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**LOVE AND RECONCILIATION IN THE FOREST:
A STUDY IN DECOLONISATION**

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LOVE AND RECONCILIATION IN THE FOREST: A STUDY IN DECOLONISATION

Deborah Bird Rose*

INTRODUCTION

In this period of global warping of time–space topologies, and of increasing awareness of disorganisation and catastrophe, it is a matter of urgency to ask how we ‘new world’ settler peoples come to imagine that we belong to our beloved homelands. We cannot help but know that we are here through dispossession and death. What does this mean, for us and for country? The aim of this paper is to destabilise the moral ground of colonisation within the context of place, and thus to contribute to emerging practices whereby we may more effectively inscribe a decolonising and reparative presence for ourselves into the new world places that have become our homes.

My exposition explores the linking of social and environmental justice around an Aboriginal sacred site in New South Wales. First I examine a dispute that arose when the NSW Forestry Commission decided to log a sacred mountain. I then move to a series of interviews that I conducted with a local dairy farmer, a white man by the name of Mal Dibden. He describes the changes he has undergone in articulating a moral presence for himself, and he discusses his efforts to inscribe his life into place and time. The story of the mountain, and the story of reconciliation amongst people and with nature, are stories that tell us that alternatives to the status quo not only exist among us, but exist in contested places such as forests. They show us how to imagine alternative futures, and thus how we might work step by step toward decolonisation.

WARFARE

In 1801 Pierre Du Pont de Nemours wrote to Thomas Jefferson: ‘The inhabitants of your country districts regard Indians and forests as natural enemies which must be exterminated by fire and sword and brandy, in order that they may seize their territory’ (quoted in Churchill 1992: 139). Australians say much the same thing in

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their pithy and succinct vernacular: ‘If it moves, shoot it. If it doesn’t move, chop it down.’

Both statements express the profound historical fact that settler societies are built on a dual war—a war against nature and a war against the natives. In our societies the issues of environmental and social justice are irrevocably intertwined. Furthermore, decolonisation is not, for us, simply a matter of stopping the war; it is a matter of learning to make peace. The question is whether our desire for reconciliation is a comforting dream or whether it may be an assertion of faith in the possibility that we may yet be able to make peace with the people and places we have badly wronged.

Hannah Arendt used the term ‘dark times’ to refer to periods when the construction of law-like generalities and theoretical models is cut loose from human knowledge (Luban 1983). Her work is pertinent to our time now for three reasons. First, our postmodern condition is one of failed master narratives; we no longer have faith in the great stories that once made sense of the world for us. The second concerns my specific endeavour: decolonisation. We have not done this before, and so we cannot theorise in advance just how it will happen. We have to work it out step by step with and amongst each other. If it happens at all, it will unfold in real time. Third, and perhaps very specifically, we are entering a period of deep uncertainty, in which many unthinkable things have happened and undoubtedly are happening right now, and will continue to happen. The beauty of Arendt’s work, for me, is that she affirms the possibility of morally grounded action by proposing that what sustains our understandings in dark times is the web of stories we are able to weave out of our historically grounded experience. If we cannot see into the future, we can still look around us. If our world is uncertain, it is also richer than any monocultural or single-voiced story would lead us to believe. To anticipate an idea I will develop later, in dark times we are pressed to go to school with life.

SETTLER DYNAMICS

New world settler societies loosen moral accountability from the powerful constraints of place and time. In detaching people from place these societies enable action to escape feedback from the place. Settlers imagine themselves free to depart, indeed make a virtue of departing, and both geographical and economic mobility are fuelled by people’s efforts to escape the results of their actions. In detaching people from continuity in place they also loosen people from the feedback of time. Founded in disjunction (‘new’ worlds), settler cultures posit an endless overcoming in which the present is always already about to be superseded. Detached from organised moral accountability in two of the most fundamental domains of human life, new world settler societies generate catastrophe. To paraphrase Tacitus, they make a desolation and call it civilisation.

