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The River is Three-quarters Empty: Some Literary Takes on Rivers and Landscapes in India and Australia

Paul Sharrad

University of Wollongong, psharrad@uow.edu.au

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The River is Three-quarters Empty: some literary takes on rivers and landscape in India and Australia.

Paper for the Eastern IASA conference, Kolkata, January 2009

Paul Sharrad,
University of Wollongong

This paper takes its title from the historical novel by Ranga Rao, *The River is Three-quarters Full*, itself apparently borrowed from a Telugu proverb about the beneficent powers of riverine nature and the ultimate benevolence of the cosmos. The phrase is invoked repeatedly by villagers despite a major drought and connects to East India Company idealists envisaging controlled water management while their profiteering colleagues mismanage famine and pursue their own advantage.

The book gives me an entrée into comparing cultural and literary visions of rivers in Australia, since drought, deforestation, agricultural pollution, and a history of damming for flood control and irrigation have created a national disaster in our Murray-Darling river system. [MAP] This has been a matter for government and public debate for some time. From Federation on, states have declared the need for a national management authority but resolutely refused to give up control of their own sections of the rivers. In 2007 the Howard government established the Murray Darling Basin Commission with a budget of \$10 billion to return 500 gegalitres to the rivers, cap irrigation onselling, redevelop native fish stocks, manage salinity and promote interstate trading of water. Last August the private company Murray Irrigation (which supplies some 2400 farms in New South Wales) put a package to government. The trade journal *Stock and Land* [PIC] struck a tone of reasonable compromise suggesting that farmers would support

government buy-back of irrigation water to restore flows to the river system, but only at \$2200 a megalitre as opposed to the unreasonable offer from Canberra of \$950 (Barber). In *The Australian* of 10 January this year, a farming lobby warned that government insistence on reducing carbon emissions would result in reforestation taking up farmland and sucking away water from the rivers so that food prices will rise (Maher).

The Murray-Darling Basin covers over one million square hectares — 14% of the nation's land. [MAP] It spans three states and the ACT (perhaps the major problem in getting any agreement on a uniform management policy) and produces 41% of Australia's agricultural wealth: wool, wheat, sorghum, canola, cotton, rice, almonds, citrus, grapes and more. This is possible because it includes around 75% of the nation's irrigation. It also encompasses wetlands listed on international heritage treaties and is home to 35 endangered birds and 16 endangered mammal species, 20 mammals already being extinct. Increasing salinity endangers farming as well as natural vegetation and wildlife, [PIC] the water supply for many towns and most of the state of South Australia, and water levels at the lower end of the system are so alarming that some environmentalists think there is no hope of revitalising the ecosystem [PIC].

It can be of little surprise to anyone that rivers recur as central locations and symbols in Indian writing, given the ancient Hindu myths of waters descending from Shiva's hair and Vedic rituals of pilgrimage, notably to the Ganges. Religious respect for rivers can be found in Narayan's fiction (the Sarayu river in *The Guide*) in Raja Rao (the Himavathy in *Kanthapura*) and there is awe if not actual devotion attached to the rivers of the

Sundarbans in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. Adil Jussawalla, living in the regularly flooded plains of Orissa, infuses his poetry with rivers as an integral part of his tone and vision. Pankaj Mishra writes a story about young people living around the Ganges in Varanasi (*The Romantics*).

In a more political context, rivers provide regional identity (as in the Punjab) and form natural boundaries to political and cultural areas. Khushwant Singh dramatises the political import of river boundaries in *Train to Pakistan*, when during the Partition era a Sikh lover sacrifices his life so that his Muslim girlfriend and many others can escape by rail across the bridge into Pakistan. Contemporary rivers constitute a site of struggle over the management of water resources — for irrigated farmland or industrial power supply. Arundhati Roy prefigures her work against the Narmada Dam scheme with her images of riverine decay in *The God of Small Things*. There a Kerala 'backwater' that has irrigated rice paddies for centuries is 'controlled' to produce more crops per year, and disrupts the rhythms of nature and social practice:

He walked along the banks of the river that smelled of shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. (13)

Downriver, a saltwater barrage had been built in exchange for votes from the influential paddy farmers lobby.... So now they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice for the price of a river. (124)

