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Imagining the Frontier: Environment, Memory and Settlement – Narratives from Victoria (Australia), 1850–1890

Lindsay Proudfoot and Dianne Hall

I Introduction

The conventional narrative of European settlement in nineteenth-century Australia is well-attested, as is the role played within this by Irish and Scottish settlers. The growth of the white population (to approximately 3.7 million by 1901), its increasingly urban character, the expansion of pastoralism, the complex property negotiations which accompanied this, and the social and economic transformations effected by the discovery of gold in the 1850s, have all been represented in an extensive Whiggish historiography that has emphasised national progress, improvement and modernity.[1] Since the 1970s, however, this has given way to anxious introspection, as scholars have debated the ecological damage and destructive indigenous relations that characterised European settlement, and have questioned the ethical legitimacy of the modern Australian state.[2] Similarly, the filopietistical certainties of earlier 'contribution histories' of the Scottish and, particularly, the Irish role in this nation-building have been challenged by more nuanced accounts which have recognised the fractured identity constructions that were central to these and other ethnic diasporas in Australia as elsewhere.[3]

Despite this reframing by modern scholarship, these settler engagements remain grounded in a contemporary encounter between discursive European environmental knowledge and experience on the one hand, and the physical realities of the (then) unknown continent on the other. Consequently, as

[1] Summarised in Stuart McIntyre, *A Concise History of Australia* (2nd edition, Cambridge, 2004).

[2] Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton (eds), *Creating Australia: Changing Australian History* (Sydney, 1997); Stuart McIntyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (2nd edition, Melbourne, 2004).

[3] Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia: 1788 to the Present* (3rd edition, Sydney, 2000); Kevin Kenny, 'Diaspora and Comparison: The Global Irish as a Case Study', *Journal of American History*, 90 (2003), 134–62; John Belchem, 'The Irish Diaspora: The Complexities of Mass Migration', *Przeglad Polonijy*, 31 (2005), 87–98.

Joseph Powell and others have shown, the history of European settlement in Australia was characterised by a sometimes steep and often painful learning curve, as the country's non-indigenous population slowly acquired some of the environmental competencies necessary to sustain agricultural and pastoral production.[4] Thus, regional and seasonal variations in climate, soils, hydrology and vegetation, not to mention specific hazards such as bush fires and insect plagues, all demanded constant reappraisal in the light of the settlers' accumulating colonial experience. The question we ask here is whether this constant environmental re-imagining also invoked something more. In coming to terms with 'Australian nature', did settlers seek the reassurance of their own remembered past as the basis for their engagement with a seemingly fickle and uncertain colonial present? Their European environmental knowledge and experience may have been of limited utility, but in the face of these physical uncertainties, did they nevertheless attempt to ground their identities in the colonial landscape by imprinting it with the self-sustaining signatures of their own cultural memory?

We explore these issues in the context of Irish and Scottish involvement in the expansion of pastoralism into the Port Phillip District from the late 1830s onwards. Following the pioneering journey of Major Thomas Mitchell, Surveyor-General of New South Wales, along the Murray River into the region in 1836, increasing numbers of pastoralists from New South Wales overlanded their flocks and herds in the Port Phillip District, preferring the uncertain status of (illegal) 'squatter' to the prospect of paying artificially high prices for inferior land in the founding colony.[5] By the time the Port Phillip District was proclaimed as the separate colony of Victoria in 1851, the focus of this movement, the new colony's Portland Bay District (Figure 1), had been more or less fully claimed by squatters, though by no means completely settled.[6] During the next fifty years, despite periodic vicissitudes of drought and insect infestation, and the sometimes unintended effects of the 1860s Selection Acts (which were intended to open up pastoral areas for agricultural settlement but instead allowed many squatters to secure a title to their land), the Portland Bay District (or Western District as it was later known) emerged as one of Australia's pre-eminent pastoral regions. The number of pastoral runs or

[4] Joseph Powell, *Environmental Management in Australia, 1788–1914* (Melbourne, 1976); Ann Young, *Environmental Change in Australia Since 1788* (2nd edition, Oxford, 2000).

[5] Peter Burroughs, *Britain and Australia 1831–1855: A Study in Imperial Relations and Crown Lands Administration* (Oxford, 1967), 35–9.

[6] Joseph Powell, 'The Squatting Occupation of Victoria, 1834–1860', *Australian Geographical Studies*, 7 (1969), 9–27.

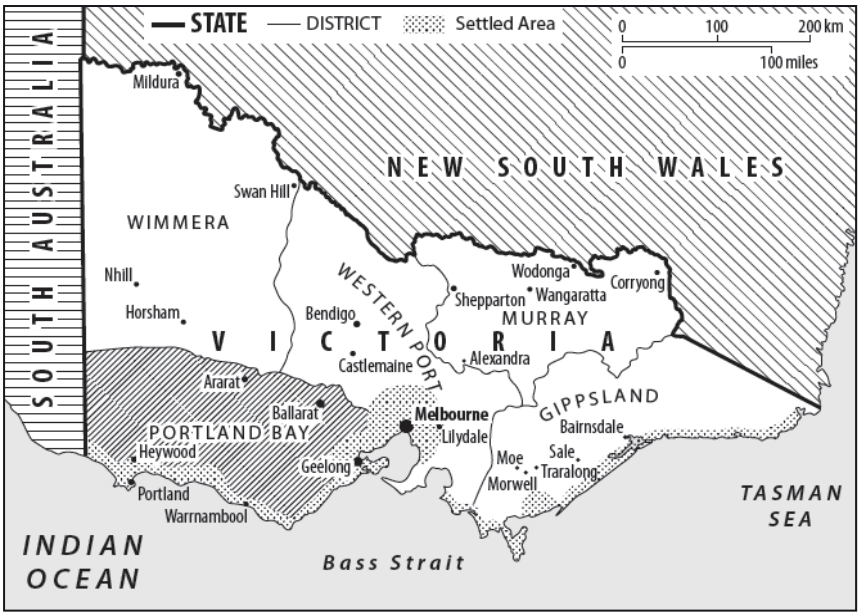

Figure 1. Squatting Districts in Victoria, c.1850-1880 (Cartography: Maura Pringle).

stations in the area rose from 282 in 1847 to 463 in 1880, as the boundaries of settlement were pushed northwards into the drier Wimmera, and the vast areas originally claimed by some of the earliest pioneering squatters became subject to increasing regulation and subdivision.