Moreover, our new world nations are founded in violent catastrophe, the extent of which settlers will never fully grasp. Many of my Aboriginal teachers suggest that white people just do not seem to get the sense of it at all. I have turned to the literature on the Holocaust because here people are struggling to make sense of atrocity. Rosenberg and Marcus take up questions of catastrophe and meaning in a particularly challenging way in their article ‘The Holocaust as a test of philosophy’. They point out that on the one hand there is the claim that the Holocaust is the major historical crisis (for the western world) in the twentieth century and that it must therefore have profound impacts on human behaviour and values. This claim is counterbalanced by the social fact that the impact of the Holocaust has not been widely acknowledged in ordinary social life, or in philosophy, or theology, or sociology, or any of the arenas of intellectual life in which we claim to grapple with the significance of the world we live in. They suggest, therefore, ‘that it may be possible for a historical event of overwhelming impact to alter quite radically the prevailing conditions in the objective world without the real significance of the event being absorbed into historical consciousness’ (Rosenberg and Marcus 1988: 203).

I think we see exactly this process in respect of colonisation within a larger set of settler societies that includes Australia, America, Canada and New Zealand. There have been catastrophes of major consequence, and we settlers barely know what to make of that. Equally, however, awareness of the ruptured alienation of settler societies is becoming ever more apparent. Unlike the Holocaust, which stands as a unique event, the violence that disconnects settlers from time and place is both foundational and continuous. The most usual name for this regime of colonising violence is ‘development’. The generations alive today may be the first wave of settlers to try to grasp the enormity of conquest, and to understand it as a continuous process. In consequence, many of us really search to understand how we may inscribe our moral presence back into the world. I would say that that is an impulse that needs to be taken very seriously indeed. I would like to see far more attention devoted both to the generation and the growth of this impulse, and to the obstacles to its realisation. This paper is just one step.

MT DROMEDARY

Captain Cook came sailing up the eastern coast of Australia in April of 1770. He saw ‘a pretty high mountain’ that looked to him remarkably like a camel, and so he named it Mt Dromedary (Forestry Commission 1987). According to the local Aboriginal people, Captain Cook discovered neither their mountain nor them. They had been advised of his journey, and many of their compatriots from the inland had joined them at the coast to watch him sail by. The Aboriginal people responsible for this mountain are the Umbarra people (people of the black duck) of the Yuin nation. These people call their mountain Gulaga. Today, part of the mountain is incorporated into Bodalla State Forest, part is a Flora Reserve, and farms, tiny

villages, an Aboriginal community and an Aboriginal area of land cluster around the lower slopes on the eastern side.

The mountain is an extinct volcano, linked geologically to Little Dromedary and Montague Island. From the perspective of the Umbarra people, the mountain—Gulaga—is a Dreaming woman, and she is linked by story to her two sons Little Dromedary and Montague Island. The term Dreaming refers to the beings who made the world to be as it is, and it further refers to the process of coming forth into the world. In terms of connection, Dreaming speaks to relationships that structure obligations of care, and that constitute webs of reciprocities within the created world. Gulaga is a Dreaming place, or sacred site, for local Aboriginal people. It is a place to which they are uniquely connected as a consequence of creation.

The mountain is located near Central Tilba and Tilba Tilba, and is seen from all the neighbouring communities: Narooma, Bermagui, Cobargo and a few others. This is a rural area of farms, and, increasingly, of tourism and holiday/retirement homes. Central Tilba is a heritage town; it is very attractive, as well as being a popular tourist site. This is an area where many local people have successfully made the shift out of primary production—dairy farming and logging—and into the kinds of economic ventures associated with tourism: wood-turning galleries, bed and breakfast cottages, and so on.

