Like
Nothing
on
this
Earth
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 W.K. Hancock prizes for Australian history. Hughes-d’Aeth was co-editor of Westerly magazine, a literary journal devoted to Australian and Asian writing and culture, from 2010 to 2015.
Tony Hughes-d’Aeth

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Most nights I watch the television news until the end so I can see the weather report. The presenter stands in front of a virtualised image of Western Australia on which appear, in harmony with her prompts, the various data and signs that allow her and us to participate in the narrative of our state’s weather. At some point, maybe ten or fifteen years ago, the map of the western half of the continent was replaced with a satellite image which ranged in colour from fawn to forest green. To my naïve eye it seemed that the green portions of this map roughly matched the green parts of our state. I was most struck, and have been ever since, by the sharp line that ringed Perth to the north and east, stretching roughly from Geraldton to Esperance and marking out an area most West Australians know as the wheatbelt. Inside the ring was a wheat-coloured yellow, outside the ring a muted eucalyptus green. The line where they meet, known by analysts as the “clearing line”, is the most obvious visible sign from space of humans’ effect on the planet. These pixels are abstractions but they are not mere metaphors. They bear a strict relationship to the surface of the land they represent. The pixels are given a colour value based on the degree of “reflectance” measured by the satellite camera. The more light, the brighter the pixel; the less, the darker. The sharp line is
created by the spectral contrast between native perennials (bush) and the crop and pasture grasses that now predominate in the agricultural areas. It is made sharper by the comparative flatness of the country.

The clearing line follows the rabbit-proof fence which also marks (more or less) the minimum rainfall threshold (the “10-inch line”, or after the 1917–18 survey, “Brockman’s Line”), below which cropping is unsustainable. Depending on how you look at this line it is either natural or man-made. At first blush it seems overwhelmingly, disconcertingly artificial, if only by its almost perfect diagonal straightness. Yet viewed from its other side it is a line of resistance, the point at which intensive agriculture was no longer able to extend itself. It draws to mind other imperial demarcations, the famous walls that marked the limits of the Roman and Chinese empires. It is this picture, taken every day from machines orbiting in space, that leads us to a central theme of any history of the Western Australian wheatbelt, which is that of radical disappearance. Of the shires and districts that make up the wheatbelt, only 7 per cent of the original vegetation, and thus the animals that depend on it, remains today. Remnants survive only in the form of islanded reserves, large in some terms, but tiny by proportion and without the former continuities that allowed the southwest to operate as a fluctuating bioregion responsive to savage climatic change across aeons.

This book traces the creation of the Western Australian wheatbelt during the course of the twentieth century by considering the
creative writing of those who lived in the wheatbelt at various points in their lives and then wrote about that experience. This is what I mean by a “literary history”: a history of the wheatbelt as captured in the literary works deriving from it. The book approaches this task by following an “event/witness” model. The event is the creation of the wheatbelt and the witnesses are the creative writers. The creation of the wheatbelt was not felt to be a single event, but instead a gradual and, in lots of ways, “natural” process that took place over generations. But in the deep time of ecological history, the creation of the wheatbelt was sudden and spectacular. Also, from the vantage point of ecology, the event is not the creation of the wheatbelt, but the disappearance of a vast territory of native wilderness with a biodiversity almost without equal on the planet. So, the creation of the wheatbelt and the destruction of the native habitat that preceded it are one and the same, and constitute the “event” that this book is tracing. It took place in two main phases, 1900–1930 (roughly 17 million acres) and 1950–1970 (roughly 20 million acres), with the Great Depression and the two world wars providing hiatuses in the process. Total land cleared by 1970 was approximately 50 million acres or 200,000 square kilometres. To give some perspective, the land mass of Britain is just under 230,000 square kilometres.

Choosing creative writers as the “witnesses” to this event deserves some explanation. My own background is in literary criticism and cultural history and I have gradually come to realise the particular value of creative writing as a document of record. The event of the wheatbelt has been traced through the disciplines of agriculture, economics, social history and ecology. It is significant in each of those domains. Literature, though, offers something different, which is the interior apprehension of how life feels to people. The eleven writers I have chosen to focus on take the story of the wheatbelt from its beginnings in the early 1900s to the turn of the millennium. Each has presented a different problem to me and the chapters spend time introducing each writer. The different wheatbelts that come into view in their writing represent not just changes in historical time, but variations in literary genre and the particularities of each writer’s encounter with the wheatbelt. Some grew up there, left and never returned. Others moved there for work in their early adulthood. Others have had family
connections that have seen them return again and again through the
course of their life and are able to speak to the changes they have seen
take place. It became clear as I wrote that learning about the witness
was as important as learning about the event.

Let me briefly introduce the kind of witness that literature offers
to the event of the wheatbelt, remembering that what happens is a
vast and almost total destruction of the pre-existing lifeworld of the
southwest of the continent. Diagrams like the one above illustrate
the matter plainly enough, but it is difficult to replicate the sense
of shock that such an absence might once have generated. To the
acculturated, the wheatbelt will often appear a pleasant blend of fields
and trees, an undulating fertile country beneath bright blue skies.
One has to imagine a person who did not know what a field was, or
what wheat or indeed crops were. Such a person was Ronald Gidgup

2. The clearing of the wheatbelt.
Senior, a Noongar-Yamatji man who grew up on a station outside of Carnarvon before moving with his father to Bruce Rock in the wheatbelt in 1941:

Coming from the station country down to the farming country was different. I never knew what a farming area was until I saw the land was cleared and there were these big haystacks. I thought they were people’s homes but they weren’t because they were made out of hay. I had never seen a cleared field before and I couldn’t work out why all the bush was gone. When you live in station country that’s all you see, the bush. I didn’t know what wheat was, I had never seen wheat …

Gidgup’s memories retain in an undiminished way the bafflement that ensues when one realises for the first time that something one had thought belonged to the order of permanence has been simply and utterly erased. Another Aboriginal observer remembers a more recent moment of estrangement from the wheatbelt’s ordered fields. In his book *Kayang & Me*, Kim Scott describes being sent to a site near Quairading by the Ballardong elder, Ralph Winmar, with Indigenous students from Curtin University on a cultural expedition:

[Ralph Winmar] sent a group of us to climb the rocky side of that creative spirit, the Waakal, or at least that transformed remnant of it fenced within a small rectangle of the wheat belt somewhere around Quairading and York. On the climb we tasted water running from the wound left by an ancestral Noongar’s spear and, standing high on the Waakal’s fossilised back, looked out over a tractor describing small futile circles in the paddock below us, and heard the bleating of distant tiny sheep. The breeze in our faces, and the air entering our lungs did not, despite the cleared paddocks and the fences and sheep and tractor, belong to any place known only as “the wheat belt”.

For Scott, the moment captured the erasure of Aboriginal presence from the everyday life of the wheatbelt, with its tractors and sheep, and how in its remnant corners the wheatbelt still retains connections to an ancient system of language, thought and human community. Scott’s account comes from a point in history where the familiar
cleared fields of the wheatbelt become more and more strange. They cease seeming to express the natural historical outcome of agricultural pioneering, and instead represent the violent interruption of a much longer history—the history of Aboriginal occupancy.

In Tom Flood’s wheatbelt novel *Oceana Fine* (1989), which we will consider in detail later in this book, we see the wheatbelt—as it is so often experienced—through the windscreen of a motor vehicle. The driver is a young man on his way to work on “the bins” in the eastern wheatbelt in the late 1970s:

> The landscape is so immense, hot and huge like nothing on this earth, that I fear it might swallow me. The heat makes its own horizon, multi-layered and inconstant. Out of this mirage runs a highway … The car burned along the lonely highway through miles of brown-green bushland and straw-coloured paddocks, the stubble of the wheat blotched with charcoal-green tree clumps and bounded only by the endless miles of fencing strung to the horizon.6 (3)

More than forty years earlier, in his novel *Men Against the Earth* (1946), John K. Ewers describes a similar scene, one of mesmeric expansiveness, as seen through the eyes of a young girl born in the wheatbelt in the first decade of the twentieth century. She is travelling on a wheat-filled wagon across the sandplain that separated her farm from the railway siding. She is gradually falling asleep, and, tragically, so is her father next to her. She will wake up to his screams, realising with horror that he has fallen beneath the wheels of the wagon:

> She wanted to gaze over the plain to where it joined the sky in the blue, hazy distance. She liked the plain, because it gave her a feeling of distance. It just seemed to go on and on. At home, everything was bounded by fencing. Each paddock was a certain size and shape. But here there were no fences and no shape. The plain seemed to reach right out to the ends of the earth. If you went on across it over its trackless scrubs, with each new rise yielding another illimitable waste, you would come to somewhere, just as you would if you went over the sea. Arvie thought the sea must be something like this plain, although she had never seen it.7 (121)
While in Flood’s novel the driver looks out on a landscape almost entirely denuded of its native vegetation, in Ewers’s novel the sandplain appears in its original form. Yet the two descriptions share the quality of sublime awe in the face of a world which escapes limit, and particularly the limits which would signify a “human” quality or scale to the environment. In each case, both the “illimitable waste” of the sandplain in the 1900s, and “the endless miles of fencing strung to the horizon” of the 1970s threaten to overwhelm the viewer.

