

Lost and Found Wetlands of Melbourne

Rod Giblett

Abstract

Like many other cities, Melbourne was founded amongst marshes and swamps. The maps of the first explorers and early settlers noted their presence; later colonial chroniclers and municipal historians described them; and recent history retells their story. All of these observers across two centuries have seen these wetlands in terms of European landscape aesthetics and functionality, such as when they presented a clear sheet of beautiful water or were suitable for cattle grazing; otherwise they were denigrated. This article critiques this understanding and the absence of these wetlands from Nearamnew, a public artwork inscribed into the surface of Federation Square.

Like many other cities around the world, Melbourne was founded amongst marshes and swamps. Over the following 180 years some of these wetlands were completely lost to drainage or filling, such as Batman's or West Melbourne Swamp. Others were landscaped into lakes and parks, such as South Melbourne Swamp transformed into Albert Park Lake. Remnants of others remain and can be found today, such as Bolin Bolin Billabong in Bulleen. The history of these wetlands is largely unknown to the majority of Melbourne's current residents, but they were prominent features of the site and the city in the past.

The maps of the first explorers and early settlers noted the presence of these wetlands; colonial chroniclers and municipal historians described them; and recent history retells their story and that of the place and its peoples, the Aboriginal owners and European dispossessors. All of these observers across two centuries see these wetlands in the terms of European landscape aesthetics and functionality by which they were valued when they presented a clear sheet of beautiful water, for example, or were found suitable for cattle grazing; otherwise they were denigrated as 'bad swamps'. The first part of this paper traces critically the history of Melbourne and its wetlands in the context of contemporary European landscape aesthetics. It shows that these wetlands were crucial in constituting the site on which the city grew and

in posing initial limitations and impediments to its development and spread that were eventually overcome. In their absence they still remain a defining feature of the relationship of the colonial centre to its location.

All these lost and found wetlands are largely absent, however, from *Nearnamnew*, the inscription in stone of the history of the city of Melbourne and the colony of Victoria created for the commemoration of Federation in 2001 in Federation Square beside the Yarra River on the corner of Flinders and Swanston streets. This omission is surprising as the presence of these wetlands is well documented in many of the sources that were used for the creation of the artwork as well as for the first part of this paper.

The second part of this paper critiques *Nearnamnew* and argues that it represents a lost opportunity to commemorate and celebrate the wetlands that were part of the environmental context in which Melbourne and the colony of Victoria was founded. It is also a missed chance to mourn the wetlands' loss and to commemorate their role as living places of, and for, plants and animals, as sources of sustenance for the local Aboriginal people, and as nutriment for settlers and city-dwellers to grow their crops and graze their animals. Unlike Perth, which has two or three wetland memorials and several interpretative projects, Melbourne does not seem to have any. This paper argues the need for such projects to commemorate and celebrate the role of wetlands in Victorian ecology.

Lost Wetlandscapes

Matthew Flinders' 1802 map of Port Phillip Bay and adjacent coastline describes what would become the future site for Melbourne as 'swampy shore'.¹ A year later, Charles Grimes's 1803 map of Port Phillip Bay not only describes this site as 'low swampy land' (or 'country') and north of the 'Yarra' River as 'swampy', but also names seven other 'swamps', 'very bad' 'swampy' 'ground' or 'soil', or 'swampland' around the bay.² This is a salutary instance of the moralisation of landscape, in which swamps (or woody wetlands) are denigrated. In his field book of 1803 Grimes wrote that 'the Country appeared full of swamps'.³ Many of these swamps were subsequently filled or drained, or transformed into parks.

The lost wetlands of Melbourne make an intermittent cameo appearance in more recent histories of the city—of the place, its peoples and their practices—principally in the work of Gary Presland over the past thirty years, to which I am indebted and upon which I rely heavily

as will be seen below. These swamps ceased to be waterbird habitat or a source of sustenance and home to the local Aboriginal people. Presland conducts the readers of his books—*The Land of the Kulin: Discovering the Lost Landscape and the First People of Port Phillip*, (later revised and republished as *Aboriginal Melbourne: The Lost Land of the Kulin People*)—on ‘an imaginary tour’ of ‘the landscape of early Melbourne’.⁴ Given the emphasis on lost land and lost landscape in both subtitles, it may have been more accurate to call it the lost *wet*landscape of early Melbourne, for the dry landscape has not been lost, though its flora, fauna and Aboriginal peoples have largely disappeared. The wetlandscape sustained and nurtured much of the flora and fauna, as well as the Aboriginal peoples (as emphasised by Presland in his latest foray into this topic).⁵

Typically, both early explorers and recent historians, such as Presland, do not consider the wetlands of Port Phillip to be aesthetically pleasing, though some early settlers did. Presland sees the wetlands positively as a rich source for Aboriginal food gathering, but he also views them negatively in terms of the European landscape aesthetic, such as when he asks his readers to imagine that we are ‘coming up’ Port Phillip Bay. Along the edge of Hobsons Bay on the left, ‘there are mud flats and marshy ground’ while on the right:

at the top of the bay there is another wide expanse of low-lying marshy ground ... The marsh sedges, swamp grass and ti-tree which cover this area are relieved only by a strikingly green grassy hill which rises prominently above its low surroundings. This is soon to be named Emerald Hill⁶

The green hill, as represented here, redirects the weary eyes of the traveller, imaginary and otherwise, from yellow grass and dull trees; the prominence provides relief from the surrounding flat countryside and the tedium of the wetlandscape. The dreariness of the marsh can thus find compensation in the European landscape aesthetic when balanced by a pleasing prospect viewed from a considerable eminence.⁷

