Tony Hughes-d'Aeth. *Like Nothing on this Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt*. Perth: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2017. 520pp
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Tony Hughes-d'Aeth's *Like Nothing on this Earth* begins by telling of how his interest in the Western Australian wheatbelt grew out of watching weather reports on TV. He became transfixed by the satellite image of the sharp line that rings Perth, to the north and east, stretching roughly from Geraldton to Esperance and marking out an area most Western Australians know as the wheatbelt.

Inside the ring was a wheat-coloured yellow, outside the ring a muted eucalyptus green. The line where they meet, known by analysts as the 'clearing line,' is the most obvious visible sign from space of humans' effect on the planet (1).

Hughes-d'Aeth takes pains to situate the wheatbelt geographically, explaining that it sits on a vast plateau, the Yilgarn block, that dominates the southwest corner of the continent. This is a rainfall region, enabling the successful growing of wheat but not always.

The book seeks to trace the creation of the wheatbelt during the course of the twentieth century by considering the creative writing of those who lived in the wheatbelt at various points in their lives and wrote about the experience. This is what Hughes-d'Aeth means by 'literary history' in this context: a history of the wheatbelt as captured by literary works deriving from it.

Using an 'event/witness' model, the book treats the creation of the wheatbelt as an event and creative writers as the witnesses. It makes a case for creative writing as a 'document of record': the literary offers 'interior apprehension of how life feels to people' (3). Of course, the wheatbelt has been experienced very differently over time, according to who is apprehending it.

Like Nothing on this Earth takes its title from a quotation from Tom Flood's underrated novel *Oceana Fine* (1989) which offers a view of the wheatbelt from the windshield of a car. A young man on his way to work on the 'bins' in the eastern wheatbelt reflects on the overwhelming-ness of the place: 'The landscape is so immense, hot and huge like nothing on this earth, that I fear it might swallow me' (6).

The book is organised around eleven writers who have a chapter each:

Albert Facey (1894–1982); Cyril E. Goode (1907–1983); James Pollard (1900–1971); John Keith Ewers (1904–1978); Peter Cowan (1914–2002); Dorothy Hewett (1923–2002); Jack Davis (1917–2000); Barbara York Main (1929–); Elizabeth Jolley (1923–2007); Tom Flood (1955–); John Kinsella (1963–).

Two notable absences are Randolph Stow and Kim Scott. Instead, Hughes-d'Aeth has subsequently published an article on Stow's Geraldton farm novels in *JASAL* 1.18 (2018). Kim Scott, whose home country around Ravensthorpe, west of Esperance, was opened up to cropping after WWII, is mentioned briefly in the introduction but he does not get a dedicated

chapter of his own. Even a work of this size (almost 600 pages) and comprehensiveness cannot hope to contain all the writers who ever lived and worked in the wheatbelt.

This book might be read in the context of the 'new regionalism' identified and practised by a number of Australian literature scholars. As Philip Mead has argued, regional literary histories are often ambivalent, given that they are usually produced to coincide with anniversaries of settlement, thereby reminding us of the dispossession involved with settlement (Mead). Of course, literary history in a scholarly sense is a western idea; its tendency to focus on material textual outputs implicitly excludes oral and other modes and has contributed to the silencing of Indigenous voices and the forgetting of Indigenous presence in Australia. Although it doesn't devote space to Indigenous oral history, this literary history is sensitive to the existence of storytelling traditions which pre-dated white settlement. Hughes-d'Aeth acknowledges that the establishment of the wheatbelt represented the violent interruption of the history of Aboriginal occupancy (6).

What is now known as the wheatbelt is the traditional country of the Noongar people, comprising of seventeen tribes, but sharing a similar language. The Noongar people suffered the most when the wheatbelt was 'created.' Jack Davis is the only Indigenous author to have his own chapter but the discussion of work gives the reader insight into the devastation that the wheatbelt wrought on the Noongar people.

As Hughes d'Aeth observes, Davis is not usually thought of as a wheatbelt writer, but he lived and worked there sporadically for at least eleven years between 1932 and 1962. In this chapter Hughes d'Aeth confronts the near-slavery of Aboriginal people on wheatbelt farms, noting that the extent to which the wheatbelt was built on the back of Indigenous workers has not yet been fully assessed by historians.

This chapter considers the Aboriginal wheatbelt via Davis, whose work was critical of the whole enterprise: 'Where the white man turned the soil whose tribes were completely obliterated' (326). To fill out the discussion of Davis's biography, Hughes-d'Aeth turns to the life of Alice Nannup who has told her story in *When the Pelican Laughed* (1992). Davis was born six years after Alice Nannup but they had much in common including their movements in and out of the wheatbelt during its formative years and their internment at the Moore River settlement. Davis is a crucial witness of the Moore River settlement which he narrated in later life. He was 'bemused' by the experience which Hughes d'Aeth reads as kind of literary, ironic distance. Hughes d'Aeth argues that Davis was able to capture, better than anyone before or since, the complexity of Aboriginal policy as it affected the lives of thousands of people during the twentieth century.

