

DISCOVERING HANCOCK

The journey to Monaro

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Neither word of this essay's title is so simple as it seems. Let us look first at the second word.¹

Hancock

Professor Sir Keith Hancock (1898-1988), arguably Australia's most eminent twentieth-century historian and a legendary trawler of documentary archives, often claimed that he had destroyed all his private letters.² Although he did not and could not do so, all who write about him are firmly in the grip of a master of history who carefully shaped his archival legacy and published persona. In discovering Hancock, one engages not only with his oeuvre but also with Hancock's own evolving characterisation of that oeuvre. The stories one tells about him are often the stories he fashioned himself. The subject is frighteningly self-conscious.

Discovering

'Discovering' was part of the Hancock lexicon of moral, scholarly engagement. It comes between 'craft' and 'witness' and 'attachment' and 'justice'. He used it in the title of

Discovering Monaro (1972); he meditated on its meaning as I am now doing (in respectful imitation); and he considered himself a discoverer. Discovery, he wrote, 'is not a once-for-all achievement, but rather is a continuing effort, whose end - if ever there is an end - still lies far beyond sight'.³ It is a process that connects the historian not only to the past - but also to the future.

Hancock's famous tension between country and calling is generally and correctly construed as one between birthplace and career, origins and opportunity, Australia and England, home and 'Home'. In that sense it is peculiarly colonial and specifically Australian. It can also be seen to represent the poles of rural and urban existence, one (literally 'the country') evoking his upbringing and preferred habitat, and the other denoting the regulated, built environment of the professional. But his eloquent opposition of country and calling is also, I believe, expressive of a universal scholarly tension between emotion and intellect, practice and theory, poetry and science that underpins all his work. 'Country' was not just Australia or even Gippsland in the Aboriginal sense of 'country'; it was also childhood, innocence, earth and experience - the organic past. And 'calling' was not just career and overseas opportunity, but also the impersonal discipline of profession, argument and abstraction - the idealist present. Hancock continually searched for a rapprochement between these two worlds of practice as he did between his two soils. He expressed it in his notion of history as a craft, his profession as a guild, his sources as 'witnesses', his brief as 'taking sides', 'thinking and doing', 'inquiry and narration', and his enthusiastic approval of conducting history 'with boots on'. His two categories of 'discoverers' in *Monaro* illustrated the dichotomy: they were 'the observers' and 'the practical men', and Hancock endeavoured to place himself in both lineages. His key words and phrases aimed to reconcile the competing ideological demands of this version of 'country' and 'calling' just as his peripatetic career knitted anxiously across geographical tensions.

So one must give equal weight, as Hancock did, to both words in the title of *Discovering Monaro*. The book is as much about how and why he delves into that region as it is about what he finds there. In this essay, I trace some of the emotional origins of Hancock's environmental history, trying to see it as a projection of his career and sensibility. In his discovery of Monaro he returned to source, emotional and geographical, and this essay does the same by unpacking three scenes which recede in time - Australia in the 1960s, England in the 1940s, and Italy in the 1920s - seeking in each the seeds of *Monaro*.

AUSTRALIA

It is a balmy day in the summer of 1966. Two men are setting off from Canberra for a day's fishing in Monaro. They are both historians, one Sir Keith Hancock, recently retired Professor of History in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University, and the other Dr Robin Gollan, a Senior Fellow in the same institution and a distinguished scholar of radical and labour movements in Australia. They choose a bank of the Gudgenby River and cast their lines. At first they have little luck. But towards midday, after Hancock makes 'a perfunctory cast on to the rippled surface of a wide ford', a big trout rises and takes him by surprise. Hancock misses him. 'Never mind', he says, 'let's have lunch'. As they eat and smoke their pipes, the two talk about Hancock's next research project. He is less than a year away from finishing the second volume of his biography of the South African leader Jan Christiaan Smuts, a task that has occupied him for fifteen years. What is to be his next task, his next question? (Hancock always asked students and colleagues 'And what is your question?'⁴) The acclaimed author of *Australia* (1930) wants to write again about his own country, but this time with more 'news than views', and his question is: 'How, for good or for ill, have Australians used the land on which they live?'

But such a sweeping inquiry needs a precise and exhaustive focus, a specific region of study. Over lunch Bob Gollan, gesturing to the river and the blue Brindabellas, says: 'you love this country, why don't you write about it?' They tidy the camp and Hancock makes a careful cast into the ripples. The big trout plays with his ambitions and rises again. This time he nets him - and is netted by him. 'In that moment', recalled Hancock, 'Monaro became my quest'. Hancock caught four fish that day, but the lunch with Gollan was as persuasive as the trout.⁵

In 1940, Hancock's biographical subject Smuts, in his seventieth year, was still regularly climbing Cape Town's Table Mountain at a cracking pace.⁶ Twenty-eight years later, Hancock celebrated his seventieth birthday by walking with friends, including Gollan, for several days in the Australian Alps, rucksacks on their backs.⁷ Hancock and Smuts both loved climbing summits; both defended and curated their local mountains. The biographer would have relished this personal play with history just as he relished bringing together the physical and intellectual challenges of his quest, uniting country and calling in both senses.