The assumption that some wetlands are not aesthetically pleasing persists in Presland’s most recent book iteration of his work on early Melbourne, *The Place for a Village: How Nature Has Shaped the City of Melbourne*. In his description of the ‘lost [wet]landscape’ of Melbourne, he characterises the area around Batman’s Hill as ‘a low-lying area of little

scenic attraction’ with ‘no advantage for scanning’, so ‘the hill presented itself well suited for the purpose’ of taking in the pleasing prospect from a commanding height.⁸ The hill is figured as the means of enabling the roving eye to see and master the surrounding denigrated wetlandscape press-ganged into the service of the European landscape aesthetic as visually inferior. Presland’s account of how nature has shaped the city of Melbourne is also an instance of how the conventions of culture shape perceptions and representation of the land—wet and dry.⁹

Given the physical conditions, K.J. Fairbairn, an urban geographer, could conclude that ‘the site of Melbourne has not seriously hampered its expansion. Certainly, local topographic differences have directed some of its development and these add variety to an otherwise continuous mass of urban sprawl.’¹⁰ Fairbairn does not specify what these local topographic differences are, nor does he indicate that, in the case of wetlands, many have been lost or incorporated into parks where they do add variety to an otherwise continuous mass of urban sprawl. Those that have been lost could have acted as mitigation against the consequences of an expanding urban heat island. The destruction of so many of its wetlands has played no small part in making Melbourne the worst city in Australia for this phenomenon.

About some selected local topographic differences Fairbairn goes on to wax lyrical that:

The site can be divided broadly into two parts. To the east of the city centre the land surface consists of gently undulating hills of low relief interspersed with numerous valleys. The western and northern suburbs spread over a very gently undulating basalt surface into which the streams have cut some steep valleys ...¹¹

Fairbairn makes no mention of the wetlands that were and still are features of the area, albeit landscaped as vestiges in parks.

Fairbairn is merely following in the footsteps of Garryowen (colonial journalist Edmund Finn) who, in his *Chronicles of Early Melbourne*, also pressed into service the descriptor ‘undulating’ from the landscape lexicon:

The site and surrounding of the embryonic city, when in a state of nature, formed a picture of wild and wayward beauty ... The Eastern Hill was a gum and wattle tree forest, and the Western Hill was so clothed with she-oaks as to give the appearance of a primeval park

where timber-cutting and tree-thinning were unknown—whilst away northward as far as the eye could see was a country umbrageous and undulating, garbed in a vesture of soft green grass.¹²

The primeval park was the product of Aboriginal land care. Tree-thinning in the form of timber-cutting was unknown, but it was known in the form of fire, either anthropogenic or meteorological. The timber clothing was later to be unceremoniously stripped off the body of the earth and the land laid bare for suburban sprawl.

Unlike Fairbairn, however, Garryowen had acknowledged previously the presence of the wetlands, both those adjoining the Yarra and those further afield:

The River Yarra[’s ...] low sides were ... skirted with marshes covered with a luxuriance of reeds, wild grass, and herbage ... whilst trending away north-westward spread out a large expanse of marsh of deep black soil, and without a solitary tree, its centre a deep lacuna where swans, geese, ducks, quail, and other wild-fowl swarmed.¹³

Along similar lines to Garryowen, Ellen Clacy, en route to her ‘Lady’s visit to the gold diggings’ in 1852–53, noted that the Yarra was very swampy and queried whether it was really a river. She could only ‘discover a tract of marsh or swamp, which I fancy must have resembled the fens of Lincolnshire, as they were some years ago, before draining was introduced into that country.’¹⁴ The drained fens were a model that Yarra and other Melbourne wetlands were doomed to follow. The lacuna of the lagoon was to become a lacuna in the geography of the city to be filled with rubbish and later drained, as well as a gap in the history of the city. And the wetlands have indeed disappeared from popular memory if Paul Carter’s *Neararnnew* in Fed Square is anything to go by.

South Melbourne Swamp/Albert Park Lake

On his 1803 map of Port Phillip Bay, Grimes described an area at the head of the bay and to the south of central Melbourne as ‘low swampy country.’¹⁵ W.H. Ferguson reminisces that ‘the glory of Albert Park was the lagoon, a marshy place with brackish water.’¹⁶ This marshy place, or swampy country, or land, was eventually drained and filled to become a park with a lake in an all-too-familiar story.

The lost wetlands of Melbourne, including West and South Melbourne swamps, make an intermittent cameo appearance in

municipal histories of the city and its surrounds, such as Charles Daley's *The History of South Melbourne*, first published in 1940.¹⁷ Daley's history eventually segues into an account of their 'reclamation' by 'filling in, levelling, raising [and] draining', thereby 'overcoming swampy conditions'.¹⁸ Without noticing or noting the contradiction, Daley concludes his history on a brighter note by assembling 'Some Early Reminiscences of South Melbourne', including James Barrett's comment that 'Port Melbourne lagoon in the 'sixties was a beautiful sheet of water, clear as crystal'.¹⁹ Barrett's description subscribes to the European landscape aesthetic in which the open water of wetlands is beautiful and attractive.²⁰ By way of contrast, the closed water of the woody wetlands of swamps and the grassy wetlands of marshes is generally represented as ugly and repulsive.

Presland describes the South Melbourne Swamp as early settlers saw it and as it was to become:

The low-lying country around the hill forms a shallow [but large] swamp. This feature will become known as the South Melbourne Swamp and, during the Depression of the 1930s, will be formed into Albert Park Lake ... The marsh will be drained and built over as the area develops until virtually the only reminder of its original state is the Albert Park Lake.²¹

Albert Park and its lake are more famous today for being the centre of the circuit for Formula One racing than for once having been a swamp. The hill referred to by Presland was named Emerald Hill after a jewel, whilst the swamp, here rather prosaically called 'a feature', was first named for a compass point in relation to the city, then renamed after Queen Victoria's consort, Prince Albert.

Of Albert Park Lake, Sophie Cunningham in her recent contribution on Melbourne to a series of books about Australian cities describes how during 'some months the marshlands dotted through it are dry. Dozens of water birds gather here, the most magnificent being the native black swan [with their] snow-white flight feathers contrasting [with] their coal black bodies'.²² These swans are the black and white, yin and yang birds of the black waters of wetlands. Cunningham goes on to explain that: 'This sometimes beautiful, strangely shallow lake is a remnant of the South Swamp, an enormous salt lagoon that formed a part of the delta where the Yarra met the sea'.²³ In Presland's account, the

unrelieved low-lying marshy ground and shallow swamp are contrasted with 'rolling pastures as far as we can see'. This 'undulating country [is] covered with native grasses, not unlike English Downs'.²⁴ This pastoral-looking landscape was, however, the product of Aboriginal fire practices.