Scottish settlers were particularly prominent in this process. In her classic account of the Western District's pastoral society, *Men of Yesterday* (1961), Margaret Kiddle suggests that as many as two-thirds of the area's pioneer squatters may have been Scots.[7] Surname and biographical analyses of the Crown Land Licences extant in 1851 indicates that her estimate represents an absolute maximum, and that a more likely figure for early Scots involvement in the Portland Bay/Western District was around 40 per cent, with Irish-held runs accounting for no more than 20 per cent at most (Figure 2).[8] This was still a considerable and, in terms of the overall numbers of Scottish migrants to

[7] Margaret Kiddle, *Men of Yesterday: A Social History of the Western District of Victoria 1834–1890* (Melbourne, 1961), 14 n.

[8] 'Crown Land Leases', Return to Address, 8 June 1855 (tabled 18 March 1856), *Votes and Proceedings*, Legislative Council, Victoria. In Figure 2 the white areas were occupied by non-Irish/Scottish squatters who were, for the most part, English. The 'Settled Area' was reserved under colonial legislation for agricultural rather than pastoral settlement.

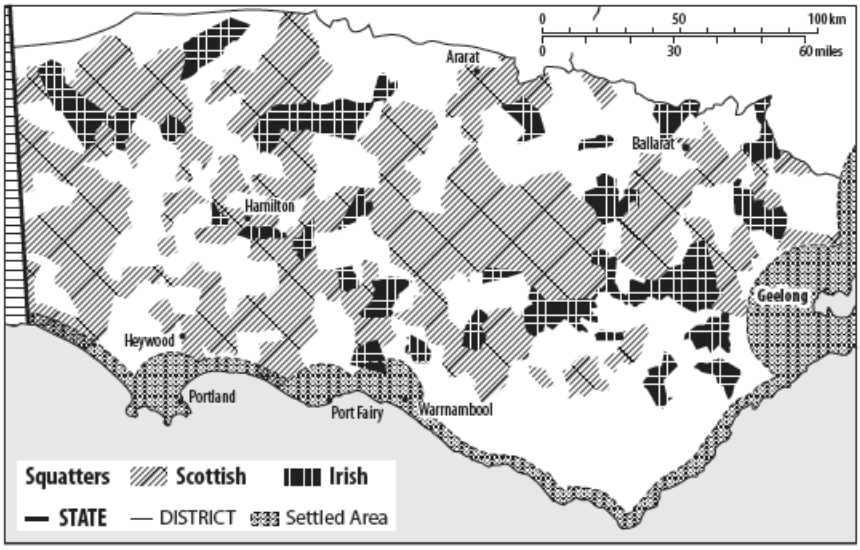

Figure 2. Pastoral Runs in Scottish and Irish Occupation in 1851, Portland Bay District, Victoria (Cartography: Maura Pringle).

Victoria, disproportionately large figure. In 1851, the Scots born constituted just over 10 per cent of Victoria's population. Moreover, the Scottish proportion among the Western District's landowners does not appear to have altered significantly over time, even though the pattern of run occupation was generally unstable. Paul de Serville's monumental biographical analysis of the pastoralists listed in the 1879 *Return of Landowners in Victoria* indicates that 41 per cent of the 360 who held runs of over 5,000 acres were Scots, compared to 12 per cent who were Irish.[9]

Clearly, this disproportionate Scottish presence requires some explanation, but specific causes are difficult to pinpoint. Differences in human and financial capital are one possibility, but this hypothesis requires qualification. For one thing, many early Anglo-Irish pastoralists (part of the 'Port Phillip Ascendancy') were, individually, at least as well capitalised as their Scottish counterparts. We must also take account of the legendary efficiency with which the district's Irish migrants facilitated their absorption into colonial society through the creation of supportive transnational chain migration networks from the 1840s onwards. And finally, the argument that the sheep walks of

[9] Proportion of Scots born calculated from James Jupp and Barry York, *Birthplaces of the Australian People: Colonial & Commonwealth Censuses, 1828–1891* (Canberra, 1995), 4, 17, 23. Paul de Serville, *Pounds and Pedigrees: The Upper Class in Victoria 1850–80* (Oxford, 1991), 456–502.

