

Reading *All the Rivers Run*, Nancy Cato's Eco-Historical Epic

Susan Sheridan

NANCY CATO'S THREE-VOLUME EPIC *ALL THE RIVERS RUN* FIRST APPEARED BETWEEN 1958 and 1962.¹ The River Murray is the central presence in the narrative, which encompasses the river's immense length, over 2,000 kilometres, from mountain springs to the sea, and its colourful history from 1890 until the great flood of 1956. During much of that period the Murray was intensively used to transport goods and people, as well as for irrigation as it is still today. The river was subjected to massive re-shaping, in the early twentieth century, when the construction of a series of weirs and locks attempted to transform it into a more reliable medium for transport, and a more reliable source of water for agricultural and industrial uses. *All the Rivers Run* offers a vision of the Murray as a region, defined by the river itself, with its towns, industries and peoples, its ecology and mythology. What strikes a reader of this novel today, when we are acutely aware of how drastically the whole Murray-Darling river system is endangered, is the way it incorporates the ecological as well as the social history of the river.

¹ Volume 1: *All the Rivers Run*; Volume 2: *Time, Flow Softly*; Volume 3: *But Still the Stream*: published by Heinemann, London, between 1958 and 1962, and reissued in condensed form in a single volume, *All the Rivers Run*, in 1978 by New English Library, London, and St Martin's Press, New York. In-text references are to the single volume version.

The novel's author, Nancy Cato, was born in Adelaide in 1917. As a young woman she worked as a journalist and studied English and Italian at university; she also completed a two-year course at the School of Arts. Her early poetry was associated with that of the Jindyworobak writers Ian Mudie and Rex Ingamells, who were a strong presence in literary Adelaide. She shared their mystique of the land and their interest in creating a distinctively Australian poetry which claimed Aboriginal culture as part of its inheritance. After her marriage in 1941 to racing-car driver and inventor, Eldred Norman, and the birth of their three children, she continued to write poetry, fiction and journalism. In addition to all this, she managed to travel a good deal, including a trip to Alice Springs and the Northern Territory in a jeep with her husband, and to England, Scotland and Italy in 1956 on her own (Guiffre 153).

She loved to travel and explore new places, and this desire probably fed her fascination with the Murray River as a channel of connection between different parts of Australia. The Murray appears in her early poems, and was the setting of her first novel (later published as *Green Grows the Vine* in 1961). It dominated her imagination for years, while she composed the trilogy. Later she researched and wrote a biography of Daniel Matthews and his Aboriginal Mission at Maloga on the Murray between 1864 and 1902 (*Mister Maloga*, 1976), and co-authored with Leslie McLeay *River's End: The Story of Goolwa and the Murray Mouth* (1985). What she achieves in *All the Rivers Run* is a portrait of the Murray-Darling river system as a bioregion with its own ecological, social and political history.

She has recorded that the inspiration for *All the Rivers Run* was the River Murray itself:

The first idea probably came to me from a visit to Mount Buffalo in Victoria when I was sixteen, where I first saw snow. ... A few years later I spent some weeks on a paddle-steamer houseboat and made a trip on the *Marion* in midsummer, and became fascinated with the lower river.

On my marriage I came to know Goolwa near the mouth where my mother-in-law had a riverside cottage, and also heard about the early days of the river above Echuca from her childhood memories. The sound of the sea, always noticeable at Goolwa, these stories and my memories of the snow-country ... and of the river between Morgan and Murray Bridge, all came together in my mind. ... Since 1950 I have spent ten years in research and travel on the Darling, the Murray and the Lakes.²

² Author's note on the typescript of *All the Rivers Run* (1960) in the State Library of South Australia, Cato Papers PRG 217, Box 2.

