Essay:
Sustaining a nation

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We visited our relations in spring last year. They raise their living from the central western plains of New South Wales, near Forbes. This is not the kind of country where city folk buy hobby farms, or aspire to holiday homes. A day’s drive from Sydney, it is not easy or pretty. It is working-farm country, straightforward and pragmatic, although the flat pastures and waving wheat have their own beauty in good times. These are not good times.

Lambs were fetching four dollars a kilogram at the Forbes saleyards in the week of our visit. That is how they are sold – not on the weight of the bleating animals, but on a calculation of what their carcasses will yield in meat once the hide is removed, the internal organs scooped out, the blood drained away and the head, feet and tail disposed of. Only we city slickers, leaning over the railings of the yard, smelling the manure, watching the animals roll their eyes and push in fear as the auctioneers shout, see a chasm between the cold calculation of ‘dressed weight’ and the reality of living creatures.

The animals are not only animals. They are units of production. Their entire lives – the costs of rearing, feeding and transporting – are calculated in dollars, with the end point being dressed weight, on which the farmer is paid. According to Meat & Livestock Australia, the costs of production for an efficient lamb producer are around two dollars a kilogram, dressed weight. An inefficient producer might have costs as high as $3.34, leaving little room for profit and what the corporation calls the ‘lifestyle aspirations that your farm must support’.

After the dressed weight is calculated and the farmer paid, fat is trimmed. Bone is cut away. More blood is lost. Up to half the dressed weight disappears between sale of the living beast and dinner.

The owner of the farm we visited, Graeme McIntosh, has a saying: ‘You’ve got livestock, you’ve got dead stock.’ There is little room for sentiment, yet they take such care. We heard about how Graeme and his partner, Yvonne, spent hours picking barley-grass seeds out of the eyes of their sheep. The animals have two eyelids, and the sharp seeds get caught in between. The pain can drive animals mad, or, in the cool language of farming publications, lead them to ‘lose condition’. To pick out the seeds, Yvonne had to hold the animals down, one by one, warm waxy wool against her work shirt, while Graeme took to them with tweezers.
In the yards near the back door of the farmhouse, Yvonne keeps an enclosure of baby lambs who have lost their mothers. She buys powdered milk in the supermarket, mixes it, and feeds it to the lambs morning and evening in old soft drink bottles topped with a baby’s bottle teat. My children love to help with the feeding, although the hungry lambs butt so hard that it can be difficult to hang on to the bottle. Once, the children found an orphan lamb close to death and brought it back to the farmhouse. After a few days of Yvonne’s care, it was clearly going to live, and the children named it Lucky. On our most recent visit, they asked what had become of it. Lucky had gone, of course. My husband suggested that next time a better name might be Chop, or Rolled Roast.

I have heard tales of how, many years ago, sheep on a farm near here had to be put down and buried in a mass pit in a time of drought, when they could be neither kept nor sold. The pointless mass killing could have broken hearts but after some hours, as each carcass hit the trench, the people doing the shooting broke into song. It was the song from Monty Python’s Life of Brian: ‘Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.’

When we visited the Forbes saleyards last year – when lambs were being sold for four dollars a kilogram, dressed weight – lamb forequarter chops in Woolworths and Coles cost around eleven dollars a kilo. In between was transport, slaughter, more transport, butchering, the packing into plastic trays and all that is involved in maintaining the bright lights and cold cabinets of the modern supermarket. The profits on any one piece of meat are not big. The two big supermarket chains, Coles and Woolworths, make big money, but largely because of the volume of stuff they sell, rather than enormous mark-ups. The industry relies on volume.

In previous years, I have visited the farm in summer, when the region is consumed in the business of the wheat harvest. Combine harvesters work through the night. Farmers survive with little sleep. Wheat dust covers everything. I have sat in a truck on its way to the silos, which stand silent for most of the year but at harvest time are so busy you have to watch yourself or be run over. Selling wheat is not as simple as it once was, when the grower took the Wheat Board pool price and left it at that. These days, farmers can sell for cash at the silo or take a fixed-grade contract, which can give a premium price but leaves them exposed if the grade or yield of the crop fails to live up to the contract.