West Melbourne Swamp/Batman's Swamp

South Melbourne Swamp was not the only wetland to be accorded the indignity of being named for a mere compass point that placed the city at the centre, and the swamp as peripheral and marginal. West Melbourne Swamp was originally named 'Batman's Swamp.' This name has got nothing to do with the comic book character and superhero of this name but everything to do with John Batman, who is popularly regarded as the founder of Melbourne, but for Miles Lewis, the official historian of the City of Melbourne, Captain John Lancey can 'best claim paternal rights to Melbourne'.²⁵ Lancey was the acting commander of John Fawkner's schooner the *Enterprise*, which sailed from Launceston and landed on the banks of the Yarra River on 30 August 1835. Lancey described Batman's Hill and Batman's Swamp (for him a marsh) in terms of the European landscape aesthetic as having:

a beautiful prospect. A salt lagoon and piece of marsh will make a beautiful meadow and bounded on the south by the river. This hill is composed of a rich, black soil, thinly wooded with honeysuckle and she-oak.²⁶

An open meadow of grass can be both aesthetically pleasing and agriculturally productive (aesthetically pleasing because it is agriculturally productive). Typically, grassy marshes were regarded by first explorers as meadows for grazing cattle and sheep and only later by first settlers as limitations to be eliminated by draining. Thinly wooded rich, black soil indicates both fecundity and the ease of clearing native vegetation.

John Batman, for Lewis 'chose something close to the present site—but further west and mainly on the south bank of the river' as indicated by Batman's map of 1835, whereas the present site is on the north bank. Batman's map also indicates the junction of the Maribyrnong and Yarra Rivers as 'extensive marsh reserved for a public common'.²⁷ This marsh was later to be called 'Batman's, or West Melbourne Swamp.' Batman presumably indicated the marsh and designated it as a public common because, as Lewis comments, of 'its unsuitability for permanent

occupation.²⁸ Yet Batman's preferred site on the south bank was also unsuitable for permanent occupation because it was 'swampy' too and so Lewis argues that 'this indicated the northern bank as the place for settlement,' but east of Batman's Swamp.²⁹

In 1835 John Batman described Batman's Swamp in his journal as:

a large marsh, about one mile and a half wide by three or four miles long, of the richest description of soil—not a tree. When we got on the marsh the quails began to fly, and I think at one time I can safely say I saw 1,000 quails flying at one time—quite a cloud. I never saw anything like it before ... At the upper end of this marsh is a large lagoon. I should think, from the distance I saw, that it was upwards of a mile across, and full of swans, ducks, geese, etc.³⁰

Clouds of birds were a commonplace figuring of their numbers for nineteenth-century explorers and early settlers. These clouds invariably blocked out the sun, blackened the sky and turned day into night. They are indicative of the profusion of life that pre-contact wetlands nurtured.

Along similar lines to Barrett's description of South Melbourne swamp in the 1860s as 'a beautiful sheet of water, clear as crystal,' George Gordon McCrae in 1912 recollected that Batman's or West Melbourne Swamp in the 1840s was at that time 'a beautiful blue lake ... a real lake, intensely blue, nearly oval, and full of the clearest salt water; but this by no means deep.'³¹ For both writers an open body of clear water is beautiful. By contrast, McCrae goes on to relate how in the 1910s 'you may search for it in vain to-day among the mud, scrap-iron, broken bottle, and all sorts of red-rusty railway *débris*—the evidences of an exigent and remorseless modern civilization' that typically and habitually transforms wetland into wasteland. Flannery surprisingly omits this passage and the following one from his anthology, *The Birth of Melbourne*.³² This is especially surprising given his critical comments regarding the transformation of Melbourne into the hypermodern 'Los Angeles of the south.' McCrae goes on to trace mournfully the transition of the wetland from beautiful blue lake, through swamp and 'the stickiest mud that I can remember anywhere,' to 'all dry land now,'³³ the sad and sorry story of the demise of many wetlands in modern cities.

A century after McCrae and citing him in an epigraph, Jenny Sinclair in her account of 'Where Dynon Road Runs Now: The Ghost of Batman's Swamp' shows that nothing much has changed in one hundred years, just the addition of detritus from more recent technology:

There were junkyards piled high with broken stuff, festooned with purple-flowering creepers; there were patches of dried mud infested with old bottles glinting like jewels; maintenance tracks heaped with ute-loads of household rubbish: fridges, pink plastic toys and snarls of ruined fabric.³⁴

She concludes that ‘the land itself was dead – a wasteland.’³⁵ Wetland to wasteland marks the sad and sorry story of the demise of many wetlands in modern cities.

Along similar lines to McCrae, Presland also describes how West Melbourne Swamp was ‘another extensive swamp’ located on the eastern side of Moonee Ponds.³⁶ He goes on to relate how it came ‘to be noted in the early years of settlement of Melbourne for its abundance of water plants and its birdlife’, not surprising for a wetland.³⁷ When Sinclair ‘squints and shades the upper part of my vision ... this could be a calm lagoon on an early misty morning, teeming with life’, as it was for McCrae a century earlier without squinting or shading his eyes.³⁸

Sinclair describes how in 1860 ‘the fate of the swamp was sealed’ when a royal commission enquired into how ‘to get big, modern ships to dock in Melbourne. Dredging the Yarra was considered, but a new channel was cheaper.’³⁹ So that option was taken and it resulted in the construction of Coode Canal and Coode Island. Like McCrae, Lewis relates how:

for many years up until the 1880s West Melbourne Swamp was used as a dumping ground for rubbish collected in Melbourne, [increasing] to a depth of two meters, and with it was dumped raw sewage sludge from street channels and sewage catchpits, making the area very offensive. It had become “a nuisance, injurious to health, and a disgrace to the city” in view of the Low Lands Commission in 1873. The Commission recommended that the land be drained in accordance with a plan proposed by [...the] Chief Engineer of Water Supply, and it is apparently this which was followed.⁴⁰

