

## Let the Water Run: Australia's Water Vocabulary

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Water is taught by thirst.  
Emily Dickinson<sup>1</sup>

Australia is considered the driest continent in the world. In 2014, for instance, 80% of Queensland swaggered heavily under debilitating drought conditions.<sup>2</sup> Curiously, however, in the last 150 years, devastating floods have also ravaged this wide brown land. *Australian Geographic* reports that 'between 1852 and 2011, at least 951 people were killed by floods, another 1326 were injured, and the cost of [water-related] damage reached an estimated \$4.76 billion'.<sup>3</sup> We chorus along with Hanrahan: 'We'll all be rooned' by floods and droughts. And so the Australian preoccupation with water—too much or too little—has created a lexicon about this national treasure. Thus, water often frames Australian religious, literary and visual (film) discourses whereby our *aqua pura* is represented as a blessing/curse binary, privileging its power to shape both indigenous and non-indigenous Australian narratives.

During the Federation Drought from 1895 to 1903, considered one of the worst droughts of (white) Australian history, the country suffered below average rainfalls causing the Murray-Darling river system to run dry. Garden's fascinating research into this historical drought recognises the long dry spell stunted colonial 'progress'.<sup>4</sup> And newspapers at the time featured tales of drought-stricken communities with thirsty cattle

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- <sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson, CXXXIII, *Part four: Time and Eternity*. in *Complete Poems*. <<http://www.bartleby.com/113/4133.html>>
  - <sup>2</sup> Cassie Hough and Eliza Rogers, 'Queensland's largest drought-declared area ever', *ABC Rural*, <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-03-07/qld-drought--most-widespread-ever-recorded/5306044>>, accessed 1 May, 2015.
  - <sup>3</sup> Delana Carbone and Jenna Hanson, 'Floods: 10 of the deadliest in Australian history', *Australian Geographic*, <<http://www.australiangeographic.com.au/topics/history-culture/2012/03/floods-10-of-the-deadliest-in-australian-history/>>, accessed 1 May, 2015.
  - <sup>4</sup> Don Garden, 'The Federation Drought of 1895-1903, El Niño and Society in Australia' in Massard-Guilbaud, G. & Mosley, S. (eds), *Common Ground: Integrating the Social and Environmental in History*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2010, p. 270.

and personal hardships<sup>5</sup>. A letter to the editor appeared in *The Brisbane Courier* from a concerned citizen. Queenslander A.C. Smith's letter claimed that 'the elements' were against them and felt that 'no public general recognition [had] yet been taken of the prevailing awful drought' and called his readers to action: 'in some pronounced way [we should] beseech and continue beseeching God for rain'.<sup>6</sup> To many, droughts were a religious representation of God's damnation for the nation's sinful ways. In 1864, early bush journalist and poet, Oscar G. Hughan, published a poem 'Prayer for Rain' in *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*.<sup>7</sup> And it was during this Long Drought that the government called for a Day of Humiliation and Prayer for Rain in all states. Queensland's day was April 17, 1902. According to *The Brisbane Courier*, a day after the government-sanctioned 'holy day', it was acknowledged that although 'divergent opinions will be entertained respecting the efficacy of praying to the Creator for a readjustment of the natural laws', church services were well attended by 'all classes' and the day was observed with a 'solemnity becoming the occasion'.<sup>8</sup> By 1903, historical meteorological records indicate that above average rainfalls finally 'blessed' the country.

Furthermore, Australian poetry often foregrounds powerful water images. Teacher and early bush poet Mary Hannay Foott (1846–1918) paints a land of 'wistful-eyed' sheep and cattle in 'a waste of gravel and water' with 'waterless gullies' in her poem 'In Time of Drought'.<sup>9</sup> Yet each stanza concludes with a reoccurring symbol of God as water: 'the river of God was full'.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, by 1899, Arthur A. Adams's poem, 'Rain in the Bush' depicts '[t]he steady soaking of the rain' and personifies 'the bush all sad and sombre' under this wet blanket.<sup>11</sup> His watery images connote heaviness and melancholy as the 'fern-fronds shiver' feeling the '[c]old foot-prints' of the 'drip of rain-drops'.<sup>12</sup> However, the Indigenous Australian poetic voice—complex, varied and compelling—often connects water to great festivity. Well-known poet, Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), in 'Community Rain Song', writes of the Wyambi rain chant: the lightly falling rain crescendos into a raging downfall, creating infectious elation in all of nature. The plovers, frogs,

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>6</sup> A.C. Smith, 'Letter to the Editor', *The Brisbane Courier*, 11 September, 1895.

