CHAPTER 6

‘A useless weight of water’:¹ Responding to stagnancy, mud and morasses

Mud mud mud; nothing but mud, watery mud, creamy mud, treacly mud, mud like school boys’ ‘stick jaw’, mud which won’t be passed by, mud which clings like Potiphar’s wife, and mud like unto Dante’s sea of defilement, for seven long and weary miles!²

Whatever may be the means employed by the landholders to carry out the work of the reclamation of the swamp, there can only be one opinion as to its value … Their success would ensure immediately increased value to the land so created, and would add materially to the progress and prosperity of the town.³

Introduction

The nature of the hydrological cycle is one of constant, varied movement. Sometimes that movement is barely perceptible, and with groundwater, it is invisible. This chapter turns the focus to places in the landscape where the movement of water is slowing down, where the force of the current is dissipating.

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¹ GT, 16 April 1886.
³ The editor of the Gippsland Times commenting on a cooperative proposal to drain the Heart Morass, 18 January 1886.
According to Giblett, ‘the distinction … between flowing and stagnant waters is one of the fundamental organising principles of the dominant western cultural construction of nature’.4 The previous chapter argued that colonial Gippslanders had a preference for moderate amounts of permanent, flowing, channelised water. This chapter continues the exploration of this ideal by examining its opposite; those parts of the catchment that were soggy, muddy and still.

In contemporary environmental parlance, places in the landscape where water is slow moving or still are called wetlands.5 They are recognised as being absolutely critical for a wide variety of important ecological functions, including habitat for fish and fowl, providing breeding grounds, retaining floodwaters, preventing erosion, and water filtration and cleansing.6 In 1982, parts of the Gippsland Lakes catchment (the coastal brackish/saline lagoons, permanent saline/brackish ponds and permanent fresh water marshes) were nominated by the Australian Government as internationally significant wetlands under the Ramsar convention. They were listed for their ability to support waterbirds, and for their representation of ‘natural or near natural wetland characteristic of the appropriate biogeographical region’.7

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5  Definition of ‘wetland’ in M Allaby (ed.), *A dictionary of ecology*, Oxford University Press, 2006. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press, www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY. html?subview=Main&entry=t14.e5956, accessed 16 July 2008. The word ‘wetland’ is an invention of the mid-twentieth century, which passed into common use when it was defined at the world’s first international convention on wetlands in 1971 (the Ramsar Convention) as ‘all areas of marsh, fen, peatland, or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish, or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six meters’.
7  Department of Sustainability and Environment, *Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site: Strategic management plan*, July 2003, East Melbourne, p. 3. The listing includes Lake Wellington (18,000 ha), Lake Victoria (10,850 ha), Lake King (7,100 ha), Lake Bunga (460 ha), Lake Tyers (1,186 ha), Macleod’s Morass (520 ha), and Lake Reeve (5,158 ha), of a total plan area of 58,824 ha.
Such an action could scarcely have been dreamt of by the catchment’s residents 100 years earlier. In fact, their agitation to drain wetlands was fierce. To them, the best thing to do with a swamp, bog or morass was to drain it and make it ‘productive’. This perception permeated the highest levels of society. Reporting on their trip through Gippsland in 1874, the Surveyor General and the Secretary for Mines remarked several times on the extensive swamps and the need to drain them for agricultural use. This attitude was so common that the 2006 Australian *State of the Environment Report* concluded that ‘unfortunately, wetlands have frequently been regarded as useless swamps to be drained, farmed or otherwise “reclaimed” for agricultural and other uses’.

This chapter explores the multifaceted reasons why colonial Gippslanders had such a dislike for wetlands, and what they did about it. In the first part, I discuss how Gippslanders perceived still waters. The second part examines the range of responses made to them, including legislation, policy and physical changes, and discusses the long-term environmental implications of the changes made to wetlands in the nineteenth century.