The mighty Murray was a great subject, but the novel needed to have a human heroine, and this is Philadelphia Gordon, known as Delie. The character was inspired by Alma Norman, Cato's mother-in-law, a painter who had studied with Hans Heysen, and later raised six children. Alma had grown up on her father's Aboriginal mission on the Murray near Echuca, though she never lived on a paddle-steamer—that was Nancy Cato's particular fantasy for her heroine. In the novel, Delie lives beside or actually on the river from the age of twelve until her death, so that she becomes identified with it. An orphan, she is taken to live with an uncle and aunt—first at Kiandra, in the Snowy Mountains, where the river rises, and later on a farm on the Murray near Echuca. She learns to paint and finds her subjects along the river. Her early married life is spent actually living on the river, the wife of a steamer captain, as their boat plies the Darling and Murray Rivers with cargoes of wool and wheat. She gives birth to six children, four of whom survive. When her husband is injured and bedridden, Delie becomes captain of the steamer, and operates it as a shop and postal service as well as carrying cargo. When she is an old woman and her son has taken over the boat, she goes to live in a cottage at Goolwa, near where the river flows into the sea, and there she dies.

Cato was a good journalist, and her novels are strong on historical and environmental detail, less so on characterization and narrative tension. The main focus on river life in the novel is the paddle steamers and their crews, rather than agricultural activities along the river banks. Indeed, Cato alludes to Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, perhaps as a precedent for her book (438-9). She regularly evokes the annual rhythms of the river, when it 'comes down', filled by winter rains and the spring snow melt, and then shrinks over summer and autumn, sometimes to a series of waterholes. The paddle boats ply their trade when they can, setting off upstream from Echuca in late winter to transport logs from the mountains and wool from early shearing; later, over summer, their cargoes are wheat and fruit. They race each other to gain the most favourable loading and fuelling places. In the dry season when the river is low and boats become stuck, bullock teams have to be sent to transport their cargo, if it is perishable. Sometimes boats got stuck for more than just the dry season—one was reported to have taken three years to travel up the Darling as far as Bourke (216). Delie's boat is involved in the building of the locks and weirs when she is commissioned to bring barge-loads of equipment to Blanchetown from the rail head at Murray Bridge. A reviewer of the first volume wrote that 'The River Murray almost steals the novel from Delie. The river is often Miss Cato's real theme and she is most at home when writing of its steamers and currents, its banks and billabongs and ports'.³ But this theme is not confined to social history: in making her heroine,

³ *SMH*, n.d., Cato's scrapbook (photocopy), Nancy Cato Papers, Fryer Library, University of Queensland, MS 107, series D.

Delie, a painter as well as (eventually) a steamboat captain, Cato is able to work into the narrative lyrical descriptions of riverscapes as well as observations of ecological changes along the river.

Cato the poet draws on mythologies of the river—both European and Indigenous—to lend her story a universal dimension. The river serves as a powerful symbol of time and eternity, which the writer invokes by taking her title from the well-known verse from Ecclesiastes: ‘All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full: unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again’ (Ecclesiastes 1.7).

Cato also works into the novel an Indigenous story of how the river came to be. An old man living across the river when Delie is a girl, in Yorta Yorta country, tells the story of how an old woman went on a long walkabout down from the mountain and across the great flat plain. As she travelled, dragging her digging stick in the sand as she went ‘in and out and all-about’, she was followed by a big snake. When the rain came, it began to trickle along the track the snake had made. When the old woman reached the sea she went to sleep in a cave there (54-5).⁴

Delie takes on both of these myths as her own—the river as the passage of time in eternity, and the river as a woman’s journey through life to death. At the end, she herself stands in the sandhills, between the noise of the surf and the stillness of the quiet lakes and the Coorong, and reflects:

This was the place she had come to find. Like the Old Woman ... who had made the Murray River with her stick and her magic snake, she had come to the end of her journey; this was her spiritual home, this wild and empty shore. In the boom of the surf and the changing phases of the wind she seemed to hear, mindless and eternal, the voice of the Old Woman singing in her sleep. (612)

Delie’s identification with the river allows Cato to overlay the narrative with big themes, which she described in a letter to her literary agent as ‘the gradual passing away of youth, beauty, passion, ambition, in the inexorable flow of Time’.⁵

⁴ From her report of local Indigenous stories recounted in *Mister Maloga*, it would appear that Cato learned about this one about the old woman, Tongala, with her digging stick as the origin of the river, from the memoirs of A.J. Matthews, the wife of Daniel Matthews (*Mister Maloga* 4). She also refers here to another, better-known story about the origin of the river being the track of Ponde, the giant cod, which comes from the Ngarrindjeri people further downstream.

