

Reading Social Organization in a Watery Landscape: Cutting Through South Australia's Woakwine Range

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Introduction

Before the influx of European settlers, which began in the 1830s, South Australia's south east was home to several Aboriginal groups, such as the Boandik and the Meintangk, that ranged widely across a paradise of wetlands, ephemeral lakes and swamps adding fish and plant roots to their rich diet. This abundant surface water, such a boon to indigenous people, was anathema to settlers. They immediately began to cut drainage channels to make the land more suitable for familiar forms of agriculture and animal husbandry. Euro-South Australia's land-histories have largely been stories of clearance and irrigation, but in the south east the stories are of drainage.

The subject of this paper is the drainage landscape of an area that stretches along the South Australian coast from Robe to Beachport and extends inland by several kilometres, including Lakes Eliza, St Clair, George and Hawdon. The paper takes three time-slices (as European incursions began, early in the twentieth century to 1918, and 1955 to the early 1960s) through the landscape and subjects them to a comparative analysis that considers historical and cultural indications gleaned from archaeological data, letters and diaries, newspapers, interviews, photographs, films and government records.

Central to the paper's purpose is the question: what can historians learn about social organization from examining the cultural landscape of water control strategies? The paper argues that the three time-slice examples indicate several differences in social organization in the region: not only differences in the form, roles, responsibilities and attitudes towards government and the expected differences in environmental knowledge, appreciation and/or interpretation, but also, significant differences in people's perception of themselves and each other, both as individuals and as social beings.

The Landscape as a reflection of Geology

South Australia's lower south east landscape reflects its distinct geology where 40 million years of marine sedimentation created a limestone peneplane deeply infiltrated by confined and unconfined aquifers. Periodic climate changes (including glaciation) caused the generally retreating sea level to rise and fall, leaving proud stands of stranded coastal dunes, lying roughly parallel to the current coastline on a north-westerly to south-easterly axis. Surface water moves gently westward across the inter-dune flats until, trapped against the landward dune faces, the flow pools in swamps and wetlands and is diverted to the north west. On the coastal margin between the towns of Robe and Beachport, the landscape under discussion, the surface waters meet the unconfined aquifer, forming coastal lakes, ponds and other seepage areas that discharge to the sea or the land surface.

Indigenous landscapes

Abundant cave art near Mount Gambier is evidence that the area has known human settlement for at least 30,000 years and, at the time of European Settlement, several Indigenous language groups ranged across distinctive territories within the region. The Meintangk people may have used some part of the landscape under analysis. According to Tindale (1974) and Watson (2002) Meintangk boundaries extended from Granite Rocks in Lacedpede Bay (19 miles north of Kingston) southward along the coast to Cape Jaffa and east to Lucindale and Naracoorte, extending inland as far as Mosquito Creek and Lake Hawdon. The Boandik peoples certainly lived in the southernmost and most watery part of the South East landscape. Tindale described their boundaries as running south from the promontory at Cape Jaffa, continuing eastward on a line between Penola and Naracoorte (abutting the Meintangk) to the west flanks of the Grampian Mountains in Victoria, and then turning west to take in Mount Gambier, Penola and Robe. Christina Smith, a settler with well-known interests in the 'Booandik', describes their territory as extending from Rivoli Bay (near Beachport) south along the coast to the Glenelg River and extending inland by about 30 miles. Other contemporary accounts (especially Stewart) tend to agree with her.

Boandik life thrived in the watery landscape and middens reveal a varied diet but one where fish and shellfish were staples. Rain in their territory is predominantly a winter phenomenon, resulting in wet and dry seasons, and the Boandik controlled the surface water in their living environment by migration rather than by direct water control strategies. In summer, they lived in coastal locations, often in long-stay camps, while the floods and winds of the winter (frequently inundating summer locations for months at a time) drove them into the higher ground to be found at Mount Gambier, Mount Burr and the Woakwine Range. Their water management was controlled by the local group. It consisted of two migration cycles: migration to coastal food resources and to comfortably drier land at appropriate times.

