

Sunshine, “Sultanas and Lexias”: Place-Making in Sunraysia

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Place-making is fundamental to the poetics of empire. A detailed exploration of the relationship between name and place in the region of Sunraysia in north-western Victoria and south-western NSW is revelatory of the “region” as a construct, and the role of place names in furthering the colonial enterprise. Whilst regions can be said to coalesce around a unifying factor, whether or not a region endures can also be contingent on the poetic valency of the name used to describe it. Both the name of a region and the stories told about it help secure its place in the cultural imaginary. Although founded on a false premise—a hydrocolony formed around an impermanent waterway—the Sunraysia topos was sufficiently evocative to conjure up an entire reality. The name and its region prevail. Colonial places can “grow into” their skins. As Karen Barad has theorised, the material and the discursive can be consubstantiating (Barad); however, colonial insistence on the “blankness” of pre-settlement history combined with a failure to acknowledge settler violence, ultimately see these place-making narratives fail. The history of Sunraysia reminds us that names are the means by which coloniality is enacted, iterated and performed.

(Where Is?) Sunraysia

The area of south-eastern Australia loosely referred to as Sunraysia is famously amorphous and indeed seems to lack a “unifying characteristic” to even justify its status as a region. The map in Figure 1 outlines the area generally denoted by the term. As a category it is actively contested by other more convincing taxonomies. Sunraysia is intersected by the state border of Victoria and New South Wales and a cluster of other “regions” such as the Mallee, Riverina and Millewa challenge and overlap its borders. Electoral and municipal divisions are also drawn along other lines. The category of Sunraysia becomes intelligible however if one understands it as a type of “hydrocolony,” that is, a place which has limits “indelibly shaped by imperial uses of water” (Hofmeyr 9). Its main towns of Swan Hill, Robinvale, Wentworth and Mildura cling to the back of the Murray and the region depends upon on the river for its sustenance, industry and identity. Geography is after all, as Neil Smith has theorised, a “practice of empire” (Smith 493). I argue here that a “place name” can be seen as the most convincing story being told about any given locale at a particular point in time, albeit a story that is itself constantly in flux, and that builds upon, and is always already a citation, performance and reiteration of stories told before.

In this paper I probe four key place-making narratives pertaining to the region with regard to the way in which they act to further the imperatives of empire. Whilst the narratives differ substantially, I argue here that all trade, cite, and expand upon, performative representations (and indeed a conflation) of ideas of “whiteness,” prosperity and sunshine in order to advance imperial agendas. Explorer Thomas Mitchell’s “Australia Felix,” the settlement prospectus known as “The Red Book,” Ernestine Hill’s *Water into Gold* and of course “Sunraysia” itself, are examples of a poetics of empire; they reify, validate and fortify the colonial matrix from which they emerge. Employing Annie Ernaux’s insight that all family history is also social history (*The Years*), I weave into this literary-historical analysis an interrogation of my own family’s participation in the place-making narratives of the region over the last hundred years.

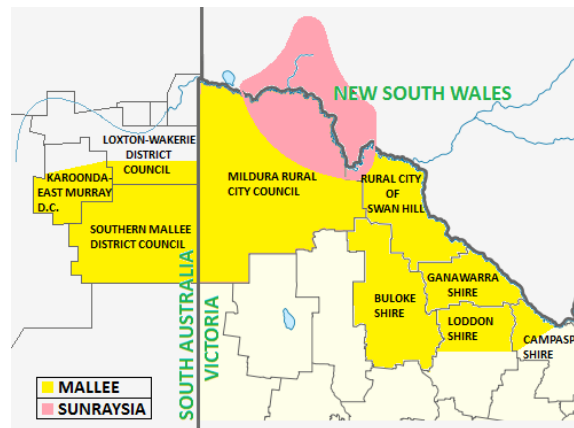


Figure 1. Map of Sunraysia
 “Landscape of Mallee and Mulga.” (odysseytraveller.com)

“Australia Felix”: Settler Creation Myths and Home for the Colonial Imagination

If, as Judith Wright has suggested, white Australians have configured themselves as having arrived in the continent by almost “supernatural descent” (*The Generations of Men* 5), explorer narratives such as Mitchell’s can be seen as foundational texts for this makeshift cosmivision. Inland Australia was written into the colonial imaginary in the journals of the first explorers. Charles Sturt and surveyor-general Thomas Mitchell both led expeditions into the Sunraysia region in the 1830s. In 1836, when travelling through what we today call the Western District, Mitchell christened the “flowery plains” and “rich soil” he found there “Australia Felix.” Through publication of his journal, *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia; with Descriptions of the Recently Explored Region of Australia Felix, and of the Present Colony of New South Wales*, in 1838, and the subsequent publication of Thomas Ham’s Australia Felix map in 1847 (Ham), the name became associated with the wider, then unsettled area we now identify as Victoria. Whilst Mitchell’s expedition was a catalyst for settlement, my interest is in the role it played in creating a poetics of place for the fledgling colony—a poetics of empire. The expedition journal offered an entry point into the interior for the colonial imagination, and as such can be seen as a key creation myth for settler Australia. In the lands of Australia Felix, Mitchell was confident that he had found a new “Eden”—a “country ready for the immediate reception of civilised man” (145). The Latin “felix” translates as both fortunate and happy. Finding poetry in the landscape and referencing classical myth, his journals sanitise the empire’s most base appetites for control and expansion. In Mitchell’s writing of the landscape, “progress” and “agriculture” are coded as waypoints to the sublime.

