ARTICLES
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LAND NATIONALISERS, SINGLE TAXERS AND ENVIRONMENTALISM IN LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY AUSTRALIA

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In Peter Carey’s novel *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), Miss Lucinda Leplastrier travels by ship to Australia during the 1860s. On the way, she has the bad luck to share a meal with Mr Borrodaile from Ultimo. Borrodaile is a figure we all recognise from British period drama: fat, boorish, rich, self-opinionated, and very red about the nose from drink. He has made a great fortune, Carey tells us, ‘out of buying land and chopping it up’. He hopes to make another fortune out of animals – in their case he is strictly ‘a tallow man, a chop-them-up-and-boil-them-down-man’, something of which he is exceedingly proud. This approach to the colonial environment is profoundly offensive to Lucinda. Buying land and chopping it up is ‘a calling which moves her to great anger’. If she had enough money to buy land, she tells Borrodaile, she would cherish it beyond measure, treating it ‘in accordance with what I understand the parable of the talents instructs us to’. If she had property to call her own, she would use it to ‘make something that was not there before’, and she would stick with it through ‘good seasons and bad’.¹

*Oscar and Lucinda* was not set at the same time as the land nationalisation and single tax campaigns of the mid 1880s and 1890s, the movements explored in this paper. As a form of distilled agrarianism, however, Lucinda’s attitudes to the environment have a great deal in common with these latter-day campaigns. Both radically agrarian in their emphasis, the land nationalisers and single taxers held the view that the solutions to society’s ills lay ‘in and on the land’.² They shared Lucinda’s hatred of land speculators and the ‘money interest’; her resentment at the massive fortunes made from land monopoly; and her belief in the moral value both of *using* the land and of sticking to it. Like Lucinda, they also saw themselves as sharply distinct from the Borrodailes around them. They despised the ‘city-bred, belltoppered gentlemen’ in their midst; men who did nothing but collect rent and buy up land for subdivision and development.³ Landlords and speculators, they argued, were idle and wasteful in character, as was their treatment of the land.

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¹ Peter Carey, *Oscar and Lucinda* (Brisbane: Queensland University Press, 2001), 238-39
³ W H Hardy, ‘Letter to the Editor’, in *Observer*, 29 November 1884
Against the bell-toppered Borrodailes of the day:
Single tax propaganda in the *Voice*, 27 July 1894

In criticising the attitudes of land monopolists, the land nationalisers and single taxers followed a long agrarian tradition. *Unlike* many of the earlier agrarian activists in Australia, they married this critique to a passionate opposition to traditional property rights. Neither Lucinda nor the mid-nineteenth century advocates of free selection would have rejected the financial privileges associated with freehold title to land. The land nationalisers and single taxers, on the other hand, argued that it was unconscionable for individuals to keep the profits made from rent or playing the property market. They sought for these profits to be used instead for services to benefit the public at large.

It should be apparent even from this short discussion that there was considerable diversity in colonial attitudes towards the Australian environment. Gesturing at this diversity was evidently one of Carey’s objects in *Oscar and Lucinda*. Certainly his sympathetic rendition of Lucinda’s agrarianism can be read in this light. As a reader of environmental histories of Australia you could, however, be excused for being oblivious to this multiplicity of colonial views. You could also be excused for being oblivious to the possibility that the environmental views of agrarian reformers in particular might be seen with a sympathetic eye. In works by green historians like William Lines, for example, the variety of colonial approaches to the environment is reduced to the monotony of tallow; the chop-it-up-or-boil-them-down approach of men like Borrodaile is condemned in the same terms as the attitudes of agrarian reformers. Each is lambasted as utilitarian and mercenary,
evidence of the fact that Australia’s white invaders ‘felt no emotional ties to the land’.  

In this paper, I will show that an early form of environmentalism was articulated within the radical agrarian movements of late nineteenth century Australia. Not all land nationalisers and single taxers, of course, expressed sensitive views towards the environment. They had inherited a utilitarian attitude to nature from the long tradition of British agrarian thought, tending to see any ‘unimproved territory’ as morally reprehensible. Their perspective on wilderness was thus patently distinct from that of most environmentalists today. In spite of this, there are unmistakeable correspondences between the radical agrarianism of the 1880-90s and contemporary environmentalism. The land nationalisers and single taxers felt a righteous anger, for example, at the idea that land could be viewed as a commodity, articulating an impassioned opposition to the windfall profits made by land speculators. They also criticised the system of property rights that allowed a minority to live in relatively pristine environments, whilst condemning the rest to living in degraded conditions. Drawing from the ideological milieu of John Ruskin and William Morris in England, some agrarian radicals even called for a return to small-scale living in harmony with nature. Forming part of the history of environmentalism in this country, the agrarian radicalism of the late nineteenth century thus requires a more careful exploration than it has received in green historiography to date.