Government Drain L

To the European eye, water moved strangely over this land. A few well-defined streams flowed from the Naracoorte Ranges in the east but soon petered out in the flat plains. Despite the lack of obvious watercourses, frequent and often extensive flooding and inundation interfered with the settlers' farming ambitions and stymied any hope of developing the area because it washed out organised transport and communication. These settlers came from a cultural background where water control, either irrigation or drainage, had been a commonplace sign of 'civilization' since their pre-history. Their government set about draining the snake-infested flood-labile swamps. Between 1864 and 1883 the first major drainage system was constructed between Millicent and Tantanoola. The settlers were so happy with the results, they petitioned their government for more and between 1883 and 1908 a major system was cut into the lower south east, encouraging 'excess' water to join the natural north-western flow towards the Coorong

Although similar north-west drainage channels continued to be dug throughout the twentieth century, in 1911, a new technique was employed. If the swamps occurred on the landward side of the fossilised dune systems, why go to the enormous nuisance of channelling them away? Why not just cut through the old dunes of the Woakwine Range and send the troublesome water straight out to sea? Unemployment made labour cheap and men could be induced to camp in the wilderness and hack a way through to the sea at Robe.

The second time-slice of this paper examines the cutting of government Drain L, which was completed in 1918. This water control strategy was implemented by South Australia's central government in response to pressures from local groups and their drainage demands, more distal local groups and their economic demands for reliable transport and communication, and in response to city-located demands that undesirables (including unemployed and returned soldiers) be cheaply employed on infrastructure projects.

Private Drains

Ever since drainage began in South Australia's south east, private drains have been a prominent feature. The subject of time-slice three is the most famous of them all: the Woakwine Cutting. This drain was begun in May 1957 and began to flow in May 1963. Murray McCourt, a south east grazier and horticulturalist was at first refused permission to dynamite his way through the Woakwine Range but, after what he described to the *Postcards* television programme as 'a few years of persuasive argument', the South Eastern Drainage Board approved his plan to drain his property into the coastal Lake George, just north of Beachport. The well-known cutting is a landscape of hyperbole. A regular tourist-stop on the Southern Ports Highway between Robe and Beachport, it has a fan-club of admirers attracted to the 'marvel of engineering' and the monument to 'one man's persistence' in the teeth of both nature and the government bureaucracy.

The third time-slice also re-examines Drain L. Between 1950 and 1972, the South Australian government expanded its programme of diverting water to the coast rather than to the upper south east, and drains L, K, and M were widened and new drains dug. Drain L, situated in the recently proclaimed Woakwine Conservation Reserve, and the Woakwine Cutting are self-proclaimed tourist landscapes that celebrate this policy.

A limited discussion showing direction of [argument] flow

Water control strategies are articulations of belonging in a particular landscape and understanding them helps historians to understand the ways in which a landscape has been socially and culturally (and politically) constructed. This example, which looks at the three time-slices in a specific landscape, shows various forms of social organisation cut into the landscape. Briefly, slice one shows a culture that emanates from the landscape, controlling its environment by migration and imprinting itself on the landscape by its use of available seasonal food and shelter resources, while slice two shows an imported culture of interventionist water controllers. Their community combines its resources to re-write the landscape. The third slice shows what might be called a neo-local culture in which individuals who identify strongly with their perception of local needs recreate the landscape against the community's wishes.

On examining any landscape we are instantly reminded that any place (or perhaps all places) has been crossed and recrossed by all sorts of influences. Permanent changes in a landscape are monuments to power, even though the landscape does not necessarily divulge the source or even direction of its power. All these water control strategies are investments in that particular place. Certainly they are investments of recognizable resources such as money, time or effort, but they are also investments of self and vision. They imprint on the landscape statements of purpose, markers of social organisation and indications of identity. They give power to their implementers by demonstrating a sense of agency in the present combined with a demonstration that the future can be controlled, all producing a sense of identity that can be read in the landscape. The slices also communicate their visions of each others' landscape. For example, slice two sees slice one as a snake-infested, disease-ridden wilderness, while what might be called slice four (today) looks at slice three as a monument to individual endeavour. This means that the cultural landscape shows its viewer what its viewer wants to see. At the same time, the cultural landscape is a site of analysis where a range of histories can be present at the same time – not so much present in layers of meaning, which implies a sort of geological ranking or stratification – but in a non-hierarchical, non-patterned co-existence of different traditions and experiences.

Tor Arnenson (1998) makes the point that 'losing landscapes means losing memory banks', which means that losing the landscape 'threaten[s] social cohesion in the affected group'. He goes on to make the point that, even more than losing the landscape, groups are affected by the ways in which their landscapes are lost. By examining these three time-slices against each other (illuminated by the fourth) this paper can say something about things like fairness, legality, representativeness or dominant values, when reading the social organisation in the cultural landscapes of the study area.