⁵ Cato to Florence James, 7 July 1953, State Library of NSW, MLMSS 5877 James Papers, Box 22.

When they were first published Cato's trilogy of novels met with a mixed reception. Reviewers welcomed it as an epic of the Murray River from the 1890s to the present, but its focus on a woman's life and loves was seen to compromise its status as a serious historical novel. The eminent critic Marjorie Barnard liked the fact that it *was* 'a woman's life and love imagined by a woman who is also a poet', and that this life was 'given stature by the river which is its background' (439). But another reviewer who praised the book's poetry of the river and its way of life thought that Delie was a failure as a character: he found her artistic talent lacked credibility and so thought the conflict set up between that and her love for husband and children was just 'conventionally romantic' (Ashworth 56). Another male reviewer, apparently made queasy by details of bodies, sex and childbirth, complained that Delie's life as a wife and mother is 'stark and rather unnecessarily horrifying'.⁶ It seems that Cato had written a 'woman's book', and that put it out of the league of serious historical novels. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reviewer judged that 'the flavour and vitality of one of the most extraordinary periods of our history are smothered by all the commonplace ingredients of the popular novelist's formula'.⁷ But Katharine Susannah Prichard wrote to Cato that the river and the men working on it 'make it more than' a mere woman's book.⁸ Even to her, the label 'a woman's book' undermined its power. The men working on the river, doing productive rather than reproductive human labour, lent the book dignity and worth, in that Marxist writer's eyes.

The status of historical fiction mattered a great deal in Australia at mid-century because, before the gradual emergence of significant Australian historical research in universities, novels and other literary and cinematic representations of the past held sway (Sheridan, 'Historical Novels' 7-9). Back in the 1930s and 40s, best-selling writers like Frank Clune and his contemporary Ion Idriess specialised in historically-based tales that were 'nationalistic, nostalgic, romantic and heroic' (Griffen-Foley 151). At the same time, there were a few literary novelists, such as Eleanor Dark, Brian Penton and M. Barnard Eldershaw, who felt a sense of mission to write well-researched and critical versions of Australian history—even if this meant debunking popular myths such as that of the heroic pioneers. During the 1950s and 60s popular historical fiction flourished. Most of these representations reinforced the prevailing 'national story' of heroic pioneers and oppressed convicts. Catherine Gaskin's 1954 success with *Sarah Dane* (based on the convict, Mary Reibey, who became a successful business woman) sat at the top of a large heap of historical romances, many of them brought out by local Australian pulp fiction publishers like Horwitz. The doyen of

⁶ By Clive Kelly, no details of place and date; Cato's scrapbook (photocopy), Cato Papers FL107, Fryer Library.

⁷ 'Reviews in brief', Cato's scrapbook.

⁸ Prichard to Cato, 20 December 1960, Cato's scrapbook.

the genre was E.V. Timms, who began his Great South Land Saga of 12 volumes in 1948 with *Forever to Remain* and ended it in 1962 with *The Big Country*. By contrast, Cato's trilogy was unusual in dramatising relatively recent history, from the 1890s to the then-present, and by avoiding the strongly nationalist tenor that marked much post-war historical fiction. That, and its focus on a female heroine who was a steamboat captain and an artist as well as a wife and mother, posed the question of whether it truly belonged in this valued genre. How could the story of such an unrepresentative figure be seen as nationally significant? In its first life as a trilogy, then, *All the Rivers Run* was not altogether a success as a popular historical novel—the 'woman's stuff' was not seen as having real historical interest or value, and to belong to the conventions of romantic fiction.