Highland Scotland provided a better grounding for would-be emigrants than the labour-intensive potato and dairying peasant agriculture of pre-Famine Ireland depends on the greater transferability of this particular experience to Australia's environment.[10] We are left, nevertheless, with the conclusion that the relatively small number of Irish pastoralists was most probably a function of the relative poverty of the Irish migrant stream in general. Despite the fact that throughout the later nineteenth century, there were approximately twice as many Irish born as Scots born in Victoria, fewer Irish were able to invest in land acquisition than their Scottish counterparts; individually, however, those who did so might be spectacularly successful.[11]

While it is clear that Scottish squatters played a disproportionately important role in creating the colonial pastoral geographies of Western Victoria relative to their overall numerical presence in the colony, the extent to which they invoked their imagined past while doing so remains to be established. Here, we argue that prior to the 1850s the general insecurity of pastoral tenure ensured that the squatters' imprints on the landscape were ephemeral. They were characterised by the acquisition of often hard-won local environmental knowledge rather than by permanent material inscriptions of ethnic identity. Only latterly, as tenures and wealth improved and the pastoral frontier 'closed', did some Scottish and Irish pastoralists acquire the means and opportunity to memorialise their sense of selfhood in the landscape in social or ethno-cultural terms. We pursue our argument by first exemplifying the public discourse of improvement in the Port Phillip District during the 1830s and 1840s, and then contrasting this with the local environmental appraisals of individual squatters. We argue that the latter were framed by a common experience of the unexpectedness of the Australian climate and landscape. This transcended settler origins, demanded new thinking and made old knowledge and practice largely redundant. We envisage these individual appraisals as part of a cumulative process whereby the initially decidedly optimistic public discourse of environmental improvement and

[10] de Serville, *Pounds and Pedigrees*, 456–502; David S. MacMillan, *Scotland and Australia 1788–1850* (Oxford, 1967), 83–4; Malcolm D. Prentis, *The Scottish in Australia* (Melbourne, 1987), 39–41; Lindsay Proudfoot and Dianne Hall, 'Points of Departure: Remittance Emigration from South-West Ulster to New South Wales in the Later Nineteenth Century', *International Review of Social History*, 50 (2005), 241–77.

[11] Victorian censuses between 1851 and 1891 show a progressive fall in the proportion of Irish born from 18.8 per cent of the population in 1851 to 7.5 per cent in 1891; and in the Scots born from 11.3 per cent in 1851 to 4.4 per cent in 1891. The absolute numbers of both groups also fell from 1871. See Jupp and York, *Birthplaces of the Australian People*, 4–5, 17, 23; de Serville, *Pounds and Pedigrees*, 456, 459, 493–4.

modernity was moderated by private experience. We continue by considering examples of the ways in which, latterly, the proprietorial gaze of some Scots and Irish pastoralists in the Portland Bay/Western District invoked a sense of their origins. We explore the ambiguities inherent in these inscriptions, and conclude that for many Irish and Scots pastoralists, grounding their sense of identity and belonging in the landscape was as much a matter of social practice as of material ethnic inscription.

II Public Discourse and Private Learning

However ephemeral the initial pastoral settlement patterns may have been, they were nevertheless a function of a newly-introduced agrarian capitalist ideology which attempted to reorder the landscape in terms of externally-derived economic values. These held no meaning in the complex social, cultural and environmental negotiations which had characterised the relationship between the continent and its indigenous inhabitants for, perhaps, 40,000 years.[12] Consequently, the spaces created by pastoralism, the property boundaries, the naming strategies, even the early attempts at environmental management, were the outcomes of a European appraisal which did not simply see the landscape (however imperfectly) as it existed, but also saw it in terms of what it was thought it could become. In short, the landscape was seen in imaginative terms that allowed for its unilateral reordering in line with the (presumed) requirements of effective agrarian capitalism.

A flavour of this sort of imaginative appraisal is given in Major Thomas Mitchell's report describing the Port Phillip District in 1836:

> The territory, still for the most part in a state of nature, presents a fair blank sheet, for any geographical arrangement, whether of county divisions – lines of communications – or sites of towns, etc etc. The growth of the colony there might be trained according to one general system, with a view to various combinations of soil and climate, and not left to chance, as in the old countries – or, which may perhaps be worse, to the partial or narrow views of the first settlers.[13]

[12] Donald Denoon, Philippa Mein-Smith and Marivic Wyndham, *A History of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific* (Oxford, 2000), 37–50.

[13] Sir Thomas Mitchell, *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia* (2 vols, London, 1839), II, 333.

This approach to colonial planning offered an opportunity for the material inscription of cultural identities in the landscape which might act to memorialise and reinforce the discursive links between the settlers' colonial present and their origins (for the most part) in the spaces of European capitalism. This, in effect, blanket re-imagining of the Australian landscape encouraged the creation of symbolic cultural meanings that could, in some cases, act to tie settler identities to their imagined past. Not all settlers found it necessary or appropriate to create such symbols, but the imagined nature of the colonial landscape facilitated the efforts of those who wished to do so.

One of the unspoken assumptions underpinning this landscape re-imagining was the idea of property. Bounded, demarcated, allocated, valued and identified, under colonial capitalism property commodified the landscape. The settlement patterns created by pastoral expansion represented the codification of these ideas of property, and their imposition on the landscape as an alien cultural rubric. But these settlement patterns were also highly unstable and contested. Prior to 1880, the average length of occupancy of pastoral runs in Western Victoria was just under four years, reflecting not merely early insecurities of tenure, but also the impact of climatic and other environmental variation, and economic conditions generally.[14] The economic depression of the early 1840s, for example, acted as a major 'Darwinian' selector of the fittest and most able to survive among the pioneering generation of squatters. The size, environmental resource endowment, and consequent viability of these runs were also subject to increasing bureaucratic ratification in the 1840s through the activities of Boundary Commissioners such as Captain Foster Fyans. Charged with responsibility for arbitrating disputes between neighbouring squatters and for establishing fixed run boundaries generally, the Commissioners wielded extraordinary local delegated authority.[15] As the pastoral frontier closed and the demand for land increased, they became increasingly important as the arbiters of the capitalist agrarian imagination which underpinned the creation of the material places through which the narratives of the self were enacted. But underpinning the ways pastoralists exploited the land lay their steep

[14] Calculated on a 5 per cent sample of runs listed in Robert Spreadborough and Hugh Anderson, *Victorian Squatters* (Melbourne, 1983).