The Monaro (pronounced Mon-air-oh) was Hancock's 'particular place'. It backed onto his childhood home of Gippsland. In *Country and Calling* (1954), he had celebrated that rural upbringing and comforted himself in his mature years with the thought that, from a block of land he bought in 1948 on the north-eastern slopes of the Dandenongs, he could follow mountain ridges all the way to Croajingalong.⁸ Monaro had a similar geographical relationship to Gippsland. In the making of *Discovering Monaro*, Hancock acknowledged 'the Gippsland springboard'; his journey to Monaro, which took him via England and Italy, began in Croajingalong.⁹ The squatters he studied in the book went the other way - for Gippsland was partly colonised from the Monaro - but they, too, saw these regions as two sides of the same range.

The Monaro was also Canberra's hinterland. It is one of the legacies of the placement of the national capital that scientists and scholars have, since the war, swarmed into the high country. In the alps, as in Burley Griffin's Canberra, systematic, intellectual ways of knowing have preceded, paralleled and often prompted emotional attachment. Hancock was ambivalent about Canberra. In 1930 he wrote: 'there is something very attractive about garden cities; but it is difficult to pretend that they are nobler than Pericles' Athens.'¹⁰ In 1948, on a brief return to the city, he confessed: 'Canberra, now that I saw it again, both irritated and charmed me, as it had always done.'¹¹ If, as Geoffrey Bolton and Libby Robin argue elsewhere in this issue, the Wool Seminar was Hancock's way of 're-discovering Australia', then studying Monaro was his way of intellectually deepening an uneasy attachment to Canberra.

Keith Hancock's *Discovering Monaro* is widely regarded as one of the foundation texts of Australian environmental history. How might we place it in the context of other scholarship before and since? Looking back from the 1990s, what lineages of literature and enquiry might we find for this book? Hancock himself had an interest in environmental matters and an enthusiasm for biological metaphors that preceded the publication of *Discovering Monaro* by up to half a century.¹²

But, in the early 1970s, Hancock's book became identified as a pioneer of a 'new field'. Although historical fashion had finally caught up with him, the geographers were still well ahead. It is reasonable to wonder why Hancock did not do more to draw attention to the work of researchers in a neighbouring discipline who were exploring the same themes at the same time and considerably earlier. He certainly must have known of the regional historical geographies of F H ('Slim') Bauer, or of Les Heathcote on western New South Wales in his book *Back of Bourke*, published in 1963, work undertaken in Hancock's own research school. And what of Donald Meinig's analysis of South Australia's wheat belt,

Hancock's earlier hinterland, in the book *From the Margins of the Good Earth* (1962)? When Hancock was in Adelaide in the early 1930s he had witnessed a flight of farmers from ruined land to the north of Goyder's Line, Meinig's study area. Did Hancock know of J M Powell's study of *The Public Lands of Australia Felix*, published a couple of years before his own land-use study? These oversights are surprising considering Hancock's own championing of interdisciplinary endeavour, although it was always his style to find his originality in the primary sources. However, they reveal the extent to which *Discovering Monaro* was the swansong of a distinguished and retired scholar rounding out his own life and oeuvre rather than an academic carefully positioning himself in the literature.¹³ And it is worth remembering that Australian historians generally took a long time to learn from their colleagues in geography.¹⁴

Why, then, has *Discovering Monaro* earned itself a reputation as a pioneering environmental history? I think that, above all, it is because Hancock was a doyen of his discipline, a highly respected professor and academic leader, at ease in recording and interpreting world affairs, and in his retirement he turns to ... what? To that most antiquarian of pursuits, to that marginal and often-disdained academic endeavour, local history. The book is consciously, proudly 'parochial' - Hancock used the term positively. He enjoyed the thought that after a lifetime of working in imperial and Commonwealth history he was embarking on the intellectual equivalent of the classic retirement occupation, that of cultivating his own backyard.¹⁵ He wished to enrich Monaro's life and pastures with 'a good historical tilth'.¹⁶ The book is suffused by a certain bravado. It could still be daring for young historians to do postgraduate work in local or regional history in the 1950s and 60s. Hancock helped redeem and dignify it as a proper subject for professionals.

Further, Hancock always wrote self-consciously as an historian, continually reflecting on the skills and orientation of his own 'craft'.¹⁷ Although he championed cross-disciplinary

enquiry, it was to historians and students of history that he ultimately spoke. His book was certainly not the first to offer a fine-grained regional analysis of land use and appraisal, but it probably *was* the first undertaken by a senior academic historian, the first to be so artfully grafted onto the traditions of professional historical inquiry.

But if one were to choose the most pathbreaking environmental history of the 1970s and early 80s, you might turn as well to J M Powell's *Environmental Management in Australia* (1976), or Eric Rolls' *They All Ran Wild* (1969), or - especially in terms of regional history - Eric Rolls' masterpiece, *A Million Wild Acres* (1981), an environmental and human history of the Pillaga Scrub in northern New South Wales. Organic rather than schematic, *A Million Wild Acres* revealed the story-telling power of an ecological sensibility, reached the heights of great literature with its laconic and vernacular style, and - in Les Murray's words - burnt off derivative or imported forms of ecological consciousness.¹⁸ Although, by contrast, *Discovering Monaro* focused conventionally on 'land-use', it also anticipated the cooperative alliance of historians and ecologists that has flowered most notably in the 'forest history' of the 1980s and 90s.¹⁹

Another pioneer of the new environmental history was George Seddon, a connoisseur of landscape, whose book *A Sense of Place* (published in the same year as *Discovering Monaro*) was concerned not just with the physical patterns of the Swan River coastal plain but also with the imaginative apprehension of the land, bringing together science, history and aesthetics. More recently, in *Searching for the Snowy* (1994), Seddon has worried eloquently about how to write 'an environmental history' of a river and its catchment. Seddon and the Snowy, Hancock and the Monaro, Rolls and the Pillaga: here we can discern a strengthening lineage of regional history with a moral and environmental edge to it.²⁰