In fact, his expedition was also the performative sleight of hand that transmogrified sovereign Indigenous lands into the colony of New South Wales. His mandate to find the junction of the Darling and Murray Rivers had been prompted by English *horror vacui* at the still gaping Australian interior. The fact that in 1836 no detailed map yet existed was a source of anxiety for the British. Government eagerness to survey the “fair blank sheet” of the interior was both pragmatic and symbolic (Mitchell 146). As novelist Abdulrazak Gurnah has written, “maps made places on the edge of the imagination seem graspable and placeable” (*By the Sea* 35). Australia’s vastness meant that symbolic occupation through acts of survey, and most pertinently for this paper, language, were the only real means by which possession could be attained. Meghan Morris has written of how the “erasure of indigenous stories and songs” results in the “settler colonial project furiously filling spaces” (243). Re-casting the “parched deserts of the interior country” as “Australia Felix” was an exercise both in demarcation and in marketing (Morris 145). On a practical level the “discovery” of fertile plains was a long overdue vindication of the entire colonial enterprise. The publication of Mitchell’s journal in

1837 is credited with having accelerated settlement. Indeed the settlers that would come after him literally followed in his cart tracks; overlanders and selectors alike plotted their own incursions into the interior along “the Major’s line” (Doyle n.p.). Mitchell’s “felicitous” choice of name for the new lands evidences an awareness of larger imperial objectives and his journal’s potential readers. Dispatches from the colonial frontiers were eagerly consumed in Britain and, as Emily Potter and Brigid Magner have written, Mitchell and other explorers “wrote performatively for readers in the centres” (“Murray-Mallee Imaginaries”).

Mitchell’s instinct for the importance of place-making was acute. The journal weaves together multiple strands of personal, imperial, epistemological and even literary ambition. He is a singular figure amongst the first explorers in his efforts not only, as Carter has pointed out, to “enclose” the land in the survey but to somehow write the colony into the grand narrative of humanity (Carter, “Botany Bay” 119). Mitchell wrote his own poetry, translated the Portuguese epic poem *The Lusiad* and studded his field journals with literary allusions. Whilst finding poetry in the landscape helped to sanitise and vindicate the colonial enterprise, the pastoral also afforded an opportunity to cement Australia Felix in the Western imaginary. Mitchell’s expedition journal and its assurance that the land was eager to “receive the plough” (74) and in fact “seemed to have been prepared” for the colonist’s arrival (17) articulates the prevailing fiction used to justify the dispossession. As Emily Potter explores in her book, *Writing Belonging at the Millennium: Notes from the Field on Settler-Colonial Place*, the pastoral can be considered one of the most enduring “self-justifying spatial tropes of the frontier” (4). Entitlement to a territory’s “first fruits,” and the historical use of pastoral as the go-to discourse for the vindication of European expansionism is central to place-making narratives in this country, and is a subject of Ford and Clemens’s excellent book, *Barron Field in New South Wales: The Poetics of Terra Nullius*. The notion that ownership is legally and morally vested in those who make the land productive is a fundamental assumption of Mitchell’s journal, and the “emptiness” of the land is held up repeatedly as almost its most salient characteristic.

Sarah Ahmed’s deconstruction of happiness as a societal aspiration is also instructive here (*The Promise of Happiness*). Coding the invasion as “happy” became fundamental to its justification. The land, hitherto, empty and “laying waste” (Mitchell 77) was presented as needing and even desiring cultivation in order to be fully realised. Pastoral as a literary trope, reified in the work of Virgil and the bucolic poets, and cited throughout the Western canon, conferred upon the “Australia Felix” idyll an intellectual valency derived from a perceived nearness to classical or “high” culture. The “discovery” and appropriation of “Australia Felix” was “happy,” necessary and even poetic—thus providing settler Australia with a narrative of absolution.