**Naming names**

The main words used by Gippslanders to denote places of slow or still water were lake, morass, swamp, waterhole and backwater. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines a lake as ‘a large body of water entirely surrounded by land; properly, one sufficiently large to form a geographical feature, but in recent use often applied to an ornamental water in a park, etc.’ The key feature of this definition is the size, distinguishing it as permanent landscape feature. Within the GLC, the term ‘lake’ was applied to Lakes Wellington, King and Victoria, which have no hint of ephemerality, and Lake Guthridge in Sale which became an ornamental lake. Originally part of the extensive low-lying floodplains around Sale, Lake Guthridge was often disparaged in the press as being unworthy of the name, as it was used as a sewerage and drainage dumping ground.

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8 Harris, ‘Inland waters’. This report noted that the Murray-Darling Basin has a 90 per cent rate of alteration to wetlands, while Western Australia’s Swan Coastal Plain has a 75 per cent loss.

‘Morass’ was an important word in the lexicon of nineteenth-century Gippslanders. It was commonly used by the Scots migrants, and passed into general use with the naming of key landscape features, such as Clifton’s Morass, MacLeod’s Morass and Dowd’s Morass. It derives from Middle Low German and Middle Dutch through the Old French noun *marais*, or marsh.¹⁰ Morasses are land and water together, places of mud and marsh with low-lying vegetation adapted to permanent or periodical inundation. Gippslanders gave the term morass to areas that were predominantly fresh water, like MacLeod’s Morass on the fringe of Lake King. They tend to be intermittently open areas of reeds and small *Melaleuca* trees. Areas of saline water such as around Maringa Creek at Nyermilang tend to have the characteristically red-tinged samphire plant.

‘Morass’ has another, less neutral usage. It is used to denote ‘a complicated or confused situation which it is difficult to escape from or make progress through’ and reflects the physical nature of this type of landscape. The examples given in the *OED* link morass with vice, doubt, addiction, outdated scholarship and politics. More often than not, the complicated or confused situation that Gippslanders found themselves in was the actual physical morass, which impeded their progress. However, they were also using the word in its figurative sense. For example, Sir Charles Gavan Duffy speaking on the Bill to connect Melbourne and Sale via rail described parliament as one of the most odious morasses in the world.¹¹

Other terms common in England did not make their way into place names, although sometimes they were used adjectivally. The word ‘fen’ is occasionally used to denote a place of ill health and bad air, reflecting contemporary beliefs about miasma. ‘The bleak misty air generated by the outlying swamps and morasses, indeed, reminds us of the fens of Lincolnshire.’¹² Where ‘mere’ might have been used, swamp tends to be substituted. The *OED* is unclear on the origins of ‘mere’, but notes that its first recorded usage is in Virginia. The dictionary suggests that the origin of the word may be Germanic, and may relate to ‘sponge’ or ‘fungus’, both organisms preferring watery surroundings. In the American usage, it denoted a tract of rich soil having a growth of trees and other vegetation, but too moist for cultivation. Waterhole is another term defined as being of colonial origin, and means a being a permanent pool of water in a river.

¹² *GT*, 23 April 1870.
course. Gippslanders use the term somewhat more freely than this, but
nor are they specific as to which waterhole they could be driving their
stock to. It may be a farm dam; however, as these were generally very small
and ephemeral, it is more likely to be part of a fluvial system.\(^{15}\) Waterhole
simply seems to refer to any place where stock can drink.

