

Dispossession, Possession, and Obsession: Changescapes and Abjection in the Riverina Fiction of E. O. Schlunke

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Before the High Court's recognition of Native Title, literature that explored dispossession, invasion, or colonisation was rare. Just prior to Mabo, anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose wrote that because "Australian history is not so much a set of events or social relations as an arena of self-definition." for non-Indigenous Australians, the underlying fact of colonisation "constantly distorts their assertions of their own identity and of their relations to others" (2). The self-definitions imposed by that history informed fiction writers, like other Australians, who therefore rarely proceeded to imagine the Indigenous experience of murder, land loss and cultural erasure across generations. Lukas Klik, however, makes a convincing case that the silence enveloping these themes has not banished settler colonialism from Australian fiction. Instead, employing a key notion of Julia Kristeva, he argues that it emerges as an "abject structure that, despite efforts to do so, cannot be banished" (Klik 1). While his argument develops from a reading of Kenneth Cook's *Fear is the Rider*, written in the 1980s, I elaborate on it through the work of a regional writer, E. O. Schlunke, from a generation earlier.

Through Schlunke's writing I suggest that the "abject structure" perceived by Klik in fiction-writing is expressed in a further dimension: the land in tension between its status as a symbolic and a physiological entity—between the natural environment in its organic and inorganic manifestations shaped in part by Indigenous practices and simply called "the land." This settler's "land" is matter for "self-definition," asserting relationship, signalling individual or collective ownership, aligning it with and distinguishing it from European "nature." Kristeva recognises the life of fiction writing as enacting such a double entity. The nature of writing is solitary "screen[ed] from another's appraisal" while the writer "manag[es] the rapport with reality for the subject himself" (10). That double "reality" necessarily includes relations with the physical world in a junction of settler as subject and as body. Such a relationship is what Ross Gibson theorises as "changescape," a poetics that is mutable and includes aesthetic, historical and physical relations. Tony Hughes-d'Aeth argues in his ground-breaking *Literary History of the Wheatbelt* that regional writing has "particular value as a document of record" (3) differing from economic, ecological or agricultural records in that it offers "the interior apprehension of how life feels to people" (3) which in turn allows a better understanding of applications of settler colonialism.

In this essay I explore these propositions through the fiction and farm-works of E. O. Schlunke (1906–1960) who wrote, lived and farmed in the Eastern Riverina of NSW.¹ His foregrounding of the other-than-human and the natural world he works within come perilously close to engaging a poetics of dispossession and possession. While his early fiction deflects that move through affects derived from a Western ideology of farming, later stories support Klik's proposition that settler-colonial history erupts in the form of the abject.

That abjection emerges most powerfully in Schlunke's story "The Man Farther Out." Set in the infamous drought of 1944, it opens with an acknowledgement of the damage to land being inflicted by European pastoralism and moves to the destructive potential of scientific extremism and racism (it contains some shocking details). Jenkins is a white cattle farmer, who, sitting on his verandah with Freeman, an urban visitor, is waiting out a dust storm:

Jenkins . . . could see some of his stock wandering disconsolately round their feeding troughs, waiting for the next meal to be brought to them. They powdered his good red soil with their hooves, so that it joined the grey western dust on the way to the mountains and the sea. It hurt him to see his land suffering like that. (94)

This passage is not merely scene-setting but establishes Jenkins's emotional connection with the living world: it is the devastation of the earth that hurts, not simply the starving and impatient cattle; not just Jenkins's loss of livelihood or the undermining of his ownership. Schlunke's story-titles frequently deploy a significant *double entendre* and, in this case, "farther out" indicates both geographical distance—the Far West of NSW—and the extremes of political thought and agricultural science contributing to the devastation of Jenkins's land. As the two watch the droughty scene through swirling dust what at first looks like an emu approaching proves to be a "westerner," that is, a landowner from "farther out." Coated in dust, the nameless character explains that neighbouring pastoralists' cattle "ate the land bare [and] were the ruin of us" (97). Overgrazing, one of Schlunke's thematic preoccupations, has caused not only dust to rise but the sand beneath to blow in such clouds that the humanity of "the man" is obscured. He tells Jenkins and Freeman that he is on his way to Canberra, to inform the Prime Minister of discoveries he has made "in the last two months" (99).

First, he experimented on his white family. He has been left by his wife and surviving children after one died through being "conditioned" to live without water: "I was doing it because I have a theory that if we, as a nation, could learn to live without water we would be unconquerable" (97). He was not then alone, having forced his First Nations employee—whose name is Warri but is also addressed as "boy"—to stay: "I didn't want to lose him because I was using him as a test case in determining the relative power of survival in the white and dark man" (97).

