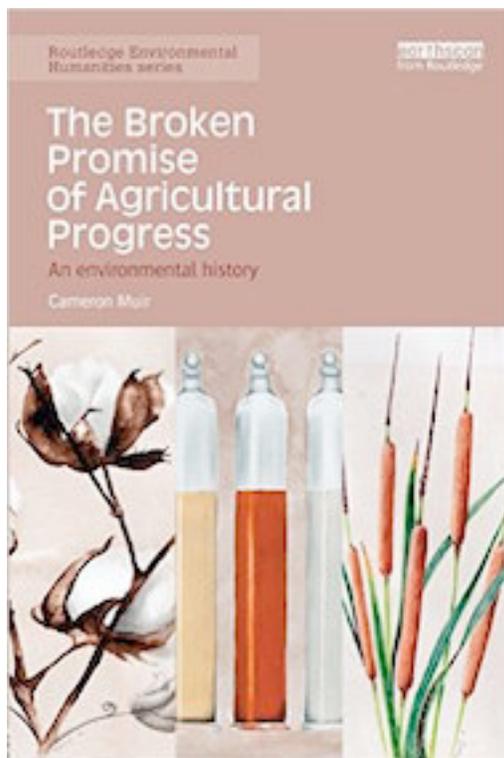


The Broken Promise of Agricultural Progress (2014) by Cameron Muir,
London and NY: Routledge Environmental Humanities Series.
Kindle edition available.

Though not ecocriticism, this is an important work for anyone working anywhere on representation of the inter-being of natural and cultivated worlds. It shows the health of a bioregion changing through social, political, natural, economic and scientific influences from local, national and global sources. Muir's primary focus is the dynamics of 'agricultural progress', a concept that so often results in damaging exploitation of earth and ecosystems. He shows this is so in Australia, a settler-colony, and nowhere more than his case study, the western plains of NSW where he grew up.



The environment he details lovingly is based in the ancient river systems of the Darling / Namoi, Macquarie, Bogan and Castlereagh rivers, eventually part of the Murray-Darling Basin. Geographically, it roughly equates to the area of central NSW between Walgett and Bourke in the north, Wellington and Cobar to the south. Given the generous quantity of images from a very wide range of sources, the absence of a conventional map or specifications of the area of the study must be deliberate, as if to emphasise its boundaries shift with the category assigned by humans. The narrative travels through un-named country, which becomes a place in one context, irrelevant to another, and in various historical manifestations. These include once-diverse life, the vagaries of pastoralism and 'agriculture that has come, and gone away again' (xviii) through government-funded experimental farms, in the leavings of hard-case opportunists who have ignored the

law and the rights of other people especially of Aborigines, and the modest people who have stayed through thick and thin, part of the place that is part of them.

Muir's aim was a study that shows 'broken places are still worthy of attention and care' (xviii). His approach is a history of the human and natural accretions making what and where this 'broken place' is now, and how it has 'broken' between the arrival of Europeans and the present. These details are gathered into subject chapters such as 'Hooves', 'Wheat', 'Dust', and 'Cotton'.

What *Broken Promise* also does that is important and still new is to reflect both the globalisation of such knowledge and the understanding that bioregional issues are global issues. And Muir writes 'to' a world reader, not the conventional reader familiar with the

background. He names three primary ideas that shape his tracking of how such developments played out in the western plains once believed so isolated. The first is that twentieth-century Western agriculture developed as it did because it succeeded the ‘ecological imperialism’ which saw the continent occupied in the political and economic ambition of European nations, bringing land-hungry would-be farming colonists and settlers. Secondly, that European biological thought about ‘inheritance, race, population and civilisation’ influenced government policy and business practices in modern agriculture and food production during the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries (1). His third considered view reached ‘unexpectedly’ during years of field-work with plains-dwellers, is that ‘good ecological relationships depend on good social relationships’ of which there are many in the communities across the region (2).

These relationships are perhaps humanity’s better nature, or a glimmer of what was imagined in the colonial administration’s instructions from London in 1788, to ‘protect the wealth of the soil, the rights of Aborigines and ensure the steady development of a stable, civilised society founded on agricultural yeomanry and small industry’ (9) (the colony operated for 50 years before the infamous *terra nullius* was produced during Bourke’s governorship). It is instructive to remember the trajectories that combined and collided from the outset: ‘convicts’—criminals, the majority shaped by drastic urban poverty—were transported by the same British government to solve its problem of exploding prison populations, and so became most of the unlikely labour and citizenship of the ‘stable, civilised society founded on agricultural yeomanry and small industry’.

Muir does not review this convict heritage—hardly an oversight when the great reach of his research traces so much else in the formation of the place—but he more than once quotes the nineteenth-century view that in ‘the antipodes Europeans lost their morals and racial characteristics and regressed to a level “worse than beasts”’. (9) There are good reasons why a uniquely Australian description of exploited and devastated land is ‘it’s been flogged’.