There are other buyers at the silos as well: biscuit manufacturers and exporters offering their own prices for different grades of wheat. The truck drivers use mobile phones to keep in touch, and calculations are made on whether to go to one silo or another, factoring in the cost of fuel and driving time. The trucks pull in under the elevated office. Samples are taken from deep within their loads, and measured on the spot for moisture and protein. The higher the protein level, the higher the price. Wheat that contains too much moisture is rejected and must go back to the farm, perhaps to be stored for feed.
All this activity, all this hard work. All the fertiliser, the fuel and the rain. It seems extraordinary to me that at home I can buy a loaf of bread – baked, packed, wrapped and sliced for my convenience – for just $1.80.

There hasn’t been a decent wheat crop in Forbes for some years. The Yarrabandai silo is silent and empty. On its side there is ironic graffiti: ‘The Hub of the Universe.’ There is not a soul to be seen.

The lives of my farming relations are not about the Epicurean, nor about the personal relationships of farmers’ markets, nor about any of the fads and fashions of food that haunt the city. My relatives are preoccupied with the hard and gritty business of the industrialised production of food, which remains the means by which most Australians are fed. They are proud of this.

In the city, we risk making a fetish of food. There is so much of it, and it is so cheap. There have never been so many cookbooks, celebrity chefs, unusual ingredients, or attention paid to gradations of taste in oils and nuts, breads and vinegars. There are parts of the city where, for hundreds of metres, every business is a café or a restaurant or a fast-food outlet. In living memory, we have moved from a situation in which most people were worried about not getting enough food, and in which the breadwinner was preoccupied with just that, to one in which most of us worry about how not to overeat.

Yet, while food has become so fancy and fussed over, the growing of it has become less important to our national economy and our national psyche. In the 1950s, agriculture – mostly food production – made up almost a third of the nation’s gross domestic product. Today it is 3 per cent.

Growing food is about connections, but these days it is also about disconnections. The country and the city seem out of sympathy with each other. We visited the farm during the Sydney dust storm of September 2009. Graeme and Yvonne were scathing about the media coverage. In the farmhouse, dust storms are a weekly occurrence. Every nice thing in the house is in sealed plastic bags. The lounge-room chairs are permanently dressed in dust covers and still the fine red grit gets in everything. Reading about what happened in Sydney, Yvonne almost cracked a grin. ‘Those poor petals,’ she said.

The farm is connected to the cities by roads, but more powerfully by money, and economics, and what is metaphorically described as a supply chain. Every link on the chain is a location of tension, of the playing out of competing interests.

The Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (ACCC) reported on the competitiveness of the grocery industry in 2008. It examined whether the rising price of food was reflected in the prices paid to farmers, whether the supermarkets were taking unfair advantage. The resulting report was almost five hundred pages
long. The supply chains for food are almost impossibly complex and various. ‘There is no single story that can be told about the grocery supply chain in Australia,’ the report said.

The ACCC undertook a series of case studies on milk, chicken, apples, bread, eggs, biscuits and beef. Each product had a different chain, a different coalition of growers, processors and wholesalers. Some products, such as beef, were aimed mostly at the export market. Others were almost entirely sold through domestic supermarkets, meaning the buyer had significant market power. Suppliers could hardly walk away from negotiations.

The ACCC concluded that the big two supermarket chains, Coles and Woolworths, accounted for about half of all the fresh produce sold in Australia, and nearly three-quarters of packaged goods, yet the industry was still ‘workably competitive’. There was keen price competition on the three hundred or so products the supermarkets knew customers used to assess value – including lamb chops and bread. Sometimes that meant these products were sold below cost to bring customers in. Sometimes the sheer volume of their purchases meant the big two were able to squeeze farmers on price. But the ACCC found no consistent evidence that farmers were being taken advantage of. Generally, higher prices in the supermarket were reflected in higher prices at the farm gate, it said. Despite the Horticulture Australia Council saying that 85 per cent of its members felt that growers were unwilling to raise concerns with major retailers for fear of retribution, the ACCC found that the numerous anecdotes and allegations about standover tactics and threats by the big supermarket chains were not reflected in hard, actionable evidence.

