

WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE

A GUIDE TO THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN *by* KATE JENNINGS

WHenever I want a dose of crazy, I tune into the tea party mob. The alternative reality crowd. Essence of nutty. Or I read the pronouncements of the Australian Greens, who would be endearing in their prelapsarianism if they didn't have the country by the short and curlies. They seem to want to create an Arcadia or a return to the 1950s and its 'sustainable' population – but with good coffee. An alternative reality crowd at the other end of the spectrum.

Settle down. I insulted the Greens on purpose. Greenish myself. Climate change? Happening. Melting poles, warming oceans. But if I'd started by discussing tillage fractures your attention would have wandered. I also wanted to make a point about insults. If you propose, as Tim Flannery did in the *Age*, that "white Australia's relationship with the bush has been a kind of rape and pillage", subsequent points about agricultural innovations are lost on the audience you want to reach: the rapists and pillagers. Heightening environmental awareness with provocative language will mobilise some. Others, who could potentially agree, grow weary of the posturing on both sides of the climate debate, the endless parade of 'you're either for us or against us' binary pronouncements. Opinionists of every stripe. No room for complexity or solutions, which Australia needs, unless you want to outsource everything that is vaguely polluting and become a NIMBY nation.

The demonising of farmers reached a crescendo this last year when the Murray-Darling Basin Authority's *Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan* was released and a miniscule contingent of angry irrigators, egged on by journalists, burned copies in the streets of Griffith. It was a plan proposing water cuts

that would have, if not outright killed irrigation areas and their towns, at the very least caused them to atrophy, because social and economic factors were not considered. A plan that was assembled without consultation with farmers and scientists from the irrigation areas. A final plan is due in mid November, and it's strongly rumoured we are in for another season of rural outrage. This is not a storm in a teacup: over 2 million people live in the basin, which produces 40% of our agriculture.

I have a dog in the fight because I descend from rapists and pillagers. My father was brought up on a soul-shrivelling soldier-settler farm that had rendered my grandparents almost mute by the time I spent school holidays with them. Farming the unfarmable. At the end of World War II, he went to work for his in-laws in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, where my maternal grandfather was a pioneer. In 1963 my father moved to Coleambally to create a rice farm from what was four surveyor's pegs. If not appalling hardship, then bloody hard work. We don't have to mythologise farmers but we might refrain from condemning them from our armchairs. Australia first embraced irrigation in the 1880s because of droughts and over the last decade, because



Walter Burley Griffin's grand plans for the township of Griffith, c.1920. Courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

of another, has begun rejecting it. With the rains, we can stop being Henny Pennys and start assessing the future less feverishly.

I have another dog in the fight. As I said, I'm Green-ish. That doesn't mean I have to tick all the boxes in a set of beliefs. It's possible to be pro-irrigation and anti-fracking. Even Peter Andrews, the salinity guru, supported irrigation if it was done in the right place. Many farmers are natural environmentalists; they have to be. They are computer and science literate, as modern agriculture requires it. They are more than capable of analysing statistics and dissecting scientific models and knowing when the MDBA is getting it wrong or the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) is fudging facts.

My first thought on reading the proposed Basin Plan was this: Surely, with climate change bringing about food shortages, we should upgrade our irrigation systems, not destroy them. Next thought: What country in its right mind would sacrifice a vibrant rural town such as Griffith? Third thought: How did all of Australia manage overnight to become experts on rice- and cotton-growing?

I call my cousin, Jim Sainty, a barrister and farmer in Griffith. He wasn't sanguine: "This issue has more hairs on it than my foxy Sal." That would be Sally, his fox terrier. I ask Ian Geddes, a town solicitor, what he would say to Penny Wong if he had the water minister's ear: "We've done much to change our methods of irrigating, and there is more we can do." Irrigation has gone through a revolution. Drip tubing, laser-graded rice bays, sophisticated machinery. Run-off water is recycled, the drainage channels are empty. During droughts, water is rationed in New South Wales and priority

is given to vines and fruit trees, not to yearly crops, such as rice. But Geddes isn't sanguine, either, because of bloated bureaucracies that block farmer participation and a scrum of competing interests: federal and state governments, catchment authorities and farming and environmental bodies. "The basin authority is a good idea if it's done right," Geddes says. When the Murray-Darling Basin Authority replaced the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) in 2008, more than a name change was involved: the farmers were shown the door, according to Wayne Meyer, a natural resource science professor at the University of Adelaide. He explains: "We were getting somewhere. The great tragedy is that the MDBA unlearned or forgot or conveniently put aside the lessons learned with a lot of effort by the commission, such as the community consultation programs."