The rise of environmental politics since the late 1960s directly stimulated historical scholarship, and gave the new environmental history an occasionally apocalyptic and moralistic tone. Ecology and history were brought closer together by environmental politics. Hancock consciously placed *Discovering Monaro* in this new political and scientific context through his explicit engagement with the insights of ecologists and also his twin invocation of the local and the global, a dialectic that bypassed nationalism, the central concern of Hancock's history. Whereas Hancock, in this book, declined to place his scholarship in an Australian geographical or historical tradition, he readily linked the Monaro with the emerging international politics of environmentalism. Manning Clark, writing in the *Bulletin* considered it 'the first significant look at our past through what might be called the "pollution and ecology window"'.²¹ The geographer Oskar Spate observed: 'This is a story with a moral, or any number of morals; one is tempted to think that the whole book is designed just to lead up to a restrained but eloquent conservationist polemic'.²² *Discovering Monaro* is an extended historical and philosophical parable about 'man and nature', informed not only by global environmental politics but also by the Bible, for it was in retirement that Hancock renewed his study of biblical and early church history. It is no surprise, then, that Hancock's model for the writing of *Monaro* was not a fellow academic but a judge, Leonard Stretton, Royal Commissioner into the Black Friday bushfires (1939) and Forest Grazing (1946), a man who called witnesses, who projected a powerful moral vision, and who wielded biblical language in the service of public policy.²³ And one of the heroes of *Monaro* is the forester Baldur Byles, who got down on his hands and knees in the alps and examined the evidence of soil erosion, who strenuously advocated the protection of the water catchments, and whose practical management philosophy drew on both the arts and the sciences. Hancock likened Byles to the botanist Maisie Fawcett and the lawyer, Judge Stretton, because all three shared a practical wisdom, a bureaucratic fearlessness and a commitment to applied ecology which he admired and hoped to emulate in his work on the Monaro.²⁴

Another lineage we might sketch would be to say that Hancock's book of the 1970s, written by a repatriated professor with European longings, is still caught - in some ways - in the ebbing tide of 'the cultural cringe'. Eric Rolls' book of the 1980s, written by a farmer about his own land, is by comparison home-grown, almost unconsciously indigenous. And, to take an example from the 1990s, Tim Flannery's *The Future Eaters* (1994), an influential ecological history written by a zoologist and offering a provocative Australian history of the world, could be characterised as 'the cultural strut'. Historian, farmer, zoologist; Europe, Australia, the world: here is an interesting essay in the changing relationships of country and calling, of nature and nation.

Let me turn now to analyse Hancock's European longings, for they suggest other ways that we might place his achievement and explain his enduring impact. I'll return, as Hancock continually did in his imagination and emotions, to Tuscany. But we go there, again as Hancock did, via England.

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ENGLAND

It is a sunny day in the spring of 1949. The Vice-Chancellor of the newly-established Australian National University, Douglas Copland, has just arrived in London from Canberra and is sitting with another man on a bench in Saint James's Park. The man is Keith Hancock, Gippsland boy, author of *Australia* (1930), and Professor of Economic History at Oxford University. Hancock is also a member of the Academic Advisory

Committee of the new Australian National University and has been invited to take up the position of foundation Director of the Research School of Social Sciences in Canberra. He has lived in Britain for fifteen years and longs to return to Australia; in fact, he has already given preliminary notice of his intention to resign his Oxford Chair. The Vice-Chancellor opens the talk on the park bench, and Hancock responds. In his autobiography, Hancock recalls: `Within ten minutes everything is finished between the Australian National University and me.'²⁵ He is plunged into great and prolonged misery. Postwar England shadows and engulfs him and his separation from Australia appears absolute and irrevocable.

It is an enigmatic moment in Australian university politics, and an iconic one for a man who made his anguished love for his country the central relationship of his life. It is the most cryptic passage in Hancock's autobiography *Country and Calling* (1954), and the park bench attracted the attention of his reviewers who became fascinated by his `mysterious' silence on this exchange. `Friction" Costs Us Historian', `Canberra Lost a Brilliant Brain' and `No Job Here For This Historian' were amongst the headlines greeting the publication of his autobiography.²⁶ What transpired during those minutes on the park bench in Saint James's Park and what do they say about Hancock's love for Australian soil and his later scholarly study of it?

Reading *Country and Calling* in draft, in the Library of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, where he wrote it, impresses one with the easy fluency of Hancock's writing.²⁷ The sequence and flow of the published book are already there; the notebooks are ordered and numbered; so are most of the pages. The corrections that Hancock makes are largely to expression and tone, rarely to the order of argument or narrative. He uses pencil but rarely rubs it out. The only significant deletions occur in his elucidation of the park bench scene. This section was part of the final chapter of the book and relates to his

account of his disagreement with the ANU. Here there is an unusual number of false starts, large slabs of the handwritten version have been eliminated from the published text, and some pages have been removed. His discomfort is clear, and he confesses as such in the book, saying: 'In an earlier draft of this chapter I did try to make those explanations but found myself unable to make them adequately because I knew only one side of the story.'²⁸ Well, here is that draft.²⁹