The Aboriginal people and the mountain have both experienced the full gamut of colonisation since the 1840s when white people first settled in the grassy plains around Narooma. I will discuss the history of the mountain first. Between 1877 and 1910 it was the site of intensive mining: 335 kilograms of gold were extracted in the period. Much of the rainforest was destroyed in the area where miners worked. It is now regenerated (Forestry Commission 1987). Mal Dibden, the dairy farmer with whom I conducted the interviews, described this period: ‘The place was totally raped, turned upside down, burnt everywhere. It was just like the action of a mob of pigs. The mountain had sat there for 80 million years minding its own business, and then came this twenty years of damage. It must have been reeling.’

Timber-getters have been active on the mountain for most of the history of settlement. Farmers have cleared up the slopes to the point where it just wasn’t viable any more, and during the period 1880–1970 this area was a thriving dairy community. Human disruptions opened areas on the mountain that were subsequently swept by violent fire. And there have been some savage fires. The 1952 fire is remembered vividly. People down at the coast at Bermagui said that the mountain went up like an atom bomb.

In spite of these impacts, the mountain is very rich botanically. There are three major types of rainforest as well as several types of eucalypt forest. According to the Mount Dromedary Flora Reserve Working Plan: ‘Botanically, Mt Dromedary

Flora Reserve is of unusual interest and of high conservation significance ... it includes a large and diverse range of plant communities, and in particular, for its latitude, of rainforest communities. A number of these communities are quite disjunct and separate from similar stands elsewhere on the South Coast' (Mount Dromedary 1985: 6). A number of the species recorded are at their southernmost known occurrence in the reserve, while many others are uncommon or rare.

In the 1960s Mal Dibden started agitating to get some protection for the mountain. In 1966 it was incorporated into Bodalla State Forest and, as part of that transfer, the eastern side of the mountain and the summit were designated 'Mount Dromedary Flora Reserve' under the Forestry Act in recognition of the unique concentration of different plant communities.

The ecological significance of the Flora Reserve led to its inclusion in the Register of the National Trust and listing by the Australian Heritage Commission. In 1986 the New South Wales government nominated the Flora Reserve for inclusion in the World Heritage List (Forestry Commission 1987). The Flora Reserve is managed by a committee whose members include a few local white people, a few local Aboriginal people, and a few foresters.

The history of the mountain reflects the history of white people in this region: mining and logging were sporadic activities, while small-scale farming endured until the collapse of the rural communities in the 1960s. The white people with whom I spoke looked back on the time before mechanisation as a time when they had close and often warm relationships with local Aboriginal people. In contrast, the Umbarra people with whom I spoke emphasised their sense of apartness throughout the twentieth century.

The colonisation history of the local Aboriginal people is punctuated by two main periods of concentrated brutality. The first was in the mid-nineteenth century. Devastating epidemics, dispossession and some massacres caused the loss of about 90 per cent of the population. There followed a period of adaptive co-existence in the last decades of the nineteenth century. During this interesting period some Aboriginal people became owners of land under Anglo-Australian title. Farming and fishing were the two main activities that contributed to the cash economy, for whites and for Aboriginals. There were Aboriginal cricket teams and musical events. Aboriginal people asked for and were allocated a school. At the same time, ceremonial life, while diminished, was still a rich part of the Aboriginal culture of the region. This period of adaptive coexistence came to an end in the twentieth century with a new wave of dispossession and confinement on reserves under the rule of the Aborigines Protection Board. In this period language and formal ceremonies were extinguished, as was Aboriginal ownership of land under Anglo-Australian title. By the 1950s assimilation policies and practices were actively moving people into 'white' society, and at the same time a lot of the former reserve land was sold off (summarised from Cameron 1987).

Since gaining unconditional citizenship in 1967, the Umbarra people have seized opportunities for cultural and economic renewal. They now run a very successful cultural centre with cultural tours to several areas, including the mountain.¹

In addition to the cultural significance of the mountain, there is historical significance to the fact that, through all of these years of conquest, policy shifts and enforced evictions, the mountain has remained a constant. It is visible from surrounding communities, so that even people who were moved into white settlements like Cobargo were still in sight of the mountain. It was there on the horizon: a visible presence signalling identity, belonging, responsibility and their relationship to the sacred.