[15] For example, see the entries for 1 August and 5 November 1844, 'Diaries of Andrew and Robert Scott, 1843–1847', State Library of Victoria (hereafter SLV), Scott Family Papers, MS 8853, MSB 438, Box 915/1.

environmental learning curve. How well informed were Irish and Scottish pastoralists about the environmental potential of the areas they occupied?

Conventional wisdom has it that in its early stages at least, the British colonial enterprise in Australia was led by environmental optimism grounded in environmental ignorance. This gave rise initially to the almost fatal assumption that European agricultural practices and knowledge could be easily and effectively transposed into the colony.[16] While it is true that it was already becoming apparent well before 1820 that pastoralism rather than agriculture was likely to be the mainstay of the colony's future economy, a fundamental ignorance remained. This was particularly true, for example, of Australia's soils. Many of these are regoliths, meaning that they were formed under climatic and hydrological conditions that no longer exist. Many are also characteristically deficient in organic content and minerals like potassium. While they remain undisturbed they remain stable, though potentially fragile.[17] None of this was appreciated during the pioneer period or indeed until much later.[18] Instead, the economic potential of the landscape was appraised through a discourse of civilising European modernity. This interpreted the apparent verdure of the natural vegetation (itself also an unknown) as a providentially-ordered sign of fertility and productivity, ripe for European practices of exploitation.

This type of optimism is evident in Major Mitchell's account of the south-western part of the Port Phillip District, which prompted the subsequent grassland rush of pastoralists into the area:

> We had at length discovered a country ready for the immediate reception of civilised man; and destined perhaps to become eventually a portion of a great empire. Unencumbered by too much wood, it yet possessed enough for all purposes; its soil was exuberant, and its climate temperate; it was bounded on three sides by the ocean; and it was traversed by mighty rivers and watered by streams innumerable. Of this Eden I was the first European to explore its mountains and streams – to behold its scenery – to investigate its geological character – and, by my survey, to develop those natural advantages, certain to become, at no distant date, of vast importance to a new people.[19]

[16] John Gascoigne, *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia* (Cambridge, 2002), 69–76.

[17] Young, *Environmental Change*, 34–64.

[18] Joseph Powell, *An Historical Geography of Modern Australia: The Restive Fringe* (Cambridge, 1991), 155–60.

[19] Mitchell, *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia*, II, 171.

Similar enthusiasm was evident five years later in a propagandist emigrants' guide published in Melbourne in 1840 by the editor of the leading local newspaper, the *Port Phillip Gazette*:

> Over a large tract southward and westward of the Grampians on the Rivers Wannon and Glenelg the most beautiful park-like scenery presents itself to the eye; the trees, unlike those of New South Wales and Van Dieman's Land, have a fresh green foliage; the natural grass rivals the sward of Old England … the general characteristics of fertility, including richness of soil and abundance of pasture, place it far above the older districts in those advantages which immigrants naturally seek for.[20]

No mention here of the drought of 1837–9, when major rivers in the Port Phillip District like the Murrumbidgee ran low and stock losses were enormous.[21] Thirteen years later, with the publication in 1853 of William Westgarth's influential *Victoria: Late Australia Felix or Port Phillip District of New South Wales*, the tone, although slightly more circumspect following the renewed droughts of 1841–2 and 1850–1, was still generally optimistic:

> The park-like open forest with its grassy carpet beneath forms a striking and unique aspect of the country, which affords pastoral facilities, ready-made, as it were, at the hand of Nature … [These] explain the rapid progress of these colonies … and more particularly of Victoria, which abounds in these pastoral lands. Despite the problems of over-grazing in the years of drought, the colony of Victoria is favourably distinguished as comprehending within its boundaries the greatest comparative extent of available soil of any of the other large sections of Australia.[22]

As these examples indicate, the early push of pastoral settlement into the western Port Phillip District was framed by a 'bullish' public discourse of environmental opportunity and expansionism.

[20] George Arden, *Latest Information with Regard to Australia Felix, the Finest Province of the Great Territory of New South Wales* (Melbourne, 1840), 32.

[21] Stephen H. Roberts, *The Squatting Age in Australia, 1835–1847* (1935; Melbourne, 1970), 315.

[22] William Westgarth, *Victoria: Late Australia Felix or Port Phillip District of New South Wales* (Edinburgh, 1853), 31–2, 41.

Surviving station diaries and journals from the period make clear, however, that for individual squatters the environmental realities of both initial run selection and subsequent daily station life were altogether less certain and more demanding. The key factor in run selection was water security, both during the initial land grabbing free-for-all and later, when Boundary Commissioners arbitrated the subdivision of many of the earliest claims. Significantly, Thomas Ham's celebrated distribution map of squatting homesteads in Victoria, published in 1853, shows that the vast majority of these were located on the banks of creeks and rivers, however ephemeral some of these eventually proved to be.[23] Concern over water resonates as a *leitmotif* in many station journals. For example, in 1843 when Scottish pastoralist Charles MacKnight occupied his newly licensed run, Dunmore, near Portland in the far south-west of the Port Phillip District, his first concern was to dam the local creek. This was not altogether surprising: family memory recalls that he had been forced out of his previous run, Strathlodden, in the drier Wimmera district to the north, by the drought of 1841–2. After six months' effort, during which MacKnight struggled not only to make his dam watertight but also to quell dissatisfaction among his men–(March 1843: 'men grumbling a little, I told them if they didn't like the work they could go and be damned, which they said they would')[24]–the project was finished in July 1843. Two months later, two days of torrential rain flooded the river and destroyed the dam, prompting this philosophical entry in MacKnight's diary:

