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# Middlemarsh: The Hopkins River and Kindred Wetlands in Western Victoria, Australia

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**Abstract**
The Hopkins River is the longest river in the south-eastern Australian state of Victoria. Along its serpentine course from source to sea through fertile plains it is accompanied by kindred wetlands that flow into it and feed and water its grasslands. This article calls this area 'Middlemarsh.' The area is rich in Aboriginal culture, language, story and contentious history, including colonization, massacres and a recent proposal for a quarry adjacent to Aboriginal land. Middlemarsh is a cradle of Aboriginal civilizations, including the construction of stone houses and eel traps, and the cultivation of wetlands. It is akin to Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilizations where wetlands were cultivated too. Both places are also the sites of creation stories in Aboriginal and Mesopotamian mythology and biblical theology. The fertile crescent of Mesopotamia is regarded highly as a birthplace of western culture. The fertile serpent of Middlemarsh should be valued equally as a birthplace of Aboriginal cultures.

**Keywords**
Aboriginal culture; wetlands; western Victoria, Australia

The Hopkins River is Victoria's longest river. From the 'head' of its catchment in the hills near the town of Ararat in mid-western Victoria, the Hopkins flows roughly due south to its 'mouth' in the Bass Strait on the south coast near Warrnambool on the shores of the Southern Ocean. Or should that be 'cloaca'? The 'head' of the catchment of a river and the 'mouth' of a river are at opposite ends of the river, but the mouth is in the head of the body of humans and other animals. The reluctance on the part of colonial explorers to name the outflow, or exit, of a river by its related part of the human body points to squeamishness about naming the excretory and reproductive organ and going up the inner digestive passage or tract of the body of the earth, but not on the part of colonial explorers and setters about penetrating the earth itself.

Cloaca is a more precise and apt term for the outflow of a river figured in the anatomical terms of some animals, including all reptiles, such as 'the Rainbow Serpent'.

Cloaca is both an excretory and reproductive organ, a fitting trope for the decomposing and regenerating elements in the water of rivers and wetlands in God's first and best work in the biblical terms of *Genesis* 1: 2. In other terms, the terms of other than biblical ones, swamps and other wetlands are the 'Great Mother'(*Magna Mater*) or 'Great Goddess' of creation (see Giblett, *Postmodern* 145–150, 196–198; *People* 30).

Yet 'mouth' is a somewhat appropriate term for figuring the dynamic place on the Bass Strait where the Hopkins River meets the sea as both salt water and beach sand flow into the estuary of the river in a reverse delta. The estuary is both an artery and a vein, conveying matter back and forth from womby wetlands to watery sea. The nine kilometre-long estuary from Tooram Stones to the sea is a 'salt wedge' with a layer of salt water of greater or lesser depth above an underlying layer of fresh water. The depths of these layers depends on rainfall with heavy rain upstream in the catchment creating flooding downstream reducing the top layer of saline water to virtually nothing. Estuarine water flows out through the gap in the rock bar blasted in the early part of the twentieth-century (John Sherwood, pers. comm.). The coastal zone is "ecologically very dynamic" and the estuary is a highly productive ecosystem, more productive than the open ocean (Bantow et al. 3, 9). Where the Hopkins River meets the sea is thus both cloaca and mouth. It is a sacred place with its rocky outcrops, beach sand and ancient middens.

The Hopkins River is Victoria's longest river measuring over 270 kilometres in length from source to sea. The ten-times longer Murray River that forms much of the Victorian border with the neighbouring state of New South Wales is located entirely within that state. The Murray River is also Australia's longest river and a national icon whose history has been told many times and in many ways, unlike the Hopkins. The Murray-Darling Basin also contains internationally important wetlands, unlike the Hopkins Basin whose wetlands are regarded as locally important. The Murray River is like the Thames River, England's longest (at 346 kilometres) and most famous river. The Thames has a polluted estuary, unlike the Hopkins estuary.

The shorter and less famous Hopkins River and the wetlands in its basin deserve to be better known and for the stories of it, the places along it and the people who have lived and still live by it to be told (as the story of the Thames, the places along it and its people have been told on many occasions, over many centuries, again unlike the Hopkins and unlike Victoria's most famous and much shorter river at 242 kilometres, the Yarra that flows through Melbourne).[2] The Thames has had its bards with such classic realist writers as Joseph Conrad

and Charles Dickens, its popular historians, such as Peter Ackroyd, and recently 'the new nature writing' of Crampton and Lichtenstein. The Yarra River also has its artists, bards and its new nature writers, such as Maya Ward who relates in *The Comfort of Water: A River Pilgrimage* her walk up the river from its 'mouth' to its 'head,' from sea to source (or more precisely from bay to spring; see Giblett *Modern*, chapter 8 for a discussion of the Yarra, its artists and its writers). The Seine has its bards, writers, artists, photographers and film-makers too numerous to list, to whom Sciolino devotes much of her book. The Hopkins is yet to find its bards and nature writers, but it has many artists.

A river is a story, with a beginning, a middle and an end. The river cannot tell its own story, so it needs a storyteller who can tell its story on its behalf without be-halving or diminishing it. The story of the river has many twists and turns, as well as some straight passages and boring bits. It has many levels above and below, some visible to the naked eye and open to observation, some invisible that require imagination. The river binds the stories of the places along it and the its peoples together. The Hopkins River is no exception.

The Hopkins River rises between Mt Langi Ghiran and Ararat, flows by the rugged mountain ranges of Gariwerd ('the Grampians'), then through fertile, sweeping plains dotted with life-giving wetlands, God's first and best work as indicated in *Genesis* 1: 2, before mixing with the sea and coming to rest in its estuary in the coastal city of Warrnambool located on Bass Strait between mainland Australia and the island of Tasmania. The Hopkins River begins in the bioregion of the central Victorian uplands, and bisects the bioregions of the five million year-old Victorian volcanic plains and the Warrnambool plains on the coast of Bass Strait.