There are however important moments of rupture in Mitchell’s poetics—these ruptures being as instructive to the place-making narratives under discussion as the poetics themselves. The country we today call Sunraysia was in fact heavily populated before White arrival. The Murray Valley provided a permanent food supply and sheltered country for the Wemba Wemba, Kureinji, Ngintait, Latji Latji, Wergaia, Tatti Tatti and Wadi Wadi peoples amongst others. The land did of course already have many names. The name Mildura is from the Latji Latji language and is thought to mean red eyes, red rock or red earth. Yerre Yerre and Yuranga were other Indigenous names used for Mildura (“Mildura”). Matakupaat was the original Wemba Wemba name for Swan Hill.

The Australia Felix expedition is not one immediately associated with settler violence, however, on this very same journey, Mitchell’s party were the perpetrators of a massacre. On 27 May 1836, near what is today Euston in NSW, Mitchell’s party fired on a group of the Barkindji people. Mitchell’s account (as usual this is a contact narrative told only from one side) is that it was in self-defence. However two important facts have never been in dispute—the Europeans opened fire before any actual attack had been made and also continued shooting

at the Barkinji as they tried to escape by swimming back across the Murray. The official death toll was seven, but the *Australian* newspaper later reported as many as 30 people had been killed (“Expedition of Discovery”).¹ There were no casualties amongst the explorers. Mitchell named the site “Mt Dispersion.” A week after the massacre, and after “founding” and naming my hometown of Swan Hill, Mitchell’s party travelled to a place we now know as Lake Boga. On asking the local people the name of the place, tensions arose when they responded, “too much ask” and “we won’t tell you” (Mitchell 143). The incident ended with the murder of the man who refused to disclose the name. Stapylton, Mitchell’s second in command, wrote indignantly in his journal: “[A] civil question is asked and the answer a shower of spears” (Stapylton 113). What is a civil question? What constitutes civil behaviour? Who has the right to know the name of a place? This story reminds us that to know a name is in itself a form of intimacy. Settler Australia’s assumption that it has a right to know and use Indigenous place names continues to this day and is in itself a form of imperialism.

The Red Book: A Garden in a Desert

Place names masquerade as places themselves, but a name is really just an idea imposed upon the landscape, a kind of parochial cloud that hovers there until another cloud floating on a stronger wind blows in to take its place. Half a century after the publication of Mitchell’s journal, the Australia Felix conceit was complemented with a new place-making narrative specific to the region we now call Sunraysia. In 1888, irrigation was cutting edge tech and was hailed as the solution that would allow the English yeoman ideal to at last be achieved in arid Australia and on a grander scale. Championed by Alfred Deakin and implemented by the Canadian Chaffey brothers who had already set up similar schemes in California, Australia’s first irrigation colonies were established at Mildura and Renmark. *The Australian Irrigation Colonies of the River Murray of Victoria and South Australia* or “The Red Book” as it became known, was a detailed if hyperbolic 135-page prospectus intended to encourage “closer settlement” in the area. It was published both in Australia and England in 1888.

“Half a million acres situated on a great freshwater river the Murray, now being Colonized under exceptionally advantageous conditions, and in one of the most desirable and salubrious climates of the World.”

“From these sunny lands where our sons and daughters have made their homes, we shall draw our future supply of FRUIT, quality and quantity probably exceeding that of any Fruit Industry the world has seen.”

“The land has all the natural advantages of a garden.”

The Australian Irrigation Colonies of the River Murray of Victoria and South Australia. Prospectus for New Settlers.

Settlers flocked to the area—my great-grandfather among them. The above quote is noteworthy for being one of the first explicit references to sunshine as a commodity. The notion of an idle, sunny land, awaiting the hard-working settler for its full and fecund realisation was to be a recurring vignette held up to potential immigrants. The irrigation “colonies” were marketed as being separate and superior to the vast pastoral runs of wider NSW—irrigation allowing for agriculture more akin to that practised in England. The fact that the colonies were too far from market to sell fresh fruit was redacted from the narrative. Irrigation itself is in fact an apt metaphor for the imposition of settler culture. Hills and hollows, deviations from the

mean—specificity is erased. If survey can be seen as a form of symbolic dominion, the homogenisation of the land for irrigation sees that razing made literal.

Four years after the publication of the Red Book the introduction of the White Australia policy left no doubt as to the type of people wanted to populate the “blankness.” A government prospectus entitled “Australia Unlimited” published by the Department of the Interior in 1913 and circulated abroad specified that white migrants were sought in order to “fill our Great Wastes as rapidly as we can” (“Australia Unlimited”). “Irrigation” and “close settlement” were touted as key ways to achieve this. Over one hundred years after settlement the emptiness of the continent was still being characterised as a national emergency—that the country itself was at risk of rotting on the vine. The conflation of what was now seen as the quintessential Australian commodity of sunshine, with ideas of whiteness, prosperity, luck and happiness is made explicit in a 1915 calendar advertisement distributed in California (Figure 2). A blonde girl with a picnic basket full of fruit stands in a field. The copy reads “Australia: The Land of Sunshine, Health and Prosperity.” An accompanying text welcomes “all healthy persons of white race” (“Australia: The Land of Sunshine”).