Twenty years later, however, Cato's novel became a best-seller. The denigrated romantic elements of her trilogy came to be seen as strengths, when a canny London publisher marketed the single volume internationally as a neo-feminist historical saga for the 1970s: a story incorporating both masculine adventure and feminine self-discovery. This publication, *All the Rivers Run*, was blurbed as 'a novel on the grand scale' with 'a beautiful riverboat skipper as its wilful heroine', rivalling *The Thorn Birds*, Colleen McCullough's bestselling outback saga of 1977;⁹ Cato's son, Bill Norman, attributed the surge of interest in Australiana in the 1970s in part to *The Thorn Birds*, that surge which carried the new version of *Rivers* to international success, selling 'hundreds of thousands of copies in the US, UK, France and Germany' (Norman 13). Advertised without acknowledgment that it was a condensation of the previously published trilogy (it was 16 years since the final volume had appeared) the book had pre-publication sales of 25,000 copies (Ruskin 6). Several of Cato's literary friends wrote to congratulate her on 'your break through into the world of big book production' (Mary Durack) and 'world acceptance' for a writer 'of your calibre' (Nancy Keesing).¹⁰

Some reviews echoed earlier judgments that Cato's strength in historical background and descriptive passages of the river and steamboat life was not matched by skill in characterization. One judged Cato to be 'oblivious of the need for psychological resonance in her characters', without which, 'however generous the sequence of adventures that befall Delie Gordon, no understanding of her is possible, and she becomes merely a pretext for extravagant fancy offering the reader B-grade entertainment and no enlargement of his experience' (Gould 22).¹¹ Delie still posed problems for readers in that the depiction of her romantic and sexual longings was riddled with clichés. While in 1960 reviewers

⁹ Dust jacket, New English Library edition 1978.

¹⁰ Durack to Cato, 13 February 1979; Keesing to Cato, 20 October 1978: Cato Papers FL107, Box 1, Series B (Correspondence): Fryer Library.

¹¹ A recent account of the novel repeats this criticism, even claiming that 'a Mills and Boon love plot' was added 'for sales purposes' (Sharrad 63).

had attributed these weaknesses in the novel to 'popular' and 'romantic' literary conventions, in 1978 they were seen as a sign of the novel's datedness: 'her emotions and her thoughts belong more in a Victorian melodrama than in the real world' (Ruskin 7). Cato was struggling to create a strong woman whose sexuality was central to her passionate life as woman and artist. She represents Delie as being unsatisfied in sexual relations, at least until after the birth of her first child, and then as sexually frustrated after an accident renders her husband an invalid. For such Lawrentian subjects there were few accessible models available to a novelist, especially an Australian female novelist, and few precedents published in Australia, as Jessica Anderson said of her novels of the 1960s (Sheridan, *Nine Lives* 189-90).

Despite these reservations on the part of reviewers, the novel was a popular success. The television series of the same title made in 1983 is still available in DVD format, and the single-volume novel is still widely read. The most recent republication was in 2007, when it was advertised as: 'Beautifully set, brilliantly realised, this acclaimed novel from the golden age of epic storytelling is now repackaged as a Hodder 'Great Read'. Philadelphia Gordon is an artist, a riverboat skipper and a beautiful, independent woman'.¹²