Umbarra people love this mountain, and look to it for affirmation of themselves. The perduring relationship is one of connection. The mountain is understood and experienced as an active presence that exerts a hold on people. Umbarra people say that no matter where they go the mountain calls them back (see Byrne 1984).

TO LOG OR TO PROTECT?

In 1989 the Forestry Commission of New South Wales (Forestry) began a timber removal project on the west side of the mountain. Umbarra women and their relatives sought to ban that logging, and they were joined in their action by white people from all of the communities within sight of the mountain.

The women took their concerns to Forestry and to the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service. Forestry agreed to halt logging while the matter was investigated.² I was approached by the Umbarra women and formally asked to assist. Once Forestry also agreed that in their view I was a suitable person, I began the task.

The basis of the women's action was that the mountain is a sacred place, one of a series of sacred mountains along the south coast. Gulaga is a Dreaming woman; the mountain is her body. There are portions of the mountain where men can go, and portions where only women can go. The main division is into two sides, east and west, and the west side—the side that was being logged—is exclusively for women. The mountain is ringed with tall standing stones called guardians, some of which are male, some female. The trees are gendered too. As well, the mountain is home to a number of extra-ordinary beings who guard it, and whose presence sustains its spiritual integrity. The mountain was an initiation and teaching place 'from time immemorial', and in recent years people have publicly resumed

1 Persons wanting to know more about the significance of Gulaga can contact the Umbarra Aboriginal Cultural Centre and Tours, Wallaga Lake, NSW.

2 There was already a precedent for restraint from logging on the grounds of cultural significance in relation to Mumbulla Mountain (Egloff 1979).

teaching and other ritual activities on the mountain. Underlying the action to stop logging, there was a sustained belief amongst Umbarra people that the mountain is theirs: they belong to it, and it belongs to them (discussed in Rose 1990).

Most of the settler-descended people in the area opposed Forestry. This probably would have been different if a significant proportion of the local population was engaged in logging, as Peace's work on forestry disputes indicates (Peace 1999). They formed several action groups; the most prominent were the Gulaga Protection Group, and the Women's Forest Action Group. There were many white people who, in fact, did not believe that the mountain was sacred, but who still thought it was significant for one reason or another, and so opposed logging. Like Umbarra people, they spoke of the need to protect water supplies, to control erosion, and to sustain biodiversity.

Many of the settler-descended people involved in these groups knew many of the local Umbarra people, and had known for some time that the mountain was sacred to Aboriginal people. Some of these white people had also come to their own understanding that this was a sacred mountain. That is, some of the local white people understood the mountain to be sacred in reference to themselves as well as in reference to Aborigines. Some of them understood themselves to have been drawn by the power of this place. Thus, while they deferred to the Aboriginal people's statements of sacred significance, and regarded Aborigines as the primary spiritual custodians, many of them asserted that the mountain was sacred to them too, that it influenced their lives, that they had assumed responsibilities toward the mountain, and that their lives would be diminished if the mountain were damaged. Some of these people had participated in teaching events organised by Umbarra elders. Thus, the convergence of concern for the sacred significance of the mountain was quite clearly the result of the generosity of local Aboriginal people. In addition to permissions given to local groups to use the mountain, several elders have taken groups up onto portions of the mountain for teaching, and they have included both white and indigenous people in their teaching groups.³

I can summarise the outcomes very quickly: I completed my investigations and offered two main proposals: that Forestry desist from logging, and that they develop workable mechanisms for consultation with the Aboriginal women and other members of the community so that they could jointly determine a boundary beyond which there would be no logging. Forestry agreed to these proposals, and the western side of the mountain is not logged.

