

**Sugarcane and the Wet Tropics:
Reading the Georgic Mode and Region
in John Naish's Farm Novel *The Cruel Field* (1962)**

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Many critics regard the pastoral ideal as the key to understanding Australia's rural development and therefore interpret literature as either supporting or working against that ideal. However, this approach is problematic when positioning a 'farm novel' within current understandings of the Australian novel. The pastoral ideal dismisses labour (Low), ignores harsh realities (Indyk, 'The Pastoral Poets'), and marginalises Indigenous people (Eustace). Yet these three elements are central to the Australian 'farm novel' because farmers gain knowledge through the experience of farm labour (Cohen), farmers face 'conflicting forces of unmediated nature' (Sarver 156), and Indigenous perspectives change our understandings of Australian history and literature (Hughes-d'Aeth, *Like Nothing on This Earth*). To better address these elements, I propose the georgic mode as a new interpretative framework. My understanding of the georgic mode is taken from the work of Paul Alpers and Anthony Low. As Low writes '[l]ike pastoral, georgic is primarily a mode rather than genre. It is an informing spirit, an attitude toward life, and a set of themes and images' (46). Put simply, the georgic mode attends to labour and the uncertainty of nature, while the pastoral mode centres on leisure and ease. The pastoral mode is prominent in a significant body of Australian literary criticism (Archer-Lean; Delaney; Eustace; Indyk, 'The Pastoral Poets'; Kinsella, 'Is There an Australian Pastoral'; Lynch; McCredden; Ross), yet a commensurate body of research on the georgic mode is lacking.

In this essay, I examine how the georgic mode conveys insights into a specific region through a reading of the neglected 'farm novel,' John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962), which is set in the Wet Tropics of north-eastern Australia. A farm novel is a novel that is set on a farm, uses farm people as main characters, and explores farming issues (Freitag; Meyer). Australia's small collection of farm novels includes novels by Benjamin Cozens and James Green set in the Victorian Mallee and New England respectively (Hughes-d'Aeth, 'Settler Colonial' 203), the farm novels of the Western Australian wheatbelt (Hughes-d'Aeth *Like Nothing on This Earth*), and Carrie Tiffany's *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* (2005) also set in the Mallee (Kirne). My identification of *The Cruel Field* as a farm novel not only adds to this collection, but expands the footprint of the farm novel to an area in 'the North' known for its high rainfall, rainforest, hot humid weather, and rich biodiversity. My attention to the Wet Tropics Bioregion aligns with growing understandings of Australian regions as intrinsic to particular ecological systems (Hughes-d'Aeth, 'Regional Accent'), and builds on Tony Hughes-d'Aeth's literary research focused on wheat cropping (*Like Nothing on This Earth*).

Naish's depiction of sugarcane farming in north-eastern Australia is geographically opposite to the south-western portraits of wheat farming in Hughes-d'Aeth's *Like Nothing on this Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt* (2017). It also contrasts with a concentration of poetry and prose about cattle, dairy, wool and wheat farming across the southern half of Australia. Given that ninety-five percent of Australia's sugarcane is grown in Queensland, Naish's use of a sugarcane farm as a setting firmly positions *The Cruel Field* in 'the North.' To date, 'The North' has been understood in Queensland-centric terms as the entire state of Queensland (Hadgraft),

regions north of Rockhampton (Astley), or regions roughly north of Townsville (Buckridge and McKay). Allison Craven's view of sugarcane as a 'metonym' of the tropics (52) reinforces *The Cruel Field's* North Queensland setting. Hence, my reading builds on Cheryl Taylor and Elizabeth Perkins's 2007 research on North Queensland literature.

