Book Review

River Dreams: the People and Landscapes of the Cooks River
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In 2004 I attended a conference on estuarine ecology at Ballina, on the New South Wales north coast. The conference was sponsored by the Estuarine and Coastal Science Association from the UK and the Estuarine Research Foundation from the USA. Then, and even now, it struck me as odd that these two organisations would choose an insignificant town in New South Wales, a settlement with a population of only 25,000 and a substantial distance from Sydney (750 km) and from Brisbane (200 km), to hold their international meeting. Maybe that isolation was the attraction, plus of course the looming presence of The Big Prawn (especially appropriate for a meeting of estuarine ecologists). What was just as intriguing was that they chose the Ballina RSL as the conference venue; the oral presentations were sometimes drowned out by the cacophony of the massed cicadas outside, more often by the incessant racket of the poker machines inside. But what caused our foreign visitors their greatest perplexity was probably the RSL's minute of silence at 6 PM each day, when the locals stopped talking and averted their eyes from the one-armed bandits, placed their drinks on the bar, and bowed their heads in quiet contemplation of past military disasters.

As you will know, Ballina is situated on the Richmond River. These huge drowned river valleys of the New South Wales coast were a favourite haunt of mine when I lived in that State, so I lost no opportunity to mosey down to the rock breakwater every morning, before the emotional and mental onslaught of the day's presentations. Each day I saw the same three or four old blokes fishing off the structure. All had the magpie-like body that typifies Australian men of a certain vintage: round bodies and extended tummies, dark gnarly legs with protruding knees, small balding heads, and eyes that didn't miss a thing, constantly darting from one scene to another. Their fingers were yellowed from decades of rolling their own fags with Tally Ho papers and Capstan tobacco. That didn't stop them from gingerly placing a bit of estuarine algae (usually *Ulva*) onto a small hook, tied onto a light tracer below a pencil-thin cork float. They were fishing for luderick (*Girella tricuspidata*) you see, although they wouldn't know them by that (Victorian) name; they would have called them 'blackfish' or 'darkies' or 'niggers' (Roughley 1953). Slightly upstream, in the quieter sections of the lower Richmond estuary, were a number of small tinnies, again handled by a gaggle of old blokes intent on fishing for, I guess, flathead or bream, maybe garfish, maybe tailor. Why do I mention this? It's because the Richmond River was the centre of these men's lives. They had probably been brought up on, seen it change during their lifetime, and it allowed them to collectively whinge about the influx of bloody tourists and the availability of these flash new boutique beers in the RSL. They loved the river. They spent their life on it. In all probability, some would die on it.

Ian Tyrrell owned up to a similar attachment to the Cooks River in his book *River Dreams: the People and Landscapes of the Cooks River*. In the opening pages he confessed that since the 1980s "… the Cooks River has become a personal obsession". Soon after he admitted that "This book is the result of my intellectual and emotional entanglement with rivers in general, and with this one in particular". I understand how a river can get into your blood. I similarly declared in the prologue to my recent (2017, p. xix) book on the Hawkesbury River that "I sometimes wonder whether the book is actually a love letter to the Hawkesbury, written by an absent paramour who simply wishes the very best for his beloved".

It all goes to show that rivers loom large in what might be called the Australian psyche, at the personal and at the collective level and by the professional historian and the professional ecologist and the retired angler just seeking a moment's quiet fishing. Rivers have featured on our banknotes; they are immortalised in untold place names, especially in central Australia; they have been painted in huge numbers by our most influential and talented artists; poets such as Henry Lawson have written about them; we are all terrified by the bunyips that are known to lurk in quiet waterholes in the outback; many of us waste hours at a time angling (often fruitlessly) in them; and we debate endlessly the management of the Murray-Darling River system, a topic so contentious that it nearly derailed the federation of the various colonies into the Australian Commonwealth, has been the subject of innumerable royal commissions since the 1880s, and is a topic that even today seems to be beyond resolution, viz the latest royal commission, the 2018–2019 South Australian inquiry into the Murray-Darling Basin Plan (Walker 2019).