These examples are all literary in the sense that I will be using this word in this history. In the case of the extracts from Flood and Ewers, the matter seems straightforward. Both are novelists and the words come from novels they have set in the wheatbelt. The quotations from Kim Scott and Ronald Gidgup Senior are less obviously literary. Each is in the mode of memoir, not fiction in the usual sense, but factual, albeit personal, accounts of events experienced. Both Gidgup’s reflection on first seeing a land evacuated of bush and Scott’s feeling of estrangement on the hilltop near Quairading are literary in the way that they attempt to come to terms with an emotion or memory that somehow resists description in the everyday language that serves to describe reality for most purposes. This temporary failure of ordinary language causes each to search for a way of conveying this experience. For each, what they were looking at was the wheatbelt, but for each the term “wheatbelt” was inadequate to what they were seeing, converting what was strange, profound and drastic into something commonplace, unremarkable and fully completed. In this book, I use “literary” not to designate the line between fact and fiction, but to signal the recourse to the imaginative faculty.

It is this ability for literary writing to suspend the casual (but far-reaching) presumptions of everyday language that provides the basis for the approach I take in this book. One can get a very good idea of the history of the wheatbelt by reading any one of the dozens of excellent shire histories that have been produced since the 1950s. What my study seeks to do, though, is something rather different, which is to try to consider what the wheatbelt felt like. This slightly odd way of expressing the matter is meant to suggest that by focusing on literary works we can begin to reconstruct, through the roughly 100-year history of the wheatbelt, a picture of this singular event as a
subjective experience, as something which was lived emotionally and imaginatively in the private lives of people’s innermost thoughts. The book is arranged chronologically with each chapter based on the life and work of an author who has lived in the wheatbelt and written about that experience. As I have mentioned, 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.
The Western Australian wheatbelt sits on a vast plateau, the Yilgarn block, that dominates the southwest corner of the continent. This plateau is fringed on its western edge by a narrow coastal plain of roughly 40 to 60 kilometres, encompassing Western Australia’s only major city, Perth, and running from Shark Bay in the north to the southwest capes. This coastal plain has sandy soils and chains of freshwater lakes and wetlands in the south, and contains the extensive inlets of the Swan and Peel Rivers, as well as the smaller Moore, Greenough, Hill and Irwin estuaries. It absorbs the sprawl of Perth, as people want to stay close to the ocean and its moderating summer breezes. The coastal plain is met on its eastern horizon by the stumpy line of ranges which separate it from the plateau falling away gently to its east. Near Perth, these are known as the Darling Ranges, the Darling Escarpment, or simply “the Hills” or “the Scarp”. These hills, forested and with rocky soils, have tended only to be farmed in their valleys and, while logged extensively at various stages, have not been cleared in the way that the lands either side of it have. Thus the Darling Ranges appear as a dark blotch on the satellite photograph. The ranges do not on their eastern side fall back to the level of the coastal plain but taper into the undulating plateau. It is
on this country—a mosaic of open woodland, sandplain, and wodjil scrub—that the wheatbelt now stands.

Essentially, the wheatbelt is a rainfall region. Winter storm fronts from the Southern and Indian oceans wash across the southwest corner of Australia and provide sufficient rainfall to sustain forests and woodland and, much more recently, broad-acre grain-farming. (These same oceanic clouds also deposit tons of salt, dissolved in the rain and then sequestered in the soil through which it drains, a fact of some significance in the history of the wheatbelt.) In 1917, a royal commission set up by the Western Australian State Government requested that the Surveyor-General F.S. Brockman produce a map marking the effective safe extent of cropping, and this line is more or less the one that we see in the satellite photograph.¹ On the Great Eastern Highway that heads due east out of Perth towards Kalgoorlie, this limit is reached at Southern Cross, roughly 350 kilometres inland, with an average annual rainfall of 270 millimetres. East of this, the country is used as pastoral rangeland and not for cropping. To the south, the expansion of the wheatbelt was slowed and stopped by more heavily wooded country which, apart from being harder to clear, was more prone to crop rust. The northern limit of the wheatbelt, as with the east, is also a rainfall line, which gradually lessens the further north you go. This has the wheatbelt tending closer to the coast as you head north and becoming more narrow as it is hemmed by the northern and eastern rainfall limits. For grain to ripen, one also needs sun. The generally sunny, warm conditions that prevail in the wheatbelt suit the vigorous growth and maturation of cereal crops, provided there is sufficient rain. Thus, the wheatbelt is bound on its east and north by the 270-millimetre rainfall line and on its south and west, closer to the coast, by the 750-millimetre rainfall line. Land north and east of the former is too dry for wheat; south and west of the latter is too wet. These are rules of thumb but provide the general picture.

The southwest is the traditional country of the Noongar people, comprising some seventeen distinct tribes, but sharing a similar language that distinguishes them from the Wong-gie and western desert peoples further east, and the Yamatji peoples of the Murchison and Gascoyne. Indeed, to the clearing line, the rabbit-proof fence and the rainfall line, we might transpose what early anthropologists
sometimes called the circumcision line, falling in almost exactly the same place. This line denotes the fact that Noongar men, somewhat unusually in Indigenous Australia, were not circumcised. The wheatbelt is mainly situated on Noongar land and it was the Noongar people that suffered most directly when it was created. It was Noongar people that first met Europeans on the south coast in the early 1800s and when the Swan River Colony was established in 1829. This colony was primarily conceived of as an agricultural colony of free settlers, a relatively novel idea at this point in European imperial history. As flour and bread were staple elements in the British diet, the cultivation of grain for milling was amongst the highest priorities of colonial settlement.

As is generally well known, the colony in Western Australia grew slowly in comparison to the other Australian colonies. Nevertheless, from the outset, wheat was a crucial component of the farming
enterprises of the early settlers at, and beyond, the Swan River Settlement. In the early colonial years, wheat was cultivated primarily for domestic consumption, with wool being grown for export. In 1831, two years after the colony was founded, 160 acres of wheat were reaped. In that year, an agricultural society was formed to promote agriculture in the colony. Sufficient grain was grown in 1833 to end the rationing of the first years and self-sufficiency was reached in 1835, but thereafter production really only kept pace with the (modest) increase in the colony’s population, and it would be many more years before wheat was exported. By 1837, there were 1,381 acres harvested producing 22,104 bushels. For much of the nineteenth century, the techniques for growing wheat in Western Australia remained unchanged, and were adapted from traditional English methods. The agricultural historian Burvill explains the methods:

Before crops were sown … manure was spread and the land ploughed with single furrow ploughs drawn by two oxen or horses. Seed was then broadcast by hand and the sown areas levelled with spiked iron harrows. Cereal crops were cut when ripe by hand with a scythe and the grain threshed out by hand-beating or by horse-treading.3

By 1850 the area under tillage for wheat had grown to 4,400 acres. As well as the Avon and Dale valleys beyond the Darling Ranges, wheat was grown on the Swan coastal plain throughout the nineteenth century and into the early 1900s when it was ultimately superseded by the wheat farms east of the ranges. Indeed, as Burvill notes, wheat was grown (and often milled) wherever new farms were established in the southwest, including places not now associated with wheat farming, such as the south coast or the high-rainfall Karri country around Manjimup.