The Cruel Field is known for its 'verve and pace' (Tennant 507), and a 'masculinist orientation' that supports 'the social-realist mode established by [Jean] Devanny' (Taylor and Perkins 239–40). Published in 1962, *The Cruel Field* addresses Indigenous dispossession and a multi-racial society ahead of the growing understandings of the 1970s. While Ronald McKie's town novel *The Crushing* (1977) depicts a multi-racial society (Cryle), it 'elide[s] living Aborigines from Australia's story' (Cheryl Taylor 2). By contrast, *The Cruel Field* offers a realistic yet sensitive portrayal of the social circumstances of Indigenous people by not shying from racist dialogue, yet giving Indigenous characters agency and subversive power. *The Cruel Field* is one of many texts about the Australian canefields that include writings by Naish, Devanny, McKie, Louis Nowra, Faith Bandler and Nancy Cato. When read alongside Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1957), *The Cruel Field* completes a portmanteau of the canecutter's life, such that Lawler's city leisure hinges to Naish's farm labour. The number of writers connected with the Australian canefields may warrant a new genre, however, developing a genre is beyond the scope of this essay.

This essay begins with a definition of the georgic mode and an examination of a literary culture that nullifies this mode. In particular, I discuss the unstated assumptions that muddy a pre-occupation with 'the pastoral ideal.' The second part of the essay gives a reading of *The Cruel Field* as an example of the georgic mode in the Wet Tropics Bioregion. Given the lack of Australian literary criticism focused on the georgic mode, I draw instead on the work of art historian, Jeanette Hoorn, who identifies georgic conventions and regional insights in John Glover's painting *My Harvest Home* (1835). In my reading of *The Cruel Field*, I identify the georgic conventions of the harvest, seasons, labour, harsh conditions, heroism, and farming instructions and discuss how these conventions convey insights into mid-twentieth-century rural society and the Wet Tropics Bioregion. These insights arise from depictions of sugarcane, seasons, rainforest, Indigenous people, and women. Within my discussion, I argue that sugarcane farming and Indigenous fishing align with the georgic mode. I also delineate spatial boundaries that situate the farm and sea as georgic, and the rainforest as pastoral. Classifying rainforest as pastoral arises in part from my recognition, rather than John Naish's, of humans managing country beyond the farm.

The Georgic Mode

The georgic mode is about farming, labour, uncertainty of nature, and harsh realities (Graver; Hoorn; Low). A primary source of the georgic and pastoral modes is Virgil's poetry (Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?*; Graver; Halperin; Hoorn; Low), however, depictions of the hardships of farming and the farmer's calendar have been traced to earlier poetry such as Hesiod's *Works and Days* (Hagenstein et al.; Williams; Ziser). Virgil draws analogies between farming and warfare (Attié; Graver; Low). Like a soldier, the farmer faces adversity in a struggle to impose order on a hostile land. Losses may occur but success is declared when the land has been tamed for the good of the nation (Attié). This analogy makes farming heroic (Graver). It also explains why labour can at times be difficult and the conditions harsh. These harsh or violent conditions, inherent in the georgic mode, are elsewhere labelled 'anti-pastoral' (Delaney; Gifford; Reed) or 'counter pastoral' (Williams). I must emphasise that both sunny skies and violent storms are georgic. The term 'anti-georgic' instead applies to an attitude of contempt towards farming and

an inability to farm due to idleness or war (Attié). Importantly, the georgic mode carries the ‘realistic’ perspectives of farming people (Low 20), rather than the urban views tied to the pastoral (Hoorn), or the perspectives of ‘those pretend [farmers] ... who are really courtly shepherds in disguise’ (Low 20).

Examining a Pastoral Dominance

Introducing the georgic mode requires an understanding of the problems it can resolve, many of which arise from a pre-occupation with the pastoral ideal. To understand these problems, we must first understand what is meant by ‘the pastoral ideal.’ This ideal is the pinnacle of success in the pastoral mode (Low), where human labour is disregarded because nature does all the work (Marx). In the pastoral ideal, nature provides humans with an abundance of food, which allows them to enjoy leisure and culture in rural landscapes (Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?*; Gifford; Low; Marx). These landscapes are formed by humans in a way that meets European aesthetic tastes (Marx). Low claims that Virgil purposely ‘invoked [the pastoral ideal] to provide a contrast to the hard and laborious world of his farmers’ (18). This invocation casts the pastoral ideal as a wish or desire for how things could be in the best of circumstances (Poggioli). In Australia, the pastoral ideal is understood as contributing to national identity (Eustace; Lynch), as a place for enjoying a leisurely retreat from the pressures of city life (Blair, ‘Amanda Lohrey’s *Vertigo*’), an imagined alternative to reality (Archer-Lean), or the origin of distinctive Australian words like ‘pastoralists’ (Ross). However, the pastoral ideal is also problematic. It is too simplistic (Delaney), and fails to account for the Australian colony as a prison (Hassall; Ross) or the social advancement of former convicts (Kinsella, ‘Is There an Australian Pastoral’). It also provides a means of legitimising the dispossession of Indigenous peoples (Eustace), ignores the reality of negative human impacts on the environment (Reed), disregards the harshness of colonial life in Australia (Indyk, ‘The Pastoral Poets’), and inadequately accommodates the nature writing of early Australian poets (Kinsella, ‘Is There an Australian Pastoral’; Ross). The pastoral ideal’s inability to account for labour and harsh realities invites attention to the georgic mode. However, paying this attention is difficult when the georgic mode is either nullified or elided by a literary culture that prioritises the pastoral ideal.