3 The teaching that has gone on this area has been accomplished primarily through the unflagging efforts of Ann Thomas and Guboo Ted Thomas.

MAKING PEACE

Almost everybody I spoke with in the area advised me to consult a local dairy farmer named Mal Dibden. He had worked to get the Flora Reserve put in place, and was on the Advisory Committee; he was active in working against logging, but tried to keep a low profile, in keeping with his status as a local farmer. In 1990 the historian Peter Read and I worked together on a pilot project investigating white Australians' attachments to place. We decided to go back to the Tilba area and interview Mal Dibden in depth. The interviews I am drawing on in this section of my paper are interviews that Pete Read and I conducted with Mal in 1990 (see also Read 1992).

Mal started off with a 400-acre farm called Spring Hills that had been in his mother's family. It is right up against Mt Dromedary, and much of it is too steep to farm. His father purchased the place in 1948, and Mal worked there with him. He had spent his childhood holidays there, and the place was already dear to him. Over the years he bought more and more properties. Some are on the flatter land near Wallaga lake and are pretty good dairy country. Most, like Spring Hills, are poor dairy country, and a lot of the land is bush. On most sides his land is bordered by national parks, state forests, wildlife preserves and the lake, so that, as he says, the boundaries are not really boundaries at all.

He had 1300 acres in 1990, of which only about 300 were cleared. That is to say that less than one quarter of his land was economically productive.⁴ In this area property values and property taxes are rising very rapidly, and Mal needs a cash income. Blocks that he bought for £2000 are now worth a quarter of a million dollars. Like many farmers, he operates under a large financial debt.

The philosopher Emil Fackenheim (1994: 5) says that in dark times we have to go to school with life. Mal has done exactly that. He calls the school nature, and he has worked out for himself a philosophy of life that he shared with Pete Read and me in extended interviews. Nature, in Mal's view, is more powerful than humans, and a human life lived well is a life that has been 'knocked into shape' by nature. He seems to be saying that society offers ideas and expertise, directions for action, that allow us to kid ourselves that we are in charge. Getting knocked into shape by nature is a process of realising the folly of thinking you are in control. He talks a lot about 'nature', and I find the word inadequate. But with all its sad history and current imperfections, it is a word into which we constantly are pouring new meanings. Mal's meanings are not definitions, but rather are actions and processes. For him, nature is an active force that he encounters with pleasure, awe and humility.

4 Recently the Dzogchen Community of Australia has purchased a large block of land in the foothills of the mountain and has established a residence and teaching centre for the Rimpoche Chogyal Namkhai Norbu.

Much of Mal's thinking moves between the extremes of the forest and the cleared land. The farmers, and the former farming communities that he loves so much, were thoughtless in their clearing of the bush, and Mal lives that legacy. Thus, for him, farm and forest are strongly alternative modes of engaging with nature. Mal loves them both, but valorises them differently. It is a tension he does not try to resolve, minimise or justify.

The ratio of bush to cleared land on Mal's blocks means that most of the land does not produce a cash income:

It's a privilege to own and a burden to try and hold.

It doesn't produce much, unless you want to cut the trees down, and the rates around here are enormous. So, you've just got to be crazy to kid yourself that you can hold onto it in the long term.

You've got to be honest with yourself, really. For me, my beef effort, and even the dairy effort are only efforts I'm making to kid myself and kid the banks that I'm a farmer.

The original farm of 400 acres only had 160 cleared acres but, as Mal says, what was cleared was beautiful in his eyes.

It was amazing how tidy it was, and what a good job they did do, as far as keeping it tidy was concerned.

I'm still not convinced that it ever should have been cleared in any way, ever. But it was cleared and it did look nice.

I like to remember and think of sections that really looked wonderful. You get that mountain country tidied up, and the granite rocks poking out through the green grass, and it's fantastic mountain country, mountain gazing country. To look at. Not for any other purpose, but to look at.