AUSTRALIA’S RADICAL LAND REFORMERS

Both the single tax and land nationalisation movements were international phenomena. The specific ideas leading to the establishment of these movements in Australia began circulating in the early 1880s, although land nationalisers were the first to appear in the colonies. Their campaign originated in Britain in association with the natural scientist Alfred Russel Wallace. Wallace was a prolific writer and fervent advocate for land nationalisation, but as a busy professional and inept public speaker he was a reluctant leader of the cause. The single tax campaign, on the other hand, originated in America through the single-minded promotion of journalist Henry George. George was a relentless publicist of his ideas, visiting Australia for three months in 1890 and travelling many times on lecture tours to the United Kingdom. In his day George was a major celebrity; ‘the most discussed man in England after Gladstone himself…the third most famous man in the United States, only surpassed …by Thomas Edison and Mark Twain, and a household name in Australia and New Zealand’.

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Just as there were striking differences between the leading figures of the land nationalisation and single tax movements, there were also significant differences in their ideas. Land nationalisers claimed that property ownership should be abolished through state resumption of all privately owned land. With this emphasis on state ownership, they were ‘closer to the mainstream of developing socialist thought’ than the single taxers. George’s followers opposed private profit from land rather than private ownership itself. They argued that the existing system of individual land titles should remain intact; instead of resuming property, the state should tax all ‘unearned’ land values, and at the same time do away with other taxes. Single taxers had no problem with profits made from land due to improvements directly attributable to the landowner (profits made, for example, through renovations on a house in order to increase its value). They staunchly opposed any profit, however, made from rent or from a general rise in land values. This ‘unearned increment’, as they called it, properly belonged to the public at large. The single taxers thus believed that individual land ownership could coexist with state expropriation of unearned land values, subscribing to an intriguing combination of liberal and socialist ideas.

In spite of these differences, the land nationalisation and single tax movements were often seen as synonymous. This was obviously the case after 1890, for during the course of George’s Australian tour that year the land nationalisation campaign was absorbed into the single tax movement. Influenced by what Marx called George’s ‘Yankee talent for advertisement’, most of the existing land nationalisation bodies disbanded after hearing him speak in mid 1890, converting themselves into Single Tax Leagues. Even before this, however, many so-called ‘land nationalisers’ had cited George as their leader. Conversely, many single taxers had argued that the single tax was simply a form of de facto land nationalisation. Others had simply referred to themselves as ‘land reformers’ in an effort to avoid sectarian terms. Both before George’s tour and after, the single taxers and land nationalisers had seen themselves as part of an overarching utopian ‘push’ to regenerate society. It was for this reason, above any other, that they spoke of membership in a singular land reform campaign, and were tolerant of considerable doctrinal heterogeneity within their ranks.

The utopian character of the radical agrarian movements can be seen in their belief that the diffuse evils of late nineteenth century society had a single cause. Both rural and urban problems, as they saw it, sprang from private monopoly in land. Overcrowded cities, depopulated towns, agricultural depression, commercial monopoly, urban unemployment and oppressive employment practices were firstly related, and secondly could

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10 J Medway Day, Editorial, Voice, 23 December 1892
be transformed through radical land reform. It is in order to emphasise
this shared belief that I focus on land radicals’ similarities rather than
their differences over the course of this paper.

LAND AND NATIONALISATION: ‘IT’S NECESSITY AND AIMS’

A Land Nationalization [sic] Society (LNS) was first formed in London
in 1884 by Wallace and his colleagues.11 In the preceding year, he had
published Land Nationalization: Its Necessity and Aims (1883) in which
he decried the system of land monopoly that had cast the majority of
British people off their commons, shut them off from ‘the wild and
beautiful scenery of their native land’, and sent them to eke out a
miserable living in inner-city slums and factories.12 Wallace had been one
of the leading activists in the fight by the Commons Preservation Society
to save Epping Forest (near London) from enclosure and destruction
during the 1870s. It is thus no surprise that his LNS formed in the same
year as another early environmentalist group in Britain, the National
Footpaths Preservation Society.13 (In Land Nationalization, he denounced
‘the stopping of footpaths’ and ‘the destruction of roadside greens’.)
Wallace wanted the people’s dependence on capitalists to be removed by
the creation of ‘small associated communities of workmen, by home
manufactures, or cooperative workshops’. He also wanted the labourer to
be given the ‘freedom to enjoy and cultivate a portion of his native soil’.14

Although Wallace never visited Australia, his LNS became the
prototype for the South Australian LNS, also established in 1884, in the
copper-mining town of Kapunda.15 One of Wallace’s LNS colleagues, A
J Ogilvy, went to Tasmania in the mid-1880s and established a similar
organisation there. Like their British counterparts, these Australian LNSs
held that the best way to abolish land monopoly was to vest all property
titles in the Crown. They campaigned for an immediate halt to the sale of
public lands. They also argued that the government should re-purchase
land alienated to private owners since the colonisation of Australia began.
All land, they argued, should eventually be owned by the state, with
landholders paying a yearly rent for the privilege of occupation. The
management of the public estate would be ‘entrusted to thoroughly
competent non-political boards’ assisted by experts in land valuation. As
a result, everyone (so the theory went) would have security of tenure on a
small property which was effectively their own.16 The colonies’ big
landowners would no longer be able to hold onto their massive holdings,
and would be forced to make the lion’s share of them available to the
general public for occupation. Workers would then be in a position to

