
Book Review

Reviewed by Diane Bell

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The Water Dreamers

by Michael Cathcart

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Michael Cathcart knows how to tell a story. His account of the settlement of Australia, the scarcity of water and the need to fill an imagined silence with the sounds of civilisation is a story for our times.

During the 2010 Adelaide Art Festival Writers' Week, Michael and I were on a panel entitled Fire and Water and, yes, there was fireworks and a hosing down. On that scorching hot March day, Michael spoke with intelligence, passion and humour to an attentive audience of *The Water Dreamers*. 'Water', Cathcart tells us, "is the fundamental limit on how Australians live" (p.2). But it is a limit we have misread, manipulated and mismanaged. We are at Code Catastrophic with our rivers, the Murray-Darling River system in particular, and without a multifaceted understanding, such as Cathcart provides, of the factors that contributed to the current situation, we risk repeating past mistakes and entrenching poor practices.

Cathcart begins with the mismatch of understandings between the First Fleeters whom he glosses as "wet-country people" (p.8) and the stories of the original inhabitants that reach back across millennia. In the Aboriginal narratives of the founding era, creative heroes criss-crossed the land giving it form, shape and meaning. The essence and power of these ancestors continues to infuse the land. The rituals laid down in this era, often called the Dreamtime, were enduring management strategies for living in an arid, wilful land.

Cathcart marks the moment when white Australia began its 'water dreaming' as Sydney Cove, 1788 (p.28). The local Eora people saw life-giving wetlands, veritable nurseries teeming with life, the new arrivals saw malignant marshes that needed to be drained to make the country habitable. Thus, the stream that flowed through the fledgling penal settlement withered to a trickle and Governor Phillip ordered the stonemasons to carve three large tanks into sandstone abutting the stream (p.28). At that moment the native Cadigal waterway became the Tank Stream and constituted the first government funded hydro-engineering project. This chapter should be compulsory reading for all water engineers. Walking the sites that signal the presence of this entombed stream

should be part of our experience of Sydney from the estuary at Circular Quay up Pitt St. to Bridge St.

In case study after case study Cathcart exposes the folly of placing our faith in engineering and technological fixes. He charts the forays of the water dreamers and their grandeur of vision but concludes they failed to learn from their mistakes, failed to understand that “we cannot strip water from the environment or pipe it around the country at will” (p.248). Cathcart writes:

“Artesian water allowed marginal grazing to extend into thousands of square kilometres of previously hostile country ... The Queensland pastoral industry boomed ... the rapidly expanding wool industry in the colony was worth £1 million. For the Aborigines, the results were devastating. Aridity had been their greatest defence against the white man and his guns. Now water gushed out of the earth ... The deserts did not bloom ... The bores made a few graziers extremely rich. But did not open the country to more intensive settlement nor produce cities in the wilderness.” (pp.173, 174)

Cathcart teases out the lessons and traces the contours of our myth making as he meticulously deconstructs what he calls our ‘geographical nationalism’. Thanks to his thorough research and evocative prose, we become witnesses to key events: the draining of swamps, the polluting of waterways, the stripping of vegetation. We struggle with a stream of explorers as they sally forth into the desert. We hear the silences. We start when Cathcart writes of ‘necronationalism’, a nationalism based on death: Leichhard, Burke and Wills. The latter, he points out did not die in the burning deserts sands. Rather, they were detained by muddy bogs. “But weather does not suit the myth. If Burke and Wills were to be elevated into legend, the legend required that they die of thirst – into the weatherless silence” (p.157).

The concluding chapter ‘New Beginnings’ cries out for further deliberation and I hope the author will return to a number of the issues he raises. What is the lure of the concept of ‘wilderness’? Who and what does it silence? In what directions is the environmental movement heading? How are we to speak across the conceptual gulf between those who take water to be a commodity and those who understand rivers as living systems?