Mal treasured the aesthetics of it, and also the self-supporting community that was associated with it.

They were only small dairies. And they didn't make much money, and they didn't have much money. It wasn't economically all that wonderful ... It was a particularly close-knit community, particularly in a cheese making district because you delivered milk to a factory every morning. So you met every farmer, practically every morning, seven days a week ... You had community effort on each individual

farm, and you had community involvement because people met almost every day.

But thinking since, when you think of all those farms around the mountain, that steep country that should never have been cleared in the first place. When you think of the numbers of people that it supported, just for a short period, you know, only thirty or forty or fifty years. And the work that was involved in doing it, and the soil that must have eroded away as a result of all their efforts plowing hillsides. It was just crazy.

The rural way of life that Mal treasured has collapsed, and he speaks of a double shame: the shame of clearing in the first place, and the shame of losing those self-supporting communities to mechanisation and development.

If you look at it one way, you'd have to say it was a waste and a shame. You can look at it in so many different ways. You can say, well, it's a shame now the way it's gone, neglected, only rabbits and regeneration; but you can look at it and be honest and say, it's a shame it was ever cleared in the first place.

So, maybe it's all a shame.

Mal started life as a keen farmer:

You get knocked into shape by droughts and financial situations, and, yeah, I did some things that looked pretty good, and I was pretty cocky about it for a time. Like agricultural scientists said, I raised cattle for beef, extra beef efforts that went along with what I should be doing. I had things that I thought were looking pretty good at one stage. And then whang, four years of drought, and these lovely cattle that I'd raised, and the nice pasture that looked good, it turned to dust, and the cattle ended up most of them dead. Most of them dead over four years. That comes as a pretty fair message. When it's all over, that is. When you're going through it you keep kidding yourself that it can't go on much longer, its going to rain soon, you're going to get out of it, and you're going to be a good farmer, when really you're a dreadful farmer. Because droughts come every so often no matter what.

When you're young you don't know. [You only learn] because you've been knocked into shape by the lessons of nature.

To get a closer look at nature, we have to go to the mountain. Mt Dromedary has been part of Mal's life since childhood as a presence that towered above him. He

did not actually go up onto the forested areas of the mountain till after the 1952 fire. It was easy to travel up the mountain then, and he and his father rode up on horses. They came to one part that had not been burnt, and it had a great impact on him.

Mal compared the impact of his first time in the mountain forest with what he thought it might have been like for Aboriginal people to have been taken up there for religious purposes. This event was for him a transformative experience that would be with him for the rest of his life. Here as elsewhere, when Mal spoke of his deepest experiences and beliefs, he expressed himself in conjunction with Aboriginal people, as if talking about Aboriginal people enabled him to articulate a spirituality that he was hesitant to claim for himself.

The impact on young people would be such that they never would forget; a very deep feeling straight away; they could feel the sacredness. Not to live there, but to keep it in reverence in their hearts and in their minds for the rest of their lives. That's the sort of impact it had on me.

Mal started returning to the mountain in the 1960s and he kept coming back. In his words:

I didn't come back again for quite a long while; it was in the sixties or so before I started becoming interested in it again. Rough times on the farm, disappointments, pasture improvements that did badly, the drought, the cattle dying, that changed my life. Thinking back on it now, it doesn't mean a thing. You're mad to get worked up about those things, but when you're younger, you put a fair bit of work into it, and think you've done a good job over it, and if it's all wiped out by nature with a few years of drought, it has an impact on you. I don't know why I started coming up here again, really.

As the Aboriginals say, it seemed to draw me back.

Mal took Pete and me up the mountain, and we spent a day straggling along behind him with camera and tape recorder, while he took off his thongs and leaped around as nimble as a goat, picking leaches off his feet, and pointing out to us particular places and trees that he had been visiting and observing for decades.