The Hopkins River has about a dozen creeks that flow into it and many kindred wetlands accompanying it on its way, some of whose underground waters flow into it too, such as the Cockajemmy Lakes. Mt Emu Creek is the main tributary of the river, but it only joins the river near its estuary on the south coast of Victoria. It is 271 kilometres long, roughly the same length as the Hopkins River, and is the longest creek in Victoria. Its Aboriginal name of 'Barriyalug' means 'salty creek' (Clark, "Water" 97). The lower stretches of Barriyalug and the Hopkins River are threatened by the proposed development of a basalt ('bluestone') quarry at Panmure that will "kill the river," says Aboriginal elder Uncle Robert Lowe (pers. comm.). The proposal is resisted by many members of the local community and has prompted a campaign to 'save the Hopkins' by stopping the quarry (see Figure 1).

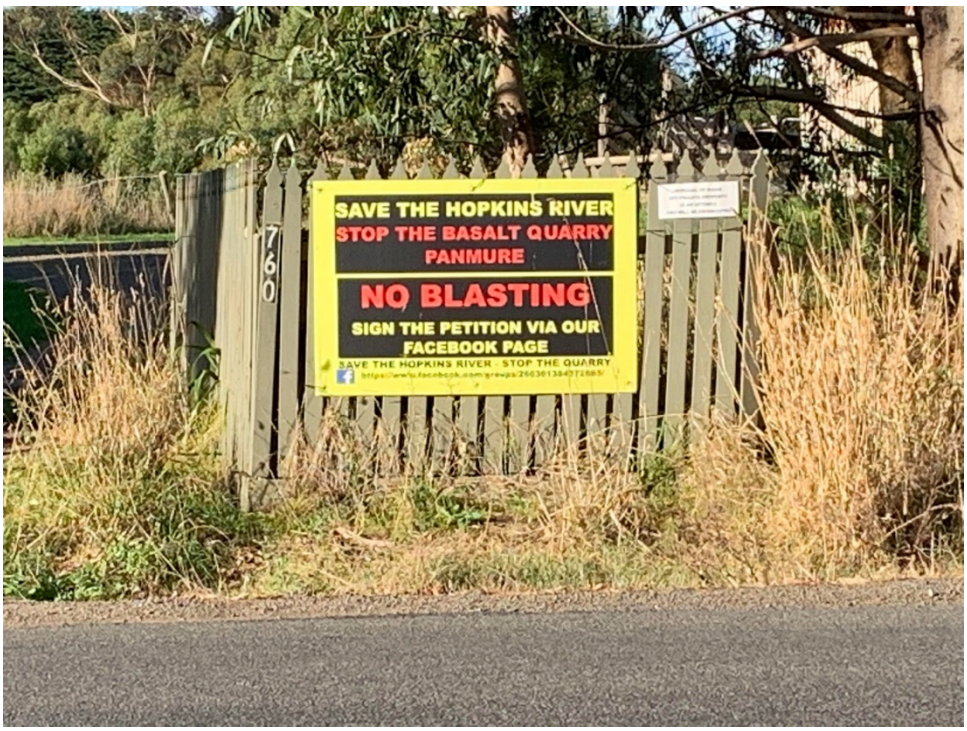


**Figure 1**. Save the Hopkins, Stop the Quarry. Photo by Rod Giblett

The campaign has resulted in a petition to the Victorian State Parliament to 'Save the Hopkins' (Parliament of Victoria, Legislative Council e-Petitions). The present article introduces the conservation and cultural values of the Hopkins River, its creeks, wetlands and environs. It supports the campaign to conserve the area.

The Hopkins River catchment is 8,650 square kilometres in extent with approximately forty Landcare groups working in it (Bantow et al. 66). This area is the traditional home lands and country owned, occupied and used by the Djab Wurrung, Kuurn Kopan Noot, Girai Wurrung and Pik Wurrung peoples (Dawson 1–2). I acknowledge them here. In the late nineteenth century local Aboriginal people informed James Dawson about their lands, customs and languages in mid-western Victoria and he recorded this information in his book, *Australian Aborigines: The Languages and Customs of Several Tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria, Australia*.

Dawson called the Djab Wurrung people the 'Hopkins tribe' and located their country from where the Hopkins River rises in the north, extending to Mt William in the west, to Salt Creek in the east and Lake Bolac in the south. Dawson located the country of the Kuurn Kopan Noot and what he later called 'the Bolac Tribe' people along both sides of the Hopkins River between Caramut, Mt Napier, Dunkeld, Wickliffe, Lake Bolac, and along the western

side of Salt Creek to where it joins the Hopkins near Hexham. Dawson called the Girai Wurrung people the 'Mount Shadwell tribe' and located their country on the eastern side of Salt Creek and its junction with the Hopkins River and along Mt Emu Creek between Mt Fyans, Mt Elephant, Mt Noorat, Lake Keilambete and Framlingham Aboriginal station. Dawson called the Pik Wurrung people the 'Port Fairy tribe' with their country including Allansford, Framlingham and down the Hopkins River to the sea (Dawson 1–2, 95). With its kindred wetlands, I call this area 'Middlemarsh'.

In the 1980s Ian Clark (*Aboriginal* 108–109, 208–209) used Dawson as one source for his mapping of the Aboriginal languages and clans of western Victoria in the nineteenth century. He did not include the Kuurn Kopan Noot and the Pik Wurrung peoples. The area between the Hopkins River from Wickliffe and Lake Bolac to Salt Creek and its junction with the Hopkins is an overlapping area of Aboriginal languages and clans for both Clark and Dawson. This area is Hopkins River central, the middle of Middlemarsh. The Hopkins River flows through an area rich in Aboriginal culture, language, story and contentious history, which is hardly surprising given the record of tens of thousands years of Aboriginal possession and settlement, followed by colonial dispossession and massacres.