Yet the city had caused the swamp to become a disgrace to itself; the city had created the nuisance, injurious to health, and the offense to its eyes and nose, to the senses of sight and smell. The swamp had ceased to be a swamp and become a rubbish dump and then subjected to the discipline and drain discourse of the ‘low lands’ commission. The Melbourne Harbour Trust ‘General Plan Shewing [*sic*] Harbour

Improvements' of 1879 shows 'Swampy Land now in course of reclamation.'⁴¹

On his imaginary historical tour of early Melbourne, Presland describes how West Melbourne Swamp 'covers an area of almost two hundred hectares.'⁴² Recently Presland has recalculated this figure and doubled the size of Batman's Swamp at settler contact to 'greater than 1000 acres (404.7 hectares).'⁴³ Presland earlier says that West Melbourne Swamp 'will gradually be reclaimed for industrial use as railway yards. Parts of the original swamp will be visible into the 1930s.'⁴⁴ 'Reclaimed' is the stock-in-trade term and euphemism for triumphalist wetland drainage and filling, as if the water wrongfully claimed the land and the drainers rightfully claimed it back.⁴⁵

With the Yarra River, the city also created a similar nuisance, injurious to health, and offensive to its eyes and nose, to the senses of sight and smell. At the end of the nineteenth century, Garryowen notes the transition from how the Yarra (river or marsh) had:

flowed through low, marshy flats, densely garbed with t-tree, reeds, sedge, and scrub ... The waters were bright and sparkling; ... how different in aspect and aroma from the Yarra of to-day—a fetid, festering sewer, befouled midst the horrors of wool-washing, fellmongering, bone-crushing and other unmentionable abominations!⁴⁶

Whereas the marshes were filled with rubbish and/or drained, or transformed into parks, the open sewer of the river was cleaned up, its industries relocated. Wetlands were not to enjoy the same privilege of remediation or rehabilitation, presumably because they did not provide the same amenity of a transport corridor, unlike a river, but were impediments to transportation and posed limitations to urban expansion and development.

The filling and draining (or 'reclamation') of Batman's Swamp was proposed by Alexander Kennedy Smith in 1859.⁴⁷ Tim Flannery relates how in the 1860s 'Batman's Hill was gouged flat and the refuse used to fill the Blue Lake,' or Batman's Swamp.⁴⁸ Batman's Swamp is now buried beneath Etihad Stadium and Docklands; the former site of Batman's Hill is Southern Cross Station. Here was an early instance of civil engineering cut and fill that cut one geographical feature above the surface in order to fill another subsurface geographical feature—in the process it destroyed both features and wiped the name of 'Batman'

off the map and off the surface of the earth. Even in its absence, ‘the former Batman’s Swamp’ is for Lewis one of the features that defines the relationship of Melbourne to its location:

Melbourne’s “Golden Mile”, the central one by one half mile grid which is the core of the Central Business District, or CBD, is one of the great colonial centres of the 19th century, distinguished by its Victorian architecture, characterised by its regularity of layout and defined by its relationship to the Yarra River ... and the former Batman’s Swamp.⁴⁹

Batman’s Swamp is almost an afterthought. Typically, even archetypally, the colonial centres of Melbourne, Perth, New York, Toronto and other cities were defined by their relationship to their wetlands by establishing the centre adjacent to them and then by draining them.

Lewis goes on to relate that ‘the early removal of Batman’s Hill and the draining of West Melbourne Swamp largely eliminated that topographical limit to the town to the west.’⁵⁰ Wetlands run the gauntlet of being features that define the relationship of the colonial centre to its location and pose a topographic limit to the centre. They then are drained to eliminate that limit, but in their absence they still remain a defining feature of the relationship of the colonial centre to its location—provided of course that one knows that the wetland was present in the first place. The wetland, indeed, was present *as* the first place, of the first people.

Other Swamps

Unlike South and West Melbourne swamps, a swamp in the Doncaster/ Templestowe area was dignified with the Aboriginal name of Bolin Swamp from the local Wurundjeri clan.⁵¹ Remnants of it can be found today, though much of it is now beneath the Trinity Grammar sports grounds. It was being rehabilitated in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but now it is in a degraded state. Local dog owners allow their dogs to roam freely in it scaring off the waterbirds. Marilyn Bowler says that, ‘Bolin Swamp [also] is called Bolin Bolin Billabong ... The word means “lyrebird” as does Bulleen and repetition of a word in Aboriginal place names usually indicates that there were a lot of them.’⁵²

Like South Melbourne Swamp, Bolin Swamp was, in Presland’s words, both both ‘low-lying swampy land’ and as ‘a large marshy area.’⁵³ Like West Melbourne, or Batman’s, Swamp, Bolin Swamp ‘is an important source of eels, fish, water birds and vegetable foods and a

popular camping place for the Aboriginal people.’ A map of 1863 shows the two parts of Bolin Bolin Billabong connected to each other and to the Yarra River.⁵⁴ They look like two internal organs of the human body in an anatomical illustration. They are also organs of the body of the earth. Humans should care for wetlands like they do for their own organs and body. After all, we only have one body and one earth.

In South Yarra also, according to Presland, ‘there are swampy lagoons’ and ‘much of the area between the [Yarra] river and the future location of Dandenong Road is swampy and prone to flooding, and in winter there is often water on the ground.’⁵⁵ This area qualifies as ephemeral, seasonal or temporary wetland. By contrast, ‘in the vicinity of the future suburb of Caulfield there are ... a number of permanent swamps.’ These include Le Mans Swamp, which for Presland:

in later years ... will be reclaimed and become Koornang and Lord Reserves. This is a particularly favoured spot of the Aborigines. The vegetation in the area consists of ti-tree, marsh grasses, sedges and tubers such as *Typha*, which is a favourite vegetable food. There are places where Aborigines catch birds and collect eggs. Most importantly, however, they provide eels and fish.⁵⁶

Just like just West Melbourne Swamp, Le Mans Swamp was a source of sustenance and nurturance for a so-called ‘subsistence’ culture that was in fact a sustainable culture.