Anyone growing up in the Griffith area knows that a belief in progress is part of our DNA. We embraced science. The CSIRO's irrigation research laboratory, established in Griffith in 1924, was an integral part of our lives, trusted to solve our problems. In my experience, farmers were open to ideas and quick to adapt. Meyer qualifies my memories. He remembers "terse" conversations with Coleambally farmers to persuade them to change their rice-growing methods. Terse because they were being told they couldn't grow rice unless they had clay soil 3 metres deep. High water tables and the attendant salinity convinced doubters, just as the threat of water cuts is now focusing farmers on the benefits of wetlands.

My cousin Jim's father is the botanist Geoff Sainty. Renowned for his expertise on water plants, he has considerable knowledge of wetlands and their restoration. Seventy-seven years old and irrepressibly curious, he's finishing a two-volume opus, to be titled 'Plants in Estuaries in South

East Australia'. An environmentalist to the core, he believes the way to restore ecological life in the basin is to unblock the "tribs": "My interest is in the thousands of unnamed creeks and some of the named ones in all the catchments. The streams need the stock taken off them. The minor farm dams need their capture reduced. The approach should be on a sub-catchment basis. [We need to] stop talking about the Murray-Darling as if it's a single entity."

Griffith residents are grateful for its hybrid vigour. The immigrants who supplied it were Italian. They laboured in the Queensland cane fields and came south to pick fruit, living in spartan barracks. Today, half of Griffith's population has Italian heritage from both North and South Italy. The Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area farmers lived in equally spartan fibro houses. At Coleambally, farmers raised whole

ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS HAVE FIRM CONTROL OF THE NARRATIVE

families in the ends of sheds. Irrigators are accused by the Greens of having a free ride on taxpayer money, a charge that sounds suspiciously like Tea Party rhetoric, but if we were sponging, we weren't living a lush life. By today's standards, we were poor. Importantly, though, we felt prosperous. A true waste of taxpayers' money would be to close down an efficient irrigation area such as Coleambally. I try to imagine what the area would be like if the bulldozers filled in the channels and levelled the bays. And I see a bumper crop of Bathurst burrs and the topsoil heading for Sydney next summer.

With the hairs of Jim's foxy Sal in mind, I set about becoming acquainted with the complexity of the issues. I learned about the restrictive *Water Act 2007*, John Howard's stab at environmental awareness, and the Greens' intransigence on changing it. The root of the problem: the act mandated that a specific amount of water be returned to rivers for environmental use, meaning allotments for irrigation would be slashed. In the case of the Murrumbidgee and Coleambally Irrigation Areas, the figure was 32%. Modelling was used to arrive at the percentages, but models are only as good as the data fed into them, and the MDBA data was faulty to an extreme degree.

I met the appointment of Craig Knowles, former NSW

Labor minister, as the new head of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority in January first with relief and then suspicion. He said the right thing to *everybody*. But I don't envy him. Labor wants to please suburban Adelaide voters. Whatever he does, given the constraints of the *Water Act*, Knowles will have to be Solomonic in his decision-making. Or become the bureaucratic equivalent of Jeffrey Dahmer.

Like the irrigators, I welcomed Independent Tony Windsor's inquiry into the impact of the MDBA's *Guide to the Proposed Basin Plan*, which Windsor states "has no status under the *Water Act 2007*". The report, *Of Drought and Flooding Rains*, published in May, demonstrates an understanding of the issues as well as an abundance of clarity, common sense and compassion.

The Murray-Darling Basin covers over 1 million square kilometres of south-east Australia, 14% of the country. It extends from just north of Carnarvon in Queensland to Goolwa in South Australia and just south of Creswick and Kilmore in Victoria. It comprises 23 river valleys with climactic conditions ranging from rainforest regions, to mallee country, inland subtropical to arid and semi-arid land of the far west.

In other words, enough with the extrapolating. The MDBA was egregiously guilty of this in the *Guide*, projecting from 14 environmental asset sites to all 2442 such sites. Given the variety of catchment areas, the Windsor report questions the wisdom of the draft plan's focus on "end-of-system flow"; that is, the volume of water arriving at the Murray River mouth. The report also asked that all "non-strategic" water buybacks be halted because of the damage they are doing to communities. Hasn't happened.

