‘Why misguided humans have attempted to make their homes in it is more than I can comprehend’: Francis Ratcliffe’s first impressions of Australia.

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Francis Noble Ratcliffe, young Britisher

To a public exhorted to be ashamed of its birth rate, still being told to populate what was considered a virtually empty continent or else perish, Francis Ratcliffe wrote in 1938 that Australians had ‘every reason to be intensely proud of their record in settling the great spaces of the inland’. Their feat was a courageous conquest. ‘They are only to be blamed’, he insisted in his travelogue and scientific diary, *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand*, in that they seem to have done the job too thoroughly.

Having travelled the margins of white settlement on two major scientific expeditions, Ratcliffe was saying that no biologist’s wand could be waved over the arid interior to force its difficult landscapes to support more people. Therefore, those who relied on that land would be forced to change their expectations, reassess their national ambitions, and perhaps even decrease the pastoral population. At least, they must admit their destructive agency.

Ratcliffe’s famous book, which has been frequently reprinted and set from time to time as required reading in school and environmental history classes, described the exact point at which he was struck with this realisation ‘that man must share the blame with providence’. In September 1935, somewhere along the Broken Hill railway line in north-eastern South Australia, Ratcliffe was ruminating in the guard’s van at the rear of a freight train when the wind picked up. Soon he could see ‘no more than a yard or two beyond the railway fence’ on the right side of the track, which had been grazed down to what looked like ‘yellow asphalt’ by a leaseholder’s
stock. To his left, where neither sheep nor cattle had been roaming and so the native scrub thrived, the view was relatively clear.

Long before he helped establish the Australian Conservation Foundation, Ratcliffe’s account of these sorts of revelations helped turn the public and political lens towards the consequences of mismanagement. Environmental historians have long considered *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand* crucial in this respect: J.M. Powell has called it ‘the classic reference’ in the public history of conservationism; Geoffrey Bolton a ‘minor classic’ at least in arousing the reading public. [4] The text bequeathed a legacy to the next generation of Australians, as Libby Robin suggests, by raising their consciousness about ‘the ecological limits of agricultural enterprise’. [5] While acknowledging the book’s enormous popularity, Drew Hutton and Libby Connors in their recent history of the Australian environment movement characterised Ratcliffe’s efforts as ‘the work of a good government scientist, not a social movement activist’. [6] Most, however, downplay such a distinction. Thomas Dunlap recognises that Ratcliffe’s recommendations were sufficiently ‘radical’ to inspire subsequent activists to identify the dissonance between social demands and the rhythms of the land, and Tim Flannery sees the text as one of the key moments of recognition that only ‘a courageous but deluded people’ could persevere at scratching away towards the centre of the continent at land that had died beneath them.[7] The legacy was a gift, albeit laced with a challenge, to the Australian community, of which Ratcliffe was an important member.

Ratcliffe’s message was typical for the scientists of his era whom we would now consider conservationists. He implied that the people deserved the best possible advice to prevent any dangers in their environment threatening their progressive way of life. Yet when he travelled, Ratcliffe maintained a far more candid commentary in his faithful correspondence with his family in Britain and his superiors in Australia. These suggest precisely the opposite: the environment needed to be defended from the ravages of a backward people. His letters home in which he drafted his first impressions of Australian lives were recently deposited in the National Library of Australia, and his correspondence with senior civil servants is held by the Australian Archives. Some of these items are typical of any young traveller’s letters home: expressing dutiful concern for his sister and parents (S.K. Ratcliffe was a BBC lecturer with particular interest in
American affairs), inviting them to follow his progress in their family atlas, and reassuring them that he was still solvent. Others present a significant counterpoint to both the published work and the historical reputation of the Australian conservationist. In the early pieces, there is little sign that Ratcliffe could ever settle in the alien environment, let alone come to consider himself an antipodean patriot leading others in the effort to defend the nation’s soil.

