

Tasmanian Nature Writing and Ecocriticism

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This paper takes up Robert Zeller's challenging remark that Nature Writing in the *belle lettristic* form associated with Thoreau and Aldo Leopold is a genre which does not exist in Australia (ASAL 1998). From the outset, I protested. Tasmania? The Wilderness State? No Nature Writers? Tasmanian writers with a close connection to landscape, in fact donating sanctuaries to the State, include children's author Nan Chauncy and the legacy of Chauncy Vale; Mary Wilson and 'The Steppes'; John Skemp and the Skemp Memorial Reserve; and for good measure let's add Clive Sansom, patron of the then newly-formed Wilderness Society. Why, Van Diemen's Land was even governed by naturalists, in the figures of Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin.¹ It seemed too remarkable that Tasmania had no 'Nature Writing'. 'Australia', perhaps. But not Tasmania.

Zeller has since uncovered a dozen writers he places in the genre (ASLE 1999), and I have since discovered what 'Nature Writing' is. This paper historicises and clarifies major differences between Natural History Writing, and Nature Writing, through examples from early Tasmanian writing thus demonstrating the existence of an early and active literary ecoconsciousness. The paper then moves from a consideration of the restrictions of the *belle lettristic* (or essay) form, to ecowriting in prose fiction.² James McQueen's *Hook's Mountain* (1982) and Charlotte Dick's *Huon Belle* (1930) will be examined from two ecocritical perspectives, deep ecology and ecofeminism.

Thomas J. Lyons' 'A Taxonomy of Nature Writing' classifies typical writing strategies within the sub-genres. 'Natural *history* writing' for instance conveys pointed instruction in the facts of nature. In other words it is data-driven. It professes to be objective, and although the 'I' can emerge in the text, it is the 'I' of the observer. We can place zoologist and ornithologist John Gould (1808-1881) in this category.³ Gould settled in Tasmania in 1838, and it is after him that the Gould League is named – a league that provides information on nature study for Australian schools.⁴ Another familiar name in this sub-genre is Gustav Weindorfer who contributed

essays to *Victorian Naturalists*. It was through the efforts of Gustav and Kate Weindorfer that Cradle Mountain was declared a National Park (1971), and later, a World Heritage Area (1982).

The next step in the evolution of the genre is Nature Writing, the bringing together of science and *bellas lettres*, as a literary form. Nature Writing is concerned with personal perspectives of nature which are unapologetically subjective; it is also concerned with the relationship between the human and non-human, expressed through data (the language of scientists) and metaphor (the language of poets). That is to say two things: it's interdisciplinary, and it's concerned with extratextual reality (the actual and the abstract).

The interaction of the actual with the abstract is evident in the 'ramble' (a sub-set of 'Nature Writing,' according to Lyon's taxonomy). The ramble records the writer's detailed knowledge of the local area and is often concerned with the pastoral. But the pastoral is one of the textual abstractions currently being challenged by the *experience* of 'nature.' It's the type of literary pastoral marketed by Tasmanian Tourism: the pastoral as an 'excursion in to simplicity which exists primarily for the sake of its eventual renunciation and a return to the 'real' world' (Love 231). In other words, the literary pastoral actively encourages *disassociation* from nature after it has fulfilled its use-value in a human-centered value-system. Pastoral texts green the machine that links wilderness and urban experience: licence plates read 'Tasmania: Your Natural State'. Context rides supreme as 'wilderness' is imaged via the extinct thylacine situated somewhere between the petrol tank and the exhaust.

