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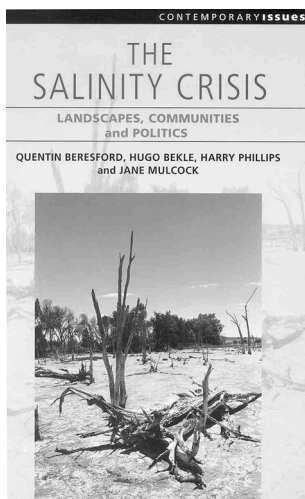
Book Review Section

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Review essays

Quentin Beresford, Hugo Bekle, Harry Philips and Jane Mulcock: *The Salinity Crisis: Landscapes, Communities and Politics*. Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2001. xii + 324 pp., illus., ISBN 1 876 26860 3, \$29.95



In the annual Jack Beale Water Resources Lecture at the Australian National University last October, Andrew Campbell suggested that in the interests of sustainable land use, we could no longer justify spending taxpayers' money employing wheat breeders. Wheat also comes in for some bad press in this book examining the emergence of dryland salinity in Western Australia. Almost a third of the book is devoted to the history of agricultural development, providing valuable insights into the role of

government, the place of science and the expectations of European settlers in the development of the state. It also introduces some much-needed perspective to the debate on how to manage a crisis that has been described as the most serious environmental problem facing the country. The analysis of underlying causes and proposed responses in the book is, however, less satisfying.

Early in the introduction, we are told the book will address three questions. Why has Australia been farmed so destructively? What role did government play? What is required to turn the situation around? Readers looking for considered answers to the first and third questions will be disappointed, however, as the authors set their sights firmly on the role of government. We are given a strong hint of their answer to that question as the introduction closes:

...our failure to respond to salinity has been dogged by a lack of political leadership and weakness in the institutions of government. In the case of Western Australia, it may not be an exaggeration to claim that salinity on such a threatening level presents a failure of our democratic process. (p. 37)

The analysis is dominated by a tone of indignation that governments so vigorously pursued land development policies in the face of evidence that they were doing environmental harm. The authors present evidence that a strong case was mounting by the 1960s to question seriously the wisdom of further settlement schemes. But to expect the brakes to have

been applied in the 1920s or 1930s as they imply seems unrealistic. It fails to acknowledge the momentum and single-mindedness embodied in the sense of manifest destiny possessed by the early settlers. This may have been a milder strain than that afflicting the new arrivals in North America, but it was there never the less. It was there in Thomas Mitchell's 1920 campaign slogan for re-election as premier 'to bring together idle lands and idle hands', the idle hands referring to diggers from the goldfields and the trenches of World War 1.

The assertion that salinity illustrates a failure of liberal democracy begs the question, a failure to do what? To demonstrate foresight? History suggests there would be grounds for celebration if a society ever exhibited foresight in the management of natural resources but hardly cause for indignation in its absence. The authors suggest that government failed because it ignored advice, but it is worth considering the nature and implications of that advice. The early advice amounted to an assessment of risk. Until recently, the risk was judged to be small compared to the perceived economic and social benefits of food self-sufficiency and export income. Until very recently, the advice to government did not suggest an alternative course of action, and therefore by default represented a direct challenge to the philosophy of development and the assumption that agriculture was the appropriate foundation stone of settlement and society. To expect this view to have been openly questioned and a new course chartered in the early decades of the last century assumes that governments and citizens would easily abandon their sense of entitlement to an uncultivated land, a view not rejected formally until the High Court's Mabo decision seventy years later. This is not to justify the values of early settlers but to suggest that such deeply held and unquestioned beliefs were not likely to be easily abandoned.

To say the government failed in not listening to a handful of brave and insightful scientists and engineers like W. E. Wood, John Patterson and R. Bleazby also assumes that science was held in high regard at the time. D. O. Masson, professor of chemistry at the University of Melbourne and founding member of the CSIR, observed that science in the first decades of the twentieth century represented a threat to authority both religious and secular. This threat is reflected in the report of the Royal Commissioners in the 1917 inquiry into the development of the Esperance and mallee belt cited in the book. John Patterson, founding professor of agriculture at The University of Western Australia conducted a soil survey along the south coast and presented his findings to the commission. He predicted that 30% of the land was at risk of becoming saline if cleared. The commissioners responded in their report '...we will not let scientific prejudice get in the way of opening up our mallee lands'. In a similar vein, the premier Thomas Mitchell is quoted as saying: 'If the good Lord had provided scientists when Adam and Eve were created, no useful work would have been done'.

Group settlement schemes and the vision of establishing a 'bold yeomanry' in an unfamiliar land did not go unchallenged however. The authors point out that there were five Royal Commissions into land development between 1917 and 1944 prompted by their failure to live up to their promise, the hardship of individual settlers and a five-fold increase in state debt between 1900 and 1930. The latter was due in part to premier Mitchell borrowing heavily in London to fund group settlement after the success of his election slogan. The role of government during this era suggests that WA Inc., the term coined to describe the closeness of state government to the private sector in the 1980s, had deeper roots. The persistent calls for

inquiries into public administration that have followed ever since prompted the current premier Geoff Gallop to suggest that we need a Royal Commission into 'The Founding of the Swan River Colony and Events Thereafter'.

By the end of the section on solutions, the prospect raised in the introduction of turning the situation around is all but gone. Instead the authors seem to acknowledge reluctantly that huge public expense is difficult if not impossible to justify in many instances, with the unfortunate implications that some areas and some landholders will miss out on the allocation of public funds for rehabilitation. This recognition that we are in trade-off territory is an acknowledgment that the response to salinity for most of its history has been an economic one. The scale of the problem is now forcing a more open evaluation of the role of agriculture in the economy and the value we place on maintaining social and physical infrastructure and natural capital. In his book on the collapse of complex societies, Joseph Tainter concludes that the common theme explaining the collapse of the civilizations he studied from Casa Grandes to Rome was declining marginal returns on investment in socio-political complexity. His case studies have particular resonance with the situation in regional Australia and also suggest the issue is deeper than a failure of liberal democracy.

The possibility that salinity represents an ethical rather than a political failure is raised on the second last page with a quote from Aldo Leopold. In his 1949 essay *The Land Ethic*, widely regarded as having kick-started the environmental ethics movement, Leopold suggests that history consists of a succession of excursions from

a single starting point to which humanity returns time and again to organise yet another search for a durable set of values. Civilizations come and go he argues, and the reason they fail to persist is that their value system lets them down. He suggests that the fault lies with the view of nature as a commodity that belongs to us, rather than as a community to which we belong. The question is what we do about it. To abandon the former view leaves us with eco-totalitarianism. Whales, wolves and spotted owls have been the iconic emblems in that debate over the last quarter of the twentieth century, but we are still a long way from reconciling those two views of nature. In the final paragraph the authors suggest that ethics is a much-needed addition to 'the equation of our response to salinity'. The ethical challenge, however, is so substantial it requires a new mathematics, not simply a new variable.

The strength of this book lies in the historical account of agricultural development. If we are to find solutions to a crisis of these proportions it is essential we stand back and attempt to understand the underlying causes, attitudinal, even more than political and hydrological. The historical section alone makes this book required reading for those confronting the problem of salinity for the first time as well as those who have been immersed in it for years. The weakness is that at times it has the flavour of a negligence case against successive state governments. This makes it invaluable for landholders planning a class action, but unsatisfying as it may seem, I suspect the defendant would get away with the argument 'society is to blame'.

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