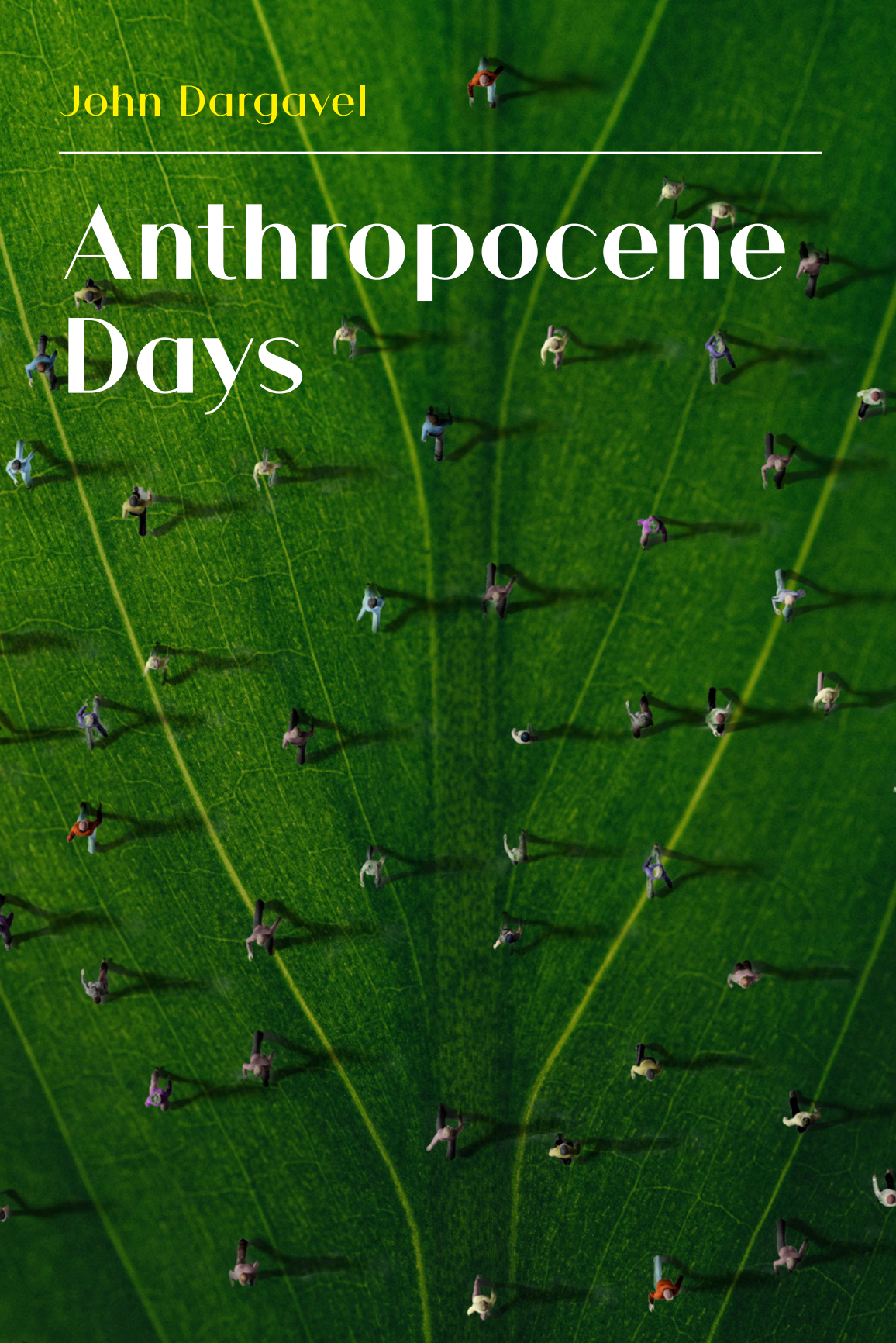


John Dargavel

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# Anthropocene Days



# ANTHROPOCENE DAYS





Sample excerpt from

**ANTHROPOCENE DAYS**

**by**

**John Dargavel**

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## CHAPTER 1

### BLACKBIRDS SINGING IN THE APPLE TREE: A PREFACE





**M**y earliest memory is of blackbirds singing outside my bedroom window. I could never see them in the apple tree, even when I stood on a small stool to look out of the window, but I could see them busying about on the lawn looking for the worms that emerged after rain. Now, as an old man half a world away, I still hear blackbirds, quite often in Canberra and occasionally in Melbourne, for they too are migrants. Yesterday their song took me back so strongly to my London boyhood that I wondered what had become of that apple tree. With the magic of Google Earth, I conjured 66 Old Lodge Lane to my screen; the house looks much the same, there are big trees at the end of the garden now, but the apple tree has gone and the beautiful silver birch at the front of the house has been replaced by a garage.

I am delighted to hear blackbirds in this very different time. People like to give names to times. Now I am in the Anthropocene, before that I was in the Information Age with its wonders of computers and satellites, Late Capitalism, Post-colonialism, the Atomic Age, the Second World War and the Great Economic Depression of the 1930s when I was born. Before that my parents and grandparents were in the Age of Empire and my great-grandparents in the Industrial Revolution that drove some of them into poverty and emigration. The characteristics that coin such names linger long after new ones have gained favour, none more so than for the Anthropocene whose origins lie with the increasing use of fossil fuels from the late-eighteenth century.

I am bemused and intrigued by how we go about our everyday lives while our times change. Much so in my lifetime. Some have been sharp disruptions, but most have crept up on the world day-by-day without being noticed much. My concern here is with the environment. On the world scale, it has been changed greatly during the Anthropocene,

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yet we experience it only in small ways each day. More than that, each day we change it in our individually minuscule ways.