11 In the 1880-90s, land nationalisation was referred to uniformly in Australia, Britain and the United
States with a ‘z’: hence the spelling of ‘Nationalization’.
12 Alfred Russel Wallace, Land Nationalization: Its Necessity and Aims, (London: William Reeves,
1883), 231
13 Raby, Alfred Wallace, 219-20; Marsh, Back to the Land, 49
14 Wallace, Land Nationalization, 231, 17
15 Observer, 17 May 1884; Advertiser, 22 May 1884
16 South Australian LNS, Manifesto of the South Australian Land Nationalization Society, (Adelaide:
South Australian LNS, 1884), 23; Wallace, Land Nationalization, 192-94; A J Ogilvy, A Colonist’s
leave their factories in the cities and take up small-farming in the countryside if they so desired.

In the mid-1880s, branches of the South Australian LNS were opened in some of the colony’s rural or mining centres, and also in Adelaide and its suburbs. 17 Land Nationalization Leagues (LNLs) were established in other colonies over the proceeding years: in New South Wales, at Lithgow, Goulburn, Cowra, Wagga Wagga, Gundagai, Bourke, Young, Bathurst and Sydney; in Queensland at Gympie, Charters Towers, and Brisbane; and also in Victoria. 18 By the end of 1890, most of these bodies had become branches of the Single Tax League (STL). There were at least fifteen STL branches in New South Wales by that time, for example, and similar numbers in other colonies. There were also a range of bodies with different names, which nonetheless subscribed to most (if not all) of George’s ideas: Land Reform Associations, Women’s Taxation Leagues, Women’s Land Reform Leagues, and the like. 19 These latter bodies illustrate that land radicalism was by no means an all-male phenomenon. Whilst men dominated the platforms and leading positions of the various LNSs and STLs, women were active participants within them. They held ‘at homes’ to promote the cause of land reform and formed sister organisations like the Women’s Land Reform Leagues. As Bruce Scates tells us, the majority of women’s suffrage and temperance organisations were also ‘single tax to the backbone’. 20 These linkages reflect the commitment to social equality, including gender equality (as this was conceived in first-wave feminist terms), which inspired many radical land reformers.

THE SINGLE TAX UTOPIA

If there was a utopian cast to the land nationalisers’ beliefs – State ownership of land was said to advance the cause of labour, promote cooperative endeavour, and restore the people’s connection to nature – single taxers were even more brazenly optimistic in their claims. Many of Australia’s single taxers used an overtly utopian vocabulary, echoing that used by George himself. (The prophetic tincture of their prose was easy prey for their opponents. As one cynic put it, ‘truth, decency, and common sense revolt against the Yankee highfalutin, rhapsodical trash’21 that was said to be found in George’s work. At least two of Australia’s utopian novelists, Mary Moore-Bentley and Catherine Helen Spence, 

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17 Observer, 1 August 1885
21 E G Fitz Gibbon, Essence of ‘Progress and Poverty’ / Extracted From the American of Henry George and Done Into and Deal With in Plain English, (Melbourne: George Robertson, 1890), 18
were self-avowed single taxers. 22 George’s seminal work, *Progress and Poverty*, included a chapter not dissimilar to Spence’s *A Week in the Future*, which described how an idealised future society could be secured though his proposals. 23

The single taxers’ commitment to a utopian regeneration of society can be seen most distinctly in South Australia. South Australians were unusually receptive to an alternative politics framed in religious and utopian terms during the late 1800s, a circumstance that stemmed from the ‘high degree of evangelical piety’ and religious dissent in their colony since it began. 24 Both progressive Christianity and more radical forms of Christian socialism found fertile soil in the colony during the late nineteenth century, encouraged by the emigration of charismatic British preachers-cum-single taxers like Hugh Gilmore and Charles Marson. 25

As Verity Burgmann points out, South Australia was also unusually receptive to an *agrarian* politics as a result of its history as a colony settled on the Wakefieldian system. Wakefield’s plan had involved the sale of Crown land at a price high enough to prevent manual labourers from acquiring their own properties. 26 Through this system he had intended to create an agrarian utopia with a solidly petit-bourgeois character: ‘a self-supporting society of agriculturalists on freehold farms, worked by a sturdy middle-class yeomanry’, with plenty of landless workers available to help cultivate the land. 27 Land radicals of later decades in South Australia were drawn largely from middle-class occupations, and retained something of Wakefield’s small-farming vision. At the same time, however, the social injustice on which that vision was based was impetus for their activism. They expressed a profound anger that his system had entrenched “‘vested interests’ and the influence of ‘the money power’ which was at the expense of the landless masses. The selling off of the people’s heritage was in direct contravention of God’s will. It was high time, they believed, for land radicals of any persuasion to stand up against the glaring wrong of private property, to fight for the God-given right of all people to share equally in the fruits of nature, and thus to advance the cause of ‘justice and humanity’. 28

South Australia’s STLs were part of what was known as the ‘Forward Movement’ in the early 1890s. This Movement was comprised