Figure 2. “The Land of Sunshine, Health and Prosperity.” Calendar, 1914. Australia, Department of External Affairs.

A 1914 poster reads “Mildura—for Winter Sunshine,” and shows a woman posing in front of a cornucopia of fruits with a paddle steamer on the river in the background (Figure 3).



Figure 3. “Mildura, Victoria, Australia—for Winter Sunshine.”
Poster, James Northfield, 1935.

A 1921 Prime Minister's Department pamphlet bore the headline "Millions of People Are Wanted to Fill Australia's Empty Spaces," and showed a map of Australia with a gnawing hole in the centre ("Millions of People"). Another pamphlet "Encouraging Migration with the Million Farms Campaign" also published in 1921 by the same department reads: "Why not settle our idle lands with white men?" ("Encouraging Migration").

Yet the path to bucolic bliss was to be a bumpy ride. In reality the challenges faced by settlers were extreme. The absence of a railway and record low river levels in 1893 saw the harvest unable to reach market. The bank crash of the same year and ongoing problems with rabbits, salinity, locust plagues and dust storms all contributed to the Chaffey brothers' Mildura Irrigation Company going into liquidation by 1896. The Federation drought exacerbated the growers' predicament. Many settlers went broke and abandoned the colony. The colony had been conceived of to showcase man's triumph over the natural world but the garden in the desert had failed. Engineering and/or agricultural and economic missteps aside, I am interested in how these events can also be seen as a failure of language. William L. Fox has written that deserts induce in humans a form of "cognitive dissonance"—we refuse to accept their failure to conform to our expectations of what a landscape should be (1). Mitchell himself lamented that the riparian vocabulary of European rivers was hopelessly inadequate for the types of waterways he found in Australia (41). The place-making narrative offered by the Red Book had been patently misleading in claiming that "that great freshwater River Murray at all times navigable . . . facilitates the conveyance of produce" ("Irrigation Colony of Mildura"). The fact that rainfall in the Mallee is only around 300mm a year (Regional Weather and Climate guide), making it comparable to rainfall in Australia's Red Centre ("Rain on the Rock") had also been excised from the pastoral idyll. The oasis in the desert was just that—an oasis; low river levels meant that the transport route was impassable for riverboats for over six months at a time. Grapes and stone fruit were highly perishable and sensitive to bruising and heat. A grower complained in that it took 22 days for his fruit to reach market ("Closer Settlement Commission"). Sunraysia was not only a hydrocolony built around an inconstant waterway in a semi-arid region—it was a market garden too far from market to allow the produce to arrive before it rotted. The failure of the river and of the promises of the Red Book saw the industry pivot. All fruit must rot—unless it is dried. The hydrocolony would thrive on dehydration. The garden of Eden would dry its fruit—sunshine itself would come to the rescue to transform the harvest into non-perishable products. In 1907 the Australian Dried Fruits Association was formed and, in 1918, in an attempt to boost sales, hired enigmatic Mildura local Clement de Garis as publicity director.

A "Sun-Raysed" Country: "Wanted—A Name!"

De Garis had grown up in Mildura but was not a typical pioneer. Fruit grower, businessman, aviator, librettist, playwright, writer, land speculator—he was said to be "gifted with a striking personality and subject to white hot enthusiasms" ("C. J. de Garis"). The title of his autobiography: *The Victories of Failure: A Business Romance of Fiction, Blended with and Based on Fact*, appears a good summation of his marketing philosophy and indeed personal style. De Garis staged a competition to come up with a brand name for the dried produce, commissioning cryptic posters to appear around the country reading simply "Wanted—A Name!" The name "Sun-Raysed" won. "Get the Habit—Eat Sun-Raysed Fruits" was the slogan ("Remarkable Record"). The leitmotif of sunshine lay at the heart of a marketing campaign designed to appeal to women and children. A poster for a further competition claimed that "Sun-Raysed" fruit was "Concentrated Sunlight" and spruiked "Raisins Raysed by the Southern Sun" (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Australian Dried Fruits Association. Competition Poster, 1919. Public Records Office.

The campaign's breadth and creativity was extraordinary. An allegorical *Children's Sun-Rayseed Fairy Book* was published (Figure 5) and also a range of "Sun-Rayseed" recipe books to encourage housewives to cook with more dried fruit.