An example of the ramble which demonstrates the difference between the experience of the pastoral, and the pastoral as a literary abstraction, can be found in the journal of the Quaker William Wells. Wells arrived in 1884, sketching and writing about his bioregion, the Don, in the North-West. The term bioregion reinforces the interdisciplinarity of the genre: a bioregion (local area or re-inhabitation) is generally characterised by its natural, as well as its cultural, attributes; it provides a 'model of ethical human relationships to place' and it attempts to show how humans can live sustainably in collaboration with their local natural environments (Armbruster 8-9). Wells's journal reflects his role as a participant-observer; the economy of experience (family and business, the reading of literature) is interwoven with the economy of nature (sustainable harvesting and hunting).⁵ Wells's detailed observation of flora and fauna demonstrates his knowledge of and respect for the naked lunch.⁶ This is not the pastoral of safety and temporary abode, but of complexity and permanency. It is the pastoral of experience that Glen Love redefines as containing a primal undercurrent, the 'wild that kicks things to pieces', rather than being 'benign' and 'stylized' (Love 231). It's what Thoreau implied, in 'Walking', when he wrote that 'in Wildness is the preservation of the World' (1862);⁷ it's the wildness lurking beneath the bucolic (literally), and in the 'domestic' cow as celebrated both by Thoreau and recently, Barney Nelson. In *The Wild and the Domestic* (2000); it's precisely what Kathleen Graves wrote about, 50 years ago, in *Tasmanian Pastoral* (1953), when as a North-West farmer she attempts to reconcile the needs of non-human species with land-as-human-resource. Contemporaneous reviews

comparing Graves with foundation environmental writers, Thoreau and Gilbert White, indicate awareness of the existence and complexity of the Nature Writing genre.

I'll complete my rebuttal regarding this part of the Southern Hemisphere's lack of Nature Writers in the *belle lettristic* form with reference to Lyons' broad category 'Essays on Experiences in Nature' (Glotfelty 278).⁸ The titles of works by Louisa Meredith (1812-1895) declare their allegiance to Nature Writing and its interdisciplinarity, and it has been suggested that Meredith might be the first to have received a government pension for services to science, literature, and the arts.⁹ Natural scientist and photographer, Michael Sharland, falls into this category also. *A Pocketful of Nature* (1971) is a selection of writings published in the *Mercury* under Sharland's pseudonym, 'Peregrine'. A writer of numerous nature books Sharland was for 16 years Superintendent of Scenic Reserves. Lesswell-known, but straddling *belle lettristic* and imaginative writings is H.W. Stewart who wrote poetry, and a nature column for the *Examiner*, under the pseudonym 'Wart'.¹⁰

An exemplary text here is J.R. Skemp's *My Birds* (1970).¹¹ Although *belle lettristic* it invites a broadening of the discussion concerning the 'nature' of nature writing. Written in the 1940s and situated in Skemp's bioregion, Myrtle Park, in the north of the state, *My Birds* is a collection of prose, verse, sketches, and photographs. Skemp's ecoconsciousness is signalled not only by content, but also by the book's three-part structure of ever-widening concentric circles. Text and architectonics reflect ecology's insistence on inter-relationship.¹²

Part One is titled 'They Nest in My Garden'. Skemp describes minute nesting territories within the confines of a 2-acre garden, a biotic community composed of a variety of birds and a solitary human. Part Two, 'They Nest in My Paddock', broadens out to show Skemp as farmer of a 150-acre plot, exploring his impact on the pastoral ideal with the entrance of the machine (a tractor).¹³ His land clearing impacts on population as forest birds chase the shrinking forest, and grassland birds, like the spurwing plover, move in. Finally, in 'They Nest in My Gully', the domestic and the wild are brought into conflict when the migratory black-checked falcons prey on birds introduced by the Homing Pigeon Clubs. Conflict is resolved through a human-centered hierarchy of use-values – pigeons have resource value – and blood money puts paid to the falcons ever again nesting in the gully. The book's structure demonstrates the inter-relations between organisms and their environment. And as the fate of the migratory falcons demonstrates, the bioregional is related to the global.

