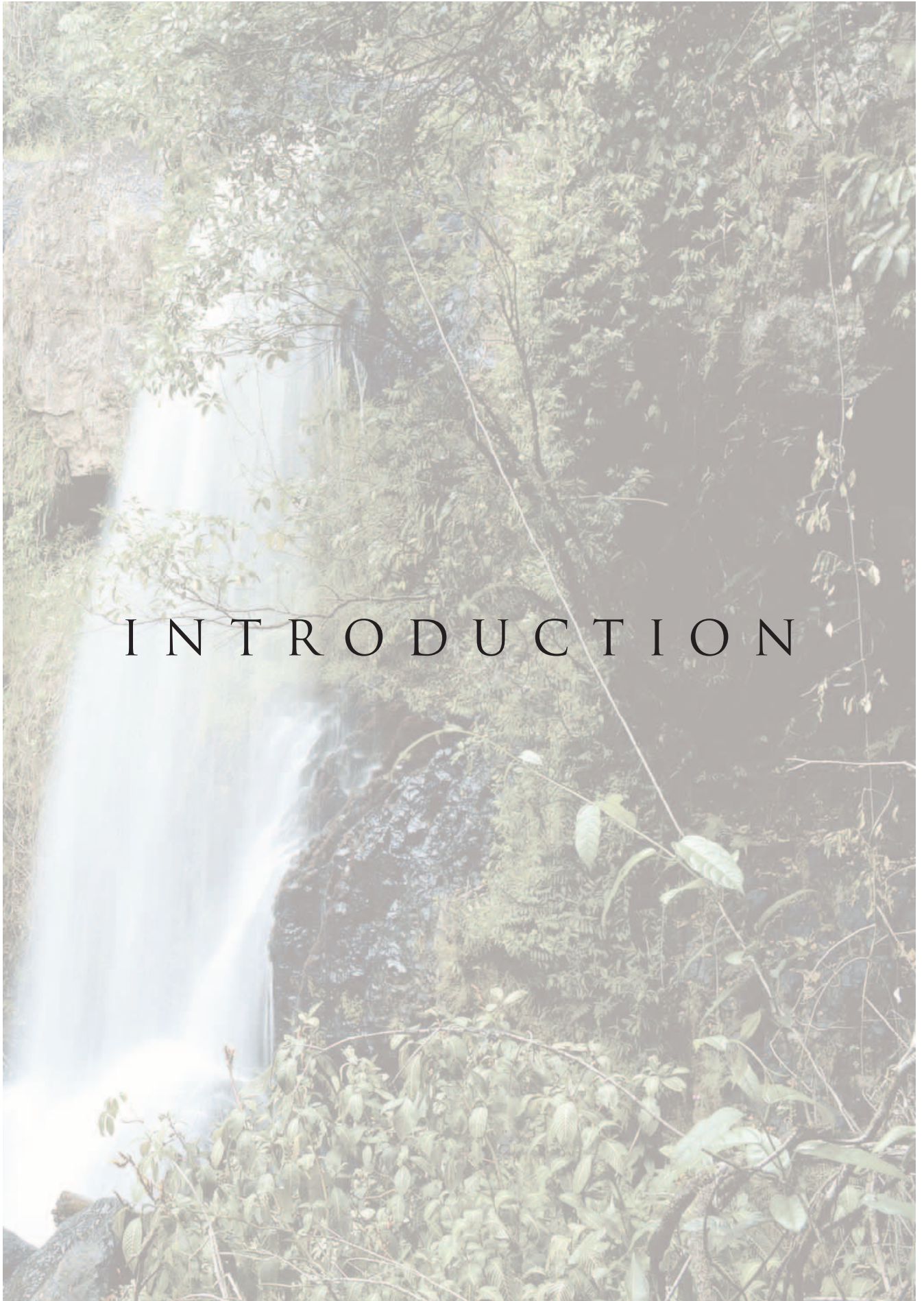


Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84310-2 - The Old Country: Australian Landscapes, Plants and People
George Seddon
Excerpt
[More information](#)



