

# Landscapes of Australian Childhoods: A Regional Comparison of Edenic Imaginings

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Like writers from overseas, Australian authors commonly invoke the mythology of Eden in narratives about childhood. Childhood is typically viewed as a time of blissful innocence where the infant possesses a vision of the world as perfect and unchanging, a harmony of nature and culture. With the onset of maturity, this ideal is shattered or gradually eroded, as the growing individual apprehends life's complexities and is exposed to humanity's fallen condition. In the Australian context, the Eden mythology takes on added historical and spatial dimensions. It is well known that early white settlers imagined their new land alternately as paradise and hell: paradise because it offered a new start in an apparently untouched land, hell due to its harsh environment and distance from the mother country. This contradiction continues to be demonstrated in twentieth-century post-war writing, and certain regional preoccupations in literary constructions of Eden have also emerged.

This article seeks to explore some of the environments that are imagined as Edenic realms in reconstructions of childhood from three Australian states: Western Australia, Queensland and Victoria. The mythology of Eden has numerous facets, and an exhaustive analysis of its employment in the literature is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, this enquiry will focus on features of Eden's ideal that resonate with the child's unique perspective.<sup>1</sup> As Susanna Egan points out, children typically possess an incomplete sense of the separation between themselves and their external environment, and this corresponds with the Edenic vision of the world as unified and undivided (72). In particular, nature and culture are

seen not as competing with one another, but coexisting in harmony. Closely related is the child's sense of timelessness, which finds a parallel in Eden's static paradise, removed as it is from the influences of change and death. Just as the child's progression from innocence to experience is inevitable, so too is Eden's destruction. Within every Eden there exist elements that undercut its timeless unity and herald its imminent demise.

Given that antipodean landscapes have traditionally been depicted as alien and resistant to western culture, Eden's unity of nature and culture presents unique challenges for Australian writers. While traditional English paradises, such as the bountiful garden or rural arcadia, are invoked by some Australian authors, our country's unique environments have compelled writers from some regions to develop more locally authentic versions of Eden. Among others, the beach, the weatherboard Queensland house, and an industrial dockyard setting are all explored as Australian versions of this ancient mythic ideal.

In this article, the term "reconstructions of childhood" is used to allow the inclusion of works from a broad range of writing, from autobiography, to "fictional" autobiography, and also to works of fiction where the depiction of childhood landscapes may have been inspired by the author's own experience. As such, issues surrounding the nature of memory, temporality and perception are all significant when considering the landscapes evoked. Eden has always been a story of loss. Biblical scholars<sup>2</sup> believe Genesis to have been written around the time of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt and, accordingly, paradise is evoked from the point where it has already been lost. This aspect of the mythology resonates strongly with the element of nostalgia often present in life writing. Edenic landscapes are always to some extent internal as well as external, and underpinning most accounts is the sense that Eden *is and always was* lost.

#### WESTERN AUSTRALIA—FROM ARCADIA TO BEACH PARADISE

Western Australia has long been associated with an arcadian ideal. Ever since Captain Stirling's original reports of the Swan River's fertile alluvial land tempted the first white settlers to make their homes there, an element of Western Australian culture has been preoccupied with recovering this elusive promise of paradise.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the city's isolation by both land and sea provides the distance necessary from busier metropolises to foster an image of utopia. As Suzanne Falkiner points out in *The Writers' Landscape*, authors such as T. A. G. Hungerford and Kenneth Seaforth Mackenzie recreate semi-rural childhoods full of larrikin adven-

tures and sensual indulgence in an arcadian pre-war Perth (118–22). These are echoed in the country homesteads around Geraldton that Randolph Stow describes in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*. In this novel, the enclosed garden at Andarra is a sensual paradise where children are likened to animals in their uninhibited instinctual response to the environment (King 75). The children “sniff the air with pure pleasure, like dogs,” “harrumph like horses,” and, in the Geraldton Wax bush, “perch like birds and talk very seriously” (63).