Opposition to the Narmada dams finds its literary and legendary equivalent in Gita Mehta's *River Sutra*. There is little indication in this novel of the social and political conflict surrounding this waterway, though the book itself may be an implicit protest against the destruction of an entire historical-cultural ecosystem. In the novel, a senior

civil servant, now widowed, retires and heads to the upper reaches of the Narmada river to live out - as he sees it - his 'forest retreat' stage of life before renouncing the world. Instead, the world keeps coming to him. His interest in the traditions of the river and the sites of pilgrimage to its holy waters brings him into contact with people whose stories fill out his knowledge of the place, but also show him how little he actually knows of life and how unready he is to play the sage. One of the principal agents in his education is his chess companion, Mullah Tariq Mia. This old man is a Sufi who mixes with all kinds of people and whose stories are all about the need for desire as a fuel for living and a necessary adjunct to transcendent peace. What we end up with, I think is a tribute to the folklore and higher ideals of a predominantly Hindu India that is also a working through of both to end up confirming a humanist set of values and an ideal of multicultural friendship.

In Australia, the attitude to rivers has been somewhat different. Firstly, there are fewer of them, so that only the Swan and the Murray-Darling system seem to figure with any regularity in literary works. Secondly, they have been thought of entirely in secular, utilitarian terms. Public culture has been shaped by white settlement, and only recently are the foundation myths of Aboriginal lore being recognised. White settlers came with expectations of the Niger as traversed by Mungo Park, or the Nile as charted by Burton and Speke, or the Mississippi and the Amazon in North America. With some obvious exceptions in the later experience of tropical zones, what they found was a relatively mean supply of water. When the Blue Mountains were crossed, the plains descending into the sub-sea-level heart of the continent were supposed to drain waters into an inland

sea, and stories abound of explorers setting off into the Centre equipped with boats they never got to use save as shelter from sun and wind. Lakes came and went from one month to the next; rivers seemed either to be vast flood plains or dry beds of sand. It could break the explorer's heart or the farmer who sought to run sheep and cattle after him. Such dramatic contrast is famously celebrated in Dorothea Mackellar's poem, "My Country", with its "droughts and flooding rains" contrasting with the tamed natural world of Europe.

The exception in this was Charles Sturt, who in 1829 traced the Murrumbidgee- Murray rivers from one end to the other. He failed to find a navigable outlet to the sea and was forced to row back upstream through crowds of Aborigines not pleased at seeing him for a second time. The Murray became the major image of hope for inland settlement such that it was termed "the mighty Murray" (Nicholson) and referred to as Australia's Mississippi. Children's literature has works dramatising boat races between paddle-steamers and the carrying of loads of wool thousands of miles from the inland to ports near Goolwa where they could be transhipped to Europe (McRoberts, Thiele).

After the Second World War, possessed by the golden glow of industry and technology, Australia instituted major water management programmes. The best known of these was the redirection of the Snowy River to the inland and construction of hydro-electric power stations to supply Sydney and Melbourne. The plan changed the social face of Australia by importing large numbers of Displaced Persons from Europe after the War as labour and by enabling industrialisation in the cities. Although the High Country of the Snowy

continued to run cattle and horses, the days of rural romance celebrated by Banjo Paterson were on the wane. The uncritical triumphalism of technological progress can be heard in this popular song concocted at the time:

Snowy River Roll

Give me bulldozers and tractors and hoses
and diesels to ease all my troubles away.
With the help of the Lord and of good Henry Ford,
the Snowy River will roll on its way.

Roll, roll, roll on your way,
Snowy River roll away;
roll on your ay until Judgement Day,
Snowy River roll. (Lovelock)

Only in recent years has the ecological impact of this redirection of water been assessed and some flows have been returned to the original eastern course of the Snowy River.

Further west, the returned soldiers were given tracts of land for small-scale farming all along the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers. These were dairy farms in wetter parts, wheat and sheep farms in the more remote areas and fruit blocks surviving on irrigation close to the rivers. Again, there were demographic implications as the latter developed, Greek and Italian migrants increasingly becoming involved in a growing wine industry and the beginnings of rice and olive production. This process was again trumpeted as a triumph of white civilisation and modern technology, as echoed in Ernestine Hill's documentary history, *Water into Gold* (1943). The second edition in 1958 carried a preface by R.G. Menzies, Australia's long-serving Prime Minister.