But can Cato's novel justly be relegated to the realms of historical epic, albeit with a feminist slant? An entirely different context presents itself today for a re-reading of *All the Rivers Run*—as part of recent moves to re-read Australian literature from ecocritical perspectives.¹³ Cato's romance of the river is a text which particularly invites a reading of its representation of the natural world and human relationships to it. It encompasses both a significant ecological critique of settler uses of the river system and a celebration of the transcendental qualities of nature. The narrator comments: 'Slowly, patiently, with the organised industriousness of ants, men were forcing the great sprawling river into a new pattern. The river flowed on, accepting all the indignities heaped on it by these puny creatures, and quietly bided its time' (461)—and the novel ends with the great floods of 1956, a kind of revenge by the river. Sharrad describes this as a Gaia-like belief that nature will outlast all human efforts, black as well as white (60), and characterizes it as 'an environmentally dangerous quietism' (68). I would suggest that the celebratory tenor of the text is often in tension with its critical perspectives on human exploitation of the river. As narrator, Cato deploys her journalist's skills in observation and reporting to incorporate the social and political history of the river industries, filtered through her characters' lives on the river; and she places her heroine Delie as one who sees another side

¹² <<http://www.hachette.com.au/books/9780340938355/>>

¹³ Since I presented early versions of this paper, Paul Sharrad has published an essay on the novel's presentation of river and landscape, in a comparative Indian-Australian perspective.

to all this human activity, both through her artist's eye for the beauties of the land- and river-scape, and through her philosophical bent for seeking out poetic images of the river's timelessness.

With Delie and her family living on their boat, the *Philadelphia*, Cato takes the opportunity to describe various parts of the river system—the Darling, where they are stuck in a ditch between its steep banks for nearly twelve months during the 1902 drought (291), and the Riverland, when their boat is fitted out as a floating store and visits the new irrigation towns of Waikerie, Berri, Loxton, and isolated farms in between (356). When they enter South Australia for the first time, passing Border Cliffs and the old Customs House, Delie wants to paint the beauty of the cliffs; and Renmark appears to her painter's eye like this: 'Rows of vines, covered with the pale green of new leaves, lined the rich red earth, and the dark green of oranges, and groves of pears and apricots, made an oasis in the desert of saltbush and sand that stretched on all sides of the settlement' (330).

Cato involves the *Philadelphia* in the building of the locks and weirs when she is commissioned to bring barge-loads of equipment to Blanchetown from the rail head at Murray Bridge—'iron sheeting for coffer-dams, pumping engines, blocks and tackle, piles and pile-driving machinery' (416). Now Delie is Captain, and work is harder to find as shipping is replaced by rail transport. She takes on the challenge of crossing Lake Alexandrina with a load of wool, a dangerous trip if the wind is wrong. A local tells her: 'Sometimes the waves are eight feet high and, since the lake is only about eight feet deep, you have to have eighteen inches of freeboard, minimum, for the Lakes, and an extra insurance cover' (430). For a few years while her children are at high school, Delie stays on land, at Renmark: 'She rested like a caravan voyager at an oasis in this fruitful place, before going on into a future which seemed as full of menace as the desert' (535). As indeed it proves to be 'full of menace'—her husband dies, river traffic decreases and the *Philadelphia* is moored permanently at Murray Bridge; World War II breaks out, and her favourite son is taken prisoner and dies in Changi. Finally we see Delie, an old woman close to death, living alone in a cottage at Goolwa, within earshot of the waves that mark the river mouth.

She is there at the time of the great 1956 flood, when the river rose to over twelve metres, and the flood reached all the way to Goolwa. The river is portrayed as spreading out, having broken its banks, 'with a great sigh of triumph, over the wide flat plains about the Lakes' (631). This prompts Delie, now an old woman, to mutter "'It's all these banks and barrages. ... I knew the Murray wouldn't like it'" (632).