Yet this ideal of paradise is subverted by the child’s nightmarish experience beyond the confines of the garden. Stow sprinkles his account with images of Rob falling. Earlier in the narrative he falls from a tree (57); later he is depicted “stumbling and falling” into ditches as he wanders in Andarra’s paddocks at dusk. There he finds himself expelled from Eden, and experiences the oppression of vast limitless spaces. His wandering is a parody of Psalm 23<sup>4</sup> as he traverses barren pastures with no guiding shepherd: “He tried to lie down beside a sheep to sleep, but they bounded off when he came near them. So he lay in the stubble, shivering” (145). Although this episode marks the culmination of Rob’s move from innocence to experience, it is foreshadowed on numerous occasions when he is confronted by experiences that disrupt his vision of the world as unified and unchanging. The Hand Cave, for example, brings a new awareness of mortality: “Time and change had removed this child from his country” (56). The words “his world was not one world” (57) become like a refrain as they are repeated throughout Stow’s narrative, hinting at Rob’s inevitable awakening to the reality of life’s divisions.<sup>5</sup>

So too, in Dorothy Hewett’s *Wild Card* is the description of an arcadian paradise imbued with knowledge of its unsustainability. Her “house of childhood become myth” (3) is described in the present tense, having become, in the author’s mind, a realm beyond time passing. The homestead is fertile and marked by an abundance of flowers, fruit and natural produce, from the almond trees that ring the house, to the orchard “heavy with peach and apricot” (7), to the supplies of bread and preserves in the pantry. Yet darker elements also intrude, from the gallows where sheep carcasses hang with their throats cut, to the image of the beautiful “twenty-eight” parrots that cause her father to reach for his shotgun (4). These darker elements foreshadow the succeeding chapters where Hewett exposes sinister emotional currents in her family. As David McCooley notes, Hewett’s childhood is stained by bitter conflicts, humiliation and deceit (56). Such foreshadowing highlights the importance of perspective to the mythology of Eden. Hewett’s paradise has been, from the beginning, tainted with knowledge. At the close of the first chapter she writes: “The farm is the centre of our existence, our Garden of Eden, but I *always know* that under the bridal creeper and the ivy geraniums, the black snakes wait and slide” (32, emphasis added).

A similar balancing of contradictions between a benign surface and a pervasive corruption is evident in Robert Drewe's *The Shark Net*. Drewe pays homage to the local literary tradition of imagining the Swan River as an arcadian realm when he explores the history of the delightful pleasure garden that once attracted Perth's nineteenth-century elite to the Dalkieth area:

[I]n summer the beauty of the gardens attracted boatloads of weekend sightseers and picnickers. The Gallops supplied Perth, Fremantle and the Goldfields with plantains, grapes, quinces, apples, figs, mulberries, peaches. (220)

Yet this image of Eden is subversive: instead of the gardens being subject to the intrusion of snakes or dark forces from outside, the *gardens themselves* are depicted as the intruders in the landscape. Drewe's mention of the Aboriginal camp on the gardens' fringe points to the fact that the land's original inhabitants have been marginalized and dispossessed. The paradise thus founded on abuse proves short-lived: after a sudden murder, the gardens are dismantled.

This earlier paradise and its contradictions resonate with the fragility of the idyllic image of Perth against which Drewe sets his own childhood. Drewe's memoir is pervaded with sinister depictions of a serial killer stalking Perth's leafy suburbs, yet this is not the only disturbing undercurrent in the 1960s city. Perth's apparently carefree society is riddled with hypocrisy, exhibiting a paranoid xenophobia in its wars against imagined armies of sparrows and argentine ants, while being surprisingly relaxed about personal security. Drewe reflects, "the back door was never locked" (111). The police and media are also revealed to be corrupt when they conspire to suppress a news story that would embarrass the Police Commissioner (293). By juxtaposing past and present evocations of a false paradisaical quality in Perth, Drewe underscores the deception that is at the core of the Eden mythology. Perth is not, and never was, innocent.