The dominance of the pastoral ideal in Australian literary criticism is underpinned by unstated assumptions that perpetuate the misunderstandings and misrepresentations described by Alpers as a ‘happy confusion of definitions’ (*What Is Pastoral?* 8). Critics of the pastoral in Australia tend to blend the pastoral and georgic modes and apply the label ‘pastoral.’ I offer two ways of recognising ‘the pastoral.’ The first combines all the themes and concepts arising from *both* the georgic mode and the pastoral mode. The second uses *only* the themes and concepts arising from the pastoral mode, thus *excluding* the georgic mode. This second method allows critics to vividly distinguish two modes. Low, for example, states that ‘pastoral celebrates play and leisure, georgic celebrates work’ (4). Bruce E. Graver distinguishes an ‘artificial world of idle *otium*’ from the ‘continual toil and hardship’ of a ‘life of *labor*’ (119), which he later translates as ‘pastoral and georgic’ (127), and Alpers assures us that ‘[i]n Virgil’s works, pastoral and georgic are distinct’ (*What Is Pastoral?* 28).¹ This essay seeks to extract the georgic mode from the dominant blended ‘pastoral.’

An added complication is that some critics use the term ‘georgic’ as a blend of *both* the georgic mode and the pastoral mode. This makes the term ‘georgic’ synonymous with ‘pastoral.’ Tom Bristow provides an example when he writes:

Practical aspects of agriculture within the georgic tradition exhibit expressions of human labour in the world that are not reduced to viewing nature as simply enriching; modes can be read as shifting from peaceful repose to the depiction of the opposition of violence and care, and pleasure and pain. (57)

Here, Bristow describes ‘the georgic tradition’ as including ‘peaceful repose’ which suggests a view of the ‘the georgic’ as comprising both the georgic mode and the pastoral mode. Ultimately, whichever way a critic uses the terms ‘pastoral’ or ‘georgic’ is acceptable, however, stating assumptions would make their intentions easier for readers to understand.

Problems arise when meanings are ambiguous. An example is found in Ruth Blair’s ‘Introduction’ to the 2015 special issue of *Australian Literary Studies* ‘Afterlives of Pastoral.’ Blair writes that, according to Alpers, the endings of pastoral literature exhibit a need for limits that are neither set nor suggested. Readers conditioned by a preoccupation with the pastoral ideal may interpret this as meaning that pastoral endings have no limits because they are idealistic and do not account for reality. However, Alpers intends the opposite: that these endings represent the mess of real life, which is never neatly resolved (Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?*). Although Alpers regards pastoral as mode, he holds a different view of this mode to Virgil and Low. Alpers constructs his pastoral mode, as do numerous Australian critics, as a blend of concepts arising from Virgil’s pastoral and georgic modes. By not providing insight into Alpers’s use of the georgic reality to inform his view on ‘pastoral’ endings, Blair’s writing is unclear. In her Introduction, pastoral endings could easily be understood as idealistic, which misrepresents Alpers. This confusion may help to ‘ring some problematic bells for ecocritics’ (‘Introduction: Why Pastoral?’ 8), however, the risk of misunderstandings is high. Stating different ways of constructing ‘the pastoral’ is a step towards recognising the georgic mode.