Beyond the coastal districts and the river valleys, the first inland district to be opened up for wheat farming is the area called the Victoria Plains. This was the undulating but wooded country north of Toodyay (known then, on a slightly different site, as Newcastle) and Northam. This land was canvassed in the 1840s as possible grazing country, and a mission was established by Dom Rosendo Salvado on the east branch of the Moore River under the name New Norcia. New
Norcia was also a Benedictine monastery and, under the principles of that rule, was to be as self-sufficient as possible. Thirteen hectares were cleared for tillage in the early part of 1847. From 1860 to 1890, the Victoria Plains “became the granary of Western Australia”. Small wheat enterprises continued to be pursued in other areas, usually as an adjunct to pastoral farming, which had the advantage of not requiring either fencing or clearing. The Norrish family had started to grow wheat at Kojonup in the Great Southern in 1849. A small wheat farm of 20 acres (with a mill) was established by A.Y. Hassell in 1861 at the pastoral holding of Jerramungup, inland from Bremer Bay. What is now the northern and eastern wheatbelt—the districts of Kellerberrin, Kununoppin, Nungarin, Doodlakine, Quairading, Dangin, Bruce Rock, Narembeen, and Mullewa—were originally taken up as pastoral leases. For this purpose, the land favoured was the York gum and jam country, which offered better feed for stock and often fresh water in the soaks near granite outcrops. The salmon-gum, morrel and gimlet country was ignored, although this would later become “first class” wheat land. The techniques for growing remained primitive, prompting Anthony Trollope, in his visit of 1872, to judge it:

> Atrociously bad … Men continue to crop the same ground with the same crops year after year without manuring it, and when the weeds come thicker than the corn they simply leave it. Machinery has not been introduced. Seed is wasted, and farmers thresh their corn with flails on the roads after the old Irish fashion.\(^5\)

Yet investment in wheat farming was also hampered, as Bolton points out, by the generally slow growth of the Western Australian population and economy. The latter part of the nineteenth century saw considerable pastoral expansion, but cropping stagnated, increasing modestly from 54,000 acres in 1870 to 70,000 acres in 1890, roughly half of which was wheat.\(^6\) By contrast, these were years of significant crop expansion in Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland.

During this time (1870–1890) the non-Indigenous population of the colony roughly doubled from 25,000 to 49,000, but still remained tiny by comparison to the other Australian colonies. Very little wheat
was exported, and wool remained the major export commodity. The surveyor-general and commissioner of Crown lands, John Forrest (1847–1918), introduced tariffs to protect local produce at the end of 1887 and he also established a parliamentary inquiry, chaired by H.W. Venn, to map out the future of the agricultural industry in the colony.\(^7\) (Forrest would be appointed the colony’s first premier when responsible government came into effect in 1890.) One of the direct outcomes of the Venn Commission was the establishment of Declared Agricultural Areas, including the establishment of the Meckering Agricultural Area, surveyed by George Leeming, for the specific activity of crop production.\(^8\) Fatefully, it was also in 1887 that the movement of rabbits westward along the bight of Australia was recognised for the first time as an impending threat. The Declared Agricultural Areas would become the nodal points in the expansion of the wheatbelt.\(^9\)

**The Golden Grain**

The watershed year for the wheatbelt would prove to be 1890, when a number of events occurred that would dramatically alter the future of the colony. As mentioned, responsible government was granted, with John Forrest appointed as the colony’s first premier. Of even
more significance, though, was the discovery of gold, which would transform the colony almost as dramatically as the metal transformed Victoria forty years earlier. The key discoveries were in the semi-arid country some 500 kilometres east of Perth. Gold was found at Southern Cross in the late 1880s, in the Murchison in 1891, Coolgardie in 1892 and Kalgoorlie in 1893. The effects were immediate and dramatic, and are rightly called a “rush”. The population of Western Australia trebled between 1889 and 1896 from 44,000 to 138,000. The wheatbelt’s most important border is thus not one in space, but in time. The gold rush of the 1890s was the event that funded and drove the expansion of the wheatbelt in its first convulsive period of growth, that is, in the opening three decades of the twentieth century. In the minds of key figures at the time, gold would be the catalyst to the more lasting, and wholesome, economic development provided by agriculture. The influx of people to Western Australia increased domestic demand for grain both as food for people and fuel for horses. At the same time, the newly responsible government saw an opportunity to fulfil the founding vision of Western Australia as an agricultural colony, a pleasant country of farms and villages, feeding the “bread-eating” nations of the world.

The Western Australian parliament passed the Homesteads Act in 1893 (based on similar legislation in the United States) and the Land Act in 1898. These were progressive state-of-the-art bills that were carefully designed to prevent the kind of rampant speculation that had subverted the “Selection Acts” of the Eastern colonies. The parliament also established the Agricultural Bank in 1894 to assist farmers in financing new farms. The completion of the Kalgoorlie rail-line in 1896 and the Goldfields water pipeline in 1902 were central to the creation of the wheatbelt, and initial settlement took place along the axis that linked Perth to the Goldfields, with Agricultural Areas declared at Meckering, Doodlakine and Bainding. At first, the block sizes tended to range between 100 and 400 acres, although this quickly increased. Joseph Placid Stokes’s grandfather selected 500 acres near Cunderdin in 1906. It was a small block, but very well situated. Albert Facey’s uncle, not a wealthy man by any means, selected 1,000 acres of first-class land near Pingelly in August 1901, taking it up in September the following year. At the other end of the spectrum, in 1912, having
made their money as storekeepers at Southern Cross on the route to the Goldfields, Dorothy Hewett’s maternal grandparents, Ted and Mary Coade, were able to select 3,000 acres of land 22 kilometres from Wickepin, a holding which made them the richest in the district.

Much of the population increase was driven by internal migration from South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. The 1890s were Depression years in the Eastern colonies and rural poverty had become chronic. In this context, the incentives offered to settlement were indeed enticing. The legislation allowed an applicant to acquire a “Homestead Farm”, which is to say a farm of 160 acres on which they were to reside, for no cost provided certain minimal improvements (fencing, clearing) were completed at annual intervals. In 1897, the Minister of Lands George Throssell (1840–1910) remarked that “160 acres and a wife was all that was required to make the majority of Perth young men happy”. Further land could be selected at 10 shillings per acre by conditional purchase. The conditions were a twenty-year repayment period; residence on or near to the land purchased, and that it be fenced within five years. In the years that followed, the sustainable holding of land steadily increased. By the time the wheatbelt began to really operate at the turn of the century, the “thousand acre” farm had become the norm and it was mainly settled on this basis in the first phase (1900–1930) of the wheatbelt’s growth. For a while in the years after World War Two, 2,500 acres was considered average. A decade into the twenty-first century the average size of a wheatbelt farm was 20,000 acres. The general rule was that the further “out” in the wheatbelt you were, the more land you needed to ensure profitability. The mechanisation and chemicalisation of the wheatbelt both allowed and demanded economies of scale, which has meant a progressive depopulation of the wheatbelt since about 1950.

While Western Australian land was remarkably cheap, a number of factors still gave prospective selectors pause for thought, and these were matters that were immediately targeted by the government. First of all, the land was remote, in the sense that it was not serviced by ready transportation. It was inland and there were no river systems to ship crops to market. The expansion of rail and road networks was thus a constant ambition for the early developers of the wheatbelt.
The rail link to Kalgoorlie was completed in 1896 and soon lines spurring south and north opened the plateau east of the Darling Ranges to clearing and farming. The Great Southern rail-line was commenced on 20 October 1886 and opened in June 1889. It connected to the Perth–Goldfields line at Beverley and ran south to Albany, creating in its course the future wheatbelt centres of Pingelly, Narrogin, Wagin and Katanning. The goal was to bring most farms within a 20-kilometre radius of a siding or station. The cartage limit was generally held to be no more than 48 kilometres, though some would gamble on carting it further in the hope that a rail would eventually come. In John K. Ewers’s wheatbelt novel, *Men Against the Earth* (1946), set in the years before the Great War, one character recalls “how for ten years before the rail was built he had carted to Northam, forty miles [or 64 kilometres] away.”