Alongside the arcadian ideal, a trend has developed in recent Western Australian literature towards recreating the beach as a type of Eden, or at least as a hedonistic alternative to it. As Tim Winton points out in *Land's Edge*, Australia is a littoral society, "content on the edge of things," concentrated on the coastal fringe (37). This has a powerful psychological and symbolic impact for coming-of-age narratives, as the setting positions characters on an edge between two states: land and sea, innocence and experience. Perth's famous sunny weather and numerous tracts of relatively isolated beach land facilitate this idealization of the coastal environment. These settings are rich in natural beauty and wildlife, yet, as with all Edens, at the heart of the paradise is the force that threatens it: the ocean. The sea is a traditional symbol of change and the passing of time, and, through its sheer enormity and power, also carries the very real danger of death.

Numerous authors attempt to balance the attractiveness of the coastal lifestyle with the ocean's fearful qualities. Hewett's family getaway near Albany is exotically beautiful with its white dunes and great karri forests, yet the ocean is a volatile unsettling force, as tides rise to bog cars of holiday-makers innocently enjoying the view and sweep fishermen off rocks with king waves (9–10). In a similar vein is Drewe's recollection of his childhood beach going, which offers a ten-year-old ample prospects of "pleasure and danger" (42). Family excursions to the seaside are fraught with numerous fears—from his mother's warnings about getting "boiling brain" (37), to his father's paranoia about currents (41) and Drewe's own fear of sharks (299). As the rest of his narrative indicates, the shark is a metaphor not only for the serial killer stalking Perth's pleasant suburbs, but also representative of a wider endemic corruption and hypocrisy he sees blighting Perth's moral fabric (Dalziell 101–02, 105).

The beach is an unconventional Eden in that it seems to lack the quality of enclosure possessed by the paradisaical garden. As McCooey observes, "the garden is Edenic not simply because it is beautiful or bountiful, but also because it is enclosed; an enclosure which is always under threat" (54). By contrast, the coast is appealing as place of openness, space and freedom. Yet, McCooey goes on to observe that:

The myth of Eden . . . *need not* be recreated by the autobiographer in a garden, for it is the myth of beginning-history par excellence, and can operate *anywhere in which it is felt a state of grace once existed*. It is the story of the loss of innocence in an unchanging, united world, for a gaining of experience in a changing disunified one. (57, emphasis added)

Arguably, Winton's portrayal of coastal environs depicts them as regions in such a "state of grace." For Winton, the sea is loaded with overtones of the religious and sacred, yielding "blessings and miracles" (*Land's Edge* 39). For his characters, it frequently offers renewal, escape and solace.<sup>6</sup>

Winton's *Blueback* offers a useful example of the coastal paradise as a type of Eden. Subtitled "A Contemporary Fable," this short work of fiction traces the life of Abel Jackson from age ten to his mid-thirties and details his special connection to an isolated place on the Western Australian coast. Winton recreates a simple subsistence life where humans live off the land, dwelling in respectful harmony with their natural environment. Longboat Bay is secluded, surrounded by a national park, and devoid of modern amenities like mains electricity and television. The isolation and lack of change in the pattern of life over generations creates an Edenic sense of timelessness. This is heightened by Winton's use of the huge blue groper, named Blueback, as a symbol of stasis and continuity. Blueback's size indicates he is already very old when ten-year-old Abel starts swimming with him (17), and

yet the groper is the same presence for Abel's young daughter some twenty-five years later at the story's close (94).

The Jacksons' relationship with the ocean, however, is not without conflict: the family's ancestors were whalers and a freak storm eerily exposes the bones of hundred-year-old whale skeletons on the beach in front of their house (80). This undercuts the unity effected between the Jacksons and the life of the ocean through Abel's relationship with Blueback. Like all Edens, Longboat Bay is also threatened by external forces. Abel and Dora Jackson must fight to protect the ecosystem firstly from a rogue fisherman (60), then from a chain of developers (64), and, finally, from environmental degradation and pollution (76). Eventually, Longboat Bay is declared a marine sanctuary. Abel has long since become an adult and moved out into the "real world" to pursue his career as a marine biologist, but he now moves back to the Bay, where he re-enters his own infancy, living "the life of his boyhood every day" (93).