Terminology also plays a role in nullifying or eliding the georgic mode. Rather than referring to the georgic, Australian literary critics refer almost exclusively to pastoral-related terms. Consider the non-idyllic landscapes and violence of the *anti-pastoral* (Delaney) and the *poison pastoral* (Indyk, ‘Kinsella’s Hallmarks’); the non-anthropocentrism (Blair, ‘Amanda Lohrey’s *Vertigo*’; Delaney; McCredden) and ‘uncertainty and incompleteness’ of the *post-pastoral* (Delaney 6–9); the nuanced city-country contrast of the *cosmopolitan pastoral* (Beardwood); the changed boundaries between humans and nature of the *radical pastoral* (Garrard; Kinsella, ‘Radical Western Pastoral’) *subpastoral*, *displaced pastoral*, and *corrupted pastoral* (Kinsella, ‘Is There an Australian Pastoral’), and the ecological focus of the *ecopastoral* (Lynch). Many of these terms label concepts already represented by the georgic mode, for example the uncertainty and harshness of nature (Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?*), and none specifically address labour. Closer attention to ‘the georgic’ would not only further understandings of regions and the farm novel, but connect Australian literary discourse with international and interdisciplinary scholarship on the georgic mode.

Naish’s Contribution to Australia’s Farming Imaginary

One way to demonstrate the value of the georgic mode is to read a novel that aligns with georgic conventions. To this end, I turn to Naish’s *The Cruel Field*. John Naish was a Welsh-migrant canecutter who wrote an autobiography *The Clean Breast* (1961), two novels, *The Cruel Field* (1962) and *That Men Should Fear* (1963), and a number of plays, yet his works are scarcely known. Naish is absent from *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (Peter Pierce ed. 2009) and the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (www.adb.anu.edu.au). The AustLit database holds only three reviews of Naish’s second novel, *That Men Should Fear*, all written

in the year of the novel's publication, which was also the year of the author's death at the age of forty. Both novels are now out of print. Nevertheless, Naish is acknowledged in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* and by Cheryl Taylor and Elizabeth Perkins in *By the Book: A Literary History of Queensland* (2007) edited by Patrick Buckridge and Belinda McKay. Additionally, *The Cruel Field* is instrumental to the research on migrant indentured labourers by historian Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui.

The Cruel Field is a fictional account of the 1951 sugarcane harvest on a farm at Cook's End, Nagonda. The farm is owned by two Italian-migrant brothers, Tony and Peter Leonardi. The protagonist is not a farmer, but the English-migrant canecutter, Emery Carol. Emery joins a canecutting 'gang' comprising four men: brothers Ruf and Jeff Craig, Mark Westcott and Pedro Morgan. These men have cut cane together for years. Due to new industrial rules requiring a minimum of six men in a gang, Emery and young Danny Hoover are signed on. When Emery announces that he intends to cut cane, he receives the 'wise weatherbeaten look of the Queensland old-timer' and is told that 'Cane killed Abel ... And cane will kill you!' (Naish 54). Jeff Craig and his wife Betty live with their children in one of the farm barracks, and the single men in the other. The single-men's barracks consists of a row of individual rooms opening onto the verandah where Emery sleeps. The men share the 'galley' where they take turns to cook (131). Naish's 1951 cane harvest involves the common mid-twentieth-century practice of burning the crop before cutting the stalks by hand. The stalks are loaded onto 'trucks' for transport by rail to a central mill (34). The cutters spend their leisure hours drinking and gambling at The Queen's Hotel. Emery also swims in a rainforest waterhole known as Round Lake, and he and Mark socialise with the Indigenous people living at Turtle Point. Three men die during the harvest: Old Jack Kelly is worked to death, and the farmer Peter Leonardi and canecutter Pedro Morgan die in an uncontrolled canefire. Nonetheless, the harvest is completed. The story ends with Mark Westcott as poor as when he started and headed for a term in Stuart Gaol. And Emery leaves the farm 'without looking back' (222).