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23 Thomas, *Alternative America*, 121
of a tight cluster of reform groups, including Democratic Clubs, the emerging Labor Party, the Fabian Society, Methodist reform groups, ‘Christian sociology’ classes, and women’s suffragists. The typical land radical involved in the Movement was a Methodist based in Adelaide or Port Adelaide; a man engaged in journalism or commerce, or his wife, someone anxious to move beyond an exclusively middle-class activism to further the cause of labour. The colony had its share of orthodox Georgists – men like the entrepreneur Lewis Berens, who balanced a commitment to radical land taxation with a desire for the curtailment of state power and for absolute freedom in industry and commerce.29 In the early 1890s, however, a significant number of the colony’s land radicals echoed the single taxer George Napier Birks when he spoke in defiance of ‘Capitalism, and Philanthropy, and the [hierarchical] Church’.30 Birks was willing to sell off his own commercial interests in pursuit of a cooperative ideal with his wife Helen, members of his family and with Adelaide’s STLs. Birks joined the New Australians in their attempt to forge a Paraguayan utopia in the first years of the decade.

Back home in South Australia, George Birks’s brothers Walter and John Napier, each of them also staunch single taxers, engaged in a utopian experiment closely modelled on New Australia. Their families and other Forward Movement members also joined them in this venture.31 They too sold their chemists and drapery businesses in the city, heading out to the community of Murtho in mid 1894. There they engaged in cooperative agriculture and communal ownership of the land. John tended Murtho’s big community garden, Walter was responsible for the dairy, and their wives Jemima and Anne helped in the harvest of apricots and berries. ‘We hope to …prove that inherent good in human nature is not all a myth’, wrote John’s daughter Elsie, who left a teaching academy in North Adelaide for Murtho in late 1894. A cooperative life on the land, Elsie Birks believed, would be more equitable, ‘less artificial’, and altogether ‘better than [the] existing conditions of society’.32

In the early 1970s, Fritz Schumacher’s *Small is Beautiful* (1973) ‘denounced the relentless dispute of profit and productivity’ apparent in the pro-development era of the 1950s and 1960s. His ‘perseverand romantic notion’ that smallness was preferable to bigness – that economics should be based on human and environmental values rather than the slavish pursuit of growth – struck a communal nerve.33 Now considered one of the leading figures of the green movement in the seventies, Schumacher’s work gave a voice at the time ‘to people who felt a profound anxiety about the way society was going’ but had not yet found a way to articulate it themselves.34 Radical land reform appealed to

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29 Scates, *A New Australia*, 23
30 George Napier Birks to Fred Birks, 4 August 1894, Helen Chartier Papers, Mortlock Library, Adelaide, 4
32 Elsie Birks to Blanch Vivian, 5 October 1894, Elsie Birks Papers, Mortlock Library
34 Barbara Schumacher, cited in ibid.
a broad audience in the 1880s and 1890s for similar reasons. George’s impassioned exposition of the evils caused by monopolies of land and capital harnessed a widely felt resistance to the ‘unparalleled speculation and profiteering in the land’ taking place in the nineteenth century. In Australia, the charismatic efforts of single taxers like Frank Cotton and Hugh Gilmore augmented this critique. Like Small is Beautiful, the single tax movement offered a practical solution to modern ills, a fact that significantly contributed to the zeal with which it was embraced.

Like the green movement of the 1970s, agrarian radicalism of the 1880-90s appealed to small numbers of people who left the cities to lead a ‘less artificial’ existence on the land. Of course, “back-to-the-landers” like the Birks, reciting Ruskin on picturesque beaches by the Murray, were by no means representative of the Australian single tax movement as a whole. Overwhelmingly, Australia’s agrarian radicals were concentrated in the cities and wanted to remain there, intending to continue in their predominantly white-collar occupations. At the same time, however, the idealisation of a direct relationship to the soil exerted considerable imaginative force upon them. Firmly convinced of the power of their proposals to regenerate society, even the most moderate single taxers and land nationalisers drew inspiration from utopian experiments like Murtho and New Australia. A belief in the ‘redemptive’ power of the land had long been cherished within the agrarian tradition, often intersecting with ‘the romantic critique of urban industrialisation’. In spite of their urban character and their own engagement in capitalist enterprise, most of Australia’s single taxers reflected this belief; at the centre of their imagery and language remained a conviction as to the virtue of manual labour on the land and the edificatory powers of ‘mother earth’. Beliefs not wholly dissimilar to these were to provide visionary succour to environmentalists of the 1970s and beyond, the greatest proportion of which are still located in cities in mainstream occupations.

THE DEMISE OF AGRARIAN RADICALISM FROM THE MID 1890s.