I THINK I have had an epiphany recently, but I am still thinking about it. It was about birds. The word ‘epiphany’ is not much used at the breakfast table, but assorted writers have had them, or claimed to have had them. James Joyce had them. William Blake had them, but – unpretentiously – called them ‘fancies’. Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Yeats had them, or something akin to them. An epiphany is more than an insight or an inspiration, which are positive. It is more like a revelation. The Bible has a whole book of them, and some of them are pretty scary, as was mine. When the veils are ripped off the mundane, what you see may well be confronting. Think of the Anglican Dean Swift writing in Catholic, conquered Ireland: ‘The other day I saw a woman flayed, and I have never seen anyone whose appearance was so improved for the worse’. The bite of this spare observation comes from the way in which several implied value systems come into violent collision: concepts of humanity, male respect for the gentler sex, his Christian role, the need to maintain public order in a repressive and fragile colonial society always on the boil and in constant danger of eruption, and the power of social institutions of which he was a part and a beneficiary.

My epiphany was modest, but still confronting. As I said, it was about birds, which have often been instruments of epiphany, from Greek tragedy (*The Birds*) to Edgar Allan Poe’s raven, Coleridge’s albatross, even Blake’s Fancy: ‘How do you know that every bird that cuts the aery way is a whole world of delight, Closed off by our senses five?’ Well, we *don’t* know. I find it attractive to think that birds may experience a world inaccessible to us, but it is still confronting. Our ‘senses five’ are still limiting, only one possible window on reality. What Blake does, what I think that all epiphanies do, is to question the relation between the observed and the observer and his assumed position of privilege.

My birds were kookaburras, a family of them, four in all. I was writing about a part of the campus of the University of Western Australia known as the Great Court, a large rectangle defined by handsome buildings. In the early days, there was a gardening shed in one part of it, and the gardener of the day planted trees around it. The shed has long gone, but the trees have thrived prodigiously in a sheltered location with a high watertable and fertile soils (old swamp soils of humus-rich silt and clay). The trees have grown so luxuriously and created such a dense canopy that they are now

known as the Tropical Grove. None of the species is specifically tropical, but *en masse* they give that effect. A colleague suggested that I might mention the amiable family of four kookaburras in the Tropical Grove:

they are very tame, living off offerings of sandwiches and pilfered pies. And they also seem more equitable in their pecking order than those terrorists of the bird-world, seagulls. They should really be cult figures as cultural custodians of the campus – they may even be metamorphosed spirits of old professors.

Almost a Blakean ‘Fancy’, more endearing than confronting at first sight, but I rejected it with all the force an ‘old professor’ could muster. The idea of metamorphosis is not unattractive in itself, and the implication that professors of any age tend to live off the casual bounty of students has a certain propriety, but kookaburras on campus, forsooth! Kookaburras anywhere in Western Australia are an ecological disaster. May Gibbs was a sharp-eyed naturalist in top gear while she was based here, but she left Western Australia and went into Neutral in Sydney. Snugglepot and Cuddlepie are true sandgropers, based on marri and the red-flowering gum (*Corymbia calophylla* and *C. ficifolia*), very distinctive of the West. In Sydney she made a hero of the jackass by presenting it as a snake-killer. In the popular psyche from the Garden of Eden on, the serpent is bad news, evil and loathsome, so the kookaburra becomes a knight in shining armour.

Kookaburras may indeed occasionally kill a snake, but snakes are shy and few on the ground, so a kookaburra-induced mortality must be a rare event. The bird is, however, a fierce predator, eating frogs, worms, caterpillars – and eggs and baby birds. It is not indigenous to Western Australia. It was introduced to Yanchep National Park one hundred years ago, and has since spread. The indigenous avian fauna did not evolve with the kookaburra and there is no close equivalent in the South-West. The small and largely defenceless birds that belong here are a delight; the singing honeyeaters, the little brown honeyeaters, the New Holland honeyeaters, the striated pardalotes, rainbow bee-eaters and more. They are a source of immense pleasure to many people in Perth, they serve a range of ecological functions including insect predation – and they are at risk.