The environment is also two-sided, like a coin. On its public face, where the Anthropocene is cited, we see the scientists explaining and politicians dodging the grim issues that bludgeon our future. On its reverse we have our private, everyday face where the Anthropocene is lived. We may hear the public news, but it is remote from our mostly urban life; it is the weather, not the climate that we look out at each morning. Yet the two faces, public and private were struck together, inescapably joined. This is the way of the world with all its ambiguities, paradoxes, quiddity, inanity, grief and hope.

On the public face, scientists set off on established routes with coherent paths, defined by an issue and directed to an end; they know what they are about and persist with hope. They must understand before others can act. My working life has been concerned with forests, the advance of their science, the practice of managing them and the history of their use. I have also had the good fortune to associate with others with different disciplines and perspectives. I admire their careful science and thought-out principles that lead many to propose remedies and some to advocate them fiercely. I think, for example, of Rob Heinsohn who spent years in remote Queensland forests quietly observing the unusual, polyandrous lives of *Eclectus* parrots; they are few and vulnerable, and his work has enabled plans to be made for their protection. I hope they survive but I am sad that so many serious investigations sink in the slough of Australian politics.

The private face absorbs me every day but the public one is always just on the other side. Like most people, I am still startled by the climate crisis. It took a century from scientists learning of it before the United Nations set up its intergovernmental panel to investigate it in 1988. By then the Earth's climate systems had been changed so much by burning fuel that in 2000 Paul Crutzen called it a new geological time, the Anthropocene. It is hardly a name in common usage yet, the Age of Climate Crisis might have better suited the present time,

*Blackbirds Singing in the Apple Tree: A Preface*

but the Anthropocene is what we have and it might as well cover all our environmental woes.

Although we don't notice it day-by-day, change is coming faster at the public face. J.R. McNeill and Peter Engelke call it *The Great Acceleration* of economic growth and energy use from which so much has followed. They time it as starting with the Atomic Age: an ominous and fearsome choice marked by the bombing of Hiroshima and tragically Nagasaki – substituted when the target elsewhere was hidden by clouds. Those human evils and the years of bomb tests that followed caused world-wide pollution. Paradoxically, they left marks in lakes and dunes across the world that have helped scientists measure effects of climate change.