In spite of the radical land reformers’ enthusiasm, they were to win no major political victories. Some historians point to the fact that many council rates today are calculated on the basis of unimproved land values as a legacy of the single tax movement. Others see the existence of any form of land tax in Australia in the same light. Even if this were the case, it falls wildly short of the utopian transformation sought by the devotees of George and Wallace. One of the reasons for this lack of success is the fragmentation of the Australian left which took place in the mid-1890s. For a period of time, most of the early labour parties in Australia supported the single tax and contained STL members. By the mid-1890s, however, interconnections between the two movements were

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37 Most of the examples given to illustrate the effect of a single tax or its basic ideology focused on the ‘working farmer’. See, for instance, Max Hirsch’s The Solidarity of Labour, (Melbourne: Land Values League, 1894), 5
38 Clark, ‘Roasting the Landowner’, 134-47; Rae Else-Mitchell, Legacies of the Nineteenth Century Land Reformers From Melville to George, (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1975)
at an end. In holding that land monopoly was the root cause of workers’ oppression, land radicals obviously differed from socialists and trade unionists. Single taxers also supported free trade, running into serious conflict with the protectionists within the broader labour movement in the last years of the 1800s.39

Another reason for the failure of the agrarian radicals of the 1890s is the fact that they never gained widespread support in rural areas. For a movement that sought ‘the redemption of the working farmer’ and the liberation of the urban worker, the rejuvenation of country life and the transformation of the urban environment, it was vital to obtain support from rural populations as well as those in the cities. It was for this reason that urban single taxers like Max Hirsch and Harry Taylor conducted relentless tours of country areas in the early 1890s, preaching the relevance of their ideas to farmers and bushworkers. Their own lack of expertise on the land, however, must surely have undermined their authority in country towns.40 So too must the failure of Murtho and New Australia as small-farming enterprises. Both communities were in decline a few years after formation; the cause of the latter’s included internal wrangling and in the former there was an inability to viably cultivate the land.41 This circumstance would have further diminished the land radicals’ credentials with farming populations.

The disintegration of alliances between labour activists and land radicals had a debilitating effect on their ability to maintain public support. Given the inspiration that the agrarian movement had drawn from Murtho and New Australia, their demise deflated much of the utopian buoyancy exhibited in the early 1890s. The strength of conservative opposition to the cause of land radicalism was also crucial to the failure to push proposed reforms through parliament. In most colonies, National Defence Leagues formed to combat the single tax and land nationalisation movements. Their memberships were stacked with precisely those ‘bell-toppered gentlemen’ decried in the Observer; men who stood for monarchy, the ‘money interest’ and property, ‘the majority of whom would treat a poor hard-working man as a dog’.42 The latter half of the 1890s thus saw a heavy decline in agrarian radicalism. Whilst thousands of Australians had described themselves as ‘single taxers’ or ‘land nationalisers’ (or both) at the beginning of the decade, by its end they were almost a spent force. A newly organised STL appeared in New South Wales in 1901, and a ‘Henry George League’ campaigned in Victoria over much of the twentieth century – indeed there are still ‘Georgist’ lobby-groups active in Australia. The wide enthusiasm their movement once attracted, however, was to die with the nineteenth century.43

39 Scates, A New Australia, 74-116
40 See the heckling given to Taylor by farmers in Woodside during a lecture for the STL. Pioneer, 13 June 1891
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42 Hardy, ‘Letter to the Editor’, Observer, 29 November 1884
43 Clark, ‘Roasting the Landowner’, 133-146. The Henry George League is still in existence, now calling itself ‘Prosper Australia’. For links to this and other existing Georgist organisations, see www.multiline.com.au/~georgist/lin.htm, (Perth: Georgist Education Association, viewed 29 April 2004)
Agrarian attitudes to the environment have had a bad reputation in Australian historiography over the last few decades. One reason for this is that intensive land schemes based on agrarian principles have caused great devastation to Australian ecosystems. Tim Flannery notes in *The Future Eaters* (1994), in the early twentieth century the Western Australian government caused whole forest ecosystems to be near-annihilated in an attempt to create a system of small-scale ‘yeoman’ farms. Similar examples can be found in other colonies. Agrarian visions, Flannery concludes, were both ecologically infeasible and damaging in this country; ‘a form of foolishness which seems to have known no bounds’.44

In *Taming the Great South Land*, Lines argues that agrarianism was misplaced in an Australian context for cultural as well as ecological reasons. The agrarian ideal was based on Old World ‘peasant’ or ‘yeoman’ systems of agriculture, he says, in which land was occupied and worked by a family over the course of generations. Farmers and pastoralists in Australia, however, ‘worked within an entirely different context’ to those in the Old World. Owning land was not an emotional commitment for them; instead of inheriting their land, ‘they purchased it’.45 Geoffrey Bolton argues similarly that few Australian landowners had ‘the same sense of attachment to the land which sometimes characterised their British models. Life in the bush was often harsh and

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45 Lines, *Taming the Great South Land*, 96
brutalising'. The implication here is that the great majority of white Australians saw their adopted land with a simple and businesslike rapacity – a nation, in other words, populated by Borrodailes.