Ian Tyrrell's book concerns the Cook River, that short (23 km) coastal waterway that rises near Strathfield in Sydney's inner south-western suburbs and discharges into Botany Bay, draining about 100 km^2 of densely populated and industrialised land on the way. His treatment is part environmental history, part scholarly vignette. Environmental histories can be prepared by a wide range of people, but most commonly are written by historians, geographers or ecologists. They can cover an immense range of topics, according to the skills, experience and interests of the author, the type of environment under study, and the expected attractiveness to a target audience. They can be organised along roughly chronological lines, as Ian chose for his book, along thematic lines (as I chose for my Hawkesbury book) or along spatial lines (e.g. with Greg Blaxell's 2009 book on the Parramatta River). Ian's book is obviously written by an historian, and its specific focus is indicated by the subtitle: "the people and landscapes of the Cooks River". The book concentrates much more on the people and environmental institutions associated with the Cooks River than it does with a quantitative description of how the river has changed over time, or why. This is not a criticism, merely a description of the book's focus. Other books could be written addressing other aspects of the river or from different perspectives – Ian's spotlight is on the people of the river and their history of engagement with it. Such is the wonderful variety of Australian environmental histories: imagine if they were all written from the same perspective – that would be as boring as if all wine in this country were made from the one grape, by the one winemaker, from the one wine-growing region.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the river from the dual perspectives of how it provided a home for Aboriginal people for millennia and how it was perceived by James Cook (after whom it is named) and the early British colonisers, in particular by that most observant reporter of the First Fleet, Watkin Tench. I worry a little bit about the claim on p. 16 that "Aboriginal inhabitants touched the land lightly…", given that there is overwhelming evidence of the central role early humans played in the extinction of the megafauna in the late Quaternary, that Bill Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* provides the primary evidence for Ian's position (despite the fact that many of Gammage's ecological conclusions and nation-wide generalisations have been roundly criticised by ecologists since his book came out in 2011), and that contrary evidence is mentioned later in Ian's book that Aboriginal hunting pressures may have been responsible for the scarcity of large vertebrates around Sydney observed and reported on by the first British colonisers. It seems to me that you can't have it both ways: you cannot claim that Aborigines trod lightly on Mother Earth but at the same time they managed the entire continent by fire for tens of thousands of years, changing the flora to better suit their needs and increasing the yield of the animals that they hunted.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the early European colonisation of the river and its catchment. They concentrate on the period after 1830, which leaves me wondering what happened between 1788 and 1830. After all, this is a period of nearly half a century, and an awful lot happened in colonial Australia – and especially in Sydney – over this time. In this chapter I found the first of many amusing quotes Ian has collated, little things that made me quietly chuckle. This particular one in Chapter 2 is the description of New Town in 1838 as "one of the finest Landscapes nature ever painted". Surely, this is not the Newtown I knew as a university student in the 1970s! The philosophical link between improving the river and improving the moral character of the human residents was also an interesting element of Chapters 2 and 3. A similar notion was investigated on a national scale very capably by Muir in his 2014 book *The Broken Promise of Agricultural Progress*.

It is in these first few chapters that I would have liked to have seen some more maps, showing for example the location of the various sites mentioned in the text and, given that I'm a one-time botanist, how the vegetation had changed from the pre-European distributions shown at the very beginning of the book. The locations of the various industrial sites and factories would also have been nice to see in a diagram. So would a map showing the sections of the river that had been channelised and concreted. But such things cost money to generate and to reproduce, and the price of the book would have had to be increased had my suggested maps been included. The suggestion, however, provides additional evidence of the sorts of things that are focussed on by historians, and how geographers and ecologists writing or reading environmental histories might want other types of information as well. It's a balancing act, and perhaps we should rejoice in the diversity of treatments that are available. And in Chapter 3 I came across another of those amusing anecdotes that Ian has scattered throughout the book: the case where "a crowd of youths [swimming naked in the river in front of some female tourists] who instead of concealing themselves gloried in exposing their nudity to the utmost". Larrikinism, it seems, was well and truly alive along the banks of the Cooks River in 1884.

There are ten chapters in total, but I feel that it's only at Chapter 4 that the book gets up a head of steam. From then on, it's a thrilling read – a bit like a 38 Class steam locomotive thundering up the Cowan Bank from the Hawkesbury River that I wrote about.