“The idea of buying water so it can run down a river is bizarre”, writes Cathcart (p.258) and his disquiet over the way in which water has become tradable is well placed. He acknowledges the validity of the campaigns of Canadian water advocate Maude Barlow (p.257) who holds that water should be a public good and that access to clean water is a human right. He enumerates the shortcomings and inequities of the market, but in Cathcart’s view it is too late to turn back. We need to make the market work and that will take some ingenuity. I do not share his optimism that the market can be made to work. And, for my part, I do not think it is too late to reclaim water as a public good. I do think that most Australians do not understand the extent to which our limited water is being exported in minerals or farmed produce, and the extent of the privatisation of water. As competing Australian states struggle to thrash out a plan for the management of the Murray-Darling Basin, these matters will come into public focus and Cathcart has laid a good foundation for that discussion.

The Waters Dreamers is a compelling account informed by Cathcart’s careful historical research and eye for enlivening detail. Cathcart draws on previously published work and his PhD thesis. The ‘literature review’ feel of a thesis runs through the book, but Cathcart manages to weave references to colonial texts, art, poetry and media

seamlessly into his narrative. It is good to have his work on this topic in one book. *The Water Dreamers* is an important contribution to the burgeoning literature of the poetics and politics of water in the driest continent. Dip into *Water Dreamers*. Each chapter has its own finely wrought point to make. Read *Water Dreamers* in one sitting, as I did earlier this year, and wallow in the flow of ideas.

Book Review

Reviewed by Frank Stilwell

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***Positive Development: From Vicious Circles to Virtuous Cycles
Through Built Environmental Design***
by Janis Birkeland
Published 2008
by Earthscan, London, 408 pp
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Past approaches to architecture and urban design have often paid scant regard to the limits of nature. We have housing forms that are wasteful of energy and poorly planned city layouts serviced with transport systems that generate intractable problems of pollution and congestion. Water, land and other resources are not used efficiently, equitably, nor sustainably. Much of the built environment is based on growing 'ecological debt', with the high material living standards of the present generation being at the expense of future environmental quality.

Janis Birkeland's book sets out some principles for creating more sustainable patterns of building design, environmental management, urban planning and regional development. She addresses the task of "turning vicious circles into virtuous cycles" of sustainable development, and posits a positive approach that she labels 'Smart Mode' (Systems Mapping and Re-design Thinking Mode) as the means of conceptualising what needs to be done. Emphasis is put on eco-retrofitting to modify buildings and urban areas in ways that improve human and environmental health, reduce resource depletion, and even expand the ecological base. Green building, bio-regional planning and eco-governance are among the central concepts in this call for a new paradigm.

It is both a conceptual and practical challenge to embrace this more sustainable alternative. Effecting change always requires critique vision, strategy, and organisation. We need a critical analysis of what has gone wrong, an inspirational target to aim for; a plan for making the transition from the unsustainable present to the desired future; and an organisational vehicle to drive the change.

Birkeland's book is strong on the critique, arguing that past architectural and design practices have not paid due regard to ecological concerns. It is also strong on vision, pointing to the prospect for positive ecological and social synergies in design for better living. The strategy for change is a harder call, of course, going beyond exhortation to identifying practical steps. The organisational aspect is harder still, raising thorny questions about the ability and willingness of governments to drive change through direct regulatory interventions. Or, if not governments, what institutions within civil society – professional associations, NGOs and community organisations – can make a difference to attitudes, behaviours and outcomes? The book tries to address some of these matters.

For example, identifying 'decision trees' for choosing appropriate technologies and means of linking policies to outcomes are among the numerous 'boxes' at the end of the book, showing an engagement with practice as well as principles.

A central theme of the book is that design is more fundamentally important than regulation or incentives. The author argues that "trying to change producer and/or consumer behaviour through incentives or regulations suggests we do not know what *to* do, only what people should *not* do" (p.48). On similar reasoning, there is a rather critical approach to 'rating tools', such as standards assessments of energy efficiency ratings in new buildings. These are said to facilitate the achievement of 'best practice' but not to encourage "thinking outside the box" about ways to enhance sustainability. Similarly, the use of economic tools to 'internalise the externalities' associated with pollution and other environmental damage is regarded as a limited strategy for driving behavioural change, leading only to the choice of 'less bad' options (p.77). Design, on the other hand, has the capacity to create something that does not yet exist. Hence, the title of the book, 'positive development'.