Significantly, this ability to re-enter paradise runs *contrary* to the conventional Eden mythology, which is predicated on paradise's inevitable, irreversible loss. In this respect, Longboat Bay is not a true Eden. Furthermore, the paradise of Longboat Bay is infused with images of death, arguably more so than versions of Eden found elsewhere in Australian literature. Behind the orchard is a small family cemetery, a perpetual reminder of mortality. Abel's father is absent, killed by a tiger shark before the story starts, and a family friend tragically dies in an accident while out abalone fishing. This emphasis on death means that Winton's coastal utopia may more appropriately be characterized as a "postlapsarian paradise" rather than an Eden in the traditional sense. It is arguably a more positive, sustainable image, where life can prevail over loss in a world that is beautiful but not perfect, where death is acknowledged as part of the scheme of life.

#### QUEENSLAND—NATURE AND THE PRIMITIVE

In Western Australia, the arcadia sought is primarily associated with the past—a simpler, rural existence, pre-metropolis. Queensland, by contrast, is often portrayed as a *continuing*, presently existing region of childhood innocence and simplicity. Perhaps this is partly because several key Queensland writers have, in adulthood, become Queensland "expatriates." David Malouf, Thea Astley, Jessica Anderson and Joan Colebrook are in this category and more than one of them<sup>7</sup> has commented that they could only write about Queensland after they were no longer living there. For these authors, Queensland *is* the country of childhood

and there is a sense in which the two become more particularly entwined as they write from a position distant in space as well as time. Gillian Whitlock identifies a body of narratives that “associat[e] Queensland regions spatially in terms of a lost innocence and simplicity” (“Speaking from the Warm Zone” 173). A commonly cited example is Anderson’s collection *Stories From the Warm Zone and Sydney Stories*, which juxtaposes the Warm Zone stories about childhood set in Brisbane against stories of adult relationships set in Sydney. Broadly speaking, the Warm Zone stories foreground security in the family and motherly love, while the Sydney stories largely depict broken relationships and disillusionment.

Malouf takes this opposition between a sleepy, innocent Queensland and the more “sophisticated,” “experienced” southern states a step further. In *Johnno*, Malouf’s alter ego, Dante, reflects, “Brisbane, where I sometimes thought of myself as having grown up, was a place where I seemed never to have changed. . . . Here, I knew, I would always be an ageing child. I might grow old in Brisbane but I would never grow up” (144). This identification of Queensland with childhood is borne out in Malouf’s story “The Kyogle Line.” The story traces a childhood train journey from Brisbane to Sydney. The journey becomes a vehicle for the movement from a simple, child’s view of the world to one with a greater awareness of its contradictions and injustices. Heavy with imagery of crossing thresholds, the movement from innocence to experience is registered by a drop in temperature and darkness falling as the train moves from Queensland into New South Wales (*Edmondstone* 127). At a break stop, the narrator sees Japanese prisoners of war caged in one of the rear carriages like animals (131), and suddenly becomes aware that a darker world of violence, racism and war exists beyond his own hitherto sheltered life. Malouf emphasizes the different sound and rhythm of the interstate train on its “foreign” NSW gauge as they head towards Sydney, a sound which produces a new “inner dialogue”—the dawning of experience—as the child’s physical horizons are extended south of the garden of innocence (134).

This tying of Queensland with origins and childhood, of course, also has roots in the region’s natural climate and landscape. In the tropics and subtropics, the coastal regions experience very little cold weather, corresponding with Edenic and related mythologies of paradise as a place of perpetual springtime or endless summer (Egan 70).<sup>8</sup> The lush vegetation and prolific growth of the wet areas also evoke primeval continuities, suggesting a region that is prehistorical and, as such, beyond the reach of time passing.

As McCooley points out, “the loss of childhood is characterized as ‘outside’ adult history.” For the adult writer, “childhood may have occurred only thirty or forty years ago, yet it is perceived as ‘prehistoric’” (54). This is clearly the case for Joan

Colebrook, who grew up in the Atherton Tableland in the 1920s. In her autobiography *A House of Trees*, she describes mountains formed by the “great upward thrust” of the Pliocene epoch (4). The verbs imply a landscape still active, as it “draws” rain to water rich volcanic soils, producing the backdrop of rainforest to her childhood home. Preternaturally alive, it is brilliant in colour with its “vivid emerald” grass and “reddish roads” that “[vein] the earth as capillaries vein flesh” (4). An Edenic unity between the human and the natural is implied in Colebrook’s personification of trees that “accepted [children] between the pillars of great trunks into what seemed temples” (7). So powerful is the presence of this landscape that it has a permanent place in Colebrook’s psyche. She reflects, “The sound, the feeling, the envelopment of such constant light swirling rain has been with me always, like one of those primordial lullabies we are supposed to carry with us from another world” (4). Queensland becomes, in this image, an integral part of her childhood self, still residual within her, timeless, unaltered and unalterable.

