

Eungedup

a wetland summer diary



Giles Watson



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The natural flow of water sustains aquatic ecosystems that are central to our spirituality, our social and cultural economy and wellbeing. The rivers are the veins of Country, carrying water to sustain all parts of our sacred landscape. The wetlands are the kidneys, filtering the water as it passes through the land.

Nelson, Godden & Lindsay, *A Pathway to Cultural Flows in Australia*, 2018.



This book was written on Menang Noongar boodja.
The author acknowledges that sovereignty was never ceded.

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Prelude

I need a Place where I can breathe – but after eighteen years abroad, I'm blocked at the trachea. I feel I am claimed by a different Place entirely – that I'm still subsisting on the final breaths I took there – a world's width away. Chronic fatigue drags me down, dries out my mouth, elongates every duty into drudgery. My dreams are haunted by constriction – a slow, parched throttling of the soul. No matter what medical solutions I may find, nothing within me can heal without this connection – even though this land is not my land, but another's.

I need a Place whose struggle is my struggle – a Place which floods and parches as I do – even though I am a newcomer to it. A liminal Place – for a liminal spirit. A Place open to receive the one who does not belong – a Place which is always open to receiving.

I do not want to own this Place. But I do want to be owned by it. I will come to it – I promise – knowing I am an interloper, hoping to be known.

I found a grove of coastal Karri trees five minutes from the beach – ringing with the songs of birds – and thought it might be the Place. But they cut down a corner of the grove to make way for a house, and the birds went silent.

I found a meadow beside the harbour spangled with astonishing constellations of flowers – and thought this might be the Place.

But they overturned the soil, poured concrete, built houses on the meadow, and the flowers dimmed and straggled.

I found a hillside covered with orchids overlooking a beach with a buried shipwreck – a Place where I felt I could see the spirits of ancestors not my own looking out between the leaves of Peppermints at a sailing ship taking on water from the spring – and thought this might be the Place. But they designated a corner of the hillside for a tourist resort – and it seemed the spirits scattered.

There is talk of a Place called Eungedup – half an hour by road from Kinjarling. I do not even know yet how to pronounce it – but it is said that there are Bitterns. I've heard rumours of a community initiative to buy it – restore and preserve it – so that no sentence will ever be written about Eungedup that begins with “But they...”.

Eungedup – land of waters. This may be the Place.

I must go there. I must go without delay.

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Lake Saide, eastern shore

Australasian Bittern?

(Botaurus poiciloptilus?)

Before they gouged a road here
the only tracks were left by Roos.
On the wild side of the lake
I trace their quaggy trails
to reach the reeds.

Old *Banksias* form a grove here -
grizzled twigs festooned
with spiders' webs and fluff
of windblown seeds.

Frogs click and craik and rattle.

It's a warm day for winter
so I'm braving ticks and snakes
to see the open water.
Swamp Harriers reconnoitre
and hidden birds
make ghost noises.

I almost failed
to heed you - but here
I swear you're calling
like darker thoughts

or undertones of loss -
broad brown Bittern pulsing
your feathered resonance
in winter when the textbooks
insist that you are silent.

I guess but never see you
skygazing to align
striations with the reeds
invisible in plain sight -
straight and living pattern
of sunward growth and bronzing -
one of two thousand
remaining in Australia.

When your calls subside -
a great while I remain
to heed your silence
and other distant booms
from roads whose makers
barely seem to care
if this voiceless absence
should last forever -
who'd let weeds corrode
your precious wetland -
leach poisons into it -
steal its water.

Surely, we could save it -
if we ratchet up our hoping
but governments won't -
and councils won't -
and so you're waiting -
and I am gone to ground
beneath a *Banksia*.

When I wake
you've waded further -
and I fantasise a world
rejuvenated - where wetlands
flourish and Warblers' songs
are almost deafening - where
reeds and windless surface
quiver at your booming.

Later on at home I wonder -
could I have really heard you
at daytime and in winter
when your last thought is of breeding
and your heart is set on fishing
and on fattening in hope
of lustful summer - but I have you
on a recording - and compare you
obsessively with soundbites
of other dwindling Bitterns
across Australia - and find myself
not wishful - but convinced -
then tell myself I'm wrong -

that perhaps you were only
a Swamphen pumping up
his purple breast and drumming.

But it's enough. The wetland and its calling
swells within my dreaming - and I'm longing
to be walking - even wading - through
the humming summer of Kambarang
Birak and Bunuru - seeking living treasure
at Eungedup - place for sustained pilgrimage
where snakeskins - Bitterns' feathers -
shells of Dragonfly nymphs - birds'
splayed footprints up and down the silt -
emptied skins of Cicadas part way up
the Peppermints - bristling cones of *Banksias* -
eyegleams of the *Antechinus* -
the splash and spreading wake of the Rakali
are the relics - and the lip of land
at the edge of lapping water
where I can sit and get my notebook muddy
is a shrine.