

# Thank your mother for the rabbits: bilbies, bunnies and redemptive ecology

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at recent efforts to replace the Easter Bunny with the Easter Bilby as a means to explore shifts in ideological constructions of the Australian biophysical environment. The ecological debate concerning what belongs in this landscape (and what doesn't) is examined from an anthropological perspective and historically contextualised in order to analyse how such debates are linked to long-standing ideas concerning the relationship between settler Australians and 'nature'. I use the term 'naturework' to describe the various ways in which settler Australians have sought to re-shape the land (from productive landscape to Arcadian landscape). I argue that there is a form of totemic logic to naturework; a logic in which conservationists and others make correspondences between themselves and the 'saviour' bilby and between their colonial predecessors and the 'pestilent' rabbit.

**Key words:** Rabbit, Bilby, totemism, Australia, naturework.

As for our 'inferior' animals, now that the sheep has faltered, Australians ride more and more upon the marsupial's back (Flannery 1995:14).

## Introduction: a short history of naturework

*Easter Bilby*, a children's book co-published by the Anti-Rabbit Research Foundation (ARRFA),<sup>1</sup> tells the story of the Easter bunny's transformation into Easter bilby; it concludes as follows:

Easter Bunny says, 'Bilby, I want you to have my job.  
You know about sharing and taking care.  
I think Australia should have an Easter Bilby.  
We rabbits have become too greedy and careless.  
Rabbits must learn from bilbies and other bush creatures. (Garnett and Kessing 1994)

Few Australians would have seen a bilby *Macrotis lagotis*, or even heard of one until about fifteen years ago. Since 1991 ARRFA has coordinated a nation-wide urban education program to transform the Easter Bunny into the Easter Bilby. Backed by some powerful support (including Western Mining, Environment Australia, CSIRO and Elders<sup>2</sup>), the campaign was initiated by Nicholas Newland

(the director of the RCD program)<sup>3</sup> during the time that he was employed in the South Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Easter bilby supporters argue it is contradictory to uphold the rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* as the symbol of Easter while simultaneously denouncing it as a national pest. Aside from superficial resemblances, the bilby and the rabbit are in many respects diametrically opposed. The former is an endangered indigene and the latter is an invasive hyper-productive alien. Formerly extant throughout the continent but now found only in remnant colonies in remote tracts of Western Australia and Queensland, the bilby has historically been imperilled by the rabbit's spread.

As an anthropologist I am fascinated by conservationist strategies such as RCD and the Easter Bilby and the public debate that they engender, because I believe they are laden with symbolic meanings. Most anthropologists would agree that human attitudes to animals are projections of our attitudes to 'others' and ourselves. As I will demonstrate, public attitudes to the bilby and the rabbit reveal that ideas of nature, native and nation do not only exist in thought; in order to be *imaginable* they must be *represented* and given cultural form in narratives, images, symbols, rituals and customs.

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps aware that it might be construed as being against rabbit research, ARRFA has recently changed its name to the Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia (FRFA).

<sup>2</sup> Elders is Australia's largest rural services provider. Its services include insurance, rural finance, real estate and merchandise, as well as being stock and station agents.

<sup>3</sup> In October 1995, rabbit calicivirus disease (RCD) escaped from a field-testing site on Wardang Island, South Australia, and spread rapidly across mainland Australia. One year later, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) embarked on a program of deliberate release, sowing calici-infested carriers at 327 sites across Australia with immediate and dramatic effects on rabbit numbers. Even among virologists, there is little agreement on either the name or the appropriate acronym for calicivirus. I will use the most commonly encountered form, RCD, which I suspect is used to disguise the rather unpalatable reference to a symptom of the disease – RHD standing for Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease. In New Zealand, calicivirus is commonly called the 'kitchen-whiz-virus' (Clark 1999: 145) possibly in light of its effect on the rabbit's internal organs, or perhaps in reference to the pulping of infected organs in a blender to facilitate the dissemination of the virus (Nigel Clark pers. comm. 2000)

I suggest (following Milton 1996) that while environmentalism is a socio-political movement, it is also an intrinsically cultural phenomenon. One way of examining Australian environmentalism is to see it as mythology of nature; that is, as an assemblage of stories about people and place.<sup>4</sup> Arguably one of the key foundational mythologies of Australian nationhood is that of the exploitation and domination of the Australian bio-physical environment. Colonial efforts to come to terms with the unpredictable and frequently hostile environment of the infant prodigal nation can either be viewed as a destructive assault or as a brutally efficient 'working' of the land. An underlying Protestant ethic reinforced the idea that by 'improving' the land, colonists themselves were improved. Timber, minerals and other natural resources were inexhaustible in the colonial view, originally because of the sheer enormity of the continent. Science was enlisted to serve first the exploitation and then the preservation of resources. When Australia's national anthem is sung, the line 'golden soils and wealth for toil' still exalts this economic aesthetic.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of improvement is a consistent and pervasive theme allied to the commodification of nature as a resource. Improvement or progress justified occupation; Aborigines could be displaced because colonists could use the land more productively. Scientists found indigenous nature lacking and, by way of compensating, 'civilised' Australia with their attendant floral and faunal colonisers.

