Michael Cathcart: *The Water Dreamers. The Remarkable History of Our Dry Continent.* Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2009. 319 pp + index, A$ 29.95. Isbn: 978 1 921520 64 8.
Reviewed by Adi Wimmer, University of Klagenfurt

I heard Michael Cathcart give a paper in 1997 which was thematically related to this book. An interesting paper, but what I remember best about it is how entertaining its presenter was. Everybody was rolling around with mirth. So I approached this study with great expectations.

Michael Cathcart is a senior Researcher at the University of Melbourne's Australia Centre. He trained as a historian and geographer and worked for five years with the ABC, where he presented the daily Radio programme Arts Today. On ABC TV he was visible as the host of a 15-part series "Rewind", which investigated little-known vignettes from Australian history (www.abc.net.au/tv/rewind/txt/s1162957.htm.) There was also a 2-part TV documentary on early colonial crime, titled *Rogue Nation*.[1] This special talent he has for winkling out stories from the past ranging from the unheard-of to the 'bizarre' is much in evidence in the present study, studded as it is with yarns, furphies and anecdotes.

We have had a number of hydrological studies on "the dryest continent", but this one is far more ambitious than anything before it. Cathcart attempts no less than to re-write Australia's history from the perspective of its often deliriously unrealistic hopes for an abundance of water where there was none. If I may just single out one of these unrealistic hopes, or rather, expectations: As late as in 1945 the engineer L.H. Lascombe "proposed a canal linking Spencer Gulf with Lake Eyre to create a salt-water inland sea" (184). On the plan he drew up for his mad-cap scheme Lake Eyre is heart-shaped, a reminder that until about the middle of the 20th Century, Australians viewed Lake Eyre as the "heart" of their continent, not

[1] www.australian.unimelb.edu.au/aboutus/people/cathcart.html.

Alice Springs or Uluru. Not only would the canal have been five times the length of the Suez canal with appropriately staggering costs; once completed, of what possible economic use could it have been?

Cathcart starts out with a 40-page history of the Sydney Cove settlement – from the perspective of its water supply. Sydney once had the 'Cadigal' (later re-named the 'Tank') river, a quite substantial rivulet. The settlers managed to first foul it up and then to make it wither away in just 3 years. Water had to be got from further inland, from a swampy area called the Lachland swamps. (Today Centennial Park occupies this area.) The settlers managed to turn the swamp into dryland. So bores had to be sunk into the land. Once again, the settlers were so profligate with water most bores very quickly ran dry. Even though Sydney has more precipitation than London (1200 mm as opposed to 600 mm, so Cathcart claims), Sydney's porous sandstone made for dryer soil conditions than back in England. Nor did it help that the early settlers were possessed by a veritable mania for axing trees.

Axes are an important *Leitmotif*. What early explorers of the bush – and early Australian poetry – noted about it was its silence. Today, we connote silence positively. Not so in the early 18th Century. The as-yet to be explored continent was forever labelled "melancholy", "mournful"; "funeral", "secret" and a "silent wilderness." This silence had to be broken through the colonial enterprise. It was almost as if the British were seizing the land through noise. Once again colonial poetry provides material for this insight: in poem after poem, the sound of a "ringing axe" perturbs the Aboriginal silence of their seemingly inactive, unproductive land. Axes were freely given away to Aborigines, we are told. Clearly the British were hoping they would fell trees for them. (One is reminded that 15 years ago, the governor of a Brazilian province gave away chainsaws to a ragbag of buccaneers so that the rainforest be cleared and vexatious indigenous people be 'dispersed'.) In 1828, a ceremony was held by a boatload of pioneer settlers on the shore of the Swan River. The wife of the Chief Naval officer symbolically felled a gum tree, thus

claiming possession of the land: "Axes and saws proclaim the dawn of civilization" (60/1)

The lion`s share of this study is devoted to the most significant of mid-19th Century explorations. They were, according to Cathcart, a search for Australia's mythic inland sea. Elaborate maps exist of this imagined inland sea – or lake – with fanciful names such as "The Desired Blessing." Time and again a hopeful expedition got stuck in the inland desert, sometimes barely making it back to civilization. But Australians collectively refused to accept their continent's interior was barren. It HAD to have potential, it HAD to be arable if one only applied the right watering technology. The way the author sketches and comments on the follies of various cuckoo-cloud 'scientists' and explorers is both astonishing and painfully humorous. They are the "Water Dreamers" of the book's title. Elsewhere Cathcart sees them as "Lemurians" who

> affirmed an uncomplicated optimism about the future of Australia, a confidence that death and melancholy could be washed away by irrigation and the exploitation of the great artesian basin (190).

Cathcart is surprisingly astute (for a scientist) when creating meaning from colonial poetry and fiction. Of the "mournful silence" so often contained in the former I spoke already. How about colonial prose? Cathcart boldly claims the collective unconscious is present in the bulk of Australian novels of the second half of the 19th Century. How so? Because Australians, in their efforts to construct for themselves a national identity free from British paternal influences, had to construct the idea of a continent that was prosperous and full of hope. How could they have identified with a *barren* land? How could they possibly be weaned off from the idea of being British when only that "Scepter'd Isle" possessed pastures of green and plenty? He presents us with an array of adventure novels modelled on American frontier narratives particularly of one genre, that of eradicating the horrible 'Injuns'. Novels that describe how a tribe of blacks lives on the shores of an inland sea and they are governed by a white. It is curious how many such narratives fancy native tribes as governed by a white leader who is never a Brit. The British could not be corrupted by tribalism, but an Irishman

or a Norwegian might be. Or how intrepid white explorers engage in gun battles with murderous Aborigines over possession of waterholes. Such tales propagate the national discourse of bringing the "silent" land into history and prosperity. And often the success of these explorers hinges on the discovery of a lake, a river, an inland bight connected to the Timor Sea by an undiscovered channel.