> Dam carried away, a cut having been made to let more of the water out. This ill-fated occurrence is calculated to teach many valuable truths, touching the vanity of human wishes and endeavours in general. But in particular it should check that tendency (so incident to frail humanity) to an over-weaning confidence in the success of scheme and operation, before time has justified some confidence. As a corollary from the former moral we may also learn the folly of repining, and we may read another inference, although perhaps not so obvious as the preceding,

[23] Thomas Ham, *Ham's Squatting Map of Victoria (Port Phillip District, New South Wales): Carefully Corrected to this Date from the Colonial Government Surveys, Crown Land Commissioners and Explorers' Maps, Private Surveys etc.* (Melbourne, 1853), National Library of Australia, MAP NK 10059, http://nla.gov.au/nla.map-nk10059, accessed 30 March 2009.

[24] Dunmore Station Journal, vol. 1, entry for 20 March 1843, SLV, Charles MacKnight Papers, MS 8999, Box F1839.

> from the circumstance of labour of weeks and months having been dissipated in a short hour, viz., that the first wicked action – the first plunge into the downward stream, may burst the barriers which it has taken a long course of good action to erect. Lastly, however zealously you may labour to effect a particular object, your labour will be unavailing unless you employ the true and legitimate means.[25]

Charles MacKnight's reaction appears at this distance to have been remarkably stoical, particularly given the amount of collective effort that had been invested in this enterprise and its importance to the future success of the run.

MacKnight's reaction is also informative insofar as it suggests that a sense of providential purpose may have imbued the way in which he approached his various colonial encounters. It is hard to ascertain how widespread this sense of the divine – if that indeed is what it was – may have been among Scots Presbyterian settlers generally.[26] But with or without the aid of 'providence', Scottish pastoralists, like others, faced the task of exploiting country that was environmentally unknown. For example, in 1839 Andrew Scott and his sons, originally from Edinburgh, were able to acquire a licence for 16,000 acres of heavily timbered country at Mount Boninyong, near Ballarat, precisely because earlier squatters had dismissed the country as 'too dry for sheep'.[27] In fact, experience subsequently showed that this district was too exposed, cold and wet for a successful sheep run. Six years later, in 1845, in the sort of move that characterised more enterprising squatters, the family overlanded 1,500 sheep north to a second run at Warracknabeal, in the drier Wimmera near Nhill. They held this until 1887, when it was forfeited under the Selection Acts and subdivided for agricultural settlement.[28] At Warracknabeal, the Scotts' hydrological experience was decidedly different. The relative aridity of the

[25] Dunmore Station Journal, vol. 1, entry for 16 September 1843, SLV, Charles Macknight Papers, MS 8999, Box F1839.

[26] The common assumption is that for most (though not all) Scottish emigrants, one form of Presbyterianism or another provided a major *locus* for their post-arrival identities. Prentis, *The Scottish in Australia*, 134; Ian Breward, 'The Scottish Character of the Australian Presbyterian Churches' in James Jupp (ed.), *The Australian People: An Encyclopedia of the Nation, Its People and Their Origins* (2nd edition, Cambridge, 2001), 655–9.

[27] Anonymous, 'Mount Boninyong, 1839–1989', SLV, Scott Family Papers, MS 13178, Box 3840/11(e).

[28] Ibid. 'Diaries of Andrew and Robert Scott, 1843–1847', SLV, Scott Family Papers, MS 8853, MSB 438, Box 915/1.

region required the construction of numerous dams and bore holes throughout the 1850s and 1860s, the latter being completed by groups of itinerant miners from the nearby gold mining town of Stawell.[29]

As Charles MacKnight's and Andrew Scott's experiences demonstrate, the squatters' initial appraisal of their prospective runs, whether in terms of water supply or forage quality, told them nothing about the day-to-day environmental conditions they would subsequently encounter. Extreme climatic events, whether flooding or drought, periodic outbreaks of disease like sheep scab, or summer bush fires, all compounded the problems squatters already faced from livestock depredation by dingoes and the local indigenous people. All figure ubiquitously in surviving station diaries and all formed an essential component in the place narratives which were enacted by squatters in terms of the mundane routines and practices of station life.[30]

Unpredictable though these environmental encounters were, they nevertheless offered the possibility of formative learning. Some may even have had an unexpectedly beneficial immediate effect, as suggested by the *Reminiscences* of William Moodie. These were written as an autobiographical account of his life in the Western District, and were compiled some time shortly before his death in Melbourne in 1914.[31] Moodie was born in Glasgow in 1840, a year before his family emigrated to Australia on account of the health of Moodie's father, following in the footsteps of an uncle who had already established himself on a run at Muntham, in the Western District. Moodie's *Reminiscences* are typical of the many 'Pioneer Autobiographies' that appeared during the early decades of the twentieth century, and which found a ready market at a time when many Australians were renegotiating their own sense of national identity and heritage within the Empire.[32] Moodie described his early working life and station routine on the 19,000 acre run at Wando Dale, adjacent to Muntham and north of Heywood, which his father bought in 1853. Recalling the effects of one particularly extensive bushfire in the vicinity, he wrote:

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[29] Joseph Powell, *Watering the Garden State: Water, Land and Community in Victoria, 1834–1888* (Sydney, 1989), 44–5.

[30] A point made in Roberts' classic but now dated *The Squatting Age in Australia*, 272–349. For a particularly extensive account of these practices by an Anglo-Irish squatter, see Mary Anne Bunn, *The Lonely Pioneer: William Bunn, Diarist, 1830–1901* (Braidwood, 2002).