**First impressions**

Francis Noble Ratcliffe was just twenty-five years old when he made his first voyage to Australia. In 1929, fresh from Oxford University and after a year as a Proctor Fellow at Princeton, New Jersey, he was commissioned to study the spread of flying foxes in the fruit growing regions of Queensland. He was then an unknown animal ecologist eager to learn and if possible to impress his employer back home (the Empire Marketing Board). However, during his second trip six years later for the official central Australian survey of soil erosion, he was on close terms with the hierarchy of the local Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. On both occasions, Ratcliffe conducted his surveys with no fleet of vehicles or technical support staff. He was usually solo, travelling by train, mail van, motor cycle, and often by hitching rides from the locals.

At the time, Ratcliffe told his family that he dreaded steering his motor cycle daily over one ‘apology for a road’ after another, though in retrospect he remembered singing at the top of his voice as he rode, and counted these days ‘among the happiest in my life’. In spite of the difficulties he faced in getting around the outback, Ratcliffe’s impressionistic accounts that he sketched whilst on the road now have a hallowed place in the evolution of Australian nature conservation. Perhaps their popularity stemmed from this very sense that his findings relied as much on serendipity as science. First he wrote *The Flying Fox (Pteropus) in Australia* as a CSIR bulletin in 1931. Two soil drift pamphlets emerged from his following trip, on *The Arid Pastoral Areas of South Australia* (pamphlet 64, in 1936) and then *With special reference to South-Western Queensland* (number 70, 1937). While he was contracted for technical bulletins, he is remembered for the 1938 publication of *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand*. Subtitled ‘the adventures of a biologist in Australia’, this brought what Ratcliffe called his ‘youthful wanderings’ together, serving as both a travelogue and a clarion call for greater sensitivity to Australian ecology. His
wanderings might have been youthful, but the combination of naturalism and social critique contained a wisdom that went to the heart of the relationship between people and the land.

On his arrival in early 1929, Ratcliffe – sweltering in the Brisbane summer – found that the local administrators and academics to whom he was expected to report hardly knew or cared who he was or for what purpose he had come. Unacclimatised, he interpreted the native nonchalance as barbarism or an obsessive quest for mediocrity. In time, he would happily consider the heads of Australian research organisations mentors in place of his Oxford dons (having studied under Sir Julian Huxley, who wrote his book’s foreword). His disappointment with the apparent ‘tiring uniformity’ of the Australian eucalypts and flat wilderness would similarly yield to a love for the fragile diversity of the bush. In his first year, this redemption was yet to come, and he struggled to see the silver lining on the clouds of apathy hanging over the northern wet season.

Ratcliffe’s lifeline was the correspondence he maintained with his parents and sister, punctuated by their precious parcels of traditional British news and magazines. ‘I try not to think too much of friends just now’, he typed from his temporary digs at the University of Queensland, ‘as I have not yet discovered anything to replace them, and am afraid that I might develop some form of homesickness, which I rather want to avoid’. He soon found a few families vaguely associated with home, often urbane emigrant Scottish and English administrators, although their hospitality only cast the typical Australian in an even dimmer light. This postcolonial settlement seemed at every turn to reinforce the stereotype of a succession of slothful, violent frontier towns. The one solace he could draw was that the locals might make a less than demanding readership. ‘Luckily’, he wrote in an attempt to sound upbeat, ‘the people do not expect any practical results from my survey’. Evidently, the politicians (whom he presumed were corrupt and inefficient) and the fruit-growers (whom he feared would be as brutish as the rest) simply wanted him ‘to state the problem’, in other words to confirm that fruit-eating bats were a pest worth eradicating.

