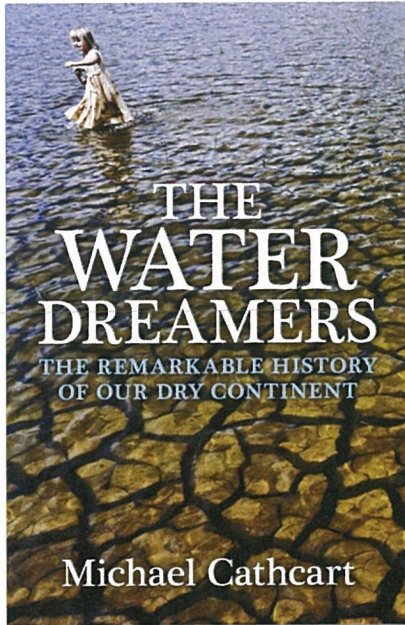


INTERVIEW

WATER. WATER EVERYWHERE AND NOT A DROP TO DRINK

The Water Dreamers was this year's winner of the \$10,000 Colin Roderick literary prize, administered by the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies in memory of Professor Colin Roderick. This will be the second time in two years that the prize has gone to a nonfiction book. The book was also short-listed for the 2010 Prime Minister's Prize.

LINDSAY SIMPSON interviewed Dr Michael Cathcart, the winning author, about how water has defined this large island continent and its identity.



The same week I interviewed Michael Cathcart about his book *The Water Dreamers, The Remarkable History of our Dry Continent*, the headlines on the front page of *The Australian* newspaper screamed: *Extreme weather is threatening to push the economy into reverse amid fear record-breaking rain in the east and drought in the west will wipe up to \$6 billion.*

Cathcart might say it was ever thus.

In spite of our historical preoccupation with water, however, when Cathcart began writing this book for his PhD back in the mid nineties, the idea of 'a water crisis' was not part of the public discourse.

"Back in 1994, if someone had said what are you doing with yourself, and I'd said: 'I'm writing a history of water,' it sounds

so esoteric," he chuckles. "It's like saying I'm writing a history of dirt or a history of sand. It sounded like one of these things that people feared academics got up to."

Originally seeking to tell a history of Australia, his research spanned almost two decades among other projects. Cathcart is also the host of the popular Radio National's *Bush Telegraph* and he was ABC presenter in other programs including *Arts Today* and *Late Night Live*.

The Water Dreamers charts the obsession of the colonial newcomers as they dreamt of water's existence in 'the most arid continent on earth.' Cathcart's ability to provide broad brush strokes to a large canvas, while applying a finer brush to the particular, affirms his ability to see history as 'a series of patterns'.

"I needed to think about some factor that affected everybody no matter what their culture, no matter what their gender, no matter where they live. And I realised that that one factor was water," he explains.

Cathcart is candid in paying homage to his former lecturer at Melbourne University, Geoffrey Blainey in providing him with a framework to view history on such a broad canvas. He credits Blainey's subject on problems of peace and conflict that he studied at university as being "one of the most important influences in my intellectual development". Here, Blainey regularly engaged in "a kind of intellectual, freewheeling analysis of extremely large questions to do with war and peace on a global scale. I found it incredibly stimulating."

"Politically we're miles apart," he hastens to add later, when I suggest he had a 'go' at Blainey in the book in which he accuses him of misreading a passage because he had a different agenda.

"I think I do it quite respectfully."

"I think he (Blainey) has a wonderful imagination. I've read everything he's written. I find it kind of bracing and challenging even when I'm shouting: 'Geoffrey No. Geoffrey No.'"

Cathcart confesses he would be flattered if *The Water Dreamers* was considered as good as Blainey's classic *The Tyranny of Distance*, written in 1966, which outlines how distance shaped Australia's colonial history. In taking up a similar theme, Cathcart's book is about how water limits how we live.

"It's the fact that it determines what our ultimate population capacity will be and what parts of the country we will occupy. It's simple. You look at a rainfall map and then you look at a population map, and we live where it rains and then if you look at a map of the distribution of Aboriginal languages, it's the same thing. Aborigines lived in greater numbers on the coast than they did at the centre. They didn't choose to do that but the rain decided where they would

live and we've been allowing the rain to decide where we live ever since."

His decision to document the encounters of the white colonists with Aboriginal people came, he says, when he took up his PhD again in 2006 after abandoning it.

"The stress of writing a doctoral thesis became too much. I just put it in the cupboard and put it away and then I got a job at the ABC...as a presenter. I never really intended to come back to it. I was just another person in the world who'd failed to complete a PhD."

The increasing focus on a water crisis was one reason Cathcart changed his mind. The second was the 'Windschuttle debate'. Keith Windschuttle, historian and journalist, criticised historians for 'fabricating' historical evidence about violence against Aboriginals by white colonists, which Cathcart recalls 'exploded into the conversation' in 2000. Initially, Cathcart didn't have enough time to weigh into the arguments, but, increasingly as he went back to his thesis, he found no basis for Windschuttle's claims that historians had exaggerated incidents of violence against Aboriginals on the frontier.

"The Windschuttle debate sensitised me to the need to incorporate Aborigines as part of the wider Australian story and sensitised me to the level of violence on the frontier. Far from thinking he (Windschuttle) was in any way vindicated, I thought he was very wide of the mark."