Change is also accelerating at the private face where we notice it more. Alvin Toffler wrote in 1970 about the personal and social shocks it caused, and now we have added home computers, tablets, smartphones, streaming services, QR codes, crypto currencies and all the rest – things that have become part of my daily life. While I relish the worlds they open to me, I struggle to keep up with their relentless change.

Like most people, I find comfort in consistency, when the days are much the same with just their ordinary amount of variation. After a while I find the everyday too ordinary and I seek some change by going to the theatre or on a holiday, but these too are ordinary on my calendar. Even the pesky upgrades to the computer systems can have their ordinariness. I find comfort in familiarity; seeing Mt Baw Baw or the Brindabella Hills on the skyline lifts my heart. Reading a well-loved book again, perhaps one by Dickens that my father knew so well, reassures me of continuity amid change.

It is sudden disruptions that upset me; now it is Covid and before that it was bushfires and war. I have been fortunate in these; bombs never hit me when they might have, I have fought fires, not suffered them, and have been inoculated against Covid. Even during these disasters, new patterns of daily life appear after a few days, but their normality is personal and tentative, as the misfortune of others con-

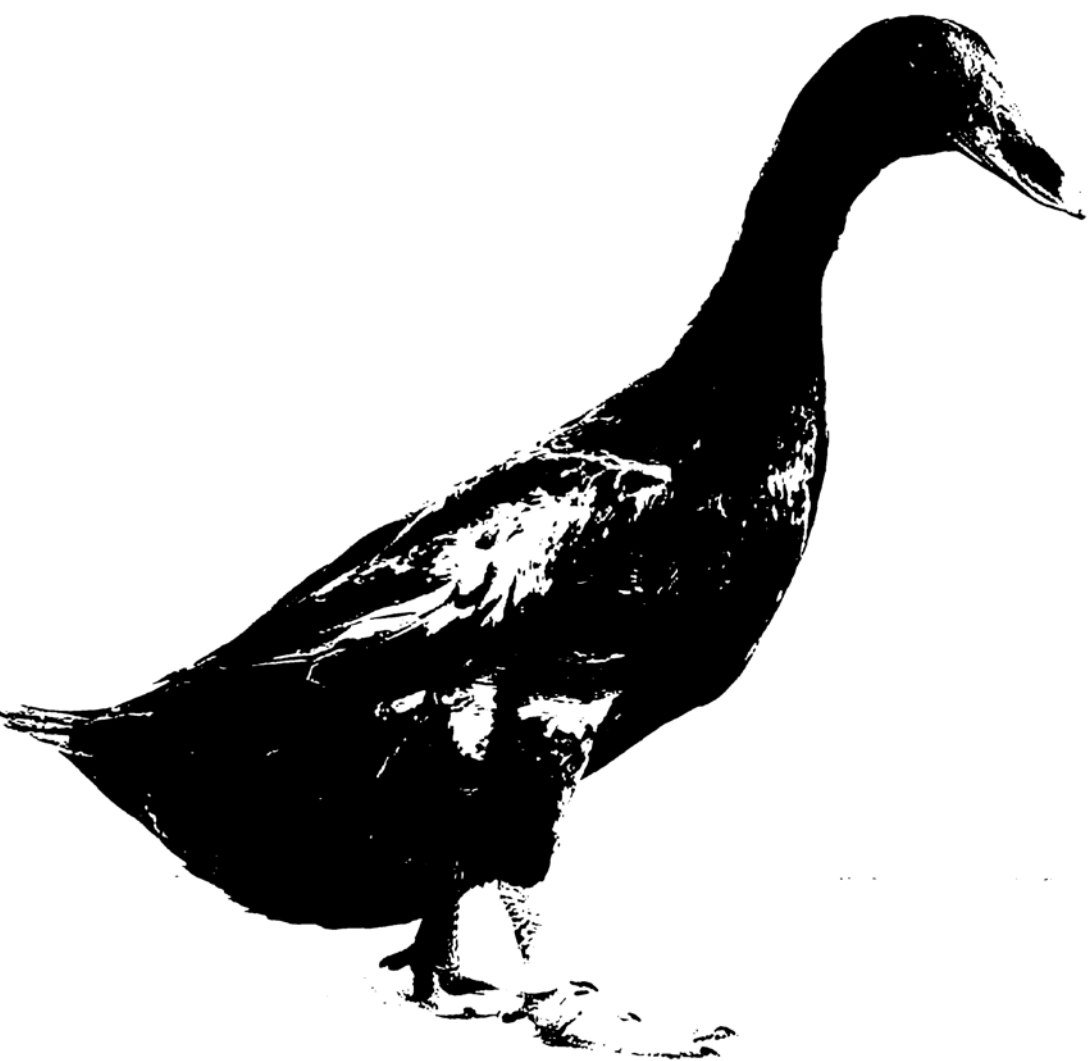
*Chapter 1*

stantly reminds me. I am also fortunate in being an educated, white male living comfortably in peace in a way that provides some buffer against change and gives me a privileged position on larger scales.

When I set out to explore the environment in the private face of everyday life, I started a different journey from my days in science. My everyday experiences are intimate, personal and occasional. Sometimes I hear a magpie chortling joyously away, or often the gentle sound of wooing doves. I rejoice in them, the paperbark trees in my street, the smell of the eucalypts on hot summer days, the forests I have worked in, the places I have lived in and much, much else. No single route could be set through such diversity when a seemingly limitless number of intriguing, wandering paths opened before me. Some meander and, like going along any path, I look aside as I go and back to see where I came from. I enjoy the looking and feel it a privilege to tell these tales about them at my leisure. They all started by hearing blackbirds singing in an apple tree.