Clark ("Reconstruction") relates later that:

> The Hopkins River rises in what is now cleared farming land between Mt Langi Ghiran and Ararat in Djab Wurrung country. The name 'Hopkins' was conferred by New South Wales (NSW) Surveyor General Major T[homas] L. Mitchell in September 1836 after Sir John Paul Hopkins, a military friend. The river transects three language areas (Djabwurrung, Giraiwurrung and Dhauwurdwurrung), and some 25 placenames have been documented that apply to junctions with other streams, waterholes, the confluence of the river, and other localities along its course [see Clark "Reconstruction," Table 8.1]. Three of these names are considered to be Djabwurrung, three are considered to be either Djabwurrung or Dhauwurdwurrung/Giraiwurrung, and the remaining 19 are considered to be Dhauwurdwurrung/Giraiwurrung. Of these 25 names, [George] Robinson [the Protector of Aborigines] is a primary source for 20, Dawson for four, and Smyth for the remaining name.

Places along the river are rich in names, or 'microtoponymy,' small place names. Mt Emu Creek, or '*Barriyalug*,' is a hydronym. Numerous waterholes along the Hopkins River also have 'hydronyms' (Clark, "Water" 97). Hydronyms are the names of water bodies that 'are

an important means by which Aboriginal people communicate the location and suitability of water sources' (Clark, "Water" 97). Until Mitchell named the river the Hopkins, the river had no name as a whole, or no name that has come down to the present. It existed in the names of the places along its course. Mitchell abstracted the river from its places in a typical colonial gesture of concern for flowing water and the lie of the land, not with Aboriginal places that were the homes of Aboriginal people along the river, nor with water bodies, such as wetlands, along the course of the river that made these places home and homely by providing water.

In the very wet season of 1836, Mitchell encountered what he later called 'the Grampians' and recorded in his field notes that:

> on the 11th July, I discovered the summits of a noble mountain range of broken and picturesque outline, and by subsequent survey I found that was the predominant feature of that vast territory lying between the River Murray and the southern coast, giving birth to numerous streams of convenient width and constant current, by which the surrounding country is watered abundantly. (cited by Andrews 135)

Assistant Surveyor Granville William Chetwynd Staplyton concurred when he described how "an isolated range standing up in the midst of a fertile pastoral country […] serves to water the Country with fine streams" (cited by Andrews 141). "This splendid heap of mountains," as Staplyton also describes them, known to local Aboriginal people as 'Gariwerd,' Mitchell initially called 'the Gulielmean Mountains' after William IV. He eventually called them 'these Grampians of the south,' with an obscure nod to the Scottish Highlands and reserved 'Mt William' for "the highest and most eastern summit" (cited by Andrews 135).

Mitchell not only saw some aspects of the Grampians as picturesque, but also as sublime, whereas Staplyton stuck to the picturesque, such as when he describes how he "emerged upon a vast grassy plain" and "the most romantic view that can be imagined" of the Grampians "here opens to the beholder. The grandest I ever saw in New Holland," as Australia was known at that time (cited by Andrews 141). The plain was also dotted with many wetlands. The Grampians 'gave birth' not only to many streams, but also to many lakes and lagoons, as Mitchell also noted, including the Cockajemmy Lakes that flow into the Hopkins River and the twenty seven lakes Stapylton observed from Mt Arapiles on 23rd July and noted in his journal (cited by Andrews 134, 136, 143).

On September 23rd 1836, Mitchell ascended Mt Cole west of present day Ararat near the source of the Hopkins River. He wrote later in the published journal of the expedition that he found "the prospect extremely promising, the land being variegated with open plains and

strips of forest, and studded with smooth green hills of the most beautiful forms." Mitchell later named this 'vast territory' 'Australia Felix' (Australia the Blessed, or Blessèd). According to one commentator on Mitchell, it was a name "chosen to describe so fertile and favourable a tract, a land blessed by fortune" (cited by Andrews 120).

In short, in biblical terms and as the historian of Ararat puts its (Banfield 4), 'Australia Felix' was 'the promised land' with Mitchell as a latter day Moses who led God's chosen people out of slavery on an exodus through the deserted land *to* the promised land and who saw it from Mt Pisgah. Moses did not lead God's chosen people *into* the promised land as he had not prevented them making and worshipping idols. Mitchell led a latter day expedition of exploration for potential colonial settlers out of the desert of industrial England and wage slavery into the promised land of 'Australia Felix.' He did not get to lead them into it either, but showed them the way in his books.

In secular terms, 'Australia Felix' was "the land of hope and glory" (as the same commentator puts it; Andrews 6), alluding anachronistically to Edward Elgar's patriotic song of 1901 referring to England that still expressed jingoistic sentiments going back to at least Mitchell's time and culminating in the bellicose imperialism of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and the bloodbath of the mud-hell of trench warfare in World War I. 'Australia Felix' was reminiscent of England. Or it was England transplanted to the great south land. Mitchell and Stapylton saw the fertile and well-watered grass plains of mid-western Victoria and thought that they were well-suited for sheep—which they were and still are. The Grampians for Stapylton (cited by Andrews 141) were "properly speaking an isolated range standing up in the midst of a fertile pastoral country."