The issue of friction that Hancock would not mention in his book was 'academic recruitment'. Two and a half years earlier, Hancock, Sir Howard Florey, Professor Marcus Oliphant and Professor Raymond Firth had been invited by the Interim Council of the University to constitute themselves as an Academic Advisory Committee; 'each one [in Hancock's words] ... was the potential director of a School'. There were two meetings of the four advisors with the Interim Councillors in Canberra in 1948. In Hancock's view, the first had gone well, but the second - at which the newly appointed Vice-Chancellor, Copland, was present - not so well. The Interim Council was in a hurry to appoint professors, but Hancock would 'not be slapdash' in seeking his colleagues. '[S]ome influential members of the Interim Council seemed to have very flexible views of academic quality', he wrote. In March 1948, after his eight-day journey from Britain on a Sunderland flying boat to attend these meetings, Hancock perhaps had a greater sense of the isolation of Canberra than did Council members, and, together with his own ambiguous feelings about the city and even about the 'novel' experiment that was the ANU, a stronger insight into the difficulties of attracting people to the invented capital.³⁰ 'Write some time and tell me whether the dice are loaded against the research school of social studies at Canberra', he wrote to his Melbourne friend and former Adelaide student, Colin Badger, in 1947. 'Can you pursue social studies creatively in such a limited society?'³¹ Hancock was also acutely aware of the national university's obligation to supply 'a new creative impulse' and fulfil a

truly national mission in order to meet the expectations and soothe the sensitivities of 'the State universities' (a term still current in Canberra).³²

Soon after returning to England from this trip, Hancock received a formal invitation to become Director of the School of Social Sciences, the acceptance of which he postponed, pending the appointment of electoral boards and the securing of two professors to support him. Of the list of 'about a dozen men' drawn up as appointable desirables for the chair in economics - in spite of being approached personally and often in person - none was willing to accompany Hancock to Canberra. His first two attempts at filling the chair of political science met with the same disappointment. His protracted and unsuccessful search for these two professors was causing 'anxiety and impatience' in Australia, as no doubt was his own delay in accepting the Director's position.³³ The Vice Chancellor was due to arrive soon in London, and Hancock was expected to give 'a clear answer then'.

An unexpected event galvanised Hancock into positive action. Raymond Firth wrote to him with a copy of the letter he had sent to the Vice Chancellor regretfully but definitely declining the invitation he had received to head the School of Pacific Studies, and resigning from the Academic Advisory Committee.³⁴ Firth also informed Hancock that there was no alternative director in sight. Hancock already held misgivings about the overlap between the two humanities schools, and so he immediately proposed that he head them both for an initial period. He also claimed that, on this basis, he had instantly secured three willing professors, one for the Social Sciences and two for Pacific Studies. He felt exhilarated. It was at this point that he gave verbal notice of his intention to resign his Oxford Chair.

He was therefore 'a bit taken aback' when the Interim Council declined to accept his proposal, especially when he was also able to secure Firth's support for it. He felt that as an

Academic Advisor, he had duly delivered his advice, and as an invited Director of a School he had acted in the best interests of that School and its close partner.

The talk on the London park bench, whether it lasted 'ten minutes' or 'four hours' (which was Copland's estimate - the meeting may have continued elsewhere that day), settled the matter.³⁵ Hancock had waited a long time for the meeting, the Vice Chancellor had flown far, but the outdoor discussion was decisive. According to Hancock's unpublished account, Copland told him that 'the Interim Council would still feel very happy if [he] could accept its invitation to direct the School of Social Sciences: that it saw no real difficulty in filling the chairs: that it could not under any circumstances accept [his] offer to start the two Schools together'. 'So that was that', concluded Hancock. He was 'no longer ready to give advice on the principle of limited liability.' There were things he thought he might have said in reply -for instance, that he had been asked for general academic advice and had duly delivered it, and that he had some right to be told the reasons why such advice could not be accepted - but he found himself 'unable to say it'. Why did he not seek more information? Why did he not pursue a compromise? 'I had no false dignity to hold me back but somehow I lacked the spirit.' This was his puzzlement and regret. His misery was great. Why had his homesickness been insufficient to draw him through this difficulty, why had politics and pride overwhelmed his emotional geography? Was he 'only half-Australian', as Nettie Palmer had judged?³⁶ His compass was spinning. He felt now that he 'had no roots anywhere at all'. Neither country nor calling seemed to have triumphed in this messy negotiation.

Why does this moment interest me, and how does it relate to Monaro? It encapsulates a number of pressures and tensions. At the heart of it was Hancock's uncertainty about his 'country'. He had left Australia fifteen years before and, although he yearned for it in many ways, going home was a leap into the unknown. Then there was Canberra, a place

Hancock would learn to love, a place he would contrive to possess - through his contribution to the ANU, his discovery of Monaro and his fight for Black Mountain - but about which he had always held profound doubts. ' - And the place?' he had questioned Badger. 'Is it possible to get service? Is there any conversation?'³⁷ Restless in Adelaide and Birmingham, Hancock liked camping in the bush or dining with heads of government, but could not see any merit in provincial society.³⁸

Then there was the question of trust. As an administrator, Hancock believed in 'getting the right men' and then letting them have their heads. And, being unquestionably a 'right man' himself, he expected the same autonomy. He was, after all, a man who could have accepted a position as a Vice Chancellor years before having power held over him by a man who had only just become one. And then there was personality. Copland and Hancock clearly didn't get on; they couldn't do business.³⁹ And then there was Theaden, Hancock's wife. Suffering from exhaustion and depression, anxious about another move, and apt to speak frankly even to Vice Chancellors: 'What sort of life would it be for [her]?', Hancock anguished. And how would she fare in a frontier, academic society?⁴⁰