Another major obstacle to farming in the wheatbelt was the non-availability of water. There are virtually no permanent running streams or rivers. The Moore River, mentioned earlier, is a good example. Even in the wet winter months, it is little more than a
chain of elongated puddles for much of its course. In the absence of rivers and freshwater lakes, water was obtained from “soaks”, which were naturally damp areas adjoining granite outcrops, that could be dug out into small ponds to water stock. The Noongar people had done this, and the early pastoralists had expanded these soaks during the nineteenth century. In the Victoria Plains, the Benedictines dug and lined hundreds of wells, many of which are still intact, though many have also turned saline. In 1902, the famous Goldfields water pipeline designed by C.Y. O’Connor was completed and delivered water from Mundaring Weir in the Darling Ranges to Kalgoorlie some 570 kilometres inland with the aid of six steam-driven pumping stations. Branch pipes were built to water the towns and farms of the adjoining wheatbelt. For districts beyond the reach of the pipe, the government built dams to capture surface run-off from winter rains and summer thunderstorms, and water was carted from them by surrounding farmers, who also built dams on their own land to water stock. Water for domestic use was harvested from rooftops of sheds and houses once corrugated metal became readily available.

From the 1890s, the application of superphosphate as a fertiliser also substantially improved wheat yields and broadened the extent of farming to soils that were not previously arable. James Mitchell (1866–1951), the first Minister of Agriculture would later proclaim of the men leaving the goldfields to take up land in the wheatbelt: “Gold brought these men to Western Australia, and superphosphate will keep them here”. The dissemination of new techniques was aided by the establishment in 1894 of the Bureau of Agriculture, which became the Department of Agriculture in 1898. Under all these conditions, areas sown to wheat increased dramatically in the 1890s and early 1900s, more than doubling in the period 1890 to 1900 and again in the period 1900 to 1905. In 1904 Western Australia became for the first time a net exporter of wheat and has remained so, almost without exception, ever since. As M. Barnard Eldershaw declared proudly in 1939, “Thirty years ago Western Australia was importing flour, to-day wheat is her premier product.” Today, the output from the Western Australian wheatbelt is crucial to Australia’s wheat export. Without the Western Australian wheatbelt, Australia would not, except in good seasons, export wheat.
In all of this the State Agricultural Bank was indeed a crucial, perhaps the crucial, institution. The Bank employed people to assess the purchasers of land and establish whether they were meeting the terms of the purchase by making the agreed “improvements”. Inspectors conducted due diligence on settler-farmers seeking loans from the Agricultural Bank by auditing them for compliance with the lending terms. Initially, the Bank would make available up to £400 measured against half the value of certain specified “improvements” to the land granted. In 1902, the loan limit was increased to £1,000 and to £2,000 in 1912.17 The inspector had to assess whether the land and its farmer(s) were likely to repay the loan in due course. This involved measuring the size and quality of the land selected, and recording any “improvements” (especially fencing and clearing) as stipulated under the terms of selection under the relevant Acts. Also, up to 1912, when the rule was relaxed, the inspector checked that residency provisions were being met, so as to prevent the kind of rampant speculative acquisition that had marred the attempts at close settlement in the Eastern colonies of Australia in the previous century. The relaxation of these restrictions saw speculation creep in, with fatal consequences, from 1912 until the catastrophe of 1929.

Along with the Agricultural Bank, the other key government agency was the Lands Department. Eva Braid’s study of the “surveyor-explorers” employed by the Lands Department to classify land reveals the considerable energy expended by the Colony, and later State, in the creation of viable farms through commissioning reliable land surveys. She explains that the surveying was closely tied to the construction of railways. For example, as the rail-line was being built east to the goldfields, Agricultural Areas were surveyed along its intended path. Thanks in no small part to its powerful patrons (Forrest, Mitchell, Throssell), the town of Northam became the epicentre of the operation. Just 100 kilometres from Perth, Northam eclipsed its Avon Valley neighbours—York, Beverley and Toodyay (known as Newcastle until 1910)—due to its location on the east–west rail-line that served the goldfields, and later connected to the rest of the country. It was also, as we have noted, the first major axis for wheatbelt expansion. In the late 1890s, it was decided to push the wheat frontier from Northam towards the Goomalling forests, some
50 kilometres northeast of the town. These “forests” were salmon-gum and gimlet woodlands, and doubts remained about the ability of their underlying soil to carry crops. Even if the soils and rains were good enough, farming there would not be viable without a railway connecting it to Perth, so the political argument essentially turned on the necessity of constructing a rail-line spurring north from Northam to service farms not yet in existence. The surveyors were thus tasked with classifying the land so as to assess whether such an expansion would be economic. In effect, the question is the classic one of modern governments in capitalist societies; that is, to what extent infrastructure ought to follow and support enterprise, and to what extent it should stimulate and create it on behalf of interested parties. So, the surveyors were part of a political project as much as a scientific and economic one. The results of government surveys were used by the Midland Railway Company to promote land for sale, granted to them by the government as payment for the building of the rail. This type of arrangement between governments and railway companies was typical of the development of the Northern Prairies in Canada and the United States at roughly this time.

The district around Goomalling, like other districts in the south-west, had been leased as 20,000-acre pastoral runs since the 1870s. Turning pastoral land into cropland was a radical reorganisation of land usage:

The pastoralists had set up homesteads only where there was permanent water; but for agriculture, men and women would be trying to make farms where they would be fortunate to have even one of those little soaks or gnamma holes. The surveyors would be trying to ascertain rainfall, to find water, to locate and mark the smallest piece of granite, mark out areas of clay where tanks might be excavated and hold water, sink trial potholes to ascertain the quality of the clay. The land differed frequently and suddenly. The belts of forest country were divided by the sand plains of heath and scrub, considered worse than useless for agriculture. Poison country had to be marked, stands of suitable timber for fences and building found, and recommendations made for railway routes and the feeder roads to the railways. Searches had to be made for gold-bearing country, which would be a help for all if found;
but above all the classification was to ascertain soils and sub-soils and the surveyors were to report if they considered wheat growing would be possible. (25; emphasis added)

The Goomalling line, light-gauge and primitive in every respect, was opened in 1902, securing for the district a relatively safe, cheap, reliable transport for both crops and (in the other direction) the materials needed to grow them. From Goomalling, the surveyors pushed out again, this time to Lake Cowcowing, a large salt-pan some 24 kilometres beyond the 48-kilometre cartage radius drawn from the terminus of the Goomalling line. In the spring months between August and November 1903, a surveying team led by Inspecting-Surveyor Marmaduke Terry (1859–1932) classified over a quarter of a million acres (enough, depending on quality, for up to 250 thousand-acre farms) into the four classes of land then used for potential cropland. This land was for a long while known as “Terry’s Survey”, even after the Cowcowing Agricultural Area was gazetted in April 1905.

Amongst Terry’s assistants, both on the Cowcowing survey and the Rabbit-Proof Fence survey, was the young cadet John Aubrey Nunn, whom Eva Braid was able to interview in his bed at Shenton Park Hospital in the 1960s. It is to Nunn that the honour of being the first wheatbelt poet might properly be given. After the entire party contracted dysentery in 1904, some 90 kilometres north of Cunderdin, he wrote a “Bush Ballad”, which commences as follows:

A surveyor’s life is the life for me
It’s grand to be in the wild bush, free,
With axe and slasher, theodolite and chain
And sometimes working in gales and rain;
Some days so thirsty, other times so wet;
And often ½ quart a day is all the drink you’ll get
And it’s sometimes filthy water with a snake or emu in it. 18

And while Nunn’s doggerel is written in the conventional irony of the period, the conditions it lampoons were certainly difficult. Indeed, shortly after ascending to the position of acting surveyor-general in
1901, George Leeming was forced to retire due to health complaints attributed to years of poor food and water whilst on his numerous surveys. In 1902, Leeming died in Melbourne, where he had gone to seek further medical help, at the age of forty-three. As well as being physically taxing, the work of surveying could weigh heavily on the conscience, partly because it was the subject of such intense social and political investment. In short, a lot hinged on it. Terry was conscious that people were investing their lives on the basis of decisions he was making. He was acutely aware that his surveys were relied upon, often somewhat optimistically, and at other times quite cynically exploited, for agricultural land development. Giving voice to Terry’s concern, Braid writes:

[These new farmers] would give years of their lives and would acquire debts they could never hope to repay … Mitchell, in Northam, was telling the world that the land was easily cleared and the only thing needed was men who would go out with their families, take hold of the right end of an axe and get going. (30)

The prospect of individual failure, in the midst of such overwhelming pressure for the wheatbelt enterprise to succeed, must have been horrifying for many, so much so that it was never really discussed, except in a way that converted all the blame of that failure to a source distinct from the plan itself.