Mitchell and Stapylton also gained the impression, as the same commentator puts it, that:

> this land […] had once been covered by an ocean [and t]hey were absolutely right […] Thirty million years ago the sea stretched far inland to the Murray River. In the next ten million years […] the Grampians were 'awash.' […] The sea commenced its retreat about ten million years ago and […], from a couple of million years ago, significant uplift and warping of the land took place[. The gradients of streams, including the Hopkins] flattened, [and] their flows either evaporated or disappeared into the watertable, or both. (Andrews 134; for Stapylton's own account see Andrews 143)

Or appeared seasonally in the 'chain of lagoons' and other wetlands that flowed into rivers on and under the surface, such as Mitchell observed with the Cockajemmy Lakes and the Hopkins River.

Both Mitchell and Stapylton also noted that the boggy state of the earth with the preponderance of wetlands was an impediment to wheeled vehicular transportation. Mitchell noted that "Mt William," "this lofty mass, so essential to water the lower country, presents no impediment […] to the formation of roads, and the progress of colonization" (cited by Andrews 136). Roads were an instrument for colonization for Mitchell. The 'lower country,' however, at the time presented an impediment to the expedition. Mitchell went on to report that "from the continued rainy weather, the earth was in a very soft state, and this at length became a most serious impediment to the progress of the expedition" (cited by Andrews 136). When they did find 'firmer ground' in 'the Grampians,' they were "still occasionally impeded by the soft and boggy state of the earth" (cited by Andrews 137).

Mitchell's reports or field books of 1836 reproduced in Andrews (1986) differ in some substantial ways from his later elaborated and embroidered account of his travels in the same country during his three expeditions, published three years later (Mitchell 1839), not least that the former describes "the boggy state of the earth" and its impediments to transportation, whereas the latter largely ignores these aspects and talks up the pleasing aesthetic qualities of 'Australia Felix,' and so its suitability for colonization and pastoralism.

According to Rod Bird (3) in his short history of wetlands in south-west Victoria, Stapylton saw the land in much more practical ways than Mitchell did as he "had the task of coping with this soft, exceedingly swampy country. His view of the landscape was not so lyrical for he was responsible for the extrication of bogged wagons and boat carriages and the management of unruly convicts." Yet Stapylton also waxed lyrical about the landscape and Mitchell also reported in his field notes the same transportational impediments as Stapylton did that were posed by the swampy qualities of the country (as we have just seen). Soft and boggy wetlands do not lend themselves to being easily traversed by heavy boat carriages and baggage wagons. Wetlands at least since Roman times in Britain have been denigrated (literally 'blackened') for the transportational difficulties they pose to the imperial colonizer (Giblett, *Postmodern* 18–19, 206–207).

British colonizers, such as Mitchell and Stapylton, encountered and bemoaned the same swampy or paludal (from the Latin 'palus' for mire or marsh) conditions in Australia. Looking at the dry and wet land from the point of view of transportation (as Stapylton did

and as Mitchell reported in his field notes) is different from looking at it from that of its potential for industrial agriculture and pastoralism (as Mitchell and Stapylton also did) and from that of the aesthetics of the pleasing prospect of the picturesque pastoral (as Stapylton did) and the rugged mountainous sublime (as Mitchell also did and as the colonial landscape painter Eugene von Guérard did too). Mitchell held differing views of the same country at different times for different audiences. While the picturesque and the pastoralist were compatible and mutually reinforcing, the pastoralist, the paludal and the transportational were inimical to each other.

The colonial landscape painter von Guérard travelled extensively in 'Australia Felix' in the 1850s and made many sketches that he later worked up into paintings, sometimes many years later when he had a client willing to pay for the privilege. He depicted the rugged mountain ranges of Gariwerd and the sweeping plains of 'Australia Felix' in terms of the European aesthetic conventions of the sublime, the beautiful and the pleasing pastoral picturesque. Pastoralism and landscape painting went hand-in-hand and were mutually reinforcing colonizing enterprises. The picture told the story; the story enacted the picture. He also depicted some of the extensive wetlands in the area, either in the foreground or midground, with rugged mountains rising majestically in the background.

In one painting he called "Mount William and Part of the Grampians, West Victoria," he depicted the sublime Mount William in the background with slimy Mount William Swamp in the foreground to provide interest and lead the eye/I of the viewer to the majestic mountain renamed from Mount Duwil by Mitchell after King William IV, the then reigning monarch of Britain and its empire including Australia. In another painting he called "Mount William from Mount Dryden," von Guérard depicted the wetlands of Fyans Creek in the midground to convey the eye/I from the foreground with native animals grazing peacefully in pastoral bucolic bliss to Mount William rising imperturbably in the background.

'Australia Felix' is a kind of Australian 'fertile crescent' among the wetlands on the volcanic plains of mid-western Victoria between Gariwerd ('the Grampians'), the Hopkins River and Bass Strait. The fertile crescent of Mesopotamia, from Greek *mesos*, 'middle' + *potamos* 'river,' lies between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. In the Mesopotamian myth of "The Epic of Creation" the fertile crescent was created by Tiamat who is "salt water personified as a primeval goddess. [She is the] Mother of the first generation of gods. [She] epitomizes chaos" (Dalley 329). This creation myth is the basis for the biblical story of creation in *Genesis* 1: 2 and for the old Germanic theology of *chaoskampf* ('the war of the

elements') and the creation of order out of chaos (see Giblett, *Environmental* chapter 1). The head waters of the Tigris, Euphrates and Hopkins rivers rise close to Mt Ararat in present day Turkey where Noah's ark came to rest after the 'Great Flood' (as related in the biblical book of *Genesis* 8: 4). The other Mt Ararat in Australia is where the first colonial squatters of the area 'came to rest' 'like the ark' near the site of the present day town of Ararat (as related in Banfield's history of the town).