And any attempt to alter the relationships, to free up the links in the supply chain, hit obstacles. The ACCC recommended changes to regulations governing the horticulture industry, to make it mandatory for merchants to tell growers what price they would get before the produce was delivered. At present, the price given to the farmer depends on what the merchant can get in a fluctuating market – sometimes high, sometimes low, sometimes nothing at all, with rejected produce being returned. There are no guarantees until the money is in the bank. The ACCC’s recommended changes would have transferred the risk of the market from the grower to the merchant, but even this wasn’t simple.

The federal government sent the ACCC’s recommendations to an industry committee for assessment, but the committee members could not agree. Farmers worried that the changes would mean merchants would offer only very low prices so they would be more able to manage the risk of the market. Premium prices for growers would become a thing of the past. On 1 November 2009, the industry
committee’s report was put aside for yet more consideration. There is no sign of speedy resolution. Meanwhile, the Minister for Agriculture, Tony Burke, acknowledged that at every link on the supply chain connecting growers to eaters, there are ‘considerable tensions’.

Sitting in his dust-proofed lounge room, Graeme McIntosh commented that once, everyone believed that growing food was unquestionably a good thing to do. He wonders whether people in the city still think that. These days, the farm depresses him. Mostly it is the drought. He has grown a beard in the last few years. It is white and trails down to his chest; he has told his family he will cut it off when the drought breaks.

A year ago, last summer, Yvonne took us for a walk over the paddocks and showed us how the soil had opened up in the wheat paddocks – not mere cracks, but great fissures and funny potholes – because all the moisture had disappeared from the soil. ‘They never see this in the city,’ she said. ‘They don’t understand.’ The wheat crop had failed yet again for lack of rain, and the sheep had been sent in to graze on the stunted remains. In the farmhouse, the floors were like waves because of the shifting clay underneath.

None of the young people in this family plans to take on the farm when Graeme and Yvonne retire, nor are they encouraged to. The pay is too low, and the work too hard.

Our recent visit was a time of hard decisions. Another wheat crop, half grown, was withering. Graeme had to decide whether to hang on in the hope of a little rain, or slash it while it was still good for making hay. He elected to cut his losses, and was out until late every night raking and slashing and raking some more. The drought goes on and on, and his beard gets longer.

Surely, Graeme and Yvonne say, growing food is as important as ever? Surely the drop in the proportion of GDP cannot entirely reflect the value of that often ignored fact, that Australia is one of the few countries in the world with the capacity to feed its own population from its own land, and feed them very well. How much does this matter to us? And what, in these hard times, are we going to have to give up?

Graeme and Yvonne’s farm lies in the middle of the Murray-Darling Basin, the food bowl of the nation, and the exemplar of the connections and disconnections in food production. Water connects people. Paul Keating called the Murray-Darling a ‘real and symbolic artery’. The metaphor is a cliché when applied to most rivers, yet it is right for the Murray. This river system is what makes a large part of Australian life possible. It is both lifeline and drain, with capillaries running to and from it, carrying water to crops and cities, and discharging waste so it can be carried from the interior to the sea.
The basin is home to more than a third of the nation’s farms. It covers about a seventh of Australia, and is responsible for more than a third of its agricultural production. The country’s three largest rivers – the Darling, Murray and Murrumbidgee, which water three-quarters of Australia’s irrigated land – run through it. The Murray-Darling Basin grows nearly all our rice, most of which is exported. Nearly all of Australia’s oranges are grown on Murray-Darling irrigation. In the basin, we raise and grow more than half the nation’s pigs and apples and almost half its wheat, as well as grapes, vegetables, nuts, cotton, canola and pasture for dairy cattle, beef cattle and sheep.