In Australia a number of factors moderated the official ideology of progress and improvement. Settlers could never fully rationalise the land, partly because a great deal of environmental damage was caused by non-human agents, such as rabbits, as well as natural disasters. Settler

ingenuity and resourcefulness in this blighted paradise has bred a self-conscious environmental determinism. Being 'shaped by the land' inversely corresponds with the enormous amount of shaping settler Australians have wrought upon Australian nature, not so much in terms of urbanisation, but more in terms of the transformation of 'wild' country into rural landscape.<sup>6</sup>

In the early nineteenth century Australia was known as a 'working-man's paradise'. The Australian Labor Party remains one of the country's largest political organisations and the eight-hour day is the Australian union movement's contribution to the international labour market. It is also notable that the origin of the term 'greenies' lies with members of the New South Wales Builders Labourers Federation who instituted 'Green Bans' on projects that endangered areas or buildings of natural and/or national heritage.<sup>7</sup> These observations on the nature of labour may at first seem fairly scanty. But, if we reposition them alongside observations regarding settler Australians' work upon nature (and nature's workings upon settler Australians), we can begin to understand something characteristically antipodean about nature-work. I have adapted this term from Gary Fine (1997: 69), who renders naturework as 'the technique by which social actors individually and collectively make sense of and express their relationship to the environment' – a process that is, in turn, 'linked to a set of core ideologies that specify the moral valuation of the relationship between nature and culture'. I have adjusted Fine's concept to incorporate a form of ritual agency<sup>8</sup> in naturework. From this perspective, the current efforts to erase the European wild rabbit from Australian hearts and minds (and stomachs) can be seen as productive ritual labour fundamental to the redesignation of the bush as recreational space.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In using the term 'mythology' I do not imply that it is not 'true'. Myths articulate values and beliefs. The exploitation of the natural world clearly has dire consequences, such as ozone depletion and loss of bio-diversity. Environmentalism is, for many people, a practical response to real fears for survival, as well as a call for a reappraisal of human understandings of nature. As Pederson quips, 'nature is suffering, [but] the concept of nature is thriving' (1992: 148).

<sup>5</sup> For much of the nineteenth century, Australian nationalism stemmed largely from pride in the development and improvement of the land. The hopes of colonial developers and the successes of settlement were realised in wealth derived from wheat (the golden grain), wool (the Golden Fleece), and, of course, gold itself. This form of economic nationalism was counterpoised by a romantic appreciation of Australian nature. Robert Birrell (1987) argues that the transformation of attitudes to Australian nature is historically linked to the development of nationalism, particularly the literary nationalist movement of the 1890s, and the self-conscious construction of a distinct cultural identity prior to Federation in 1901.

<sup>6</sup> In the early twentieth century, concern for land degradation was perhaps an acknowledgment of the 'success' of land improvement. Soil erosion and the accompanying loss of productivity were first documented at the turn of the century and again came to prominence in the 1930s and 1940s. Official inquiries established that current levels of settlement would not be sustained as the productivity of millions of acres was lost due to topsoil depletion. This resulted in the establishment of Soil Conservation Services in most states and a new science professional came into being – the 'dirt doctor' (Breckwoldt 1988). The Australian conservation movement has its roots in such concerns for national productivity.

<sup>7</sup> In the 1970s a successful attempt to save remnant bushland from residential development on the Parramatta River (NSW) forged an unusual alliance between residents of the elite suburb of Hunter's Hill (who called themselves The Battlers for Kelly's Bush) and the predominantly Communist Builders' Labourers' Federation (BLF). This protest set the pattern for similar 'green' actions against rampant urban development throughout Sydney where local community opposition was backed by the BLF's refusal to work on nominated sites. 'Green Bans', as these co-operative actions came to be called, ignited a wave of urban protests across Australia and extended relationships between conservation organisations like the ACF and the unions (Hutton and Connors 1999: 131; cf. Roddewig 1978).

<sup>8</sup> If environmentalism is in part a mythology of nature then according to anthropological tenets it follows that the practice or re-enactment of this myth would constitute a ritual.

<sup>9</sup> This domestication of 'wild' Australia is wrought in myriad ways (see Smith 1999, Morton & Smith 1999).

In any effective totemic system<sup>10</sup> there are reciprocal exchanges, both material and symbolic (cf. Willis 1990; Morton 1991; Ingold 1988). The redesignation of the bush, therefore, does not preclude work; instead, colonial ideas of improvement have been bent to serve the eco-national<sup>11</sup> desire to restore the land to its pre-settlement condition. Naturework is to environmentalists and conservationists a form of virtuous civic labour. Given that nature as a resource is not inexhaustible, some of it must be conserved in order to sustain future use.

The ritual aspects of both 'modern' and 'pre-modern' totemism can be thought of as a kind of naturework. Aboriginal people regard ceremonies as 'work' and speak of their roles as 'owners' and 'managers' both of their country and the rituals upon which their country's and their own health depends. In Aboriginal English, ritual maintenance is referred to as 'bringing up the country'.<sup>12</sup> The conservation estate 'owned' by the nation is similarly deemed to require management to maintain its Arcadian image — and this management also incorporates ritual aspects.

'Bringing up the country' in Aboriginal terms equates with nurturing responsible human beings. Aboriginal ceremony also enshrines a biotic philosophy — a *logos* — now shared by conservationists and environmentalists, premised upon the idea that, by caring for the country (the *eco-nation*), it will provide for all its subjects. In other words, individual and collective reproduction of biotic and human communities are intertwined.