The primitive is also a strong element in Malouf’s *12 Edmondstone Street*. Malouf effectively blurs the distinction between the natural and the man-made as he describes his childhood home in Brisbane. He depicts old style “Queenslander” houses as existing in a state of harmonious symbiosis with the landscape. The house is fluid and responsive to its setting, indicated by the “gradual adjustment of all its parts, like a giant instrument being tuned” as its timbers expand and contract with temperature changes, and by its openness to the natural world:

Airy, open, often with no doors between the rooms, they are on such easy terms with breezes, with the thick foliage they break into at window level, with the lives of possums and flying foxes, that living in them, barefoot for the most part, is like living in a reorganized forest. (10)

Malouf’s enthusiasm for this image of forest dwelling, in unity with other living creatures, points to his perception of a residual affinity with the primitive in the modern self.<sup>9</sup> As Whitlock asserts, Malouf’s house, its surroundings and occupants become “an organic entity, an ecosystem” (“The Child in the Queensland House” 78). The house embodies an ideal confluence of culture and nature, and is thus a type of Eden for Malouf.

As with all Edens, however, other features of Malouf’s Queensland house undermine the image of unity it presents. As several critics observe, Malouf uses the architecture of the house as a metaphor for his exploration of the different elements of the self.<sup>10</sup> This effectively reveals a world of divisions. While verandas are continuous with the outward social self, inner rooms, like the lavatory, are analogous to the private, interior life. More disturbing is “under the house” which is connected to the irrational and subconscious modes of being (Hills 11). Malouf

is profoundly ambivalent about this realm that contains both “freedoms” and “terrors” (47). It is “a dream space” where ordinary rules of time and physics are suspended (47). Dimensions are measured “not in ordinary feet and inches, but in heartbeats, or the number of seconds you can endure the sticky-soft lash of cobwebs against your mouth” (46).

This sense of the house as a divided realm is heightened by the emphasis on boundaries between rooms. For example, the child narrator is conscious of his transgression when he enters the maid’s room in a moment of “extravagant bravado” (17), and attaches significance to re-entering the house proper each morning after his night time exile on the veranda-sleepout: “Each morning I step across the threshold to find a world recovered, restored” (21). In this way, Malouf’s narrative places the child on a tenuous edge between an Edenic vision of a united world and a more mature perception of its contradictions. His tracing of the child’s movement between rooms, gradually apprehending their separate functions, poises the child on the verge of losing the Eden he inhabits. Nor does Malouf rejoice in the house’s openness to nature without complication. The fernery near his childhood sleepout goes “*too* far back into the primordial damp and breath of things”; its nightmarish quality threatens to transform him in a reversal of the evolutionary process into a brute “smooth or hairy green thing with dirt in my fists” (19). The very sense of warm lush jungle that contributes to a timeless paradisaical quality in Queensland is thus, simultaneously, the serpent within the garden, eliciting, as it does, unknown and therefore fearful possibilities of this primitive element within the self.

Other writers also detect a sense of threat within the fecundity of Queensland’s environment, in its wild and overgrown qualities. So prolific is nature in the face of Queensland’s traditional, flimsy-looking weatherboard architecture that nature at times seems poised to overwhelm and consume culture. Perhaps the epitome of this is Tony Maniaty’s image of that signature of Queensland lushness, the mango tree. In his autobiography *All Over the Shop*, the mango tree becomes the tree of knowledge, its tempting delights harbinger of painful childbirth for Maniaty’s mother and expulsion from the womb into the wider world for the author himself:

The mangoes are responsible for this. My mother . . . couldn’t sleep and left her sweaty January bed for the garden. Imagine: it’s only five o’clock and she’s twenty-two years old and nine months pregnant, and over me and her nightgown she places an apron in which to collect the ripe fruit. And reaching up, in that pre-dawn light—pure Botticelli—she goes for the fruit and slips; and falls flat on her bum.