The rich alluvium of Mesopotamia between the two rivers of the Tigris and Euphrates was what Scott (47, 127) calls "a […] wetland paradise" where marshlanders practiced "an exuberant diversity of livelihoods." He argues that "the earliest large fixed settlements sprang up in wetlands" (Scott 47) in Mesopotamia. Smaller fixed settlements were built near cultivated wetlands in Australia. Drawing on the work of Jennifer Pournelle on Mesopotamian marshlands, Scott goes on to relate that these settlements "relied overwhelmingly on wetland resources […] for their subsistence" (Scott 47). Or more precisely, they relied overwhelmingly on wetland resources for their sustenance as these wetlands were traditionally a rich source of animal and plant foods as Scott (47–57, 127–128) goes on to discuss and as they were for the Gunditjmara people. As both peoples in roughly the same period regulated the flows of water and cultivated water plants in wetlands, they were not only hunters, gatherers and foragers (as Scott calls the Mesopotamian marshlanders), but also paludiculturalists.

Mesopotamian wetlands were the site of the civilizations of Akkad, Sumer, Babylonia, and Assyria dating back over 4000 years. The rich, volcanic plains of 'Australia Mesopalus,' or 'Middlemarsh,' from Greek *mesos* 'middle' + Latin *palus*, 'marsh' or 'mire,' were also a wetland 'paradise' where Aboriginal marshlanders also practiced an exuberant diversity of livelihoods and constructed settlements by wetlands in the area dating back over 4000 years. The mid-western districts of Victoria are more precisely 'Mesopalia' ('Middlemarshes') because of the sheer number of wetlands dotting the fertile, well-watered plains around the Hopkins River between the mountains and the sea. These wetlands were the site of the civilizations of Aboriginal peoples who constructed oven mounds, stone houses, eel and fish traps, wove baskets to catch eels and fish, and cultivated native grains and edible wetland plants. Their presence and use were documented in the Connewarren area on the Hopkins river near Mortlake from the late nineteenth century.

Like the biblical book of *Genesis,* 'Middlemarsh' tells the story of the beginnings of life in wetlands and of Aboriginal people in places of mid-western Victoria. These creative

places were seen by early colonial explorers and colonizers as the garden of Eden. The original garden of Eden is usually located in ancient Mesopotamia, literally between the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates, a birthplace of western civilization (rather than of civilization *per se*[3]). Major Mitchell first called 'Australia Felix' an Eden. Located between the wetlands and the creeks along the Hopkins River of mid-western Victoria, it is what I am calling Middlemarshes, or 'Mesopalia.' Wetlands were the birthplace of Aboriginal civilizations in western Victoria. Wetlands were the birthplace of civilizations in both ancient Mesopotamia and Aboriginal Australia. Wetlands were also the cradle of ancient cities in Mesopotamia, China, Mexico and Africa (Wilson 15–18, 20–25), of ancient and modern cities in Europe, and of modern, colonial cities in North America and Australia (Giblett, *Cities*). Wetlands were also the cradle of Aboriginal villages in western Victoria.

Among the wetlands and the creeks along the Hopkins River of mid-western Victoria the Djab Wurrung, Kuurn Kopan Noot, Girai Wurrung and Pik Wurrung peoples established and sustained their civilizations in their garden of Eden for tens of thousands of years. The first fall from grace and expulsion as related in *Genesis* was from the original garden of Eden; a second fall from grace and dispossession occurred with the second Eden with the colonial invasion. Redemption and reconciliation are still coming. The messiah of conservation has come and spoken to those who have ears to hear. In keeping with rewriting stories from *Genesis* in *Middlemarsh,* a third Eden is perhaps located on a farm on the Hopkins River where Ayesha Burdett and Howard Brandenburg live and with them as a kind of latter day environmental Eve and Adam as she is a freshwater ecologist employed in facilitating local land management and he is an artist, including an illustrator of fish of the river.

This is no less so than with Aboriginal people and their civilizations in mid-western Victoria. Eel and fish traps and stone houses located at Lake Condah and Condah Swamp in the country of the Gunditjmara people date back over four-thousand years. They are older than Stonehenge (Gunditjmara People) and are now a 'World Heritage Site' (AAP). These people practiced architecture with the construction of stone houses, agriculture with the cultivation of native grasses and cereals, aquaculture with the building of stone traps and weaving of baskets to catch eels and fish, aquaorniculture with the weaving of nets to snare water birds and paludiculture with the cultivation of edible wetland plants.[4]

More than intensive hunters, gatherers, fishers and foragers, and merely managers and manipulators of plants, animals and fish, it is well-documented that the Gunditjmara people of mid-western Victoria around Lake Condah were designers and builders of eel and fish

traps (or "engineers of aquaculture"; Gunditjmara People 16–22) and cultivators of wetland plants (Gunditjmara People 7, 13–16, 67), or practitioners of paludiculture, from the Latin 'palus' for mire or marsh. More than mere 'swamp managers' and swamp farmers for the engineering of water in aquaculture and in irrigation for the cultivation and harvesting of edible plants and animals in paludiculture, they were paludiphytes, lovers of wetlands.

Aboriginal people endured the impact and repetition of the twin "tragedies of improvement," as Simon Winchester (171–193) calls them, of "the enclosure of the commons" in England and "the clearance of the estates" in Scotland. Both tragedies paved the way for industrial capitalism by privatizing land as a source of wealth and creating dislocated workers as a source of cheap labor for factories.[5] Both tragedies were repeated in Australia where Aboriginal people owned lands and wetlands in common on their estates were 'cleared' and their commons enclosed. Early colonists enclosed Aboriginal lands and wetlands into private property by squatting on them. Later the legislatures in which the squatters and their fellow colonial settlers sat legitimated their possession by law. They also cleared Aboriginal clans from their estates, physically removing them, or enslaving them, or massacring them. Early colonists largely destroyed Aboriginal triumphs of traditional improvement, such as eel traps, oven mounds, stone houses and wetland paludiculture, to make way for their own industrial improvements of wetland drainage, dryland agriculture, stone mansions and grassland pastoralism. These so-called 'improvements' were a third tragedy of improvement inflicted on Aboriginal peoples and their lands with the ruination of wetlands, soil erosion of grasslands and fiery destruction of bushlands. The differences between Aboriginal and colonial improvements were spatial in scale, temporal in sustainability, economic in kind and environmental in impact.