When Tim Bonyhady wrote *The Colonial Earth* (2000), his aim was to attack this view of colonial attitudes to the Australian environment. It was time for a history to be written, he said, which recognised the ‘richness of Australia’s history of environmental concern’. Throughout its colonial history, ‘the protection of the continent’s native fauna and flora, degradation of its pastoral lands, planning and improvement of its cities, …[and] retention of public reserves’ were major issues in Australia.47 Ian Tyrrell adopts a similar view in *True Gardens of the Gods* (1999). In the 1880s-90s, he says, there was a loose affiliation of horticulturalists, botanists, journalists, politicians and activists – including George – who supported ‘an early form of [environmental] “sustainability”’. Drawing on agrarian language, these people opposed deforestation, the degradation caused by mining and by large-scale farming of the land. They were, as such, far removed from the brutalised pioneers described by Bolton and Lines.48

Twentieth century terms like ‘environmentalism’ are obviously problematic for histories of the nineteenth century. When these terms emerged with the green movement in the 1960-70s, they were linked to its preoccupation with wilderness protection, mass urbanisation, and the possibility of global destruction through nuclear war.49 The late Victorian land radicals understood ‘wilderness’ in very different ways to activists of the 1970s. Whilst they were acutely concerned with urbanisation, they invested it with moral connotations absent in later green critiques, highlighting the morally contaminating effects of slums and their poor sanitation. Evidently, none of these people viewed issues of environmental degradation and sustainability through twenty-first century eyes. Speaking of them as ‘environmentalist’, however, allows us to appreciate the long history underlying today’s concerns with heedless speculative development, the need to maintain public lands, the social injustice caused by an inequitable distribution of land, and the desirability of small-scale living. It also allows us to see beyond the standard assessment of these movements as backward-looking and irrelevant to current concerns. In their elaboration of a host of environmental concerns, there is much within these movements that speaks to our time, even whilst they speak emphatically of their own.

REWORKING UTILITARIAN VIEWS OF NATURE

At first glance, one of the biggest obstacles to understanding the radical land reform movements as ‘environmentalist’ is their utilitarian rhetoric. In his study of British agrarianism in the early nineteenth century, Malcolm Chase argues that agrarians necessarily took ‘a starkly

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48 Tyrrell, *True Gardens*, 13
utilitarian approach to nature and the aesthetics of landscape’. For reformers like Thomas Spence, one of the primary evils of land monopoly was that it left great tracts of nature idle; the very notion of wilderness was positively reprehensible. The same notion that ‘all of nature should effectively be harnessed for work’ was exhibited in expressions of mid-nineteenth century agrarianism in Australia; the period in which Carey situates *Oscar and Lucinda.* Most free selectors of this period held that it was the duty of the Crown to alienate its lands as soon as possible to make them available for small-scale cultivation.

Closely related to the classic agrarian belief that ‘the earth was there to be used’ was the belief that there was a special relationship between land and labour. The often-repeated assertion that the Crown lands of Australia were the heritage of ‘the people’ was an expression of this view. Those prepared to produce something from the soil, in other words, were the only ones considered to hold a moral entitlement to it. To this assumption about the relationship between labour and the land, classic agrarian thought added a faith in ‘the fecundity of nature’. An astounding number of agrarian reformers over the course of Australia’s colonial history seem to have believed that greening the brown earth of the continent was simply a matter of working it hard enough. In the 1890s, for example, agrarian reformer Charles Strong spoke of the ‘rich fountain of real wealth left neglected’ in the uncultivated territories of Victoria, apparently assuming that the earth would shoot forth a cascade of produce as soon as the soil was turned. From New Australia, too, Frank Birks wrote home to his younger brother Harold, exhorting him to work valiantly clearing trees at Murtho so that good things might come from the ground. This belief that fertility would follow as a natural consequence of agricultural labours was responsible for the destruction of wildernesses across Australia, and for land-clearing and irrigation practices which have led to such intractable problems as soil erosion and salinisation today.

Late nineteenth century radicals shared the classic agrarian belief that the land should be used, tilled, put to physical and moral account. The South Australian LNS argued, for example, that land nationalisation would ‘compel those who are holding land for speculative purposes to put it to some use instead of allowing it to lie idle year after year’. One of the key articles in the Manifesto of the New South Wales LNL was likewise that God had ‘given the earth for the use and benefit of all mankind’. Any system that prevented nature from being used thus contravened His law.

The radical land reformers thus diverged considerably from wilderness lobbyists today in assuming that the country should be a working landscape; that nature existed first and foremost to serve

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50 Chase, *The People’s Farm*, 7  
51 Ibid.  
52 Ibid.  
53 Reverend Charles Strong, ‘The Bitter Cry of the Unemployed’, Handwritten Notes, Charles Strong Papers, Series 3, Folder 6, MS 2882, National Library of Australia  
54 Frank Birks to Harold Birks, 28 November 1898, John Napier Birks Papers, Mortlock Library, 1  
55 South Australian LNS, *The Labour Difficulty*, (Adelaide: South Australian LNS, 1884), 4  
humanity’s needs. This starkly different approach to wilderness, coupled with its ecologically disastrous consequences, has blinded historians to the other environmental concerns apparent within their campaigns. Indeed, even within these reformers’ utilitarian rhetoric there are nuances relevant to the history of environmentalism. Their belief in fertility as labour’s reward assumed that hard work was an ethical way of relating to nature, defined in contradistinction to the practices of pastoralists, mining corporations, and large-scale landowners. As they saw it, working the land as a small farmer meant carefully nourishing it, attending to the long-term fertility of the soil. It did not mean overstocking it until every plant was consumed, and then moving heedlessly on. Nor did it mean stripping the land wholesale of its minerals and nutrients in order to make a fast return.

