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Jayne Regan

Irrigation Nation or Pacific Partner? Visions for Postwar Australia

Historian Paul Sutter argues that American environmental historians have neglected the “history of interwar environmental thought and politics.” According to Sutter, scholarship on the earlier Progressive-Era conservation efforts and the later green environmental movement has overshadowed what came in between, so that there exists no “interpretive definition” of the period. The same could be said for the Australian context, where environmental historians have shown greatest interest in the colonial period (from 1788 to Australia’s Federation in 1901), and in the years since the advent of modern environmental movements in the 1970s. The culmination of international political and economic crises in the first half of the twentieth century has contributed to this neglect; interest in these major events has sidelined historical treatment of environmental thought, although one notable exception is Warwick Frost’s 2004 article “Australia Unlimited? Environmental Debate in the Age of Catastrophe, 1910–1939.”

In this essay I offer an initial intervention into this understudied period. I introduce William Hatfield and Flexmore Hudson, two Australian literary figures who wrote evocatively and passionately about the Australian environment in the 1930s and 1940s. Both men were politicised during the 1930s and, to differing degrees, took up left-wing politics in response to the international climate of crisis. I am particularly interested in the way that the interwar years, as well as the war unfolding across the 1940s, shaped their environmental visions for postwar Australia. While the political atmosphere of the Australian 1940s was characterised by optimistic plans for postwar social and economic reconstruction, Hatfield and Hudson demonstrate that the environment played a part in these imaginings. Hatfield and Hudson held vastly different environmental visions for postwar Australia, but, considered together, their work demonstrates that Australian environmental thought and debate flourished, despite, and perhaps even because of, the major political and economic events of the 1930s and 1940s.

Looking Inland

William Hatfield was born in Nottingham, England in 1892 and travelled to Australia at the age of nineteen. Upon his arrival he immediately set out for the interior of the country in search of work. Over the next twenty years Hatfield did a variety of itinerant work, particularly in the northern regions of South Australia, the Northern Territory, and in northern and western Queensland; he was a stockman on large inland sheep and cattle stations, a deckhand, an accountant for shipping and mining companies, and sometimes made a living from kangaroo shooting and dingo trapping. During the 1930s and 1940s, Hatfield produced several popular novels based loosely on his experiences and adventures in remote areas of Australia. In 1931, he undertook the first of several long-distance car journeys, sponsored by the English Hillman Motor Car Company and Shell Petrol Company, which enabled him to build up a journalistic career. These trips, during which Hatfield tested cars and his masculinity against inland and northern Australia, featured heavily in his autobiographical and travel books *Australia through the Windscreen* (1936) and *I Find Australia* (1937). Also in these two books, Hatfield began to offer criticism of the environmental damage done to inland Australia since white colonisation. He was particularly concerned about deforestation and soil erosion, which he attributed to poor agricultural and pastoral practices. In 1944, Hatfield, by now identifying as a Communist, published the nonfictional work *Australia Reclaimed*, where he outlined his postwar vision of Australia as a socialist state. Integral to his plan was the irrigation of the inland in order to correct environmental damage and enable more intensive agricultural settlement.

Ambitious engineering proposals to irrigate and populate inland Australia, often inspired by hydrological schemes undertaken in arid regions of the United States and the Soviet Union, were widespread in the first half of the twentieth century. E. J. Brady's 1918 book, *Australia Unlimited*, argued for the almost infinite potential for agricultural development in Australia's inland; Brady hoped to disprove what he called Australia's "'Desert' Myth," and advocated closer settlement of semi-arid regions of the country. In the late 1930s, engineer J. J. C. Bradfield, well known for his involvement in the design and construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, proposed a scheme to dam and divert the rivers of North Queensland so that they would flow into the often dry rivers of western Queensland, rather than out to sea. Bradfield argued that this additional water would permanently alter the climate of the inland. Popular adventure novelist

Ion Idriess advocated Bradfield's Scheme in his 1941 book *The Great Boomerang*. The Bradfield Scheme gained currency during World War Two as fears mounted about the potential for Asian invasion of Australia's sparsely populated north, but was never seriously considered by the Australian federal government.

Like Bradfield and Idriess, Hatfield believed that with major dam construction and river diversion, large amounts of water could be directed into irrigating arid Australia, enabling more intensive farming and a much greater inland population. Hatfield pro-



Figure 1: In this illustration of Hatfield's vision, the destruction of trees (along the bottom) and a Victorian city dominated by factory pollution (top left), is being replaced by the image of a young Australian couple admiring a well-watered and densely vegetated agricultural scene. George Farwell, "William Hatfield Sees," *Tribune* (Sydney), 26 October 1944, 4. National Library of Australia, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article208689648>.

posed that such a project would provide work for returned soldiers and believed that technologies developed during war could be repurposed for inland construction, rather than destruction. An “army” of Australians could be put to work “reconquering the enemy Nature” in Australia’s remote regions. Though sometimes framed as a battle, at other times Hatfield imagined his plan to be one of rehabilitation and restoration. In part, Hatfield aimed to restore arid and tropic environments to their pre-colonisation state, and reverse damage done through deforestation and soil erosion. He argued that “nature’s methods must be copied to restore it to that state in which we found it.” Even when emphasising restoration, Hatfield’s vision for a densely populated inland would in reality have involved enormous environmental transformation.