Delie seems to speak for her creator in voicing this belief in the river's power. Cato's interest in the transformations—and degradations—of the river system

constitute, I suggest, an ecological critique of its uses by settler Australians. Early explorers had remarked that the Murray, like many other Australian rivers, lost its presence as a flowing river during a drought, dwindling to a series of waterholes. As Cato shows in this novel, after the bad droughts of 1902 and 1914, plans were set in place to make the Murray more consistently river-like by regulating its flows. This involved building a series of locks and weirs which made it more useful for transport and for irrigation—but at a cost.: salinity of the soil and of the freshwater reaches, death of many trees that were now permanently rooted in water and, as a deeper narrower channel was established, the loss of that regular shallow flooding which fertilised surrounding land and nurtured a variegated flora and fauna. At several points early in the novel Cato describes ‘flooded gum forests’ on the river banks (36, 78) and later as the locks are built, she notes: ‘The gum trees, now wading many feet deep in a flood that would never go down, looked greener and fresher than ever before; but this was a false flow of vitality before the end, for they were soon to be grey skeletons, drowned by the continuous inundation of their roots’ (568).

Cato was aware that the Murray Valley, unlike the Darling, ‘is really a huge flood-plain through which the river meanders from one mile-wide bank to the other’ (293). She was also aware that the much-vaunted draining of the swamplands on either side of Murray Bridge, after World War I, which made so much rich black-soil land available for dairying, resulted in the loss of the varied bird life that had thrived there: ‘Wild duck and black swans, pelicans and shags left for the wide waters of the Goolwa channel and the salty Coorong at the mouth’ (461). The problem of salinity is mentioned in the novel, not as an effect of the rising water table (Hammer 236), but as an effect of inflows from the sea at times of low water. Delie recalls, when the boat is aground during the 1914 drought:

There was even talk of building a great wall or barrage across the mouth, to be closed in time of drought so as to prevent the flowing away of fresh water and the inward flow of salt; for the whole of the lower reaches had now become saline, and a salt-water mullet had been caught at Mannum, more than a hundred miles upstream. (387)

The idea of barraging the Murray mouth is later extolled by an engineer at Blanchetown:

‘When we get all the locks and weirs in, then there won’t be any more low rivers. ... You’ll be able to snap your fingers at droughts. A barrage or rather a series of barrages at the mouth would be ideal. You could stop the whole river flowing for as much as half the year, until the water was coming down again. The whole length one enormous dam!’ (514)

Delie's response is sceptical: 'You engineers! ... You love to tame Nature, to turn rivers out of their courses or dam them up. But this river's too big for you...' (514).

Delie and her creator are clearly of the view that the river would win in the end—would bide its time, would take its revenge. When she is told that all the red-gum forests around her old home near Echuca have been cut down, and it will take five hundred years to replace them Delie reflects that, despite the 'treeless paddocks and the eroded, sand-drifted higher land, where the wild daisies used to grow beneath the Murray pines', yet 'she felt the comfort of the river's calm flowing round the familiar bends; this was still unchanged, the eternal, unrelenting flood which brimmed on for ever' (599). But nothing is for ever, including a river. Few Australians in 1960 seem to have anticipated the extent of the present crisis, where the survival of the Murray-Darling river system itself is endangered. It was, after all, the period when the new Snowy River hydro-electric system was being celebrated as a triumph of technological progress, and irrigation along the Murray and Murrumbidgee rivers was being intensified (Sharrad 58). The environmental movement was still small, although there was a growing awareness of the dangers of environmental pollution—American Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) was much discussed. During the 1960s the Australian Conservation Foundation was founded, and that decade also saw campaigns against mining and quarrying, and against the flooding of Lake Pedder for hydro-electricity. It was at this time that Judith Wright and Kathleen Macarthur set up the Wildlife Preservation Society in southern Queensland (Hutton and Connors 89-120). In 1967 Cato and her husband moved to the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, where she also became active in the conservation movement and published *The Noosa Story* (1979, 1982), an indictment of 'unplanned development'.