In Chapter 4, Ian addresses the awareness that was growing by the end of the 19th century that the Cooks River was in a really bad way. He claims in a number of places that the Cooks River is Australia's most polluted river ("River of filth, stream of stench. Putrid pariah among waterways."). I'd liked to have seen some empirical evidence for this repeated statement. I can think of a couple of other rivers in Australia that would have a very strong claim to the title. In south-western Tasmania, for example, the Queen and King Rivers have received nearly 100 million tonnes of tailings from the mine and smelter at Mount Lyell since the end of the 19th century. This was sufficient to fill in almost all of the King River downstream of the mine to a depth of 5 m, and to form a 250 ha delta where the river debouches into Macquarie Harbour (Crawford 2000). In New South Wales, the Parramatta River surely would have a strong claim too. Look at the staggering range of noxious industries that operated along the Parramatta River until very recent times, especially in its mid-stream reaches: shipworks and slipways, gas works, light industry of all types, manufacturers of sheep dips and creosote, paints and antifouling compounds, fell-mongering and skin tanning, flour mills, the State abattoir and the State brickworks, mineral-preparation plants… The list goes on and on, and I well remember the stench that hung around the suburb of Rhodes in the 1970s. As an aquatic ecologist with a particular interest in aquatic biogeochemistry, I would have liked to have seen some empirical evidence for the assertion of the primacy of the Cooks River as Australia's most polluted stream.

Regardless of these equivocations, I think the author is on firmer ground when he says that no other Australian river has been "manufactured" the way the Cooks has. After all, the entire bottom section was chopped off to make way for the enlarged airport at Mascot in the mid-late 20th century, and large parts of it were planned to be converted into a massive canal system in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for the south-west of Sydney. Of these grand plans, only the 4 km Alexandra Canal remains. (But then again, about a third of the original length of the Latrobe River in Victoria's Gippsland was removed by various River Improvement Trusts as they sought to straighten the river, remove meanders and billabongs, and drain adjacent land in order to better 'manage' the waterway. A powerful argument could be made too that the Murray River, with all its dams and weirs and barrages and alienated floodplains, is now more-or-less a totally human construction.) Here again I found in Ian's book an amusing description that prompted a knowing chortle: the selling of cheap land along the river "only miles from the city" in the last decade of the 19th century, plots that very soon proved to be at least flood-prone, if not completely submerged at times. So the White Shoe Brigade that was active in Queensland real estate in the 1970s and 1980s had an historical precedent along the Cooks River a century earlier.

Chapters 5 and 6 continue with the theme introduced in Chapter 4, concentrating on the canal schemes that would have converted the Cooks River into an antipodean Birmingham, and with the dredging that was constantly required to prevent the river silting up completely. A range of great canal schemes were proposed in the late 19th and first decades of the 20th century, by which time the Cooks River was in a parlous state. Ian describes these deliberations aimed at 'improving' the river with great clarity; these chapters were a joy to read.

Chapter 7 examines the river in the post-war period and describes how the rapid spread of secondary industry transformed the river and its catchment, as well as the social composition of its human population. Ian describes with touching sincerity the way local residents became increasingly dismayed at the way the river was changing, how in 1945 "children splashed in the stream and played along the banks" but soon after environmental deterioration had led one resident returning from the war to question "if he'd made a dreadful mistake" in buying a house there. Ian describes well how the combination of the post-war boom in population, in affluence, in industrialisation led to a new suite of pollutants being discharged into the river, things such as rubber, heavy metals and hydrocarbons from road runoff, toxicants from heavy industry, pollution of all sorts from oil refineries.

Chapter 8 starts to bring us to the modern day. It looks at developments in the 1970s, including the establishment of the State Pollution Control Commission and "the birth of modern environmentalism". In hindsight, these seem like halcyon days, when action really started to be taken to reign in polluting industries and ensure a decent quality of life for residents. But lest I get too rosy-eyed, let's consider the magnitude of the sums that Ian outlines were to be spent on such environmental remediation. On page 204, he points out it was argued in 1995 that $18 million would be needed to resolve the river's pollution problems (the remediation program was never implemented, and the funds not allocated). Then on page 209, that $4 million was set aside in 1993 for the State-wide 'Rivers Reborn' scheme, of which a trivial 1/16 went to the Cooks River. It's instructive to compare these 'investments' with property values for the land around the river. A quick glance at real estate agents' websites reveals the median house price in Tempe is now $1.1 million; in Dulwich Hill and Strathfield South, it's $1.5 million. So we all rejoice when the State or Commonwealth Government announces a million-dollar river rehabilitation program somewhere? Ye gods, that's not even the value of one suburban house block in this part of inner south-