[31] William Moodie, 'Reminiscences of Wando Dale (Nareen)', Royal Historical Society of Victoria (hereafter RHSV), Box 160/6.

[32] Others include Cuthbert Fetherstonhaugh, *After Many Days* (Melbourne, 1917) and James C. Hamilton, *Pioneering Days in Western Victoria* (Melbourne, 1914).

> Springvale lost its woolshed and fencing but not many sheep. Xongbool lost all its fencing and yards and about 1,800 sheep were badly scorched. Willis lost 100 miles of brush fencing, several sets of yards and 5,000 sheep were burnt. The fire was at its height on Sunday 23rd January, we called it Red Sunday, but the effect was black enough. The fires were very severe in the early settlement of the country but they had their good side in keeping the country free from plagues, even to the latest, the blowfly that causes so much loss and damage amongst well bred flocks of sheep. There is no doubt that the country is much sweetened by a good heavy fire and I saw the proof of that very plainly in the effect of the fire above mentioned … On the 2,000 acres that were saved, Mr Willis put the best of his whethers expecting to sell them fat. They had grass enough for double that number but in spite of that they fell away, while those in the burnt country put on condition. The lambs were the finest I have ever seen before or since … The same fire had deprived them of their woolshed but the improved sheep and lambs would make full compensation in one year.[33]

Moodie went on to imply that so quickly were these benefits realised, that many squatters in the Western District developed the practice of controlled burning to 'sweeten' the vegetation – just as aboriginal people had been doing for thousands of years – much to the consternation of their more newly-arrived and closely-settled neighbours.[34] In short, Moodie's account contains a clear subtext of environmental learning, even though it is one which is recounted through the lens of memory with all its possible distortions. It provides evidence, nevertheless, of the power and immediacy of local experience as squatters sought to translate the hegemonic colonial discourse of improvement into personal reality.

Accounts by other squatters make it clear that local environmental problems sometimes reinforced wider economic downturns to form 'a perfect storm' with the potential to overwhelm any pastoralist. This is more or less what happened to Andrew Suter in 1875 on his run at Yambuck, near Warrnambool, when falling sheep prices and outbreaks of disease among his flocks signalled the start of a progressive decline in his financial situation. This ended in the seizure of his property during the banking crisis of 1890

[33] Moodie, 'Reminiscences', 25–6.
[34] Ibid.

as a result of unpaid debts.[35] Suter came from an Inverness family which had strong military connections with the British Raj in India.[36] He had emigrated to Melbourne in 1845 on health grounds, where he joined George Mercer, a relative by marriage and one of the original Port Phillip pioneers.[37] Relatively well capitalised, Suter had invested in a series of pastoral runs in the Western District before buying Yambuck, and also helped finance the purchase of a station by one of his sons at Hughenden in North Queensland.[38] Writing to his aunt in Inverness he summarised his situation in 1875 thus:

> This year has been a very disastrous one to me. Sheep fell in price and are almost unsellable. I held on [to] those I had to sell until I could hold no longer for want of grass, I got a low price and the remainder of my sheep lost condition. The lice disease broke out and numbers died for want of sufficient food, the wool deteriorated and the clip turned out a very remarkably bad one. My wool of last year did not realise the price advanced upon it and the wool of this year will not cover the advance upon it. My family expenses for the year are in a great measure still unpaid and my interest and rents become due at the end of this year … Again the dam at the sheep wash has burst, the spring has been a most unusually wet one and I have to keep … men waiting a favourable chance to close the gap and getting the machinery into working order. If I delayed too late the grass seed will get into the wool and reduce its value, and if I shear without washing I must accept £200 less for my wool. There was a small mutiny amongst the men yesterday but I think it will all blow over.[39]

Suter's letter reminds us that the environmental frontiers facing squatters were subjective as well as objective, and perceptual as well as physical. The

[35] RHSV, Suter Family Papers, MS 000656, Boxes 155–164.

[36] Letters, Peter Suter, RHSV, Suter Family Papers, MS 000656, Box 157/2; Letters, Georgina Blunt Suter, RHSV, Suter Family Papers, MS 000656, Box 157/3; Letters, Lt Andrew Mackintosh Suter, RHSV, Suter Family Papers, MS 000656, Box 157/4; Letters, James Suter (senior), RHSV, Suter Family Papers, MS 000656, Box 157/5.

[37] James Suter (junior) to Andrew Suter, 20 July 1845, James Suter Personal and Business Letters, RHSV, Suter Family Papers, MS 000656, box 158/1.

[38] Letters, James Vernon Suter to Andrew Suter, RHSV, Suter Family Papers, MS 000656, Box 159/1a.

[39] Andrew Suter to Miss Suter, 30 November 1875, 'Miscellaneous correspondence to Andrew Suter and others, 1844–1888', RHSV, Suter Family Papers, MS 000656, Box 160/5.

problems facing Suter, which were caused by the unpredictability of the climate and the incidence of disease, were exacerbated by the financial practices of the pastoral economy within which he operated. Arguably, all were made worse in his own mind by his despondency and sense of impending crisis. But even in this situation, there is still a sense that however limited Suter's options were, and however dire the probable economic consequences of his current difficulties, there were still choices he could make on the basis of experience: when and how to shear his remaining sheep, for example, or when to repair the dam.