The municipal history of Caulfield calls this swamp ‘Leman Swamp’ and relates the history of how, ‘in a somewhat shrunken state, [it] became the Sugar Works Swamp and later the Koornang and Lord Reserves.’⁵⁷ Similarly Paddy’s Swamp and Black Swamp in Caulfield were ‘gazetted as permanent public reserves in 1879’ and Paddy’s Swamp is now Caulfield Park.⁵⁸ From the time of white settlement, these swamps posed the problem of ‘control of the swamps’ and ‘the seemingly eternal question of control over the swamps’ whose ultimate solution, after a brief flirtation with peat extraction, was ‘converting the swamps to public parks.’⁵⁹ The swamps had to be converted to white Christian propriety and Indigenous now-time converted to Christian chronology in the past, present and future.⁶⁰

Presland relates that ‘further south from the Caulfield area ... there is another very large swamp, so large that it will pose problems for the earliest European settlers and their grazing cattle.’⁶¹ This swamp was

unsuitable for cattle grazing because it was too large. Presland goes on to describe how:

This will be known as Carrum Swamp ... Although the area of this swamp is huge and water lies on the surface of the ground all year round, it will often be referred to by settlers as the Little Swamp to distinguish it from an even larger one, the Great Swamp of Koo-wee-rup ... at the top of Westernport Bay [that] will effectively cut off movement by Europeans into Gippsland to the east.⁶²

The Carrum wetlands for Presland were, 'a major hydrological feature of the metropolitan area ... This series of swamps and marshes extended for about fifteen kilometres in length and its widest point, in the north, was eight kilometres across'.⁶³

Like the other Melbourne swamps (south, west, wherever), 'beginning in the 1860s, the Carrum Swamp will be gradually reclaimed by draining and other public works. Some of the area will be used for market gardening,' a typical use for wetlands in close proximity to cities as with Perth in South Perth and Northbridge, 'in an area that was once a rich source of food and materials for Aborigines'.⁶⁴

Melbourne swamps were not only a source of sustenance and home to the Kulin, the local Aboriginal people, in the past but are also home to the Melbourne Cup horse race in the past, present and foreseeable future. Googling 'Melbourne swamps' yielded one result from 2002 that 'in 1840 ... a racecourse was laid out along the swampy banks of the Saltwater River, four miles (6.5km) from the town centre'.⁶⁵ The Saltwater Flat location, as it was also named in keeping with the general flatness of swamps, developed into the Flemington racecourse, the home for one of the richest horse races in the world and no longer the home for one of the richest peoples in the world in the richest of places, the swamp.

Given the rich history of Melbourne wetlands, Cunningham draws the conclusion that 'to make sense of Melbourne, look to its erratic, brackish wetlands; its muddy, beautiful rivers; its sometimes smelly old lagoons and lakes; and the sudden shock of those moments after heavy rain when the city's cup runneth over'.⁶⁶ This is when the Melbourne Cup becomes a sick joke, when Melbourne *is* a cup and when the city's repressed wetlands return with a vengeance. To make sense of Melbourne, of its history and development, look to the draining and filling of its wetlands as Presland does when he argues that 'no feature of

the original landscapes of the Melbourne area has been so deliberately altered as the wetland and drainage patterns.⁶⁷ Perhaps no feature of the original landscapes of the Melbourne area has been so deliberately forgotten as its wetlands if the general lack of commemoration and interpretation in and around Melbourne and *Nearamnew* in particular are anything to go by.

Nearamnew

The lost and found wetlands of Melbourne are absent from Paul Carter's carved sculptural stone pavement installation *Nearamnew* in Federation Square. In the second and final part of this paper I not only critique *Nearamnew* but also propose ways of commemorating and celebrating these wetlands. Despite its ambitions 'to dream place into being' as Emily Potter puts it, *Nearamnew* largely ignores the history of Melbourne as a wetland city.⁶⁸ There is no history of the place of Melbourne as a wetland and no history of the wetlands on the site for Melbourne and so, in Cunningham's terms, it does not make much sense of Melbourne, at least of its wetland history and geography (which Sinclair finds intertwined in Batman's Swamp).⁶⁹ This is so despite Carter referring in *Mythform*, his book about the project, to Presland's book on the Kulin, the local Indigenous people, and acknowledging his account of them (though not their practical use of wetlands and the sustenance it gave them).⁷⁰ As a result, Carter reduces Presland's book to a source about the Kulin people. He does not regard it as an account of the specificities of their place and their practical uses of *Nearamnew*, and so does not consider it to be about the wetlandscape of Melbourne. Place is abstracted into space. This is so despite invoking *Nearamnew* as a name meaning the 'place on which the city of Melbourne is now built.'⁷¹ People are also abstracted into static figures posed against the tableau of the background of Melbourne and not respected as active agents engaged in the practices of everyday life in the wetlands and drylands of Melbourne. People, place, practices and processes should be dreamt, thought and traced together.

Carter goes on to state that 'the precise location of this "place" [on which the city of Melbourne is now built] is unclear.' Presumably the location of *Nearamnew* was not unclear for the local Aboriginal people and certainly the location of Melbourne is not unclear for all to see today. Wherever it was, the location of this place for local Aboriginal people and for early explorers, settlers, founders and chroniclers included

and referred to the wetlands of the area, as we have seen. The wetlands beyond those adjoining the Yarra are absent from Carter's account of the place, both those written in print in *Mythform* and those written in stone in *Nearamnew*. The Yarra is also a questionable name as, according to Garryowen, the Aboriginal name for the river is 'Birr-arrung' whereas 'Yarra Yarra' refers for Garryowen to the falls upstream.⁷² For some, 'yarra yarra' means 'ever-flowing.' Melbourne was founded on the banks of the dubious river Yarra, on the questionable site of *Nearamnew* and on its indubitable adjoining and much more widespread wetlands, but the larger place in which the city was and is now built included many other wetlands absent from Carter's account.

