

# Mixed Blessings: Narratives of Inheritance in Farming and Writing.

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What does it mean to live at a time when the way we feed ourselves threatens the social and ecological fabric of the planet? (Cameron Muir, *The Broken Promise of Agricultural Progress*, 2015, 1).

**I**N 'ON INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE', JOHN FROW OUTLINES CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE dimensions of intergenerational justice largely in terms of political, social and economic structures (Frow). In this paper I suggest a focus on previous generations' experience of inheritance within the natural world for its relevance to environmental devastation and climate change. Frow also refers to 'tradition, the passing on of a culture, language, a stock of knowledge, a way of life' (25) which leads my discussion to local as well as national relevance. For example, the material heritage of an area of Wiradjuri country on the south-west slopes and plains of NSW is quartz scrapers made perhaps 200, perhaps 20,000 years ago; is the charred stumps of ironbark trees harvested by colonists in the nineteenth century; is the daubs of white foam marking the progress of the Round-up sprayer on vast paddocks preparing for grain or hay inside the remaining thin wall of native vegetation lining the fences. These are experiences of past and present that I have inherited, traditional practices that have been suppressed, ignored or forgotten in the service of 'the needs and interests of a successive present', as Frow argues from Benjamin (30).

In my quest to undertake action to mitigate a future of environmental devastation, I explore literary and historical narratives for insights. My examples are, like Frow's, drawn from literature, unpacked from the writing and life of E. O. Schlunke (1906-1960). One of the small number of Australian writers who have also been full-time farmers (Hughes-D'Aeth 7), Schlunke was born into the farming community of German-speaking Lutherans that had 'settled' near the NSW town of Temora. Widely-read and with a passion for classical music, Schlunke saw both writing and farming as a financial necessity and inseparable forms of work. He would write, he said, 'only of those things he encountered in his everyday life' (Semmler). The result is closest to Frow's utilitarian position, Schlunke's 'things' being complex relations between interdependent people, other-than-human lives and the very ground of that large district, Narraburra Shire.

Schlunke inherited the family farm as a very young man, and with it the deliberately-moderate farming practices of his father and grandfather (*Rosenthal* 87). While many of Schlunke's narratives present the wealth of life-forms he knew on his land, they also voiced deep concern for its present and future health. In an area that had been over-grazed by pastoralists and over-cleared after subdivision into small farming properties, he in turn advocated and practised what would now be termed regenerative farming.

Carrying out extensive pasture improvement and soil conservation... he pioneered the use of contour ploughing (with a chisel plough), flumes (grassed waterways) and holding dams—to maximize rainfall effectiveness and check erosion. (Walsh)

*The Bulletin* initially accepted his short stories and its editor, Douglas Stewart, mentored his writing, meaning he adopted *The Bulletin's* tone, ironic humour and (in his case) deceptive narrative simplicity, tracking life for first- and second-generation migrants, change from the mechanisation of farming, from post-war to mercantilism transforming small towns, in the complexity of belief systems.

Though he wrote few First Nations characters, rarely referred to colonisation and rarely published verse, 'Benelong Returns to Heaven' is an exception to all three. Using the device of the voice from the afterlife, the poem appropriates the name of Bennelong, (well-known advocate and elder of the Eora people in Governor Macquarie's period), his biography and voice then defines dispossession by aligning it with callous exploitation of both people and the earth:

Benelong Returns to Heaven

A fool of an idea that was, to get nostalgic and go  
For a reincarnated walkabout down below,  
*Our* harbor, with white-men's gunyahs crowding all the shores,  
All the creeks —think of it—running in white-man-smelly  
And not enough fish in it to fill one blackman's belly.

Schlunke combines what he knows of First Nations society and economy with enumerating species decline and land degradation inflicted by European agriculture—by his own rapacious and hypocritical colonists:

Wherever I looked there was hardly a bird or a tree,  
Not a kangaroo left; a terrible country to be.  
Even away from the gunyahs it wasn't much better;  
All the land ruined by that awful invention, the plough.  
Hardly one goanna to the acre is it carrying now.