In the popular imagination, rivers are places of meaning and memories. The Murray is one of the geographical features that connects the Dreaming stories of the first human occupants. Most of the tribes along the river shared the story of the great Murray cod – Ponde, in the language of the lower Murray – that carved the river’s course before being speared by the Dreaming hero Ngurunderi in the lower lakes. It was another river myth about the lower lakes – the so-called secret women’s business of the island at the mouth of the Murray – that transfixed the nation in the early 1990s, and set the early Aboriginal-affairs agenda for the incoming Howard government.

The European myths of the river are also powerful – archetypal, even. Europeans, beholding the inland, dreamed of gardens in the wilderness and fruit growing in the desert. Realising these dreams was the job of engineers. In the postwar years, engineers were heroes. The historian Ernestine Hill published in 1958 a history of irrigation, Water into Gold. ‘Here is the beginning of a great story,’ he wrote, ‘the transfiguration of a continent by irrigation science…the radiant twin cities of Mildura and Renmark, the Garden Colony in that lucky horseshoe of Murray River that unites two Australian States, will always be our first national shrine to irrigation science.’

Hill described the Chaffey brothers, Canadians who joined pioneering irrigation schemes in California and later developed Mildura and Renmark, as ‘apostles of irrigation’. The water they pumped on to the land was a benediction, bringing civilisation to the dusty and hostile Mallee wastes.

And yet something has gone wrong with the story-making and the engineering marvel. We hear it all the time now, and the engineering terms are unintentionally ridiculous. There have been ‘dry inflows’, meaning no inflows. The river has been ‘over-allocated’, meaning more water is given away than the land can provide.

Today, the Murray-Darling system is not only a collection of rivers. Rather, it is a feat of plumbing. The Murray-Darling Basin Authority has schematic maps of the system that show it as a canal, with weirs and storages and taps that enable the precise management of water. The dreaming of the river has become separated from
the way the water is managed. Engineers manipulate the flow by tapping keys on a computer many kilometres away from the river red gums, the birds and the big brown smell of the water.

It was in the early 1990s that the engineers fell from grace, when a toxic blue-green algae outbreak covered a thousand kilometres of the river, making the water poisonous to man and beast. The algae forced us to realise that this sluggish, harnessed river was not healthy. People began to talk about it dying.

The dream of turning water into gold was questioned. People began to backpedal, and to research. There had been warning signs before, but 1991 marked the big shift in attitude. The late Peter Cullen, the water scientist and founder of the Wentworth Group, saw in the blue-green algae outbreak a change in our understanding of the nation. ‘Every now and again, politically, we get a focusing event when the ideas of different people all coalesce and you have a chance to change in this country,’ he said.

It quickly became apparent that there simply wasn’t enough water. In 1992, the Murray-Darling Basin Commission was set up to manage the basin, although most water matters remained with the states. In 1995, a water cap was put on allocations, and recently the achievement of the Rudd Government was an intergovernmental agreement setting up the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and strengthening the role of the ACCC to oversee the trade in water.

The main responsibility of the new authority is to devise the first comprehensive plan, encompassing both groundwater and river water, to cover the entire basin. It is a massive research undertaking, which will in time affect every windmill creaking on every farm, every drip-irrigation system and every dam. A draft plan will be released this year and the final version will be completed in 2011. Once the plan is adopted, it will be binding across the nation. The states, having transferred their water powers to the Commonwealth, will not be able to veto the caps and management arrangements imposed by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority. For the first time, the basin will be managed as a whole.

At least, that’s the idea. There is a lot of room for slippage between conception and reality. There will be big political battles: the states will not let their water go easily. The water of the Murray-Darling Basin may connect us, but in the world’s driest continent, it also profoundly divides us.

The management of the Murray-Darling has always been central to the nation. Nearly all of the Murray’s flow is generated by the rivers of Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales, yet South Australia depends on the water, too. When the Australian Constitution was being devised, South Australia insisted on a section giving the Commonwealth power to pass laws for navigation and shipping – the main use of the lower river at the time. New South Wales and Victoria responded by inserting a clause stating, ‘The Commonwealth shall not…abridge the right of a State or the residents therein to the reasonable use of water for conservation and irrigation.’
Ever since, the debates have turned on that word ‘reasonable’. Yet only in 2010 – when the water plan is complete, more than a century after the constitution was drafted – will we have clear data on what that word might mean, and what amounts to sustainable use.

