Beautiful Lies and the Dung Heap

Lorna Hallahan
Adelaide

1. Introduction

Tim Flannery begins his 2003 Quarterly essay, ‘Beautiful Lies: Population and Environment in Australia’ by offering to expose what he calls ‘heartfelt falsehoods that keep us from seeing the truth of our situation’. He asserts that:

If we are ever able to break the pernicious connection between our environmental mismanagement, disgraceful treatment of refugees and other victims, and lack of direction when it comes to the question of how many people we can support, we need to face some hard truths.

I could embark, in deconstructionist mood, on an exploration of truth and lies and the legitimacy for making judgements, but to do so would be to avoid the invitation that Flannery offers us all—to engage in the cultural work necessary to move Australia to a more sustainable future.

Quarterly essays aim to provoke public debate and here Flannery has declared himself boldly. One of the many attractive features of Flannery’s work is his preparedness to judge, to speak to persuade, to change our minds and our practice, not simply enlighten us by pointing out nuances in text and language. This mode works well when we move along the boundaries of the physical sciences and humanities. And it gives us strong ideas to which to react.

The first falsehood that Flannery labels the ‘founding lie’ is Terra Nullius, which he explains constructs the oppression of Indigenous people and is central to understanding our ‘environmental woes, and it is central to the dilemma we face in defining ourselves as a people.’ Denial of prior and (continued though severely disrupted) occupation leads to concerted efforts to eradicate Indigenous people. It also leads to a denial of the ways in which Indigenous people shaped the land. Australia was not pristine in 1788 and it had not been for many thousands of years. Building on this argument, Flannery highlights the follies of post-1788 interventions into the land. He also critiques our public responses to species destruction, despoliation of soils and rivers, the preservation of forests, and sustainability and population.

I am not going to critique Flannery’s lies, but I will stress three important points for activist eco-theologians. First, Flannery locates ‘culture’ as a major focus for our working towards a more sustainable future for Australia. The future is not simply saved by technocratic solutions for the mucked-up bits, but by developing a genuine ‘postcolonial awareness, a condition that allows us to strive for an adaptation of law and other cultural baggage to Australian conditions so we can finally end the colonial period of our existence’. Secondly, Flannery validates human considerations in dealing with environmental destruction, especially through his lengthy consideration of terra nullius, the situation of refugees and endorsement of a population policy. Thirdly, Flannery makes it very clear that we should ‘focus our environmental effort as strenuously as possible on the key issues of maintaining healthy water, air soil and biodiversity’.

For example, Flannery recounts the impact of land clearing in Western Australia—a practice that continued throughout the twentieth century despite repeated warnings about rising salt levels. He reveals these statistics:

2.5 million hectares of agricultural land are salt affected, 1.8 million of which are in south-west Western Australia. A further 10 million hectares are at risk nationally, 6 million of which are in south-west of WA... the problem of salination in Western Australia is in fact so immense that many experts, including some conservationists, are suggesting that we should

2. Ibid., 4
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid, 5.
5. Ibid, 70.
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simply walk away from the mess we have created. Many others, however, are fighting the salt for their livelihoods and cannot or will not walk away.\textsuperscript{6}

Let us imagine that a group of locals and technicians is brought together to develop active responses. Let us also imagine that they will consult an eco-theologian. (Sadly, an unlikely event because Flannery, like many commentators, does not consider theology in his critique of cultural forces shaping the face of this land. He blames colonialism on a vague shift from eighteenth century Enlightenment thought and liberal humanism to stuffy nineteenth century Victorian thought and social Darwinism.) Yet, theology must be engaged in public and political discourse, if only because we must own up to the sad truth that at times our traditions and structures have contributed to generating and sustaining the lies that we now must expose. So, I will turn to theology and salivation in a moment.

First, however, I will assert here that I see a significant divergence in our approaches to eco-theology. Part of our effort is aimed at securing a place for the church. We link ourselves to an eco-spirituality that is based primarily on an aesthetics of revelation. We speak to the people of the Pajero\textsuperscript{7} of God’s work in creation and of God’s presence in the natural world as part of their quest for meaning. I do not want to decry this position, I know that the mystical tradition can be life-altering. However, with fellow people of faith our conversation must also move us through the experiential to the ethical—a move through the revelatory to a concern for healing. Relatively, as thinkers, activists and fellow travellers in the environmental movement (in its widest forms) we need to develop a theology that can speak to the broken places. I don’t need this to be a tidy stitched-up theology but rather one that opens itself to the glories and contingencies of life in a huge planetary community.

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Ibid. 51.}
\textsuperscript{7} Many readers will be familiar with the television advertisements for four-wheel-drive vehicles. Their drivers get away from dreary city life and into untouched wilderness. They make this journey in comfortable air-conditioned vehicles and we never see them in the company of other seekers after freedom, peace and beauty. Pajero is a brand name.

How might an eco-theologian begin to think through a significant response to this ravaged land, now so toxic (the salt is destroying buildings and Indigenous sacred sites) and so unproductive (even the trees planted to protect native vegetation have died)?