western Sydney! And then I reflect on the types of environmental works that Ian outlines in Chapters 8 and 9 as having been done in recent years: a bicycle path here, the revegetation of a hundred metres of bankside vegetation there, the installation of uniform interpretive signs, a river festival every so often. Have we completely lost our way? The bar seemed to have been set so much higher in the 1970s, even if we never managed to jump over it and that industries of all sorts managed to find ways around the intentions of the new laws and regulations.

I have a few other quibbles, but this is only to be expected when one academic is tasked with reviewing the work of another, especially when they come from different disciplines:

1. On page 9, Ian states that "the entire history of the British Isles for hundreds of years was tied up with river management". Maybe, but I'd have thought that the management of forests and woodlands was just as central (e.g. see Oliver Rackham's magnificent monograph of 2006, *Woodlands*). Moreover, the English national hero is a man who lived in the woods —Robin Hood — not like our own, a jolly swagman who drowned in a billabong, pursued by the coppers. This is, perhaps, just one more indication of the centrality of rivers in the Australian psyche.

2. The history of the Cooks River is contrasted with that of a number of North American rivers, especially those around Chicago and Los Angeles. This is a subject the author has addressed a number of times in the past (e.g. see Tyrrell 2017). But there would seem to be many equally interesting contrasts with Australian rivers. That farming along the Cooks River atrophied following the discovery and 'taking up' of land over the Blue Mountains, for example, is paralleled by what happened along the Hawkesbury at the same time. Similarly I think there's an interesting study to be made by comparing the Cooks River with other short rivers along the Australian coast that have been buried to various degrees under growing urban and industrial metropolises. Near Sydney, the above-mentioned Parramatta River would be an obvious comparison. So might the Lane Cove River, which is similarly short (14 km and drains a catchment of ~90 km^2), but which seems to have escaped the ignominy experienced by the Cooks River. In Victoria, the infamous Maribyrnong River and Moonee Mooney, Laverton and Kororoit Creeks would also have proven interesting comparisons, as all flow through heavily urbanised and industrialised catchments on their short way to the ocean. Gary Presland, at the Museum of Victoria, has done a wonderful job in describing the environmental history of some of these waterways and the fate of their floodplain wetlands. Likewise, the way large areas of land around the Cooks River were set aside for land-based sewerage treatment bears an uncanny similarity with what occurred, but on a much larger scale, with the establishment of the Werribee Sewerage Treatment Farm in western Melbourne at the end of the 19th century. Ditto with the mining of oysters to provide lime for building, which took place also along the Hawkesbury and in Port Stephens at roughly the same time as it did along the Cooks River, and with the history of disastrous floods that inundated houses foolishly built on low-lying land on the river's floodplain, which again find a strong parallel with what happened along the Hawkesbury (Boon 2017).

3. Ian mentions in many places in his book the dam built on the Cooks River in the mid 19th century. I wonder whether the significance of this structure to the supply of potable water to Sydney could have been brought out more fully, given that the broader story has been described well by Lloyd (1988). By 1822, the Tank Stream (which had provided Sydney with most of its water supply) was badly polluted and volumetrically inadequate to provide the growing amounts of water required. The Bigge inquiry had attested to the parlous state of the colony's water supply. In the following year, Earl Bathurst, the colonial secretary in London, instructed the governor, Sir Thomas Brisbane, to secure a better water supply for Sydney. John Busby was charged with delivering the necessary improvements. He drove a bore in the Lachlan Swamps, near today's Centennial Park, to carry water from the swamps to Sydney. It ran dry during the drought of 1838—1839, and it was this event that led to the proposal to supplement Sydney's water supply by damming the Cooks River at Tempe. As Ian pointed out, this scheme failed when floods destroyed the infrastructure and seawater from Botany Bay continued to intrude into the impounded waters, salinizing nearby farms. An alternative scheme to improve the water supply was proposed that involved damming the Lachlan Swamps directly, but nothing more came of the idea. After a series of yet more water-supply proposals had been received and rejected, the colonial government decided to use water drawn from the Botany Swamps to supplement Sydney's water supply. To this end in 1855 a pump house was established close to Botany Bay, and in 1859 a reservoir was constructed at Crown Street to receive water from the swamps, joined later by a second reservoir, in Paddington. The combined system of drawing water from the Lachlan Swamps, fed by gravity through Busby's Bore to the eastern parts of Sydney, and water pumped from the Botany