Janis Birkeland presents her arguments strongly and comprehensively. Her approach is a call to arms for professionals associated with the built environment to embrace ecological principles, emphasising eco-innovations and design processes that engage all relevant parties – governments, communities, businesses, academics and professionals.

The focus throughout the book tends to be conceptual in character, rather than say, emphasising country-specific experiences of getting things done. It could have been interesting, for example, to look in more detail at actual examples of 'green building' requirements and their effectiveness in practice. Consideration of particular exemplars of urban design or regional planning could have helped ground the conceptual debate in tangible projects. Passing reference is made to some such examples, and it is clear from the comprehensive notes for each chapter that there is a wealth of experience, particularly in Australia, from which the author draws. The question of just how to link positive principles with practical engagement, taking account of obstacles arising from political economic interests and constraints, remains a big ask though.

The general style of the book is to pose questions and then to answer them. Many of the questions are the sort which a sceptical reader might pose: e.g., "If low-cost eco-solutions exist, why are not they being adopted?" "Cannot firms just compensate in some other way for their waste impact?" "Would just creating the environment for creativity ensure good outcomes?" These are examples taken at random from the book. The 'question and answer' format is evidently designed to promote reader engagement but it is not altogether effective. It works well in moderation as a means of simulating a sort of dialogue between reader and author but, as the format for almost every page in the whole book, it seems rather overdone. Sustaining interest throughout what is a large volume (408 pages, including boxes glossary endnotes and index) is quite a challenge, even for a reader in tune with the case for making ecological principles central to design and planning processes. Still, as a handbook for architects and planners willing to embrace those ecological principles and wanting to reflect more deeply on what is involved in making the transition, this is a book that can be warmly recommended.

Book Review

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Adelaide: Water of a City

by Christopher Daniels (Editor)

Published 2010

by Wakefield Press, Kent Town, South Australia, 581pp

ISBN: 978 1 86254 861 9 (hbk.)

The design of Adelaide is well known: a square mile grid ringed by parkland, planned to be the ‘lungs’ of the city. But Adelaide is also said to be the driest city, in the driest state, on the Earth’s driest continent: perched near the mouth of the dying River Murray-Darling system and now bracing for less water as the global climate changes. *Adelaide: Water of a City* aims to examine the water cycle of Adelaide, the wisdom and folly of past approaches to water management, and a range of ways forward in designing sustainable urban water systems.

With 29 chapters, 130 authors, and peer-reviewed articles on scores of topics, the book is encyclopaedic – however, this format also makes it difficult to obtain a clear and concise picture of the water problems, the challenges, and the solutions for Adelaide.

Adelaide: Water of a city attempts to look at water through the lens of a particular place, documenting everything from the water cycle to soil types, desalination, urban design, water recycling, policy and governance. The book sets key considerations for defining sustainability for urban water, suggests commonsense approaches such as increased stormwater harvesting and water recycling, and urges us to invest in long-term strategic planning for water sustainability. It is a glossy, full-colour, plain-English guide to understanding the hydrology of Adelaide.

The contributing authors are university professors, academics and researchers; government officials; and corporate engineers, consultants, and other water industry figures – all ‘experts’ in a white, Western, scientific sense. But the book is missing the voices of local Kaurna indigenous people, citizen groups, sociologists, and environmental organisations. This constituency could have offered valuable historical and social insights, and ideas on the processes of and strategies for bringing about social change in water governance.

Disappointingly, the chapter ‘What price water?’ argues for a ‘sustained regime of water prices’ to send ‘scarcity signals’ and urban water trading, dismissing without discussion concerns held by many progressive thinking people over the current trend to commodification and privatisation of water. Bypassing the failures and social crises that have accompanied the introduction of water trading and property rights regimes – the book simply asserts that water pricing is efficient, effective, and a “powerful device for influencing individuals’ behaviour”.