Finally, ‘backwater’ can have three meanings: ‘a part of a river not reached
by the current, where the water is stagnant’; ‘an isolated or peaceful place’;
or ‘a place or situation in which no development or progress is taking
place’.\(^{14}\) Colonial Gippslanders usage of the term tends towards the first
two senses. Backwaters were a common feature of the landscape, and they
were used by squatters and selectors. For example, Isabella and Dalmahoy
MacLeod selected near the backwater of Lake King, and Auchterlonie
regularly talks in his diary about the backwater paddock, from which
he regularly retrieved straying stock.\(^{15}\) In private writings, references to
these places are generally neutral, although Auchterlonie recorded his fury
when he found Bessie Auchterlonie in a compromising position with the
hired help up in the backwater.\(^{16}\)

The definitions discussed above already indicate a negative viewpoint. The
most used word in relation to wetlands is the word ‘stagnant’. If there
was anything water should not be, it was stagnant. Stagnant means foul,
unwholesome and sluggish. Nor is the figurative use of the word flattering.\(^{17}\)
Gippslanders rarely described wetlands as still, even though they were,
and regularly emphasised the aspects of unwholesomeness. This comes out most clearly in newspaper reports from local correspondents, who were attempting to get some kind of public response to a perceived problem. Concepts of heath and disease, and the kinds of topography that were mentally linked with those concepts drive much of the action in relation to wetlands.

What stillness helps

Wetlands are particularly productive and useful places. Because they are the margin between fully terrestrial and fully aquatic ecosystems, wetlands have greater biological diversity than many other parts of the landscape. Wetlands provided protein in the form of birds, eels, fish, crustaceans and eggs; important building products such as reeds for thatching; a supply of peat for heating and cooking; and summer grazing for stock. Coles’s survey of wetland archaeology in Europe serves to illustrate that the advantages of wetland life often outweighed the disadvantages for our distant ancestors. There were settlements at Glastonbury and Meare in the Iron Age whose economies were built around wetland resources, without resorting to the need to drain them to make firm land for cultivation. Michael Williams’s work on the Somerset Levels and Darby’s multiple volumes on the Fens provide ample evidence of how wetlands were a focus of settlement, detailing both the pre- and post-drainage histories of the areas.

Prior to the large-scale modern drainage projects that changed the face of English wetlands, the resources they supported were so valuable that strict rules evolved about their use. These could become hotly disputed. In mid-1300s Somerset, disputes escalated to sabotage, arson and threats of excommunication and in the Lincolnshire Fens there was an arbitration court, the Court of Sewers, which kept track of who had rights to what and dealt with the frequent and varied transgressions.

20 Williams, Draining of the Somerset Levels, p. 28.
When the enclosure and draining movement gained pace from around the 1500s, it was these wetland areas rich in resources that were the most hotly contested. There were repeated sabotage attempts of newly constructed drainage channels in the Fens by dispossessed peasants. As Mingay noted:

It is clear that when large areas of widely used common or fenland, marsh, moor or other extensive wastes were threatened by enclosure, the local inhabitants were very likely to protest … The enclosures were regarded as depriving the poor of what had always been theirs, and claims to exclusive ownership by wealthy landowners were rejected as unjust and treated with scorn.

Despite protests, in some counties as much as 50 per cent of the available land, including wetlands, was enclosed.\(^{(21)}\)

In England, there was a strong relationship between class and the kind of rural activity pursued or proposed. In Victoria, this class divide tended to be reversed. Generally in England, it was working-class labourers whose subsistence and seasonal lifestyle depended upon the wetlands, while educated, wealthy and often titled men with an interest in agricultural improvement advocated drainage, frequently employing a suite of negative imagery to bolster their case against the traditional users.\(^{(22)}\) This use of moral geography will be discussed more fully in a latter section of this chapter. In Victoria, however, it was the wealthy pastoralist who strove to retain wetlands undrained, while poorer farmers agitated for drainage.\(^{(23)}\) As Harris notes, mobility was an important strategy for pastoralists attempting to live with the variability of the climate. Large runs with a variety of water sources that they could circulate stock around increased their chances for survival and profit.\(^{(24)}\) This mobility is abundantly clear in Patrick Coady Buckley’s diary of his life as a pastoralist, covering his

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22 F Willmoth, ‘Dugdale’s “History of Imbanking and Drayning”: A Royalist Antiquarian in the 1630s’, *Historical Research*, vol. 71, no. 176, 1998, pp. 281–302. For an account of the men involved in the early nineteenth-century innovations such as James Smith and Josiah Parkes, see GE Fussell, ‘The dawn of high farming in England: Land reclamation in early Victorian days’, *Agricultural History*, vol. 22, April 1948, pp. 83–95. Engineers, mill managers, bankers and lords are some of the occupations of the different men discussed in this article.