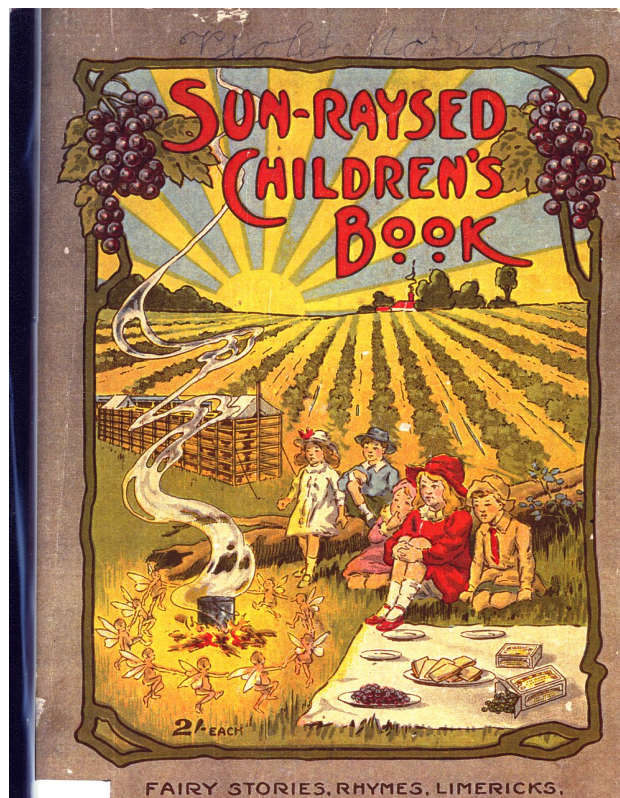


Figure 5. C. J. de Garis. *Sun-Rayseed Children's Book: Fairy Stories*. 1919.

The campaign suggested that dried fruits could cure the Spanish Flu and even a bespoke *Sun-Raysed Waltz* was commissioned. De Garis himself flitted around the country piloting his own light plane with “Sun-Raysed” emblazoned on the tail (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Clement (‘Jack’) de Garis and his plane. Photographer unknown.
From de Garis’s *Victories of Failure*.

The aspirational promise of Australia Felix was rebooted in a new visual incarnation of art deco sunbursts and technicolour illustrations of children, harvests, orchards and sunbeams. The message was clear—white children could and should be “sun-raised/raysed” on sunshine, dried fruit, and fresh air. Whilst de Garis was accused of shady business dealings throughout his life and has been judged by history as essentially a conman, in marketing terms his new “golden” version of the pastoral worked. Dried fruits sales increased, and, no doubt instigated by de Garis himself, the region began to refer to itself as “Sunraysia.”

Paul Carter theorises that “places are made after their stories” and that by “writing in” to a region we can both “ground truth” the terrain and create new realities (*Ground Truthing* 3). Whilst a brand owns up to having no concrete materiality, place names work upon the conceit of, or at least aspire to, a concrete referent. The Sun-Raysed slogan was world-building—the region, dependent economically on the sale of the product, was elided with the product itself. The brand became a place. In Spanish the expression for narrative thread is *hilo conductor*, which translates literally as “conducting thread.” I find the idea of conductivity useful in theorising why some place names, such as Sunraysia, do indeed endure. Poetry is a type of lightning rod that conveys meaning with greater efficiency and force. Advertising copy can be seen as a species of poetry. Both employ a narrative shorthand to exploit the sensory properties of words themselves.

The Sun-Raysed campaign was extended to England, and exports saw the colony at last fulfilling the Red Book’s prophecy and providing the mother country with “first fruits.” The promotion of “Empire Pudding”—a Christmas pudding recipe made up of ingredients from across the Commonwealth—was the subject of an extensive media campaign by the Australian

Dried Fruits Association in 1925, before being taken up by the King himself in 1927. The 1925 recipe includes the same old secret ingredient—housewives were instructed to use “only Australian dried fruit” as it was “drenched with Southern sunshine” (“A British Empire Pudding”). “Empire Pudding”—literally the fat of all these far-flung lands distilled, consolidated and combined and sent back to nourish the mother country—was a type of coming-of-age performative for the colony. Psychic and economic relations between Britain and its dominions remained tangible, rich and sticky, bound together with suet (from New Zealand) and cloth. In a further example of a constitutive relationship between discourse and the material, the Sun-Raysed advertising copy was “embodied” when larger than life versions of the pudding were baked and displayed (flanked by stuffed emus and kangaroos) in London as part of the campaign (“A British Empire Pudding”).