Then there were 'the Social Sciences', a term and a concept with which Hancock was uncomfortable (he preferred 'social studies'). The university proposed four postgraduate institutes or schools of scientific research. 'It would have no Greek', commented Hancock. And a 'university that was all post-graduate Science (and the adjective 'social' would be only a partial mitigation) seemed to be hardly a *universitas*.'⁴¹ Hancock was uneasy with the 'fashionable junk' that was the 'social sciences': 'although I have had much traffic with social scientists of one tribe or another,' he wrote, 'I am, as I have already explained at some length, an historian belonging to none of the tribes.'⁴² He was scathing about 'the pretentious mumbo jumbo that was called sociology' and he was dismissive of the uses of psychology for historians.⁴³ Hancock sometimes considered himself a frustrated 'artist' or

`poet', `compelled [by career] against his bent in the direction of science'.⁴⁴ That is not to say that he did not value scientific techniques in the humanities; there was a strong element of positivism in his thinking. He was an economic historian after all and, as Michael Roe recently reflected, `WKH liked *spine* almost as much as *span*.'⁴⁵ But his preferred science was natural rather than social. If he was going to work with the sciences, then it would be with the more prestigious natural and physical ones rather than with the territorially competitive social ones. Working with natural scientists enabled the historian to `belong to none of the tribes', to place his discipline at the centre of the arts and humanities, reaching cooperatively across C P Snow's `two cultures'. Many of the interdisciplinary endeavours he later initiated at the Research School did just this - the Wool Seminar, the Murray Waters Study, the Botany Bay Project, and one must add Monaro - and they (like Monaro) drew on Canberra's strength as a community unusually rich in the scientific elite.⁴⁶ These were strategic scientific alliances with which Hancock was intellectually comfortable, and with which he could maintain History's dominance in the face of the burgeoning social sciences. And so one also suspects that, sitting on the park bench, he was happier to start the two schools together because the Research School of Pacific Studies would have provided him with a ballast of empirical, regional responsibilities to balance the more abstract and potentially threatening social sciences.

Country and Calling has been called `the longest job application in history', and consulting the draft confirms that impression.⁴⁷ Hancock was very conscious of his distant Australian audience, beginning his manuscript with an injunction to `Remember the Audience' and heading the list with Vance and Nettie Palmer. He wrote at a time when Canberra, although lost, still beckoned. It is hard not to see the book as driven by regret at that missed opportunity, that failure to realise an imagined destiny. But it is deeper than that, for *Country and Calling* is about a greater loss: it is a lament for a lost Australia, for childhood, innocence, uncomplicated virtue; a feeling that he has paid the price, finally, for

absence. 'Mediterranean latitudes, not English ones, are the ones for me ...', Hancock wrote. 'How can a man feel at home in latitudes so murky that he is unable to admire his own halo?'⁴⁸ He may have considered calling the book 'Once an Australian' - it is scratched in one of the notebooks beside 'Country and Calling' on a play-page of jottings - and it is a title, intriguingly, that Ian Britain has recently given his portrait of four Australian expatriates, Barry Humphries, Clive James, Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes.⁴⁹ The implied ending, '...Always an Australian', confirms this sense of Hancock's fatal view of nationality as destiny.

In *Country and Calling*, Hancock wanted to excuse the apparent carelessness with which he let Canberra slip, yet not to burn any bridges. In the end, he uncharacteristically wasted his words. The deleted passages are, at times, too self-justificatory, and Hancock, a master of tone, knew he was protesting too much. They were more severe than the published version on the Interim Council of the University and the Vice-Chancellor. That, too, he knew might be unwise. But they also reveal that he was not a victim of politics or circumstance or distance, but of his own pride and, more fundamentally, of vacillation about 'country' and specifically about Canberra. When he did finally come, eight years later, he was determined to make amends for his private betrayal of country, and looking to make an intellectual investment not just in Australia but in the high country.

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ITALY

It is a blazing hot day in the summer of 1923. Two young men in shirts, shorts, sandals and broad peasant hats are on a walking tour - a three weeks' pilgrimage - in Tuscany, winding their way two or three hundred miles southeast from Florence to Assisi and beyond. They sleep in haystacks, olive groves and humble beds. They are both Commonwealth men, one from Australia and one from Canada - Keith Hancock and Reid McCallum - both carrying books in their packs. Their rural idyll is darkened by their encounters with a bullying xenophobia amongst the citizens of the newly ascendant Mussolini. Hancock is compelled to question the origins of fascism, and the historical relations between liberalism and nationalism - in this, his favourite landscape.⁵⁰

Hancock's Tuscan interlude resonates throughout his life, not just in an abiding love of Italy and Europe, and in his sustained professional scrutiny of nationalism, but also in a reverence for the worked landscape, one etched and shaped by the rhythms of labour and self-sufficiency. And his Tuscan experience also informed that famous 'lust for life', the scholarly expression of which was his commitment to the archive of the feet, to the practical inspiration and tutorship of crisp air, good talk and dirty boots. So, as we know, Hancock enthusiastically promulgated the injunction - which he attributed to Tawney - that good historians need strong boots, and he tells the story that Monaro people identified him so closely with that phrase that later, when he was a guest of honour at a dinner at Cooma, the flowers on the dining tables were all cunningly inserted into boots of all sizes and types.⁵¹