Ratcliffe’s first ventures into the exotic scenery, made with some new acquaintances from a Brisbane naturalists’ club, started the process of being won over by the continent’s ecology. While the stage was increasingly enchanting, the players remained less impressive. The ‘congenital laziness of the Australian’, and the astounding
inefficiency of the state public service and railways, shone through constantly.[13] The people excelled only at the usual vices, and in murdering their native birds and animals. By June 1929 Ratcliffe had drawn a few conclusions and vented these to his family, determined ‘to retract any of the decent things I have said about Australians, except that I continually meet kind and hospitable individuals’. Whenever he found a spot of natural beauty, he just knew that the ‘useless rotters’ who inhabited it would find a way to ruin everything:

But the People! … What the men do for a living I cannot guess, but there [outside the innumerable pubs] they remain, hour after hour, when decent folk should be working, propping up the pillars of the wide verandahs, dressed in the national dress of a collarless shirt and a pair of blue serge trousers or dungarees. And the faces! I can most easily sum them up by saying that they are of a low type. And the language! …[14]

No matter how pestilent or malodorous the fruit bats, they stood a good chance of making a more favourable impression upon the traveller.

In quieter, more reflective times, Ratcliffe admitted that his more intolerant lines were penned in fits of ‘if not exactly temper, at least of loneliness and depression’. [15] From Rockhampton on 4 October 1929, the correspondent attempted a more measured generalisation about the ‘Americo-Cockney’ inhabitants. He prefaced his remarks by acknowledging that this was too new a country to have cultivated what is considered elsewhere high culture, and he reserved his judgement on the larger centres of Sydney and Melbourne. However, he was disparaging nonetheless. Whereas his own English people were organised into an organic pyramid of
classes, in Australia there seemed to be ‘a great
cubic block’ of the masses, on which rested ‘an
insignificant die’ of upper-class expatriate
Britishers and leisured, educated Australians. As
for the block beneath, these presented all the
features of the more differentiated lower classes of
the mother country: the ‘good-humoured irony’ of
the British worker, the ‘narrow conservatism’ of
the lower middle-class, the worker’s habit of the
drink. Arrogant complacency had displaced the
pioneers’ resourceful independence, leaving the
typical Australian ‘a foul-mouthed, incorigibly [sic]
lazy waster, whose chief pastimes are drinking
and betting on horses’. [16]

Conservation has never been the sole preserve of
political liberals. Ratcliffe for one traced these
national characteristics back to the rotten, locally-
orientated politics of the country, spoiled by
insular protectionism and the basic wage, and
especially by the Roman Catholic liquor interests
he presumed were behind the Labor Party. The
country, it seemed, had too much democracy, and
‘the sooner the day of reckoning comes the
better’:

\[
\text{Unfortunately the independent, arrogant spirit of the people precludes the possibility of a Mussolini. If one did appear, I may say, I should be one of the first to put on a black shirt.} [17]
\]

Ratcliffe felt differently about the people on the
farms he visited. These families formed a rough
but ‘rather nice crowd’ once one surmounted their
initial barrier of suspicion, whereas to him the rest
of rural Queensland seemed to remain a cultural
desert. He could only do his best to avoid the
‘hopeless’ sorts, who filled him with ‘a mingled
despair and contempt – for I cannot help thinking
that the results of my own work will be judged by
a jury of this type’. [18]

Perhaps one should not read too much into these
observations. The traveller was young and an
outback novice, often writing when tired from
uncomfortable journeys and frustrated searches
for his elusive nocturnal frugivores. Ratcliffe did
indeed type a disclaimer to his family in June
1930, which said in part that ‘anyone reading my
diary say in fifty years time … would be very
much disappointed and disgusted' by his shallow sense of context. He knew that he was an expert on fruit bats and not social politics. Yet, he still felt qualified to judge ‘that the public life of the Australian is about as low a development as civilisation can afford to produce’. [19]

**Flying fox**

If his local superiors had few expectations, and his suspicions about the ultimate audience were well founded, then the biologist would have to set his own standards of scientific rigour to transform the potentially inconsequential journey. This difficult and self-directed adventure in natural history became the first section of *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand*. He sometimes thought of himself as a civilised hunter in an uncivilised, if not necessarily savage, land at the ends of the empire. The scientific bureaucracy was largely a male public school preserve, and Ratcliffe was not averse to replicating some elements of a ‘boys’ own’ safari:

*When I left Brisbane for the north I had no plan of campaign. I had no idea how long I should be away, or where I should finish up. This is quite the best way of setting out on a journey.* [20]

True, he had the backing of senior scientists in the capital, but by and large they left him to his own devices, for they had few preconceptions about how a study of the ecology of an Australian mammal should be conducted.