The Murray-Darling Basin is characterised by droughts and floods, but the length and severity of the current drought is testing everything we thought we knew about this land, and highlighting, if it needed to be highlighted, that the most important part of environmental policy is not plastic bags, shower nozzles, recycled cans or bricks in the toilet cistern. It is food. No human behaviour has greater environmental effects than diet, and nothing connects these effects like water.

Since 1917, the sharing of water has been governed by an apparently simple agreement, in which the inflows above Albury are shared equally by New South Wales and Victoria, subject to an obligation to supply South Australia with a fixed entitlement. In times of low inflow, the fixed obligation to South Australia is replaced by a fixed share. Now, under the pressure of ‘dry inflows’, those agreements are unravelling. Although the states have handed power to the Commonwealth, Victoria in particular is capping the amount of water it is prepared to trade downstream, and South Australia is considering a High Court challenge to force the three upstream states to allow more water to flow. Already there have been rowdy demonstrations in the irrigated districts of South Australia.

Farmers in Victoria and southern New South Wales are disgusted that a pipeline will soon carry ‘their’ water to Melbourne. ‘Why should we suffer because Melbourne is not sustainable?’ one farmer said to me. In the Riverina, they hate the idea that ‘their’ water may be used to keep the lower lakes in South Australia from becoming toxic. In the Murrumbidgee Irrigation District, the farmers resent that some of their water entitlement has been traded downstream. In South Australia, they are aghast that in New South Wales water still runs in open irrigation channels, when we know that more than three-quarters of it can be lost to seepage and sun. Throughout the basin, there is a sense of injustice, envy and fear. Drive through the Murray-Darling Basin today, and you get the feeling that water wars – the stuff of science fiction – may not be very far away.

When we left the farm at Forbes last spring, we decided to follow the course of the Lachlan River, which on the map is shown, in a deceptively clean blue line, as a tributary of the Murrumbidgee. In fact, its water rarely makes it to central New South Wales. In a normal year, whatever that means these days, the Lachlan ends in marshes. In 1817, the explorer John Oxley followed the same course we drove, hoping to find a river that flowed the width of the continent, that would open up the inland to navigation and development. He made the journey in a wet season, and found only, as the historian Michael Cathcart recorded in his recent book, *The Water Dreamers* (Text, 2009), ‘sickly marshes and unhealthy plains’ where the turbid waters spread ‘silence, death and desolation’.

From Griffith REVIEW Edition 27: Food Chain
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Oxley was wrong. When this country was drained, it became prime farming land. Yet today, without water, there is once again silence, death and desolation.

We hugged the course of the river, following dirt roads. The country was dun-coloured, the only farm activity the slashing of failed wheat crops for hay. Sometimes a crop had not even made it that far, and the sheep and cows had been allowed in to graze. What did that do, I wondered, to the calculation of the cost of production?

We drove to the riverbank, and scrambled down past trees to reach the green-brown flow. The roots of the trees were splayed out above us like arthritic hands, groping for the water that would normally cover them. In the week we were there, the irrigators in the lower reaches of the Lachlan were cut off. There were to be no more irrigation diversions that season.

We wearied of the drab depression of the drive, and decided to strike south. After only an hour, we were in a different world. The Murrumbidgee Irrigation District was first a deep-green splash on the horizon, then all around us. It was almost a caricature of plenty. On either side of the road, grape vines carried ripening fruit. The orange trees were laden, and more fruit lay on the ground.

We drove in to Griffith and had a picnic on grass as green as paint, alongside the main irrigation channel, which runs, wide as a city street, through the heart of town. We even saw a council worker hosing down a footpath. There were sprinklers watering lawns in the midday sun. We were shocked, and yet our spirits lifted. The dream of the settlers and the engineers, the garden in the desert, is still alive in Griffith, and it was hard not to relax into it, to enjoy the cornucopia.