The Ideology of Wheat
The account thus far has focused on the material drivers of the wheatbelt, how wheat farming in the twentieth century moved beyond the initial goal of providing grain to the colony of Western Australia to become a major export industry. The pathway from the goldfields to the wheatfields was an adroit piece of social policy that allowed this industry to grow at a rate much faster than it might have otherwise. These aspects of the wheatbelt are generally well known and understood. What is less well documented is the way that wheat existed in the imagination of those who undertook the task of “settling”, and in the broader community which supported the enterprise. We use the term ideology to refer to a system of ideas
that inhabit a material practice, and in this sense we might plausibly speak of an identifiable “ideology of wheat” operating powerfully in the first three decades of the twentieth century. As much as anything, this book is an exploration of this ideology and the social fantasies that powered it. The work of ideology is complicated, but broadly speaking what it seeks to do is provide imaginary solutions to real contradictions. Many of the contradictions that the ideology of wheat addresses are bound up with the complex relationship that farming has to nature. How, for instance, is an economic scheme for financial gain through the sale of cash crops also meant (and indeed felt) to be a return to nature? What exactly is natural about farming, and how can it be reconciled with its eradication of wilderness in southwestern Australia? Ideology answers these questions where it can, and where it cannot, it offers up methods by which they can be forestalled, evaded, repressed or transmuted into questions which can be more satisfactorily answered.

The creation of the wheatbelt in Western Australia at the turn of the century was not something that happened in isolation. It was in fact part of a far-reaching global phenomenon, amounting in many ways to a second agricultural revolution that spread across the world from the middle of the nineteenth century. In his classic account of the rise and fall of the South Australian wheatbelt, *On the Margins of the Good Earth* (1962), D.W. Meinig situates the emergence of this farming region in the 1860s and 1870s as part of a worldwide agricultural colonisation of “sub-humid, middle latitude, ‘open’ countries” to granular cultivation. It took place rapidly and almost simultaneously in the latter part of the nineteenth century: “in western Kansas and central Manitoba … in the Walla Walla and the San Joaquin; in the eastern Ukraine and western Siberia; in the inner Pampa and on the High Veld”. In Australia, wheat farming first emerged on a large scale in South Australia, which serviced the market created by the gold boom of the 1850s, much in the way that Western Australian wheatbelt was caused by the 1890s Coolgardie–Kalgoorlie gold rush. By the 1870s, Australia switched from being a net importer to a net exporter of wheat. In the ensuing decades wheat spread throughout the colonies, in an intermittent arc from the Darling Downs in Queensland, through western New South Wales across northern
Victoria to South Australia, and into the south of Western Australia by the early twentieth century. Western Australia’s was thus the last of the wheatbelts as well as the largest. It corresponded, as we have seen, to a quadrupling of the colony’s population and a historic shift in the balance of Australian economic power, integrating the western half of the continent with the east for the first time.

The shift from wool to wheat was a significant economic development and also made small-scale farming profitable in cash terms for the first time in Australia. However, one struggles to find examples in Australian literature in the late nineteenth century where growing crops exists as part of the heroicised work of the nation. If one tries to call to mind the heroes of popular Australian balladry, for instance, such as the poems of “Banjo” Paterson, we find bushrangers and drovers, stockmen and swagmen, boundary riders and billabongs, shearsers and prospectors. We do not find many stories or songs about people farming grain. The same goes for the epic nationalist paintings of Roberts, Streeton, McCubbin and the Heidelberg school. The work of ploughing, planting and cropping do not shine brightly in the heavens of our national mythology. Only in the late 1910s, at the very point when horse-drawn agriculture was disappearing, did the era at last find grandeur in the works of Hans Heysen. Perhaps this betrays the restless spirit at the heart of a migrant nation. Shearing and droving were characterised by a romantic nomadology that tapped a fantasy of masculine independence from homely duties and womanly demands. The fact that this mythology has persisted suggests certain continuities in the imaginative requirements that Australia still demands of its national fantasies. But this continuity has eclipsed a period of time, beginning around the time of the Great War, when this was not the case, and when grain farming briefly came to the centre of national celebrity.

With Federation in 1901 there was, in fact, already a perceptible shift in the forms of imaginative investment in rural practices, with a greater emphasis on the productive feats of the grain farmer, and the role this had in nation-building. A new and successful variety of wheat, “Federation wheat”, came to be widely used and this points rather literally to the sacramental quality with which wheat came to be invested. Just to give some sense of the scale of the cropping
6. Hans Heysen, *Ploughing the Field*, 1920, Hahndorf, South Australia watercolour on paper 41.8 × 52.3 cm. Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 816P17.

Hans Heysen, *The Toilers*, 1920, Hahndorf, South Australia watercolour on paper 40.4 × 51.8 cm. Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 696P29.
revolution in the early twentieth century, in NSW alone the area under wheat production grew from 1 million to 3.5 million acres between 1901 and 1914. And it was at this time that wheat became a subject in literary production. In particular, wheat ballads started to appear in the midst of the traditional pastoral songs in the pages of newspapers, their weekly “country” supplements, and magazines like the *Bulletin* and the *Lone Hand*. The celebration of wheat farming was a significant change in view. Cropping was previously held to be a form of almost shameful drudgery, evoking archaic feudal memories of being bonded to the land and to a master. In this context, one can see the appeal of the figures (drover, shearer, prospector) that populated the national rural mythology at the time. That this could turn so quickly is evident in the new wheat poem’s sense of stridency.

Whilst a great many poems could be cited, two poems by Andrew “Banjo” Paterson (1864–1941) and C.J. Dennis (1876–1938), serve to capture the distinctive hopes and visions that wheat farming promised in this era. Dennis and Paterson are near contemporaries, though Banjo came to prominence in the 1890s, while Dennis’s fame grew mainly in the years after the Great War. But these beloved national poets meet in the celebration of wheat farming. Dennis’s poem, simply titled “Wheat” appeared in his first volume *Backblock Ballads and Other Verses* published in 1918. The first verse and refrain are enough to give the flavour of the ballad:

Oh! The ways o’ makin’ money in this world o’
Many lands
An’ the means to eke a livin’ out are countless
As the sands
There are thousands in the cities gettin’ nothin’ out
O’ life.
But the day-to-day excitement of eternal business
Strife.
Yet a life o’ rush and bustle ain’t the sort o’ life
Fer me;
You can keep yer sudden fortunes, for I’d much the
Sooner be
A-growin’ —
Wheat, wheat, wheat. It’s a game that’s hard to
beat—
Sowin’ it an’ growin’ it—it’s what the nations eat.
Tho’ it ain’t a life o’ pleasure,
An’ there’s little time for leisure,
It’s contentin’, in a measure, is the game of growin’
Wheat.

In Dennis’s poem, wheat farming is no longer drudgery but the exact opposite, that which frees you from drudgery. The honest toil of the crop farmer is an antidote to the stresses of the urban rat-race, with its ever-present threats of financial and psychological collapse (“You can court your nervous breakdowns, you can slave to make your pile”, the poem goes on in another stanza). The “sowin’” and “growin’” place the farmer into a habit of life closer to both the rhythms of nature and the potency of production.

The violent character of the resumption of wooded land for use in the growth of cereals emerges in Paterson’s “Song of the Wheat”, published initially in the *Lone Hand* in 1914 and republished as the opening poem in his volume *Saltbush Bill, J.P. and Other Verses* in 1917, whilst Paterson was serving in the Middle East.22 “Song of the Wheat” recounts the transformation of the country west of the Dividing Range from pastoral to crop use. Here is the opening stanza:

We have sung the song of the droving days,
Of the march of the travelling sheep—
How by silent stages and lonely ways
Thin, white battalions creep.
But the man who now by the soil would thrive
Must his spurs to a ploughshare beat;
And the bush bard, changing his tune, may strive
To sing the song of the Wheat!