Packing his motorbike, shotgun and camera as luggage, he settled onto numerous trains to complete a diary entry or a half-written letter. ‘Never have I filled my time so fully’, he wrote in one letter to his parents, continually burying the recent past in ‘a mass of new experiences’. [21] The game he hunted breathlessly was a large bat that the first European explorers had described as an airborne vampire, and which scientists were only beginning to differentiate into species. [22] His mission was to drift from town to town, observe, capture and examine specimens from the foxes’ camps. In the absence of reliable textbooks, he relied on the
Ratcliffe’s first encounter with a native fruit-bat was with the grey-headed flying fox on Tamborine Mountain. On the hill at dusk, he became aware of what he described as a ‘noiseless gliding shadow’ overhead, followed by little groups of wingbeats ‘like a whistled whisper’ receding into the vague outline of what he would come to recognise as the creature’s tell-tale ‘sharp triangular silhouette’. [23] Invariably, he broke the still of the forest with his shotgun to collect specimens, measuring their canine heads, tapering torsos, and wingspans of up to five feet. (Later he would regret the numbers involved. Then, he treated it as a hunt, and even killed rare snakes and other animals unrelated to his research contract to get a closer look). From Bundaberg, he headed north of the Tropic of Capricorn to picturesque Cairns and the Atherton Tablelands in search of the black flying fox and arrived with or without notice on cattle stations. He warmed to hardy dairy farmers, though he worried that their children missed out, for the typical Australian parent had ‘no idea of the home comforts & good food that the American and Canadian insists on’. [24]

While tracking a seasonal bat migration route into the New South Wales border highlands, or slogging through the mangrove habitats of the little red fox northward near Rockhampton, the hints of the character who would become the famous conservationist were only gradually showing through. Often, he made his points to show how unthinkingly destructive Australians could be to their pristine environment, leaving evidence of ‘[m]an’s unbeautifying hand’ everywhere, in the ugly scars on the landscape which made way for hideous houses. [25]

The flocks of fruit bats could number half a million, and although they were adept at supplementing their native diet of forest flowers by raiding the nearest cultivated fruit farm, he only found sizeable camps in wilderness areas. In terms of the species’ ecology, which he, in concert with his contemporary researchers, often called their economy, he concluded that the damage to fruit crops was the work of rogue elements of otherwise harmless populations. His conclusions were somewhat subversive. Australian zoology had only been interested in their types and habitats to the extent that they represented an official economic pest to the horticultural industry. Ratcliffe viewed flying foxes from the perspective of the naturalist, not the despairing orchardist. [26] Perhaps the industry could just
learn to live with and budget for their occasional mischief; mass extermination would make as much sense as mass human imprisonment in order to stamp out petty theft (no allusion to Australia’s convict history seemed intended).

Initially, Ratcliffe did not think that his travels amounted to much scientifically. On the first anniversary of his arrival, he reflected that his investigation was '90% common sense and 10% science',[27] leaving him no better off in terms of job prospects than he was when he graduated with his first degree. Towards the end of his second year, realising he had the basis for a book of traveller’s impressions, he determined to ‘pocket my conscience’ rather than fret over how to justify interesting side-trips entirely unrelated to the flying fox study. [28] He made a detour to the famous heart of Australian naturalism in Dunk Island at the invitation of its resident Spenser Hopkins (the father of a schoolmate, and successor on the island to the beachcomber E.J. Banfield), while trips to Fraser Island and Lamington National Park became evocative ornithological or zoological digressions in the book rather than contributions to the official purpose of his travels. In the other direction, travelling the inland pastoral and sheep country, he saw enough of the continent to convince him that it was far from monotonous. He found verdant pasture blending gradually into the coloured sands of the desert, where scraggy grass partly covered the red dirt and the trees were for the most part, he wrote to his family, ‘arboreal abortions’. [29]