Conductivity and Accountability: “Sultanas and Lexias” and “The Right of Might”

The boom-and-bust cycles of Sunraysia are echoed in my own family history. In the early 1900s my great-grandfather was one of the settlers enticed by the Red Book to Mildura. His folly in setting up a butter factory and ice works in the hottest part of the state is in keeping with the magical thinking of the time. Around 1919, it appears (this detail is excised from family anecdotes) he went broke. The family, including my grandfather, travelled upriver on a paddle steamer to farm a fruit block in the tiny hamlet of Beverford just outside of Swan Hill. They offloaded the antique furniture that had come out from England with the previous generation onto the treeless bank. There they established a dairy and grew table grapes—“sultanas and lexias,” according to my grandmother. The word “lexias” is the one that has “conductivity” for me in this particular story. The lexia is a forgotten variety of grape, but the word also means “readings” in Latin. In physics, conductivity is the measure by which a substance is able to conduct electrical current. Poetic language has a heightened power to transmit and convey feelings and affect—and to do so in a thrilling and even “electric” way. Some words have a charge or valency that allows them to endure. In family memory as in cultural memory, choice snippets of language—evocative or unusual names—act as mnemonics for whole chapters of history. The boat my family travelled on would have passed by the stretch of river at Mt Dispersion—a name that is a mnemonic for settler violence. Its example reminds us that place names need to be interrogated for motive, that we should enquire what a name is “in service of”—what a name signals, but also what it conceals.

Fifty years later my Uncle Garnet helped bring the paddle steamer “The Gem” from Mildura up the Murray to Swan Hill. At the town of Goodnight, they struggled to get the boat past the sandbars known as the Bitch and Pups. Garnet’s sister was my grandmother, Coral. Her sisters were named Ivory and Pearl. Goodnight, The Gem, the Bitch and Pups, Coral, Ivory, Pearl—the word Sunraysia has a similar lustre—as a story, has “conductivity.” Finding poetry in the names of the people and places of the stories we tell not only makes their citation or retelling more pleasurable—it also makes them more resilient. Imaginative and original language finds a firmer foothold in our collective memory.

Sunraysia’s pivot to the dried fruit market can be seen as illustrative of the resilience of the broader imperial narrative—de Garis’s “victorious” if unsubtle tropes of place-making were born out of the colony’s initial spectacular failure. The difference between an oasis and a mirage is all in the mind—or in the language. The place-makers discussed here have in common a sense of awareness of the power of narrative and poetry in conveying their vision (or illusion) to others, however de Garis is undoubtedly the winner. The name “Sunraysia” is the perfect “business romance,” poetic yet pragmatic, like the dried fruit itself—able to endure.

“Water into Gold”

In 1937 the Thwaites’s Packing Shed of Swan Hill gifted a copy of Ernestine Hill’s *Water into Gold* to my great-grandfather, who still lived and worked on the fruit block. I found the copy on my bookshelf (Figure 7).