Of all the novels connected to the Australian canefields, *The Cruel Field* provides the deepest insights into farming practices associated with cultivating sugarcane and the strongest experience of canefield labour. This experience is achieved through the reader's empathy with the canecutter protagonist. In Jean Devanny's *Cindie: A Chronicle of the Canefields* (1949), by comparison, the protagonist directs canefield labour from afar and only actively engages in fieldwork to grow coffee. In Devanny's *Sugar Heaven* (1936), the narrator makes a brief observation of canefield labour, however, the story centres instead on the political awakening of the housewife protagonist, Dulcie Lee. This awakening occurs predominantly at her house and in town. McKie's *The Crushing* is firmly a town novel with even less to say about farming. In contrast, Naish depicts a range of farming practices (breakpushing, canefiring, canecutting, loading, and planting) and powerfully evokes the challenges of weather, the rat-borne Weil's disease, and the limits of human knowledge and capabilities. His rural perspective is conveyed through the values and daily motivations of farmers and farm workers. This focus on a rural perspective and farming practices makes *The Cruel Field* an important novel for demonstrating georgic conventions.

Georgic Mode Conventions in *The Cruel Field*

The most easily identified georgic convention in *The Cruel Field* is labour. In the georgic mode, labour involves persistent struggle analogous with the effort of soldiers at war (Attié). Naish's labour also mirrors the 'tragic failure of human effort' shown in Wordsworth's poem 'Michael' (Graver 128). The Nagonda canecutters face risks, repetition, fatigue, hot humid conditions,

and a devastating slowness that comes with age. Like Wordsworth, Naish portrays a situation where ‘the slightest relaxation can lead to ruin’ (Graver 119). This is typical of the georgic mode where Virgil’s farmer engages in ‘endless work’ for a harvest to be completed (Low 46). Labour appears to be Naish’s main interest, yet from a philosophical rather than political perspective. Instead of joining Devanny’s cause of improved conditions for canecutters, Naish leaves his readers wondering whether farming is worthwhile for *anyone*. This philosophical quandary mirrors human reflections on war. In this way, along with depictions of risk and struggle, Naish’s labour meets Virgil’s analogy between farming and warfare.

The harvest is another convention of the georgic mode, which Naish uses to assemble his main characters, to bookend the narrative, and to justify the action and tension between characters. His main characters include his canecutter protagonist, other members of the gang, and the farmers for whom they work. The narrative begins and ends with the harvest, which dictates progression of the plot. Naish uses the dramatic event of a canefire to emphasise a narrative climax in which lives are lost. One could argue that this loss of life opposes the traditional georgic representation of the harvest as ‘success’ (Hoorn 258). However, Naish’s climax is more like a lost battle in a war that is ultimately won. The canecutters later celebrate completing the harvest ‘with a cry of ecstasy and a great exaggerated slash’ (Naish 213), and the men receive their final pay. Therefore, despite the harsh conditions and loss of life, the completed harvest means the hostile land is tamed, and the novel abides by both the harvest and warfare conventions of the georgic mode.

Seasons are also integral to the georgic mode, due to their influence on the farmer’s calendar, and Naish makes use of them to guide his readers through his narrative and farm life. Naish uses the by-products of labour—blisters, callouses and corns—as metonyms for the turn of the seasons. In this way, a relationship between labour and the crop cycle is demonstrated:

The blisters go deeper and deeper, unobtrusively become callouses, and then one day the cutter finds himself trimming the great corns with a razor-blade to stop them splitting any further. And in the same way the good months come, September, October, November. The wet season gradually loses its grip until the damp Badila burns happily, contemptuously, drying out as the fire advances through it. The showers become lighter and the intervals between them longer until the middle of the season has come. It all happens gradually; but is noticed suddenly, like the corn on the palm of a hand. (69)

Typically, seasons are used in the farm novel to place characters in repeated situations, thereby demonstrating a deterministic aspect of farming (Freitag). This also applies to the georgic mode, where seasons govern the farmer’s calendar. In *The Cruel Field*, the men harvest in one season and plant in another. Naish makes further use of seasonality by structuring his novel in three parts: the start of a season, the good months, and the end of a season. In this way, seasons and the farmer’s calendar are interwoven with the narrative.