In Australia the meaningfulness of this form of naturework seems conversely dependent on the restoration of the indigenous Greater Bilby to the phenomenal and imagined landscape (and on the protection of many other 'indigenous species'). The existence of national environmental agencies, like the Endangered Species Unit (and its corollary the Feral Pests Program) within the Commonwealth department now called Department of Environment and Heritage, the introduction of legislation such as the *Endangered Species Protection Act 1992*, its successor the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, and strategies like the Save the Bilby Fund testify to the strength of Australian sentiment with regard to preserving our natural, national heritage. This heritage is now widely regarded as one that we are morally obliged to pass on to future generations (Sagoff 1988: 17).

The official release of RCD in 1996 was hailed by graziers, agriculturalists and conservationists alike as a 'magic bullet'. Wildlife ecologist, Brian Cooke, who endorses RCD release, declares 'I can't sit back and watch whole ecosystems destroyed' (Anderson and Nowak 1997: 37). What is of interest here is the notion that while 'doing something' may have some risks attached, the alternative, doing nothing, has even more detrimental consequences.<sup>13</sup> Given that a 1995 Morgan Research survey found that ninety-six percent of respondents deemed it important to control rabbit numbers (Morgan 1995), naturework is thus a morally imperative labour that is endorsed by a majority of Australians. (Although many in favour of culling rabbit numbers are opposed to biological control measures.)

In this sense, the (un)natural history of the European rabbit in Australia is brimming with notions of work and productivity. Australian attitudes to the rabbit convey a critical disjunction between rural and urban values. A colonial ethos enshrines work and productivity as national characteristics firmly fixed in the rural economy. (Hence, Flannery's comments above refer to the past conception of Australia as riding on the sheep's back.) According to contemporary eco-nationalist ideology, land remains the source of essential characteristics, but instead of being grounded solely in a romantic pastoral idyll, these traits are becoming situated in the natural/national heritage of the conservation estate. In many respects this is an outcome of the duplicity of the Australian climate; three years of good rain is just as likely to be followed by seven years of drought (or floods or bushfires, or all three concurrently). In practice, rural virtues (i.e. work and productivity) have always been difficult to consolidate with the peculiarities of the Australian environment; attempts to better 'God's own country' have just as readily led to disaster as to triumph. Land for settler Australians has arguably always been both friend *and* enemy, self *and* other. The 'man on the land' may have sometimes been blind to the ecological consequences of his labours, but the state sometimes demonstrated a national self-consciousness regarding the problematic character of development in the Antipodes. For example, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, nationalist anxiety prompted the Commonwealth Superintendent of Immigration to advise Australians travelling abroad to refrain from using words such as 'strike', 'drought' and 'rabbit' (as well as 'politics' and 'taxes') (Griffiths 1996: 16).

<sup>10</sup> Totemism is a system of ideas individuals use to 'represent to themselves the society of which they are members, and the obscure but intimate relations which they have with it' (Durkheim 1976 [1912]: 225). This intimacy is expressed via a metaphorical and symbolic system of kinship with plants and animals. Durkheim himself proposed that the sacred periodically assumed new forms and he saw totemic logic in the modern patriot's worship of the national flag. Lévi-Strauss (1964) described totemism as neither exclusively religious nor exclusively 'primitive'. Following Lévi-Strauss and Durkheim, I regard totemism to be neither an exclusively 'modern' nor 'pre-modern' phenomenon.

<sup>11</sup> I see eco-nationalism as both an ideological doctrine and a symbolic network; a complex fusion of ecology, history and culture. Individual narratives derive key aspects of this form from a symbolic network that allows scope for metaphorical interplay such that the network is both contested and cohesive, there being no consensus on what constitutes a 'true Australian'. The symbolic network incorporates history, with the past being reworked in the present; for while foundational mythologies may in a sense be perennial, they are by no means guaranteed to be true-to-type in their reproductions. They are, in a sense, both perennial and hybrid, constituting and reproducing the nation, its natives and its nature prismatically.

<sup>12</sup> Morton, summoning Marx, regards Arrernte totemic ritual as 'ancestral labour' (1987: 468).

<sup>13</sup> Hence the title of this paper comes from a laconic, colloquial phrase which literally means 'thank's for nothing'.

As I will show this nationalist anxiety continues today with regard to the vexed question of who or what belongs in the eco-nation (and who or what doesn't). Before returning to the Easter Bilby we need to historically situate the current anxiety by examining prior expressions of naturework.

### 'Australians will do anything to kill a rabbit'<sup>14</sup>

Coman points out that it is difficult for us now to comprehend the degree of economic and environmental damage caused by rabbits, because 'Australians have become accustomed to an environment radically altered by two centuries of grazing by livestock and to the changes wrought by the axe and the plough' (Coman 1996: 22). In other words, rabbits are just one of the many agents of ecological transformation in Australia, and much of the change to the landscape had been accomplished in the interests of agriculture and pastoralism prior to the rabbit's introduction.<sup>15</sup>

Within forty years of their introduction into Australia in 1859, rabbits had rapidly occupied all areas south of the Tropic of Capricorn; colonising the continent at an estimated rate of between 20 and 100 kilometres a year, the fastest rate of any mammal other than humans (Anderson and Nowak 1997: 34). Rural productivity levels fell dramatically and many station owners were financially ruined as plagues of rabbits left no edible vegetation for their stock.<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, much of the literature on the 'grey blanket' describes it as a vanguard of voracious pests destroying the livelihood of the 'man on the land'. Landholders saw it as adding to the pre-existing burdens of taxation, drought and other pests, exacerbating the uncertainty of life in 'the outback'.