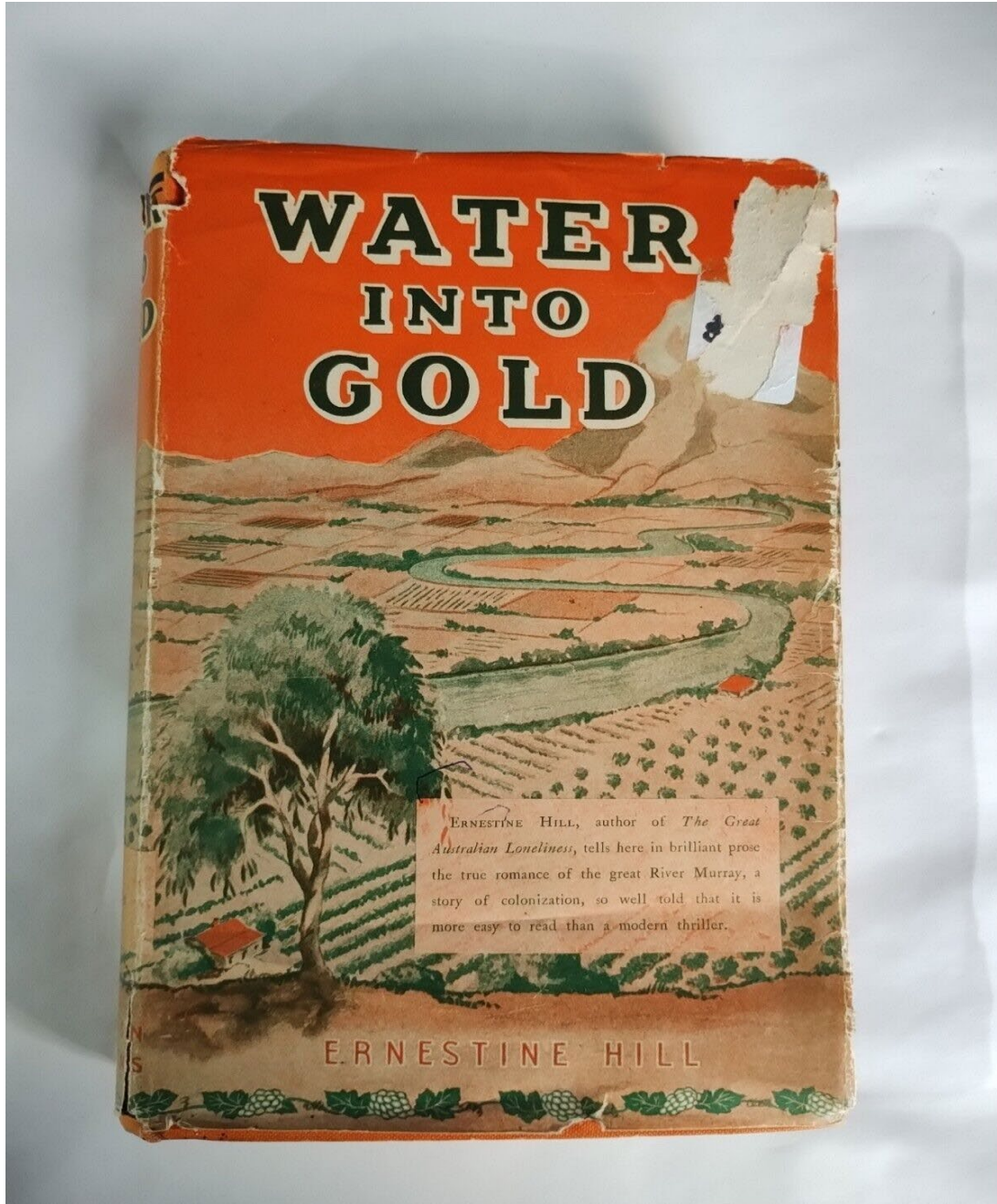


Figure 7. Cover of *Water into Gold*, by Ernestine Hill, 1937.
Photo Verity Oswin.

It was published that same year after Hill had been commissioned by the Australian Dried Fruits Association to write a history of the region. The style of writing falls somewhere between paperback Western, National Geographic travelogue, and Mills and Boon—the premise being as the title suggests, that irrigation had “turned water into gold.” The book’s objective was again to encourage settlement and Hill’s breathless prose hurtles through the boom-and-bust

cycles of the region at breakneck speed. With chapter titles including “Apostles of Irrigation” and “Utopia on the Murray,” Hill writes excitedly that here were the “only inland towns in Australia where nobody prays for rain” (48). The pre-invasion history of the land is not referenced, but she does devote a long passage to recounting the Rufus River massacre of the Maraura people which occurred downstream near Lake Victoria in 1841 (30). The massacre is re-cast as a “battle” and the violence described in prurient detail (30). Hill informs the reader that “the natives are poor defenders” and that the Rufus Creek “ran red with blood” (31). Although the massacre of Indigenous people by her own tally “left about 50 dead” and included children, she extracts the moral of the story as being the “right of might” (32). “If the country were ever for white men, it seemed the only way” (32).

Finding this book on the family bookshelf reinforced Annie Ernaux’s claim in *The Years* that “family narrative and social narrative are one and the same” (34). Hill’s book is racist and disturbing. Yet her story is part of my own family’s story—it is on my bookshelf. As settlers we are always already implicated in the poetics of empire. As Walter Mignolo has written, coloniality *is* modernity, not a condition we can somehow transcend (xxi). Ernaux’s novel *The Years* explores the idea that individual lives are indelibly marked by social forces and the events of the times—but conductivity runs both ways. Such an understanding requires us to trace direct links from our individual stories to a collective accountability. The dispossession is a story that informs all the stories settler writers may ever tell. The timber home my great-grandfather built on the fruit block at Beverford, still stands. The Tyntynder Flats are now hobby blocks and my high school English teacher lives in the old house. His son is my daughters’ math teacher. Sunraysia and its narratives continue to be a part of my personal history—in telling one part of settler history, I must tell the others. Beverford is named after the Beveridge family, first settlers and owners of Tyntynder Station. In 1848 rumours circulated that members of the Wemba Wemba or Wadi Wadi tribe had been killed with ration flour laced with arsenic on the station.² There were many poisonings across Australia during the Frontier Wars (“Colonial Frontier Massacres”). Some are rumors, many are confirmed. In one instance in Queensland the poison was given in the form of Christmas pudding.³ Settler brutality is baked into our collective history. Violence was not incidental to colonisation—the settler state was nourished and sustained by it. Accepting the rightful place of these stories in our personal histories—on our bookshelves—is an important first step in any reckoning.

Conclusion

Common to the place-making narratives canvassed here is a “blank” refusal to reference the storied history of the land and its occupation before white settlement. I would argue that this insistence on the “blankness” of pre-colonial history, and on the “blankness” of the colonial record—the refusal to tell the stories of settler brutality—are the reasons why these imperial narratives ultimately fail. Hill’s “water into gold” narrative does not ring true. The river, the garden, the discourse—all fail. White settlement, has, like the flour, been laced with violence. The stains of the dispossession have been “sun-raysed” from the record. Words fail us. Still today the land can be seen to resist settler attempts at categorisation or inclusion in Western taxonomies. Carter speaks for all settler writers in his definitive history of place-making in the Mallee, *Ground Truthing*, when, thwarted in his attempt to trace the etymology of the name Mallee or “endow it with poetic significance” he throws up his hands. Despite his careful and sustained analysis of the region, at the end of the day he concludes: “It seemed that any type of imaginative identification with the country was impossible” (25).