With seasons come harsh conditions which aid the portrayal of a hostile land being tamed. In *The Cruel Field*, the cane is made difficult to cut due to the impact of a storm. The canecutters face further challenges, such as Weil’s disease, uncontrolled fire, and the physical strain of working in the heat and humidity of the Wet Tropics. The motivation of Naish’s canecutters and farmers to withstand financial and physical threats is reminiscent of Henry Lawson’s *The Drover’s Wife*, where ‘the best one can hope for is to survive’ (Andrew Taylor 42). By the end of *The Cruel Field*’s harvest, lives and money are lost, and another storm begins. The

canecutters expect to face harsh conditions again the next year. The land is tamed, but as the georgic mode dictates, this is temporary due to the uncertainty of nature.

Another aspect of the georgic mode in *The Cruel Field* is its representation of heroism and togetherness. Low describes georgic farming as ‘a heroic activity, a kind of constructive warfare in which farmer and ox may labor together as fellow-soldiers’ (8). In *The Cruel Field*, Emery recognises his capacity for heroism in ‘the supreme fitness that had once catapulted him up London escalators when the rugby season had got properly underway’ (69–70). The heroic status of canecutters is implied by the ‘feeling’ that ‘made the schoolie and storekeeper and clerk envy the cutters’ (70). After Peter Leonardi and Pedro Morgan die in the uncontrolled fire, canecutters from other farms come to help: Ben Pitt’s two cutters and the six-man gang from Regenzani’s farm. This mirrors Low’s example where ‘others come to his aid, labouring toward the same ends, taking up the unfinished work and carrying it forward’ (63). So too, Naish’s canecutters work heroically together to complete the harvest.

Finally, instructions on how to perform farming tasks are integral to Virgil’s georgic mode and appear in *The Cruel Field* as a lesson on how to cut cane. An example from Virgil’s poetry is advice on how to maintain soil fertility, as translated by Thomas Fletcher Royds:

Scatter rich dung and unforgetful heap
 Much mould upon them, or with them inter
 Rough shells or stones of porous sort, for so
 The rains will creep between and subtle air
 Will penetrate, and fill their hearts with joy.
 (Georgics II, 415–19) (Virgil 70–71)

In *The Cruel Field*, ageing canecutter Jeff Craig teaches young Danny Hoover how to cut cane by ‘upending the old broom’ and showing him to ‘grab it chest high’ to ‘control the sugarcane’ then use a ‘razor-sharp’ knife and load smaller bundles because ‘speed’ and ‘rhythm’ are the keys to being fast (63). This scene mirrors farming lessons embedded in the georgic mode. Together, the conventions of labour, the harvest, seasons, harsh conditions, heroism, and farming instructions map a familiar georgic territory. From here, the author leads his readers into the unknown region of his farming imaginary.

The Wet Tropics Bioregion in 1951

Naish’s representation of the Wet Tropics Bioregion alters given understandings of Australian seasons; subverts prior Indigenous characterisations as powerless victims of colonisation; and accepts women’s labour as a social norm, albeit as barmaids, nurses and housewives. Naish’s representation of seasons firmly positions this novel in the Wet Tropics. Naish’s seasons are neither contrary to those in Europe as in Henry Kendall’s poem ‘Bell-birds’ (Birns), nor the ‘scorching summer’ of Geraldton in Western Australia (Hughes-d’Aeth, ‘Farm Novel or Station Romance’ 8). In Naish’s storyworld, the wet season continues beyond the Australian December-to-February summer ‘well into April’ (12). Summer and winter are replaced by the wet season and the dry season. That Naish’s canecutters ‘slaved the six-month season’ indicates the duration of the dry harvest season (11). In this way, the four seasons of other parts of Australia are reduced to two. Each of these seasons represents the ‘tortured eschatology’ of Randolph Stow’s ‘scorching summer’ and Canadian novelists’ ‘frozen winter’ (Hughes-d’Aeth, ‘Farm Novel or Station Romance’ 8). During the dry season, men suffer hard physical labour. Similarly, as the wet season begins, Tony Leonardi and Ruf Craig continue to labour, planting

cane on the farm that Tony bought at Windfall Creek. Therefore, the only escape from the physical suffering of labour occurs off the farm.

