

RESTORATION, RECOVERY, RENEWAL

Bruce Pascoe

IN A DIFFERENT summer to this, I was given *Green Mountain*, a book by Bernard O'Reilly. The essence of the story was a brave search into the rugged wilderness of South-East Queensland for a crashed airplane. For bushwalkers it is soul food, but it was written around the 1920s, at a time when the absence of Aboriginal people in the landscape – or in prose – was typically Australian. These were the stories that were told back then.

I'd had earlier experience with the stories Australia tells itself. As a schoolboy on King Island I hadn't known where to stand or look when other boys in the playground told a story about burying babies in the sand and kicking their heads off like footballs. Of course these babies were black and presumably their mothers had been raped and shot – or shot and raped – moments before.

The kids had probably received this story with attendant mirth from their fathers; they were quite possibly stories about deeds conducted by their grandfathers. A lot of those kids were from families who came to the island as children of miners, but that just emphasises the predominance of this attitude across the continent.

Australia has to acknowledge these histories but a national flagellation and purging means nothing unless we also act on the Christian principles on which we say our national morality is built. If we were to follow six of the ten commandments – about honouring elders, theft, adultery, covetousness and so on – and put aside the other four about God's ego, the history of the world would be completely different and many Indigenous civilisations would remain intact.

I can't see that a country can say a prayer before the resumption of its parliament and also believe in a Walt Disney version of the past. But it's not just the history; it is the commerce and religion upon which the nation is built. The Christian religion promoted the idea of conquest and obliteration of Indigenous peoples. The papal bull of 1493, the Doctrine of Discovery, called for colonisation of other people's houses, and allowed its troops to believe they were worthy husbands and fathers. It is that papal bull that allowed Australian men to kick the heads of babies, convinced that the babies deserved nothing else.

But Australians, as a regiment of soldiers of the bull, didn't just reserve their disdain for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; they saw the land through the same lens of contempt.

When the bloodwoods flower at this time of year at Mallacoota, I remember the man who loaned me his copy of *Green Mountain*. He died in this season, and at his funeral we collected armfuls of the blossoms to remember him. But there is a section in that book that speaks to the very heart of Western culture's hatred of the earth. O'Reilly's family cleared stolen land by cutting a scarf, a v-shaped notch, at the base of all the trees on a hillside. They then climbed to the top of the hill and felled the uppermost trees onto the scarfed trees in what is called a drive. The ridgetop trees collapse onto the ones below them and the whole forest goes down like a set of dominoes. Most of the timber is wasted and subsequently burnt because it is nearly impossible to recover. But the Christian settler has achieved his land. Don Watson, in his great book *The Bush*, tells a story of his own family using exactly the same technique to clear land in South Gippsland, Victoria. The whole forest is wasted so that the family can grow spuds but, of course, the soils on the suddenly naked and defiled hillsides washed into the rivers and out into the waters of Western Port Bay.

There is enormous labour involved in this operation; it is truly heroic in scale and commitment. Australian art and literature lauds this as the work of heroes, but the wealth of the land is not created by this gargantuan effort, it is consumed by it – and the land's capital, the soil, eventually bleeds into the sea.

The pioneer sheep ate the Aboriginal crops of lilies, orchids and yams and, so rich was the diet that the sheep had two lambs every year. The colonists were lauded as geniuses but the incredible tilth of the soil, by the admission of other settlers who recorded the history of their farms, was hammered into a hard and water-resistant pan and as a result floods were inaugurated in those areas of Australia.

Both flood and drought were phenomena to which Aboriginal people adjusted; they knew it as part of the climate and had lived here for over 120,000 years – this date is from a site in Warrnambool on the Victorian coastline – so were aware of oscillations. Sometimes there was more rain, sometimes less. It was a fact of life, and that attitude of compliance and respect allowed us to survive many climate variations.

When I was a boy, my father showed me Don Watson's South Gippsland bush. As part of the Soldier Settler scheme the land was being cleared by two giant machines towing a massive steel ball between them. The destruction was awesome, and out of the churned earth rose famous south Gippsland earthworms, some as large as pythons. Many of them had been cut in half. Those worms were the engines of the soil – but, naturally, they are now a threatened species and their capacity to aerate and improve the wet clays of Gippsland is disappearing.