Ratcliffe confided to his family that he would publish a travelogue, mainly for the few pounds it might earn, for in literary terms, it would only amount to ‘a bit of a hodge-podge, I am afraid, natural history, anecdote, description, all going to paint a realistic picture of the land and the people’. [30] We know now that this hodge-podge was precisely what would find a ready reading public. But then he was focused on his official report on the flying fox, and that progressed more slowly. Due at the beginning of March 1931, it was continually delayed as he waded through his notes. At first he had been stung by criticism, and he leapt to counter negative local press about his work, but by May 1930 he told his family that he had reached ‘a state of indifference’ to the barbs of small-town distributors and aldermen. He had grown fond of their country by then, and he viewed such locals as threats to, even parasites upon, that precious environment. In fact, he looked forward ‘to the pleasure of writing what must be to them a rather unflattering report’. [31]
Drifting sand

Disgusted by some of the coastal inhabitants, Ratcliffe was won over by their habitat. In his brief forays into the forbidding interior on the other hand, he had found that the more he looked, the more he realised that ‘[n]ever, in my life or dreams, have I been in such incredible country’. He wondered if he should ever return. Meanwhile, the flying fox report earned some critical approval, and Ratcliffe left for Aberdeen where he won a lecturing position on the strength of his two years of field work.

Then in late 1934 Senator A.J. McLachlan, Commonwealth Minister for Development, telephoned Sir David Rivett, the CSIR chief executive officer, saying that he was ‘rather perturbed about the question of soil drift’ and wanted to know what could be done. Rivett supposed that the removal of trees and the spread of rabbits left the earth open to the elements, but nothing was known for sure. Over the next couple of months, he sought the counsel of two experts at the Waite Institute of Agriculture in Adelaide known for their work on trace element deficiencies in soils. They convinced the federal Standing Committee on Agriculture to commit £500 to soil drift research survey in inland pastoral areas.

While Rivett said he could not see ‘how an officer could obtain any definite data on the problem unless he had the opportunity of carrying out controlled experiments over a long period of years’, Professor A.E.V. Richardson of the Waite Institute thought otherwise. Considering the available field workers, he suggested the civil service might again ‘put Ratcliffe on the job’: he had done well from scratch last time, and might be itching for a return to Australia. ‘Suppose we let him loose on this problem for say six months’, he suggested, ‘and let him evaluate the various factors involved’. It was all rather ad hoc, but the invitation went out anyway.

Francis Ratcliffe, therefore, returned to Australia knowing only to report to the Division of Animal Nutrition based at the University of Adelaide. From there, Professor Richardson sent him on his way, admitting that until the authorities could ‘put [their] finger on the real cause’, no-one knew which solution should be chosen. Edible soil-binding vegetation had some connection with animal nutrition. But there was more to it, and the country needed Ratcliffe’s observant, open mind.

The fabled ‘interior’ had already enticed many explorers. Since Edward John Eyre and Charles
Sturt in the mid-nineteenth century, Northern Expeditions had named landmarks after their sponsors, or in recognition of their feelings (disappointment, deception, and so on), as they searched for suitable cattle-droving or transcontinental routes, if not a mythical inland sea. While Goyder’s Line of the 1860s was still a familiar shorthand definition of the margins of safe cultivation in South Australia when Ratcliffe passed through, the tragedy of Burke and Wills, and to some extent the Adelaide to Darwin journey made by J. MacDouall Stuart, remained part of national folklore. More recently, William Austin Horn had led anthropologists and botanists into central Australia, David W. Carnegie won many readers for his more literary *Spinitex and Sand* despite warning that he would describe the ‘unbroken monotony of an arid, uninteresting country’, and J.W. Gregory coined a phrase with his book *The Dead Heart of Australia*. [38] C.E.W. Bean, later the nation’s official war correspondent, completed a journalist’s tour closer in its rationale to Ratcliffe’s, in 1907. In *On the Wool Track* Bean singled out erosion on the western plains of New South Wales for a chapter entitled ‘The Rape of the West’. [39] The era of heroic exploration was drawing to an end when Ratcliffe set off. Cecil T. Madigan, however, had only recently named the Simpson Desert which the erosion researcher intended to skirt, and would not traverse it on camel until three years after Ratcliffe’s trips. [40]