He goes on with his account: as the drought continued and the desperation everything had for water worsened, strange reptiles began to appear: the last of these were living boulders exposed by the loss of soil. Tortoise-like, they moved almost imperceptibly and Warri, now terrified, possesses the knowledge to recognise them as Stony Desert creatures that survive by eating "softer rock that absorbs a little moisture from the air" (98) while they search for more liquid. Warri warns that they both should flee, but the dustman "decides that a few hundred armour-plated tortoises couldn't harm a white man" (98).

Still determined to carry on scientific research into "racial strength," "the man" forces Warri to guard the water-tank overnight by chaining him to it. In the morning, there is no sign of Warri except his thigh bone. "The man" shows the bone to Freeman and Jenkins, telling them he has a load of the "tortoises" in an "iron safe" on his truck parked where he's run out of petrol down the road. Freeman, disgusted, goes to fetch the police while the "westerner" goes back to his vehicle. When they go in search of him, they find nothing but his own thigh bone lying on the road. The door of the safe is open, the safe empty. The white man's scientific theories are reduced to a bone (an ironic reversal of a trope of cannibalism in imperial popular culture) as Schlunke satirises the nation's championship of racial superiority, white science and "outback" masculinity. Like bodily fluids, the earth cannot be rejected or avoided. The land has literally devoured "the man" and its mobile, flesh-devouring boulders fit Klik's notion of settler colonialism as the unavoidable Abject uncannily well.

Situating Schlunke

"The Man Farther Out" appeared in *Stories of the Riverina* (1965), a posthumous collection of Schlunke's short stories, published by Angus & Robertson. The other twenty-one stories

support his stated intention “to write only of those things he encountered in his everyday life” (Semmler, Introduction n.p.). Schlunke had published fiction in journals and newspapers since the late 1930s. Despite the popularity of the short story in Australian literature (Stinson 50), his reputation had been relatively small because, at the same time, regional or “farm” writing acquired little esteem as “literature”; focus was predominantly on metropolitan modernity (Webby 269, qtd in Stinson 50). In a generous introduction to *Stories of the Riverina*, however, Clement Semmler observed: “[A] characteristic of Schlunke’s writing was one which gave his work its strength, directness and authenticity—and simultaneously defined its limitations. He was a regional writer—one of the best, I feel, that have so far appeared in our literature” (*Stories* vii).

In addition to his regional location, Schlunke’s background was distinctive among Australian writers. Firstly, at the beginning of the twentieth century his was the third generation of his family to live on, with, and by the land they called “Hope Vale” near Temora in the NSW Riverina, by contrast with rapid turnover of the region’s more recent white farm buyers. Secondly, Schlunke’s background is distinguished by its biculturalism: his family was among the German Evangelical Lutheran colonists who moved to the Riverina from South Australia to form a self-contained community—resembling a closed fundamentalist sect—controlled by a charismatic pastor and a committee of (male) elders. Its members, devout, German-speaking, often illiterate, followed puritanical social rules, while being both adjacent to and separated from Anglo-Irish and Aboriginal people alike. (Spennemann 57; Wilde et al. 610; Robinson; Temora Historical Society.)

Schlunke’s family was not completely dedicated to the secluded Lutheran community: after attending its primary school during a childhood otherwise deep in the rural world, he won a scholarship to the selective Hurlstone Agricultural High School in Sydney. He returned to help on the farm afterwards, but his father died in an accident when Schlunke was only 21; he inherited not only the farm but the pressure to provide for the family from it. He remained a full-time farmer for the rest of his life.

Schlunke’s publishing career began in the 1930s with realist narratives set in the district or in towns and hamlets in the immediate vicinity. He submitted them first to *The Bulletin*, then later *Meanjin*, the ABC, and lesser-known rural periodicals such as *Muster* (see Schlunke, Papers). They circulated widely, some translated and published in Germany, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union. Some were included in the annual *Coast to Coast* anthology. Angus & Robertson published the collections *The Man in the Silo* in 1955 and *The Village Hampden* in 1958. Of his five novels, two early works—*Rosenthal* and *Foray on Freeling*—were serialised in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1939 and another, *Feather Your Nest*, in *The Bulletin* in 1954 (Wilde et al. 610). They add to what Elizabeth Smyth notes is “Australia’s small collection of farm novels” (2).² As his entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* notes:

All this time [Schlunke] . . . was a hard-working and enterprising farmer. Carrying out extensive pasture improvement and soil conservation at Hope Vale, he pioneered the use of contour ploughing (with a chisel plough), flumes (grassed waterways) and holding dams—to maximize rainfall effectiveness and check erosion. He wrote about his work and was interviewed on the ABC radio’s series “The Land and its People” (G.P. Walsh).

