LIKE NOTHING ON THIS EARTH
A Literary History of the Wheatbelt
Tony Hughes-d’Aeth

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During the twentieth century, the southwestern corner of Australia was cleared for intensive agriculture. In the space of several decades, an arc from Esperance to Geraldton, an area of land larger than England, was cleared of native flora for the farming of grain and livestock. Today, satellite maps show a sharp line ringing Perth. Inside that line, tan-coloured land is the most visible sign from space of human impact on the planet. Where once there was a vast mosaic of scrub and forest, there is now the Western Australian wheatbelt.

Tony Hughes-d’Aeth examines the creation of the wheatbelt through its creative writing. Some of Australia’s most well-known and significant writers – Albert Facey, Peter Cowan, Dorothy Hewett, Jack Davis, Elizabeth Jolley and John Kinsella – wrote about their experience of the wheatbelt. Each gives insight into the human and environmental effects of this massive-scale agriculture.

Albert Facey records the hardship and poverty of small-time selection in Australia. Dorothy Hewett makes the wheatbelt visible as an ecological tragedy. Jack Davis shows us an Aboriginal experience of the wheatbelt. Through examining this writing, Tony Hughes-d’Aeth demonstrates the deep value of literature in understanding the human experience of geographical change.

Tony Hughes-d’Aeth is a Senior Lecturer in English and Cultural Studies at The University of Western Australia. He has published widely on Australian literature and cultural history, including Paper Nation: The Story of the Picturesque Atlas of Australasia, 1886-1888 (Melbourne University Press, 2001) which received the Ernest Scott and the WK Hancock prizes for Australian history. Hughes-d’Aeth was co-editor of Westerly from 2010 to 2015.

From the preface: I approach each writer as a witness. They are witnesses, along with thousands of others, to a socio-ecological event of planetary significance: the eradication of the lifeworld of southwest Australia. But they are witnesses also of the inner event: of just what it meant to participate in the founding of the wheatbelt. It is in this latter capacity that they hold insights that appear virtually nowhere else, and it is only through understanding the founding of the wheatbelt in this way—as a psychic phenomenon—that we can grasp its full significance.