Sydney and Melbourne have lost most of their small birds: in Melbourne, mostly because of their replacement with introduced birds



A kookaburra, ink sketch by David Hutchison

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84310-2 - The Old Country: Australian Landscapes, Plants and People
George Seddon
Excerpt
[More information](#)

A white-checked
honeyeater
(*Phylidonyris nigra*)
feeding on nectar
of *Banksia baxteri*,
Cheyne Beach, east
of Albany, WA
photo: Stephen Hopper



A honey possum
(*Tarsipes rostratus*)
feeding on *Banksia
grandis*, Millbrook
Nature Reserve,
north of Albany.
Honey possums,
endemic in south-
western Australia,
are the only non-
flying mammals
known to feed on
pollen and nectar.
photo: Stephen Hopper



that have taken over their habitat, especially the sparrow, blackbird and mynah. In Sydney, there has also been a big increase in the number of the large predatory birds, especially ravens and currawongs. When there are few small birds there is little bird-song. The harsh cries of the ravens, currawongs and kookaburras are no substitute for our 'dawn chorus' – which persists well beyond the dawn as a succession of choristers take up the melody through most of the day.

If I had to go back to Melbourne, there are things about Perth that I would not miss at all, but I would miss the small birds intensely. Their enemy is my enemy; hence the kookaburra is an unwelcome intruder from 'the Eastern States'. This is a good and loyal sandgroper point of view. But I came from Melbourne myself, so I am an intruder here too, doubly so since my family came from Britain. Moreover, this is a university, a Universitas; opposed in its very nature to the parochial. The Great Court, home to the Four Kooks of the Apocalypse, is a grove of trees almost all of which come from somewhere other than the Swan Coastal Plain. I have travelled a great deal, to the four corners of the earth, and am, so far as I am able to be, a citizen of the world. But ecology is implacably particularist, and the richness of our global environment depends on this particularity, not on the citizens of the world, the rats and seagulls and the sparrows. Kookaburras don't belong here.

The Nazis thought that Jews did not belong in Germany, and did their worst to return to racial purity. Notions of 'ecological integrity' apply not only to people and birds, but to plants and gardens. Some recent German historians have seen the 'wild garden', using only the plants local to the area, and favoured by ecologically minded opponents of French or Italian formal gardens, as complicitous with the 'blood-and-soil' ideology of Nazism.

It is beyond argument that the gardening impulse of Western culture, especially in the last three hundred years, has become a part of imperial domination, bringing back trophies from the ends of the earth. Zygmunt Bauman, the distinguished Polish sociologist, has linked this will to global domination of nature with the nightmare politics of twentieth-century totalitarianism:¹ Baumann's reflections are prompted by Ernest Gellner's wild/garden distinction in *Nations and Nationalism* (1983). Gardens are not the scene of primal innocence. They are, rather, a battleground of conflicting values and ideologies. Too often for comfort, moreover, the battle rages within, as incompatible value systems struggle for supremacy, as they do in me.

But I still think kookaburras are alien intruders in the West. They don't belong here; I am for the honeyeaters. To counter-claim that the kookaburra is an 'Australian icon' carries no weight with me. Indeed, to write or speak of 'Australian animals and plants' is to use a convenient fiction that can also lead to serious confusions. The term has its uses, but its use always requires caution.

The caution is needed because plants know nothing of nationality. Consider the following, from Patrick Fairbairn:

A nation's animals and plants are among its finest works of art. Each species is as individual as any creation of the artist. Destruction of any species or its life support system is vandalism indeed.²

These are fine sentiments, and with a few reservations I share them, but it is easier to make such pronouncements based on cultural conditioning than it is to find rational support for them. My first hesitation is that they are a luxury; they were not held by many of the convicts and early settlers of Port Jackson, whose central preoccupation was survival in a strange environment. They were and are held, we are told, by the Aborigines of the area, who could afford such luxuries because of their low density of population and, therefore, the limited demands on what for them was not a hostile environment but a known and sustaining one. They were held also by an enlightened few of the elite who could afford such fine feelings, maintained directly from Britain rather than dependent on the local scene. Affluent middle-class Australia can afford them too – and should.