Paul Pierotti of Caesars, a Griffith furniture store, was the first to state the blindingly obvious: townspeople suffer when water is cut, not just farmers. When we spoke, Pierotti's pride in his family, store and town was transparent – a pride that humbled me. He worries that the farmers haven't been able to broadcast their message. Not for want of trying, but environmental groups have firm control of the 'narrative'. The 'mighty Murray River – lifeblood of the nation' is infinitely more interesting than the complexity of agriculture.

I discuss the narrative and its attending slogans with Andrew Gregson, CEO of the NSW Irrigators' Council. We consider the notion that has taken hold: Big Irrigation, like Big Tobacco. Gregson employs three people. The Australian Conservation Foundation employs 60. Big Enviro, perhaps? Once ideas, even hinky ones, get hold, they have a life of their own. I suggest we have a moratorium on the word

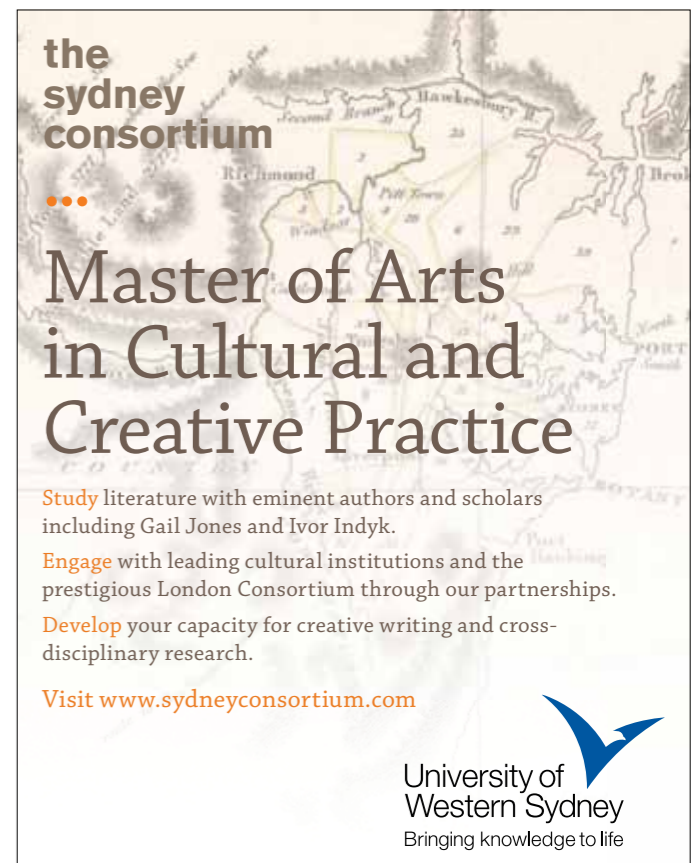
'sustainability'. Gregson would like the same done with 'environment'. They are piffle words that have come to mean everything and nothing.

One key ingredient in the narrative is statistics, which become embedded in the media daisy chain. For example: "Ninety per cent of the basin's floodplain wetlands have been destroyed." Featured prominently on the ACF website, it turns out to apply only to a south-eastern region of South Australia. Austin Evans, a Coleambally engineer, investigated the claim and contacted Arlene Harriss-Buchan, an ACF spokesperson. He also pointed out another gross error on their website: "We remove around 11,500 gigalitres of water from the Murray and Darling Rivers per year, of its average total of about 14,000 gigalitres." In fact, 10,940 gigalitres is diverted out of 32,780 gigalitres. The figures on their website remain unchanged. None of this is to deny that the rivers aren't taxed or wetlands haven't disappeared, but false facts distort decision-making.

I call Harriss-Buchan, who has a mantric solution to the basin's ailments: water has been taken away so let's put it back to make the rivers sweet. However, at the risk of sounding simplistic, you could argue this achieves only two things. Adelaide is provided with fresh water. In dry years, Adelaide gets 90% of its water from the Murray River. If you are cynical, you might conclude that the scientific priority that the MDBA puts on "end-of-system flow" stems from this fact. And the carp will be deliriously happy. The rivers are chockers with them. Unlike that early scourge – rabbits – we can't see carp in their plague numbers and the ecological effects of their ravaging.