Through damming “every little creek,” Hatfield imagined a future where “complete river-control” would mean the inland could support closer settlement; he believed that the vast pastoral stations of the inland should be divided up so that large numbers of Australians, and potentially immigrants from all over the world, would have the chance to farm. Hatfield argued that residence away from large cities would be morally, physically, and financially beneficial for the population, yet he still imagined that these new inland settlements would be decidedly modern, built with “science and industry” in mind, and “free from smoke and dirt” in order that “a new generation can be raised with the best chance of physical fitness, mental alertness, moral stability, and aesthetic appreciation.” Hatfield’s postwar vision emphasised national and individual strength and virility, garnered at least in part from residency in the Australian inland. This was a clear rejection of the densely populated, industrial cities of the Old World, often associated with physical and moral degeneracy, and even blamed for the political and social upheavals of the early to mid-twentieth century.

From today’s perspective, much of Hatfield’s environmental vision might seem quite contradictory; sometimes he wanted to rehabilitate nature and at other times to conquer it, and his emphasis on the restoration of pre-colonial landscapes collided with his very twentieth-century desire to see science and technology transform the inland into a densely populated patchwork of small farms, dotted with clean and technologically advanced towns. Yet the belief that human intervention in nature could be beneficial for both the human and natural world was commonly held in this period. Hatfield advocated large-scale environmental engineering, even continental transformation, in order to promote a new social, economic, and environmental order in Australia’s

postwar years, and to avoid the social, political, and economic turmoil that had so far plagued the twentieth century. The environmental imagination of the poet, editor, and school teacher Flexmore Hudson, though influenced by the same international climate of crisis, was remarkably different.

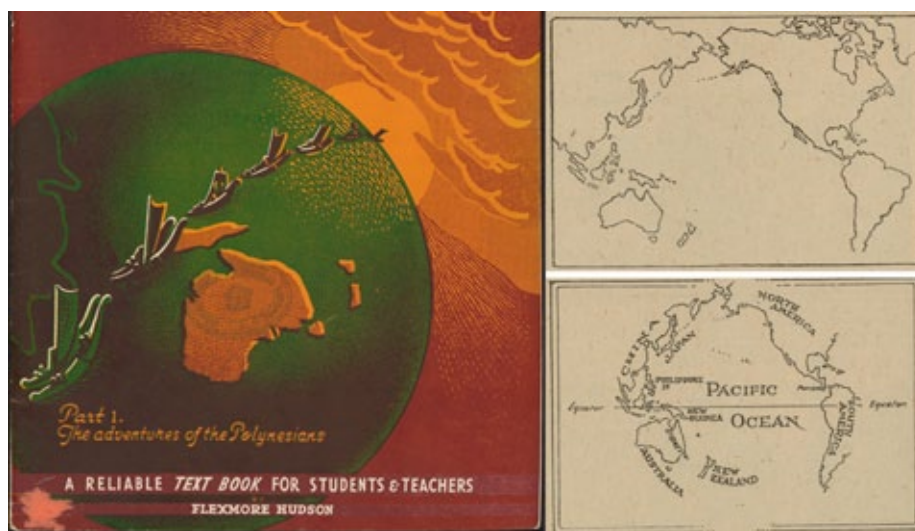
Looking Out to Sea

Flexmore Hudson was born in 1913 at Charters Towers, Queensland. He trained at Adelaide Teachers' College and attended Adelaide University for a short time, but did not finish his arts degree. Between 1936 and 1945 Hudson taught in a handful of small schools in rural South Australia, which inspired him to produce a range of environmentally sensitive poetry. Like Hatfield, Hudson launched his literary career, primarily as a poet and editor, during the 1930s, as the Great Depression, the rise of fascism, and the threat of another major world conflict politicised many writers. Hudson was attracted to left-wing politics, though, unlike Hatfield, never committed to Communism. Rather, his literary output suggests a socialist interest in the concept of "world-mindedness," which grew in popularity throughout the 1940s. World-minded thinkers sought, particularly through an emphasis on wide reading, to promote a greater understanding of other cultures, people, and humanity as a whole. They set themselves in opposition to racism, war, limited reading habits, and narrow nationalism. World-mindedness grew out of, and was a reaction against, the social and political upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century, and was particularly appealing in the wake of World War Two and the devastating results of National Socialism and racism.