The poem goes on to an 'all' who use a blatant 20th-century rationalisation of invasion and dispossession:

Our people outnumbered by ten or a hundred to one  
And all resigned and saying nothing can be done,  
Quoting some theory: 'When there's a mass immigration  
By a frugal and industrious people of another race or nation,  
It inevitably lowers the living standard of the indigenous population.'

The political structures of the democratic state provide no recourse for Benelong.

Tried to get the present Governor to listen to me  
But he's hedged in by a thing called democracy,  
Worse than all the taboos we ever invented:  
Originated by a wild new tribe called politicians,  
Who've overrun the country and camped in all the best positions.

That's why I footed it back as fast as I could  
Even though there's a lot here that isn't much good;  
Such as listening to so much outlandish harp-music  
And having to make friends with every wild animal,  
Thank God though, the number of white people is small. ('Benelong  
Returns to Heaven')

The 'fewness' of the 'white men' in the heaven 'Benelong' returned to suggests a network of factors that determine what happens to the earth. Schlunke himself, as farmer, was responding to damage caused by persistent ploughing and overstocking in the Riverina, seeing local wind and water erosion adding to the vast dust storms that swept across eastern Australia in the 1940s (Speirs 144; Henzell 128). Like Frow, he saw economic ramifications as both individual and national. In 'A House in the Country' he referred again to Indigenous care while somewhat parodying his own views and practices through his farmer character, Alec Salter:

Briefly, [Salter's] idea was that the less you did to your land the better, that the whole secret of success lay in doing none of the things that were standard farming practice, and that the quickest road to national ruin was to follow the recommendations of the leading agricultural scientists. All the efforts of his grandfather, his father and himself ... had been devoted to keeping the property as near to what it had been when only the aborigines (sic) and the kangaroos had occupied it. (*Stories* 109)

He was not alone; his local Narraburra Shire Council regarded soil erosion as a major problem by the early 1930s. It publicised preventative strategies and set up a competition for best conservation practices. Schlunke's farm won the trophy twice (Speirs 146) but in 'A House in the Country', neither of Salter's sons wishes to inherit the land. Would-be grain growers jump in, the farm is sold, he moves to Sydney where he tells the narrator:

'We went for a car trip last month, and dropped past to see the old place.' He paused a while and I could see a vein pulsing in his brow that didn't look too good for his blood-pressure. 'It's all torn up, hillsides and all, and sown to wheat. It will be an eroded ruin in a few years.'<sup>1</sup> He stopped and sat there looking at the carpet, tense with the bitterest, futile resentment. (*Stories* 118)

In this story, it is future generations—his sons—who have declined their stewardship of the earth and it is the practices required to profit from the new grain markets that cause Salter's resentment.<sup>2</sup> His literally heart-felt response to the ending of his mutual relationship with the earth Salter has lived on and from is repeated briefly in several stories, such as 'The Man Farther Out':

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<sup>1</sup> Here 'torn up' means ploughed.

<sup>2</sup> Schlunke's own son David Schlunke, combining art, rather than farming, with conservation, purchased 800 hectares when his father died, maintaining it for regeneration alone. Purchased recently by NSW National Parks and Wildlife, it is now one of the few such areas on public or private land in the Eastern Riverina (<<https://davidschlunke.com/page/2/>>).

[Jenkins's] stock ... wandered disconsolately round... They powdered his good red soil with their hooves, so that it joined the grey western dust on the way to the mountains and the sea. It hurt him to see his land suffering like that. (95)

Schlunke's characters highlighted the powerlessness of the individual who practices stewardship. In *The Broken Promise of Agriculture* Cameron Muir concludes 'unexpectedly' after years of research and field-work with western NSW river- and plains-dwellers, that narratives brought him to an understanding that: 'The stories collected together began to suggest there is a connection between how we treat each other and how we treat the land. Good ecological relationships depend on good social relationships' (2). Neither Muir nor Frow mentions the role of religion in determining Western inheritance-practices despite the Christian belief-structure of eternal salvation or damnation that is individual while the destruction of humanity and the world is expected in the Apocalypse, a progression central to Western linear time.