Nature Writing then is personal and interdisciplinary in its fusing of natural history and literature. But ecowriting extends the personal to the philosophical. It is a literature which synthesises the knowledge of ecologists and philosophers. (Examples include Peter Singer, John Passmore, Val Plumwood, Warwick Fox.) Despite the proprietorial and anthropocentric 'My' in the titles of his book, Skemp's final act was biocentric: he subordinated human interests, stipulating in his will that his 1880s homestead be pulled down and the land be returned to the birds. But because 'bio' refers etymologically to 'life,' and rocks and landscape are included in

this approach, ecophilosophers such as Warwick Fox prefer the term ecocentric. Either way, both words indicate an anti-anthropocentric position. They are against human-centered approaches to decision making. This anti-anthropocentric, ecocentric position informs what Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess referred to, in 1972, as 'deep ecology' (Nash 146)

An example of ecowriting which draws on deep ecology practices is James McQueen's novel, *Hook's Mountain* (1982). Set in 1981, this was the year David Foreman and Edward Abbey¹⁴ (ex-Gl, Park Ranger, author of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* [1975]) unsuccessfully protested against the damming of Glen Canyon.¹⁵ McQueen's novel was published in 1982, the time of the 'Fight for the Franklin' anti-damming campaign in which he participated. *Hook's Mountain* is a textual extension of the masthead of David Foreman's *EarthFirst!* newspaper, which reads 'No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth!' The 'New Warriors' of *EarthFirst!* mobilise behind a 'policy of ecological militancy' (Nash 190) and cite Thoreau's 'Resistance to Civil Government' as justification for civil disobedience and illegal acts against the state.¹⁶

McQueen's novel exemplifies the extratextual reality of the ecocritical text: as a performative narrative (one that impacts on the real world) the novel temporarily stopped logging on Blue Hill at Nahowla.¹⁷ Blue Hill (geo-graphical name) becomes bio-graphic ('Hook's Mountain') when the main character, Lachlan Hook, ex-Special Services trained killer, engages in ecotage in defense of the hill. Or rather, the character's Wordsworthian reading of nature as a nurse and healing place for trauma (another aspect of the literary pastoral) creates a deeply ambiguous situation in which an attack on nature is perceived as an attack on the self; the heart of McQueen's criticism lies in the way defence of nature can become (contrary to expectations) an ego-not eco-centric justification for anti-anthropocentric acts.

The New Warrior call to defend nature can be short step away from a call to defend one's country or motherland. Bush-lore and the masculinist ethos in Australia is discussed in *Hunters and Collectors* (1996). Author Tom Griffiths comments on the nationalist aesthetics of *Argus* nature writer, Donald McDonald, in which '[b]oys, nature, race and war were powerfully bound together in the preaching of the nature writers' (Griffiths 140). Simon Schama historicises the nationalist aesthetic in *Landscape and Memory* (1995), noting the ecological conscientiousness of the Third Reich and its Reichsforstminister Göring (119). Skemp's quiet observations (in *My Birds*) regarding the impact of his tractor on the pastoral ideal becomes violent action in McQueen's novel. Earth-moving machinery 'invades' the idyllic space when it is brought in to erase Blue Hill's diverse biotic community and replace it with a monoculture tree farm.¹⁸ Hook's response is a radical enactment of Thoreau's line 'Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine'. But Hook's intersubjectivity (to borrow a term from Abbey) is that of a machine, not a river.¹⁹ Embodying the masculine aggressiveness associated with technology, Hook is part of the counterforce 'penetrating' the pastoral ideal. He begins thinking like a machine, not 'thinking like a mountain'.²⁰ (Note this is a *simile*. One can only ever think as a human; the point is to 'try' other-centered perspectives in which decisions

are not *human*-centered, and utilitarian-based). Hook's New Warrior tactics, the language he uses, reveal the crippling effects of patriarchy, and yet '[h]ierarchy, domination, exploitation, and power – [are] all hated words in the deep-ecology lexicon' (Nash 9).

