

THE WINTER ROAD By Kate Holden Black Inc.

Nonfiction 336pp, \$32.99

Kate Holden's *The Winter Road* centres on the murder by gunshot of Glen Turner, a NSW environment officer, in July 2014. Turner's murderer was Ian Turnbull, a 79-year-old farmer based in Croppa Creek, near Moree in northwestern NSW. The two men had a history: Turner had reported Turnbull several times for clearing his land illegally, destroying protected flora and fauna in the process, and Turnbull had grown increasingly obsessed with what he regarded as the compliance officer's "vendetta" against him and his family.

In prose as rich as the landscape it describes, Holden's book digs down into this history, and sets it within the broader story of modern Australia's relationship with the land. As Holden suggests, that relationship is governed not by the ideas of Rousseauian Romanticism but by the ideas of classical liberalism. A century before the First Fleet made landfall, the English philosopher John Locke had set out a very different view of the origins of private property, outlining a logic of ownership in which those who "mix" their labour with the land exert moral claim to it. Nature was a "negative commons" in which individuals could claim a share, transforming it into property that could then be used to generate wealth and improve the lot of the "common stock".

"By the time of Australia's settling," writes Holden, "the ineluctable mark of a British citizen was land ownership. It enfranchised him, gave him rights, offered access to authority: he could complain, have restitution, be compensated." Contra Rousseau, the land belonged to those enterprising enough to make it theirs.

In Holden's telling, as in many others, it was the combination of this view of the land with the doctrine of *terra nullius* that served as the justification for Australian colonisation, while also providing the white settlers with the "mythos" they needed to justify it to themselves.

As Australia entered its nation-building stage in the early twentieth century, the idea of "settler heroism" began to shape Australian historiography. A notion of the ideal Australian "character" emerged – one stressing the resourceful and resilient nature of those who worked the land, while downplaying the extent to which the state supported, and continues to support their endeavours.

For Holden, this ideal type is found throughout Australian culture, in Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* (1955) and Robert Hughes's *The Fatal Shore* (1986), in the songs of Slim Dusty and the wardrobe of Barnaby Joyce. But it's also found in a "morbid fixation" on how hard the Australian farmer has to work, and it was this fixation that Ian Turnbull was channelling when he raised the barrel of his .22 rifle to his eye and shot Glen Turner through the heart.

Though Holden is alive to the ugliness of this mindset, and especially to the way its associated

resentments come to focus on Aboriginal Australians, she is a nuanced enough thinker to recognise its importance to many of the “tough, traumatised” settlers to have been driven from their land in the devastating “clearances” in Scotland and the “enclosures” of the commons in England. And she recognises too the disorientating way in which environmental legislation has “flipped” in recent times from an emphasis on pest-control, the clearing of trees and the raising of fences, to an emphasis on the preservation of native ecologies.

Indeed, she goes further and suggests that the Romantic view with which she is broadly in sympathy carries with it another first-world fantasy – of the uninhabited “virgin” wilderness in which the “natural man” was wont to roam, unencumbered by thoughts of agriculture. As she suggests, it was this myth, among others, at which **Bruce Pascoe** took aim in *Dark Emu* (2014), and which is rejected in a number of recent books on the potential for new forms of “regenerative farming” as an alternative to modern industrial agriculture. The pages on this are fascinating.

Holden is an excellent writer and weaves these different elements together beautifully in *The Winter Road*, moving from the Turner-Turnbull story to its historical and philosophical context with intelligence and panache. Her metaphors seem to emerge fully formed from the rich land at the centre of the tragedy.

“(W)heat,” she writes, “with its biblical associations, its satiny fields, its satisfying ceremony of sewing, harvesting, threshing and milling, its European heritage and even its blondness, fitted wonderfully into the racist, nationalist, agrarian culture of White Australia on the eve of Federation.” Of the “ravines between farmer and farmer”, she writes: Political ideology loves the craggy landscape of extreme postures: coast-dwellers against countryfolk, greenies against blacksoil battlers.

The contours of difference between farmers are as important as that between clay soil with eucalypts and black soil with brigalow. Some farmers cleave to the old ways. Some are exasperated by them.

Above all, *The Winter Road* is an implicit rebuke to the classical liberalism at the heart of societies such as our own. For while that liberalism conceives of human beings as autonomous, essentially rational actors who make their own way in the world, Holden reminds us that we are no such thing – that we are inseparable from our history, and that the sins of the present are intimately related to moral ecologies established centuries ago. Nothing in the story she tells was predictable. But in teasing out its historical elements, Holden has given it the texture of tragedy, while also recalling us to the tragic elements within Australia’s history.

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Richard King, 'A shot rings out on ancient land', *Weekend Australian, The* (online), 15 May 2021 18
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