I appear on planet Earth, in a delivery room two hours later. (2)

With similar humour, Maniaty later depicts the same mango tree slowly invading his childhood home, as if to usurp its human occupants (4).

While Maniaty's account is lighthearted, Colebrook feels the danger of Queensland's lushness to be more insidious. She mentions an enormous tree leaning close to her bedroom, a tree encased with a "thick mottled greenish vine which twisted around its branches. . . . I feared that it was a snake and about to come into the house" (25). Elsewhere, however, she speaks of actual snakes that do not "seem evil, having so bright and beautiful a pattern on their backs . . . often lying coiled up so innocently on the grass in the sun" (8). These snakes are, in a sense, a microcosm of the landscape itself, which also at times appears benign and attractive, but, as Colebrook's account makes clear, is full of potential dangers.

#### VICTORIA—SUBURBS OF DIVISION AND COUNTRY

Victoria has produced versions of Eden that are perhaps closer to the conventional English identification of childhood's paradise with the country idyll, especially in the case of early twentieth-century experiences. Alan Marshall's classic *I Can Jump Puddles* portrays a rural childhood where the persona indulges in an almost Wordsworthian affinity with the landscape of Victoria's Western District in the years preceding motorcars. In the sequel, *This Is the Grass*, he details his move to the inner city as a young adult, where he must combat exploitation and disillusionment before finding creative possibilities. Hal Porter's *The Watcher on the Cast Iron Balcony* similarly recreates the Gippsland town of Bairnsdale as a type of Eden, rich with abundance and fruitfulness. However, as McCooey points out, Porter's account persistently strikes an elegiac tone that propels the narrator towards the death of his mother (67–68). This acts as the serpent in the garden, the canker in the rosebud, so that Porter's picture is of a blighted, doomed Eden, rich in beauty but poignantly fragile.

Writers who grew up in Melbourne's inner city or suburbs seem to have difficulty finding within their immediate environment a landscape that can be assimilated to the Edenic ideal. Though some writers try to locate a sympathetic version of nature in the suburban garden, most efforts result only in satire and parody. Melbourne's famous flat terrain and grid-pattern of streets are frequently criticised for creating a severe landscape that implicitly excludes nature. Louis Nowra detests the "the rigid grid" of 1950s Fawkner. In his autobiography *The Twelfth of Never*, he recalls "those square blocks of land on which were built rectangle houses as if roundness and softness were an offence to the human eye" (28). Similarly,

George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* presents the Melbourne suburbs of the 1930s as a world "without boundaries or specific definition or safety, [which] spread forever, flat and diffuse, monotonous yet inimical, pieced together in a dull geometry of dull houses" (29).

Yet, surprisingly, Johnston's protagonist, David Meredith, discovers a "new Eden" in an industrial landscape. This is the docklands area of Port Phillip, where old sailing ships are moored. But it is an *internal* paradise that Meredith finds here, in contrast to the physical or sensual one offered by country settings. What Meredith gleans from the docklands is a new sense of imaginative freedom:

for the first time in my life I came to be aware of the existence of true beauty, of an opalescent world of infinite promise that had nothing whatever to do with the shabby suburbs of my birth. The fine floating calligraphy of a tug's wake black on a mother-of-pearl stream in the first glow of a river dawn, the majesty of smoke in still air. . . .

It filled me with an excitement, almost an exaltation that I could tell nobody about. I did not see it then as a way out of the wilderness, for the stuff of this material was too fragile to be considered as something which might be used, but I was quite sure that something important had happened to me. I moved through this newly-discovered world breathless and alone, like Adam in a new Eden, and I felt almost as if I had to walk on tiptoe wherever this shining place extended. (70)

Johnston subtly evokes the concord of the natural world and human environment through his depiction of industry combining with its setting in an artistic prospect. The reference to "calligraphy" and lyrical description of the tug's wake in the river suggests an element of design whereby the boat and water complement each other in a unified image. The religious overtones evoked by Johnston's use of words like "infinite promise," "wilderness," "this shining place" are continued as Meredith recognizes within himself the compulsion to write. His movement from spiritual barrenness to fulfillment is traced spatially through Biblical imagery as he reflects, "by the time I had reached Little Dock I had walked out of my wilderness" (73). Thus, an industrial setting can be a kind of paradise, possessing redemptive qualities that allow for imaginative expansion beyond the spiritual desert of suburban existence.