In the centre of town, more prominent even than the war memorial, was a monument to an engineering invention, the Dethridge wheel. Named after its inventor, a commissioner of Victoria’s water supply, the wheel is a drum on an axle with V-shaped veins fixed to the outside. John Dethridge refused to patent his invention, instead offering it for the benefit of humankind. It was taken up all over the world. Placed in an irrigation channel, the Dethridge wheel is used to measure the water provided to each farm.

In irrigation districts, you can hear plenty of stories about how farmers used to beat the wheels and steal water. A favourite trick was to jam a wheel with a frozen fish. By the time the fish thawed and the wheel turned again, thousands of unmetered litres would have flowed to the farm. In Far North Queensland, the story goes that they used dead turtles instead of fish. The inspectors knew the tricks, but how to prove that the fish or turtle had not died a natural death and been stuck by accident? The irrigators tell these stories with the same spirit that city folk talk of speeding fines, or computer hackers talk of free downloads. Water theft has only recently been regarded as a serious crime.
Griffith and its surrounds is, more than any other place in Australia, the product of the engineers’ dreams. The town even takes its name from a New South Wales minister for public works. It owes its existence to the biggest water dreaming of all, the Snowy Mountains Scheme. More water than Sydney uses in a day flows each day from the scheme into the Murrumbidgee and Tumut rivers. From there, it is diverted into the main irrigation canal and carried 155 kilometres, then through another 2,350 kilometres of channels to farm boundaries.

One of the oldest farms in the district, Catania, runs a tourist sideline showing visitors around the block, then selling them homemade jam and wine, and olive oil smelling of freshly cut grass. The farm makes prunes out of its plums, but these days some of the fruit is exported fresh to Japan, where fresh ‘sugar plums’ sell for more than forty dollars each. Those are the kind of prices you have to pay, the farm owner tells the tourists, if your country lacks the ability to grow its own fresh food. We were told that the produce of the district had repaid the country many times for the investment of taxpayer dollars that had made the irrigation scheme possible.

There are problems in paradise, though. The first impression of plenty is partly deceptive. Water is allocated through a system of high-security and low-security licences. High-security licence holders – mostly the growers of permanent crops like fruit trees and vines – get a fuller allocation even when the supply is short.

Low-security water is used for rice and wheat. Half an hour’s drive from Griffith is Leeton, the centre of the Australian rice industry. Next to the Sunrise factory, there is a small tourist shop where you can watch videos about how Australia’s rice crop helps feed the world. Here you can find brown rice, organic rice, Arborio rice and long-grain rice. You can buy twenty-five different flavours of rice cracker. Yet none is grown in the district. They have had to change the labels on the packets from ‘Product of Australia’ to ‘Product of Thailand’. Around the factory, the rice fields are empty.

Like every other water user in the basin, the rice industry is investing money to convince the public that it is an economical consumer of water. Certainly, the pamphlets say, rice must be flooded, but after the harvest another crop – wheat or canola – will be planted in the still damp soil.

You see these kinds of claims a lot in this time of ‘dry inflow’. The beef industry disputes the figures provided by conservationists that say steak carries more ‘water debt’ than any other food. Horticulturalists talk about investing in drip irrigation, and claim that vegetables are water-wise. In truth, the ‘water debt’ of food is hard to measure, and depends on many variables, but the CSIRO issues heavily qualified figures that estimate that each kilogram of maize takes up to 630 litres of water to grow. Rice takes 1,550 litres, and beef between 50,000 and 100,000 litres.

In raw terms, the biggest water users in the basin are cotton, dairy farming and pasture, and rice. Together they account for almost three-quarters of agricultural water consumption. Fruit and vegetables are much further down the list.
But in a time of water scarcity, the figures that really matter are the dollar returns for each megalitre of water used. These are the numbers that frighten the rice growers of Leeton. These are the figures that have caused each state, and each region, to resist the dictates of the market. Rice returns just $200 for each megalitre used. Livestock, pasture and grains return $300, and cotton $600.

If we were to use water in the most economically rational fashion, we would grow vegetables ($1800 for each megalitre of water used), fruit ($1500) and grapes ($900). Such a decision would wipe out large communities throughout the basin – the cotton growers of Queensland, the rice growers of New South Wales, the dairy farmers of Victoria – with all the dislocation that entails.