**CHAPTER 2**  
**WARTIME DAYS**



**S**unday, 3 September 1939 was an unusual day. Barbara and Barbara's mum from next-door came in the morning to listen to the radio with Mum and Dad in our front room; they never came round. Barbara and I had to be quiet and listen to the Prime Minister. He said that we were now at war with Germany. I remember the serious atmosphere, nobody spoke.

Wartime days were my usual days when I was growing up in London. They were sharply different from the pre-war days that my parents knew, but only became so to me by commentary or in retrospect. Their pattern changed from time to time as the war progressed and as I grew older, but the events and rhetoric of war were the background, rarely the foreground, of everyday life. Most days were much the same. Home and school were the bounds of my everyday life, with few excursions beyond the neighbourhood. Memory though, is sharper for unusual days.

Thursday, 15 August 1940 was my eighth birthday; Dad had come home from work, Great Aunty Millie was staying with us, and we were in the garden finishing tea in the late afternoon when we heard planes and saw smoke in the distance. The grown-ups told me it must have been a bombing raid. It had hit Britain's only international airport at nearby Croydon and was the first major raid on Greater London. September came on regardless and with it a new school year.

One fine Sunday started normally by going on a country walk with Mother and Dad and happily with Aunty Vi who was with us for her holiday. After about five kilometres we were nearly at Chaldon when we heard the village siren sound the air raid alarm. We went to shelter in a farmer's big stone barn, but inside we were confronted by a hangman's noose hanging from the rafters; it was labelled 'For



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Hitler' and had been put up by Polish refugees. Perhaps because it was frightening, or perhaps because the all-clear sounded, we left and went on to the small church. Morning service must have finished, because we could go in to look at the thirteenth century mural behind the altar, the oldest in England. It is an alarming picture that shows little souls climbing up a ladder to be with God and the angels, with some falling off to the Devil with his fiery cauldron and fierce dogs below.