Accounts of later twentieth-century Melbourne childhoods reveal that few manage to find Eden in its socially stratified suburbs. This keen sense of divisions can also be related to Melbourne's street plan. As Paul Carter points out in *The Road To Botany Bay*, the grid pattern, which presupposes homogeneity, has the para-

doxical effect of enticing the eye to seek differentiation (217). It is frequently asserted that in Melbourne, more than any other Australian city, there remains a greater consciousness of social class (Falkiner 153–54). Indeed, in accounts of Melbourne childhoods, sharp attention is paid to the finer points of geography that speak volumes about family fortunes. Amirah Inglis, for example, is keenly aware of the division between the “the pleasant part of Elwood which was almost Brighton” and the “ugly and more Jewish part, which was almost St Kilda” (87). Barry Humphries, too, is conscious that more than the back fence separates his world from his neighbours’. In *More Please*, he observes that “the lazy rhythm of the lawn-mower which chattered through every summer afternoon of my childhood was never heard in those derelict back yards . . . there at our back door, was another world; the world of the poor!” (9). This awareness of divisions mitigates against making an Eden of the suburbs: they cannot be assimilated to a vision of a harmonious unified world.

Indeed, it is the sense of social as well as geographic marginalization that leads writers to portray Melbourne’s northwestern fringe suburbs as a place of exile in the decades after World War II. Home mainly to poorer and migrant families, residence in these regions is endured in the belief that it is only a temporary solution until family fortunes improve. Serge Liberman’s story “Two Years in Exile” describes a Jewish family’s sense of alienation and displacement in the harsh, dry, dusty outer Melbourne suburbs. For them, it recalls generational memories of wandering in the wilderness of a Biblical wasteland. By contrast, the “greyer, rowdier, cruder centre of St Kilda” seems a promised land, because, though “foetid its every corner” (17), it has a vibrant Jewish community. In similar tones is Louis Nowra’s 1950s Housing Commission suburb of Fawkner, described in *The Twelfth of Never*. His is an apocalyptic landscape, where “in summer the dry friable earth opened up cracks large enough to place your hands or even your feet down inside them and in winter it turned into a black clag as if it were not so much proper soil but a gelatinous pulp which stuck to your shoes and trouser cuffs like inky porridge” (21). The edge of civilization, Nowra’s street is at the suburb’s outermost reach and overlooks vast flat, barren paddocks.

Fawkner can be contrasted with a later suburb of Nowra’s youth, leafy middle class McLeod. There, the grass is “so green it almost hurt the eyes after the dusty dryness of Fawkner’s paddocks” (213). McLeod seems the epitome of the Garden State: “Nature in this new suburb,” Nowra writes, is “lush, exuberant and prolific. Compared to Fawkner, MacLeod was an Eden” (214). Yet the falsity of this impression is driven home by the position of the insane asylum opposite his new home. Far from flourishing in the new opportunities this more prosperous place offers, Nowra senses a profound difference between himself and new school friends.

MacLeod proves rigid and hostile, a parody of paradise. In his review of *The Twelfth of Never*, Simon Petch identifies Nowra's use of various tropes of autobiography, including crisis and resolution, and epiphany, as well as tropes of the "fall or expulsion from Eden" (Petch 217). While Nowra does experience a serious "fall" and head injury, which launches him into a kind of "limbo," his narrative is arguably remarkable more for the *absence* of any truly Edenic realm in his account of his early years. Nowra's home environment seems constantly marked by violence and manipulation, leaving him to seek out alternative "Edens" on summer holidays with country relatives. He finds solace in time spent roaming the hills with only dogs for company at his Uncle's home in Locksley. There, he says, "I felt a rare true contentment and I daydreamed of hunting rabbits with my dogs forever in this paradise which was free of all responsibilities" (255).