Improvements are a sign of civilization in John Stuart Mill's definition (cited by Mayes 36). Aboriginal improvements are signs of their civilizations. One of their most famous improvements was through the use of fire that created "woods and lawns and marshes" that looked "like a gentleman's park," as James Cook and members of his expedition along the eastern seaboard of Australia observed in the eighteenth century (cited by Winchester 236). Aboriginal people were also owners of the land, wet and dry, as they "mixed their labour with nature" in John Locke's terms (cited by Mayes 34). This property ownership was held in common. Common ownership is the traditional form of ownership. It precedes and refuses medieval and modern 'Crown Land,' private property, public property, state ownership and native title.[6]

‘Commoning land’ and ‘decolonizing nature’ are urgent, contemporary political projects. Colonization is as much about the colonization of nature as it is about the colonization of ‘the natives,’ and the colonization of nature is just as much about the colonisation of ‘swamps’ as the colonization of ‘the bush.’ Indeed, for Frantz Fanon, the pioneer theorist of decolonization, they are one and the same thing:

> hostile nature, obstinate and fundamentally rebellious, is in fact represented in the colonies by the bush, by mosquitoes [from swamps], natives and fever [from mosquito bites], and colonisation is a success when all this indocile nature has finally been tamed. Railways across the bush, *the draining of swamps* and a native population which is non-existent politically and economically are in fact *one and the same thing*. (Fanon 201; my emphases)

The draining of swamps produces the flat and dry surface of the earth on which the straight lines of the railway and the rectilinear grid of the roads, streets and lots of the settler's farms and towns can be laid out. The draining of swamps is both a precondition for colonization of the earth's surface via the construction of the colonial settlement and the development of agriculture and the colonization of the earth’s depth (like mining) via the reduction of depth to surface in the case of the map or the obliteration of wetlands by draining or filling.

In the era of so-called post-colonialism, it is necessary to ask the question: what process of decolonization has been carried out in relation to the colonization of spaces and places, like wetlands, by maps (from which they are absent or on which they are present, reduced to surface and frozen in time), by settlers, and by urban development? Decolonization will not be fully achieved until space and places are decolonized, and not only external, terrestrial and extra-terrestrial space and places, but also internal, corporeal space and places, especially those regions of the human body—the ‘nether regions’—associated with the black waters and the dark and dank regions of the earth—the nether(wet)lands.[7]

Recognition of prior Aboriginal ownership of Australia needs to be enshrined in the Australian constitution and a voice to the Australian Parliament established, both called for by the *Uluru Statement from the Heart,* as is truth-telling. Pastoralist private property and its practices have extinguished native title in those places where they take place and have taken Aboriginal place. The traditional means and triumphs of improvement of sustenance of hunting, gathering, foraging, agriculture (dryland cultivation of native cereals), aquaculture, paludiculture and aquaorniculture (netting of waterbirds) have not been able to continue

unabated and uninterrupted in this and many other places in Australia. Dryland cultivation of native cereals is returning to some places in Australia (such as in New South Wales; see, for example, Allam).

The practices of paludiculture were widespread in wetlands throughout south-eastern Australia prior to the colonial invasion. Aboriginal people still practice them today in some places, such as the Nari Nari people at Gayini in the Murray-Darling Basin (Nature Conservancy Australia; Ruzicka). Elsewhere in the Murray-Darling Basin industrial rice-growers proclaim on their roadside fence signs that "you can't eat a wetland." In a swift rejoinder, Emily O'Gorman (5) relates how "many Aboriginal people will tell you [that] you can eat a wetland by cultivating and harvesting plants in them, hunting animals such as duck, and catching fish."[8] In mid-western Victoria Aboriginal people caught ducks and fish using nets they wove. Using smoke from fires they ignited they also harvested plants and hunted black swans in wetlands and using stone traps they built they caught eels.

In the Aboriginal myth of creation of south-eastern Australia Bunjil, 'the all-creator,' created everything. The Bunjil is often regarded as an eagle-hawk or as a wedge-tail eagle (Figure 2).