If Australia were governed by wise dictatorship, there would be huge forced land-use changes in the Murray-Darling Basin. Some crops would not be grown. Some communities would be relocated. State governments would be forced to comply. Instead, the effort to save the basin is a matter of slow and uncertain negotiation, limited by our awkward federation. It is also a matter of the imperfect instrument of market forces.

Water trading is one of the main ways to mitigate the effects of drought. Over the past decade, enormous effort has gone into unravelling the byzantine historical rules and regulations that govern the allocation of water. It has been directed at uncoupling water rights from land, to allow the water to be traded between properties and even between states. The process has been extraordinarily complex. The means by which water is owned and allocated vary from state to state and region to region. A farmer in Griffith will probably not understand the system in Mildura, and vice versa. Nevertheless, water is traded from one to the other and sold like any other commodity. The idea is that if the market is allowed to rule, water will naturally find its level and its most highly valued use.

Water trading is not a simple answer, nor a perfect one. Water does not flow like money. It can only be traded when there is a physical connection between seller and buyer, and when the buyer is downstream. There are good reasons to have reservations about the unnaturalness of uncoupling water from land. If water is traded out of a region, the remaining irrigators will be left to pay for irrigation infrastructure. This alone could send otherwise economic farms broke.

Additionally, water having a separate tradeable value means that many ‘sleeper’ irrigation licences that were not exercised are suddenly valuable. Water that previously never left the river is now for sale.

Finally, there is the fear that water barons will buy up the river and take it to new locations, leaving the family farmers high and dry. Is it wise, the farmers ask, for this most precious resource to be in the hands of people motivated only by profit?

The assessments on water trading have so far concluded that it has helped the basin and its people to deal with drought. The effects would have been worse had water remained tethered to land.
Yet it is not easy to let the water go. The CSIRO predicted that the basin would have to deal with up to a third less water by 2030 due to climate change. Regions such as Griffith and Leeton can be expected to resist the logic of the market. In the last annual report of Murrumbidgee Irrigation, its chair of the board, Dick Thompson, urged shareholders not to trade their water. ‘It is unfortunate from a regional perspective that we have seen water move from highly desirable and essential production with larger common benefits...to support overproduction and unviable production elsewhere. I would urge all shareholders to seriously consider producing a crop with any water they have, not only in their longer-term interest but also the community’s.’

From the perspective of an irrigator, every use downstream appears less pressing, less worthy, than use in their own district. I asked the growers of Griffith why their orchards were still productive when downstream, in the Riverland of South Australia, trees were being ripped up and grapevines left to die. Their response was somewhere between puzzlement and belligerence. South Australia should be all right, I was told. After all, despite their reservations, they had traded water downstream. If the South Australians couldn’t make it work, that was their problem.

Meanwhile, the federal government is in the market, with three billion dollars to spend on water to return it to the river. The big purchases, such as the huge Toorale Station on the Warrego and Darling rivers, make the headlines. With the departure of the water, crops and people must go, too. Some of the land returns to dry-land wheat farming. Other farms go out of production altogether. In this way, policy changes the landscape, and the economies of whole districts, while rerouting the water like a careful gardener to the wetlands downstream, trying to save the soils from becoming acid, and the birds, red gums and bell frogs from dying.

It is acknowledged that until the Murray-Darling Basin plan is completed, the purchases are being made on the basis of inadequate information about where water can most effectively be returned. The federal government has rejected the idea of compulsory acquisition. It will deal only with willing sellers, rather than forcing sales in areas where they could do most good. Yet what else can be done?

Penny Wong, the federal water minister, said recently, ‘When dealing with a patient who is critical, you have to act. I could have spent years in the courts arguing over a perfect outcome, and hoping the river was still there when I got out of court. Or I could get on with the job.’