In reply to this I offer a rudimentary theology from the dung heap.

What could an eco-theologian contribute to the cultural work necessary in working through these cherished falsehoods and their savage consequences?

In reply to this I offer an eco-theologian’s manifesto for a better Australia.

2. A theology from the dung heap

A theology from the dung heap starts not with our desire for transcendence in God, nor the mystic glory of gorgeous nature, nor with authority of the institution of the church. We start by naming as our inspiration that which gives us an apprehension of god-torsakeness—the exploited planet and our overlooked and down-trodden neighbours. This is where the beautiful lies are stripped away to reveal a dung heap—a place of ashes—spent hopes and efforts, and a place of fetid and noxious waste.

Consistent with our incarnational belief that God is deeply involved in the life of this planet, in all its pain and pined beauty, I propose that we reclaim our ethical universalism. This universalism allows us to see dung heap places like salinated land as included within God’s embrace not simply because of past health or potential for restoration, but because of current being. No place nor its troubled creatures can fall short of the love of God. This universalism allows us to adopt an ecological ethos aimed at concern for the whole planetary community.

Consistent with our adherence to the gospel of Jesus we also adopt an amazing counterpoint to this universalism. We seek at all times to give preference to those people and places most humiliated, most defiled, most overlooked, most rejected. The pull of the dung heap remains irresistible.

Yet, consistent with our resurrection belief we know that in the end our confusion, regret and pain cannot entomb us, and that ‘the resurrection means we cannot stop at our wounds or the wounds of
simply walk away from the mess we have created.
Many others, however, are fighting the salt for their
livelihoods and cannot or will not walk away.6

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resurrection means we cannot stop at our wounds or the wounds of
others. This drives us beyond what Sharon Welch calls a cultured despair and towards a recognition that although much has been lost we can build solidarity with those who have come to know that ‘the work for justice is not incidental to one’s life but it is an essential aspect of affirming the delight and wonder of being alive.’

Therefore, we do not seek to be lifted up from this world but to be dumped in it. (How untrendy can you get? Fancy risking an active advocacy grounded thus in the face of all that says ‘seek comfort, seek solace, seek beauty.’)

3. An eco-theologian’s manifesto for creating a better Australia

Flannery completes his essay with a manifesto for creating a better Australia claiming that it will assist us to move beyond romantic falsehood. He says: ‘From now on—for the next little while at least—the history we create must be more mundane. It should tell the story of a small country that did the best it possibly could for the people and environment of the world.’ I am not sure that is entirely mundane, but if I were to work with Flannery and others about land, plant, animal and human communities destroyed by tree clearing and polluted by salt, this would be my modest manifesto:

1. Where Flannery calls for a humanist consideration—commitment to the greatest good for the greatest number—I would pursue a justice consideration—creating the greatest good for the least amongst us.

2. Where Flannery calls for a Minister for the Welfare of non-Australians, I would seek a much wider debate about our relationship with others, considering a portfolio only one possibility.

3. Where Flannery calls for the calculation of the costs of decisions for future generations, I could only agree.

4. Where Flannery calls for a war-like struggle around maintaining healthy water, air, soil, and biodiversity, I would seek that we see the polluted environment as our victim, not as our enemy. This would not deplete our energy for work but would bring us into a right-minded relationship with our environments.

5. Where Flannery calls for programs that give power to individuals to fight for change, I would also stress the importance of groups and communities of people seeking solutions. In this I would also include churches and other faith communities.

6. Where Flannery calls for a humanistic and Enlightenment heritage to be taught through our schools, I would stress the need for all students to be taught how to think critically and be unafraid to explore other life-giving traditions alive in Australian history and contemporary society. Added to this I would declare an end to the church’s compromise with the life-denying tendencies of our theologies and in their place expound theologies of life.

7. Where Flannery calls for an Australia that fosters global understanding rather than fear, engagement rather than isolationism, I could only agree.

8. Where Flannery calls for a relentless exposure of the lie of terra nullius, I could only agree.

In all this I would strive to invigorate the moral imaginations of all who care for future life and who seek to know God in the seemingly God-forsaken places. I would encourage us all to tell a new story woven together with the unconditional embrace of the land—stories that tell of land occupied and shaped for 60,000 years, stories of heartbreak and folly, of conquest and vanquishment, stories of resistance and reconciliation, of generosity and hospitality; of repentance and of hope.

Ecological theology brings us boldly to the table of all people who have the effrontery to seek a radically different ethos for an ecologically sustainable future. The capacity to use our traditions creatively renews the contest of ideas and wisdom within our own communities. It brings us into solidarity with those who would take responsible action wherever we recognise each other. It inspires us with Toni Cade Bambara’s ‘sheer holy boldness’ to name eco-injustice and to desire change. Freed from gravitas, we find a humble, a decent place, not reduced, but enlarged in our capacity to be purposeful, thoughtful, informed, insightful, imaginative yet vulnerable in our trusting in the resilience of life and God.

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