The rabbit plague offered employment prospects for itinerant rural labourers who became known as rabbiters. Hundreds of rabbit canning factories were established in the latter part of the nineteenth century in outlying areas. The western Victorian town of Hamilton boasted a preserving and canning works that, in four months of 1892, processed 400,000 rabbits. Rabbiters supplied the Hamilton factory by netting and trapping the surrounding district. Although its fortunes fluctuated according to seasonal variability, Hamilton's rabbit industry provided employment for 370 people at a time of rising unemployment (Garden 1984: 133).

But the excessive 'productivity' of the rabbit far outweighed human efforts to exploit the surplus. In the first eight months of 1887, ten million rabbits were destroyed in New South Wales alone. Most primary producers lacked the resources to deal with the overwhelming scale of rabbit infestation. Legislation was seen as the solution. In 1880, New South Wales and Victoria, following South Australia (1875) and Tasmania (1871),<sup>17</sup> passed Rabbit Destruction Acts compelling farmers to take action. Some landholders worked with obsessive thoroughness, netting their boundaries and destroying warrens, but others simply ignored the 'Rabbit Act'. If legislation was inconsistently heeded, and inconsistently enforced, it may have been because of unwavering faith in science to provide a solution. The states too shared this conviction, offering great financial incentives for scientific answers to the rabbit pest.<sup>18</sup>

Western Australia responded by constructing the Rabbit-proof Fence, a testimony to the state's fear of the eastern hordes eating their way across the Nullarbor. At its completion in 1907, it was the longest fence ever built (in fact there are three), stretching over 3,000 kms from Starvation Boat Harbour on the south coast to Cape Keraudren on the North West coast.

As well as keeping the legislators busy, rabbits generated an industry based on their extermination. Along with netting, fencing, warren-ripping, smoking, dynamiting, trapping and several forms of biological control, numerous other (introduced) predators – including cats, mongoose, stoats, ferrets and weasels – were indentured in the war against rabbits. The offensive also necessitated the assembly of a formidable chemical arsenal. In just forty years, exterminators laid one hundred and fifty million kilometres of poisons in southern Australia alone. But the effect on rabbit numbers was negligible and little consideration was given to the millions of native animals killed in the process (Rolls 1994: 30). Fortunately for the rabbits there was no obvious financial incentive to undertake systematic eradication measures, so many farmers simply could not be convinced of the merits of constant vigilance. Rabbit work was felt by many farmers to be unproductive.

But naturework could be immensely profitable. Rabbiters adopted a pragmatic attitude to their quarry; if the tenacious rabbit could not be exterminated, then it ought to be commercially exploited. Obviously, it has never been in the rabbiters' best interests to completely eradicate the

<sup>14</sup> (Coman 1999b: 4).

<sup>15</sup> Rabbits are also the primary food of other introduced species, notably foxes and cats. It is therefore difficult to isolate the extent of the rabbit's environmental impact, given the combined ravages of livestock and other invasive species.

<sup>16</sup> Coman (1996: 22) gives a good indication of the severity of the rabbit problem. In 1879, at Brim Station in Victoria's Wimmera, a total of 670 live sheep were mustered; in the previous year there had been 1200.

<sup>17</sup> Thus in Tasmania, colonial pastoralists, agriculturalists and legislators deemed (indigenous) thylacines and (introduced) rabbits cognate, principally because of the economic threat the pair posed to primary industry. This was prior to the recently sedimented distinction between 'wild' and 'feral' which now divides the 'cognatic' relationship.

<sup>18</sup> In 1887 the New South Wales government offered a prize of £25,000 for a method of rabbit extermination. Numerous solutions were proposed, including William Rodier's remarkable strategy of removing female rabbits within a given controlled area. By this method, he reasoned the males would ruthlessly compete with each other and fatally harass the surviving does. The French bacteriologist, Louis Pasteur, advocated the release of chicken cholera to eradicate the rabbit pest, but, fearing the disease might spread to poultry and other domesticates, authorities abandoned this viral option.

source of their income.<sup>19</sup> It is ironic that in some years rabbiters could actually make more money from rabbits than pastoralists could from the sale of sheep or cattle. In 1893<sup>20</sup> the *Australian Pastoralists Review* totemically illustrated their desperation concerning the 'death' of their industry. Pastoralists were understandably bitter about the rabbits' (and the rabbiters') excessive productivity and the rabbiters' subsequent profitability. In New South Wales, Jack McCraith, 'the Rabbit King', built a rural empire over a period of 40 years based on the export of 130 million rabbits (Watson 1996). At an estimated value of £4.1 million, the market for rabbit meat peaked in 1948-49 when 50 million rabbits were exported.<sup>21</sup> In the same financial year, rabbit meat export was equal to the combined exports of lamb and mutton.<sup>22</sup>

Initially the loss of primary productivity motivated the war against the 'grey hordes'; the environmental cost to 'uncultivated' lands has only recently influenced Australian attitudes to the rabbit. According to Wilson, rabbits have dramatically altered Australian ecosystems, particularly semi-arid and sub-alpine areas (Wilson *et al.* 1992: 10). Rabbits not only defoliate an area they hinder its regeneration, literally undermining the work of national conservation programs like Landcare.<sup>23</sup> The rabbit's intensive grazing habits also implicate it in the extinction of many small marsupials including the bilby.<sup>24</sup>

Rabbits and bilbies in the re-imagined landscape arouse settler Australian's cognisance of past and present environmental follies. Paradoxically, the veneration of the wild amounts to a domestication of the bush. In the late nineteenth century, O'Dowd and Lawson depicted the bush as a pastoral frontier; environmentalism, on the other hand, paints it as 'wild Australia'. National parks have thus become the nation's playgrounds. Moves to farm (i.e. domesticate) feral, wild and native flora and fauna for human consumption also indicate that doing something about the nation's pests goes hand in hand with doing something about the nation's 'pets'.