I feel that it's so beautiful, and it looks after itself. Its completely natural, a natural perfect garden. Nothing looks out of place except intruders, and I class myself as being an intruder.

I feel it is a very spiritual place, really. It has more spiritual—if that's the right word—more spiritual meaning to me than walking into a

church anywhere. I think this particular type of forest, being such a lovely tranquil cool temperate rainforest ... I feel more tranquil and peaceful and responsible in appreciating the values of it, so I'm even careful about where I put my feet. There's a responsibility to the beauty, and to the values it must have meant to Aboriginals, and does now.

Mal was not sure if spirituality was the right word. I am not sure either. We simply do not have a vocabulary that works well for us in talking about relationships to place. However, looking at it in terms of context, Mal's term 'spirituality' requires that nature be understood as an active force, something living, something to be encountered. I find three interconnected dimensions of Mal's term 'nature'. The first is that nature is self-organising. For example, he contrasts the mountain forest with the rainforest in the National Botanic Gardens in Canberra, saying that they try, but they just do not succeed in making something that is anything like the real rainforest. The more important point concerning self-organisation is that the forest is perfect, as it is.

It never needs human attention. It is beauty which just works itself out without anyone picking up the sticks or putting things in order. It's all in order anyway, even a stick that's fallen on the ground out of a tree. A new object on the ground still doesn't look like a foreign thing.

A second dimension is that the forest is active on its own behalf. This is part of being self-organising, the point being that nature takes its own back, and re-forms and replenishes itself. Biologists use the term 'self-repairing'. An example is all the old farm equipment around the place. The pig pens are caving in and covered with vines, the old World War II trucks are up to the axles in soil, and have weeds growing out the windows. Mal's concept of taking care of place is non-interventionist: he is not looking to restore the land to an imaginary perfection; he lets nature take its own back.

The third dimension is that, as nature is a living and active presence, it reaches out to people. It is not only present in its self-organising life, but seeks to organise people as well.

You've got to get the impact, be hit by the beauty. It's almost got to startle you, I reckon, to stop you in your tracks and just make you change yourself to a degree while you're enjoying the beauty of it.

Nature, then, organises relationships. The fact that the mountain does not need you to organise it is counterbalanced by the fact that if you put your body into the place with an attitude of attention, the place will organise you by requiring you to make changes in yourself.

The hard knocks have sorted me out. I can see my mistakes, and the good values have come into my head. I can take [the lessons of the mountain] with me. I'll never lose it. And it was in the minds of the Aboriginals too. The mountain drew them back.

The lessons that Mal has learned by getting knocked into shape by nature, and by going to the mountain, inspire him to keep on working to protect the land and waters of his region.

The tension between forest and cleared land is a tension between reverence and labour. His reverence for the perfection of nature is in contradictory tension with the labour of clearing/transforming the land. Mal's great respect for Aboriginal culture is founded in his view that they had developed a form of reverential labour. That is, there was no contradiction for them, as there is for him, between reverence and labour. He stated the contrast vividly:

I'm sitting on the edge of the lake where Aboriginals have lived for probably 30 or 40 thousand years without cutting one single tree down, not thousands, but one single tree. And they were healthy and happy people, healthier probably than I am now and healthier than most Europeans are who've tipped the place upside down to make a dollar out of it.

Most of the current evidence of human labour in the area is degradation: the lakes are silting up, the water systems are becoming fouled, and so on. In contrast, Mal is still searching for a form of reverential labour. His compromise is to work part of his land and keep the much greater portion of it out of production. So his life problems circle back around to economics, and the terrible pressure to be commercially viable:

I don't own this land at all. In no time at all somebody else will be scratching their head and worrying about how to hang on to it. So I don't own it, I'm just the galoot who's trying to hold it together. If you think of it that way—that you do own the land—you start thinking of monetary values and it really becomes upsetting in the end. I try to disregard it because you do realise that it is worth a heap of money. And you just love it so much you don't want to sell any of it, so what's the point of it being worth a heap of money? It only makes it harder to hang on to it.