Harriss-Buchan opens with a well-rehearsed statement: "We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get this right, to put the environment and the economy on a sustainable footing. The science is critical in understanding what that means and what the trade-offs will have to be ... This is a one-off shot." I ask why she says we have a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity", a phrase now embedded in the popular narrative. Why can't the changes be local, measured catchment by catchment, whereby scientists work with farmers, as Tony Windsor suggests? Her answer is direct: "Because we have the money." She is referring to the \$12.9 billion Water for the Future program, the Labor government's ten-year initiative to address the changing water needs in the basin.

I argue that having the money is no reason to do anything. She chides me: "You have to understand the drought brought us to our knees. The Coorong and the Lower Lakes were a second to midnight from being written off. Used and abused beyond any capacity to recover ... The Murray mouth closed up because of the drought. We had to keep it open using *two* dredgers." Dredging is routine at river mouths, so I fail to understand the fuss, but as she's mentioned the



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Murray mouth, I proceed to the barrages that plug the estuary, separating the Coorong from the Lower Lakes and preventing natural tidal flows. The support by environmentalists for keeping the barrages – their removal is not even on the table – has made the structures symbolic of the entire mess. Harriss-Buchan maintains that the lakes have always been fresh, citing freshwater fossils from the Ice Age; others have found saltwater ones. Both are possible, as the river has no doubt changed course a few times in the past 7000 years.

Harriss-Buchan brings up the area's dairy farms, now dwindled to three, which are featured on the ACF website in support of upstream cuts to replenish the Lower Lakes. Given her insistence that emotion should not sideline science, I question the wisdom of irrigating there in the first place. I had sought out Wayne Meyer specifically because he knew about the suitability of soil for irrigation. "With hindsight," he said, "putting irrigation where regional ground

THE MDBA AND ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS HAVE ALREADY PITTED COMMUNITIES AGAINST EACH OTHER

waters were being discharged wasn't smart. You are forever battling the salt. The Murray Bridge community is one of a number of such places that are depressed because you can't generate enough economic activity to sustain them." It's not hard to understand why upstream irrigators view this as an unfair case of robbing Peter to pay Paul. Harriss-Buchan is having none of it. "I don't want to turn communities against each other," she insists. "When times get tough people look after their own and throw stones over the fence and say 'I'm a better performer than you.'" But surely the MDBA and the environmental groups have already pitted communities against each other.

I speak next to Warren Muirhead. A retired Griffith CSIRO scientist, he made a submission to the MDBA arguing for new efforts to reproduce natural conditions: "We can fill the billabongs by managing them better. No research has been done in this area. It can be done by gravity or by using existing irrigation channels." Or by unblocking the "tribs". Like Geoff Sainty, Muirhead is most ardent when he starts talking about species preservation.

Next up, misused science. "The concept of hypothetical water is scientifically useful [for measuring productivity],"

says Muirhead, "but it's brought up all the time as a reason not to irrigate. The ACF using science in this way – airy-fairy stuff. Needs to be challenged." Irrigated produce can be reduced to the water that goes into making it, but if we export it, environmentalists say, we wave goodbye water resources that we can ill-afford to lose. Muirhead explains the fallacy: irrigated and dry-area wheat use the same amount of water. Is the ACF saying we shouldn't export *any* food? Following that reasoning, I should have been knocked on the head at birth because I exported myself to New York. "I thought I was improving science," concludes Muirhead. "But it's all been obliterated by these irrational arguments."

David Merrylees is a farmer who successfully inserted himself early in the narrative with three restrained blogs on ABC Online's *The Drum* in late 2010. When the floods came, he abandoned writing to keep his pumps chugging. A "fourth-generation irrigator and proud of it", he came close to walking off his farm during the drought, which is on the Murrumbidgee River near Carrathool. A year has passed since the blogs and I want to know his current feelings: "It's a dog's breakfast. Every cynicism is confirmed. The state of politics in Australia is sickening. They will say anything at all if their polling suggests it's the way to go and then say the opposite shortly after and manufacture the most transparent mishmash of lies to justify the about-face."