Schlunke died in 1960 at the age of 54. Some years later Geoffrey Dutton wrote of him as “a neglected and serious writer” (4).

Reviewers had compared Schlunke’s fiction with the works of Frank Dalby Davison and Peter Cowan. True, both have regional settings though Davison’s plots, animal and

human characters have an ideological application that Schlunke's fiction lacks. Cowan's stories include farm settings and characters within which natural beings tend to serve the plot rather than be included in their own right. Colin Thiele, with whom Schlunke might be compared given their shared South Australian German Lutheran heritage, also published collections of pastoral short stories and novels such as *The Sun on the Stubble* (1961). These showed farm life in the humorous style of Steele Rudd or Lawson but it is Elyne Mitchell whose writing and farming career most closely resembles Schlunke's inclusiveness and engagement with the other-than-human. Her publications included the *Silver Brumby* series for young adults and monographs on soil erosion and conservation.

Schlunke's collections had been reviewed in literary journals (see for example, Howard) and were judged in terms of short stories in the Lawsonian tradition. This required the narrative to be, in Elizabeth Webby's summary, "realist, using a colloquial, usually male, voice and featuring working-class characters and bush settings"—an expectation that "arguably remained dominant until the 1970s" (Webby 269, qtd. in Stinson 50). I will discuss later how this expectation perhaps led reviewers to overlook much of the complexity of the stories and fail to remark on Schlunke's omission of the history of dispossession and colonisation in his district.³

Speaking Out/Not Speaking Out

Dispossession of the Wiradjuri First Nations peoples by British "squatters" had been extreme in the Temora region—beginning in the 1820s first through their invasion of the grassy woodland thought ideal for sheep and cattle, followed by a gold rush in 1881, then subdivision of the vast squatters' "holdings" into the small farms that enabled the German Lutherans to purchase and "settle"—a cumulative dispossession so intense that the very name and dialect of the traditional owners of the "Hope Vale" area is uncertain: Narraburrah to the west and—probably connecting with Tumut—Ghudamangdhuri to the east (Spears, personal communication).

Wiradjuri writers have addressed this tragedy in many different forms. Jeanine Leane has made a specialty of archival retrieval, describing "writing [as] an act of remembering a dismembered past" (6) and other Wiradjuri writers have been re-memberers of their own past and their living culture. Celebrated writers like Kevin Gilbert, Jeanine Leane herself, Kerry Reid-Gilbert, Anita Heiss, Tara June Winch, Stan Grant, and Brenda Saunders have and are writing back from their country. And not only writing: as Melissa Lucashenko notes about Kerry Reid-Gilbert's *The Cherry Picker's Daughter*: "First and foremost [that memoir] taught me that the fighting spirit of Wiradjuri women is a mighty thing" (iii).

Schlunke was thus living and writing on Wiradjuri country, while his published fiction has no representation of Wiradjuri people's sovereignty or continuous and documented battles to preserve their livelihood and cultural practices on Country. Given the sensitivity he shows to diverse ethnicities in stories such as "Assimilation," this is surprising—as is his occasional use of racist or ethnicist clichés. Though used to convey the perspective of a narrator or character, such phrases also commit uncomfortably to discourses of the day and "the result, consciously or not, is to assist, and thereby to justify, the colonial mission" (Bode 178). The paradoxical result is to both use and ignore settler colonialism, in other words to "Behold the utility of an Idea you can't look in the eye" (Araluen 48).

Evelyn Araluen's observation draws the writer close to Kristeva's positioning of "him" as freed from reality while having to negotiate that reality in "real life" as Schlunke does as writer and farmer:

Through its solitary economy, writing protects the subject from phobic affects—and if it enables him to re-elaborate his psychic space, it also withdraws that space from reality testing. The psychic benefit of such a withdrawal is obvious, but does not bypass the question of managing the rapport with reality for the subject himself. (Kristeva 11)

As we have seen in “The Man Farther Out,” Schlunke’s “rapport with reality” breaks into the “solitary economy” of writing, to be expressed in the participation of the other-than-human in events, personalities and communities. His stories are nonetheless delivered in a tone of equable impartiality by his frame-narrators. The dexterous layering is less surprising given the cultural depth that Semmler, who knew Schlunke well, described the author bringing to his writing:

One of the qualities that won Schlunke respect and affection of his friends was his considerable literary and artistic sensibility. He read widely, from Thomas Mann to James Joyce. We used to have friendly arguments about Joyce; Schlunke did not quite go the full distance with him. But he did admire Joyce’s short stories. . . . Schlunke also loved good music and was keenly interested in art. (*Uncanny Man* 166)

Critical Prisms

Most of Schlunke’s stories have farm settings; the others are set in small towns and regional city communities, which he again observes intensely, and shows human characters similarly engaged in ordinary events. Possession of land is again, in stories such as “Into My Parlour” and “Once a Sheep Stealer,” a core concern, this time in the form of trading, maintaining, and cherishing real estate.

In these ways, the land is ever-present in Schlunke’s writing, which might suggest “colonial pastoral” as an appropriate critical category by which to frame his work. There are problems, though, fitting his works into this schema, as they rarely use the vista or remote “landscape” of that genre; instead, the natural world, both precolonial and introduced, is an immediate, enveloping host to human and other-than-human beings that also determine events. The tropes of isolation and loneliness that characterise the landscape in other settler literature and art are absent; instead, there are stories of intense relationships with the immediate land, of social and local human cohesion, of shared heritage in the Lutheran community and on the small farms with their share-farming strategies. The lives of Schlunke’s characters are determined by work necessitated by and—for a reader now mindful of the “Idea that cannot be spoken”—by possession of their “property.” The significance of “ownership” is illustrated by a passage in his early and semi-autobiographical novel *Rosenthal* which, with its emphasis on labour, is also an awkward fit with the pastoral. Soon after Otto, the central character, inherits the farm as a very young man; he thinks that ownership of land by an individual is the most desirable experience and is justified by dedication to the manual labours of farming:

Otto thought that there was nothing in the world so gratifying as the feel of your own land under your feet. It gave a feeling of security that nothing else could give. He began to think of the passion people had for owning land, and how proud they were to have it. Let the humblest get a piece of earth under his feet that he could call his own, and though it made him toil from dawn til dusk for a living that a navvy would despise, he thought that he was a king. (175–76)

The sensory immediacy of feet on the earth is characteristic of Schlunke, and Otto's attitude is also shaped by an ideology of colonising with European-style farming that is elevated by state and commercial discourse, leading to his guilelessly youthful sense that despite labouring "from dawn til dusk for a living that a navvy would despise, he thought that he was a king."

Such farming was affectively celebrated in the early twentieth century in multiple ways, perhaps justified ultimately by the Lockean philosophical proposition that to work the land is to assert ownership (Davis 62). For example, *The Countryman*, a monthly magazine circulated throughout Britain and the Commonwealth, flagged an epigraph adding the authority of statesmen, classical and Biblical sources (see Figure 1) to the commendation of farming as a way of life.