## Blood and chocolate<sup>25</sup>

Personally, I have a great fondness for wild rabbits. My affection does not stem from infant fascination with the musings of Beatrix Potter, but from a large slice of childhood spent amid the fertile potato-growing hills of Thorpdale in Gippsland. During the 1960s and early 1970s, school holidays were spent working my rabbit traps, setting them at dusk and checking them in the morning's small hours. From these labours my father and I were able to supply the content of our large family's evening meal. We ate 'underground mutton' crumbed, fried, baked and stewed. Our rabbiting had little impact on Thorpdale's rabbit population. I relished what seemed, to my 'pre-green' sensibilities, an extraordinary 'wild' and 'free' bounty. And when the time came to return to school I had another new rabbit-skin bicycle seat to augment my passion for trapping until next holidays.

During the Great Depression (1930s), rabbits provided employment and sustenance for many people who may have otherwise starved. Indeed, 'underground mutton' continues to be held in high esteem because it is responsible for saving 'a lot of bloody good men' (Coman 1996: 24). In the 1940s, when a felt hat adorned almost every male head, my father, like many young rural lads, earned a good income from rabbits. Using a combination of ferrets, nets, traps and a rifle, he worked the Flowerdale area near his home in Wallaby Creek, Victoria. After drying and sorting the pelts into pound weights (6 to 8 pelts made up a pound), he sold them at Victoria Market, earning two shillings and sixpence per pound.<sup>26</sup> Rabbit meat also circumvented the restrictions of wartime rationing. For many years my father kept his old .22 'pea' rifle in his wardrobe in our suburban home, the source of my childhood fascination with his bucolic past.

According to a 1995 International Wool Secretariat survey, the wholesale value of the domestic and export rabbit market is rated at \$5-6 million annually (Ramsay

<sup>19</sup> This dilemma continues to hinder the eradication of many invasive species in Australia. The common names of many introduced plants signify the variation in opinion between those who regard these species as a resource and those who regard them as pests. In South Australia, for example, the introduced Eurasian boraginaceous weed, Viper's bugloss (*Echium vulgare*), is known alternately by pastoralists as Patterson's Curse and by apiarists as Salvation Jane (because their bees forage on its blossom). Low lists Patterson's Curse as *Echium plantagineum*, adding that it is sold in Melbourne flower markets as 'Riverina Bluebells' (Low 1999: 252).

<sup>20</sup> 15 March 1893.

<sup>21</sup> During the First World War, tinned rabbit was shipped to Australian troops serving overseas. It was clearly no problem for the Anzacs to be sustained by 'Aussie' bunny; besides, rabbit felt was the basis of the iconographic 'digger's' hat.

<sup>22</sup> By way of comparison, in 1994 the commercial harvest of 2-3 million wild rabbits was a vital rural industry with shooters earning \$3 million annually (Ramsay 1994: 122-25).

<sup>23</sup> Landcare is a voluntary organisation aligning government, farmers, conservationists and community groups that encompasses a wide range of activities including: environmental education, community-based planning and monitoring of land and water resources, rural-driven and rural-managed research and development, and community involvement in the allocation of funds to land conservation projects (Campbell 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Brian Coman says that recorded observations of the last century made by a rabbit inspector at Hay in New South Wales suggest 'that the myriad bilby burrows and nests of rat kangaroos made the detection of the first invading rabbits very difficult' (Coman 1996: 2). Not only did bilbies and other burrowing marsupials inadvertently provide shelter for the colonisers, rabbits evidently evicted bilbies from their comparatively shallow burrows and thus rendered them (the bilbies) more obvious to the eyes (and jaws) of predators. Exposed, bilbies were subjected to the next wave of alien invaders, foxes and cats.

<sup>25</sup> Apologies to Elvis Costello.

<sup>26</sup> The average working mans' wage at the time was 40 shillings a week.

1994: 126), but rabbits cost the country an estimated \$600 million a year in lost agricultural production (Anderson & Nowak 1997: 34-5). Because of the economic and environmental costs, Brian Coman argues that we should 'strive to get rid of the rabbit and replace it with other traditional food animals' (1996: 26).

'Eating green' is an essential recreational aspect of naturework, but the edibility of the nation's biota remains doubtful. Most recently, conservationists, whose convictions regarding the moral virtues of eradicating rabbits differ from those of their predecessors, have viewed wild rabbit as an ecologically redemptive protein.<sup>27</sup> 'Ask not what your country can do for you, but rather what you can do for the country?' the bioregionalist<sup>28</sup> magazine, *Green Connection* pleads - 'eat more rabbits'. The same article, entitled 'Road Kill Cafe', also advises that 'if you have them in your front or back paddock, find a way to get them in your freezer' (Anon 1996b:24). But it is not only bioregionalists who indulge their eco-nationalist palates with bunny. In the early nineties a number of chic Melbourne restaurants, including Cafe di Stasio in St Kilda and O'Connells in South Melbourne, began featuring rabbit on their menus as 'nineties fare'.

The re-emergence of rabbit as fashionable food is clearly motivated by more than physiological appetites. A recent broadsheet offering of rabbit recipes by Stephanie Alexander was headed 'Dining with the enemy' (*The Age* 19/04/2005). Food journalist, Maggie Beer, explains her commitment to eco-consumption:

I am well aware of the degradation rabbits are responsible for in the countryside, which makes it even more interesting for me to encourage people to cook them. Sort of like, "Eat a rabbit, save a saltbush" (Beer 1994: 61).