Radical land reformers placed a strong emphasis on the need to return to small-scale occupation of land. By this they usually meant anything from a five-acre block, owned by an artisan and his family, and used to supplement his wage through produce for their own consumption – through to a farm between fifty and a hundred acres in size. A farm, they believed, should be something that one could personally tend to, hold complete in one’s imagination, and know as intimately as a close family member. This was precisely the sort of intimacy sought by the Birks at Murtho, where a committee of male labourers decided the exact location of orchard trees, and every family grew their own garden in addition to the communal vegetable plot tended by John Napier Birks.57 As the politician George Witherage Cotton argued in the early 1890s, small landholders were far better able to look after their properties than larger ones because they had enough time to personally know and attend to their land. Small landholders could enrich their properties with ‘the compost heap and the manure pit’, ‘bestow(ing) minute attention to the cultivation of plant life’ – with all the connotations of love and care that this brought with it.58 The degree of careful attention advocated by Cotton was an obvious contrast to squatters’ and speculators’ approach to the land, in which money and speed were the predominant values.

A heightened sense of the environmental degradation caused by land monopoly was emerging within agrarian thought in the late Victorian era; a sense that had never been a significant feature of earlier agrarian movements. Wallace denounced the greed, for example, which had caused ‘reckless destruction of the stored-up products of nature’. It was time to stop rapacious mining practices, he added, which in a matter of years had used up ‘the slow products of long-past eons of time and geological change’.59 In a similar vein, George argued that it was

57 Murtho Cooperative Village Settlement, Minutes of Board Meetings, 1895-96, SRE 72, State Library of South Australia, Adelaide, on 7 August 1895
58 George Witherage Cotton, ‘Small Holdings of Land the Mainstay of Individual Nations’, Shearers’ and General Laborers’ Record, 15 August 1892. George Cotton was neither a land nationaliser nor a single taxer (he was no relation by blood or temperament to the single taxer Frank Cotton). He was keenly interested nonetheless in the radical land reformers’ ideas. In 1884 George Cotton formed the Land Reform Association in South Australia, which met to study the works of Wallace and George and consider their application in the colony. Observer, 26 January 1884
essential for farming practices to begin preserving the nutrients ‘embodied in the soil by the slow processes of nature, acting for long ages’. As he saw it, land monopolists currently practised an ‘exhaustive agriculture’; one which polluted waterways and denuded forests, and neglected to ‘return to the earth’ what was taken from it.60 In Tasmania, Ogilvy contrasted this exhaustive approach to nature with that advocated by land nationalisers. If the people were given access to and security of tenure on the land through land nationalisation, he argued, they would be able to improve it in ways that were ‘the most far-reaching, but slowest in yielding their results’: by planting, fertilising, draining, beautifying, and the like. This would give the landholder ‘a pride in and affection for [the land]... such as he has no chance of acquiring now’.61

The fact that many single taxers charged land monopolists ‘with the rape of nature’, as Tyrrell puts it, indicates that they had begun to rework the utilitarian environmental views of earlier agrarians. Similarly, their opposition to the get-rich-quick attitude of land speculators and monopolists enabled them to express a profound critique of modernising processes in the late nineteenth century. Land nationalisers like Ogilvy maintained that land should not be ‘an instrument out of which to squeeze as much money as possible within a given time’.62 Wallace argued that it was fundamentally wrong for land to be ‘bought and sold as easily as iron or railway shares’, and to be treated as nothing more than merchandise. It is due to radical sentiments such as these that Tyrrell describes the goal of single taxers as the creation of ‘an alternative and sustainable society characterised by broad distribution of land ownership and recycling of resources’.63 According to its supporters, the single tax would transform society’s attitude towards the countryside. It would make way for uses of the land which paid proper attention to its needs, and which refused to see the environment as something simply to be chopped up into pieces or boiled down into tallow.

‘ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE’

As Libby Robin says, ‘environmental justice’ became a popular concept within the green movement during the 1990s. In this period, ‘threats to indigenous lifestyles posed by rainforest destruction and the deteriorating quality of air, water and land in traditionally poor industrial zones’ were brought together under the banner of ‘environmental justice’.64 An attention to indigenous Australians’ land rights and an awareness of the deteriorating quality of their environments was conspicuously absent from the radical land reform movements of the late Victorian era. The only single taxer of which I am aware who criticised the destruction of indigenous Australians’ lands was Charles Marson, the acerbic Christian socialist, who lived in Adelaide between 1889 and 1892. Marson lambasted the colonising process as unjust to indigenous peoples and

60 Henry George, cited in Tyrrell, True Gardens, 38-9
62 Ibid., 44
63 Tyrrell, True Gardens, 38
64 Robin, Defending the Little Desert, 135
happily scandalised polite society by inviting an indigenous man to tea soon after his arrival in South Australia. Even Marson, however, failed to consider the implications of radical land reforms for indigenous peoples. None of the other radical land reformers appear to have considered the position of indigenous peoples at all.