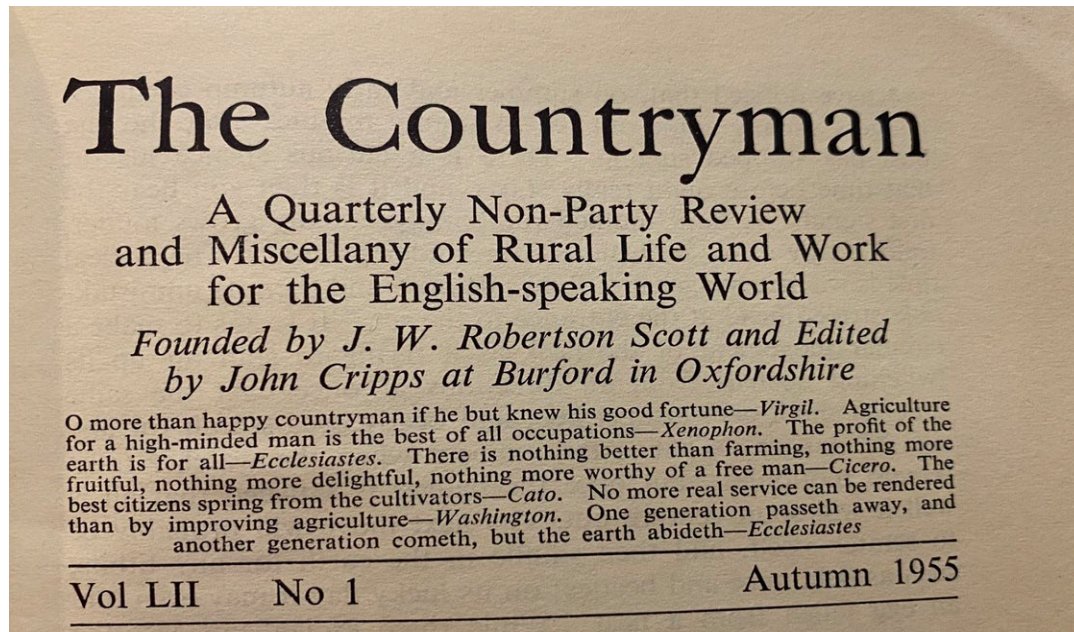


Figure 1: The masthead of *The Countryman*, Autumn 1955.

This understanding of farming as a benefit to humanity, the state, and the individual underlies *terra nullius*; it justified dispossession, and was part of the complex of legal, philosophical and commercial reasonings that propelled many colonists from Europe. Thus, the labouring yeoman-farmer identity assumed by the young Otto was an accepted icon of "a white worker forged by the sinews of his labour, a man who honed the earth, while the earth honed him" (Mauch, Morgan and O'Gorman 7). It is not consistent with a pastoralist detachment. Smyth argues:

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 . . . ignores harsh realities . . . and marginalises Indigenous people. (1)

She develops an argument in favour of the georgic, thus providing an approach to farm literature like Schlunke's. "Put simply," she says, "the georgic mode attends to labour and the uncertainty of nature" (1). In fiction it also allows for the emergence of the abject from naturalistic detail.

Schlunke's characters carry out farm work that serves different creative and narrative purposes, including as part of the structure of plot and theme, for example in the story called simply "Hay". As was often his practice, its opening paragraphs signal character, plot, and the structure of the narrative itself.⁴ Here again the ontology of emu and man is blurred, with the presence of the former signalling participation of the immediate bio-community in the seasonal process of hay-cutting as well as being symbolic of the human community with its varied habits and values:

The Kleinert boys, being keen of eye and devoted to the cheapest of blood sports, were the first to notice Weismann taking long walks in his big wheat paddock.

Because the crop was tall and dense, they could see little more than his head, and at first suspected that it was an emu. But emus are prone to stops and starts, to meaningless wanderings hither and thither, and circuitous pursuits of each other by means of which they knock down about fifty times as much wheat as they eat; and the object in the crop was obviously walking straight along a drill wheel-track, which indicated very positively to the Kleinerts that it was the owner taking stock of his crop and not breaking down one more stalk than was necessary. ("Hay" 22).

Though the reference to "blood sports" is directed at wildlife and hints at a history of violence, Schlunke's introduction is further complicated as the story progresses and the reader notes that the behaviour of Weismann, the central character, does in fact mirror that of the emus. He gets his hay cut and stoked as a result of his apparently guileless "circuitous pursuits" and "meaningless wanderings" among his neighbours, inducing them to compete against each other. These seemingly random interactions achieve his hay-cutting goal as directly as his walk along the "drill-wheel track." As the work progresses not only emus but spiders, beetles, horses, dogs, and a skylark witness or work in the operation.

Although the labour involved accords with Smyth's account of the georgic, a further question arises from the combining of Schlunke's farming, his natural world and his fiction—that is, "the question of managing the rapport with reality" (Kristeva 10). Ross Gibson, considering such a combination of art, country and work in a Pilliga Forest wood-cutter's camp, saw "some dynamic relationship within its parts" (24), and went on to coin the term "changescape" to describe

an aesthetic and practical system whose matter, method and thematics encompassed the fragility, mutability and fecundity of the habitable world. Predominantly meditative, albeit laborious, constructed, maintained and evolving in concert with a dynamic environment. (25)

In Schlunke's life and in his writings, as in a changescape "the edges between culture and cosmos are porous" (Gibson 26). The more degraded the ecosystem within the "dynamic environment," the more easily the abject is seen. The natural world might be included quite simply as metaphor grafting human and animal behaviour: in one example, when a visiting official attempts to co-opt the solitary, misanthropic farmer Schultz, the bureaucratic subject is shown to contrast starkly with the natural subject:

Heron stepped forward briskly and proceeded to address Schultz on the general outlines of the Greater South-Western Water Conservation and Land Preservation Scheme. Schultz stood there, with his head half turned away, like a horse that is being forced to face a hailstorm. ("The Psychologists" 80)