In *The Cruel Field*, the pastoral mode's leisure and ease predominates in the rainforest. Emery retreats from a complex and oppressive social life to an idyllic engagement with nature. However, this retreat is not a pastoral escape from city life, but rather an escape from farm life. In *The Cruel Field*, farm life is no less busy, organised or hostile than a city. Emery escapes to swim in Round Lake, an idyllic rainforest waterhole, accompanied by the French barmaid, Adèle Bondeau. Adèle is a symbol of culture. Emery had previously described her as 'resembl[ing] a flower in absolute desolation, or culture in a cave' (92). On their way to Round Lake, Emery compares Adèle 'high-handedly with the bleached ungainly country wives' (135). In this way, Naish makes use of his women characters to contrast Adèle, a sophisticated traveller, with the crude and ignorant locals. This contrast corresponds with Robert Beardwood's *cosmopolitan pastoral*. '[N]aturalization ceremony notwithstanding' Emery decides that he too is European (92). This rainforest scene represents the type of pastoral element that Andrew Taylor identifies in David Campbell's poem 'Droving' of a 'young swain and his female companion at ease beside a creek' (44). In *The Cruel Field*, Adèle's husband Pierre arrives and takes his wife back to town. For Emery, the rainforest becomes 'suddenly as cold as a vault,' and he runs to the farm to 'end the depressing journey as soon as possible' (138). This loss of Adèle's presence represents a separation from cultural life, from Europe, and from love. Naish offers no poem or song to resolve this loss, as is typical of a pastoral love lament (Alpers, 'Convening and Convention'). Instead, Emery turns to writing a play. Nevertheless, Emery's statement to Adèle at Round Lake that, 'You will not settle here ... If you did ...' to which Adèle replies 'Yes' (Naish 137) may be regarded as a form of pastoral invitation (Alpers 'Convening and Convention'). This transfer of the pastoral ideal from a Western human-formed landscape to the rainforest aligns with the way early Australian poets 'pastoralize[d] the bush' (Kinsella, 'Is There an Australian Pastoral' 353). Despite rainforest being represented in the novel as free of human intervention, I use the term *rainforest* rather than *wilderness* to recognise that Indigenous country is 'not a wilderness, but a humanised world' (Banning et al. vi). In this way, I counter the ideas of Australian wilderness that John Kinsella notes in Coral Hull's poem 'Rural Victoria' as places unoccupied by humans (Kinsella 'Is There an Australian Pastoral' 366). In *The Cruel Field*, the rainforest represents a spatial zone where the pastoral mode's leisure, ease and retreat dominate.

Conversely, Naish's depiction of fishing aligns Indigenous hunting with the georgic mode. Historically, fishing is linked to the pastoral mode through its association with leisure (McIlhaney). Low points to solitary fishing as 'a preferred activity for gentlemen' which holds 'the dignity of religious contemplation' (24). Yet it is also an activity for women, alone 'amid the beauty of nature' (McIlhaney 57). Anne E. McIlhaney traces the 'British piscatory (fishing) pastoral' back to *The Treatyse of Fysshynge wyth an Angle* (1496) (56–57). In Australia, Naish presents a different image. Fishing, in *The Cruel Field*, involves the labour of a number of Indigenous people to provide a social benefit. Emery joins a group of Aboriginal characters—Hughie Tray, young Willie Lyons and some boys—to fish from a rowing boat in the sea near Turtle Point. A hierarchy of skill is depicted. Willy 'load[s Emery's] bait and lines' (104), which results in Emery catching a few small cod and a trevally. However, the older Aboriginal man, Hughie Tray, has the greatest skill; he catches a giant wrasse that impresses the boys and ensures everyone is fed. Here, fishing is detached from its pastoral history of an adult in contemplative solitude to become the labour of a group of communicative Indigenous men and boys to produce food. Labour, group effort and social benefit aligns fishing, as a form of Indigenous hunting, with the georgic mode.