To the epic folly of Robert O'Hara Burke's expedition Cathcart adds no new aspects, but in discussing the totally overblown ceremony of grieving and monumentalizing afterwards he adds an important observation on the collective Australian unconscious of the time, namely that to accept a defeat as a defeat was unthinkable. Burke and Wills *had* to be heroes, had to have achieved "the great objective .. of crossing the continent of Australia for the first time". With biting sarcasm Cathcart adds that the route Burke had pioneered was totally useless. In view of these indisputable facts, it seems yet another madness that Australia's National daily *The Australian* is currently engaged in planning a re-enactment of Burke and Will's deathtrip, which will have its 150th anniversary in the second half of 2010.

Possibly the most gripping narrative in this study concerns the ill-fated attempt of Charles Sturt to find the mythical inland sea in 1844 (128-47). Reading it, I was reminded of the final pages of Patrick White's *Voss,* in which the reader is made to experience empathy with Voss in his dying days. Sturt's suffering and that of his men bedewed my brow. Like in the Burke/Wills expedition, the men had been badly chosen for the job: the majority were ruffians with a taste for the grog. But then there was also Daniel Brock, a God-fearing Methodist, who loathed them. Brocke confided seditious thoughts to his diary: "An Englishman is a curse to the Aborigines of any country." More specifically he added that "the white man has been here cruel, more cruel, than any savage." Sturt himself, ready to sacrifice his own life and that of the men in his care for an enterprise of empire, after a futile, benighted struggle that was described as "heroic" afterwards, found solace in an equally 'seditious' notion: that Nature had "intentionally closed itself upon civilized man" so that Aborigines would be able to "roam over it in

freedom." Sturt was surprisingly respectful in this insight. In other respects he was ridiculous. Wondering why he chose such an ill-suited crowd of ruffians for his expedition, Cathcart finds the reason for two of his choices. One man was called Poole, the other Flood. Their names betokened water and Sturt took that as a good omen.

Like Herman Melville's Ishmael, Cathcart time and again strays from his straight line, offering forays into unexplored territory. Perhaps the most unexpected detail of this rich study (see 140-1, so it crops up right in the middle of the Sturt expedition) is a correction to an argument created by Kay Schaffer in her well-known feminist study *Women and the Bush* (1983). Schaffer cited from Major Mitchell's diaries, in which he allegedly wrote: "Of this Eden I was the only Adam, and it was indeed a sort of paradise to me". He did not. Together with a typically feminist (mis-)reading of Mitchell's verb to "penetrate" (his meaning was militaristic, not sexual), Schaffer constructs the argument that in the eyes of early male Australians, the land was like a virgin to be conquered and penetrated. Did not Mitchell also write that he was attempting to lift "the veil" that hung over this land? Once again, he was not referring to a bridal veil but to the then common term for 'flynet'. The embarrassing truth is that Mitchell never wrote these sentences. Schaffer quoted them from a bowdlerized school textbook of 1928 in which the editor had changed some passage for greater effect. "Adam" was not in Mitchell's original diary. Nor was Mitchell's personal pronoun for the land "she", it was "it." Much of Kay Schaffer's argument falls flat to the ground.

In the final chapter "New Beginning", *Water Dreamers* chronicles the developments since 1995, the year that the "Murray-Darling Cap" was introduced. The measure had been triggered by an unprecedented environmental disaster in 1991. Since so much water had been taken from the Darling river, its flow came to a virtual halt and a toxic mass of blue-green algae clogged a stretch almost 1.000 km long. The "Cap" was designed to allow more water to flow towards the sea. But it was not sufficient. The ecosystems further down the river were extremely toxic with salt and fertilizers. The only way to save them from collapse was to allow even more water

to remain in the river. Australia's most prominent environmentalist Tim Flannery (read the review of his *An Explorer's* Notebook in ZfA 2009) called for halving the amount of agricultural water that was to be taken from the Darling, and a massive buy-back operation by the government. This happened: The Howard government spent 3 bn A$ to buy water back from farmers who had purchased it for their crops. True to its neo-con bent, the government had a solution: Water trading. Now the Murray Darling water is a commodity just like coal or gold or copper. Cathcart has this to say: "The idea of buying water so that it can run downstream is bizarre." Quite. As is the idea of buying the 'right' to pollute the atmosphere with millions of tons of carbon dioxide.

If I have any quibbles with this excellent and highly readable book it is that its structure is somewhat playful. Cathcart has too many brilliant ideas and he cannot drop any of them for the sake of a more stringent argument. His chapter on "Necronationalism" is a case in point. In it, Cathcart deals with the idea – frequently mooted elsewhere in his study – that for Australians, failure is natural and honourable. Gallipoli is seen as a case in point. And this is supposed to come from the experience of failing to find lush pastures and bodies of water in the interior! A daring argument. Could the celebration of the disaster that was Gallipoli not have had its origin in the dogged refusal of politicians to admit they had made a dreadful mistake? Cathcart identifies this mindset in the elites of the state of Victoria after Burke's and Wills's bodies were laid to rest in a pompous ceremony. Celebrating a mistake is a way of concealing its true nature.

But this is mere nit-picking, I suppose. All in all, the book is to be strongly recommended: for its factuality, its charts and drawings, and for its ingenuity to retell a story that is partly already know to us, in ways that are not.