23 To the best of my knowledge, no publication has observed this contrast. It is my observation.

arrival in Gippsland from the Monaro in 1844 up to his death in 1873. He was constantly out rounding up and shifting cattle from one place to another in search of pasture and water.

Many Gippslanders followed in this tradition of utilising wetlands. The diversity of uses is impressive. Some towns established grazing commons on low-lying lands, such as the one in Sale, which has survived.\textsuperscript{25} Attempts to privatise and subdivide the common were regularly opposed.\textsuperscript{26} Other commons were proclaimed in Bairnsdale and Bundalaguah, to name only a few.

![Sale Common, now a wildlife refuge.](source: Author)

\textsuperscript{25} Letter from CJ Tyers, dated 9 April 1856, referring to a petition from residents of Sale to establish a common between the river, the punt and Flooding Creek.

\textsuperscript{26} For instances of debate about the use of Sale and other commons, see \textit{GT}, 19 December 1874, 6 May 1876 and 23 May 1876; \textit{GM}, 18 and 25 January 1877; \textit{GT}, 11 October 1876, 25 and 30 November 1881, 18 August 1886 and 10 August 1891. See also \textit{GT}, 16 November 1881, for attempts by Longford residents to prevent part of the morass (acting like a common) around Long Waterhole from being selected.
Settlers recorded in their diaries how they harvested various food and building resources from wetland areas. Annie Prout at Flaggy Creek near Bairnsdale collected cress while Broome, on the Nicholson River, would collect swan eggs from the morass.27 Dow has discussed the use of reeds and ti-tree as building products, especially by settlers adjacent to Lakes Wellington, King and Victoria, as well as extensive recreational hunting by holiday-makers and residents.28

Broome also made an interesting reference to using mud from a morass to amend soil on his property abutting the Nicholson River. Clay or mud is an important way of building up organic matter, which in sandier soils assists in retaining water in the root zone.29 The Sale Council in 1874 debated the establishment of a loam reserve, which indicates that many more settlers used loam for property improvement reasons.30 Thus, Gippsland’s colonial settlers continued to use wetland resources in ways very similar to their English ancestors.

27 Diary of Annie Prout, 15 November 1885, SLV, MS 12306, box 3054/5; Diary of Charles Alfred [Alf] Broome, 25 June 1881, SLV, MS 10774, box 1542.
29 Diary of Alf Broome, 14 June 1899, ‘carted some mud from the morass for cultivation ground’.
30 GT, 19 December 1874. ‘Cr Guthridge could not understand about the loam reserve. Loam was intended to be used for building purposes, and it was never contemplated that the reserves should be stripped by persons wanting the earth to make up their gardens or apply it in other ways to the improvement of their properties.’
The quality of stillness contributes to one of the wetland’s key ecological functions. Previous chapters discussed how rainfall transports organic and inorganic material, which is then washed into rivers and swept downstream. As water slows down, this sediment drops out. Wetlands therefore perform a crucial role in maintaining water quality. Wetlands are also sites of significant geochemical processes, including the filtering of elements such as iron and manganese, and the cycling of sulphur, carbon, nitrogen and phosphorus.\textsuperscript{31} They are often compared to the kidneys in the human body, which filter and purify the blood of waste products. Their capacity to retain water, nutrients and silt creates one of the highest values of wetlands. They are drought refuges. In highly modified landscapes, they act as places of retreat.