So he is also discovering, or re-discovering, the youthful exuberance that he first celebrated in Tuscany. After forty and more years of being driven by large, unwieldy public projects, including prolonged war-time wrestling with 'a brute documentary mass'⁵², Hancock in his retirement finds again the freedom to choose his subject, and the exhilaration of seeking his scholarly inspiration out-of-doors. As well as fieldwork, interviews, and serious use of the

historian's recommended strong boots, he employs that other important tool of the mountain historian, the fly fishing tackle. His is a conscious and contrastive courtship with country: 'I imagine', he confessed at the beginning of his Monaro study, 'it will take a good deal of patience over a good many years to feel at home with grasses and bushes.'⁵³

And Hancock is not only discovering Monaro and re-discovering his youthful, outdoor self, or at least its sources of energy and exuberance; he is also discovering Italy in Australia, and thereby seeking again to reconcile his lifelong tension. 'In Monaro', he declared, 'I have rediscovered the Tuscan rhythm.'⁵⁴ Here is Hancock's account of a dinner on a property near Cooma:

At the dinner table that evening there were about a dozen people, all of them deeply rooted in the land yet well acquainted with the wider world of men and books. They encouraged me to talk history; two or three of them invited me to go fishing with them; one of them, an Olympic ski-runner, insisted that I was not yet too old to put on skis again and join him on a *langlauf*. The talk was spacious, like the landscape; crisp like the air. I told my friends when I returned home that I had been in Tuscany.⁵⁵

Historian Ros Pesman has drawn suggestive parallels with David Malouf, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, David Martin and Peter Porter, and sees Hancock's sentiments as part of the longing of an immigrant people for a harmony in their land with which they can identify, one that they can claim.⁵⁶ In 1970s Australia, a scholar like Hancock, whilst awakening to the ancient Aboriginal presence and influence, looked for that harmony in European echoes in the south-eastern corner of settled, pastoral Australia. In the 1990s, a scholar is more likely to seek that harmony in the continuing indigenous land-use traditions of the centre and the north.

In searching for Tuscany in Australia, Hancock was also searching for an Australian peasantry. Hence his admiration for those he met in Monaro who were, as he put it, 'deeply rooted in the land'. He was renewing his long term economic interest in peasant agriculture; amongst the historians he most admired were Marc Bloch and R H Tawney. His first book *Ricasoli and the Risorgimento in Tuscany* (1926) was dedicated to Antonio Cecconi, 'a peasant in a remote corner of Tuscany'. His imagery of Tuscany was often lyrical and romantic: '... the Old Testament pot ... hangs over every peasant's fireplace', he wrote. 'One may find young girls of sixteen singing with the sheep like the shepherdesses of the *Eclogues*.' 'Lovers of Virgil', he continued, 'are surprised and excited when they discover Tuscan peasants using that same wooden plough which is described in one of the more difficult passages of the *Georgics*.'⁵⁷ And so on. And in Monaro - another landscape where soil was a precious resource - he gleefully found properties where the horse had survived the motor car, not just out of sentiment, but out of ecological circumstance and regional utility⁵⁸; he celebrated long family continuities of ownership and care that fostered an accommodation of local environmental realities⁵⁹; he described 'a kind of Metayer system' for dairy farmers⁶⁰; he honoured and reproduced Bukalong's century and more of rainfall records; he drew attention where he could to the success of small-scale farming⁶¹; and he cherished any evidence of landscape connoisseurship and commemoration.⁶²

Yet Monaro had few farmers. It offered a cameo of pastoral Australia and a warning of the difficulties of agriculture and even diversity of production. Wool and meat were the staples, and 'Monaro people could no more compete with their neighbours to the east in producing butter than they could compete with their neighbours to the west in growing wheat.'⁶³ It was vulnerable to drought, land degradation and falling wool and livestock prices. Hancock recommended that 'Bad times in Monaro' would make a rewarding project of historical research.⁶⁴ But overall he was characteristically, and perhaps misleadingly,

optimistic. Stephen Dovers has argued that the basalt downs - Hancock's focus in his analyses of land tenure and management - are the areas of Monaro that most escaped erosion. Elsewhere in Monaro, overgrazing and rabbits, in association with drought and small property sizes (with the push for closer settlement), have meant that Monaro is one of the worst-afflicted regions of soil erosion in New South Wales. Dovers places Hancock in a lineage of overly-optimistic 'discoverers' of Monaro, all influenced by 'a regional identity constructed in the image of the basalt downs', ignoring the adjacent, less striking and less productive landscapes of Monaro.⁶⁵

But Hancock's interest in folk culture and worked landscapes in Australia, however romantic, was a fruitful result of his European yearnings, and possibly a further dimension of the book that made it original and unusual in its time. Monaro became a courtroom in which Hancock could judge the opposing forces that had ruled his own life, that of 'the stagnation which ensues when there is too little movement' and 'the disintegration which too much movement causes'.⁶⁶ His own estranged relationship to country made him search for evidence of 'belonging'. He anticipated debates about sense of place, cultural landscapes, bioregionalism and reconciliation when he wrote: 'People in Monaro do not merely own their land, they belong to it.'⁶⁷

As environmental history took off in the 1970s, particularly in America, its focus was conservation history, the wilderness aesthetic and national parks. A dichotomy grew, still evident in the environmental movement today, between the unused landscape and the misused one, the pristine landscape and the exploited and degraded one, the deserted landscape and the desertified one.⁶⁸ In 1974 Hancock indulged his anti-Americanism by making fun of what he saw to be that nation's mutually exclusive histories - he styled them as either *The Epic of America* or *The Rape of America*.⁶⁹ And the moral landscape of the conservation movement has similarly tended to be a language of extremes. Hancock, with

his Tuscan dreaming, his interest in the rhythms of spoiling, restoring and improving, and his intuitive attachment to a landscape wrought by culture, charted a different course, one that has become more compelling with the years.