Deep Ecology would therefore appear to have much in common with ecofeminism. Not so. For whereas deep ecologists focus on anthropocentrism as 'the root of the domination of nature,' ecofeminists reject the a-historical, all-inclusiveness of a term which places women in the category of 'dominator', when historical conceptual frameworks, including Christianity, have linked women *with* nature and subjected both to value-hierarchical thinking. The logic of domination is that which sanctions 'up-down' thinking in the subjugation of other races (racism), women (sexism), animals (speciesism),²¹ and nature (naturism).²² For ecofeminism, with its orientation toward social justice, androcentrism (i.e. male-centeredness) is the root of the problem.

An early prose work which reveals an ecofeminist consciousness is *Huon Belle* (1930) by Charlotte Dick who, like William Wells, was a Quaker.²³ Bearing the epigraph 'To Those Who Know the Lure of the Mountains,' *Huon Belle* is set in the author's bioregion in the south of the state. The mountain range is also known locally as the Sleeping Beauty, and comes complete with breast. The title (as with *Hook's Mountain*) conjoins geography and anatomy, and consciously engages in the feminisation of nature. The text frequently practises considered ambiguity, fusing descriptions of the mountain and the main character (Virginia Lee, or 'Ginny') so that it is unclear who/what is being referred to: 'There She lay uncovered: always with the same calm majesty, the same tranquillity' (204). The capital S signifies the character's perception of something divine within nature.

'Eco', in ecology, comes from *oikos* which translates as 'home.' Ginny, 12 years old, illegitimate, and homeless, seeks an '*oikos*': the domestic *oikos* she finds is an orchard farm owned by a middle-aged patriarch, Cairns Gilmore. She secures this material *oikos* because of her use-value as property and labour, thus Ginny, like the farms, submits to 'husbandry.' But she refuses to be cut off from what cannot be mastered, insisting she remain within sight of the mountain, a testament to humanity's shared natural *oikos*, a world household, the source of quiet inspiration. Described as a 'reclining figure,' yet one that 'guards,' it becomes for her a *genius loci*, one of the mythical guardian spirits that inhabited the non-human world until Christianity destroyed pagan animism (White 10). The suggestion is of unconscious, sexual vulnerability (a 'virgin' landscape, relational to 'Virginia') which, in its 'wildness,' is nevertheless inviolable.²⁴ Ginny engages in 'thinking like a mountain': an elaboration of the land ethic in which all forms exist in the same moral universe.

The uprooting of the patriarchal order comes thick and fast when Cairns dies: Ginny practises enlightened stewardship, exchanging the practice and language of dominion inherited from traditional Christian usage – such as 'mastery,' 'control,' 'husbandry' – for bioregional practices, ethical human relationships to place, and living sustainably in collaboration with the local natural environment. Ecoconscious, ecofeminist 'Eve' is now legal owner of the apple orchard. 'Cairns' is replaced by the

enduring friend Simon Peter ('God's Rock'). The couple's suitability is marked by their love of the mountains and their joint ownership of the revered foundation mythology text, Thoreau's *Walden* (1854).²⁵

Of course it's a fiction. It's part of the fiction and 'greening of religion' signalled in the photo of Bob Brown at Farmhouse Creek, 1985, performing the new foundation mythology. The tableau is a forest, containing an earth-moving machine, and hard-hat workers grasping the outstretched arms of Bob Brown. According to an analysis titled 'Green Images' in *The Rest of the World is Watching* (1990) the forestry workers are 'enacting their set roles in a passion play,' with Bob Brown as the new Messiah (Pybus and Flanagan 168). The fiction behind the crucifixion is part of the image-making machinery or political aesthetic of the Greens, employed to oppose the counterforce, the machine that has well and truly gone beyond the garden.

Ecocritics point out that no place is untouched by humans. Historically, wilderness has been cleared of human habitation to create nations, in order to create parks, in order to regulate human access.²⁶ The wilderness, complete with machinery, that exists beneath the same ozone hole as the rest of the world, is now the pastoral: the Overland track where 8,000 people a year experience re-creation, and the kick of the wild, and then go home. Because performing 'wilderness' means exclusion of humans other than consuming transients or tourists there can be no bioregional model of 'ethical human relationships to place.' Indeed, the frame of mind that accompanies the vacationer might be that the rules do not apply to them.