Here the rural subject is identified with a horse suffering a barrage of hail but forced by the implied rider/bureaucracy to obey. Beyond the hailstorm image, the story continues to invoke water as metaphor and plot device, depicting its movements through swamp and between contour banks. The abject need not manifest as grotesque creatures or bloodthirsty boys: Schultz, having cleared his land so that it is now “uniformly flat and bare of trees” experiences the abject as a “bitterly cold south-west wind [that] swept across [the land] unchecked” (*Stories* 78). Schultz obsessively identifies “his” land with his self. Not unsympathetically the story suggests that the two are mutually created. The visiting officials with their project to channel a stream across his land, while reducing the swamp, manifest both “the paternal, rule-governed symbolic order” (Gross 93) and the repressed history of dispossession. Gibson informs us:

A changescape helps you think and feel so that you are engaged with the dynamic world, so that you feel informed about its maintenance and feel motivated by its available momentum rather than distressed by its entropy. A changescape is a vulnerable but sustainable place with practical poetics suffusing it. (25)

This outline accords with Schlunke’s representation of landscape, his embrace of land as inseparable from being, when he hints at a greater participatory presence in such stories, a kind of energy principle that flows between and sustains all forms of life like a changescape or dynamic environment. “Complexity” is the term Gibson unpacks (28–29) to apply to human interaction and coincidentally in the scene he sketches before theorising, he describes the formative human presence as, like Schlunke’s Schultz, also perceiving himself as outside the symbolic order and people as embodying the Law. Schlunke unpacks possession as ownership for settler-colonists who make independent decisions on “their” land but they and land are subject, like the horse, to forces such as government decisions, market fluctuations, pressure from manufacturers, the practices of neighbours, and lack of political influence (Blaikie 6). Accountability for devastating their “property is implied nonetheless: elsewhere I have discussed the later story “The House in the Country” (1958) which, by contrast with *Rosenthal*, moves away from celebration of ownership and work to stewardship, Aboriginal care and to the best farming as minimal disturbance of the land (see Holloway). Likewise, “The Man Farther Out,” the tale with which I commenced this analysis of Schlunke’s work, also a later story, presents a character whose corrupt dynamism is beyond changescape or the georgic in taking the dispossessors’ practices to their logical end. The abject in the land itself responds; with the emergence of violent monsters from the devastated earth, the unspeakable Idea comes to the surface of a land so disturbed it consumes First Nations people and colonists alike.

Conclusion

E. O. Schlunke’s fiction focused on his immediate region and I have suggested in this essay that we can discern in it “the interior apprehension of how life feels to people” (Hughes-d’Aeth 3)—that is, how it felt to settler-colonists of his time and place. His use of labour as a mode of relationship defining land, place and people fits an understanding of the georgic as a colonising ideology though Schlunke’s reach goes beyond this ideology, in the delicacy of inclusion with which he creates society from human and natural presences together. Far from recognising Native Title, Schlunke’s stated intention to write only from “things he had first-hand knowledge of” suggests that he was aware of or sensitive to “things” he chose to avoid. “The Man Farther Out” is an exception in that it digs deeply into White racism and murderous exploitation. Klik’s identification of settler-colonialism as an abject structure that cannot be erased can be apprehended in the story in relation to the latent monstrous that emerges and

survives, because land has been ruthlessly exploited. In other stories, exploitation is closely related to the economic and ideological drives to possess land, in tension with suffering that results from its degradation. Kristeva's notion of the bodily entity of the writer who must, as subject, engage with symbolic reality helps represent Schlunke's combined aesthetic and material environment in which the human is embedded and creates as "he" lives, a "changescape." Within it abject structures appear as destructive winds, waterlogged earth or dust storms caused by wholesale land-clearing. The presence of an absence, of traditional owners who maintained its well-being becomes obvious and with it the history of that absence. In the decades since the High Court's ruling on Native Title, literary and research writing by Wiradjuri people has taken settler-colonists to new understanding of caring for country and the history of its undoing. The outcome of the recent referendum cannot halt that process.



Figure 2. Photo by Sally Ward

NOTES

¹ I acknowledge that I have grown up on country stolen from the Tarlo/Gundugara people of the Southern Highlands. Although I recognise the overwhelming injustice and violence of settler colonialism, I do not experience it as a First Nations person does.

² *Rosenthal* was republished by the Temora Shire Council in 2013.

³ 19 Sept: “professor [sic] Elkins [sic] very pleasant, wise & witty about the aborigines.” E. O. Schlunke Diary 1958; Papers Box mlk. 03823 mlms 4585. State Library of NSW.

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