¹ These are the words with which Hancock begins *Discovering Monaro*, Cambridge, 1972. I am grateful to Anthony Low who, as convener of a stimulating 'Hancock Symposium' held at the Australian National University, 1-3 April 1998, first asked me to speak on this topic. This article is an expanded version of that talk and draws on the inspiration of the conference, and in particular the comments of Geoffrey Bolton, Tim Bonyhady, Stephen Foster, Bob Gollan, Joe Powell, Michael Roe and F B Smith. Since this article was accepted for publication, I have had my attention drawn to Trevor Daly's similarly titled, but complementary essay, 'Discovering Hancock: A Profile of an Australian Environmental Historian (W.K. Hancock)', *Limina*, vol. 4, 1998, pp. 69-84.

² See, for example, Hancock's testimony reported in Professor N Meaney, 'Reflections on Hancock's *Australia*, following an interview with Sir Keith Hancock on 13 Jan 1985', typescript, in W K Hancock, Book Review File, National Library of Australia.

³ W K Hancock, *Discovering Monaro: A Study of Man's impact on his Environment*, Cambridge, 1972, p. 12.

⁴ Deryck Schreuder, 'History's Page - Australia as a Post-colonial Society', in Schreuder (ed.) *The Humanities and a Creative Nation: Jubilee Essays*, Canberra, 1995, p. 11.

⁵ W K Hancock, *Professing History*, Sydney, 1976, p. 68; Robert Lehane, 'Fresh Fields May Prove Greener', undated newsclipping [1967] in the Hancock Papers ('Discovering Monaro' files), MS 2886, National Library of Australia; Interview with Robin Gollan, Canberra, 11 August 1998.

⁶ W K Hancock, *Smuts: The Fields of Force, 1919-1950*, Cambridge, 1968, pp. 341-2, 300.

⁷ Interview with Robin Gollan, Canberra, 11 August 1998.

⁸ W K Hancock, *Country and Calling*, London, 1954, p. 246.

⁹ Hancock Papers, NLA, second draft of 'Discovering Monaro', for mention of 'the Gippsland springboard'.

¹⁰ Hancock, *Australia*, p. 233.

¹¹ *Country and Calling*, p. 239.

¹² See J M Powell, 'signposts to tracks'? Keith Hancock and environmental history' in D A Low (ed.), *Inquiry and Narration*, forthcoming. For an analysis of some of Hancock's natural and organic metaphors, see Kosmas Tsokhas, 'Reflections on the Life and Work of W K Hancock', *The Round Table*, no. 314, April 1990, pp. 213-226.

¹³ *Discovering Monaro*, although annotated, lacks a bibliography. Hancock was perhaps partly excused from this work by the geographical (and historical) talents of his research assistant, Dan Coward (now Huon).

¹⁴ J M Powell assesses Hancock's contribution as an environmental historian in his 'signposts to tracks'? Keith Hancock and environmental history' in D A Low (ed.), *Inquiry and Narration*, forthcoming. Powell has also addressed the relationship between environmental history and historical geography in Australia: see, for example, 'Historical geography and environmental history: an Australian interface', *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 22, 1996, pp. 253-73.

¹⁵ 'You see my work in the past has been what you might call global - Commonwealth history - ... So after being global, I want to be local and cultivate my own garden', in Robert Lehane, 'Fresh Fields May Prove Greener'.

¹⁶ Hancock, 'Discovering Monaro: Progress Report', Cooma, 5 May 1969, Hancock Papers, Butlin Centre.

¹⁷ See Julian Thomas, 'Keith Hancock: Professing the Profession', in Stuart Macintyre and Julian Thomas (eds), *The Discovery of Australian History, 1890-1939*, Melbourne, 1995, pp. 146-157.