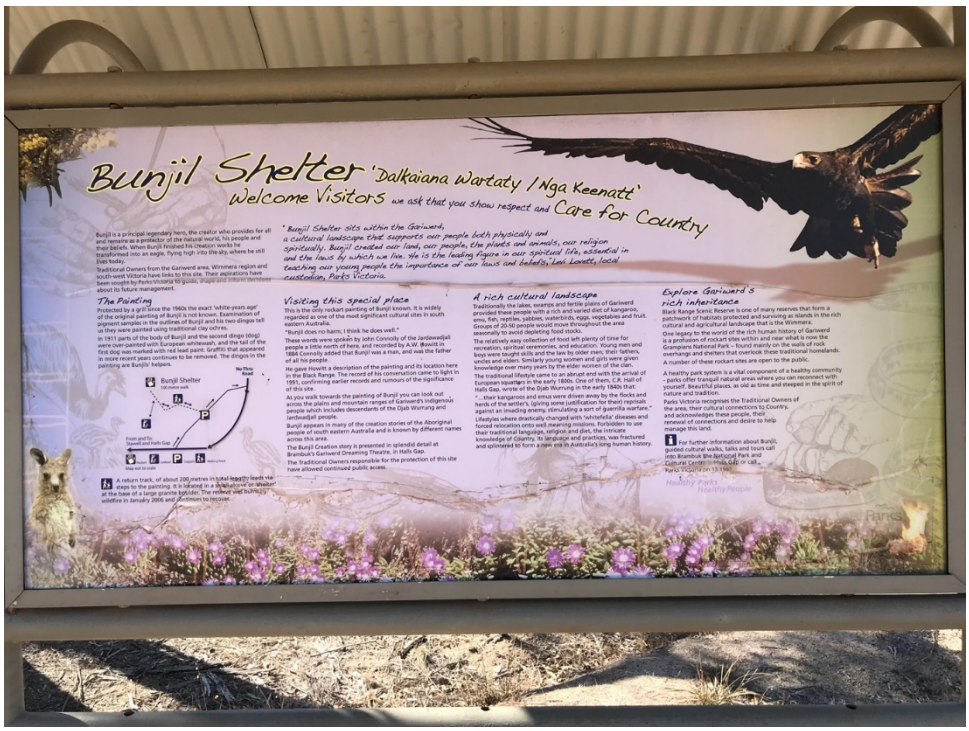


**Figure 2**. Interpretive Signage for Bunjil's Shelter, Black Range, Victoria. Photo by Rod Giblett.

As the all-creator, it can assume many forms (Philip Clarke, "Totemic" 4, 6–7; "Water" 36; Giblett, *Modern* 164). It is figured as humanoid in the only visual representation to survive in a cavern or rock shelter (Figure 3).

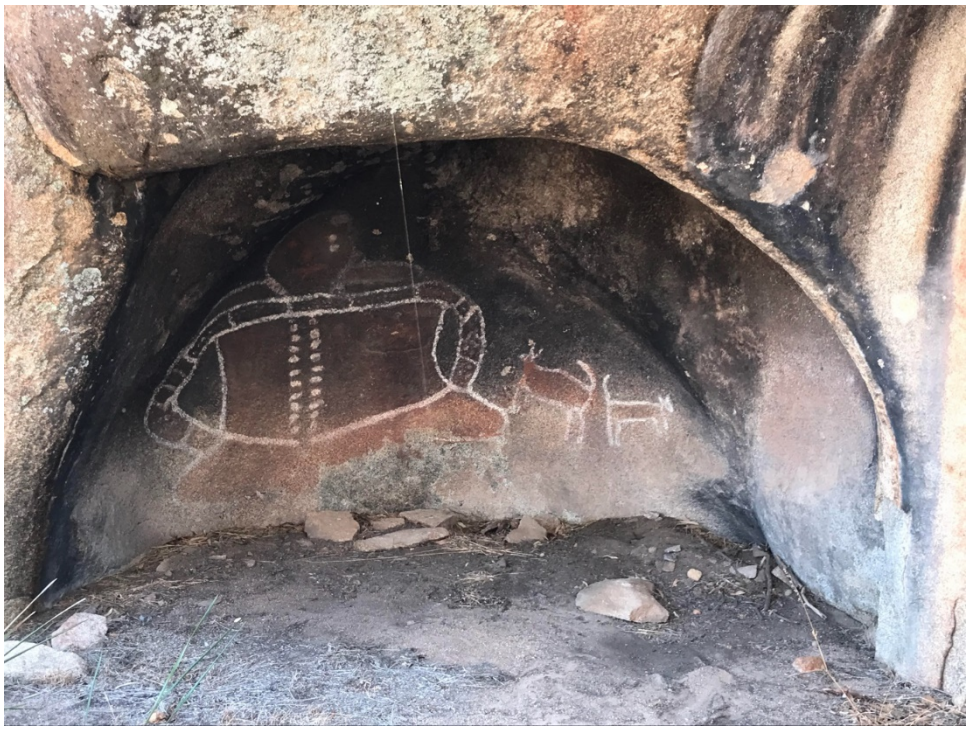

**Figure 3**. Bunjil's Cave or Shelter, Black Range, Victoria. Photo by Rod Giblett

'Bunjil's Shelter' is located in the Black Ranges east of Gariwerd and Lake Fyans and at the northern end of Middlemarsh overlooking the fertile plains and 'good country' of 'Australia Felix,' a fitting place for the Bunjil to reside, with Gariwerd rising in the background.

Bunjil created Middlemarsh and "the Rainbow Serpent of the Hopkins River" (Patricia Clarke). I take 'of'' to be both possessive (the Rainbow Serpent is the Hopkins River's, and vice versa) and a tautological copula (the Rainbow Serpent *is* the Hopkins River, and vice versa). The Rainbow Serpent is not in the river, nor of the river, but *is* the river and vice versa. They are tautological (the Rainbow Serpent and the river are equivalent, the same being). The 'Rainbow Serpent' or 'Rainbow Spirit' in Australian Aboriginal myth/religion/story is water animalized and sacralized as a marsh monster mother/swamp serpent spirit (see Giblett, "Rainbow"). The Rainbow Serpent of the Hopkins River is the water of the river and kindred wetlands animalized and sacralized thus. The Hopkins River/Rainbow Serpent is the waters of the earth in the region on the surface and in the depths, above and below ground, the river, wetlands and aquifers. The River Serpent is not

merely a gastro-intestinal tract draining the country, digesting nutrients and excreting wastes, but a body with the kidneys, placenta and liver of wetlands and aquifers that nourish and filter water as the lifeblood of the body of the earth of Middlemarsh.

The Hopkins River for Bob McKenzie (22) "has been the lifeblood of the rural communities through which it passes." Rivers are the lifeblood of Australia for Ian Hoskins in his recent book of this title, though they are more precisely, as he points out, veins, capillaries and arteries (Hoskins 5). Moreover, fresh water, as he also points out, is "often likened to lifeblood" (Hoskins 5). It is not confined to rivers, but is found in wetlands too. Hoskins (7) acknowledges the importance of wetlands "related to river systems" in what John Lhotsky (cited by Hoskins 2020, 5) called the "vascular system" of "the organism of the globe," but Hoskins does not accord them the status of organs, such as kidneys, in the body of the earth. The lifeblood of living water flows through wetlands filtering waste from water and feeding nutrients to the land.