As a boy, I gaped in astonishment at the scale of the destruction.

Later Dad showed me the same machine operating on the mallee forests of north-western Victoria. The only difference was the speed of the operation; it was faster in the flat Mallee. In the same decade I watched the Mallee soil blow across our home in the northern Melbourne suburb of Fawkner. The genius of the Australian agricultural method had turned our topsoil into a cloud destined to destroy the fishery of Port Phillip Bay.

When Europeans first invaded Australia, it was common for them to comment on the verdant grasslands and gardens of the country. Few acknowledged – and most probably couldn't conceive – that these features had been created by Aboriginal agricultural methods.

Many of them, however, noticed the sudden deterioration in the colonial landscape and its soils after their arrival. The blasted sand deserts of Henry Lawson's western New South Wales, the home of the unemployed swaggies – many of whom were unemployed farm workers – had been ridden through a few decades earlier by Sir Thomas Mitchell. He reported that the grass was above his horses' saddles and that in some places his party rode through nine miles of hay ricks, obvious evidence of an agriculture.

Mitchell's fellow 'explorers' referred to it as being like an English field of harvest. That none of us learnt about this in our education is a breathtaking obscuration of colonial history – the sleight of hand of those curriculum designers requires its own Royal Commission.

The important thing to consider is that this is what our country was like, verdant and productive. And the agent of that productivity, apart from Mother Earth herself, was Aboriginal labour and ingenuity. The ingenuity was based on long and careful observation of the continent's qualities, a study Europeans were too impatient and contemptuous to allow.

IT HAS TAKEN me a long time to get over the events of last summer but I knew that we would all have to learn from it. In some places the fires detonated like a bomb laying the land to waste. But then there was nothing left to burn, and so they moved on. Out at my farm, north of Mallacoota, they were slower and less dangerous and we could fight them, slow them down, save our houses. Many of us feel survivor guilt because of this luck.

But we had a different problem. The fires threatened us for five weeks and we were exhausted by them – after the rains eventually came, many people disappeared for months.

I remember, late one afternoon, retreating from a patch of bush on a ridge as I saw a wind change turn a fire back towards me. I looked at a group of massive trees before I left. This was a remnant of the original Aboriginal forest. The trees were massive, but there were few of them. Somehow the loggers had ignored this patch: perhaps this was because they were mostly angophora and bloodwood. Or it could have been because they were atop a ridge and had been written by the wind, the trunks and limbs twisted into shapes the sawmiller cannot abide.

Anyway, I felt sure I would see these trees the next day even though the fire had begun to roar up the mountain. The trees did survive but all the smaller regrowth forest was smashed; some of it had completely disappeared. The vindication of Aboriginal forest method was self-evident.

I don't like going up there much because there are other memories associated with that time I'd rather not recall. But I do show that patch to young foresters and agriculturalists as I ask them to consider the ability of larger and fewer trees to resist wildfire.

Before the fires of the 2019 to 2020 summer began, the district sat in appalled silence as we waited for them to begin. It had been so dry and hot and now the winds were so fierce; it was inevitable that fire would soon be with us and dry lightning eventually provided the spark.

A few days before they arrived, I stopped at a forestry coup in New South Wales and counted the trees in an acre. There were more than 330 trees in that plot and some patches were even more dense. The Aboriginal forest, depending on the location, had only ten to twelve trees to the acre but those trees were massive. The most crucial thing about the old forest was that fire could not reach the crowns of the trees; they were too big and so spaced that their upper branches never touched.

Older Australians remember their grandfathers and grandmothers talking about this open forest. One told me that his grandfather had ridden between Bairnsdale and Sale in a straight line because the forest was so open.

Since those days almost every hectare of Australia has been logged at least once and some parts dozens of times. And in this current phase of exploitation, many forests are devoted to woodchip production so that we can ship the raw chips to Japan and ship them back as hamburger wrapper.

These forests are usually harvested by one or two people. Sawmill production used to employ dozens of people and the product was preserved as timber, but today the entire forest can be harvested by one man. One machine cuts the tree off at the base and removes its bark and limbs and then loads it onto a truck. It is not Greenies who have cost Australian jobs – we cut more timber now than at any time in the past – but the fact that we are doing it with machines.