- 18 Les Murray, 'Eric Rolls and the Golden Disobedience', in his *Persistence in Folly*, London and Sydney, 1984, pp. 149-67.
- 19 See, for example, the *Australia's Ever-Changing Forests* series, published by the Australian Forest History Society since 1988.
- 20 One could add: Margaret Kiddle and the Western District of Victoria, Geoffrey Bolton and North Queensland (Bolton found this commission through Hancock), G L Buxton and the Riverina, Bill Gammage and Narrandera Shire, and several others. In this paragraph and the next I have drawn on my entry on 'Environmental History' in G Davison, J Hirst and S Macintyre (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Melbourne, 1998. For an appraisal of Seddon as a landscape essayist see my 'George Seddon: The Man from Snowy River', *Southerly*, vol. 58, no. 1, Autumn 1998, pp. 116-22.
- 21 *Bulletin*, 8 July 1972, pp. 45-6.
- 22 *Canberra Times*, no date [1972], Book Review File, NLA.
- 23 Hancock invoked Stretton in his 'Work-in-Prospect Seminar', History, Research School of Social Sciences, 7 March 1968, entitled 'Discovering Monaro - First Sight of a Seven Years' Task', Hancock Papers, NLA. For Stretton as Royal Commissioner, see my *Secrets of the Forest*, Sydney, 1992, pp. 23, 50-52.
- 24 Hancock makes the links between these three in his *South Australia's Lifeline*, (A public lecture delivered at the University of Adelaide), Adelaide, 1983, pp. 16-17.
- 25 *Country and Calling*, p. 243.
- 26 See Hancock, Book Review File, NLA.
- 27 The incomplete manuscript of *Country and Calling* exists in fifteen notebooks which form part of the Hancock Papers held in the Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library, Russell Square, London.
- 28 *Country and Calling*, p. 241.
- 29 The omitted sections of the autobiography relating to Hancock's skirmish with the ANU are to be found in Notebook 13, pp. 28-32, and Notebook 14, pp. 33-46. For an outstanding account of the foundation (and later) years of the university, see S G Foster and Margaret M Varghese, *The Making of the Australian National University, 1946-1996*, Sydney 1996. Although Foster and Varghese could not draw on the draft of Hancock's autobiography in London, other letters and papers exist which enabled them to piece together a perceptive account of the tensions.
- 30 He criticised the attitude that 'Canberra had merely to whistle': Notebook 13, p. 31.
- 31 Hancock to Colin Badger, 30 January 1947, Hancock Papers, P96/23, Noel Butlin Centre, ANU. Hancock mentions his prospects of employment at 'a post-graduate University in Canberra' as early as 1941 (Hancock to Herbert Burton, 26 May 1941), and in another letter to Badger (17 January 1943), he asks him 'to spy out the land for me as my employment agency', but warns (as Copland was to discover) that he would be 'exact about terms'.
- 32 Notebook 13, pp. 30-31, ICS Library, London.
- 33 Anxiety and impatience were words used by Hancock in his draft, later crossed out: Notebook 14, p. 39.
- 34 In mid-1949, Firth was persuaded to resume the role of Advisor. See Foster and Varghese, p. 42.
- 35 Foster and Varghese (p. 46) refer to Copland's account of longer negotiations.
- 36 Quoted by N Meaney, in Book Review File, NLA.
- 37 Hancock to Badger, 30 January 1947, Hancock Papers, Butlin Centre.
- 38 I owe this insight to Geoffrey Bolton.
- 39 Hancock even mis-spells Copland's name (Copeland) in his manuscript autobiography.
- 40 For Theaden's frank comments to Copland, see Foster and Varghese, p. 46. Hancock's concerns are expressed in his letter to Badger, 30 January 1947, Butlin Centre.
- 41 Notebook 13, p. 13.
- 42 *Country and Calling*, p. 223.
- 43 *Ibid*, p. 70; Hancock, *Attempting History*, Canberra, 1969, pp. 23-27.
- 44 Hancock to Badger, 23 March 1955, Butlin Centre; Interview with Robin Gollan.
- 45 Michael Roe to Libby Robin, 31 July 1998. Roe also made the point about Hancock's positivism.
- 46 Alan Barnard (ed.), *The Simple Fleece: Studies in the Australian Wool Industry*, Melbourne, 1962; H J Frith and G Sawyer (ed.) *The Murray Waters: Man, Nature and a River System*, Sydney, 1974; N G Butlin

(ed.) *The Impact of Port Botany*, Canberra, 1976; Dan Coward, *Out of Sight...: Sydney's Environmental History*, Canberra, 1988.

⁴⁷ Sir Douglas Wright joked about the book in these terms with H C Coombs: Foster and Varghese, p. 127.

⁴⁸ *Country and Calling*, p. 129.

⁴⁹ Oxford and Melbourne, 1997.

⁵⁰ *Country and Calling*, chapter 3; Hancock, *Ricasoli and the Risorgimento in Tuscany*, London, 1926.

⁵¹ *Professing History*, pp. 71-2.

⁵² *Country and Calling*, p. 95.

⁵³ Robert Lehane, 'Fresh Fields May Prove Greener'.

⁵⁴ Hancock, *Economists, Ecologists and Historians* (The Edward Shann Memorial Lecture in Economics), Perth, 1974, p. 18.

⁵⁵ *Professing History*, p. 71.

⁵⁶ Ros Pesman, 'Keith Hancock and Italy', in D A Low (ed.) *Inquiry and Narration*, forthcoming.

⁵⁷ Hancock, 'Italian Metayage', in *Politics in Pitcairn and other Essays*, London, 1947, pp. 140, 142.

⁵⁸ *Professing History*, pp. 70-71.

⁵⁹ *Discovering Monaro*, p. 127: "the twenty years turnover" of ownership which people took for granted on the western plains was not the custom of Monaro ... many of the land users stayed put and continued to stay put through good times and bad until they achieved at least a rough and ready understanding of their environment.'

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 121, footnote 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 160.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 163.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 121.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 126.

⁶⁵ S Dovers, 'Still discovering Monaro: perceptions of landscape', in Dovers (ed.), *Australian Environmental History: Essays and Cases*, Melbourne, 1994, pp. 119-140.

⁶⁶ *Discovering Monaro*, p. 163.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 163.

⁶⁸ Some of these oppositions are drawn from Wendell Berry, 'The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity', in *Another Turn of the Crank: Essays by Wendell Berry*, Washington, 1995, pp. 71-72.

⁶⁹ Hancock, *Economists, Ecologists and Historians*, p. 17.