The fact remains, however, that neither Suter's newly-acquired environmental knowledge, nor Moodie's, nor Scott's, nor McKnight's was in any way uniquely 'Scottish'. As Stephen Roberts observes, similar environmental encounters are described in the journals of pastoral stations across Australia.[40] All formed part of a cumulative private experience of the Australian environment which was shared by pioneers of all ethnicities and nationalities, and which acted, however slowly and unevenly, to mediate the over-optimistic founding public discourse of seamless 'Enlightened' improvement and modernity. Within the spaces created by this dialectic, individual squatters were nonetheless able to take advantage of the developing discourse of property ownership to imprint their sense of personal identity and belonging on the landscape. And it is here, in the spaces created by the squatters' environmental interrogations rather than in the interrogations themselves, that we may find evidence for a reflexive memory that linked past cultural origins with the colonial present.

III Memory, Identity and Landscape

When we examine the evidence for the ways in which Irish and Scottish squatters imprinted their identities on the landscapes of Western Victoria, it very quickly becomes apparent that material significations of ethnic belonging or cultural origin were by no means ubiquitous. Where they existed, they were frequently ambiguous, hard to decipher, and often blurred by more widespread renditions of class and status. The pastoral stations constructed by Irish and Scottish squatters provide a case in point. Australian historians have long recognised that the pastoral boom of the 1870s and 1880s, together with contemporary improvements in title, provided both the means and incentive

[40] Roberts, *The Squatting Age in Australia*, 314–8.

for some squatters to rebuild their homesteads in lavishly ornamental styles.[41] Occasionally houses would be graced with pleasure grounds in colonial imitation of the English country house and park.[42]

In Western Victoria, Irish and Scottish squatters engaged wholeheartedly in this sort of activity, but preliminary research suggests that very few commissioned houses were intentionally 'Scottish' or 'Irish' in style. Ercildoune, near Ballarat, and Overnewton Castle at Keilor, were two rare exceptions, both of which were built in 1859 in the Scottish Baronial style. At Ercildoune, the Scottish Learmonth family erected a bluestone house which, in a particularly deliberate act of memory, incorporated a copy of the Pele tower which formed part of their ancestral home on the Scottish borders. At Keilor, following a visit to Scotland, William Taylor commissioned Scottish craftsmen to reconstruct his existing single-storey homestead. The newly-extended house incorporated iconic architectural features such as stepped gables and spired turrets to such effect that it was regarded locally as a convincing example of 'the oldest Scottish architecture'.[43]

Yet such deliberate architectural invocations of memory appear to have been the exception rather than the rule. More commonly, Irish and Scottish pastoralists commissioned houses which, architecturally speaking, were statements of wealth and standing in the colonial present, rather than memorials to a remembered past. But even where this was so, it was still possible for other forms of cultural memory and ethnic belonging to be enacted through the material spaces of these properties. Two examples must suffice. On the Monivae run, near Heywood in the Western District, the present house (Figure 3) was built in the mid 1870s by James Thompson, a Scotsman who had bought the property following the death of its original Anglo-Irish owner, Acheson Ffrench. Ffrench was a scion of a landed family with extensive estates in counties Galway and Roscommon, who arrived in Australia in 1839. In 1841 he acquired 17,000 acres in the Grange District, which he named Monivae after the family's ancestral seat in Galway.[44]

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[41] D.N. Jeans, *An Historical Geography of New South Wales to 1901* (Sydney, 1972), 282–3; Kiddle, *Men of Yesterday,* 283–318; Richard Waterhouse, *The Vision Splendid: A Social and Cultural History of Rural Australia* (Fremantle, 2005), 116–7.

[42] Susan Priestley, *The Victorians: Making Their Mark*, vol. 3 (McMahons Point, NSW, 1984), 92–5.

[43] Sarah Scott, Mount Boninyong, to Sarah Mitchell, Glasgow, 14 April 1860, 'Letters from Robert Scott and Sarah Scott (nee Mitchell) to Sarah Mitchell, Glasgow, 1859–1862', SLV, Scott Family Papers, MS 13178, Box 3840/12.

[44] Ian McClelland, 'Worlds Apart: The Anglo-Irish Gentry Migrant Experience in

Figure 3. Monivae, Hamilton, Victoria (Photograph: Lindsay Proudfoot).

Neither Ffrench's original house – a sixteen room, prefabricated corrugated iron building he imported from England – nor Thompson's replacement reflected anything about their builders' respective origins. Indeed, the broad verandas surrounding Thompson's house indicate an entirely pragmatic response to the intense heat of the local summer climate. Consequently, the run name – Monivae – takes on added significance as an intentional act of commemoration which was presumably designed to signal Ffrench's Irish origins, if not to those for whom the name would have no meaning, then at least to other expatriate Irishmen in the circles in which he moved. There is evidence, moreover, to indicate that the informal Irish networks which flowed through Monivae had a particular social vitality in Ffrench's day, and gave the place an ethnicised identity which its external appearance belied. Writing in 1917, Cuthbert Fetherstonhaugh, another Anglo-Irish pioneer settler, recalled his first encounter with Acheson Ffrench and Monivae in 1854:

> At Hamilton I made the acquaintance of Acheson Ffrench of Monivae, and his large family, and spent a few days with them. Ffrench was the

Colonial Australia' in Oonagh Walsh (ed.), *Ireland Abroad: Politics and Professions in the Nineteenth Century* (Dublin, 2003), 186–201.

> type of the well-bred Irish gentleman – a most delightful man, and clever, and none more hospitable. At Monivae you got a real Irish welcome; if you were not at home and happy there it was your own fault. Monivae was run on the old generous Irish lines; there were plenty of horses, children galore, boys and girls – all fearless and good riders.[45]

Fetherstonhaugh's friendship with Ffrench continued until the latter's accidental death in 1870.[46] Their relationship typified the wider social networks that were articulated by pastoral stations and connected Irish and Scottish pastoralists alike in a regional web of family relationships, mutual hospitality, shared commercial interests and common cultural and social institutional affiliations.[47] Moreover, these networks frequently extended much further, and connected settlers with their previous lives in Scotland, Ireland or elsewhere. And while these discursive ties might remain mute in terms of overtly ethnicised material imprints on the landscape, they could still imbue homesteads with a reassuring sense of place-based cultural belonging in the face of the uncertainties of colonial life.