Nancy Cato is an Australian writer well recognised in her lifetime with awards for services to literature, but often overlooked by scholars. She wrote poetry in the 1940s and is best known for a trilogy of novels published from 1958 to 1962 and collected under the title of the first book, *All the Rivers Run*, later scripted for television. [PIC] These are centred on the Murray River, the first volume being the childhood of the daughter of a British migrant family in the Snowy Mountains, the second the daughter grown to a young woman seeking to find her own career as an artist in the town of Echuca and the third the same woman as wife, mother and captain of a river boat running between Wentworth and the lakes at the mouth of the Murray.

Cato was a South Australian who never visited India. She does however, have some links. A poem entitled “India” is actually about loss of childhood imagination occasioned by the exotic gifts her missionary relations sent back to the family. Later, she writes the history of the Maloga Aboriginal mission near Echuca and records that the popular and long-serving teacher there, Thomas Shadrach James, was, despite his name, an Indian from Mauritius who spoke fluent Tamil (134). He also organised the mission cricket team. The third of her trilogy novels also carried an epigraph from the Buddha, in which the ideal of non-attachment is linked to a poem by Kathleen Raine that echoes Vedantic symbolism of rivers and the sea as “the stream that flows down to stillness”. So the banks of the Murray are not so far from the Narmada after all — it’s just a very long voyage around time and space to connect them.

Cato's metaphysical overlay seems to be confined to associations of the river with childhood summer holidays and meditations on the shortness of human life. The river is depicted as a slow-moving rhythm of natural fluctuations that is an ever self-renewing part of a timeless land. A paddle steamer disrupts nature's calm with its noise and bustle, but when it moves on, the trees whisper:

... They pass, they pass and we remain
 And the waters, and the silence. Those black men,
 The childlike ones who used our bark in living,
 And wrapped it round the dead, are seen no more.
 The white ones who came after,
 Who hasten up and down, and chop and slay,
 Their day will come; and in the endless river
 The waters of Time shall smooth behind their wake
 And not a ripple mark their noisy passing. ("Paddle Steamer" *The Dancing Bough* 13)

Noting the prejudicial representation of Aborigines as children already passed away, we can also see that critical assessment of the white settler activity fails to consider that the end result might be the death of the trees and that the river itself might succumb to the waters of Time in an untimely response to human mismanagement. In her fiction, Cato's protagonist takes an unheeding optimistic view of the recuperative powers of nature:

A bucket of refuse was thrown overboard with a splash.
 'And yet the river is so clean!' thought Delie, 'for all the pollutions of life that it receives; for it is always refreshed, always renewed, from the pure snow-mountains at its source. Though it rises in the mountains and flows to the sea, it has no beginning and no end, because it is for ever.' (*Time, Flow Softly*, 71)

The Murray was seen through a screen of other rivers— Goolwa was labelled the New Orleans of the South, the Murray 'the Nile of Australia' (Simon 9) Cato has a Canadian engineer give Delie and her husband Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* and they savour the richer life on that bigger river (*But Still the Stream*, 30-31), and that in itself

contributed to mismanagement of the riverine ecology. But Cato's gift is to show life along the river in its recognisably Australian details, shorn of any romantic glow when we see the hard slog of farmers trying to eke out a livelihood and women suffering deprivations of material and social kinds amid dust, drought, flood and isolation.

The positive side of this realism lies in Cato's alliance with the Jindyworobak movement. This was a group of poets and painters seeking to promote respect for local material and themes as fit matter for artistic expression. As their name suggests, there was some attempt to connect with Aboriginal culture so as to anchor European habits of mind and feeling in the Antipodes. Cato published poems in the Jindyworobak anthologies edited by Ian Mudie and Rex Ingamells from 1940 onwards, and her fictional protagonist trains as a painter, coming up through names like Fred McCubbin and Arthur Streeton to record on canvas the red cliffs and sweeping plains of the Murray, sometimes in a style that seems to suggest the brutally Australian attention to local form and colour of Russell Drysdale (182-5). In an early poem, "The River", she depicts yellow sandstone cliffs, and ... green flats/ Where willows knelt to wash their streaming hair/ ... under tall gum-trees that scattered/ Bees, nectar and blossom on the vibrating air."; "hot sandhills, fiery-orange glowing," are set against the detailed observation of "watching a heron wade/ With delicate high-stepping legs" ("The River" *The Dancing Bough* 14).

