

**Ruth A. Morgan, *Running Out? Water in Western Australia*,
UWA Publishing, Perth, 2015; pp: 320; RRP \$34.99 Paperback.**

At first glance, it may be easy to think that a book on the history of water in Western Australia is part of a long line of books on the esoteric history of salt, art, time, colour and, according to Bill Bryson at least, 'Almost Everything'. Mercifully, this is not. Nor is Morgan's treatise a dry treatment of water usage (pun intended) and political mismanagement (although there is that), but it allows the reader to understand the history of Western Australia's development using a single stream of thought linking the establishment of the colony to contemporary arguments about the effects of climate change.

Among the various lines of inquiry, including water for irrigation, domestic use and the effect of climate change on water supply, one of the sub-plots of the book of particular interest was the use of water as a form of social control. The sight of Colonial women walking around Mount Hawthorn and North Perth carrying buckets in the middle of the night desperate to find a well with water with which to cook, bathe and clean, is a much needed addendum to the story of hardships endured by many working class families. This is especially so when compared to the story of more affluent households upstream 'taking' water and leaving little for the working classes to squabble over.

Colonial working class women and Indigenous women in particular were required to attain and maintain increasingly difficult societal standards in cleanliness and sanitation. The role of women within the colonial discourse was as a domesticating and softening contrast to the harshness of the settling experience. This included maintaining Victorian standards of domestic cleanliness which was difficult with limited access to water.

Morgan notes that during the 1960s there was reluctance on the part of policy makers to improve the living standards of Indigenous families. Whilst there was a program to provide transitional housing to Indigenous families moving from camps to homes, a lack of funding made this difficult. In fact in the South West 'only 5 of the 22 reserves had full access to water, laundry, shower and toilet facilities' (p. 90). The Department for Native Affairs expected Indigenous families to have clean homes and to prove to 'mainstream white society' their intent to be a part of it. However,

as nearly 85 per cent of the southwest's Aborigines still lived on reserves for most of the year, where infrastructure was poorly maintained, it was extremely difficult for Aborigines to maintain these standards. In many cases, a failure to meet the department's standards was grounds for the removal of Aboriginal children from their families (p. 91)

Another key theme is Morgan's treatment of 'Big Water' – the promise that the Government would provide an endless supply of water regardless of its availability

or intended usage. It wasn't just domestic demand creating problems for the government but irrigators in the state's south west who demanded a greater share of an ever dwindling supply. Historically, household consumption was both necessary and conspicuous – a garden a symbol of prosperity and cleanliness.

A dry garden was irrefutable proof of an uncivilised household. According to Morgan,

[a]s a resident from the leafy, riverside suburb of Applecross explained 'If you drive down the street and everybody has got reasonable lawns and one's got a dead patch, it's like pointing the finger of scorn isn't it?' (p. 179)

Western Australian governments have a long history of trying to minimise domestic water usage and only recently have the public supported these efforts, to the point where people are encouraged, and have subsequently embraced, the idea of reporting 'water wasters'. Following the First World War the Minister for Water Supply said Perth's avid gardening community 'wasting water' was the catalyst for the imposition of restrictions. The swift rebuke from militant gardeners was repeated against the first Court Government of the late 1970s whose policy to minimise water usage was seen as a direct assault on people whose only crime was to keep Perth 'pleasant and presentable [against the alternative of] brown lawns, wood chips or paving bricks' (p.117). By 1994 when restrictions were again introduced, this militancy had diminished and households did not object to the same extent. Morgan argues this is because the policy did not affect residents to the same extent and 'the muted response to restrictions reflected a shift in the public perception of responsibility for the restrictions from Big Water to [the] householders themselves' (p. 159).

This otherwise meticulously researched and very well written book has one significant omission – a discussion on the amount of water used by industry. Morgan discusses water use by the agricultural and domestic sectors, but not the industrial and manufacturing sectors. If households do indeed recognise that they (we) need to take responsibility for restrictions to maintain water supply, how much responsibility is accepted by industry? This is but a small quibble; this book by Ruth Morgan is a triumph for its level of research and forensic examination of an issue that is both important and urgent for policy makers, climate scientists and the Western Australian public who are trying to understand an increasingly noisy policy arena.

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