

*South of the Strezlecki Ranges: an environmental history of Corner Inlet*

Launched by Dr Gary Presland, Saturday 20 October 2018

I must start by acknowledging that we are meeting on the land of the Brataualung—members of the GunaiKurnai nation—and I pay my respect to their elders past and present.

I'm indebted to the organizers of this gathering, especially Cheryl Glowrey and Liz Rushen, and thankful for the opportunity to launch this book. It gives me great pleasure to be here. My life affords me many pleasures and one of them is to be invited to talk about something that is of great interest to me — environmental history, and particularly historical connections between people and nature.

For me, it's always a pleasure to launch a new book because in doing so I am re-assured that books are still being published. This is important because it gives me confidence to keep writing, and also hope that I might one day get out of my head and into print, any one of the two or three books that are presently rolling around in there.

For too long, the study of the natural environments of Corner Inlet has been overshadowed, figuratively, by its better-known close neighbour, Wilsons Promontory. Corner Inlet has, literally, been lying low — behind the more prominent landscape feature. This is a pity because, as Cheryl has been able to show, the many and varied environments of her study area offer ample, and fertile ground for numerous interesting stories of the relationships that link nature and human action.

Like all good studies of this kind, Cheryl's book addresses the central issues from different directions. It focuses, firstly, on the myriad ways in which the natural environments of Corner Inlet played a part in the human history of this region. To the extent it does this, it is different from most published environmental histories, which draw attention only to the ways in which local environments have been altered, most commonly in the wake of European settlement. Cheryl does acknowledge that changes have been made—some deliberate, some accidentally—and does not shy away from spelling this out. She considers the many ways in which local people—both Indigenous and immigrant—have altered parts of the local environments for their own ends.

There are many stories to be told. Here, in recognising the primacy of environment in environmental history, Cheryl has placed stories of human endeavour in a context that links those actions to the natural settings within which they took place. These are grouped, in chronological order, under four headings:

Yirruk

The scene is set in the first part, beginning with the final formation of Corner Inlet, at the end of the ice-ridden Pleistocene, a period that began about two million years ago. In this part the nature of much of the environment encountered by the earliest European settlers is introduced. This is nicely done through the diary entries of individuals who were at the forefront of the European invasion. This sets the scene very well for the environmental history that follows. It also points very clearly, I think, to the

wide gulf that existed between Indigenous and European culture, particularly relating to their respective perceptions and understandings of nature.

As a personal aside, I was pleased to see that my old travelling companion G A Robinson is commended for his noting of local environments, through which he travelled in the 1840s. I was responsible, largely, for bringing Robinson into the field of Indigenous studies, through transcribing sections of his journals—that was more years ago than I care to remember. Since then he's received a generally bad press so it's good to see here a bit of balancing of the ledger.

Thanks to the long-standing practices of the Brataualung clans in caring for their country, some of the local environments that were invaded by Europeans were not exactly natural. Although the specifics of these practices are a matter of (sometimes heated) dispute, it is now generally recognised that Indigenous peoples here, as everywhere else on this continent, were not simply collecting and hunting, they were also managing plant and animal resources.

#### Corner Inlet

In the second part the focus is on the growth of local industries in Corner Inlet, such as timber milling and fishing, as well as a gold rush to Stockyard Creek. There was an attendant rise in the population of the area, a significant proportion of which were Chinese. This increase in the number of residents brought inevitable change to local environments, with the clearing of native vegetation and planting of exotic species. But as the permanent population grew it wasn't only the environment that was changed to suit the European settlers; references to the pre-settlement Indigenous population were progressively removed from the texts written to commemorate the non-Indigenous settlement of Corner Inlet.

In advance of the advent of the railway in 1892, grandiose plans were put in train for new settlements in Corner Inlet and on Wilsons Promontory, each devoted to attracting visitors for the pursuit of pleasure. Perhaps fortunately, these projects coincided with the end of the 1880s land boom, and the subsequent downturn in prospective developments meant the schemes went off the rails. On the other hand, when it came, the railway did bring numbers of selectors wanting to try their hand at dairy farming.

#### Land and sea

Wholesale changes to natural environments always come at a cost, and the area of Corner Inlet is as good an example of this as anywhere in Victoria. In Part 3, the reader is taken through the travails of people eking out a living on the coastal plains and in the hill country. In the low country, drainage of wetlands was required in a number of places, in order to make the small selections workable.

Reclamation of local swamps is a common feature in histories of both rural and urban areas throughout Victoria; in most cases it was the inevitable outcome of the view of wetlands that Europeans brought to this country in the nineteenth century, and which prevailed well into the twentieth.

In the second half of last century, changes were wrought also on two the Inlet's major industries — farming and fishing. The driving forces in this period were factors such as

advances in technology and global economic developments, social elements well beyond the control of local people. There are few happy stories to be related here, but time and again the narrative brings out the ingenuity, determination and adaptability of people faced with the possible demise of their livelihood.

### Environment

In the final part of her study, Cheryl brings the reader up to date, focusing on concerns and themes that were played out in Corner Inlet, and with which we are probably all familiar. Environmental issues, raised in the context of conservation movements, wind farms and ecologically sustainable development, have become the stuff of television news, newspaper headlines and social media. In her concluding chapter Cheryl argues cogently that the experience of local people in contesting issues regarding conservation and preservation of natural and cultural landscapes—against inappropriate development, against pollution, and against bureaucracy—is of global significance. We can no longer think of rural areas such as Corner Inlet, away from the seat of government and the boardrooms of international companies, as isolated or immune from global economic forces.

Anybody who can satisfactorily complete the many tasks involved in writing a book, and then attract the attention of a publisher, deserves to be congratulated. I know that Cheryl has written a book before, but—you can take my word for this—that doesn't necessarily make it any easier. It takes belief in one's self, it takes dedication to work towards what is often a nebulous end, and it takes time. For all of that, Cheryl should be congratulated. She should be applauded also, because in order to write environmental history of this kind, one needs to come to grips with a much wider range of subject matters than historians are ordinarily trained to deal with. Cheryl has done this, and done it well.

I've enjoyed reading this book, and hope that it reaches as wide an audience as possible.

It thus gives me great pleasure to officially launch *South of the Strezlecki Ranges: an environmental history of Corner Inlet* and wish it, and its author, the success that is so richly deserved.

Thank you.