To eat a rabbit, then, is to serve the eco-nation. Currently, though, the rabbit's status is looking rather shaky as the pernicious tools of the eco-nation work to banish it from Australian hearts, minds and stomachs. With devastating success in many pastoral areas, calicivirus (RCD), the so-called 'magic bullet', has removed what was once referred to as 'the grey blanket' and is seemingly poised to render Australia a bunny-less nation.

It may be damned and doomed, but the rabbit continues to captivate the Australian imagination. Brian Coman, an agricultural consultant specialising in nuisance wildlife, is jubilant about the rabbit's demise, but he is not immune to its significant place in Australian rural culture:

My grandchildren ... will never know what it is to keep ferrets or to hear the rabbits bolting underground. They will never know what it is to wake up on a Saturday morning to the whine of Ginger and Spot and Stumpy as they anticipate the day ahead. They will never sit around the open fire on a winter's night knitting up rabbit nets. They will miss those views, early in the cold, autumn morning when you peep over the hill to see dozens of rabbits sitting on their burrows (Coman 1999a: 225).

Likewise food columnist, Jill Dupleix, wistfully acknowledges the lost cultural baggage departing with the rabbit:

Rabbits are either loved or hated, seen as soft, fluffy, cuddly things or downright pests that ravage crops and leave earth riddled with holes. Because they are one of the last remaining wild foods, they remind us that not all food comes in neat plastic packs, already plaited for our convenience. Some things still require a degree of skill in hunting, shooting and trapping; alien acts done in the netherworld of moonlight, conjuring images of country squires and hungry poachers, frost on early-morning lawns, and furs hanging on fences to dry. It now seems this last remaining link with the land has more than an image problem (Dupleix 1995: 7).

Within months of RCD's escape, the fifteen million-dollar commercial rabbit industry was devastated<sup>29</sup> and, understandably, it was bemoaning the demise of its raw material. The Akubra company, manufacturer of the nation's iconic headwear, derives its felt from rabbit fur. The company remained viable only by importing sixty thousand rabbit pelts per week. Akubra's company secretary, Terry Hunt, somewhat belligerently speaks of the adaptive resilience of the 'Aussie bunny' and forecasts that its decline is not necessarily inevitable: 'I have great faith in the Aussie bunny. It's survived shooting, trapping, 1080<sup>30</sup> poisoning, ripping up the burrows, and myxomatosis. I think there will be some around after all this' (Blake 1996: 1).

<sup>27</sup> 'Eating green' raises questions concerning the edibility of indigenous species versus introduced ones. Flannery argues that eating beef is evidence of an ecologically inappropriate attempt to 'hustle nature' (1995:405). Meat pie eaters may ostensibly appear more Australian he says, 'yet no one cares to ask whether the meat has come from kangaroo or cattle, or how much soil was lost in the production of the wheat products used to wrap the meat' (1995:405). 'True' Australians will come into being, Flannery says, only when they become 'ecologically attuned'. In part, this means we must abandon conventional monoculture and embrace feral, wild and indigenous food (1995:398).

<sup>28</sup> Bioregionalism is a social movement of North American origin that owes much to Aldo Leopold's notion of an environmental identity located in place (and hence via Heidegger it is also tangentially related to Nazi ecology). The Australian version described by Walker (1993:2-3) is an 'outlook' that respects natural boundaries, values the local and the regional, is ecologically sensitive to a region, is decentralist and 'green' and acknowledges Aboriginal land rights.

<sup>29</sup> The rabbit's popularity as human food has fluctuated. Fennessy (1962) states that rabbit consumption peaked in Australia in 1955-56 when 45 million were harvested. European immigrants might account for some of this increase, while the decline in consumption after this period is possibly a consequence of the introduction of myxomatosis (because of reduced numbers of rabbits and because of the distasteful associations of the disease). In parts of Central Australia rabbits continue to be a vital protein component of the Aboriginal diet (Wilson et al. 1992: 32).

<sup>30</sup> 1080, pronounced 'Ten-Eighty', is the common name for the poison, sodium fluoracetate.

The current reversal of the bilby's fortunes has also gained potency as a result of the uncanny synchronicity of the calicivirus release. As far as the rabbit's edibility is concerned, the introduction of RCD has reaffirmed rabbits as 'pests', not 'game' – pests worthy only of eradication by viral warfare and clearly unfit for human consumption. In other words, the rabbit's diabolical character is further sanctioned by its contagiousness. The Easter bunny has 'disguised its true monstrous self under a fluffy, twinkle-nosed exterior' (Scott-Norman 1995: 17).<sup>31</sup> The avaricious rabbit represents the error of colonial overuse of the land. Like colonists rabbits are misguided; each 'works' too hard on Australian nature. As over-productive aliens, rabbits 'ate all the food and took over all the good country' (Garnett 1994: 13). In another book for young readers - *The Rabbits* - John Marsden richly analogises the rabbit's misdeeds: 'They ate our grass. They chopped down our trees and scared away our friends ... and stole our children.' Consequently, 'the land is bare and brown and the wind blows empty across the plains' (Marsden 1998: 21-25). The illustrator of *The Rabbits*, Shaun Tan, paints the 'monstrous self' as mechanical hybrids, regimentally overwhelming the land. Though very different in style, both Kessing's and Tan's work graphically depict the rabbit as a corruption of the Arcadian fantasy. However, the begrudging respect for the rabbit's adaptability signals that settler Australians partly acknowledge rabbits as not wholly alien. Rabbits, like colonists, unwittingly worked the land too hard — to the point that it now 'is bare and brown and the wind blows empty across the plains' (Marsden 1998: 26). We may identify with the rabbit's failure (or triumph, depending on one's perspective), but I suggest Marsden's query – 'who will save us from the rabbits?' (1998: 29) – echoes the more common identification, that is, who will save us from ourselves?