Swamps to the two new reservoirs sufficed until the early 1860s, when rapid industrialization and urbanisation were making both schemes untenable; moreover, the swamps that provided the city's water supply had become polluted with effluent from filthy industries such as fell-mongering, wool-washing and boiling-down works. Many of these industries were located in the catchment of the Cooks River, again as Ian points out. Perhaps even worse though, the development of a general cemetery at Randwick threatened the problem of the seepage of decomposing body parts from the cemetery's vaults into the water supply's main drain. A royal commission was established in 1867 to resolve the problem of how to supply Sydney with a reliable supply of good quality potable water, and during the two years of investigation it considered building dams on Cooks River (again) and on the Georges River, but rejected both on the grounds that it would be too difficult to find suitable sites for the dams and that pumping costs would be excessive. Attention was then switched to the Grose River and its tributary, Burralow Creek, and the Colo River and its tributaries, Wheeny and Little Wheeny Creeks. The Colo was initially favoured, because water draining from the sandstone catchment was very pure; but it would be necessary to penetrate deep into the Colo wilderness to find a dam site high enough to provide Sydney with gravity-fed drinking water and this was thought to be an insurmountable problem. The option to obtain water from the Warragamba River, a tributary of the Nepean River, was then examined, but it would require a dam wall 200 feet high and it was not clear at the time that such a structure could be built safely. Having ruled out all these options, the commissioners were left to consider diverting water from the Upper Nepean or the Lower Nepean River. The Lower Nepean option had the advantage of harvesting the large flows that came down the Warragamba and Upper Nepean River systems each year, but was dismissed on the basis of poor water quality and, since the dam would be relatively low in the catchment, any water that was collected would have to be pumped to Sydney. Even if cheap coal could be obtained (from the nearby Illawarra deposits) and the pumps built near the railway station at Penrith, the Lower Nepean system would still be uneconomic. This left the Upper Nepean as the only option. It had the advantage of being sited on intractable sandstone country which "if not turned to account as a gathering ground for water it is never likely to be of use for anything else" and which, unlike the Lower Nepean option, yielded water of exceptional purity. And that is how (1) the Cooks River played a vital role in early deliberations about how best to provide Sydney with potable water and (2) how the Upper Nepean River and its tributaries, especially the Warragamba, eventually came to provide that service.

4. Chapter 10 concludes the book, and it contains an insightful commentary on what have become known as 'hybrid' ecosystems among environmental historians (e.g. see Sutter 2013). There is a wealth of literature from ecologists and from natural-resource managers on this topic of indeterminate ecosystems. Some interpret the hybridicity (and especially the creation of offset habitats to replace those lost during development) as 'faking nature'; others see it as part of an inevitable evolution of 'novel ecosystems', especially with ongoing climate change. The changing status of mangroves along the Cooks River provides an excellent example of these changing perceptions and attitudes. Mangroves were once common along the Cooks River but, as Ian points out in Chapter 4, were extensively cut out by the end of the 19th century, and are now making a vigorous recovery. We have described similar processes in Victorian mangroves too (Sinclair and Boon 2012), and the similarities in social responses to saline coastal wetlands across the two Colonies/States could have been brought out more strongly. How these changing dynamics are to be interpreted and acted on is still highly contentious, given that mangroves (and saltmarsh) are about as popular with large sections of the wider community as the reality of climate change is with the Liberal Party.

