

Sue Edney and Tess Somervell, editors. *Georgic Literature and the Environment: Working Land, Reworking Genre*. Environmental Literature, Culture and Media, Routledge, 2023. 268 pages.

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In the *Georgics*, Virgil, deliberately or not, set out guidelines for human transactions with the earth, seeing the need to identify types of land, to prepare it, choose appropriate species of plant or animal, to sow or graft, practise maintenance, harvest, understand the roles of weather and pests—and, when vigilance and skill fail—appeal to or blame supernatural powers. Better still, writing in hexameters like plough-lines himself, Virgil regards the act of composition, or working with words, as labour. The present volume shows writers, century by century, genre by genre, drawing on Virgil's model to write about how that is all done “now” and “here,” wherever and whenever that may be, including Australia.

In his Foreword to *Georgic Literature and the Environment*, David Fairer sees the “concerns” of the georgic “steering away from ‘overall vision’” (xiv) in a context of a renewed alertness to the natural world, towards “experience and the experiment” (xiv). “In the process,” he writes, “georgic has extended from a literary genre to a mode of thought, and one that has valuable things to say about the environment” (xii). The editors, Sue Edney and Tess Somervell, lay out their own deep command of this complex of factors in the Introduction and Afterword as they summarise aspects of Virgil's text, its background, its history in English and its relation to modern ecocritical work.

The fifteen erudite, adventurous essays in the volume are “themselves experiments in combining ecocritical methodologies with genre and reception studies” (7). The essays are divided into three sections and in the first, “Defining Georgic,” Terry Gifford distinguishes georgic from pastoral, lays out key issues and names relevant figures both literary and critical. Juan Christian Pellicer unpacks critical discussion of Thoreau's *Walden* to argue that while *it* is not georgic despite others' claims, the georgic is as ingrained in literary contexts as the pastoral. Henry Power's wide-ranging essay situates George Eliot's novels, especially *Middlemarch*, in terms of literary precedents in English and the georgic attitudes of her characters in their socio-economic context.

The second and largest section, “Managing Nature,” begins with Todd Andrew Borlik's “question of whether the georgic tradition sowed the dragon's teeth from which modern pest control science sprang” (55). Tracing Frances Burney's use of the language and imagery of georgic through her journals and letters, Barbara Witucki draws out the parallel between making “furrows of the field and the lines . . . on the page” (89). Andrew Pite situates Wordsworth's “Tintern Abbey” in the critical debate distinguishing georgic from Romantic pastoral developed in the early nineteenth century. Even though the River Wye—above which Tintern Abbey stood—represented an increasing flow of industry and trade—Pite argues that since the Wye is tidal the poem conveys the georgic “idea of subsistence” (119). Also considering the implications of increasing trade in early nineteenth-century Britain, Ethan Mannon writes about Wordsworth's “Michael” in terms of the commodification of nature, with international economic and technological forces changing the life of small agricultural freeholders, especially after the Enclosure Acts. Philipp Erchinger elaborates on the experience of farming in his analysis of Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native* where cultivation implies and benefits both mind and earth in “participant observation.” The approach highlights the fact that few of the essayists in *Georgic Literature* imagine their writers' personal presence “on the farm” or “in the field” rather than at the desk.

The essays in the third section, “Eco-Georgic for the Anthropocene,” are closer to that engagement with personal presence. Edney sees that “[s]omething in Virgil’s work understands that we need to steward ourselves; humans are produced by the land” (154) and in analysis of the work of two early Romantic poets, Robert Bloomfield and John Clare, Edney elucidates the complex relationship between land, rural community and political problems. Georgic labours do not end in the field but have sociopolitical implications, as Shun Lu’s essay about Seamus Heaney’s verse shows in its analysis of how this work continues indoors for women, who by convention, transform it into food, meals and wellbeing.

As noted, it is interesting to think of georgic trajectories embedded in Australian literature and criticism alike. Readers might think of Mary Gilmore’s preoccupations with the immersion and trials of nature for the colonising would-be subsistence farmers, and both her and Judith Wright’s alertness to dispossession as a consequence of the colonists’ labours. An aspect of Wright’s georgic mode is discussed here by Sarah Lawrence, showing both Virgil and Wright depicting interactions between humans and horses, snakes, dogs and “the symbiosis of this land with wild creatures and wilderness” rather than in cultivation (199). Elizabeth A. Smyth sets aside georgic literary structure in order to explore the georgic mode in a trio of twentieth-century novels set on sugarcane farms in Queensland. Literature set in farms is rare enough and by this strategy Smyth is able to add sugarcane to “Australia’s ecocritical territory” (187) and to show Aboriginal characters’ “interaction” with the mode in labour, harvest, and farming-instructions especially in Naish’s *The Cruel Field* (1951). It is instructive to compare Smyth’s reading of these settler-colonial novels with Brycchan Carey’s discussion of the long poem *The Sugar Cane* by James Grainger (1764) for the resonances of empire and slavery in what many have called “imperial georgic.” Carey coins the term “naturalists’ georgic” as a further category because the text “must in some way either attach natural history to agricultural georgic or celebrate the rural labour done by naturalists” (984) in their study of immediate nature.

The Australian essays are part of what this collection terms “capacious georgic” (228), which includes Greg Garrard’s study of Derek Jarman’s discontinuous art films—particularly *The Garden*—his journals and the “impossible” garden he became famous for close by the nuclear power station at Dungeness. This section also includes Harriet Tarlo’s essay on Rachael Blau DuPlessis’s similarly multilayered and playful reprise of Hesiod’s georgic *Days and Works*.

This is a rich and scrupulously researched contribution to ecocritical and literary studies, proving, as Tarlo writes, that the “capacious georgic offers opportunities to consider our ancestral and contemporary relationship with land, work, agriculture, the seasons, economics, ethics and didacticism” (228). In this volume, a wide range of texts are enriched by readings that approach georgic content from many different angles. These clearly show how Virgil’s work can prove fertile ground for ecocritical views of human relations with the land in the present environmental crisis. It is heartening to see a few Australian-focused essays in this collection, and these Australian essays, whether discussing literature indebted to Virgil for genre or mode, indicate a particularly rich direction for critical studies, leaving the concepts associated with the pastoral, to explore how the land has been known, written and worked as individual and local experience, in Indigenous, colonial or postcolonial relations.

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