Mount Boninyong provides a further example. The existing house (Figure 4) was built in 1884 by Robert Scott, the son of the original settler Andrew Scott, as a replacement for the earlier homestead. Unlike Ercildoune, it makes no architectural statement about the family's Scottish heritage, but testifies instead to the substantial prosperity they eventually achieved as pastoralists. Moreover, its size and grandeur obscures the family's sometimes perilous earlier financial history in Australia, and says nothing about the abiding Presbyterian faith that sustained them through this, nor about the increasingly close ties they maintained with their immediate relatives in Scotland. Yet all of these factors shaped the Scotts' colonial experience, and contributed largely to their continuing Scottish identity in Australia. Successive generations remained active Presbyterians, and the family was responsible for introducing the first (Scots) Presbyterian minister into the district in 1847, as well as for helping to finance the first Presbyterian church at Boninyong in 1860.[48] Following Andrew Scott's death in 1853, his son Robert Scott ran Mount Boninyong, while Andrew Scott Sr's other

[45] Fetherstonhaugh, *After Many Days*, 62.

[46] Ibid., 115.

[47] Hamilton, *Pioneering Days*, passim; Moodie, 'Reminiscences', passim; Kiddle, *Men of Yesterday*, passim.

[48] Anonymous, 'Mount Boninyong, 1839–1989', SLV, Scott Family Papers, MS 13178, Box 3840/11(e).

Figure 4. Mount Boninyong, Scotsburn, Victoria (Photograph: Lindsay Proudfoot).

son, Andrew Jr, ran the Warracknabeal station referred to above. By this time, Robert Scott and his wife Sarah (whom he had married in 1857) were engaged in an active correspondence with Sarah's mother in Glasgow. This was characterised not only by detailed accounts of the Scotts' social *milieu* in Victoria—which contrasted starkly with the emphasis in earlier journals on environmental learning and routine station practice—but also by mutual expressions of a warm and close relationship, culminating in an invitation to Sarah's mother to emigrate.[49] This did not eventuate, but the strength of the family's continuing connection with Scotland is attested to by the career of Robert Scott's own son Robert Scott Jr. By 1884 he was studying medicine at Glasgow University, and only returned to take charge of the Mount Boninyong property on the death of his father in 1896.[50]

But like Monivae, Mount Boninyong stands testimony to the elusive quality of whatever Scottish and Irish ethnic symbolism is present in the landscapes of settler colonialism in Australia as elsewhere. Whereas Ercildoune and Overnewton Castle were conscious representations of a selectively imagined

[49] Sarah Mitchell, Glasgow, to Sarah Scott, Mount Boninyong, 18 February 1862, 'Letters from Robert Scott and Sarah Scott (nee Mitchell) to Sarah Mitchell, Glasgow, 1859–1862', SLV, Scott Family Papers, MS 13178, Box 3840/12.

[50] 'Letters to Robert Scott, Glasgow, from Robert Scott (senior), Mount Boninyong, 1884–85', SLV, Scott Family Papers, MS 13178, Box 3840/11(b).

material past, designed by their owners deliberately to invoke a 'Scottish' sense of place in the Australian bush, Monivae and Mount Boninyong were rendered architecturally in terms appropriate to the *colonial* wealth and status of their owners. Ostensibly, cultural memory played no part in their creation, save in the Irish run name at Monivae. Yet as we have seen, closer inspection demonstrates that both these properties were the *locus* of social practices that were actively imbued with a sense of ethnic identity that was tenacious and long-lived. At Monivae, Fetherstonhaugh's comments imply an unreflexive expression of 'Irishness' by the Ffrench family, whereas at Mount Boninyong the connection with Scotland and the continuing affiliation with local 'Scottish' institutions such as the Presbyterian Church seem to have been more pro-actively maintained. Either way, Monivae and Mount Boninyong both emplaced ethno-cultural identities which, despite being expressed in non-material ways, were as central to the social construction of these places as the more materialised expressions of Scottish identity were to Ercildoune and Overnewton Castle.

IV Conclusion

In the final analysis, all the pastoral stations discussed in this paper reflected the discursive localism and conditional nature of settler experience in Australia, as elsewhere in the colonies of white settlement. All were grounded in a continuing narrative of environmental learning and adjustment as their Irish and Scottish owners learnt, like other pioneer settlers, what was and was not possible in terms of environmental management and exploitation. Whether Learmonth, MacKnight, Moodie, Scott, Suter or Taylor possessed the Scottish squatter's allegedly more appropriate livestock skills is unknown. Scott's early difficulties and the collapse of Andrew Suter's enterprise at Yambuck suggests that, like all settlers, these men remained vulnerable to environmental ignorance and, at times, sheer bad luck, during what was a painfully steep and fractured learning process. But with the gradual acquisition of more appropriate environmental skills came the opportunity to create more permanent material inscriptions in the pastoral landscape. As pastoral tenures improved, and pastoral property occupation became more secure, many stations like Ercildoune, Monivae, Mount Boninyong and Overnewton sustained an increasingly clear 'gaze of ownership' that framed the process of landscape inscription. In each case, this 'gaze' was a matter of individual

perspective, reflecting who the owners thought themselves to be. And in this subjective projection of the imagined self, a sense of belonging—whether to the colonial present, or to the remembered past, or perhaps, in truly diasporic fashion, to both of these—played a major part.

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