In his discussion of Australian environmental texts, Tony Hughes-d'Aeth argues that the first novels to fit the description of works which 'assert the primacy of the nonhuman world' emerged in the 1930s, when Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* and Eleanor Dark's *The Timeless Land* registered 'an awareness that nature is fragile, that it is woundable' rather than seeing it as an antagonistic force. According to his account, 'ecological concerns waned in the postwar years', until the 1970s when 'anti-development sentiments as well as a more detailed depiction of the biota became more frequent', including in the work of Thea Astley (118). *All the Rivers Run* is a post-war novel that anticipates later critiques of development, while at the same time showing its inheritance from the 1930s, when Cato was a young writer associated with the Jindyworobak poets and their desire to draw inspiration from the land itself and from the culture of its first people (Sheridan, 'White Women' 252). Although that Jindyworobak sensibility suffuses Cato's poetry, and is present in *All the Rivers Run*, it is placed by its

context in a novel which emphasises the material interventions of settler culture into the environment, and their cost. In this respect *All the Rivers Run* tends towards a critique of the 'progress' and 'science' that were so much part of post-war economic and cultural development in Australia. This suggests a link to more recent understandings of ecological politics as involving a critique of modernity (Heise 507).

Hughes-d'Aeth notes in passing that in Herbert's and Dark's 1930s fiction 'environmental destruction is closely linked with the cultural destruction of Aboriginal people' (118). In *All the Rivers Run*, however, Aboriginal people living on the river are present only in the first volume, when Delie is a girl. After that they disappear from the story, as if from history itself. Despite the fact that she re-told their stories and noticed the miserable life led by so-called 'half-castes' on the fringes of town life along the river, Delie's story implies—and she explicitly repeats—the white settler adage that 'true' Aboriginal people died out. In this Cato was typical of her generation in the immediate post-war years, either ignoring Aboriginal Australians or construing them as a problem left over from the past. Aboriginal cultural survival was brought to the attention of many settler Australians for the first time with the campaign for Aboriginal rights leading up to the 1967 Referendum, and books such as W.E.H. Stanner's Boyer Lectures in 1968, published as *After the Dreaming* (Griffiths 8). In her later fiction, Cato returned again and again to the 'contact zone' of colonial times, and in *Queen Trucanini* (1976), the dispossession and indeed the attempted elimination of the Tasmanian Aborigines was her central subject. Yet for all her interest in, and sympathy for, Aboriginal Australians on the colonial frontier, she could never entirely escape contemporary beliefs about race and assimilation and imagine a place for the indigenous 'other' in a shared culture (Sheridan, 'White Women' 255).

Cato's ecologically sensitive vision contributes an important layer of meaning to *All the Rivers Run* as a historical novel of life on the river. It places her novel in the category of works in which the non-human environment is 'present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history', as American ecocritic Lawrence Buell puts it (7). In the context of Australian literary accounts of human relationships to country, where such relationships are typically represented as antagonistic and the land as a cruel or indifferent opponent of human endeavour, Cato's love of the river is highly unusual. It involves her in presenting the environment as process rather than as a given, and her text can be read as holding humans accountable to the environment, two further criteria for environmental texts proposed by Buell (7-8).

All the Rivers Run makes an important contribution to writing ecology into Australian literature, all the more effectively because it is so specifically a regional ecology, where region is defined by the course of the river. The Murray-Darling Basin has its own ecological history, which both shapes and is influenced by human uses of the river system for transport and irrigation. This kind of consciousness runs counter to conventional political identifications with state and nation. In his account of 'post-national Australian literary studies', Philip Mead identifies the importance of 'place-consciousness', 'rereadings of the local', as they complement the new work on transnational comparisons and contexts (551). He sees regionalist redrawings of the map as a process of resisting and critiquing the historical process by which the 'natural' entity of the continent came to provide 'a powerful legitimating form for the political and social entity of the Commonwealth of Australia' (554). Cato's novel of the river predates this current change in spatial consciousness, which Mead points out is 'profoundly influenced by Aboriginal being' and sense of 'country' as complex relationships of belonging and responsibility to a particular place (554-5). However her sense of place surely counts as a significant re-drawing of the map of the south west of the continent.