<sup>7</sup> Oscar Hughan, 'Prayer for Rain', 14, January, 1864, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> *The Brisbane Courier*, 18 April 1902.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Hannay Foott, 'In Time of Drought' in *Where the Pelican Builds and other poems*, Australian Poetry Library, <<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/foott-mary-hannay/in-time-of-drought-0011006>>, accessed 30 April, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Arthur A Adams, 'Rain in the Bush', in *Maoriland*, Australian Poetry Library, <<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/adams-arthur-h/rain-in-the-bush-0052004>>, accessed 2 May, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

rainbird and tribe, together, laugh and sing to the welcomed rains. They celebrate the end of the 'too long dry' with 'grass all brown'.<sup>13</sup> And this transformative power of water is also found in Henry Lawson's 'The Song of the Darling River'; he constructs striking images of 'brass' 'skies' and 'plains bare / Death and ruin are everywhere' during drought-infested times.<sup>14</sup> However, fed by the Queensland rains, the Darling River, elevated to a first person pronoun in Lawson's ballad, gives life:

I drown dry gullies and lave bare hills,  
I turn drought-ruts into rippling rills --  
I form fair island and glades all green  
Till every bend is a sylvan scene.<sup>15</sup>

Here, the reader recognises water's power to 'drown', 'turn' and 'form'.

Australian film culture also explores water vocabulary. Australian Screen claims that, 'more than most other countries, Australian movies worry about water: getting it, keeping it, damming it, drowning in it'.<sup>16</sup> Russell Crowe's 2014 production, *The Water Diviner*, features a water diviner from the outback who journeys to Gallipoli to find his sons after the Great War. Although criticised for its misrepresentation of Australian war discourse, the film propels water and mysticism into popular culture. Further, Australian film interrogates the binaries of floodwaters as a god-like damnation, a punishment for wickedness, and an Edenic life giver.<sup>17</sup> Based on a 1902 Australian play of the same name, *The Breaking of the Drought*, a silent 1920s film juxtaposes the harsh realities of drought, flooding, and raging bushfires. By contrast, Australian director Charles Chauvel, in his 1949 film, *Sons of Matthew*, privileges purifying water pools nestled in an Australian paradise. Moreover, some cinematic narratives examine Aboriginal mysticism and folklore. According to the Yolngu people in north eastern Arnhem Land, water is 'the source of all that is holy'.<sup>18</sup> For example, the 1996 film, *Teen Canoes*, frames swamps as unthreatening and welcoming, something pure and undefiled by Western penetration. And perhaps this visual interrogation of the sacredness of water, for both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, provides a powerful metaphor to help forge reconciliation and restitution for all Australians.

<sup>13</sup> Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 'Community Rain Song', in *The Dawn is at Hand*, Australian Poetry Library, <<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/noonuccal-oodgeroo/community-rain-song-0719046>>, accessed 2 May, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Lawson, 'The Song of the Darling River', in *Verses Popular and Humorous*, <<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/lawson-henry/the-song-of-the-darling-river-0022021>> accessed 2 May, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> 'Water in Australian Cinema', *Australian Screen*, <<http://aso.gov.au/titles/collections/water/>>, accessed 14 Nov. 2014.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Deborah Bird Rose, 'Dreaming Ecology', *Nourishing Terrains*, 1996, p. 32.

Twenty-first century Australian culture continues to be shaped by water. From the rainfall deficiency reports and parched landscapes to current concerns of modern Australian infrastructure preventing the flow of water, we negotiate its power—the curses and the blessings. The western religious and traditional Aboriginal gatherings, poetic Australian voices and film culture all wrestle with the *paradiso-inferno* dichotomy of our water: the enigmatic fluidity of the great Australian water narrative. In the final analysis, however, A.B. ‘Banjo’ Paterson’s ‘Song of the Artesian Water’ promises us that this natural resource brings ‘hope’ and ‘comfort’—may we ‘let the water run’.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> A B Paterson, ‘Song of the Artesian Water’, in *Rio Grande’s Last Race and Other Verses*, Australian Poetry Library, <<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/paterson-a-b-banjo/song-of-the-artesian-water-0004015>>, accessed 30 April, 2015.