In this case, unlike the mystery of the unstudied flying fox, he foretold his conclusion from the very start. Barely out of Adelaide, Ratcliffe had a premonition that talk of the rabbit and bad luck with the weather would prove to be no more than excuses. He wrote to his superior, saying that overstocking was probably the ‘only important factor’ leading to soil erosion further north. [41] He would recommend a change in land-use policy rather than perpetuate any delusions. As soon as he had his first glimpse of the territory, Ratcliffe was making plans for a report which would advise landowners to retreat from permanent to nomadic pasture, at stock levels based on what was sustainable in normal drought conditions and not on the rare good seasons. [42] This could be what he called the ‘thin edge of the wedge’ in forcing politicians to respond. He proposed that Rivett’s CSIR wrap up the soil drift baby and hand it back to the politicians, for it was principally political and economic demands which were ‘forcing the pastoralists to stock their country in an unscientific and dangerous way (dangerous to the country and to posterity).’ [43]

Good seasons were not just around the corner,
Ratcliffe insisted; the natural state of the interior was drought. He hoped to collect evidence of this by ‘trusting to the kindness of managers to run [him] around a bit’ and filling gaps with ‘a trip or two with the mails’; Rivett told him to ‘regard yourself as free to settle your own course’.[44] Yet, as this correspondence implies, Ratcliffe’s course was settled long before he hitched his first ride. Although again he had few preconceptions about his exact route (he had not even sighted a map), this time he anticipated what he would find. His methods were again innovative. From the Flinders Ranges to Lake Eyre he caught freight trains, got out in dangerous bogs to push old cars, with or without headlights and kept alive by bush mechanics, flying at breakneck speed across the sand hills. As he crossed silent salt plains in state pastoral board vehicles and took mail trucks up the Birdsville Track beside the Simpson Desert, he passed some of the last camel teams ever to transport staples to the settlements. After the extreme humidity of the lush tropics, here was the toughest environment the desert fringes could offer.

To his hosts, the still noticeably young and obviously British biologist more often represented the latest mad explorer than the promise of assistance from research organisations to improve the fate of the soil and the people who lived off it. He was alone and under-resourced, and because his studies were under the auspices of the CSIR, they could have quarantined soil conservation as a scientist’s quandary rather than the farmer’s concern. In his mind, however, Ratcliffe was still a naturalist writer, and he had the vision to recognise the need to publicise scientific findings and recommendations as widely as possible rather than hoarding them in the academy.[45] He would indeed wrap up the politicians’ unwanted baby in his reports on arid pastoral South Australia and south-western Queensland: as predicted, his verdict was that the problem was one of pastoral administration and stock management. [46]

Some anecdotes and local faces and families featuring in his early drafts of the two soil erosion bulletins made way for the science in the published versions, but Ratcliffe’s contacts with many remote communities did influence his book. City housewives turning these pages, he said, could hardly imagine the complications created for ‘their sisters in the interior’ when the dust darkened their lives. He helped their imaginations by delivering their experiences to the suburbs, using the words of one of his own hostesses:
We have had seven dust storms already this month. I don’t mean just days with dust in the air, but bad enough for me to have to clean the house out. Three of the seven were bad, and by that I mean that I got about half a kerosene tin of dust and sand out of every room! [47]

While these families wanted their stories of the unremitting dust and grasshoppers or rabbits swarming in their millions to be relayed to politicians and city folk, Ratcliffe commented most on the story-tellers, whose resilient decency impressed him more the longer he spent with them.