For authors Young and McCall: “‘Affordable’ is code for not having to pay for the full cost of the water delivered”. Where is the political principle of equity here? Surely, the global water justice movement already goes beyond ‘affordable water’ in asserting access to water as a human right – one recently recognised by the United Nations General Assembly.

Adelaide: Water of a City devotes an entire chapter to the cultural heritage of the Kaurna – local Traditional Owners of the *Mikawomma* or Adelaide Plains. However, the section is limited to historical observations by white anthropologists. It includes a ‘Kaurna calendar’ of seasons (not endorsed by Kaurna people), and reproduces dreaming stories composed by non-indigenous anthropologists (the accuracy of which stories is contested by Kaurna elders today). There is no mention of Kaurna experiences of occupation and displacement; or of Indigenous perspectives on water governance; or on their contribution to sustainability today. Indigenous interaction with and knowledge of water are documented as purely historical – even in the chapter’s conclusion, the ‘respect’ that Kaurna people have for water is noted in the past tense.

This omission is regrettable as indigenous peoples in Adelaide, and right across Australia, still occupy and use water in traditional ways. In recent years, indigenous groups have been working successfully to assert their water rights and visions for cultural and sustainable water use. In February 2009, for example, the National Water Commission hosted the Indigenous Water Planning Forum in Adelaide, where Indigenous peoples, researchers and water planners considered consultation protocols, co-management, and tensions in water ownership and governance. At the conference, the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations presented their work advocating ‘cultural flows’ (‘Submission to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Standing Committee’ on the *Water Amendment Bill 2008*). Cultural flows are defined as:

“water entitlements that are legally and beneficially owned by the Indigenous Nations of a sufficient and adequate quantity and quality to improve the spiritual, cultural, environmental, social and economic conditions of those Indigenous Nations.”

Indigenous peoples’ advocacy for water sustainability extends beyond the mere survival and management of water systems, to the interaction of water with cultural sites and practices, animal breeding cycles, rights to water, and much more. This holistic understanding is a valuable complement to the reductionist methodologies of mainstream science.

The book is silent again, on the work and perspectives of citizens and environmental activists in Adelaide, groups whose popular campaigns have had many successes. They have protected some of the world’s most diverse ocean areas by establishing marine national parks. They put the Murray-Darling system and sites like the Coorong Wetlands squarely on the public agenda. They prevented BHP Billiton from extracting an additional 120 million litres of water for free every day from the Great Artesian Basin for their Olympic Dam mine. Other citizen protests have focused on the proposed desalination plants. The omission of this socio-political context clouds the highly significant role of conservation groups in water planning and protection, an oversight that leaves the reader bereft of ideas on how to take action to affect the changes needed in water governance.

Adelaide: Water of a City does provide a comprehensive scientific look at the Adelaide water cycle. It is also a sober circuit breaker for government policy and industry plans that have long applied a 'one size fits all' approach to deliver short-term technological 'fixes' at the expense of long-term, locally appropriate, and sustainable water systems. The book asks simply, why are we not doing this better? Why, for example, are we building expensive and inefficient desalination plants when we continue to flush large quantities of waste and storm water out to sea? In the words of one author: the city has a water governance problem, not a problem of water supply, and this, despite the expected impacts of climate change.

Adelaide: Water of a City is a hopeful book. It carves out a future for Adelaide – an antidote to old fears of its abandonment for lack of water.