The martial tone, in the midst of the Great War, could hardly be accidental, and what for Dennis had been a delicate kind of coping out, becomes for Paterson a call to arms. What is significant, though,
is the manner in which the eruption of the war allows, effectively in retrospect, a symbolic context for the agricultural colonisation of the rangelands of southwestern New South Wales:

Yarran and Myall and Box and Pine—
’Twas axe and fire for all;
They scarce could tarry to blaze the line
Or wait for the trees to fall,
Ere the team was yoked, and the gates flung wide,
And the dust of the horses’ feet
Rose up like a pillar of smoke to guide
The wonderful march of Wheat.

The shocking speed with which one agricultural moment was being superseded, the pastoral age over whose last years Paterson had so distinctively presided, by a new mode of exploitative, close-settlement, is given a meaning by a war that would soon itself struggle for meaning.

In the ensuing decades of the 1920s and ’30s, the wheat poem remained a staple in the *Bulletin*. Charles Souter from South Australia published a series of light-hearted poems in the line of Dennis in 1926, which describe the various stages of wheat farming in metered couplets (“Harvestin”, “W’eat-Cartin’!’”). R.G. Henderson of New South Wales published an ode to “The Wheat” in which the grain speaks nobly of itself in the first person, revealing how it has shaped human history since the time of the pharaohs. Despite its displacements, Henderson’s poem shows a clear sense of the close relationship between the mass production of grain and the reshaping of the world through the mechanisms of globalising capital: “For me they barter their brightest silks and Forge their greatest guns.” Such optimism is present but more tempered in subsequent years, often adopting a polite fatalism. Nevertheless, in the wheat song one discerns the formation of a national ideology of wheat-growing which still persists in many ways, encrypted into our imagery and iconography.

If we turn from poetry to prose, we can also see the beginnings of a literature of crop farming nudging into the traditional pastoral stories. In particular, the 1880s and 1890s saw the emergence of a literature of
“selection”. Selection was the name given to the taking up of smaller parcels of Crown land under the various Land Acts passed by the Australian colonies from the 1860s onwards. They had been specifically passed to encourage close settlement and intensive agriculture, such as the growing of wheat. The “selector” is a notable figure in the stories of Bulletin writers like Henry Lawson (1867–1922) and Barbara Baynton (1857–1929). The Drover and his Wife, in Lawson’s “The Drover’s Wife” (1892) are selectors and so too, Squeaker and his Mate, in Baynton’s “Squeaker’s Mate” (1902). Both stories reference events some fifteen to twenty years prior to their dates of publication, and in that sense are each tinged with retrospective colouring. But it is not clear in these stories whether either couple is growing a crop; there is no strong consciousness of the task of cultivation, of the kind that was present by the time the Western Australian wheatbelt came to be founded at the turn of the century. The term of the time, that is, in the 1870s and 1880s, and which remains in use, was “mixed farming”, and designates all the various agricultural pursuits that were taken up by holders of these smaller lots, including the growing of crops, the keeping of animals on pasture, but also pigs, chickens, potatoes and whatever else might either sustain or turn a profit for the farmer. By far the most popular portrait of the mixed-farming selector was that found in the stories of “Steele Rudd”. “Rudd” was the alter-ego of Arthur Hoey Davis (1868–1935) and the narrator of the stories which document the struggles of his family who take up a selection in the Darling Downs in the 1870s. The first of these to appear in the Bulletin was “Starting the Selection” in 1895. As their popularity grew, they were published in book form (by the Bulletin) as On Our Selection! in 1899, selling over 20,000 copies. It was these stories, and their various sequels, along with their countless adaptations as “Dad and Dave” stage plays and radio serials, that forced the image of the small-scale farmer into the national imaginary.

What emerges quite plainly in the “Steele Rudd” stories, to a much greater extent than in Lawson or Baynton, is the particular value given to cropping. Whilst the family turn their hands, often with tragicomic results, to almost every conceivable form of farming, it is clear from the stories that prosperity for the small landholder lay in crops—particularly in wheat, corn, barley and oats. The very first
Like Nothing on This Earth

story, “Starting the Selection”, documents the family’s attempts to sow a crop, beginning with the painful “toil” of clearing an initial four-acre paddock:

We toiled and toiled clearing those four acres, where the haystacks are now standing, till every tree and sapling that grew there was down. We thought the worst was over; but how little we knew of clearing land! Dad was never tired of calculating and telling us how much the crop would fetch if the ground could only be got ready in time to put it in …

“Look at the Dwyers,” he’d say; “from ten acres of wheat they got seventy pounds last year, besides feed for the fowls; they’ve got corn in now, and there’s only the two.”

This “toil” is the basis for the comedy. It is a humour based on poverty, on the ridiculousness that can haunt the desperate. Having cleared the land laboriously and painfully, the Rudds are left with the problem of ploughing it. The problem here was that the family had no horse—and no plough. So they borrowed hoes and turned the land this way, then drilled each grain of corn in by hand. But against this misery is the slow but distinct improvement in finances. The good years were good enough to allow investment in new equipment, and in the bad years the farm at least provided sustenance of a kind, even if a perilously thin one at times. The four cleared acres became, after a season or two, ten cleared acres. The two-roomed “Shingle Hut”, becomes a four-roomed one. Fresh years brought fresh challenges, but the trend over time was towards greater wealth, so much so, that by the end of the first book, the Rudds have now gathered sufficient means to buy a “new selection” (“Saddletop”), which was the subject of the next book. There, the family quickly put a “hundred acres of plain-land under wheat” and are blessed with “light showers falling every week” (119). They buy a two-furrow plough, and then a three-furrow one, with new teams of horses to pull them.

The dire quality of the events at the first selection (“Shingle Hut”), the near starvation and extreme privation of the family, is made bearable by the comedy, which is in turn made bearable by the fact that we know from the narrator’s first sentence that the events had happened twenty years prior. Published in 1895, this places the taking
up of the selection in 1875, roughly when Davis himself, at the age of seven, moved with his family to take up their selection in the Darling Downs. It is this quality of retrospection that gives to these comic tales their mythic dimension. So, by chapter six in the second series, *Our New Selection*, we have this:

How Time passes! Those days of toil and moil—that weary, up-hill struggle at Shingle Hut—were now thought of only in moments of merriment. Queer old days—wild old ways that all of us loved to remember—none of us wished to forget.

Farming was not the drag—the wretched, murderous, drudgery—it used to be. We were improving every day—climbing rapidly to the lap of comfort. The wheat turned out a success again, and the profit made us all rejoice. (106)

The underlying narrative is one of success, even if most of the incidents document moments of failure. The selection stories of “Steele Rudd” share that sequential, sacrificial typology of phases that were memorably captured in McCubbin’s triptych *The Pioneers* (1904).

The success of small farming depicted in Steele Rudd’s stories is not a dimension often remarked upon, but it is a feature that clearly distinguishes it from the work of his contemporaries, Lawson and Baynton.

The Shores of Cowcowing
How literature dealt with the experience of the small selector in Western Australia is, of course, the subject of this book. The wheatbelt has produced a surprising number of writers, more indeed than I have been able to include. But it is also worth mentioning the writers who did not, by and large, consider the wheatbelt in their writings. Randolph Stow (1935–2010) has been a difficult exclusion from this study, because he grew up in wheat-and-sheep country in Geraldton and its surrounding farms, and wrote about these places in his novels *The Haunted Land* (1956), *The Bystander* (1957) and *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965). But, significantly, Stow and the caste he writes about do not consider themselves as the kind of aspirational selector that defined the wheatbelt. In his novels, crops are a distant background, and one sees no evidence of the ideology of wheat. The land had been settled with convict assistance in the mid-nineteenth century and the farmers considered themselves as “station” owners and treated their holdings with the dynastic pretensions that attach to the grazier in Australia. Stow himself was acutely conscious of the distinction between a “farm” and a “station” and apologises in his preface to *The Haunted Land* for confusing the two in his novel: “I have called Malin, Koolabye and Strathmore ‘stations’, as it is a local custom to give that name to the older and larger properties in this district. They are, of course, not sheep stations, but only very large farms.” In *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, the line between these farms (called stations) and the true stations of the “North” is a source of fascination for the young Rob Coram, where he becomes aware of living on this frontier: “His country was where the small farms ended, where the winter-rainfall ended, where the people ended. Beyond lay the open North: unpeopled, innocent.” The farmers in the novel, Rob’s various relations, conduct themselves as if they were on stations and his novels have the air of station-romances. Their land is inherited and worked by employees. People ride horses
and play tennis. Boys are sent to Guildford (“College”) and then to university.