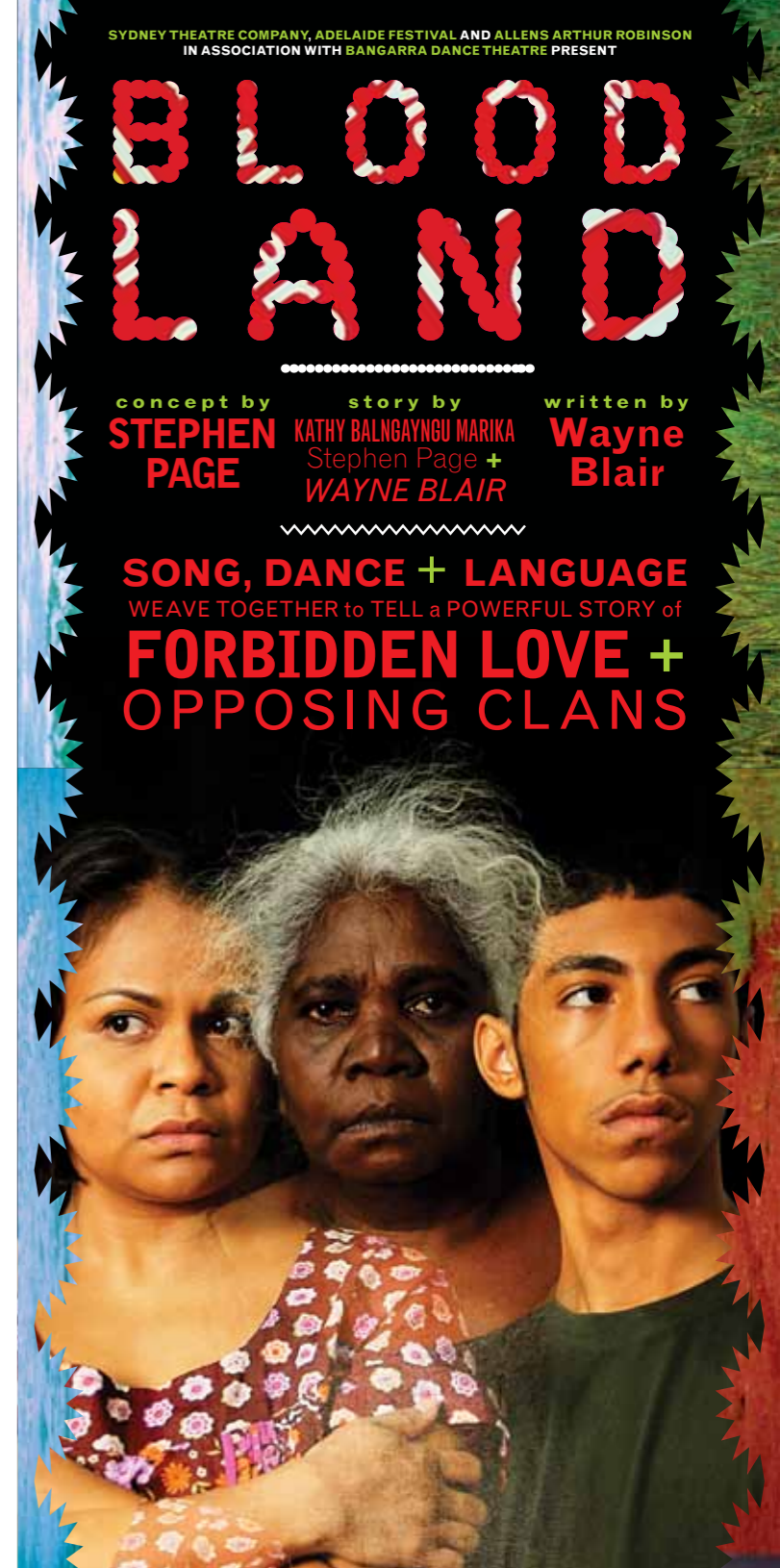
The worst that could happen is for the MDBA to do irreparable damage to productive irrigation communities. Equally bad would be for the "transparent mishmash of lies" to cause a crash in confidence and for nothing to be done. Wayne Meyer asserts: "Irrigation is important. There has been a revolution in agriculture. Fantastic improvements. Minimum tillage, productivity measurement. But energy costs are going up. We can't keep dumping energy into farming to improve it. The next revolution will be about farming-to-land capability. That means finding places in the landscape, even within paddocks, that are more responsive, more productive. Farmers are really thinking about this and adapting."

More than anything, I wish the Greens and the farmers could make common cause, as they are doing over coal seam gas. Australia's future is at stake. We got where we are because irrigation allowed population growth, but growth seems to be what's at question in the current climate debate. The binary here is prosperity versus survival; both are possible. I wish also I could get Tim Flannery to sit down with Geoff Sainty and Warren Muirhead to make common cause on saving species; they are as ardent as Tim and also have racked up a few more years of wisdom on the subject. Alas – forgive the pun – I fear that too much water has passed under the bridge. M

An extended version of this essay is at www.themonthly.com.au



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