\textsuperscript{31} Pers. comm., Sara Beavis, 30 September 2011.
Squatters regularly used wetlands for summer grazing of cattle. In 1897, a drought year before the massive bushfires, the *Gippsland Times* reported that ‘the Sale Common, small in area as it is, has furnished evidence of its fattening abilities when the grass in the paddocks of the surrounding district is burnt up’. When grass was scarce after the fires, surviving stock were sent to graze on the unburnt portions of Moe Swamp.

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32 *GT*, 16 December 1897. See also as examples, Diary of Patrick Coady Buckley, 25 January 1858, ‘Collecting [stock] on my run about Fidler’s Flat and Farrell’s swamp’; *GM*, 17 March 1877, editorial: ‘The weather has recently caused grave fears to be entertained as regards the future. We have had a long continuance of dry and hot weather which has had the effect of scorching the grass in all places except swampy land, and the plains of Gippsland, so green and refreshing to the gaze, present now a desert like appearance.’

33 *Coach News*, vol. 3, no. 3, March 1976, pp. 6–7. It should be noted that this pattern of using the drier lands of swamps was also practised in the United States, see H Prince, ‘A marshland chronicle, 1830–1960: From artificial drainage to outdoor recreation in Wisconsin’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 21, 1995, pp. 3–22. doi.org/10.1016/0305-7488(95)90003-9. Wisconsin farmers survived in drought years through sowing wheat on drier wetlands, p. 6. DC Smith, ‘Salt marshes as a factor in the agriculture of north eastern America’, *Agricultural History*, vol. 63, no. 2, Spring 1989, pp. 270–94, for uses of coastal swamps in the US.
Morasses and swamps also acted as places of shelter and refuge for other animals. The Gippsland Lakes are internationally recognised as habitat for waterbirds. The waterbirds of the lakes helped feed settlers during leaner times and there are many reports of hunting as a pastime. Many of the hotels dotting the lakes in later years offered hunting equipment to guests. These hunting parties were capitalising on the still and protected qualities of wetlands, which provide safe nesting spots for the many different types of birds that live on or visit the Lakes.

Stillness is also a precondition for the growth of certain bacteria. These can affect ecological processes and have a negative impact on human health. Dow has pointed out one nineteenth-century occurrence that sounds suspiciously like an algal bloom:

Fisherman Jock Carstairs described what must have been an algal bloom in the 1880s. After a few dry years, he wrote, the entrance became shallow and the ‘lake grass’ and weed rotted. “The water up the lakes became very stagnant, and the lakes became full of rotten green sediment. The water turned green like a ‘green field’, ‘tonnes of fish’ died and fisherman Charlie O’Neill, who fell in and swallowed some water, died.”

This is the only evidence to date of nineteenth-century toxic blooms in the lakes. Stillness in the water column is needed for bacterial pollution and algal blooms to occur. The population explodes, then collapses, leaving a mass of stinking and decomposing weed. They also require an excess of nutrients, which is why serious algal bloom problems in highly developed catchments occur mainly in the decades after the introduction of artificial fertilisers.

For the nineteenth century, evidence abounds of complaints about foul-smelling waters in towns. The ‘pong factor’ is important in understanding responses to wetlands. The bad smells associated with bogs and marshes were taken as a sign of unwholesomeness, and in some English localities

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34 For example, East Gippsland Historical Society Newsletter, vol. 1 no. 3, letter from Frederick Gray to Mr Lewis, dated 4 August 1855, describing his life at Lindenow, ‘there are plenty of wild ducks and pigeons, one or two of us go shooting if we have nothing to do just a little amusement’.
36 Pers. comm., Sara Beavis, 30 September 2011. Beavis has advised that blooms can occur naturally in catchments where there is basalt parent material, and it is the delivery of sediments with adsorbed phosphorus that provide the source nutrients for algal blooms to develop.
were associated with supernatural spirits. 37 This folk belief reinforced wetlands’ bad reputation. The generally inadequate nature of stormwater and sewerage disposal in all the settlements in the GLC meant that most rubbish ended up in the nearest low-lying swamp. For example, Mirams of Sale pleaded for some of the water liberated by the artesian well to be used to cleanse the gutters of York St, described as ‘the foulest open sewer in Sale’. 38 Settlers generally neglected to think about where the contents of the gutters ended up. This excess of nutrients was far more than what the natural system could possibly decompose, and so Gippslanders reinforced their learnt attitudes about wetlands being dangerous by their own behaviour. They then followed this with regular bouts of lobbying to drain the, by now, stinking wetland, or planting eucalypts to freshen the air. 39