The 'romance' of the river boats central to Cato's trilogy was certainly real. The first paddle steamer was built in Mannum in 1853 and they covered enormous distances (from Goolwa to Albury and up to Bourke) and supported the economy of three states at least

until the railway networks spread into the interior, lasting as working vessels into the early 1950s. [PIC] Their servicing of remote settlements was a heroic struggle against shifting channels, hidden snags, drought and flood:

Delie hated the Darling River for the rest of her life....

‘It’s just like a ditch!’ she cried. ‘A great, muddy ditch full of drain-water!

‘Ah, you haven’t seen the Darling in a good season when the banks are brim-full or overflowing. Why once Captain Randell picked up wool twenty miles from the main channel.... the mirage glistens along the horizon with reflections in it like a lake.’ (137)

Nonetheless, she and her husband are stranded for months up-river and all the fruit in Mildura goes to waste for lack of steamers to transport it.

The records of this era might be taken to ameliorate concerns over the current low river levels, since Cato notes how boats would be aground for months of the year, and the Echuca wharf was famous for its construction having to cope with huge variations in river levels (157-8). But the boats contributed to the degradation of the environment, even as they popularised the rivers as an Australian success story. They required large amounts of timber to keep them running and they carried logs from up river down to sawmills. The boats also collected wool from distant stations and the deforestation they enabled produced furniture, houses, fenceposts and railway sleepers and so helped spread rural agriculture that itself degraded vegetation and exacerbated the drought cycle. Cato’s history of the Echuca mission inadvertently attests to the effects of white settlement around the rivers, in that it begins with regular accounts of Aborigines supplying fish to feed the Maloga inhabitants and gradually these tail away until a scarcity of fish is mentioned. One reference to the welcome catch of a 57-pound Murray Cod (280) reminds

us that it is very rare to find such a fish of any size these days; they have been both fished out and starved out by the introduction of European carp.

From the deck of a paddle steamer, there was little doubt that some control of water flows would be a good thing. Delie mentions irrigation on her father's farm during her childhood (64) and the novels chart the process of engineering the river system. Already in 1901, the setting of *Time, Flow Softly*, there is an experimental pumping station near Tooleybuc (127) and an irrigation settlement at Mildura (134). Two Canadians, George and William Chaffey, had pioneered irrigated horticulture in California and with encouragement from the then Victorian cabinet minister Alfred Deakin (who had seen a promise for Australia in the irrigation systems of India) travelled the Murray to start farming colonies in Renmark, South Australia, and in 1887, Mildura, Victoria. Despite almost complete collapse following the major drought mentioned in Cato's novel and the international depression of the 1890s, their 250,000 acre land grant developed into the grape and citrus heartland of the nation, supplying two-thirds of the country's dried fruits of which over 70% earns export money. [PIC] To quote the second novel, *But Still the Stream*:

Many returned men could not make the adjustment, especially to city life, and a grateful government settled them on the land. They were given arid acres of mallee scrub to turn into wheat farms: tough tenacious scrub which after burning and rolling still sprang up from the roots which filled the ground like dragon's teeth. When the scrub was conquered, erosion took over and the topsoil blew away and buried fences in drifts of sand.

Then new irrigation areas were surveyed along the Murray and returned men worked at digging channels and ditches and installing pumps.

At last they were settled on blocks of their own to grow fruit for the dried-fruit market. (38-9)

This story is in part my own. My first three years and some summer holidays were spent in a tiny dairy and barley town called Milang on Lake Alexandrina, where the rusty cranes and gray timber wharf and the huge disused warehouse recalled the days of river shipments. I went as a child with my father to Renmark in 1956 to help sandbag the town against the biggest floods for a very long time. My high school was completed in Wagga Wagga on the Murrumbidgee, where we would compete to swim across the river from warm sandbar to icy currents by sheer cliffs and back. And for the last few decades I have driven the thousand kilometres from Wollongong across the Hay Plain to visit my parents in Mildura. Each trip I take, the mallee scrub is replaced by more paddocks of grapevines and the saltbush by more hectares of water-fields for growing sorghum, canola and rice. Needless to say, this is accompanied by the subsuming of family farms into multinational agribusiness and the draining of the river system is accompanied by seepage of chemical sprays back into what's left.