'Vandalism' is a key word. If its meaning is restricted to 'wanton destruction', well and good. The difficulty is that 'destruction' can also be unwitting, or the by-product of other activities generally considered necessary or acceptable by society – in Australia, by clearing for agriculture, by the introduction of hooved mammals, by the spread of pathogens like *Phytophthora cinnamomi*, and by introduced plants that can out-compete the indigenous flora. These have all been more significant than wanton destruction.

THE CASE AGAINST?

Fairbairn's first sentence, 'A nation's animals and plants are among its finest works of art' seems unarguable. Yet even allowing all the above

qualifications, there is still a view in partial opposition to his full statement, put forcibly in a recent issue of *Greenplaces* by the Landscape Regeneration Manager for the Peabody Trust in Britain:

WILDLIFE XENOPHOBIA

I get a buzz from seeing ring-necked parakeets (India) skeeting overhead, red admirals (yup, European visitors) feeding on buddleia (eastern China) and Californian poppies bursting forth out of nearby wastelands. They are as much a part of my cultural landscapes as bluebells, hornbeams and green woodpeckers.

I therefore take issue with some of the sweeping xenophobic statements made by John Lovell in respect of ‘foreign invaders’ (*Landscape Design* 325). Our biodiversity and landscapes are the result of the impact we have made over countless generations, a consequence of the influences of very many peoples arriving on these islands over the past 7,000 years or so. Hundreds of species of animals, plants and fungi have been brought here with us, some purposefully and others incidentally.

The three species Lovell mentions – giant hogweed, Japanese knotweed and Himalayan balsam – were intentionally introduced. Indeed, Japanese knotweed was introduced by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew some 150 years ago, and in the following years horticulturalists took great delight in extolling its ornamental credentials. The same happened with giant hogweed, where seeds were sold for their proliferation throughout the countryside. I accept that in many places they are causing problems and need effort to control them, but they did not ‘invade’.

The term ‘invasive’ is problematical: in ecological circles it is too commonly attached to ‘alien’, ignoring the fact that native species are perfectly good at being invasive themselves. Oak, bracken, silver birch, common reed and stinging nettle all act brilliantly at out-competing other species if circumstances permit.

At root, I suggest that too many of us are wedded to a romantic pre-urban idyll, where good, honest British species once innocently frolicked unthreatened by nasty foreigners. However, we are one of the mostly densely populated nations on earth, and our cultural heritage reflects this. The hundreds of introduced species are with us to stay. Some of them are a problem (such as the aquatics azolla and parrot’s feather), most are benign and many brighten up our landscapes.

Sweeping statements about foreign invasives bringing ‘detrimental consequences’ to people’s ‘quality of life’ are not supported by evidence, and can lead to confusion of a public already perplexed about what wildlife is ‘good’ or ‘bad’. If we deem non-natives per se as bad and requiring ‘zero tolerance’, what message does that send to the multi-cultural society of which I am proud to be a member?³

Mathew Frith’s views may well be appropriate for his small island, but not for our big one. Is it too late, is it even possible, to ‘shut the door’ on ‘invasive’ plants and animals? This is a misleading metaphor. Even for Britain, the case for maintaining remnants of the indigenous flora is not incompatible with accepting most of Frith’s points, and that case is far stronger in Australia.

Another difficulty with purist attitudes is that they are static. The clock ticks on, and there is always change. The London Basin was tropically luxuriant in the Eocene, not so long ago in geologic terms, full of *Nipa* palms and an exotic fauna – including our early ancestors, who looked, according to the reconstructions, not unlike today’s straphangers on the Underground. This interval was followed by others and, in time, the Ice Age wiped out just about everything growing, from which there has been a slow recovery, not yet carried very far. At least some of the introductions have probably done little more than speed up natural recolonisation.