Some of these machines have wheels as tall as a church ceiling and each revolution churns a massive trench in the forest. Tonnes of gravel are brought to the surface by this method and decades after a forestry operation that gravel is resistant to the most vigorous plant. The forest is horrible to look at: stumps and sterile soil.

Of course there is legislation meant to prevent this but Australia has looked away as foresters flaunt the acts and agreements. The country is ruined and the exposed gravels are flushed into rivers that become shallow drains.

In some parts of the country a hybrid bluegum was grown. The results were phenomenal, the growth rates impressive. But the vigour of the plant robbed the soil of so much nutrient that it was impossible to grow a decent second crop. So, there were these stunted forests, and companies sought the quickest way to be rid of them and start again with another piece of genius: they sprayed them with defoliant from the air.

Spraying anything from the air is as accurate as some politicians' assertions, but that is what this country allowed. The same kind of scattergun approach allowed Rio Tinto to blow up a cave full of some of the world's oldest art.

We spray superphosphate from the air too – and with the same level of accuracy – so that defoliants and phosphates end up in our water courses and render streams dead. Blue-green algae is just the most obvious evidence of this method that we label as agricultural and silvicultural efficiency.

The forests in far east Gippsland and southern NSW are still producing young silvertop ash plantations for the woodchip industry, and those forests, with trees roughly two metres apart and their crowns touching, burst into flame on 1 January 2020. Entire forests exploded, leaving behind a field of snow half a metre deep. To produce ash like that you need a fire of an incredibly intense temperature.

Of course, people blamed back burning and national parks for those fires but those tightly packed forests were the real cause. We do need National Parks to allow more burning and we need them to plan for a more open forest. But first and foremost we need to return our forests to people who intend to harvest sawlogs, not woodchips.

The woodchip industry is unsustainable. To ship a tree across the equator in pelletised form and bring it back as a hamburger wrapper would be condemned as impossibly stupid by an eight-year-old, but we adults allow industry and government to do just that. We don't respect forest in this country; we calculate its worth on a Ronald McDonald scale of profit. We are the clowns.

My farm is an old farm where the bush was repeatedly logged. It now sports the same ratio of 200–300 trees to the acre that saw the east coast burn. Our aim is to reduce that number to between ten and twenty large trees. During the process we intend to harvest the thinned trees and turn them into building timber. Will this process be complete in the last ten years of my working life? No, but I hope it is complete in my great-grandchildren's lives. We have to commit ourselves, as a nation, for at least seventy years of forest resurrection.

The shock of the fires has not left our town but afterwards we watched our bush for recovery. The fires had denuded the upper canopy of the forest but we were stunned to see a resurgence of the grasses beneath the burnt trees. Redleg, spargrass and others returned to the forest because they had access to the light and carbon.

It showed us how the old people had designed their forests; fewer trees with a sparse canopy, and food products growing as a ground cover. The grasses and tubers have returned and we can now see the facility Aboriginal people made of the forest prior to the invasion.

We have been growing Aboriginal grains on the farm for two years now – and tubers in a nursery for six – and so we have some experience in these processes. But the fires showed us how things might have been in the past.

The old people would have hand-harvested between the trees, an operation that is far more productive than it sounds because that is exactly how we got the seed for our own crops. We now have confidence that we can have the forest and a crop too. We might need to design a more flexible harvester than the one we use at present, but if Elon Musk can send tourists to Mars then I'm sure even Australia can design a harvester that can crop efficiently in an open forest. After all we did invent the stump-jump plough and the Hills Hoist.

We must learn from the events of last summer and we must resist the temptation to talk in slogans. There is a body of evidence to examine in the eye-witness statements of Australian explorers and pioneers: instead of merely lauding those people as the forgers of our identity, it is time we actually took notice of the country they saw.

Not a harsh desert, not a wilderness but a managed landscape, and so carefully managed that wildfire was prevented.

I pray for summers like that. I pray for a country like that too, a nation where we love and respect our earth rather than wishing she were more like the lands from which the invaders came.

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