Book Review

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Fresh Water: New Perspectives on Water in Australia
by Emily Potter, Alison MacKinnon,
Stephen McKenzie and Jennifer McKay (Editors)
Published 2007
by Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Victoria, 285pp
ISBN: 9 78052285 4244

In the Andean world of peasant agriculture, wisdom, rather than knowledge, is conceived of as love, nurturance, symbiosis, conversation, reciprocity, and dance: all of which presuppose notions of dialogue and mutuality. This strongly resonates with Indigenous Australian relationships to land and waters – ‘country’ – and many contributors to *Fresh Water* (2007) indicate a sensitivity to these ways of being and acting in the world. Originating in a two-day workshop organised by members of the Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies at the University of South Australia in 2005, the compilation provides wide-ranging and often fascinating discussions on water in Australia, with a particular focus on the Murray-Darling Basin. This river basin covers more than a million square kilometres, stretching from Queensland in the north to the Lakes and Coorong at the river mouth in South Australia. As with many rivers across the globe, the systems have been subjected to a network of dams, weirs, locks, canals, regulators, and irrigation channels, seriously impacting on the natural flow of water and on local seasonal rhythms.

In the first chapter of *Fresh Water*, anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose calls on readers to re-imagine and revalue water. She also addresses the repeated failure of non-Indigenous Australians to learn from past mistakes and come to terms with the material, artistic, and cultural forms associated with water “in its life-giving propensity”. As Rose and many contributors to the book point out, the present environmental crisis is a time for multiple narratives, knowledges, and ways of seeing. Nevertheless, one very difficult aspect of this challenge is the ambiguous role of neoliberal economic policy as market solutions are both the preferred social mechanism for the provision of services and simultaneously complicit in exacerbating the depletion or degradation of resources.

Today, dozens of studies indicate that humanity is depleting the Earth’s water resources at an alarming rate and social disparities around access to clean water have prompted the WorldWatch Institute to argue that “water scarcity may be the most underappreciated global environmental challenge of our time”. As I write this review, a media release from the Council of Canadians informs me that the United Nations General Assembly is considering an historic draft resolution initiated by the Bolivian government to recognise “safe and clean drinking water and sanitation” as a human right.

Although on one level this is a significant and path-breaking proposal, on another, it seems surreal that people need to be reminded of this.

For Australia, water is a critical issue, and as editors Emily Potter and Stephen McKenzie suggest in their introduction to *Fresh Water*, “Living on the driest continent on Earth, it is not surprising that Australians are preoccupied with water”. However, is this the case? While a number of the contributors touch on memory and forgetting, the Australian attitude to water is more like amnesia than remembering. Perhaps this signifies a kind of colonial forgetting; or, as psychologist Paul Shepard suggests, an autism central to the disjunction from nature inherent in the knowledge systems of western thought.

A particularly pleasing aspect of *Fresh Water* is its holistic frame. Moreover, the critically stressed Murray-Darling Basin is conceptualised as a living system and a key site of historical dispossession and reconciliation in Australia. Water justice is examined through such perspectives as law, history, cultural studies, education, social policy, and visual art and for example in “A story is like a river: Weaving the Murray”, Kay Lawrence and Nici Cumpston use collaborative art work to point to the River Murray as a failed attractor for democracy. Hattam, Rigney, Hemming, and Pearce discuss Indigenous experiences of systematic colonisation, their ongoing engagement with reconciliation, and the present natural resource management regimes. Authors Giblet, Syme, and Nancarrow, Cheney, Nheu, and Vecellio discuss the diversity of stakeholders from the perspective of policy-makers and identify the environment as a stakeholder which introduces new complexities into the area of policy development. Cormack and Comber also provide an interesting exploration of the development of younger people’s representations of water and their relationships to the river system.

Ultimately, the book brings out the profound tensions between environmental exploitation and the perceived material needs of the Australian peoples. However, through their cross-disciplinary conversations, the contributors to *Fresh Water* describe an experiential relationship with water as life, sustenance, teacher, mentor, and fellow traveller. Their narratives of the river system reveal a re-enchantment with place and the natural world and the importance of an engagement with Indigenous ecological knowledges as crucial if settler Australians are to understand themselves in their environment. In this sense, and borrowing from Rose, the compilation is a significant step in moving “beyond distributive justice in order to embrace an intergenerational, multi-species longing for water in all its manifestations”.