An alternative categorisation of Sunraysia as a locus of poetic defeat holds true across the place narratives discussed in this paper. The story of Sunraysia is a story of crops, rains, business ventures, seasons and transport networks failing with regularity and at times alacrity.

As both a colony and a category Sunraysia is built around twin fallacies—the pastoral fiction of a “tenantless” and unstoried land, and the fantasy of a permanent water supply. The refusal to reckon with the country’s pre-colonisation history may indeed be generative of Fox’s “cognitive dissonance” (1). These lacunae in our knowledge are now genealogical lacunae in the cultural memory—holes in the story not easily repaired or filled. However, characterising white settlers as being merely incapable of understanding the land and its first peoples is disingenuous. Settler destruction of First Nations cultures during colonisation was also wilful and strategic. Indeed the place-makers themselves were directly responsible for acts of both physical and discursive violence. Mitchell naming a massacre site “Mt Dispersion” may be the most heinous example of euphemism, but all settler place names can be viewed as pseudonymous in so far as they are names invented not merely in order to conceal a real and prior name, but to conceal the fact that a previous naming or knowledge system even existed.

Re-examining the history of place-making in Sunraysia is instructive for reminding us of the need to probe place names for the cultural or political work they continue to perform. Settler attempts to arrive at a poetics of place without such probing necessarily fail. Emily Potter has written of “the idea of non-indigenous belonging as something desired, asserted, contested and unrealised” (2). Are there ways to think about human connections to place that exist outside colonial paradigms of possession and dominance? Is there a way in which settler Australia can afford a poetic engagement with place, without reinscribing the dispossession? As Karen Barad has theorised, the material and the discursive are consubstantiating. Settler place narratives have used poetry and what Ford and Clemens call “racist Romanticism” (188) to tell the story of colonisation. Reading and retelling these stories in a way that reveals who has stood to gain from their telling is a first step in any type of reckoning, and in “embodying” any possibility of repair. Mitchell’s poetics of empire ruptures at “Mt Dispersion,” at Lake Boga—as Ernestine Hill’s does at Rufus River. The seemingly innocuous discourse of “sunshine” and Australia Felix has acted to “raze” those place-making narratives that existed prior to colonisation.

However, failure can be (re)generative. The coda to the imperialist “Sun-Raysed” discourse is that in fact by far the most successful wave of settlement in Sunraysia has been that of the Italian and Greek diasporas who arrived in the region after the Second World War. These farmers do indeed tend profitable gardens in the desert, gardens that would in turn not exist without the influx of migrant workers from around the world during harvest. An industry website advertising for these workers uses familiar language: “Spend a summer in Greater Sunraysia and you won’t want to leave” (“Greater Sunraysia Region”). If Sunraysia as a place-making narrative ultimately fails to convince, it is precisely because of this inability to articulate ways of being other to those imagined in the “Sun-Raysed” idyll. However the opportunity to forge alternative, more inclusive place-making narratives that recognise the significance of both pre-colonial occupation of the land, and the diversity and rich history of other migrant groups in the region, emerges from this failure. Rescuing, retelling and indeed generating stories “other” to the imperial narrative is the challenge for contemporary poetics. If place names and language are the vehicles through which coloniality is enacted, iterated, and performed, new place-making narratives can also be world-building. New stories can be constitutive of new realities. If we diverge from the master narrative of sunshine, whiteness and blankness, instead telling “other” stories about the land and its people, we may find ourselves not only in a different landscape, but indeed confronted with different versions of ourselves. Poetic language—language with a heightened “conductivity,” can be used to assemble radical new articulations of history—articulations that allow for and reflect difference and that enable a radical and inclusive poetics of place.

ENDNOTES

¹ The newspaper referenced here is the *Australian* in its earlier incarnation, 1824–1848, not the contemporary broadsheet.

² The reports of this incident are discussed in “Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia, 1788–1930.” (Centre for 21st Century Humanities, University of Newcastle), and Michael Cannon’s *Black Land, White Land* (Minerva, 1993, pp. 230–31. Tyntynder Station was a continual site of conflict between local peoples and settlers during early colonisation. A diary kept by Peter Beveridge during the 1880s is an important ethnological record of the Wadi Wadi language (<https://victoriancollections.net.au/items/56c690f9400d0c3518d150cb>).

³ See Rosa Praed’s *Australian Life, Black and White* (1885), p. 42, for a contemporaneous account of this incident, which occurred near the remote station she grew up on in Queensland in the 1850s and 1860s.

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