After seeing the mural, we walked on to a field at the top of the hill for our picnic. Sandwiches, a piece of cake and an apple were what always came out of Dad's rucksack, with a thermos of tea for the adults and lemon squash for me. It was a clear sunny day, and our spot had a fine view over the low-lying Weald region to the hills of the South Downs, fifty kilometres away. We could see the giant barrage balloons floating high above the ground on their cables, the German bombers flying in formation towards us, the puff, puff of the anti-aircraft guns trying to hit them, and our fighter planes attacking them. When a plane was hit it plunged to the ground in smoke, throwing up more when it hit the ground, and sometimes leaving white parachutes gently floating down. I found it very exciting. We got up from our picnic spot, crossed the road to see the bombers who had got through flying on to London thirty kilometres away. Mother said to think about all those people being bombed there. Then we went home for tea.

One night a few weeks later, Dad woke me up and took me into the front bedroom. The lights were out, and the blackout curtains drawn back. He lifted me up to see a red light colouring the night sky across the northern horizon. 'It is London burning', he said, 'I want you to remember this'. I have, though then I just wanted to go back to my bed. The great fire was the start of 'The Blitz' of night raids.

The components of everyday lives are the same in any century: shelter, water, food, clothing, warmth, work, relationships, neighbourhood. Shelter was the most important. Dad and Mr Jones from next door dug an air-raid shelter into the hillside of our back garden. Its sides and floor were the natural chalk stone, its roof was made of railway sleepers with dirt on top, and there was a blanket that could

*Wartime Days*

be hung across the narrow doorway. It was hardly big enough for two families and in winter it was cold and wet underfoot because chalk is porous to moisture; we only tried it once. Then we had a Morrison shelter that was put up in the dining room. It had a steel top and a steel frame and was about the height of a table. We had mattresses on the floor and all three of us squeezed under it when there was an air raid. My secondary school had large underground concrete shelters. I only had two or three classes in them because after I started the raids were mostly at night.

Food is always important to boys and was to Mother who struggled with rationing and shortages. The severity of the wartime rations seems remarkable when viewed from Australian plentitude: an egg, a shilling's worth of meat (a couple of chops, say), an ounce (28 gm) of cheese, and so on for a week, or a jar of jam and twelve ounces (340 gm) of sweets for a month. Fish, vegetables and fruit could be bought whenever they appeared in the local shops. Children were given a small (160 ml) bottle of milk at school each day, and I had a usually horrible, cooked lunch there too. The 'Dig for Victory' campaign encouraged people to grow food at home or on any spare land. At home, Mother grew vegetables in the flower bed, and Dad dug up half the lawn, at first for potatoes and later most successfully for scarlet runner beans. Mother packed the beans in salt and cut our apples into rings that were dried for the winter. We tried keeping a few chickens until a fox ate them, then built a better night-time enclosure for two ducks, 'Prim' and 'Prudence', whose eggs were used in cakes. Like other children, I earned a few pennies collecting rose hips from nearby hedgerows and fields as part of a national programme to make the vitamin-rich syrup for babies and small children. Apart from the deaths and direct injuries from bombing, the general health of the population improved slightly during the war, partly due to changes in the diet.

Clothes were rationed on a coupon system –  $x$  coupons for a coat,  $y$  for a singlet,  $z$  for shoes, etc. Even when they were pooled across the family, they hardly covered my uniform when I started at secondary school. Fuel was rationed for the household. We had just enough coke

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to keep the kitchen stove going for hot water, but only enough coal to light the lounge-room fire on the coldest nights. The gas pressure fluctuated unpredictably, making cooking difficult. Petrol was kept entirely for the military and essential services, and travel was discouraged as much by the danger crossing London during the Blitz and its unreliability as by the 'Is Your Journey Really Necessary?' posters.