Everyone seemed worn down to a slower pace, but this was not the same as the apathy that had frustrated him in Brisbane. This was stoic survival. In tropical Queensland he found the natural magnificence marred by the people. Here, the inhabitants managed to humanise, if not redeem, the hellish environment. He invariably described the landscape his hosts called home as bleak, sickening, empty and cruel – indeed, in private letters during respite from imprisonment by sandstorm in the Dead Heart, he confessed that ‘why misguided humans have attempted to make homes in it is more than I can comprehend’. [48] In his book, he remembered desolate stations where he could distinguish nothing but ‘shimmering pale blue-grey emptiness under a vast cloudless sky’, an environment that seemed like the ‘most inhuman world that it was possible to conceive’. [49] Spending too long there at any one time, he was sure, would turn him raving mad. Yet the locals managed. The brutality of the country magnified the generosity of some of its settlers, and the sheer persistence of all who stayed, yet retained their sanity. His experience left him with ‘an unshakable [sic] belief in the fundamental decency and kindness of the human race’. [50]

Francis Ratcliffe became an official soil conservation ambassador on radio and through other media in 1937 before his book came out, and then once in publication he was considered
an unofficial advocate of the heroism of the settlers of the interior. Yet, based in Melbourne as a biological adviser to the CSIR, and then in Canberra with the Division of Economic Entomology, he remained to some a book-educated agricultural expert full of theories rather than experience. Just as he refused to blame entire populations of flying foxes, he said that rabbits arrived once the devastation was done rather than causing the land problems. One rural reader who had lived through the rabbit plagues of the previous decades wrote to the *Adelaide Advertiser* in February 1939, and dismissed Ratcliffe as ‘a young Oxford graduate, who had not been born at the time, and so never saw the country before it was ravaged’. This was one of the last times that his patriotism was implicitly called into question.

Ratcliffe’s newfound affection for the settlers won a generally receptive audience. If the solution to drifting sand lay not in the laboratories but in the attitudes of land users, then land-use regulations were needed to enforce sustainability and perhaps to rein in the more profligate in the pastoral industry. When state and federal bureaucracies began calling for reform in the mid to late 1930s, it helped that they had Ratcliffe’s technical pamphlets to draw upon. When politicians promised reforms, they represented constituencies familiar with the fate of the interior and more tuned in to the continent’s ecology by reading *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand*. Newspapers joined in, now that Ratcliffe had provided local evidence of a wasteful culture and proven that erosion was not confined to the well-known U.S. Dust Bowl. The Australian Natives’ Association even became involved, inviting Ratcliffe to speak at a special conference convened to discuss the land problem. The ANA resolved that erosion was too consequential for the country’s natural resources to tolerate ‘anything less than a national campaign’. But erosion control remained largely a state issue. Some states were more active than others, but progress was slow and uncoordinated until after the Second World War.

**Francis Noble Ratcliffe, Australian**

Having discovered his turn of phrase in two extremes of the young country, Ratcliffe settled permanently in Australia. Neither the travelling scientist nor his hosts knew that he would one day consider himself an Australian too. He returned in fact to the field of pest control, though his targets were smaller: beginning with termites, weevils and other pests of stored wheat. He would
work too as a malarialogist and monitor other arthropod-borne diseases during the war, including dengue fever and typhus. Ironically, the writer who was so insistent that people and not rabbits were to blame for soil erosion became the Wildlife Survey Section chief who oversaw the release of the myxomatosis virus from 1951. Working with Frank Fenner and other mid-century Australian scientific luminaries, including Ian Clunies Ross and Frank Macfarlane Burnet, Ratcliffe ushered in a biological control measure which revived the nation’s hopes for magic bullet solutions to pastoralists’ headaches. [55]

If those Ratcliffe met on his travels expected their guest to harness the tools of ecological science to find a technical solution which might change the environment to suit their dreams, then they were disappointed. He always insisted, as Thomas Dunlap has since observed, that the question be approached from the other direction, ‘to fit the social and economic order to the natural one’. [56] For all his increasing sympathy for the people, he saw not innocent victims of malevolent nature, but unrealistic human demands made of unsuitable land. Ultimately, Ratcliffe was instrumental in the establishment of the Australian Conservation Foundation. [57] Beginning his public career as an alienated Britisher, he ended it as a treasured Australian. Yet this conversion is seldom noted in the public memory of his contribution. To retrieve this process might be one way to remember the capacity of the unique continent to entrance its sojourners to become settlers. What certainly remained constant was Ratcliffe’s message, which dared to confront the Australian people with awkward truths about their relationship with the environment that supported them.