The place of and site for Melbourne is reductively regarded as located benignly and pastorally 'by the banks of the Yarra' as if the rest of the site for Melbourne were a *tabula rasa*, a blank space, for the city to be inscribed on, a *terra nullius*, an empty land, to be filled with a city, rather than a wetland traced with people and stories, and an *aquaterra fullius*, a full wetland.⁷³ Later, as Potter relates repeating and citing Carter, 'the Yarra was banked and its adjoining swamplands were drained.'⁷⁴ The swamplands of early Melbourne were more extensive than those that could be considered to be the Yarra's, or to merely adjoin it as Presland and others have documented and as we have seen above. *Nearamnew* (the place, not the monument) had many other wetlands besides those adjoining the Yarra. Carter goes on to refer to 'inundations intermittently overflowing [the banks of the Yarra presumably] to feed and preserve a network of local creeks, waterholes and billabongs.'⁷⁵ The wetlandscape of early Melbourne was a network of swamplands far more extensive than the Yarra and its tributary creeks, adjacent waterholes and adjoining billabongs.

Acknowledging and including reference to the lost wetlands of Melbourne in *Nearamnew* would have given Carter the ideal opportunity to have more extensively pursued what Potter sees as the basis for his artistic project and to have produced a more productive intersection between language and space than what he propounds as a desideratum in *Road to Botany Bay*.⁷⁶ For Potter, Carter's basis for the project is that, 'both poetically and materially, the ground beneath our feet is never given: it should not be assumed to be permanent and solid.'⁷⁷ If this were the case, why did he ignore the other swamps of Melbourne? Was it because he bought into the triumphalist history of colonialism

that drained wetlands and built cities on them? Is it because he was so concerned with the site by the Yarra for the foundation of the city and for his federalist project that he neglected the rest of the site for the city? Or that he regarded the wetlands as a matter of geography whereas he was concerned with history?

Carter is concerned specifically with what he calls 'spatial history' in which 'the future is invented' and 'travellers and settlers do not so much belong to our past as we belong to their future.'⁷⁸ Yet the future cannot be invented any more than the past can be changed. We can, however, imagine the future and have hope in and for the future by using what Raymond Williams called 'resources for a journey of hope.'⁷⁹ By *not* acknowledging the wetlands of Melbourne and their place in the space, place and history of Melbourne, as well as their role in the local Aboriginal peoples' lives and livelihoods, Carter in *Nearamnew* erases them from the past, present and future in chronology, abstracts them into space, and does not locate them in a particular time, space and place. *Nearamnew* is neo-colonialist as it abstracts place into space. Moreover, it abstracts place from a four-dimensional locale in Einsteinian time/space of energy and matter into three-dimensional mathematised Euclidean space. In this regard it is hardly surprising to learn that *Nearamnew* was designed in conjunction and collaboration with architects. By abstracting wet land place into dry stone, *Nearamnew* drains these wetlands of their significance, of their life and history, just as they were drained in fact of their wetness and dried out. *Nearamnew* is a narrative, nightmare repetition of wetland draining that dreams place out of being. As it subjects place to chronological time colonising past, present and future, *Nearamnew* is neo-colonialist. The monumental inscription in stone of *Nearamnew* represses the traces of the monstrous marsh below and before the city in space and time. *Nearamnew* subscribes to the dominant cultural paradigm of the patriarchal, the monumental, the chronological and the inscription.

The repressed always returns though in jokes, dreams, tropes and slips of the tongue and pen. The repressed wetlands of Melbourne return in this paper, the counter to *Nearamnew*. It dreams a phantasy design for a new surface for Federation Square that will never be built, that traces Melbourne marshes and swamps in temporal geography, the geography of time (past, present and future; the cycle of the seasons; the life and death, energy and matter, of wetlands), and places hope in the future for

wetlands. The temporal geography of Melbourne's repressed wetlands takes place in *kairos*, the now-time of messianic irruption in the present, rather than in *chronos*, the linear time of *Nearamnew* with its selective memory of the past and its triumphalist history. With both temporal geography and spatial history (as Carter puts it in relation to the latter), 'we recover the possibility of another history [and geography I would add], our future'—including wetlands as this paper does, rather than occluding them as *Nearamnew* does.⁸⁰ Hope in the future would amount to a spatially emplaced and embodied history and a temporal geography of the past and present with a future that acknowledges the wetlands of Melbourne in the past and in the present for the future. This paper also proposes an annual performance by an Aboriginal dance company on world wetlands' day (1 February) in Federation Square celebrating the life and commemorating the death of the lost wetlands of Melbourne and their role in sustaining the local Aboriginal people. It avows the alternative cultural paradigm of the matrifocal, monstrous, *kairos* and trace. It refuses the dominant cultural paradigm of the patriarchal, monumental, *chronos* and inscription to which *Nearamnew* subscribes.

History is located in spaces and places; geography is set in time (past, present and future), including the seasonal flowering cycles of wetlands and their wetting and drying seasonal cycles, and participates in a circular sense of time. Spatial history for Carter 'begins and ends in language. It is this which makes it history rather than, say, geography.'⁸¹ Yet geography, literally 'writing the earth,' begins and ends in language too, whether it is the verbal language of the explorer's journal about his journey in time through space between places with his record of his observations of wetlands experienced through the course of his journey, or the visual language of his topographic maps making marks on paper in the scalar grid of latitude and longitude. Time and space come together anyway in longitude as measuring time is the means to measure space cartographically. Temporal geography begins and ends in the language of time, including writing on the seasonal cycle of wetlands and on the succession of their flowering plants through the seasons. Understanding the meanings, metaphors, landscapes and gender politics of wetlands is part of a better understanding of one's place on earth and one's point in time suspended in the present between a past one cannot return to and a future one cannot invent or know but can hope for and have hope in.⁸²