Schlunke's story 'The Irling' has less immediate consideration of earth and climate but methodically explores the interplay of such religious, cultural and economic heritage in community and its underlying ecosystem. Set in the 'early days of lonely settlement' (14), the narrator, a local boy, describes the central character, Kronitz, a first-generation Polish immigrant-farmer, as he suffers from his wife's cries. Calvinistic and hard-hearted, he has left it too late to fetch a midwife because 'bearing young was ... carried out by his sheep, cattle and horses without any fuss' (14), but his wife's cries 'mak[e] it impossible for him to get to bed' (14). As he paces the verandah he sees a light in the wild country beyond his own farmland.

... suddenly he noticed something else that made him catch his breath in fear. Every time the light brightened his wife screamed, and each time it became fainter she quietened down. ... A chilling prickling and numbing feeling took possession of his body and mind. Incredible as it might seem, here in Australia was the same dreaded irling that had terrified his father and his grandfather in the forests and swamps of Czestochowa. (14)

Though Waltie the baby is born and grows up as robust as his older brothers, his father remains convinced the light is that malevolent supernatural presence, repeating 'the irling will get him in the end' (15) until the whole district knows of his fear. This belief and phobia is Kronitz's inheritance. His illiteracy is also culturally-determined, his shrewd and avaricious disposition his own.

Kronitz does not guide or control his sons who become reckless young adults. Using the ethnic prism applied by the wider community, the narrator reports this, too, is inheritance: 'Our parents attributed the wild nature of the Kronitz boys and their large and gross appearance to the fact that their parents had come from a very backward part of Europe frequently overrun by Russian armies' (15).

The family has already been driven from their distant European origins, joining with others to maintain the binding force—their cultural and religious beliefs—within their community. They attend 'the little bush church each Sunday where the bearded old pastor shouts about hell and damnation' (16).

Kronitz's sons work unpaid as his farm labourers until the Crown Land where the will-o-the-wisp appeared is released for sale. It is bought by Nietzsche, a Bavarian widower, middle-class, educated and aware of the prestige associated with his name. He arrogantly underestimates his neighbour.<sup>3</sup> They share a rundown boundary fence but Nietzsche cannot pay his half for its repair. This symbolic division is made worse by his cattle getting through it, and Hilda his daughter, raised to be a snobbish young lady, offending Kronitz by mocking his belief in the Irling.

A sexually-charged and dangerous game develops with Hilda herding her dairy cows into his paddock with her horse, and Waltie chasing them out with increasing violence. Eventually he attacks her cattle and catches and rapes Hilda. She, rejecting community sympathy, refuses to speak except to wish Waltie dead. The community, tone-deaf, decides through a meeting of Lutheran elders and the pastor that the two must marry but Kronitz, still insulted, rejects the decision until terrified into acceptance by the pastor's threat of eternal hell-fire.

There is no wedding. Instead, a light begins to reappear that the Kronitz men believe is the Irling until Waltie shoots at it. A bushfire is started by the burning branch that Hilda is carrying. It burns first through Kronitz's wheat then the district's crops before the community gets it under control. Waltie dies that night in pursuit of Hilda, knocked off his horse by a tree branch. The story ends with his father saying 'I always said the Irling would get him in the end' (21). In a sense it has, but his own human, not superhuman, actions, have fulfilled his prophecy. Is there intergenerational justice in this story? Several points underlie the trajectory; the hold of cultural beliefs and practices, the importance of mindful child-raising, of justice for women and men alike, the need for mutual respect regardless of social inequality.

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<sup>3</sup> There are layers of implication here: Schlunke is undoubtedly invoking Friedrich Nietzsche's 'eternal return'; Crown Land suggests unfarmed country in its Indigenous state.

Frow sees communities as powerless in the face of the ‘agents of transmission: nation states, corporations, political parties, privileged social classes and only in the last instance the citizenry with a stake in a future world’ (26). Schlunke’s life and writing suggest that, taken in concert with contemporary research like Muir’s, the citizenry can have immediate agency in increasing the resilience of that land that has been nurtured by ‘good ecological relationships’. Narratives like his also provide potentially-useful insights into changing ecology, so that responsibility for past and future inheritances ‘passes in a chain from present to future and present to past and we in whichever present we stand, occupy each moment in that chain’ (Frow 35).

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