As nature reached out and changed Mal, he had to query everything about himself, his society, and the public values that surrounded him. His conclusions are related to his life problem of holding land in a commodity economy:

We've all been conned. I'm pretty sure we've all been conned into a system where we've got to have heaps of money just to maintain the basics.

I think it's going to be extremely difficult to coast along with it and survive. The pressures are too great.

Pete and I asked Mal if he would do it all again—all the farming, all the clearing—and he said 'No'. Pete told Mal about some other people we interviewed who in the 1950s had dropped out of city life and gone to make a farm in the country, and who now express an awareness of the damage they did as well as feeling pride in the work of their lives. Their view was that in the 50s government policy and general social knowledge had it that it was a good thing to be in primary production and to feed the world. These folks said, 'sure we cut a lot of trees down. Maybe it was wrong, but we enjoyed it, and we had a good life.'

We put this proposition to Mal, and he would not agree. Rather, he insisted on a deeper and more problematic confrontation:

I'm not sure of the logic. I'm not sure of the earth logic. The relationship of humans to the earth. That's the serious question, I think, really. And, it scares me. I think things are running riot, really, and out of hand. It's showing up all over the world, where economics is governing people's relationships with the earth. It shouldn't be economics at all. It should be sensibilities and responsibilities.

NATURE'S SCHOOL

Mal's life exemplifies what I take to be the great problem for settlers: that of re-grounding our accountability in time and place. He shows us what it means to be a settler with a conscience and with enormous love for a particular place in this world. In light of Mal's testimony, I would want to use the term decolonisation in an extremely strong sense to mean the unmaking of the regimes of violence that enforce the disconnection of moral accountability from time and place (see also Bauman 1993: 244).

These stories—of Mt Dromedary and Mal Dibden—are not paths that take us to known places. Rather, they help us put one foot in front of the other in dark and risky times. One story concerns reconciliation. It involves Indigenous people whose connections to place and to the knowledge of sacred places is alive and well. At the same time, it involves settlers who, in their own lives or the lives of their forebears, actively or passively promoted the practices that sought most specifically to eradicate these Indigenous people, to wipe out their knowledge, and to destroy their connections to place. Reconciliation started long before Forestry threatened the mountain, but Forestry promoted reconciliation by generating the

need for people to come together, and by their responsiveness to the local communities.

A second story concerns the sacred. The fact that Aboriginal and settler-descended people were asserting, separately and together, the sacred quality of the mountain bears out the thesis put forward by Hornborg that indigenous people make a pivotal contribution to environmental discourse by having 'redefined its framework so that it is becoming increasingly legitimate to evoke concepts of sanctity' (Hornborg 1994: 250). This is a story that is full of reverence for place, and full of labour to sustain the integrity of place. It runs counter to the regimes of violence that are labelled development, and thus seems to fit what Mal calls the earth logic: the balance that sustains relationships between humans and the earth.

A third story is about love. It looks like a love story on first glance because that is what Mal says it is: he loves the place so much. That is what Umbarra people are saying, and that is what many other settler-descended people in the area are saying. Given these many powerful expressions of love, it takes a while to realise that there is a deeper story.

Let us recall the historical context. We are in the midst of wounding, after more than a century of damage, and in a time when regimes of violence are becoming ever more powerful. We are listening to a man who cleared the land, cut down rainforest, and loves the farming community which used to be the context of his life. This damage, and the various moments of shame that Mal identifies, provide a context in which love springs forth somewhat improbably. I thought at first that Mal was inscribing himself into the mountain, and only belatedly did I come to understand how deeply the mountain was inscribing itself into Mal. This is a story of Mal's love of the mountain, as he says. But it is also a story of how nature not only knocks you, and forces you to change yourself, but of how nature pulls you into love.

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