What Stow’s case helps illustrate is that the wheatbelt has struggled to be a site of heroic action. Its basic structure is, in fact, a bourgeois one. Despite the immense amount of manual work, the wheatbelt is not, strictly speaking, working-class because the worker actually owns the asset in most cases, albeit under mortgage. Nor, despite some occasional grandiosity, is it really a landed class in the sense that the land held produces sufficient profit to allow a leisured existence for the owners. Instead, a wheatbelt farm is typically a small business, usually family-owned and run, and the people fit most nearly the petit-bourgeoisie, both in material conditions and in sensibility—particularly the quality of aspiration, which defines the middle-class. For this reason, there is something ultimately “small” about the wheatbelt experience which seems to have discouraged writers from locating heroic stories there. The case of Katharine Susannah Prichard (1883–1969) is also instructive in this regard. Despite living in the wheatbelt for two years, Prichard only sparingly alludes to this fact in her writing, including her autobiography. In her novels, she writes instead of the Karri country (Working Bullocks, 1926), the Pilbara (Coonardoo, 1929) and the Goldfields in her trilogy (The Roaring Nineties, 1946; Golden Miles, 1948; Winged Seeds, 1950).30

One of those to select land on the shores of Lake Cowcowing—part of “Terry’s Survey” of the Goomalling Forests—was Prichard’s husband Hugo Throssell (1884–1933). His father, George Throssell, had been Forrest’s Commissioner of Lands from 1897 and a key proponent of the venture. Hugo and his older brother Ric (Frank Erick Throssell, 1881–1917) had taken up the land when it was gazetted before the War. When hostilities commenced, both brothers enlisted, Hugo in the 10th Light Horse. He won the Victoria Cross for valour in the Gallipoli landing, becoming a celebrity in the process. It was while convalescing from wounds from the Gallipoli campaign in England that he met Prichard, who was working as a freelance journalist in London whilst attempting to establish herself as a novelist. She gave Hugo a copy of her recently published novel The Pioneers (1915) to read in hospital, a novel that was partially inspired by McCubbin’s triptych that had hung in Melbourne’s National Gallery
since 1905. In 1916, Hugo returned briefly to Western Australia and was asked for his impressions of Gallipoli.

At about 5.30 in the evening of the 6th August I had the opportunity of seeing in the distance a glorious bayonet charge by the 16th. Line after line charged in the face of fire which seemed impossible for men to live through, and while I was watching it, a man at my side, whom I did not know, called “Hullo Mr. Throssell. How much crop have you in at Cowcowing this year?” It knocked the stuffing out of me, but I told him “240 acres and it’s looking well”.

This anecdote, with its droll punchline, is the kind of unwitting puncturing of vainglory that is at the heart of Australian humour—a scene straight out of “Steele Rudd”. Yet the linkage between the quasi-militarism of the wheatbelt, with its frontiers and surveying teams and a military campaign is not entirely misplaced.

Hugo Throssell survived the War, although both his brother Ric, and Prichard’s brother Allan, did not. Returning to Australia, Hugo had two ambitions. The first was to travel to Melbourne to secure the hand of Prichard in marriage, and the second was to recommence the work of building his farm at Cowcowing. Initially, it seemed the former was the greater task. Prichard was reluctant to marry, indeed had sworn she never would, for fear of sacrificing the writing career that was her life’s longing. But she acceded to Throssell’s proposal, and they moved west to commence married life. Throssell and Prichard (now Mrs Hugo Throssell) spent two years at Cowcowing in 1919 and 1920. They appear not to have been happy ones, according to Braid, drawing on the recollections of friends and neighbours at the time:

Katharine Susannah Prichard accompanied her husband back to the farm at the end of the War. The living quarters were one end of a large shed, with the stables the other side of a galvanised iron wall. At night the horses made a terrible noise snorting and snuffling incessantly but no one understood her protest if she complained. Her husband and their neighbours all thought the sound of contented horses, well fed, watered and safe, helped them sleep well.
It is doubtful that the noise of horses is what drove the Throssells from Cowcowing, but the insinuation is that Prichard was not used to the privations of frontier life, and complained sufficiently to force her way back to the more civilised if still pleasantly rural surrounds of Greenmount. Braid does add that “both she and her husband were very upset when a bank foreclosed on close neighbours of the area” (32). In a striking omission, Prichard makes no mention of the two years she spent at Cowcowing in her autobiography, *Child of the Hurricane* (1963).33

It is difficult to say why Prichard did not use her time living at Cowcowing as the basis for any of her novels or mention it in her autobiography. However, the experience does surface in at least one of her short stories, “Christmas-tree”, that appeared in the war-time collection *Potch and Colour* in 1944.34 The story takes its title from a species of parasitic tree (*Nuytsia floribunda*) that grows extensively through the southwest in the sandy soils of banksia woodland. It flowers a vibrant orange in December just as the rest of the bush dries in the heat of early summer, so the name was perhaps inevitable. In the story, the wife (Minnie Gillard) of a farmer (George) is looking over her farm for the last time, as the bank has called in their mortgage. The rather muted climax takes place later that evening at the end-of-year dance in the local hall, where the vanquished couple put in a rather reluctant appearance, and valiantly try to at least leave with their heads held high. At the dance, flirting with the young women and clapping the men on the backs is the charismatic bank representative, once a storekeeper and now local member, Christopher Tregear, who had just weeks earlier told George that “he could not interfere with the policy of the bank” (168). This is perhaps a nod towards her father-in-law, George Throssell, a former storekeeper and the local member for Northam from 1890 to 1904 and 1907 to 1910, as well as James Mitchell, the former bank manager turned politician, who selected land at Cowcowing Lakes at the same time as Hugo Throssell. Seeing this “old man” at the dance causes a bleak, socialist epiphany in Minnie:

Pain gripped Minnie with the intensity of her thinking. She understood well enough that there was a rotten financial system at the back of Tregear and this business of mortgages was ruining the
farmers. It was responsible for turning George away from the place he had made; from the cleared paddocks, the house, stables and machinery sheds. All their hope and toil, their years of desperate struggle against misfortune, had gone for nothing. Their youth had been wasted, and now when they were old and weary, they must make another start. What was the use? It would all happen again when they had cleared land and brought it into production. And that old man telling funny stories and laughing so boisterously—everything would go to him and his bank. (168)

This was certainly a view shared by many in the wake of the commodity price collapse that led into the Great Depression. But this explanation does not fit the circumstances of Prichard’s own abandonment, with her husband, of their new farm in 1920 in the midst of the post-war boom. There are, however, a number of parallels to the Cowcoring years, such that it becomes clear that this story is narrating a part of Prichard’s life that she was unable to bring herself to tell in her autobiography. It illustrates how studying creative literature helps gain a purchase on experiences that are not transcribable without the protection of fiction. Take the following passage, which describes—as a bitter reverie at the moment of their departure—the arrival and early years of the Gillards at their bush block:

And this was the end—the old steel trunk, those cases and her hatbox, under the fig-tree. Minnie’s thoughts drifted to the time when she and George Gillard arrived at Laughing Lakes with that trunk and little else besides. They were just married and George had taken up land round the dry lakes which the blacks had called Laughing Lakes. Why, nobody knew. The Lakes had never carried anything but a shimmering gypsum deposit for many years. Not an acre of land was cleared then. George had put up a humpy of brushwood and hessian and added some sheets of corrugated iron later on. They had lived in it for a long time.