The Greens utilise images consciously; it's time to read texts in a way that demonstrates experiential knowledge, a knowledge that can make the distinction between the experience of nature and literary tropes (the actual and the abstract) as well as the values positioned within various ecocritical approaches. Statements that treat islands as metaphors for human isolation are at least as old as Donne and are inherently anthropocentric. The shift away from this type of thinking to seeing nature as a subject in its own right is evident in works arising out of a greening of the culture. This essay has attempted to historicise and clarify the genre of Nature Writing in Tasmania, and to extend the discussion to include two of the major ideas informing ecocriticism. The critical culture so far (feminism, psychoanalysis, etc.) has been anthropocentric, and has contributed to Tasmania's landscape being coloured 'Gothic': too much *chronos* and not enough *tope*, in the time/geography nexus. An ecocritical approach to literature questions the way that 'nature' has been written up, and asserts the unsustainability of reducing nature to a linguistic construction.

Notes

- David Burn (author of Australia's first play, 'The Bushranger' [1829]) accompanied them. Nature Writing abounds in his descriptions of the journey published in *Narrative of the Overland Journey of Sir John and Lady Franklin and Party from Hobart Town to Macquarie Harbour 1842* (1843).
- Space does not permit a discussion of nature poets such as Barney Roberts or Norma Davis, or ecopoets (Vicki Raymond), or earth poets, those 'who grant some degree of consciousness to non-human nature' (Devall 74). Erle Wilson's *Coorinna: A Novel of the Tasmanian Uplands* (1953:

translated into German) is earth writing in that it grants consciousness to a thylacine, and is in the tradition of Jack London's *White Fang*, to which it has been compared.

- 3 Natural Scientists visiting Tasmania last century include Charles Darwin (1809-1882), who edited *The Zoology of the Voyage of HMS Beagle: under the command of Captain Fitzroy, RN., during the years 1832 to 1836*. John Gould was a contributor to the section on birds. Though John Gould's work has played a large part in contemporary understanding of environmentalism, his writing was not nature writing, but cataloguing.
- 4 Gould settled in Tasmania with his wife Elizabeth Gould (1804-1841), the artist of the 600 drawings in *Birds of Australia*, and the subject of a study by Alec H. Chisholm, editor of *Land of Wonder: The Best Australian Nature Writing* (1964).
- 5 Parrots eat his pears, he eats the parrots which, he says, taste like 'roast beef.' Although today this approach to pest control would rightly be seen as over-reactive, Wells shot to eat.
- 6 The issue of 'animal rights' in nature is one that divides deep ecologists from ecofeminists who hold speciesism to be a perpetuation of the logic of domination. Wells's context is within the framework established by Aldo Leopold who held that the killing of animals 'was ethically acceptable so long as it was done 'to satisfy vital needs' (Nash 147).
- 7 Often misread as 'in Wilderness is the preservation of the World' Henry David Thoreau, 'Walking' (1862).
- 8 The category includes 'Solitude and Back-Country Living'; 'Travel and Adventure'; 'Farm Life,' and 'Man's Role in Nature' (and the examples given are indeed all men).
- 9 Titles include *Some of My Bush Friends in Tasmania* (1860); *Bush Friends in Tasmania, Native Flowers, Fruits and Insects* (1891), and *Tasmanian Friends and Foes, Feathered, Furred, and Fanned: A Family Chronicle of Country Life* (1880).
- 10 'Stewart' and 'Wart' are probably the same person. The papers are held in the Community History Museum, Launceston. As a creative writer Stewart (?1882-1926) published *Rhymes and Ramblings* (1921); contributed work to the *Bulletin*, *Steele Rudd's Monthly* and *Poetry Review*, and wrote *A Handbook of Launceston, Tasmania* (1922).
- 11 Was published posthumously by the Launceston Field and Naturalists Club, the overseers of the Florence Skemp Memorial Reserve. Other works are *Memories of Myrtle Bank* (1952); *Letters to Anne* (1956); *Tasmania: Yesterday and Today* (1958).
- 12 The word 'ecology' first appeared in 1873 and is a compound of *oikos* and *logos*.
- 13 Both Skemp and Kathleen Graves were farmers, a category included in Lyon's taxonomy. There is no room for a full discussion of farm writing here, but works such as Roland Breckwoldt, *Wildlife in the Home Paddock: Nature Conservation for Australian Farmers* (North Ryde: Angus & Robertson, 1983) sponsored by the World Wildlife Fund Australia, demonstrate the collapsing dichotomy between the domestic and the wild and a more accommodating, albeit slight, shift from human-centred decision making. Deep ecologists dismiss farm writing and lump it with environmentalism, seeing both as linked to land management. This is because 'we humans are at the center, surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment' (Glotfelty xx). An associated value-laden word in farm writing is 'conservation' which indicates an efficient use of natural resources in the material interests of humankind. It does not mean 'preservation'.
- 14 Edward Abbey refused the title of 'nature writer,' which is consistent with the way 'nature writing' has been distinguished from 'ecowriting' in this paper.
- 15 Any hypotheses about the transformative power of naming is inconclusive here, but the Franklin River, like *Hook's Mountain* (Goulds Country, Legges Torr, and other Tasmanian landmarks) is a title indicating a relation between landscape as biography. Landscape as 'human bio-graphy' seems more frequently to achieve cultural and historic 'use-value,' unlike 'Glen Canyon' which describes and celebrates only itself.
- 16 The language of militancy closes Bill Devall's *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: Practicing Deep Ecology* (1988) which outlines the qualities and practices necessary for becoming a 'New Warrior.'
- 17 Another, earlier fictional work concerned with logging is Hilda Bridges', *Men Must Live* (1938). A novel about deforestation in the north, it includes descriptions of trees as 'murdered casuarinas'.