Though primarily a poet, financial difficulties led Hudson to write a comic for children in 1947. "Discovery," which appeared in the pages of *Pacific Pictorial Comic*, was particularly concerned with educating Australian and New Zealand school children about the human history of the Pacific Ocean, and promoting understanding and peaceful relationships between people of all races; goals clearly in accord with world-mindedness. By the time Hudson's final instalment was published in issue six of *Pacific Pictorial Comic* (1947–1948), the comic had covered Indian migration, Polynesian exploration, Easter Island history, and some Spanish exploration of South America. Within both the text and illustrations of "Discovery" there is a concerted effort to displace Europe as the primary context of Australian history. The maps and images

used to introduce the region all focus on the Pacific; Europe does not appear on any. Australian history is told around a geographic feature, the Pacific Ocean, rather than emphasising European exploration. Though the project was never completed, “Discovery” was an attempt to produce a world history, or at least a regional history, for school children that presented Australia as a Pacific nation rather than a European one. In sympathy with Hudson’s Pacific focus, Frank Clune’s 1945 book *Pacific Parade*, a series of short sketches based on his travels in the Pacific, argued that “the biggest war in history made us ‘Pacific-minded.’” World war had prompted a geographic reimagining of Australia’s place in the world.

Figure 2: Various images from “Discovery” demonstrate the way that Hudson emphasised the Pacific Ocean as the geographic heart of Australian history. Left: Flexmore Hudson, *Discovery: The Adventures of the Polynesians* (Adelaide: Lush Studios, 1948). Top and bottom right: Flexmore Hudson, “Discovery,” in *Pacific Pictorial Comic* (Adelaide: Lush Studios, 1947). Images courtesy of the National Library of Australia.



Hudson’s world-mindedness did not, however, preclude poetic engagement with local environments. In fact, Hudson explicitly stated that he valued the “exact and intimate observation of nature.” His poetry often celebrated simple scenes on South Australian beaches, and the flora and fauna that inhabited the arid landscape of rural towns in which he lived. Hudson’s environmental sensibility is best demonstrated in an excerpt from his 1943 poem “With the First Soft Rain”:

That strutting magpie joins us, that shadow, ants on the wall,
the saltbush, trees, the wire-weed, and the larvae of the
borer-beetle sapping the life of the gum.

So long as I can know the earth, I shall never feel alone;
for there, I know, not only is my spirit
but *all* men's spirits;
and they are in mine, and I am in theirs . . .

Here on a saltbush plain I lie in the sun:

Nearly seven million other Australians are warmed by that sun
—They squint in its glare, love it, find it beautiful; so do
Papuan, Thibetans, Javanese, Chinese, Germans, Rus-
sians, Eskimoes—they shout and wave harpoons as it
rises over the ice; fruit-pickers of the Amazon and the
Congo, emerging from the dark gloom, are glad of its
light and warmth.

. . .

The sun, and the stars that will chill this plain to-night,
the moon that will climb the black hills,
are links with all humanity.

Hudson evokes the South Australian rural landscape with which he was so familiar, yet demonstrates that such environmental specificity did not have to be parochial; in fact, environmental localism was crucial to Hudson's brand of world-mindedness, and diverse global cultures were essential to his evocation of Australian rurality. The physical environment, the sun, earth, and even the life on a South Australian saltbush plain seem to offer both spiritual and ecological connections between people the world over. Hudson's technique of listing environmental features, animals, and various groups of people has a levelling effect; all seem to have an equal right to the earth. This poem was clearly a plea for peace at the height of World War Two. Both "Discovery" and Hudson's poetry demonstrate the way he used geography and environment to argue for an intellectual reorientation in postwar Australia, one which might secure lasting international peace.

Competing Environmental Visions

Hatfield was anxious about the continent's perceived environmental shortcomings, heightened during World War Two as fears mounted over the possibility of invasion; he advocated continental-scale engineering projects in order to drastically alter the environmental, and therefore social, fabric of the country. Though Hatfield's vision for inland Australia was never realised, in the decades following World War Two there remained enthusiasm, particularly among state and federal politicians, for large-scale hydro-engineering projects; the Snowy River Hydro-Electric Scheme (1949–1972) and the Ord River Irrigation Scheme (1959–) demonstrate the postwar eagerness for environmental transformation.

Hudson's less aggressive approach revolved around education and intellectualism; as a poet and school teacher he hoped to inspire a world-minded and environmentally sensitive outlook in others. Interest in world-mindedness reached a peak in the immediate postwar years, but popular enthusiasm waned as a result of the conservative Cold War climate. While there was greater continuity between Hatfield's vision and popular environmental thought in the postwar decades, Hudson's embryonic ecological sensibility might be understood as an early step towards the environmental movements of the late twentieth century.

Despite remoteness from the hub of calamity in Europe, international events influenced the way the Australian environment was imagined, and, conversely, writers frequently employed the landscape as an arena to explore the societal ruptures that preoccupied them. Like many fellow writers and intellectuals, both men were attracted to left-wing politics in response to the political turmoil of the period, and, like many in the broader Australian community, both held somewhat utopian hopes for postwar Australia. Hatfield's water-dreaming and Hudson's world-mindedness offer just two examples of the way in which Australian culture and environment were jointly reimagined in response to the major political and social upheavals of the early to mid-twentieth century.

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