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Endnotes

Men, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1988 (first ed. 1941, and written in 1936, while Ratcliffe was surveying the arid interior). Back

[2] After the 1938 Chatto & Windus release, the text was printed in Australia first in 1947, then again in 1948, 1951, 1953, 1963, 1970 and 1976. The page numbers did not change between the Australian editions, although unfortunately the illustrative photographs were phased out over the course of the reprints. A special school version was produced in the early 1950s, and it ‘would never have been given to school-children to read if the pastoral industry had been fully conversant with its subversive dimensions’ (Libby Robin, Defending the Little Desert: The Rise of Ecological Consciousness in Australia, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 1998, p. 66). Back


[8] Letter from Francis Ratcliffe to Family (from Rockhampton), 27 October 1929, Francis N. Ratcliffe Papers relating to conservation (RP), Manuscripts Set 2493 (hereafter NL.MS 2493), National Library of Australia, Canberra; Francis

[27] Francis Ratcliffe to Family, 23 April 1930, RP, NL.MS 2493. Back

[28] Francis Ratcliffe to Family (Brisbane-bound from Rockhampton), 11 September 1930, RP, NL.MS 2493. Back

[29] Francis Ratcliffe to Family (from Jericho & Edwinston), 20 & 21 September 1930, RP, NL.MS 2493. Back


[31] Francis Ratcliffe to Family (from Brisbane), 7 May 1930, RP, NL.MS 2493. Back


[33] Memo from A.C.D. Rivett to Sir George Julius and Professor A.E.V. Richardson, 11 December 1934, CSIR Head Office correspondence files (CSIR), Archive Series A9778/1 (hereafter NA.A9778/1), National Archives of Australia. Back

[34] Professor Richardson to David Rivett, 15 December 1934; Circular, David Rivett to members of the Standing Committee on Agriculture, 2 February 1935, CSIR, NA.A9778/1. Back

[35] G. Lightfoot to Professor Richardson, 2 May 1935, CSIR, NA.A9778/1. Back

[36] Professor Richardson to G. Lightfoot, 17 May 1935, CSIR, NA.A9778/1. Back

[37] Quoted in Francis Ratcliffe, Flying Fox and Drifting Sand, p. 188. Back

[38] See David W. Carnegie, Spinitex and Sand: A Narrative of Five Years’ Pioneering and Exploration in Western Australia, C. Arthur Pearson, London, 1898, p. ix (for quote); J.W. Gregory, The Dead Heart of Australia: A Journey Around Lake Eyre in the Summer of 1901-1902, with some account of the Lake Eyre basin and the


[41] Francis Ratcliffe to David Rivett, 19 August 1935, CSIR, NA.A9778/1. Back


[52] Letter, R.W.A. Warren (W.A.) to Adelaide
Advertiser, 25 February 1939. Some of his colleagues too took the line that the rabbits were the real problem. See J. Mules, field officer, CSIR, ‘Major problem of pastoral areas: … the effect rabbits have had …’, Chronicle Stud Supplement, 26 August 1937. Back


[54] Francis Ratcliffe, Speech for erosion meeting, typescript, 29 July 1937; J. Parker, General Secretary, ANA, to Prime Minister Lyons, 4 August 1937, CSIR, NA.A9778/1. On the reservation of land use controls to the states, see Soil erosion, typescript, July 1936, Prime Minister’s Department, correspondence files, NA.A461/7. Back


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Ratcliffe's chief adversary was Dame Jean Macnamara who, he self-deprecatingly said, regarded him as ‘a boil on the bum of progress’. Given his visionary plans for the conservation of Australia’s natural heritage, Ratcliffe grew frustrated that so few resources were available for wildlife research and showed that he was uncomfortable with bureaucratic ways. In 1961 he returned to his former division as assistant-chief. While in this post, he made an enduring contribution through his role as founding spirit and honorary secretary (from 1964) of the Australian Conservation Fo...