Cathcart's book is also about how the white settlers interpreted the new continent as silent, particularly at its centre. He relays disturbing anecdotes about white man's interpretation of the land; how the 'civilised' sound of the gun being fired by the newcomers meant 'the land had just changed forever.'

"The first phase is it starts off optimistically with explorers setting off in the hope of finding great rivers and great grasslands, and so on, and which ends in disappointment and what I call the victory of silence. And then you've got Australians trying to make sense of what they have at the centre of the continent... The first response says we'll run away. Don't bother about the centres, live in the coast...stay in Sydney, stay in Melbourne....and keep your spiritual connections with the Old World."

The second response was the term he invented called: 'necronationalism' which he describes as – "a nationalism based on death".

"The idea is that the silence at the centre of Australia is a kind of death force, dark and melancholy. We have to become one with it if we are going to become

one with the land. That melancholic nationalism appeals to a certain set of Victorian values. The Victorians were fascinated by death, the hereafter.”

This was the spirit that shaped the story the writers told about explorers like Ludwig Leichhardt who vowed never to give up until he found the ‘unknown core of the continent’. Cathcart ironically outlines how explorers such as Burke and Wills after an expedition of ‘folly and waste’ ended up being hailed as heroes by the Victorian government.

He despises histories that consist of heroic adventures.

“I didn’t want to tell a story of heroes. Because I think history when it’s reduced to heroics is very bland and banal and basically propaganda for one or other sides of politics.”

The watery prism allows Cathcart to explore some of the bizarre literature, such as the Lemurian novels, coined in Britain in the 1860s which imagined that beyond the deserts of Australia, artesian water had allowed a mysterious civilisation to survive for thousands of years. The Lemurian novelists invented ‘a fantastic past’ before the Aborigines. They were imperial stories with stalwart British Australians with ‘manly Anglo-Saxon names.’

Cathcart was introduced to the novels in the 1990s, when he began working on his PhD saying that he was quite comfortable about “using stories and poems as evidence of some wider set of attitudes, not universal ones, but ones that have some currency in the complex conversation that is culture.”

“I think it was all the social research that I did into the way people were thinking ...the way that they were settling into the country that made me understand the Lemurian novels. I do think that previous scholars who’ve written about them within the departments of cultural studies...haven’t really understood how the historical contexts have shaped the books and shaped what they mean. If you read them solely in the context of intertextuality – of one book talking to another – and read them as part of a larger global conversation where the books are reflecting values of King Solomon’s Mines, you actually miss what’s distinctive about the Australian books and in what way they’re a response to the direct experience of the Australian landscape.”

Asked in what way the fact that Australia is an island continent has shaped its history, Cathcart believes it has given us a “misleadingly neat idea” of the way in which the dispossession of Aborigines unfolded.

“People like to say that when Governor Philip arrived in Botany Bay, he took

possession of the eastern half of Australia. In one sense he did. Technically, he did, but really all he was saying was – to the world at large and to French in particular: ‘Go away. If you come here, you’ve got a fight in your hands.’ He wasn’t intentionally dispossessing the Aborigines. That was all to come later. To claim half of Australia when you land at Sydney Cove is a bit like landing in Ghana and claiming you now owned Africa. Patently ludicrous. I don’t think that the whites really believed they were in possession of the continent in any total way until well into the 19th century. They had a real sense of where there was Aboriginal lands and that the whites were at these various points on the edge of the continent and moving inwards, usually down the rivers. Settlement occurred on the riverbanks essentially. We’ve tended to think of Australian history in a much more absolute way – that there comes the moment where suddenly Britain has taken possession of the continent. It’s much more piecemeal and ragged than that and I think people’s sense of it, that settler Australian sense of how much of the continent – the important word is ‘occupied’ – was much more piecemeal.”

He says that by the end of the 19th century, the fact that the whites had “failed to occupy the country” induced anxiety that the land would be taken over by ‘Asian invaders’. In the book he documents the engineering projects of the end of the 19th century through to the Snowy Mountain scheme.

“One of the functions of these large scale engineering projects is defence. The idea that if we don’t irrigate the land, we don’t populate it, we don’t fertilise it, we don’t make it productive, it is not productive. It’s up for grabs by somebody else.”

Conversely, in *The Water Dreamers*, Cathcart seeks to position Australia as part of a global history comparing, for example, Australian notions of wilderness with other continents such as America. Cathcart claims that too many books have sought to ask the question: In what way are we different?

“I think this idea of us as an island has given a blinkered view of the factors that shape our history. We concentrate too much on our isolation instead of focusing on our connectedness.”

“In the past we’ve talked about 19th century history as hermetically sealed under a bubble so the people arrived at the coast of this continent, crawled under the lid and the place which slammed down behind them. And they were sucked into this autonomous process which we know is Australian history where something distinctive called ‘the Australian character’ was being thrashed out.”

Cathcart’s book is accessible and engaging. Is he pleased that his PhD has

translated to a work that reaches a wider audience?

“I think every doctoral student in the Humanities should write on the assumption that the work will be published and be encouraged to write for a general audience. I just think the idea of writing these things in highly technical jargon for some egg headed obscure American university... it’s insane if you are in the Humanities. It’s part of your professionalisation. You ought to be writing intelligent stuff that is comprehensible to other intelligent people.”