Places with still waters also have a dark side, being associated with murder, militarism, destruction, punishment and criminal behaviour. Whether or not this is a good thing depends on whether you are the hunter or the hunted.

For the hunted, the morasses of Gippsland were particularly important as places of hiding. Stock regularly escaped or strayed into morasses. On his journey into Gippsland, Buckley shot a cow that had gotten stuck in Clifton Morass. 40 John King had trouble with five bullocks who escaped their handlers by bolting into the morass. 41 In 1882, Mr Jenner’s

37 Marsh gas is produced by anaerobic decomposition of organic matter in swamps and may contain any of several odoriferous gases, but its principal component is usually methane, which is odourless and flammable. It is lighter than air, and floats in a pale, eerie haze until blown away by a strong wind. It also burns with a mysterious blue flame when ignited, thus accounting for popular belief that such places are the province of ghosts and evil spirits. Definition of ‘marsh gas’, JM Last (ed.), A Dictionary of Public Health, online, Oxford University Press, 2007, www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t235.e2711, accessed 23 July 2008.

38 *GT*, 3 September 1880. For other examples or urban water pollution, see *GM*, 13 March 1877, Walhalla correspondent reporting a small flood that ‘washed away a good deal of accumulated tailings’; *GT*, 20 November 1876, Sale Council meeting report of a debate on appropriate location for a bonemill, morass site approved; *GT*, 25 December 1876, ‘Complaints are still rife at Traralgon respecting the sanitary arrangements of that township’; *GT*, 11 November 1881, ‘Dr McDonald drew attention the existence of stagnant water under some houses in Raymond street, in one instance to the depth of 12 inches. When the hot weather sets in these stagnant pools are likely to be productive of much mischief’; *GT*, 28 May 1896, ‘Since the village settlers have been established along Flooding Creek there have been complaints of rubbish and filthy being deposited in the bed of the creek, which in some classes is the sole supply of drinking water for the settlers’.

39 For example, *GT*, 18 May 1896, letter about how to deal with Lake Guthridge to make it healthy by planting eucalypts and willows. Eucalypts in particular were thought to be effective air cleansers. *GT*, 3 September 1870, for a discussion about how to deal with Lake Guthridge.

40 Diary of Patrick Coady Buckley, 4 January 1844.

41 King Station Day Book, 30 October 1844, SLV, MS 11396, MSB 404.
horse was grazing in a swamp when it took fright. In its flight, it staked itself and died. Mr Glassford’s prize bull, called Royal Frederick and worth £300, slipped into a waterhole while trying to drink and had to be towed to the bridge half a mile downstream before he could be got out. Buckley also regularly recorded either retrieving his own stock from morasses, or assisting neighbours or business partners to do the same. For anyone involved in pastoralism, keeping stock out of the morasses in good times was a regular part of working life. The presence of morasses in the landscape was a central feature to their life and a matter of strategic advantage during drought.

Settlers in later years recorded how they used purposely created pools of still water to trap and drown native animals. In one family, the first attempt at killing wallabies in hand-dug water traps actually caught the family cat. The Rosedale correspondent wrote in 1874:

> The caterpillar has invaded the crops of some of the farmers in the Rosedale district. The crop in many instances is too far on to be much injured; in others trenches and pit falls have been constructed to snare unwanted visitors.

The use of trenches must have been effective because in 1882, the *Maffra Spectator* recorded that settlers were digging trenches to drown the caterpillars that were attacking crops.

