One of the most significant figures in the history of Australian mining was Essington Lewis, for many years the driving force behind BHP. He started his career with the company as a mining engineer and was a dedicated and enthusiastic miner. He believed in hard, pioneering work and the opening up of mineral resources in the outback, a country which he loved.

Mining, as carried out in Australia in the 1920s and 30s, damaged the environment, both at mine sites and processing plants. BHP's actions at Broken Hill, Port Pirie and Whyalla were fairly typical and there is no evidence that Essington Lewis saw this as doing environmental damage. Nonetheless, Essington Lewis was deeply upset by the adjacent urban and rural landscape. He saw the degraded environments surrounding these dry and dusty towns and believed that something had to be done to 'green' them, to make these better places to live in. And so he became an enthusiastic tree-planter. His biographer, Geoffrey Blainey, describes how Essington Lewis sought out new kinds of trees to plant in towns like Whyalla and how, as a result of his example, generations of BHP mining engineers became enthusiasts for silviculture.

Essington Lewis’ tree-planting has been an important part of the self image of the mining industry. Here was an enthusiastic miner, an uncompromising developer but passionately concerned for the environment. Hugh Morgan, in one of his strong attacks on the political expression of environmental concern, discovers ‘a long tradition, in our industry, of environmental stewardship’. An essential part of this ‘tradition’ is derived from Essington Lewis’ ‘interest, some called it an obsession, with trees’. So, Essington Lewis acts as a talisman for mining industry chiefs like Morgan to prove that the concern of mining companies for the environment predates the politicisation of the ACF and the fashionable popularity of environmental politics.

It is unlikely that Lewis’ enthusiasm for tree-planting was derived from some imperative embedded in the economic life of his company or his mining career. Nor that it was, properly speaking, the expression of concern by his company, BHP, though the interconnections are close and muddled. Whyalla was a company town when he was pressing for increased tree-planting and what he wanted he could certainly get. Nonetheless, BHP as a mining company hardly seems to have been involved.

Perhaps his passion was a ‘displaced’ concern for the environment. Here was a mining engineer, rising through the hierarchy of a great mining company doing manifest environmental harm: allowing waste to flow into the sea and the air, and leaving slag heaps, overburden and tailings to disfigure the landscape.

To tackle that kind of damage could well have had an impact on the economics of the company and would certainly have involved a criticism of the ways in which BHP went about its mining and refining operations: his career in the company could have been limited. Instead, he concentrated his efforts on tree-planting and improving the visual landscape of the mining towns, displacing the focus of environmental concern to an important but, compared with the mining operation, subsidiary area. I do not think the significance and sincerity of his passion should be minimised or mocked. He sought to do good by his efforts and was proud of his work and his achievements.

This is where the irony of what Essington Lewis did comes to the fore. In The Steel Master, Blainey notes his attempts to find new trees for the Whyalla area and retells this story:

Lewis found in California another tree which he thought would flourish at Whyalla, the Athel Pine (Tamarix aphylla). It was unusually green and shady for a tree that grew in arid country, and through the cuttings which Lewis imported in 1934 the Athel Pine became conspicuous at Whyalla, Mount Isa, Broken Hill, many outback towns and countless sheep and cattle stations.

With Essington Lewis’ support and patronage, the use of the Athel Pine was extensive. But it should be noted that even if Lewis had not imported the tree it may well have been introduced by someone else, or some government or other body. The introduction of the cane toad and the prickly pear are indicators of the different ways in which these ‘outsiders’ can come to Australia. At this time the tamarisk was being widely planted in California and Colorado and other arid regions for many of the same reasons.

More recently, CSIRO scientists of the Division of Wildlife and Ecology in Alice Springs have started reporting on the disastrous impact of the importation of the Athel Pine on the arid river environment of central Australia. According to these scientists “The threat posed by the athel was described as continental in scale, dwarfing the toxic blue-green algae threat in the Darling River system”. Its impact on the environment is graphically summarised:

The athel pine forms dense stands that choke out all native vegetation. Its thirsty roots pump out all available water and its leaves excrete salt crystals on the surface soil, killing plant, animal and insect life. The loss of gum trees and their leaf litter
means loss of insects and nesting sites for native parrots and birds.

How ironic and sad that Essington Lewis, acting as a good citizen to 'green' Australia was the inadvertent carrier of this environmental disaster into the heart of a landscape he loved. How much better it would have been if he had concentrated his efforts on the direct environmental damage caused by BHP's mining and mineral processing or, if he had neglected the environment completely. By displacing his environmental concern from mining to the dry and dusty landscape he played his part in more extensive and serious damage than the mining operations he promoted or oversaw. Much of the specific mining damage can be repaired even now, but it is going to take great quantities of research and effort to overcome the degradation promoted by his environmental concern.

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Little Diggers


Ten years ago a book debating Australian industry policy would have focused on the questions of tariffs and industry protection. Today the debate has shifted. The free traders have won the tariff debate and there is a general acceptance of the inevitability of lower tariffs. The issue now is: how should the public sector respond to a post-tariff environment?

Australian Industry; What Policy? is a series of essays by policymakers, trade unionists and captains of industry. Overall, the book is a welcome contribution to an important debate. The issues are current, and the contributors cut across the political spectrum. Highlights include Paul Chapman’s critique of free market orthodoxy, and Bruce Hartnett’s piece on the rise and fall of the Victorian government’s economic strategy, the collapse of which shattered the most sophisticated challenge to the economic orthodoxy of Canberra.

However, the book suffers from a very uneven level of contributions. A number are long, badly written and largely irrelevant to industry policy. A more thoughtful and ruthless job by the editors would have improved the book’s readability. It is also a pity that the debate between economic dries and interventionists is cut across the political spectrum. Highlights include Paul Chapman’s critique of free market orthodoxy, and Bruce Hartnett’s piece on the rise and fall of the Victorian government’s economic strategy, the collapse of which shattered the most sophisticated challenge to the economic orthodoxy of Canberra.

The contributions by the economic dries are disappointing. The article on the role of government by Tony Cole, the current head of Treasury, is a restatement of the conditions of the local economy based on the wisdom of the same old economic textbooks. Its message, along with that of the piece from Professor Ross Garnaut, is predictable—less government and more microeconomic reform.