As for our island, the time element is inescapable. Australia is a cruise ship that has been heading north – majestically – from the Antarctic to the tropics for sixty million years, and is still doing so. Together with climate change, the consequences for the flora are noteworthy, particularly in Western Australia:

Western Australian ecosystems are in a dynamic state on a trajectory determined by biological responses to environmental changes set in train as the continent moved from high latitude, moist, equable climates to warmer, drier, more seasonal ones... In this process, the cool-climate, moisture-dependent elements have been restricted to refugia...⁴

‘Refugia’ is an interesting word, as are ‘alien’, ‘invasive’ and ‘multicultural’. Their connotations appear to change according to context. From the above, we might conclude that invasive plants are

undesirable in Australia, and so are invasive people, but some parts of Australia can provide refuge for some Australian plants under stress elsewhere, but not for some people, while it is desirable that our population policy (for people) be multicultural, but not our conservation attitudes.

Weighted words distort discussion. I believe that Australians should be growing more local plants, but it is important to scan the arguments. It is not unusual today to be told that Australians should be growing more plants from their own country in their gardens, but why should they? The case has been argued in the past from pseudo-nationalistic grounds, and even at the home-gardening level, from a mixture of good reasons and bad. The result has been some good gardens and some very bad ones: lemon-scented gums pushing into the foundations of valuable nineteenth-century terraces in their minute front yards in the inner suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne, for example.

The bad arguments led twenty years ago to a belief that the ‘bush garden’ was self-maintaining: you bought the plants, put them in the ground, and your task was over. Neither gardening nor plants are like that, nor ever have been, but the failures may have set back by a decade or more the campaign to persuade Australians to grow more plants from their own country. So before we begin planting, let us first turn to a little weeding: weeding is as important in clarifying ideas as it is in gardening. Some of the arguments for growing Australian plants are overstated, need qualification, are incomplete, or in conflict with other beliefs, and some of the terminology is imprecise or misleading. Then we can turn to the good arguments.

‘A U S T R A L I A N ’ P L A N T S

Nations and nationality are the outcome of political history, of conquest, invasion, change, chance, all of which might, in our own case, have led to quite different boundaries. The western third of the continent might well have been claimed by the French to the north and the Dutch in the south-west, with the Dutch again in Van Diemen’s Land, and the Germans and the Dutch or the Indonesians or the Japanese in the northern third of the continent other than the Kimberley. So the words ‘Australia’ and ‘Australian plants’ might have applied only to the land and flora of the south-eastern mainland.

The nation of Australia, however, now comprises a continent, *the only nation state to do so*. Thus the political boundary coincides with a natural boundary, with the exception of a few bits and pieces that we will come to presently. This colours our thinking in many odd ways, usually unconscious. North America has eight nation states plus Greenland (Danish) and another five Caribbean island countries, just counting the larger ones, while all the other continents have many more. Yet our continental unity is also misleading; it encompasses many highly diverse environments and the plants from one often fail to survive in another, although there are also many interesting exceptions.

Europe is called a continent, even *the Continent* (although strictly a mere subcontinent of Asia, like India). Now that the political boundaries grow close to the natural ones by courtesy of the European Union, we could be tempted to speak of ‘European plants’ and urge that these should dominate European gardens. Of course we do not, for two very good reasons. One is environmental and one cultural. The cultural reason is that gardens are human constructs, and Europeans have ransacked the world for ‘garden-worthy’ plants, and then bred and refined them. They are not likely to repatriate them. The second is ecological. *Quercus suber*, the cork oak, is indigenous in Portugal and southern Spain, but there would be little point in planting it in Finland, nor in planting birches in Portugal, although both are European plants and European countries.

Plant affinities often ignore national boundaries. They may also ignore natural boundaries. For our region, the most significant natural boundary is Wallace’s Line, the dramatic gap in the Indonesian Archipelago between Lombok and Flores, dividing the biotic realm of South-East Asia and Australasia. It works well for the fauna (tigers and monkeys to the west of it, kangaroos and their kin to the east) but less well for the plants. The flora of Australia has many shared characteristics at the continental scale, but there are also many plant species and genera that look outwards rather than inwards to the centre.

Popular speech reflects this sense of a continent and a people looking out from the coastal fringe rather than inwards. It makes sense to speak of the ‘American heartland’, a powerful political and cultural force, but here the heart is dead. We call non-coastal Australia ‘the outback’, and if it is well out, ‘beyond the black stump’. What it