The book begins with an example of the dire process of dispossession and murder in the traditional Aboriginal societies of the area. It then turns to the cloven-hoofed animals of European culture that changed the fragile soil and the agriculture that, after the first few seasons could not return good crops without the addition of phosphates and trace elements, while drought-cycles now resulted in massive losses of topsoil. The plains have felt the full brunt of what the historian James Belich describes as ‘a settler revolution’ erupting from ‘a synergy between ideological and (initially non-industrial) technological shifts and explosive colonization, which compressed time and supercharged growth’. There were of course ecological successes; good managers and people who made a good living through being ecologically alert, but the natural environment progressed by two steps forward and one step back towards its current ‘broken’ condition.

Muir’s analysis is strengthened by positioning himself as historian with a long-term relationship to the region while leaving his political, ideological or even ethical views unspoken. The constant paradoxes and ironies in self-contradictory or mutually exclusive ventures, policies and undertakings that might have tempted him to pronounce judgement

are encapsulated in the chapter 'Reeds'. It relates the history of the Macquarie Marshes, major wetlands whose flooding benefited widespread pastoral country as well as the thousands of migratory birds that bred there annually. Sir William McKell, premier of NSW in the mid-twentieth century, was himself a rarity in being both a dedicated and consistent advocate for social justice and someone who understood the need to protect and study the natural environment for its own sake and to sustain farming. Setting out to undo the disasters of combined policy and drought in the 1930s, he showed, even more unusually for the time, understanding of the interdependence not just of 'land, water and soil' but of 'rural livelihoods and society's relationship with the environment'. (143) However:

In 1944 he rode though the Macquarie wetlands. He was so impressed with the marshes he declared the Crown Land area of it a National Fauna Reserve. He said the marshes were of interest to scientists of world renown, and that they were a vital sanctuary for Australian and northern hemisphere wildlife. The marshes, he said, were to be preserved for the Australian people, for posterity, for all time

How odd for him then, to announce—on the same day that he rode the marshes—that he had divided the state's newest National Fauna Reserve into twenty-one grazing blocks. . . . It would be strictly regulated, said McKell, . . . and the scattered rookeries in that 44,000 acres of wild marshlands could be fenced off.

McKell went back to Sydney and in less than two years passed the Burrendong Dam Enabling Act, the dam the New South Wales Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission and scientific authorities said would significantly reduce the size of the marshes, leaving the waterbirds no option but to 'depart to other areas'. (139–40)

There was fervent, temporarily successful resistance to the dam, but it was completed in 1965 in the interests of 'closer settlement' through irrigation opportunities. The catch-cry 'balance of nature' became a 'conceptual split between production landscapes and 'natural landscapes' in what was from the 1970s, 'natural resource management', now 'sustainable development' (p.157). The degradation of the marshes continued steadily but readers may be surprised and heartened by the many that Muir has identified who understood the ecology and climate of the plains clearly, from scientific or practical experience, and who identified environment-saving options. Bureaucratic organisation, national security agendas and some corporate land-owners worked against them. Muir concludes the story of the marshes thoughtfully and ruefully: 'Whatever the tone, the ideology or the narrative frame a historian chooses, sometimes things really are just devastated' (155).

Long-term, agricultural practices intended to feed and clothe the world damage the very medium they require: the environment. Australian farmers were lured and sustained by a vision of the combined profitability and ethical worth of their labour and investment. Governments deployed the ideology for their own purposes, but their members were themselves influenced by shifts in European thinking: Muir pays particular attention to the view that a wheat-based diet made Europeans 'superior' in civilisation to other peoples. Ethnic and national groups usually regard themselves as superior to others, but this theory not only belonged to the ugly school of eugenics, but encouraged consumption

justifying vast expansions of wheat markets, in turn hastening the development of the global commodity agriculture we know, with all its environmental implications.

Dense with such information, what is impressive and makes the book a rather awe-inspiring pleasure, is Muir's control of his vast amount of material. Its scope is often indicated by a single detail that could only be so effectively used through familiarity with a whole body of research. It is this detailed knowledge and understanding of changing micro-relations within this large region that gives *Broken Promise* its authority. In its constant demonstrations of interlinking causality between other-than-human and cultural worlds, interconnections that form a 'continually composing body' across time and across space, it fits with new materialism. It would be a valuable resource for anyone working on neo-colonial, pastoral or post-pastoral research, and it is another tile in the growing mosaic of essential environmental histories of Australia 'from the ground up'. With its erudition, it is also accessibly, often wittily written, and sets a high benchmark for the Routledge Environmental Humanities series.

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