A recent book by Jessica Weir, Murray River Country: An Ecological Dialogue with Traditional Owners (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2009), records that the Aboriginal communities along the river have a dream that one day there will be a great flood—a flush of water through the entire river system. This flood would wipe out the
Weeds, improve water quality and give the river the chance to regulate its health. It would destroy homes, livestock and irrigation infrastructure – yet it is longed for as ‘an expression of the freedom, energy and life-giving power of the river. The flood would return us to the times of droughts and floods, when the river was free of dams and weirs. The flood’s watery blanket would cover all places and seep in, returning country to the rivers’ domain.’

I understand this longing, this impossible dream. I had left the hardest part of my river journey until last.

I did a great deal of my growing up in South Australia’s Riverland, in particular in the town of Waikerie, an irrigation oasis in the middle of marginal wheat country. Here I spent most of my childhood weekends and school holidays. Here I fell in love for the first time. Here I had the epiphanies to which adolescents are prone. My first job was cutting apricots for drying in a corrugated-iron shed by the river. The only bone I ever broke was on my left hand, which got caught in a rope I was using to swing over and into the river. It is still slightly bent. It was in Waikerie that I got my first job as a journalist, working on a newspaper with a circulation of two thousand, the River News. And it was here that I returned in the early 1990s, the time of the blue-green algae outbreak, to write my first novel – which was set in a town very like Waikerie.

Most Australians have soul country, a place that lodges in and helps to set identity. There is a particular pain, a particular bitterness and a particular confusion in realising that yours smells of death.

I don’t go back to the Riverland very often these days. When I do, it hurts. But last March, I returned for my stepson’s wedding. I remember him from when he was a baby. One very hot summer day, before he could walk, I sat him and his sister in big buckets of water watching television, in a house closed against the sun. It was unbearably hot. Yet, unless my memory is faulty, I am sure that the orchards across the river were wreathed in the spray from overhead sprinklers. How we wasted water then, without even knowing it. These days, there are no overhead sprinklers. There is only the careful measure of drip irrigation, and not much of that.

On the drive to the wedding, we passed through the wreckage of orchards where trees had been ripped up and bulldozed into piles. We saw the dead grapevines, and the remaining orchards, hanging on. In the town, the sporting fields and parks were brown under the sun, the council forced into the hard calculation of which areas to keep alive and which to let go.

In the weeks that followed, I rang the office of the South Australian Minister for the Murray, Carlene Maywald, and asked why the state was losing its trees and vines while in Griffith there were still gardens in the desert. ‘Because we are downstream,’ came the bitter answer.
Just a few weeks ago, Maywald’s office issued a celebratory media release. Thanks to rains, South Australian irrigators would be able to access a third of their water entitlements: an increase of 9 per cent on the previous year. That this is a cause of celebration – just a third of the allocation – is a reminder of how desperate things have become.

My stepson’s wedding was held in a little limestone church on the rise of the main street. Wedding photos were taken against a backdrop that once would have included a flood plain. Now it is a grey wasteland.

And just a few months later, my stepson and his new wife moved to Melbourne. He had been working at the winery in Berri. Before that, he had worked on the family farm, helping, at times, to grow pumpkins and grapes. He used to deliver pumpkins to the back door of the local supermarket, where he was paid 35 cents a kilogram. He saw the same pumpkins, cut and wrapped, on sale a few hours later at two dollars a kilo.

Now, he had concluded, his future lay elsewhere. There was no future in the Riverland. Even the iconic Berri juice factory is closing down, and my stepson wants to go to university. In the meantime, he has a job in an inner suburban supermarket as a shelf-stacker. He was recently moved from packaged goods to the fresh-produce section. He tells me that this supermarket – one of the big two – throws away a lot of food. He has seen fresh carrots, slightly split, in the dumpster, joined by heads of broccoli, tomatoes that look slightly less than red and sometimes produce that has nothing wrong with it at all, but which has not been bought in sufficient quantities by a picky public.

Staff are not allowed to take the food. As it is thrown away, it is counted to make sure that nothing goes missing. The dumpsters are locked to prevent pilfering. Perhaps it is the sign of a rich country, a country used to feeding itself, that each day all that food – and all the water debt, the effort and the economics it represents – is carried away to landfill.

From Griffith REVIEW Edition 27: Food Chain
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