Naish's inclusion of a Torres Strait Islander character strengthens his regional depiction of 'the North.' In the Wet Tropics, Indigenous people from the Torres Strait Islands and Yarrabah were employed to fill post-war labour shortages in the 1946 and 1947 harvest seasons (Griggs). From the 1948 season, displaced persons and migrants began arriving from Europe in large numbers to complete the two-year term of indentured labour required for migration (Griggs; Vidonja Balanzategui). With this in mind, the Indigenous characters of Naish's 1951 season may be viewed as not only dispossessed of their lands by colonial occupation, but pushed aside from paid employment as canecutters by European displaced persons and migrants. Regardless, Naish gives his Indigenous characters agency and subversive power. In *The Cruel Field*, Indigenous men adopt leadership roles. When Caucasian canecutter Mark crashes his truck, Kevin Kelly, of Aboriginal and Irish descent, locates a replacement wheel, and Torres Strait Islander Chick Lyons oversees the project of fitting the wheel. Later, Mark is forcibly removed from an Indigenous home, which subverts the typical mid-twentieth-century social hierarchy: he 'felt the door battered inwards against his heels and the wind in his hair again. Then ... Hughie's crinkly hair in his stomach and under his hands. He couldn't stop himself going backwards ... the door was shut by the time he got to his feet ... the hut ... a solid blank surface now with the window-shutters down' (185). These depictions of Indigenous agency and subversion of social hierarchy, when combined with racist dialogue and a portrayal of marginalisation, provide a sensitive view for the 1960s of the mid-twentieth-century circumstances of Indigenous people in the Wet Tropics Bioregion.

Although Naish shows no women directly involved in farming, he naturalises women's labour through characterisations of working women. Readers are introduced to a barmaid, nurse, and housewife/mother: roles that women depicted in rural romances often fight against (O'Mahony). Taylor and Perkins identify Naish's women characters as 'foolish, heartless or mercenary' (240). This is largely true; however, Naish's narrator exhibits a measure of sensitivity by revealing the 'penury' of nurse Judith Harrison's childhood (56), and the difficulties of Betty Craig's unpaid labour as a housewife/mother due to 'the chains of bawling children round her ankles' (70). Only Betty works on the farm. Through her marriage to a canecutter, she indirectly supports the farming enterprise. The lack of women directly involved in farming limits the level to which *The Cruel Field* draws women into the georgic mode. The absence of women in Naish's canefields mirrors Glover's exclusively male workforce in *My Harvest Home*, which Hoorn views as 'reflecting local circumstances' and compares with British harvest scenes of the same era that show both men and women in the field (258). Overall, *The Cruel Field's* imaginary comprises a section of regional society dominated by tough multicultural, non-Indigenous men working hard to harvest a tropical food crop amid excessive heat and rain and the risks of disease and accidents.

Conclusion

Reading the georgic mode and region in John Naish's *The Cruel Field* draws sugarcane farming and Indigenous fishing into the Australian farming imaginary. This strengthens recognition of labour, harsh realities and Indigenous people as keys to understanding Australia's rural development. In the same way that John Glover's painting *My Harvest Home* employs conventions of the georgic mode to convey insights into early-nineteenth-century regional Tasmania, John Naish employs conventions of the georgic mode to convey insights into the mid-twentieth-century Wet Tropics Bioregion. The harsh conditions and human suffering in Naish's canefield imaginary echo Virgil's analogy between farming and warfare. Other conventions of the georgic mode convey insights into seasons, rainforest, and the lives of

Indigenous people and women in the 1950s' in the area now designated as the Wet Tropics Bioregion. In Naish's imaginary, the traditional city/country contrast becomes a farm/rainforest contrast. This mirrors a shift from the pastoral's urban perspective to the georgic's rural perspective. My examination of unstated assumptions has repercussions for how 'the pastoral' is understood and employed in Australian literary criticism. This essay positions the georgic mode as integral to interpretations of the farm novel. By embracing Indigenous food production, it also widens conceptions of the georgic. Further research is needed to identify other Australian writings where georgic conventions support literary regionalism and where representations of Indigenous hunting or gathering may be viewed as georgic.

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NOTES

¹ Pastoral and georgic may also be differentiated as the poetry about herding domesticated grazing animals and the poetry of farming. See Paul Alpers. *What Is Pastoral?* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997; David M. Halperin. 'Pastoral Violence in the "Georgics": Commentary on Ross.' *Arethusa* 23.1 (1990): 77–93; Anthony Low. *The Georgic Revolution*. Princeton UP, 1985.

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