# Making Tracks: Cameron Muir

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Making Tracks

In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

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**“A Place Where All But Man Is Vile, and Every Prospect Displeases”**

by **Cameron Muir**

Reading the other Making Tracks posts I am struck by how often an author’s childhood experiences shapes the subject of his or her environmental research decades later. Now I understand I am destined (doomed, perhaps?) to carry Dubbo with me forever.

This is a town where people would string a Confederate flag across the rear window of their ute, where the bumper stickers declared “No ute, no root,” and where recreation included shooting at road signs.

It’s a town where my good friend could be kicked out of the pub, only for all of us inside to look out towards the feature window and see him returning naked, carrying his own faeces in his hand, before smearing it in big circles over the window, and for him to be still considered quite a catch—all the young women were smitten by him.

It’s a town whose name is derived from an Aboriginal word thought to mean “red earth” but our national dictionary lists it as a synonym for “idiot.” And when the police in Sydney are dealing with a real drongo, they call it in as a “2830”—Dubbo’s postcode.

It’s a town whose river would run freezing cold in 40°C summers after authorities sent water from the bottom of the huge dam to the irrigators on the plains further west; water that spawned warnings of blue-green algae and faeces contamination, water that in the coming decades could be so salt-laden it will be unfit for human consumption.

It's a town where the government housing estate was nicknamed "Vegemite Valley" or just Veggie for short, where we played footy across front lawns on sunny winter afternoons, "blackfellas against white c***s."

It is a town where, ten years ago, residents petitioned to have Aboriginal children removed from their families if they were caught wandering the main street. They collected 11,000 signatures. This was only a few years after we'd heard the heart-rending stories of the Stolen Generations in the Bringing Them Home report.

Dubbo is where my interest in the broken and toxic, in violence and injustice, comes from.

Once, when it was the beginning of a long dry period, but no one could have known it yet, Dad drove us out west to a cotton farm. We stood on the old floodplain listening to the manager in his faded cap, a battery of pumps behind him, boasting how much water these engines could lift once the river reached a certain height. To the left of him an open channel carried water to laser-leveled fields that you could see trailing off to the horizon. Cotton saved the towns out here.

A few American families brought cotton to the plains in the 1960s. With the backing of the J. G. Boswell Company, the world's largest private farm enterprise and the United States' biggest cotton grower, they amassed thousands of acres worth of irrigation rights. "We broke every law in the state." said Boswell's business partner later.

It wasn't until the 1990s that cotton started to pay. The graziers, who had been "kings in grass castles" since they first came to the plains and fought to death with Aboriginal people, found themselves usurped. It was King Cotton's reign now. Irrigation worked on a scale and level of technological sophistication that was unfamiliar to the locals. Some told historian Heather Goodall that the rivers ran backwards. The first time I was allowed on one of the cotton properties, with Dad, it just looked desolate. These weren't the plains I knew.

So I went back to town, to Dubbo, and started talking to a local businessman about how folk downstream reckon the chemicals are harming their children, and how the riverine plains were all gone, and how graziers just broke down in tears in front of strangers blaming irrigators for taking their water, and about the rivers left emaciated and growing little else but toxic algae. He smiled, reached towards my shoulder, and rubbed

the sleeve of my t-shirt between his fingers. He said, “Everyone needs cotton, mate.” When I tried to continue, he cut in. “Look,” he said. “There’s nothing out there anyway.” Then a couple of years later there was no water and cotton went bust. It didn’t seem like a system that was good for anyone.

I thought the cotton farmers were the enemy. I was wrong. I kept talking to them because I had a lot to learn. There was this old cotton farmer I’d visit from time to time (the first time with Emily O’Gorman, a Fellow at the RCC) and listen to his thoughts on farming, the government, and life. He was generous, and frank, especially about his own failures. At one stage his farm was worth A$10 million, but after the drought the bank seized his farm, and at 80 years old he was left with nothing. He was especially proud of his grandchildren whom you could always see there, riding their pushbikes or stirring up the dust on mini quad-bikes, or chasing birds and picking wildflowers growing out of the flat earth. In all those years he never told me his son, a partner in the farm business, killed himself in the last big drought.

I struggled to explain Dubbo to my Sydney friends. I told them you have understand what’s going on out there—that most of the continent is in the hands of these few people and no one sees what’s happening, that the racial tension, the economic distress, the environmental degradation—is all related. I couldn’t do it. My undergraduate degree, which included a good chunk of Deleuze and Guattari, wasn’t going to cut it. I wanted to be able to go back and talk to the businessman who said there’s nothing out there, to the valuer who said we need to feed the world, to the landholders with their arses hanging out of their pants: Deleuze’s “Body without Organs” wasn’t the right approach.

This is how I ended up in the environmental humanities: I googled “environmental history” not knowing this was a thing, but thinking history was the only way to understand what was happening, and that anyone could read history: Libby Robin’s name was the first result. I emailed her and I read *Dust Bowl* and *Heartland*. “Yes,” I thought, “this is it!”

Sites of agricultural production are the world’s primary “shadow places.” Rural heartlands provide for our material demands and biological nourishment, yet few of us know much about them or give them much thought. Environmental philosopher Val Plumwood drew attention to a flaw in the way that many environmental writers were advocating love and connection to one’s place as a way of preserving ecological integrity. Rather than celebrating one special, privileged place, or striving for self-sufficiency, Plumwood argued we should start from the “materialist end,” taking responsibility for the

places we “don’t know about, don’t want to know about, and in a commodity regime don’t ever need to know about.” The enjoyment of homes and places of recreation, such as Central Park in New York or the nature reserves at Sydney’s edges, has been made possible by “sacrificing” rural lands to the disorder of industrial agriculture. Shadow places are out of sight, out of mind, and they are therefore easier to discount.

At the Carson Center, among warm and generous staff, fellows and students, I finished off a book—a tale of small-town tragedy and species extinction, of strange experiments and “slow violence” of idealists, visionaries, and the contradictions of an environmental hero who devastated Australia’s greatest river system. It is set in the western plains of New South Wales, where I grew up, where an old newspaper from the nineteenth century described it as “a place where every prospect displeases, and all but man is vile.” It’s not known for being the kind of place people go to experience scenic beauty, but broken country like the plains are still worthy of attention and care, and it is the place from which I draw gritty local detail to pose local, bioregional, and global questions.

Social relationships form complex ties with ecological relationships. Aldo Leopold wrote in *A Sand Country Almanac* that “[t]he individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts” including soils, waters, plants and animals, “or collectively: the land.” Long-term economic prosperity for landholders required a land ethic that engendered “respect” for fellow members and the integrity of the community itself. I guess by the end of the book I’m suggesting fractured social relationships, divided communities, and inequality can be a cause as much as a product of impoverished environments—that how we treat each other is connected to how we treat the land.

When the book is out you’re supposed to do interviews and play the role of expert, but as I go on in the environmental humanities I feel like I know less and less. What’s more, I’m not sure how to make a contribution… I’m just a yobbo from Dubbo.