Dad worked in London five and a half days a week and was often late home during the Blitz when the trains were delayed or re-routed. During some weekends and evenings, he trained with the Home Guard, and as an Air Raid Warden spent some nights in their shelter, being called out for patrols or emergencies. Mum ran a War Savings Group in our street. Such activities breached the usually reserved nature of the suburban atmosphere. Friendships developed and led to occasional social visits in the evening. Going out at night could be difficult as the streetlights had been turned off and the houses had to have blackout curtains preventing any glimmer of light escaping – a matter enforced by the Air Raid Wardens. On dark cloudy nights, I counted the number of houses by their front gates, or I felt for familiar front fences until we arrived. Occasionally, social evenings were held in the small primary school nearby, presumably to raise funds for the war effort. They were jolly affairs that opened the social atmosphere considerably.

The pattern of everyday life changed with progress of the war, most markedly from June 1944 when the Allies invaded France, pushed the Germans back and finally defeated them a year later. Although the night-time bomber raids had stopped, two new types of raids threatened security, though not as drastically as the Blitz. First were the low-flying, 'doodlebugs'; the unmanned, V-1 flying bombs whose 'phutt, phutt, phutt' sound from their jet engines became familiar and effectively told you if you needed to shelter. I was scared one day when one appeared directly above me as it came out of low-lying cloud and its 'phutt, phutt' stopped. When their sound stopped, they glided on for a few minutes until they exploded on landing, this one went on for a kilometre and hit the council offices. The second type were the V-2

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rocket-powered, ballistic missiles that delivered a one-tonne bomb. Whereas some of the doodlebugs were shot down, nothing could warn you about the V-2s, or counter them; fortunately, they were fewer.

Eventually the rocket attacks were stopped by the Allies' advance. The Air Raid Wardens and Home Guards were no longer needed; Dad could be home at night, the Morrison shelter could be dismantled, and we could all sleep in our beds. Otherwise, the pattern of everyday life changed little during the last year of the war. Rationing remained as strict, coupons still had to clothe a growing boy, we queued when something to buy had come into the shops. I went to school, did homework, rode my bike; the weather changed and was remarked. Wartime days were usually quite normal days.

The pattern of wartime days lingered long. Although the war had ended in 1945 and it was joyous to walk out at night with the streets lit again and see lights in the houses, some with their curtains left open, it was to be nine years before rationing ended. Austerity lingered longer still as Britain struggled to rebuild its cities, repair its industries and recover its economy. So did war. Allied armies occupied Japan for seven years and Germany for ten. Young men were conscripted into the forces until 1957. In 1950 another war had started in Korea – I might have been sent there or to Germany. Britain tried to suppress Jewish insurgents in Palestine before it was partitioned to create an Israeli state in 1947; and there were local wars, or 'emergencies' in Malaya and Kenya. Such things were in the background of my everyday life as a boy and young man.

Now, the contrast between great environmental concerns and daily lives during the war and its aftermath seems particularly sharp or paradoxical. More so when we realise that our present concerns, like climate change and species loss for example, were of no interest in those post-war days. Nor could we have imagined then that we were at the start of 'The Great Acceleration' in which the world's population, economy and demands for resources and energy would grow faster than ever before; nor that it would spread pollution, end species and change the very climate. Its start was so hopeful. Internationally,

*Chapter 2*

countries gathered to form the United Nations in 1945 and declare its principles of peace, self-determination of peoples and respect for human rights. Scientifically, the horror of the atomic bombs that had ended the war was leading to nuclear power plants that seemingly offered unlimited electricity. In every field, the insights of science and the ingenuity of technology promised progress as they always had, but on a grander scale; none more so than when the first Sputnik satellite orbited the Earth in 1957. In Britain, this ethos of hope was fostered with a festival of industry, arts and science held in a grand new centre of halls and galleries built on a London bomb site in 1951.