Barbara York Main, whose chapter follows on from Davis's, is an intriguing figure who combined environmentalism and writing. As a trained zoologist, illustrator and writer, York Main brought a fresh perspective to the wheatbelt and its non-human inhabitants. Her book *Between Wodjil and Tor* (1967), a natural history of an area of remnant and partially re-grown wheatbelt bushland bordering her family's farm, observes the unfolding of a year's life in an 'animated landscape' in the mode of Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) (393). Hughes d'Aeth describes *Between Wodjil and Tor* as 'a powerful counterpoint to the world of wheat and mixed farms' (398). Hughes d'Aeth notes that what we get in York Main's book is something like the 'parallel world' that Jack Davis introduced with his account of Aboriginal experience. A world that is 'both before and beyond farmers and farming' (399).

> To climb through a wire fence, out of a ploughed and sown paddock, into a wild, wind-raked stretch of bushland is to tumble into an order of life, unmoulded by man, but which can jolt his mind into a deeper wonderment, not only of this ungarnered territory but of the whole natural world. (399)

With her intricate descriptions of the symbiotic relationships between plants and creatures in this fragile ecosystem, she allows us to recognise the extent of the destruction caused by deforestation, without ever being didactic. Since she understood how the natural environment of the wheatbelt region worked on a micro level, York Main was painfully aware of how much diversity was lost and how impossible it would be to replace, yet her writing never betrays bitterness.

Hughes d'Aeth should be commended for including York Main in this collection of writers, as she is not necessarily an obvious choice, despite her lyrical and layered literary style. By reprinting many of her illustrations and quotations from *Between Wodjil and Tor* and *Twice Trodden Ground* (1971), readers unfamiliar with her name may sample her quietly radical counter-history of the wheatbelt.

The chapter on poet Cyril Goode—known in part for his passionate dedication to preservation of the bricks from Adam Lindsay Gordon's demolished Brighton home—offers a view of the wheatbelt at the time it was being painfully built with bare hands. Goode's diary entries record his early enthusiasm and increasing bitterness when things go awry. Given that he spent the early part of his childhood in the Victorian Mallee, he was not without experience of the hardship involved with 'taming' the land. In his poem 'Tractor Driver in Mallee Country' from *Horizontal Gothic and other Australian Antiquities* (1966), Goode wrote about the difficulties of 'grouting across a sandy firmament,' of being bounced by 'constellations of live stumps' and 'stung by springback shoots.' The clearing of the land in Turkey Hill that he took up with his father in 1925 was similarly back-breaking and intense. In his meticulous diary entries, Goode records the loneliness and isolation involved with his seven years in the wheatbelt, the camaraderie amongst farmers and the despair of failed crops. These experiences are also reflected in his poetry and short stories, with at least two farmers hanging themselves to escape from their lives of drudgery and failure. The representation of a suicidal farmer in Part III of 'The Grower of Golden Grain' was frowned upon by reviewers at the time, with the *Sunday Times* (WA) finding that 'several of the poems are spoiled by a little too much introspection and unconstructive (poetically) Cynicism.' Responses like these reveal the power of the prevailing ideologies around wheat farming in the early 1930s. Goode is a valuable witness for d'Aeth's project, precisely because he records the human cost of the wheatbelt experience, without sugar coating it.

The contemporary WA wheatbelt, like the Victorian Mallee, now faces complex environmental, social and economic issues including the suicide of farmers (and young men generally) that Goode wrote about eighty-five years ago. Dryland salinity is ever-increasing, as a direct result of the farming practices in these wheat growing areas, particularly the destruction of forests. A study such as this shows us what cultural richness has emerged from a place that has been despoiled in the name of productivity.

The writers who are surveyed record a range of responses to the wheatbelt, from celebratory to critical. They all have insight to offer into this phenomenon and its impact on human and non-human existence in Western Australia. The book tries very hard to maintain a balanced 'objective' view but Hughes-d'Aeth's environmental concern is evident from the first page.

He argues that a central theme of any history of the Western Australian wheatbelt is 'radical disappearance' (2). He notes that of 'the shires and districts that make up the wheatbelt, only 7 per cent of the original vegetation, and thus the animals that depend on it, remains today' (2). Although the wheatbelt was created in a fairly gradual way over generations, in terms of 'deep time,' it was a sudden and spectacular event. Essentially it involved the almost total destruction of the pre-existing life-world of the continent (4). It's a tricky balancing act to acknowledge the economic and cultural contributions of the wheatbelt while fully registering the enormous destruction it wrought.

Hughes-d'Aeth carefully charts changing attitudes to the environment as expressed in literature from the time of Albert Facey to that of John Kinsella, the final author in the collection. Each chapter is closely tied to the others with complex interconnections creating a detailed genealogy of wheatbelt literature. Hughes d'Aeth has sought to bring the book to wheatbelt communities through talks and readings in Wagin, Northam, Toodyay, York and New Norcia organised by University of Western Australia Publishing. In this way, an impressive work of scholarship has already found audiences within and beyond the region itself.

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