Despite Potter's claim that 'the mythopoeic return of the repressed environment is a key feature of *Neararnnew*', the repressed wetlands of Melbourne are not figured in *Neararnnew* and remain largely repressed in *Mythform*, except (as we have seen) for the brief mention of the Yarra's swamplands.⁸³ The repressed returns literally, though, when its low-lying areas return to the ephemeral wetlands that they once were and some of its streets revert to 'the creeks of the Yarra River'.⁸⁴ For instance, Flinders Street for Garryowen in the mid-nineteenth century was 'a swamp and Collins Street was so slushy and sticky' that pedestrians needed leggings or 'long mud-boots' while 'boggings' of cumbersome horse-drawn vehicles at intersections were commonplace.⁸⁵ So deep was the mud of Melbourne streets that one of the newspapers of the day advertised for one thousand pairs of stilts so that the inhabitants of Melbourne could 'carry on their usual avocations'.⁸⁶ A punt was proposed for Elizabeth Street in winter for 'the transit of goods and passengers'.⁸⁷ This proposal is hardly surprising given that, as Garryowen remarked, in the mid-nineteenth century, 'Elizabeth Street, the outlet between two hills, was a jungly chasm—an irregular broken-up ravine through which the winter flood-waters thundered along over shattered tree-trunks, displaced rocks, roots, and roots'.⁸⁸ By flooding, Elizabeth 'Street' is being true to its history and geography as a creek, as depicted in a famous photograph of 1972.⁸⁹

Wetlands, as Potter points out, are neither permanent nor solid, and 'neither solid nor liquid' as she also points out in cognate terms.⁹⁰ She goes on to give a potted history of wetlands in 'the western ontological tradition' and for its inheritors in non-Indigenous Australia.⁹¹ She concludes in general terms (and not in relation specifically to Melbourne, though she could have) that 'wetlands represented an obstacle' to agricultural (and she might have added urban) development and so were 'methodically drained'. Unknown to Potter at the time of writing is that this is precisely what occurred in Melbourne with its wetlands but it was known to Carter who refers to Presland's book in his chapter on the lost wetlandscape of Melbourne.⁹²

This history of this place could have been acknowledged and included in *Neararnnew*, its lost wetlands celebrated and their loss mourned, rather than their being excluded and *Neararnnew* becoming a monument to a missed opportunity to do so and to a triumphalist history of a (yet another) city draining its wetlands. *Neararnnew* could

have commemorated their role as living places of and for plants and animals, and as sources of sustenance for the local Aboriginal people and nutriment for settlers and city-dwellers to grow their crops and graze their animals. Melbourne needs wetland memorials and several interpretative projects to commemorate this history and to celebrate the role of wetlands in Victorian ecology.

Acknowledgements: I acknowledge the Kulin people as the traditional owners, inhabitants and users of the wetlands and drylands of Melbourne. I am grateful to: Robyn Ryan for pointing out that, unknown to me at the time, Melbourne is a wetland city and for lending to me her copy of Gary Presland's *The Land of the Kulin*; John Ryan for his helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier version; and Janet Bolitho, Nandi Chinna, Andrew Lemon and two reviewers for their helpful advice and suggestions regarding many useful sources.

Notes

- 1 Alan Shaw, 'The Founding of Melbourne,' in Pamela Statham (ed.), *The Origins of Australia's Capital Cities*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, figure 37, p. 201.
- 2 Shaw, figure 38, p. 203; C. B. Gary and Lynsey A. Poore, 'Middle Park—Low Swampy Country,' in *Middle Park: From Swamp to Suburb*, Melbourne, Middle Park History Group, 2014, p. 4.
- 3 Cited by Poore, p. 3.
- 4 Gary Presland, *The Land of the Kulin: Discovering the Lost Landscape and the First People of Port Phillip*, Melbourne, McPhee Gribble, 1985; Gary Presland, *Aboriginal Melbourne: The Lost Land of the Kulin People*, Melbourne, McPhee Gribble, 1994, pp. 16–34.
- 5 Gary Presland, A Boggy Question: Differing Views of Wetlands in 19th Century Melbourne, *Victorian Naturalist*, 131, 4, Aug 2014: 96–105.
- 6 Presland, *Land*, p. 11; *Aboriginal*, pp. 16–17.
- 7 See Rod Giblett, *People and Places of Nature and Culture*, Bristol, Intellect Books, 2011, chapter 4, drawing on the work of Raymond Williams.
- 8 Gary Presland, *The Place for a Village: How Nature Has Shaped the City of Melbourne*, Melbourne, Museum Victoria, 2008, p. 2.
- 9 See Giblett, *People and Places*, chapters 1 and 2.
- 10 K.J. Fairbairn, *Melbourne: An Urban Profile*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1973, p. 3.
- 11 Fairbairn, p. 3.
- 12 Margaret Weidenhofer (ed.), *Garryowen's Melbourne: A Selection from the Chronicles of Early Melbourne, 1835 to 1852, by Garryowen*, Melbourne, Nelson, 1967, p. 6.
- 13 Weidenhofer, p. 6.