He had cut out the timber, cleared the scrub of clay-bush, dead-finish, wodjil and morrell, put a bullock team and log-roller over the thicket, burnt over the broken bushes, ploughed, cultivated and sowed his first crops. What ages ago it seemed! (161)
What this little vignette points to is that beyond the melodrama of the dance and the gloating bank manager, there is also a deeper story at work in “Christmas-tree”, and that is the story of the destruction of the natural world. At first glance there seems little consciousness of this, as the whole violent process of clearing the bush for farm land is understood only as a form of thankless “toil”. The labour is alienated in the sense that it takes place individualistically, a solitary task in which the settler is pitted against a harsh and unforgiving landscape. The name “Laughing Lakes” is an allusion or quasi-translation of Cowcowing Lakes, a Noongar name of uncertain meaning, but which onomatopoeically resembles laughter. Little thought is spared for their exploitation, for the fact that the land might have indeed been owned by “the blacks” who named the lake without thinking to pass on the meaning of the name. Indeed, the Lakes’ laughter is felt as a pitiless sarcasm, and the “shimmering gypsum” a cruel mirage of what a lake is meant to hold.

But then the labour is not as isolated as it has seemed, because Minnie, too, had joined the struggle:

Minnie had helped him indoors and out, in every way that a woman can help a man when she is young and strong, and as eager as he to tame a wild country and make a home in it. She had lighted burning-off fires and watched them, stooked sheaves, sewn wheat-bags, raised chickens and vegetables, made mud bricks and set them to bake in the sun for the house. It had been a strange, lonely life for her, a city girl. (161)

Here we can ascertain at least the shadow of Prichard’s own feelings when thrust into the stark reality of a bush block in the middle of nowhere. That George owes something to her husband Hugo Throssell can be gleaned from an incident early in the story when Minnie remembers her husband’s delight at the winter rains coming to moisten his newly planted crop:

He had sown by moonlight in order to get the crop in, swearing he could smell rain in the air: had just finished when down it came, the rain, in a light wispish shower. George was crazy with joy: stood out in it shouting:

“Oh, Lord, send it down! Send it down!”
It was a miracle. The rain had come that year just when it was needed, and soaked into the thirsty land. Soon the red earth was green with springing wheat. (159)

Prichard’s autobiography, *Child of the Hurricane*, recounts an incident very similar to this, albeit at Greenmount in the Perth Hills. When the first winter rains fell to soften the soil of their Greenmount orchard, Prichard described how Hugo Throssell would sing and dance with joy and say of the moist loam, “You could eat it, couldn’t you?” (256).

In several ways the story of the Gillards certainly departs from the lives of Prichard and Throssell, most obviously on the matter of duration. The Gillards had laboured fruitlessly through many seasons, while Prichard lasted barely two in the years after the War. The longer time frame of the Gillards’ life in the wheatbelt allows the story to depict the creation of the farm as a process of history and to speak from a point in time when all has come to pass. But the story also leaves open the other possibility that I have put forward, which is that the emergence of the wheatbelt is not so much a product of human history but a violation and eradication of natural history. In this sense, the wheatbelt is something completely outside of this deeper history and antithetical to it. And perhaps it is this that lends the ambivalent accent to the fact of financial failure in stories like “Christmas-tree”. The reasons people leave the land must inevitably be as complex as the reasons people take to it. But in Prichard’s story, the point is made that the arrival and departure are often intimately connected. It is in departing that Minnie re-experiences all the hopes that were present in the arriving. In the story, the failure is ascribed to an exploitative institution—the Bank—as though in it alone resided the operation of capitalism, and the task of farming was wholly distinct and untainted by the profit motive. Yet in reflecting on her husband’s love of land in *Child of the Hurricane*, Prichard comes closer to locating the source of the wheatbelt’s intoxicating allure in a certain land-hunger that is often underplayed. Although she was, in a manner, enchanted by her husband’s Lawrentian sensitivity to the earth’s primal patterns, Prichard also recalls that his “passion for land had involved him in reckless expenditures and obligations to banks” (260–1).35
In some ways what becomes clear is that the story proceeds on the basis of a misdiagnosis. It directs its critique towards a financial system that left the worker—here, in fact, the owner of an asset of production (land)—but out of the corner of the eye something else appears, which is the natural world itself, the subject of so much of this toil as it was systematically eliminated. In many ways, Prichard’s story “Christmas-tree” is exemplary of the way that the ecological operates in the creative literature of the wheatbelt. For instance, it is there at the very outset:

Against the dim blue of the summer sky the Christmas-trees had thrown their blossoming crests; like clouds, raw gold, fluted and curled, they lay along the horizon.

The trees grew irregularly on dry, scrubby land beyond Gillard’s fences to the north of Laughing Lakes homestead. Their trunks were scarcely visible from the back door of the house where Minnie Gillard stood. All the year the trees looked dull and sinister standing in the wheat-fields on the edge of the scrub. They were protected by law, and at Christmas time put on their opulent beauty. Mrs Gillard’s thoughts wandered from those trees to the wheat-fields, ravelling and unravelling old hopes, despairs, bitter and sweet memories. (158; emphasis added)

Also typical in this passage is the extreme ambivalence of the image of nature—the Christmas-tree—ecstatically evoked in the opening paragraph, then taking on a “sinister”, brooding quality in the second paragraph. The final sentence links the image of nature to the wheatbelt mythos, making clear that it too is characterised by an occasional, perhaps illusory, opulence which masks a threat. In a later passage, just as the Gillards are pulling away in a buggy containing their worldly possessions, Minnie calls her husband’s attention to the Christmas trees:

“Look,” she said.
“What?” he growled, fearing she was going to cry.
“The Christmas-trees.” Mrs Gillard’s voice shook. “They’re in flower. Don’t you remember what we read in the newspaper the other day? Somebody has found out the Christmas-tree’s a parasite. Its
roots throw suckers round the roots of other trees and draw the sap from them. That’s why the trees near it are always so poor and dreary looking—and it’s got all that rich yellow blossom.”

This becomes the meaning of the image (of the Christmas tree) and the theme of the story—that riches displayed in one place derive from impoverishment in another. But there is a second image of nature that occurs in the story, this time in the form of consolation drawn from wildflowers and the passage of seasons:

Mrs Gillard remembered how strange and lonely it had been at first. But she had found comfort in the sweep of the sky, the pageant of the seasons on the face of the changing landscape. How she had loved the wild flowers which came up on the soil cleared for crops!

She had never seen any flowers like them. Their colours were so pure and bright. The wild flowers made a vivid fringe—purple, magenta, cerise, yellow, scarlet and blue—to the ploughed lands. Tall, freckled orchids, yellow and brown, grew in places where the fires had been. They were like the eaglehawks which, swooping out of the sky, flew off with her chickens. (161–2)

There is a poignant belief that these wildflowers could persist in the face of continued ploughing. In reality, of course, this would be their last appearance before continued cultivation replaced them with the grain crops in the newly created farms. In this way, the full reality of natural destruction is disguised by the romantic fallacy, Ruskin’s term for the imaginary belief that nature might reflect our moods. The final line in the description is something of a non sequitur. It is not clear how the orchids are like the eaglehawks, except perhaps that they are the emblems of a nature that will not be colonised, that will continue to do what it has always done. In that sense, the eagle’s predation on the chickens is in fact a hopeful image that nature might survive this massive onslaught.

This reading of Prichard’s story offers a preview of the method adopted in this history and hopefully suggests something of what is possible when you pay close attention to creative literature as a historical document. Creative writing does not primarily serve
history by detailing the emergence of new farming techniques, or the fluctuation of markets, or even the growth and decline of towns and communities. All of these things can be traced in other kinds of documents. What creative writing does is show how people felt, and how often this is at variance with how they wished they felt. In exposing the inner life of the participants of the wheatbelt’s creation, we can also begin to grasp something of the remarkable motive force—a desire, and not just a material necessity—that caused a world to disappear and committed thousands of families to a form of life they can have had little preparation to undertake. The literature of the wheatbelt provides a vital bridge between material policy and individual aspiration. In it we often see depicted the arduous expenditure of labour, the kind that George and Minnie did in Prichard’s story. And, indeed the kind that Prichard and Hugo Throssell themselves did, along with everyone else who settled in the Cowcowing Lakes. And this process occurred again and again and again, in district after district until the wheatbelt stretched from the Darling Ranges to the Eastern Goldfields, from the Indian Ocean north of Geraldton to the Southern Ocean east of Esperance. But as well as representing the work of creating the wheatbelt, the stories have their own kind of work to do—to try to come to terms with the significance of this grand project; to ask what it might mean.