Rabbits are rapacious and hyper-(re)productive. They hail from a colonial past, being interventionist, perverse and antagonistic to the eco-nation. Reciprocally, the bilby becomes a decolonising agent, our redeeming saviour:

Christian or otherwise, spare the bilby a prayer this Easter. If all goes well it will continue to transform the European Easter to a uniquely Australian one; hopefully the practice of apportioning monies from the sale of chocolate bilbies will expand and increase to help protect bilbies and other endangered Australian fauna in perpetuity... [This] may go a little way toward redeeming us from our original sin of releasing rabbits and foxes. Amen. (Christensen 1997: 28).

<sup>31</sup> The New Zealand Rabbit Destruction Council (RDC) in the 1940s likewise viewed bunnies as 'monstrous', and went to extraordinary lengths to eradicate them. Not only did RDC extensively cover the islands with baits, they 'frowned' on rabbits as pets and even went as far as proposing a ban on the sale of children's toy bunnies (Dunlap 1997a: 81).

<sup>32</sup> The Christian themes of Easter – birth, death, and resurrection – are powerful messages transmitted in association with the environmentalists' quest to regenerate the bilby. Anzac services are held across Australia roughly coinciding with the Easter festival. These annual celebrations enshrine a cyclical transformation of the Australian identity from 'decaying' Briton to an autonomous subject arising from the sacrifice of the Anzacs (cf. Kapferer 1988). Totemic correspondences are not overlooked; one journal article on the Easter bilby carried the subtitle 'Little Diggers' (Christensen 1997).

The religious overtones of this passage (albeit tongue-in-cheek) serve to reinforce the reflexive totemic characteristics of bilby regeneration and rabbit eradication. Many Australians financially endorse the transformation of bunny into bilby, consuming chocolate replicas of the sacred indigene and eradicating the alien interloper in the marketplace. Australians eat an estimated \$165 million worth of Easter chocolate, including eggs, chickens, bunnies and bilbies. In Adelaide, during Easter 1994, seventy per cent of chocolate animals consumed were bilbies. In 1998, Haigh's Chocolates produced twenty times more bilbies than the previous year and production continues to increase.

For each chocolate bilby consumed, manufacturers donate a percentage of their profits to the 'Save the Bilby Fund'. Pink Lady Chocolates assists conservation of these animals by supporting WWF Australia (which includes the Threatened Species Network) and the Bilby Exhibit at Healesville Sanctuary in Victoria.

Haigh's Chocolates also sponsor eight bilbies in the nocturnal house at Adelaide Zoo and have pledged part of the proceeds of chocolate bilby sales to the Anti-Rabbit Research Foundation. Proceeds from the sale of Garnett and Kessing's book support projects to reduce the environmental impact of rabbits and assist the recovery of the bilby. The construction of bilby breeding pens at Shark Bay is being financed by donations from Coles Myer's sales of chocolate bilbies. The pens are part of a scheme undertaken by the West Australian Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM). Called 'Project Eden', CALM's scheme plans first to eradicate feral animals and then to introduce native ones into one thousand square kilometres of Francis Peron National Park. And in the past two years, Darrell Lea has donated more than \$70,000 from the sale of chocolate bilbies to the Save the Bilby Fund. In fact in 2003, bilbies outsold bunnies by eight to one.

Being the former emblem of the Threatened Species Network (now WWF), the bilby is tied to the reproduction of countless other endangered Australians. Reproduction, regeneration and death are parallel aspects implicit in the Aboriginal and settler Australian imaginary.<sup>32</sup> Chris Bayly, a project officer in Environmental Education and Landcare of the South Australian Department for Education and Children's Services, unmistakably views the Easter bilby project as eco-nationally regenerative:

It all fits together with Australian's [sic] knowledge of the uniqueness of Australian fauna and that general consciousness is picking up, that the level of stewardship is picking up ... the growth of republicanism and nationalism in this country. I see it all going hand in hand. (Cited in Andrew and Robottom 1995: 35)

Rob Morrison, the Chair of ARRFA, speaking on Radio National's science series Ockham's Razor, believes people must have an emotional investment in endangered species (but not in feral animals). He regards sympathy for the rabbit as 'un-Australian', conversely, his efforts to render the bilby endearing are unashamedly propagandist. Indigenous species must be kept at the forefront of the imaginary in order that Australians may feel they own them; the 'right' species he says, must be kept constantly in view (Morrison 1996).

However, such attempts at symbolic transcendence are by no means (homogeneously) palatable to all Australians. The rabbit, says Coman, 'will always be with us' (1999a: 217). The Australian Conservation Foundation's Jason Alexandra believes that rabbits are now part of what he calls, a 'recombined Australian ecology' (Alexandra 1996: 15). Likewise, Corbett (1995: 52) argues that many so-called exotic animals now qualify as natives. Rabbits, he says, should be considered 'Australian' mammals. Corbett's and Alexandra's ideas of what constitutes an Australian are clearly at odds with CSIRO and ARRFA plans to purge the nation of foreign biota.