The Hopkins is like the Seine, which is for Sciolino (83, 257) the lifeblood of Paris and regions along the river in France. The Hopkins is also a sacred river like the Seine (Sciolino 25–26) and Thames (Ackroyd). The Hopkins is also serpentine like the Seine "with the path of a snake" (Sciolino 26). The nineteenth-century poet Paul Verlaine called the Seine "an aged serpent" (cited by Sciolino 208). Sciolino follows suit and describes "the Seine's serpentine curves" and places "where the river twisted back on itself live a coiling snake" (Sciolino 247, 253; see also 269, 283). The Seine is also the river of "the goddess Sequana," "the goddess of healing," from whom it, or she, takes her feminine name in defiance of the grammar police (Sciolino 10, 17, 40–49, 75, 308, 338). The Seine is also a marshy river with many wetlands along its course (Sciolino), like the Hopkins.

Viewed from above and as depicted in Aboriginal paintings of the depths of country, as surveyed in colonial cadastral maps of the surface of the land and as viewed from the air as Bob McKenzie (39) did, the Hopkins River "twists and turns as it snakes" its way through the country of Middlemarsh between the mountains and the sea with the Rainbow Serpent's head in the Telegraph Hills and its tail in the estuary near the city of Warrnambool on the south coast. Rather than crescent-shaped, the Hopkins River is 'S'-shaped as portrayed in the serpent of Patricia Clarke's "Map of the Western District (Banjo Clarke's Country)" (Banjo Clarke inside front cover). The head of the serpent is the head of the river in the hills and its cloaca is its estuary on the coast. Rather than a fertile crescent, the watery volcanic plain between the mountains, the river and the sea is a 'Fertile Serpent.' The circles nestled in the

curves of the serpent in her painting map camps dotted around kindred wetlands with oven mounds. The lines linking these places map the 'song-lines,' storylines and dreaming tracks between them. This map is a portrait of his country; it is not a landscape to view and master from a distance; it is land to live in, own and know intimately. It does not freeze a moment in time, unlike cadastral maps; it tells a story of a place and its creation.

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## Notes

[1.] Rod Giblett is the author most recently of *Wetlands and Western Cultures: Denigration to Conservation* (Lexington, 2021) and *Black Swan Song: Life and Work of a Wetland Writer* (Hamilton, 2021). The present article is drawn from the introduction to a book entitled *Middlemarsh: Life-Stories of Remarkable People and Watery Places in Western Victoria.* It is currently under consideration for publication. Another article drawn from a later chapter in the book has been published recently: "People and Place of Hissing Swan: Kaawirn Kuunawarn, Lake Connewarren, the Weatherlys and 'Connewarran' Station," *Victorian Historical Journal,* vol. 92, no. 2, 2021, 379–395. He is Honorary Associate Professor of Environmental Humanities in the Writing and Literature Program of the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University in Victoria, Australia.

[2.] For the cultural and natural history of the Yarra River, see Giblett (*Modern* chapter 8) and its references.

[3.] Despite a recent shift in acknowledging the importance of wetlands for ancient Mesopotamia and "the invention of the city" some writers on the topic persist in calling this time and place the birth, or dawn, of civilization as signalled in the title of their books; see Wilson (401–402, n1).

[4.] For a brief discussion and illustrations of Aboriginal eel traps and 'game nets' in 'well-watered areas' of Australia (such as mid-western Victoria) with no mention and mapping of wetlands here (nor anywhere else in Australia for that matter), see *The Macquarie Atlas of Indigenous Australia* (Arthur and Morphy 27–28, 53, 66, 148–149), yet another disappointing instance of wetlands being written out of geography, history and cartography, of an atlas being an instrument of colonization and neo-colonization, and of aquaterracide (the genocide of wetlands). For further discussion of wetlands being written out of geography, history and cartography, maps as an instrument of colonization and neo-colonization, and proposals for the decolonization of wetlands, especially in relation to Perth and Melbourne, see Giblett (*Postmodern* chapter 3; *Modern* chapter 5). For decolonization of nature and deconstruction of the nature-culture binary, see Giblett (*People*), aquaterracide, see Giblett (*Postmodern*) and paludiculture, see Giblett (*Wetlands*).

[5.] This is a Marxist economic theory of value and critique of political economy. Both 'land and labour' are the creators of value and wealth. This theory respects and values that the

economic base has an environmental foundation. For further discussion, see Giblett (*People* chapters 1 and 2).

[6] For the history and politics of improvement in England, especially the creation of 'pleasing prospects' in English rural landscapes, see Williams (122–123; see also Giblett *New* chapter 10). For the history and politics of the enclosure of traditional wetland commons into private property in the English Fens, see Giblett (*Wetlands* chapter 3). For 'the Australian gentleman's park is Aboriginal country,' see Giblett (*People* 91–94). For 'the biggest estate on earth,' see Gammage. For the economics and politics of 'the commons' and recent proposals for 'commoning land' and 'decolonizing nature,' see Obeng-Odoom.

[7] For further discussion of decolonizing nature in general and wetlands in particular, first proposed in the early/mid 1990s, see Giblett *Postmodern* 74-76.

[8] Flooded rice paddies are, as O'Gorman (16, 100, 105, 118) points out on several occasions, "a kind of wetland," certainly as far as ducks and other species are concerned. The boundary between the two is permeable, as she relates later with birds, frogs, insects and plants crossing it in the case of a couple of swamps and a rice-growing irrigation area in the Murray-Darling Basin (O'Gorman 97–119).