In Cato's novel, the year's crop is threatened by the river being too low for pumping and the cry that "them b...s farther up are pumping the Murray dry" (165) sets up an echo that can still be heard in interstate squabbles today. Then a government commission was discussing putting locks on the river to ensure a more regular water supply (155); now it is the opposite – a federal commission set up to guarantee regular sustainable flows along the full length of the system and to override states unwilling to upset their irrigators and lose the fees for water rights.

Cato's interest is most clearly focused on a free-thinking young woman trying to forge a life on her own terms but surrounded by terrible examples of women dried out by the rigours of isolation and farm labour and caught between children and a husband who won't grow up and then is incapacitated for his foolhardiness. She mixes Mills and Boon love plot for sales purposes with a fascination with the details of river-boat life. (Husband Brenton learns how to cope with snags, shifting channels, rapids; rivalries among captains; risks taken to earn a profit; drunken crew). Nonetheless, her concern for ecological matters is evident in her writing. The project engineer for the first lock foresees one long dam with a gleam of triumph in his eyes, though others talk of silting up, cluttering the banks with saplings and interstate rivalries over water rights (124-5). Cato's qualification of the national enthusiasm for irrigation is partly the result of her being a South Australian — someone at the end of the river whose household water is mostly piped from it.

Margaret Simons grew up in the same state as Nancy Cato. She notes the dryness of South Australia and the stunted, tough mallee scrub, the legend of the Goyder Line — a surveyor's chart of rainfall beyond which no agriculture could be safely contemplated — and the depletion of the already desiccated environment under the impact of white land use:

I have seen this country change since I was a girl. All that ripped up mallee. Now what rain there is seeps through to the aquifers underground. The groundwater, once metres below the surface, is rising. It brings with it ancient salt. It burns the soil.... Salinity scars show like greasy acne in the dips between the sandhills. It is estimated that within fifty years, many of the streams and rivers of the Murray-Darling basin will be poisonous to crops and humans. And yet the basin is the powerhouse of rural Australia. (5)

Apart from the increasing salinity, there is the basic problem of water supply. There is no doubt that the system of locks and barrages have regulated the flows of water and kept upstream at seemingly viable levels, but at Swan Reach and Mannum and Murray Bridge the levels are measured in negative figures on tables kept by the South Australian government authority (SAWater). **[PIC]** What Cato and others sympathetic to small holding fruit production on irrigated blocks could not foresee was the commodifying of resources under free market capitalism. Water quotas bought with title to property were de-linked from the land, so small farms hard up or under-utilising their quota could sell excess to richer, larger business. This allowed conglomerates such as Cubbie Station, founded in 1965, to dam the Culgoa River, store the equivalent of Sydney Harbour in open lakes, and irrigate up to 33,000 hectares. Cubbie produces cattle, sorghum and cotton and is worth \$475 million. It claims best practice sustainable management, but the effects on flows down river, water loss to evaporation and so on, are self-evident. **[PICs]**

In the novels, Delie's husband rails against government inaction in the face of droughts that stop all river traffic until in 1915 the first lock and weir across the Murray goes into construction at Blanchetown in South Australia (4). It was completed in 1922. **[PIC]** Later, Cato reports on the development of dairying from Murray Bridge to the lakes at the end of the Murray:

Farther down-stream, in the last reaches before the lakes, water was being pumped back into the river. The swamplands in the wide flood-plain on each side of Murray Bridge were being drained, their rich silt exposed for pasture land, and eventually fifty miles of river-flats were to be reclaimed. Milk from

the dairy herds established went to a Farmers Co-operative at Murray Bridge for processing.

At Wall, Pompoota, Jervois, Mobilong, Mypolonga, the ancient sanctuaries of the water birds were taken from them as the backwaters were drained. Wild duck and black swans, pelicans and shags left for the wide waters of the Goolwa channel and the salty Coorong at the mouth.

