a long history of white settlement (Schaffer 1989).

Luther’s mother dies, like Judy in *Seven Little Australians* (2003/1894) and the woman in *Squeaker’s mate* (2012/1902) from a fallen branch – ‘there she is in the end, with a tree through her’ (Winton 2001: 361), but despite Luther acknowledging that he has felt the force of the earth’s fury ‘How often has he felt that bite in a slamming gust of wind’ (361), he does not blame the land. Instead, it offers him refuge. Rose in ‘Nourishing Terrains’ (1996) suggests that ‘Country is a place that gives and receives life’ and it is in this state of deep awareness that Luther comes to know peace.

Where the ‘fine red dust’ seeping into the eyes and hair of the girls in Lindsay’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (2009/1967: 16) represents an insidious infiltration of the untamed bush, the dirt in *Dirt Music* is the force of redemption. Georgie eats it to gain a

connection to Luther and place, Luther himself is increasingly immersed in it and Cashin and Sophie (Kennedy 2009) trudge about in it, moments of peace in their troubled lives. For Sophie, the chronic nail biter, anorexic and anxious daughter of Rich and Sandy, the bush in itself is a revelation. Prior to the wilderness, Sophie had been ‘like a sleepwalker, blinking and bewildered’ (Kennedy 2009: 298), but now, like other non-Indigenous characters in contemporary Australian literature, she has come to the vital understanding that she is a minute cog a ‘speck’ in the vast emptiness of the land:

It was like discovering a world beneath the other world, holding you carelessly in its inconceivable fist. A world which showed you the underneath of everything with such supreme indifference that it squeezed the breath out of you (Kennedy 2009: 332).

Rich finally comes to understand that the notion of fame is nothing in terms of relationships or the world. He is reduced to a wreck in the wilderness ‘some old vagrant’ and imagines he is nothing but food for vultures. His final act of throwing away the spools of film on which his career could balance is a defining moment. It is the same act of burning a map in *Dirt Music*, of defying the white urge to label, name and place everything.

Luther comes to recognise that he is, like Sophie, just a ‘speck’, but an important one nonetheless. He is a speck that makes up the country, the world the universe. And this is his comfort, his salvation. ‘He knows he lives and that the world lives in him. And for him and beside him. Because and despite and regardless of him’ (Winton 2001: 309).

Winton in an interview with Ben-Messahel (2012) for Antipodes reflects Luther’s thoughts in his own vision of the relationship with human kind and nature:

Recognizing that you are not the central spinning dance of atoms within the universe is an important first step toward wisdom, wouldn’t you think? Appreciating the fact that all life-human and non-human is entwined, interdependent, fragile and finite is part of that. This is the great challenge of our species in time I think (9).

Characters like Fox Luther, Cashin, Rich and Sophie are beginning to develop ‘deep and sustaining roots in the land’ (2002), and their connection is an extension of the authors’ desire for Australians to share their own and Flannery’s vision for Australia. Richards (2009) agrees with this in terms of Winton, but it is not only Winton’s writing that reflects this new view of the country. Kennedy, Temple and others briefly mentioned here such as Murray Bail (1998) and Kate Grenville (2000) recognise this vision too.

In Australia, the bush can’t hear you scream, but perhaps it doesn’t matter. The land does not care for individuals but if we pay attention to it, appreciate its scale and power then we can begin to understand our place within it.

The telescope through which Tench and his fellow white settlers searched in vain across the seas for help and escape is being turned now, to their and our own landscape; and in peering at the bush through new and more appreciative eyes, the descendants of Tench may finally see themselves.

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