Dow devotes a whole chapter to the relationship between white squatters, the morasses and colonial violence. All the documented massacres that took place were in wetland areas. The infamous Campbell incident, where John Campbell fired a cannon loaded with shrapnel at the advancing Kurnai, involved a morass on Campbell’s Glencoe Station. Buckley records in his diary several punitive expeditions, many of which involved attempting to track Aboriginals through morasses surrounding the lakes,

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42 Both from the *Maffra Spectator*, 9 March 1882.
43 Diary of Patrick Coady Buckley, 4 December 1844, 6 December 1844, 9 and 10 February 1848; extracts of Charles Macleod’s diary from 1876 in Macleod, *From Bernisdale to Bairnsdale*, p. 75; Diary of Duncan Johnston, 21 November 1882. ‘Started with Evans and Gove to assist them to the Tambo, two horses out of Cooper’s paddock when we got there, Joe and I went to look for them, I found tracks. Tracked them to the morass could not find them. Heavy rain in the evening and night.’
45 *GT*, 22 December 1874.
46 *Maffra Spectator*, 14 December 1882.
47 P Morgan, ‘The Campbell incident’, *Victorian Historical Journal*, vol. 68, no. 1, April 1997, p. 22. According to Morgan, an unspecified number of blacks were killed.
for example between 8 and 11 April 1844. He and his party found it very hard going. His entry for 10 April stated: ‘If it had not been for this water I do not think Marshall would have got out of the morass as it was very difficult to travel through’.\textsuperscript{48} He was even more explicit in his entry of 10 April 1847:

Sowed some wheat then pursued some blacks who came to kill my cattle. With William Scott and Dan Bloore, after a good deal of tracking and wading through water we found their camp. They saw us before we got near enough to shoot any of them, however we managed to get nearly all their spears. They were camped on an island in Lake Reeve.

King recorded hunting Aboriginal people around the lakes in mid-September 1845.\textsuperscript{49} Colin McLaren, one of Angus McMillan’s workers, kept a skull with a ‘suggestive’ hole in it.\textsuperscript{50}

There are also references to the military or punishment uses of wetlands in a more metaphoric sense. On 21 January 1888, the \textit{Morwell Advertiser} told its readers of a dispute between the self-dubbed ‘holly boys’ and the Mechanic’s Institute:

Closely copying the example of the Russians in dealing with the Bulgarian Prince, the Secretary, who stands in the way of the further advancement of the ‘new church’ is to be kidnapped, and placed on an island in the Moe Swamp and there detained till the election is over.\textsuperscript{51}

Clearly, factional feeling was running high in Morwell that summer. Suspected arsonists in 1898 were threatened publicly in the papers of being drowned.\textsuperscript{52} This suggests that such criminal behaviour as kidnapping and drowning were associated with wetlands. Second, Sale residents during the Franco-Prussian War were wont to joke that they would be perfectly safe from any potential invasion, given that they were protected by the aptly named Gluepot to the west and Punt Lane to the south, both

\textsuperscript{48} Marshall was suffering from dehydration, and Buckley was forced to leave him alone for a period while he searched for water to bring back to him. Diary of Patrick Coady Buckley, 8–11 April 1844.
\textsuperscript{49} King Station Day Book, 11–13 September 1845.
\textsuperscript{50} East Gippsland Historical Society, vol. 1 no. 11.
\textsuperscript{51} Morwell Advertiser, 21 January 1888.
\textsuperscript{52} GT, 20 January 1898, Briagolong correspondent.
swamps notorious for causing grief to travellers.\textsuperscript{53} This echoed knowledge of English military history, such as when King Alfred eluded capture by taking refuge in the swamps of southern England, knowing full well that his enemies would not find their way through the marshes. During the early years of the Roman invasion, rebel Britons behaved exactly as the Kurnai were doing, protecting their land in any way they knew how and seeking safety in marshes.\textsuperscript{54}

In summary, wetlands provided drought refuge, grazing fodder, building products, food, and waste processing. They were the scene of actual violence between settlers and the Kurnai, and imaginary violence between different groups of settlers.