Slowly, patiently, with the organised industriousness of ants, men were forcing the great sprawling river into a new pattern. The river flowed on, accepting all the indignities heaped on it by these puny creatures, and quietly bided its time. (58)

There is a flood in 1931 that undoes a lot of the construction programme. People blame the engineering projects for banking up the river, but others blame the Catholics for praying for rain. (213). The government builds a holding reservoir at Lake Victoria on the Darling and then a large dam near Albury. Delie pronounces that the river won't like all this manipulation, as though it is a living creature, and Gordon suggests the Goolwa barrage, built to keep salt water from contaminating the fresh in Lake Alexandrina, will result in an increased growth of reeds and "fresh-water algae fouling boat bottoms" (238) [PIC] None of this lock and weir construction prevents the 1956 floods, a massive overflow that cut towns in half and demolishes road and rail services:

Renmark was in a state of emergency, with the army helping to fight the flood. Scoops and tractors and bulldozers and hundreds of voluntary workers, with two thousand bags of mud, built up levee banks and closed the breaches. Tired men patrolled the banks all night, watching for weak patches, flashing their hurricane lanterns and calling by portable radio for help. ... But in the middle of the night on 11 August the bank broke.... The river had won; vines, pumping stations, homes were inundated, but without more loss of life, thought one thousand five hundred people had to flee. (267-8)

Cato notes briefly that"

The Aborigines in the old days would have known what was coming – but they, like the steamers, had almost vanished from the river." (272).

In the last book, *And Shall Forever Glide*, Delie's son Alex has an enquiring mind and explores caves in the banks of the river. There he discovers Aboriginal paintings and a hoard of stone implements, plus a skeleton. This sets him thinking about stone-age man and the aeons of time and millions of deaths as a basis for a secular humanist stoic view of life. (144-6) He does think briefly of the old Aboriginal man, Tannanobi, last of the Pujinook tribe who had died in Morgan not long before from alcoholic poisoning (144), but while the books do acknowledge an Aboriginal presence along the Murray, citing several dreamtime legends, they very much place it in this 'dying race' and romance of lost pasts mode.

Miss Barrett, a friend of Delie's is detailed to be governess to an artist friend's children at Milang. She visits Point McLeay mission (Raukkan) and rails against the lack of work and spirit in the place, declaring that it is 'out of sight out of mind' to the city and symptomatic of a tacit policy of genocide (177). Nonetheless, the same woman, while expressing delight at the success of one girl as a singer, opines that "The Aborigines will never be good at competitive commerce, such things are alien to their nature; if they are ever to make their mark and be accorded their rightful place in the community, it will be through prowess in the arts." (220)

Such prowess is located in an indigenous capacity for imaginative creation stories. Cato's mission history mentions stories of the people around Echuca: the old wife of Biami walking from the high country with her stick and her snake guardian created a channel that rains turned into the Tongala river; the great Murray cod dug its own river habitat as it endeavoured to escape the hunter Thattynkul (*Mister Maloga* 4). These legends are also

part of the folklore of the river for the young artist Delie in the three novels (*Time, Flow Softly* 37). The third book has Deli think back to “the legendary lubra of Minna’s story long ago who had made the Murray River with her stick” (245). In a later version of Jindyworobak appropriation of Dreamtime stories, anthropologist Charles Mountford and artist Ainslie Roberts popularised two of the river legends:

Nurunderi (Ngurunderi) camped on the upper Murray, but his wives and children deserted him and he had to go looking for them. On his way, he saw a huge cod (Ponde/ Pondi) swimming downstream, which he pursued. Eventually, he signalled to his brother camped up ahead and he was able to spear the fish. The two men cut the fish up, throwing bits of it back into the water to become all the different species of the river. The last and largest bit remained the Murray Cod. (*The First Sunrise*, 34) [PIC]

Mangowa went hunting by the lakes at the mouth of the Murray. There he saw a young girl who he fell in love with. He courted her assiduously and gained the consent of his elders to marry, but she would not have him. Desperate, he attempted to seize her, but she fled to the sky seeking protection of the women in the Milky Way. Mangowa pursued her and flung handfuls of stars after her to drive her back home. The star people forced Mangowa to return to earth without his beloved, and the stars he threw fell to earth as the circular lagoons around the lakes. (*The Dreamtime*, 60; Simons 24-25)

The prologue to Nancy Cato’s final volume of the Murray trilogy follows the stories from source to ocean, striking a calm philosophical note reminiscent of Raja Rao quoting Sri Atmananda Guru at the beginning of *The Serpent and the Rope*:

Now all has become one, the trickle under the snow, the waterfall, the mountain torrent and the placid stream: and the river, already with the sound of its final dissolution, seems to say, ‘There is no death; in the end is my beginning.’