Cato's place-consciousness also runs counter to conventional settler Australian desire for ownership of land, 'the yeoman ideal of nationalism' (Robin 300), which haunts most settler Australian attempts to respond creatively to a particular place. As Libby Robin points out in her tribute to Judith Wright's achievement both as a poet of the land and as a public intellectual, her work 'grapples with the pastoral livelihood and its costs, in displacing the Indigenous owners of the land and in damaging the land itself' (300). In identifying with the river, Cato sidesteps the issue of ownership altogether, and hence the pastoral way of life as well as the pastoral genre as a way of writing the landscape.¹⁴ Yet this novel, which qualifies as environmental writing on so many counts, should earn Cato a place with Wright and other ecologically-conscious writers of the mid-twentieth century.

SUSAN SHERIDAN is Professor Emerita in Humanities at Flinders University and a member of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. She has published widely on women's writing, feminist cultural studies and Australian cultural history. Her latest book is *Nine Lives: Postwar Women Writers Making their Mark* (University of Queensland Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Postcolonial variations on the pastoral are the main focus of Huggan and Tiffin's discussion of 'Entitlement' in their recent book.

Works cited

- Ashworth, Arthur. 'The River Towns.' *Southerly* 21.1 (1961): 56.
- Barnard, Marjorie. 'Fiction Chronicle.' *Meanjin* 19.4 (1960): 439.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and the Literary Imagination*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.
- Cato, Nancy. *All the Rivers Run*. London: New English Library, 1978.
- . *Mister Maloga*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1976.
- . [1979] *The Noosa Story: A Study in Unplanned Development*. Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1989.
- Giuffre, Giulia. 'Nancy Cato.' *A Writing Life*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990. 151-68.
- Gould, Alan. Untitled review of *All the Rivers Run*. *Canberra Times* 9 December 1978: 22.
- Griffen-Foley, Bridget. 'Digging up the past: Frank Clune, Australian historian and media personality.' *History Australia* 8.1 (2011): 137-52.
- Griffiths, Tom. 'A Haunted Country?' *Land and Identity* Ed. Jennifer McDonnell and Michael Deves. Sydney: Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1998. 1-12.
- Hammer, Chris. *The River: A Journey through the Murray-Darling Basin*. Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2010.
- Heise, Ursula K. 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism.' *PMLA* 121.2 (2006): 503-516.
- Huggan, Graham and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. London: Routledge, 2010.
- Hughes-d'Aeth, Tony. 'A Critique of Eco-Criticism.' *Reading Down Under*. Ed. Amit Saarwal and Reema Sarwal. New Delhi: SSS Publications, 2009. 114-125.
- Hutton, Drew and Libby Connors. *A History of the Australian Environment Movement*. Melbourne: Cambridge UP, 1999.
- Mead, Philip. 'Nation, Literature, Location.' *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*. Ed. Peter Pierce. Melbourne: Cambridge UP, 2009. 549-67.
- Norman, Bill. 'Murray Novel Brought Fame, Fortune.' *Canberra Times* 7 July 2000: 13.
- Robin, Libby. 'The Eco-Humanities as Literature.' *Australian Literary Studies* 23.3 (2008): 290-304.
- Ruskin, Pamela. 'Story of an Australian Riverboat.' *Australian Book Review* December 1978: 6-7.
- Sharrad, Paul. "'The River is Three-Quarters Empty": Some Literary Takes on Rivers and Landscapes in India and Australia.' *Landscape, Place and Culture*. Ed. Deb N. Bandyopadhyay, Paul Brown and Christopher Conti. Newcastle-on-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. 54-70.

Sheridan, Susan. 'Historical Novels Challenging the National Story.' *History Australia* 8.2 (2011): 7-20.

—. *Nine Lives: Postwar Women Writers Making their Mark*. St Lucia: UQP, 2011.

—. 'White Women Writing in the Contact Zone: Catherine Martin and Nancy Cato.' *Australian Feminist Studies* 27.73 (2012): 249-57.