- 14 Ellen Clacy, 'A Lady's Visit to the Gold Diggings,' in Dale Spender (ed.), *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Women's Writing*, Melbourne, Penguin, 1988, p. 117.
- 15 Poore, pp.3 and 4; Shaw p.203 has 'low swampy land' on his version of Grimes' map.
- 16 Cited by Charles Daley, *The History of South Melbourne: From the Foundation of Settlement at Port Phillip to the Year 1938*, Melbourne, Robertson & Mullens, 1940, p. 358.
- 17 Daley, pp. 4, 8–9, 19, 30, 33, 36–37, 108, 111, 202, 204.
- 18 Daley, pp. 109, 137, 167, 210, 324.
- 19 Daley, p. 352.
- 20 See Rod Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands: Culture History Ecology*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1996.
- 21 Presland, *Land*, p. 11; see map p. 17; *Aboriginal*, p. 17; see map p. 26.
- 22 Sophie Cunningham, *Melbourne*, Sydney, New South, 2011, pp. 126–7.
- 23 Cunningham, p. 127.
- 24 Presland, *Land*, p. 11; *Aboriginal*, p. 17.
- 25 Miles Lewis, *Melbourne: The City's History and Development*, second edition, Melbourne, City of Melbourne, 1995, p. 17.
- 26 Cited by Lewis, p. 17.
- 27 Lewis, pp. 17 and 143.
- 28 Lewis, p. 25.
- 29 Lewis, p. 25.
- 30 Cited by C.P. Billot, *John Batman: The Story of John Batman and the Founding of Melbourne*, Melbourne, Hyland House, 1979, p. 101.
- 31 George Gordon McCrae, 'Some Recollections of Melbourne in the 'Forties', *Victorian Historical Magazine*, issue 7, 1912, p. 117; Tim Flannery (ed.), *The Birth of Melbourne*, Melbourne, Text, 2002, pp. 8 and 135.
- 32 Flannery, p. 136.
- 33 McCrae, p. 118.
- 34 Jenny Sinclair, *When We Think About Melbourne: The Imagination of a City*, Melbourne, Affirm Press, 2010, p. 68
- 35 Sinclair, p. 70
- 36 Presland, *Land*, p. 12; *Aboriginal*, p. 20.
- 37 Presland, *Land*, p. 12; *Aboriginal*, p. 20.
- 38 Sinclair, p. 71.
- 39 Sinclair, p. 70.
- 40 Lewis, p. 66.
- 41 Brian Carroll, *Melbourne: An Illustrated History*, Melbourne, Lansdowne Press, 1972, p. 59.
- 42 Presland, *Land*, p. 14; *Aboriginal*, p. 20.
- 43 Presland, *Place for a Village*, p. 91.
- 44 Presland, *Land*, p.14; *Aboriginal*, p. 20.
- 45 See Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands; Canadian Wetlands: Places and People*, Bristol, Intellect Books, 2014, p. 52.

- 46 Weidenhofer, p. 37; Flannery, p. 351.
- 47 Alexander Kennedy Smith, 'On the Reclamation and Cultivation of Batman's Swamp', *Transactions of the Philosophical Society of Victoria*, 3, 1859, pp. 9–18.
- 48 Flannery, p. 13.
- 49 Lewis, p. 12.
- 50 Lewis, p. 12.
- 51 Presland, *Place for a Village*, p. 75.
- 52 Marilyn Bowler, email to the author, 24 May 2015.
- 53 Presland, *Land*, p. 18; *Aboriginal*, p. 25.
- 54 Presland, *Place for a Village*, p. 77.
- 55 Presland, *Land*, p. 20; *Aboriginal*, p. 29.
- 56 Presland, *Land*, p. 20; see maps p. 21; *Aboriginal*, p. 30; see maps p. 31.
- 57 Peter R. Murray, and John C. Wells, *From Sand, Swamp and Heath ...: A History of Caulfield*, Melbourne, City of Caulfield, 1980, pp. 3, 6, 7, 9, 78, 194, 195.
- 58 Murray and Wells, pp. 3 and 10.
- 59 Murray and Wells, pp. 6, 8, 9, 194 and 195.
- 60 Now-time (a translation of the German 'Jetztzeit') is a concept developed by Walter Benjamin coming out of traditional Jewish theology and combined with Marxist eschatology to indicate a messianic and revolutionary irruption in the present that blasts open the continuum of history. Benjamin first developed the concept of now-time in the fourteenth thesis of his essay 'On the Concept of History'. See Walter Benjamin, *Selected writings: Volume 4, 1938–1940*, H. Eiland & M. Jennings (eds), (E. Jephcott & others, Trans.). Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 389–400, especially p. 395.
- 61 Presland, *Land*, p. 22; *Aboriginal*, p. 30.
- 62 Presland, *Land*, pp. 21–22; *Aboriginal*, p. 31.
- 63 Presland, *Place for a Village*, pp. 100–01.
- 64 Presland, *Land*, p. 22; *Aboriginal*, p. 32.
- 65 'Swamp became home to Melbourne cup', *Illawarra Mercury*, 4 November 2002. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.ecu.edu.au/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/364305255?accountid=10675>
- 66 Cunningham, p. 127.
- 67 Presland, *Place for a Village*, p. 62.
- 68 Emily Potter, 'Reimagining Place: The Possibilities of Paul Carter's *Nearamnew*' in Emily Potter and Stephen McKenzie (eds), *Fresh Water: New Perspectives on Water in Australia*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 2007, p. 248.
- 69 Sinclair, p. 71.
- 70 Paul Carter, *Mythform: The Making of Nearamnew at Federation Square*, Melbourne, Miegunyah Press of Melbourne University Press, 2005, p. 11; n.2 p. 120.
- 71 Carter, p. 11.
- 72 Weidenhofer, pp. 37 and 38.
- 73 Potter, p. 250.
- 74 Potter, p. 254; Carter, p. 11.

- 75 Carter, p. 11.
- 76 Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- 77 Potter, p. 249.
- 78 Carter, *Road*, p. 294.
- 79 See Rod Giblett, *Landscapes of Culture and Nature*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, chapter 9.
- 80 Carter, *Road*, p. 295.
- 81 Carter, *Road*, p. xxiii.
- 82 See Giblett, *Landscapes of Culture and Nature*, chapter 9.
- 83 Potter, p. 253.
- 84 Potter, p. 254.
- 85 Weidenhofer, p. 44.
- 86 Weidenhofer, p. 45.
- 87 Weidenhofer, p. 45.
- 88 Weidenhofer, p. 6.
- 89 See Presland, *Land*, p. 16; *Aboriginal*, p. 24; *Place for a Village*, p. 228.
- 90 Potter, p. 250.
- 91 See also Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands*.
- 92 Personal communication; Carter, *Mythform*, p. 11 and n. 2, p. 120 where he refers to Presland, *Land*, p. 25.