The radical land reformers did, however, draw attention to the environmentally degraded or otherwise undesirable conditions in which the underprivileged lived. In Britain, Wallace fulminated against the history of land enclosures which had forced peasants into poor and ‘miserably small holdings’ to make way for sheep and deer. In Australia, land radicals similarly decried the fact that big graziers monopolised rich lands whilst small horticulturalists and other farmers struggled to make a living from hopeless plots. They criticised the gulf in prosperity between rural and urban areas, arguing that farmers bore a disproportionate burden of taxes and high transport costs. They also focused attention on the appalling living conditions of poor workers in the cities. Urban land radicals like Percy Meggy, for example, were keenly concerned about the inadequacy of inner-city sanitation and working-class housing. Single tax papers like the *Pioneer* and *Voice* also carried articles on the evils of sweating, the extortionate rents in unhygienic inner-city localities, and the lack of social opportunities for ‘the dwellers of the back slums’. Late nineteenth century agrarian radicalism thus intersected with a growing body of critique and activism concerning the slum conditions of the urban poor, the lack of open space and environmental amenity in the areas in which they lived.

In effect, it is the radical agrarians’ passion for environmental justice that makes them so problematic for environmentalists today. The agrarian belief that the bounty of the earth existed to prevent distress amongst humankind is the exactly the belief that environmentalists come up against today when confronting developments which are likely to have a negative impact on the environment, but at the same time aim to further the interests of social justice. Viewing them in this light certainly gives us a more complicated understanding of these movements’ ‘utilitarian’ approach to nature. Given their appreciation of the link between environmental resources and justice, there was an obviously environmental dimension to the radical agrarianism of the land nationalisers and single taxers. This emphasis on environmental issues sets them apart from the more orthodox formulations of socialism and labour activism found during their era, in the same way that the ‘green’ dimension to William Morris’ work renders him distinct from more

65 Mathews, *Australia’s First Fabians*, 42
68 Hirsch, *A Scheme of Taxation for Producers*, (Melbourne: STL (Melbourne), n.d.), 5-6
69 Percy R Meggy, Scrap Books, Mitchell Library, Q040/3-7; also Percy R Meggy, ‘Fighting the Black Death in Sydney’, *Review of Reviews*, (April 1900), 435-442
70 *Pioneer*, 28 November 1891; 16 April 1892; ‘Land Reform Campaign’, *Voice*, 1 June 1894
orthodox Marxists. The fact that these people linked social justice to land distribution, however, meant that they were happy to sanction the destruction of bushland and other ‘wildernesses’ for the benefit of landless people, making them distinctly unpalatable to historians like Flannery and Lines.

* When I first read Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City*, I was amazed by the subtlety of the approach taken to the potency of agrarian feeling apparent throughout English history. The work remains as alluring for me now, in its eloquent reminder that agrarian longings can be reduced neither to a singular politics nor a definitive set of environmental values. On the one hand, as Williams says, agrarianism has been used to celebrate ‘a feudal or aristocratic order’ in Britain; on the other hand it has been offered as ‘a critique of capitalism’. The agrarian emphasis on ‘improving’ the land has similarly acquired different meanings over the course of British history; for some, it could mean the rehabilitation of exhausted soil through careful fertilisation; for others, the building of artificial parks and ponds; both of which have strikingly different environmental impacts. It is difficult to appreciate this range of meanings given that agrarian advocates share a common vocabulary – one that frequently references the Bible, valorises natural order, demonises the city, and makes assumptions about natural fertility. As a result, it is essential to attend to the nuances of agrarian language, trying to appreciate the particular perspectives expressed within any given instance of it. When the land nationaliser Ogilvy spoke of ‘throw[ing] open all the land for cultivation and the mines for development’, for example, he did not bring to it the sort of exploitative passion taken up by the Borrodailes of his era. As he saw it, throwing nature open in this way would prevent monopolists from seeking to make a quick profit from the earth, instituting a focus on its long-term needs.

Just as agrarian language is itself a tentacular being whose meanings are difficult to disentangle, the political agenda of the radical land reformers was a passionate entwinement of agrarian and socialist, nostalgic and progressive ideas. They struggled to make ‘old-style’ notions of small community, local production, and the dignity of manual labour on the land, relevant to the concerns of the late nineteenth century – the spectacular increase in the size of cities, the spread of mechanised forms of labour, and the rise of monopolies of business and industry. Ideas about inner-city regeneration mingled in their thoughts with a desire for the reinvigoration of rural economies; a concern for the problem of sweating with the plight of the rural labourer; first-wave feminism and a reliance on the family unit as characteristic of small-scale farming schemes. As part of a utopian movement, they tried to combine all these interests, to fight the fragmentation characteristic of green, red, and other movements of the left today. From our viewpoint now, perhaps, it seems obvious that their attempt to synthesise this variety of parts would fail. To focus on this failure however, is to fall prey to the boorishness of

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72 Ogilvy, *The Land*, 28
retrospect, and to reduce their struggle to a reconciliation of environmental concern and social justice within a crude ahistorical narrative.

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