Unfortunately the end is now a choked sandbar, the lakes behind it drying and salted, and while the locks up-river have kept some areas alive and fish are still to be found there, the “River not yet tamed” has been tamed to the point of enervation if not extinction. What

Cato perhaps unwittingly hints at, though, is the emergence of ecological protests which form strategic links with the Aboriginal people who continue to live along the banks of the Murray. Many of these folk work with its environment as well as struggle for political rights to land and retention of cultural practices.

Such a mingling of Black and White interests can be seen in the collaborative art project “Weaving the Murray”, set up by the South Australian Centenary of Federation Committee as part of “Source to Sea” a three-state project collecting local histories and generating art works to acknowledge “the river as a long community of connected interests” and the damage inflicted on it over two centuries. Cato’s interest in the women living hard isolated lives is reflected in the weaving of Aboriginal and European artefacts exhibited as a taxonomical grid of river community [PIC] and her passing reference to Aboriginal lore finds a contemporary echo in the application of traditional Ngarindjerri rush weaving to producing a fibre statue of Pondi the creator Murray Cod. [PIC] Another simple installation, “Flooded Gums” makes reference to the need for seasonal flooding plus the dams and rising salt levels that kill trees. [PIC] A more conflictual aggregation of interest groups was generated in the struggle over development of a holiday resort and bridge on Hindmarsh Island, or Kumarangk, near the mouth of the Murray. [MAP]

In *The Meeting of the Waters: the Hindmarsh Island Affair*, Margaret Simons records the intricacies of negotiation that accompanied this national controversy. Kumi, otherwise Rebecca Wilson, a Ngarinjerri elder, predated the Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission when she taped conversations with Betty Fisher in the 1960s about the waters around the

island being held sacred and old people crying when the barrages were built (Simons 356-7): “Nothing must sit between the waters and sky”, she said (359) and others claimed that if the mouth of the Murray closed over, the “natural flow of life” would fail and land would become sterile (371, 454). Sarah Milera regarded the locks as blocking Ponde’s track down the river (92) Doreen Kartinyeri repeated Ron Berndt’s more general findings about the Ngarrindjeri, that Hindmarsh Island had special significance for birth rites (152-6). George Trevorrow kept explaining that there was no way he could easily convey the concept of totemic spirituality to a white court, and that the Meeting of the Waters was *ngatji* — a place of living, breeding, feeding, and that “You upset the totem area, you are upsetting everybody.” (367). To him, this was more than just a social squabble over protecting the environment from too many visitors.

White interests and internal conflict in Ngarindjerri politics allowed a court to rule that ‘secret women’s business’ making Hindmarsh Island a sacred site had been fabricated by some disaffected radicals, but a later High Court hearing allowed the validity of the dreaming claims without seeing them as having the legal standing to prevent development. The struggle between cultural systems and economic paradigms looks to be reignited with a plan to build another barrage south of the island.

In the last five to ten years we have seen the emergence of ecocriticism, partly as a result of extending the logic of postcolonial literary theorising of difference across to other species (see Helen Tiffin’s work). A recent article in *Australian Literary Studies* by Libby Robin argues that (like postcolonial studies) eco-criticism needs to respond to local

specificities (she uses the term ‘bioregionalism’) and not become some universal tyranny of first world scholarship. Nancy Cato’s fiction shows that ecological concerns were voiced in Australian literature through the otherwise triumphalist phase of white settlement and that, despite the period ‘orientalising’ of Aboriginal culture, her attention to the river carried with it a hint of a necessary engagement with Aboriginal culture as part of its formation. Along with this, there is the other orientalising at work: that extension of Romantic pantheism across to Indian philosophical tradition resulting in vague mystical sympathies for the river as a force of nature. This environmentally dangerous quietism also expressed an emotional attachment that provided a basis for future more practical reconsideration of the effects of trafficking the Murray and its resources.

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