And it is this final point that brings me to a general conclusion I reckon can be made after reading Ian's book and viewing it in context of the large number of other Australian environmental histories that have been prepared recently. The thing is that, at least to me, a huge distance still remains between historians, ecologists and, arguably, geographers, in the preparation of environmental histories in Australia. In the Introduction, for example, Ian discusses the difference between river preservation, restoration, renovation and rectification, without to my mind really resolving the matter. Dictionaries tend not to differentiate between the terms 'restoration' and 'rehabilitation' either, but ecologists have drawn a useful distinction, especially with regard to degraded ecosystems (e.g. Bradshaw 1997; Lake 2001). They mostly take 'restoration' to mean the reversion of a degraded ecosystem to its original ecological condition. In almost all cases in Australia, the original condition is equated with some notional pre-European state. Sometimes, but less commonly, the word 'reconstruction' is used in the same way. In contrast, 'rehabilitation' describes merely an acceptable improvement in ecological condition. It is usually a more realistic management objective.

The term might be considered in the same way as it is used in the context of a rehabilitation hospital for the war-wounded: the intention of medical care and intervention in a rehabilitation hospital is not (indeed cannot be) the complete recovery of, say double amputees or those blinded in an explosion, but their treatment with prostheses, physiotherapy etc in order that they can become useful and functioning members of society. Much the same argument holds for the rehabilitation of damaged (i.e. degraded) natural systems such as the Cooks River, where management interventions are expected to improve to some degree the ecological condition of the system and allow the river to once more deliver, in broad terms, some of the ecosystem services the community expects (or wants). It is totally unreasonable to expect that it could, or should, revert to some pre-European condition.

It is this gulf between historians and ecologists that I think is of growing importance to the development of Australian environmental histories and nature conservation. Ian writes with much – and entirely justified enthusiasm – for the work of the very great historian Sir Keith Hancock. In 1972, Hancock prepared one of the earliest and best Australian environmental histories, *Discovering Monaro: a Study of Man's Impact on his Environment*. Even that long ago, Hancock repeatedly called for more interactions between ecologists and historians: "Historians and ecologists ought to keep in close contact with each other"; "To explore and explain these swings of population [in emus, small and large marsupials, parrots etc] is a task that an ecologist and an historian might profitably tackle in partnership, provided they had a few years to spare"; to explain the environmental impact of different intensities of grazing on rangelands is a research task that he thought would "…require an historian who is able and willing to work in very close contact with natural scientists on the one side, and with economists on the other". The great Griffith Taylor made similar pleas for more collaboration, but from the perspective of a physical geographer, in his *Australia: a Study of Warm Environments and Their Effect on British Settlement* (Taylor 1959). Despite these calls, I believe it's the case that there has been, in fact, only little formal interaction between the disciplines of history and ecology in Australia. For example, the second, and what seems to have been the latest, forum on Australian environmental history was held in 2007. The papers proffered were published in a special issue of the journal Environment and History (Robin and Smith 2008). All the authors were historians; none were ecologists. Conversely, in my experience it's been exceptionally rare to hear an historian or a geographer interested in environmental history present at an ecological or limnological conference. It really is time that some more cross-fertilisation took place. We have very little to lose, and very much to gain.

So, to conclude. Despite having not lived in Sydney for nearly 40 years, and during the time I was there I was based much more on the Hawkesbury River/Ku-ring-gai Chase area and passed through the municipalities that are the subject of Ian's book only infrequently, in order to visit some dear relatives who lived on the Georges River and to a then girlfriend who lived at Jannali, I greatly enjoyed reading Ian's book. I think you will too. It adds substantially to the growing resource we have on the environmental histories of the rivers around Sydney, with books now available for the Hawkesbury River (in fact, two detailed books for this river: one by Sue Rosen in 1995 and my book in 2017), the Parramatta River (by Greg Blaxell, in 2009), the Lane Cove River valley (by John Martyn, in 2010) and, with this book, the Cooks River too. These are arguably part of a much larger resurgence in the writing of environmental histories of Australian rivers more generally, with at least three books having been published on the Yarra River in the past decade alone, one on the Snowy River, a couple on the rivers of the Channel Country in far western Queensland and for the Lake Eyre Basin, and of course a veritable tsunami of books on the rivers of the Murray-Darling Basin. Those interested in the environmental histories of our rivers can look forward to many a weekend devoted to quietly reading the range of books on offer.

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