- Pathetic fallacy, a Ruskin-despised figure of speech, can alternately be celebrated as a realignment (rather than disassociation) of the non-human with the human. See Evernden.
- ¹⁸ See Louisa Meredith (*My Home in Tasmania*, 1852) and Hilda Bridges for earlier commentary on the destruction of trees; also James Fenton, inventor of ring-barking, and more recently, Barney Roberts, *Gone Bush with Horrie and Me*, 1998.
- ¹⁹ 'Intersubjectivity' is Edward Abbey's term describing how his body took on the colour, texture, and smell of the river he floated on for two weeks.
- ²⁰ 'Thinking like a mountain' is a phrase used by Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac* (vii), when he proposed his 'land ethic,' an ethic arguing for extension of 'rights' to land. For a case study of the extension of rights, see the Sierra Club's defense of Mineral King, California, cited in Nash (128-35).
- ²¹ And here we can see where other divisions between ecofeminists and Deep Ecologists might, and do, occur: ecofeminists hold that women participate in the logic of domination when they support the farming of animals (speciesism), hunting, or any other measure which seeks to subjugate, oppress, or dominate a species.
- ²² "Nature" is the original given; it is the environment before the transformations wrought by technology' (Birkerts). 'Environment' therefore includes the urban bioregions. The article remains skeptical about a nature/literature alliance.
- ²³ She later wrote as Isabel Dick, and was related to Louisa Shoobridge who applied for a grant to preserve Russell Falls, in 1885. This is in the site now known as Mt Field National Park.
- ²⁴ Kate Soper discusses dual responses to feminised nature, one of which is 'the emasculating fears inspired by her awesome resistance to seduction' (143).
- ²⁵ 'Naturally' enough, Simon Peter is younger than Virginia, for in the bigger scheme of things 'God's Rock,' representative of Christianity, is younger than the Huon Belle.
- ²⁶ For a discussion of this, machinery, and the domestic/wild dichotomy, see Barney Nelson whose work comes out of her experiences as an academic and a cattle rancher.

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