The most common image of Eden in accounts of Melbourne suburban childhoods, indeed, remains the escape to the country. A good example is Inga Clendinnen's *Tiger's Eye*, where the author recalls holidays to a beach cottage at Wye. The spot's Edenic aspect is emphasized by its isolation and pure air, wholesome rambles in the bush and, significantly, the abrupt cessation of these adventures after an incident involving snakes. A mysterious foreign couple pays Ben and Inga to catch snakes for venom research (66). The following year, the trips up river are replaced with sexual experimentation, as Ben has a girlfriend and Inga gets in trouble for coupling with a man who doesn't realize she is below the age of consent (68). After this, Inga is no longer invited to the beach cottage—she has passed from innocence to experience, through snakes and sex. Still, the image of country purity need not be spatially distant from the suburbs, as long as there is a sense of separation from the everyday world. An earlier version of Eden for Clendinnen is found in her home suburb of Geelong when she visits an old house owned and kept by three spinster sisters in a Quaker-style primitivism. Invited in by the sister who is "a bit slow" and does not talk (45), she enters a realm of country housekeeping of a bygone era. The lack of speech implies a prelinguistic haven cut off from the modern world outside, as child and adult communicate through tugs and glances, experiencing the beauty of dew on spider webs, feeding chickens and collecting eggs (45).

## CONCLUSION

While Eden is a powerful and enduring mythology surrounding reconstructions of childhood, the expression of this ideal differs among Australia's regions. While some Western Australian writing shows an intention to import the English arcadian

ideal, other more recent works identify the beach or coastal paradise as a more locally authentic type of Eden. In Queensland, evocations of the primitive and warm fertile climate are used to link the region's environment with the timeless ideal of Eden across rural and suburban areas, with the vibrant fecundity of the natural world contributing both to the evocation of paradise and also to its undoing. Victoria, both in the case of earlier twentieth-century writings and those more recent, has more obviously clung to the conventional depiction of Eden as a country paradise. Yet it too has spawned some unconventional representations of Eden, such as Johnston's docklands. While some of the examples employed in this discussion may lack significant elements of the Edenic ideal, they nevertheless create places of similar emotional and spiritual significance for the characters who inhabit them. Such attempts to realistically portray local landscapes in terms of an ancient mythology, in themselves, illustrate a yearning towards the unity of nature and culture central to the ideal world of Eden.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 For a fuller discussion of the continuities between Eden and childhood see Susanna Egan 69–74.
- 2 See, for example, *Unger's Bible Dictionary* which relates the theory of Genesis being comprised of composite sources pieced together by "a late exilic or post-exilic redactor" (397), and also identifies Moses as Genesis' probable author (763).
- 3 A good selection of writings contributing to Western Australia's arcadian image is found in Ffion Murphy and Richard Nile's collection *The Gate of Dreams*, especially Part II "Immigration and Settlement."
- 4 Psalm 23:1–2: "The Lord is my shepherd. . . . He maketh me to lie down in green pastures" (Authorized Version).
- 5 See Anthony Hassall's article "Full Circle" for a fuller examination of Stow's art in balancing the images of circularity and timelessness, represented through the symbol of the merry-go-round, with the disruptive images of Australia as a "haunted land."
- 6 See, for example, Tim Winton's character Jerra Nilsam in *An Open Swimmer*.
- 7 See Kame Gilpin (34), who refers to Manfred Jurgensen (x). In her article "Being a Queenslander: A Form of Literary and Geographical Conceit," Thea Astley comments: "I don't think my love affair with Queensland ripened into its mature madness until I came south to live" (254).
- 8 Astley, in her essay "Writing in North Queensland," speaks of North Queensland's "Edenic latitudes . . . [where] the morrow brings a repetition of the idyll; there is no climatic change" (2).

- 9 For a wider discussion of the role of the primitive in Malouf's work, see Ivor Indyk, Chapter 4, "Social Surfaces, Primitive Depths," particularly his discussion of *12 Edmondstone Street* 85–87.
- 10 See, for example, Edward Hills "La Maison Onirique."

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