There are others who share Corbett's reluctance to damn the rabbit, but for different reasons. Social reproduction is linked to sexual reproduction. Because of the bilby's tentative breeding habits and its vulnerable conservation status, the Easter Bilby campaign has met with some resistance. As a surrogate fertility symbol, it is no match for the rabbit, or for other mooted indigenous Easter icons. Flannery (1995: 396) substitutes Australia's most fertile animal, the long-haired rat *Rattus villosissimus*, but admits that is unlikely to woo the chocolate-buying public. The irony of advocating such a precarious marsupial contender as the Easter bilby is not lost on Anne Crawford. She facetiously offers a biocentric range of confectionary alternatives in the event of the bilby's extinction:

Fortunately ... there is a swag of other worthy species that could be cast in chocolate and sold by the million. If rabbits are losing their appeal as vermin, why not try another introduced pest, perhaps an Easter starling or chocolate carp. Australia has plenty to choose from. Feral pigs, crown of thorns starfish, foxes and camels may not have the same appeal but nothing that a bit of clever marketing couldn't overcome. Or what about an Easter ferret? Just the thing for the rabbit eradication people. You could always go for another obscure endangered species, a chocolate quoll or dunnart perhaps. Or without, being too blasphemous, why not go the whole hog and resurrect an animal that's already extinct? A Tasmanian tiger with milk-chocolate stripes perhaps. For my money you can't go past the idea of an Easter antechinus. This mouse-like marsupial is not only native but can be readily found in Victoria. The antechinus has a cute pointy face and could be eaten in life-size portions. Best of all, the antechinus has mating rituals that make rabbits look lazy. Fertility gone mad. The male antechinus mates with such fervour that it dies right after its first breeding session – 10-to-12 hours straight – of stress and exhaustion. No danger of extinction here, these little critters breed like rabbits. (Crawford 1995: 6)

Such flippant speciesism overlooks the mythological and ritual dimensions of the story of the rabbit and the bilby in Australia. At the very least, this indigenising of Easter engenders a collective pride in 'our' Easter icon, not some 'unnatural' European atavism.

The totemic-like obligations and prohibitions of conservationism are evident in the current Easter Bilby campaign. For settler Australians, ideas of nature and native constitute the imagined nation, and so too do Australians continue to imagine themselves and their social relationships through their bio-physical environment. Such projective identifications evident in eco-nationalist mythology are governed by a form of relational totemic logic: rabbit is to bilby, as 'destroyer' is to 'saviour', as colonist is to eco-nationalist (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1964). However, as attitudes to rabbits and bilbies evince, identification is a contested arena rife with contradiction and misrepresentation.

## Conclusion: dominion without tyranny

Saving endangered native species and eradicating introduced exotic ones engenders actions indicative of a moral community. A virtuous connection with nature is, as Harvey suggests, closely allied to communitarian ideals of civic virtue (Harvey 1996: 179). The environmental values drawn from a moral community reflect the political culture as much as the state of the environment. It could be argued that a Protestant ethic underpinned colonial naturework, while the postcolonial version rests squarely within a Judeo-Christian tradition – 'the fall' being the moment of colonisation, and our subsequent redemption conditional on the virtuous restoration of the nation's biota. But these two dominant religious traditions maintain an unsettled coexistence in Australian conservationist and environmentalist discourse.

In one respect, the values of the Australian version of this moral community have not really changed; conceptions of the land remain instrumental to national identity. Harvey alerts us to the fact that capitalism reproduces itself only through change, though of a particular sort (1996: 105). Australia may have been imagined as 'God's own country', but the irrationality of its nature meant that it thwarted colonial rationalisation (Gilbert 1982: 17). The introduction of rabbits is just one of the many forms of naturework that is retrospectively deemed ill-considered. Nonetheless, because of faith in 'God's own' land, or perhaps because of faith in science and technology to solve the problem, developmentalist logic endures. It is thus perhaps fitting that Western Mining and Elders sponsor the Easter Bilby campaign. The current manifestation of naturework examined here – the desire to rid the land of rabbits and recolonise it with bilbies – is evidence of the subtle grafting of the colonial ethos onto eco-national mythology. Garnett and Marsden's rabbit tales reveal that the story of the rabbit in Australia is also a narrative of European colonisation. Adherents to the fantasy of the eco-nation however, endorse particular versions of this narrative. The integrity of the pursuit of the fantasy seems unquestionable; it is

simply virtuous to desire to return as much nature as possible (and this includes urban parkland as well as the conservation estate) to an imagined pre-colonial state.

In the historical trajectory of advanced capitalism there has been a shift from an identity given in the first instance by production, to that given by behaviour associated with consumption. The purchase of commodities themselves is a transformative act, an economic and social practice through which the self is constituted and reconstituted and, in this context, the consumption of blood and chocolate can easily go from being a purely recreational

act to being also a sacramental one. Consuming Easter bilbies nourishes both mind and body; it is a means of 'taking in' indigeneity that circumvents the totemic prohibition (and conservationist opposition) to eating the flesh of native animals. Consuming indigeneity in the form of chocolate bilbies enshrines a principle of intersubjectivity. Chocolate bilby consumption nourishes and re-creates (indigenous) Australian nature by financially subsidising the regeneration of remnant 'real' bilby populations. It is also a way of making nature productive without having to kill it.

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## APPENDIX I

**EASTER BILBY BOOKS**

**EASTER BILBY**  
Ali Garnett & Kaye Kessing

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