Paradoxically, the continued rationing of petrol proved a blessing for growing lads. Very few of the two million cars were on the roads and we could cycle safely to school or go on long rides during the holidays. As they had during the war, many truck and car drivers continued to give people lifts on their way. As a young man, I hitch-hiked with friends across the country for climbing holidays in Wales and Scotland. Now, our 'thumbing' a ride on the side of the road has been replaced by other nifty thumbs tapping ride-sharing and car-pooling apps on smart-phones; all officially encouraged for the environmental benefits of reducing traffic and pollution.

In wartime, nature soon displayed its hope on every bomb site as seeds carried on the wind or dropped by birds found crevices, germinated and sent out their green shoots. The colourful willowherb was a welcome early sight, other herbs and plants appeared; some grew into quite tall trees before the sites were eventually cleared away for new buildings. In the countryside, nature displayed its hope of 're-wilding' every piece of land untended during the war. Many of the footpaths that criss-cross the land had become so overgrown as to be virtually impassable, while others had been blocked or obliterated by landowners. Unless they were used, their ancient public rights would be lost. Footpaths Preservation Societies had existed since early in the nineteenth century and I joined a local group to walk the paths, cutting our way when we needed to, and always marking our passage on maps to record our evidence of those long-past footsteps.

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Walking local paths, the Yorkshire moors or Scottish mountains was part of my everyday life at weekends and during holidays, when wars and armed emergencies seemed far removed and easily put aside from such peaceful pursuits. Yet war would intrude again. In 1956 Britain and France invaded Egypt just as I was about to leave Britain for better prospects of a job in Australia. The war closed the Suez Canal, forcing my ship to sail via South Africa. In another paradox, its stop in Cape Town enabled me to have a happy reunion with family members who had emigrated there.

The pattern of Australian days is disrupted now by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the faraway war in Afghanistan does not always stay in the background; its course and crimes invade our peace of mind. As I write, another war has started with the invasion of Ukraine; I fear for the people sheltering from the bombs, and where I imagine the beauty of the Carpathian beech forests in their biosphere reserve. Background or foreground, and recognised or not, war, much like the environment, is inherently part of everyday life. Wartime days are quite usual days.





*Is that the nub of the world's environmental crisis: that in the business of everyday, we pass by with our connections unacknowledged?*

*Anthropocene Days* gathers 27 easy-to-read short essays about the environment and climate change in everyday life. While the world and governments are beset by the great woes of changing climate, deforestation, species extinction, air pollution, fouling oceans and so on, we go about individually and locally as best we can from day to day. *Anthropocene Days* contends that these two domains, so apparently separate, are essentially connected.

The book looks at the diverse and mundane activities of daily life to show how the environment is experienced, and does this very personally by drawing its observations from the author's life. It is part memoir, part recent history – a medley of short essays with themes of landscape change, forests, trees, war, fire, pestilence and the domestic life of housing, dusting and clutter. Motivated by present concerns, some reach back to the 1940s. They are set in Australia, Britain, India, Singapore and America.

*Anthropocene Days* is a deceptively easy read. It does not hector readers on what to do, but its ruminations, drawn from long engagement with environments, encourage reflection on how we pass our everyday lives while the planet changes.

**John Dargavel** (b. 1932) has been deeply engaged in forests, environments, science, people, politics and history. Inquisitive and impatient at established boundaries, he has been drawn into biography, cultural landscapes and the place of trees in remembrance. He has written papers, books and a play, and has edited collections. His most recent book on the history of forest science over the last three centuries, *Science and Hope: a Forest History* was written with Elisabeth Johann and published in 2013 by White Horse Press, followed by a German edition in 2018. His most recent collection, *Restoring Forests in Times of Contagion: Papers to Celebrate John Evelyn's 400th Birthday* was edited with Ben Wilkie and published on-line.

John Dargavel was born in London, trained as a forester in Scotland and has worked in different regions of Australia. He was a founding member of the Australian Forest History Society. He is an Honorary Associate Professor in the Fenner School of Environment and Society at the Australian National University. He now lives in Melbourne.



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