**What stillness hinders**

By virtue of their still qualities, the swamps and morasses of Gippsland played an important, if underappreciated, part in the economy of colonial Gippsland. However, these advantages were not enough to outweigh what Gippslanders saw as the profound disadvantages of places of still water.

Gippslanders disliked wet and boggy areas, and reserved a special kind of loathing for ‘stagnant’ waters. In this, they were following a path well-trodden by their European ancestors, explored in depth by Giblett. He concluded, from a survey across literature, painting, philosophy, medicine, religion and psychology, that an early modern European could hardly have escaped the message that swamps were places of moral and physical danger.\textsuperscript{55} The same perception is found among the GLC settlers, reworked through their own lens as the insecure colonisers of an unfamiliar and highly variable landscape.

\textsuperscript{53} *GT*, 28 May 1870, Letter from T Booth; *GT*, 5 November 1870, report of Mayor Guthridge's speech to the anniversary dinner of the Latrobe Oddfellow's Lodge.

\textsuperscript{54} Giblett, *Postmodern wetlands*, pp. 206–7. There was considerable concerns about national security at this time as a result of the various wars occurring in Europe. See *GT*, 23 March 1873, editor calling for compulsory military training in state schools to resist any invasion.

\textsuperscript{55} Giblett, *Postmodern wetlands*. 

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6. ‘A USELESS WEIGHT OF WATER’

Figure 6.4: A part of MacLeod’s Morass, Bairnsdale. The low featureless expanse of reeds made perfect hiding grounds, but would exacerbate the troubles of the genuinely lost.

Source: Author.

Generally, broad open lakes were regarded positively, as indeed Lakes Victoria, King and Wellington were. The popularity of summertime lake cruises attests to this. The very first description of the lakes provided by Angus McMillan emphasises their size and openness. In contrast, the lack of visibility in morasses caused much grief to settlers: McMillan was by no means as complimentary about the boggy fringes of his admired lakes. Clifton’s Morass is named after the horse he nearly had to abandon there when they got stuck and lost. His descriptions of the surrounding country also place close attention on the closed or open nature of the vegetation, such as on 21 January when he noted that the Avon, where he would establish his run, has ‘high banks’ and flows through a ‘fine country of fine open forest’.56 Rev. Frances Hales ‘got into forest and scrub and waterholes that I almost got bewildered’ on his way to the Snake’s Ridge run.57

McMillan is not the only one to emphasise this closed/open dichotomy. Most of the histories that valorise the clearing efforts of selectors describe those efforts as precisely so valorous because the forest was dense, closed and trackless.58

There is no doubt that clearing was phenomenally hard, dangerous work.59 This basic structural difference of the catchment’s vegetation, between the dense forest and the lightly wooded central grasslands, had a substantial impact on the processes of settlement in South Gippsland:

58 The two best examples of valorising are, from my perspective, the following two early twentieth-century histories: H Copeland, The path of progress: From the forests of yesterday to the homes of today, Shire of Warragul, Warragul, 1934; and Committee of the South Gippsland Pioneer’s Association, The land of the lyre bird: A story of early settlement in the great forest of South Gippsland, Shire of Korumburra for the South Gippsland Development League, Clayton, Vic., 1966.

59 For an example, diary of George Glen Auchterlonie, 31 August 1874, 'Went and began cutting the hazel scrub below the hut but met an accident about eleven o’clock, a piece of stick fell from the top of a spar I cut my cheek just below my eye the cut is horizontal and about an inch long and very deep'. Also ‘Memories of the Early Settlement of Narracan’ by Lucy Bell, in R Murray Savige, History of the Savige family, Frankston, the author, 1966, p. 115, ‘Tom did a lot of his clearing single handed. Annie told later on, how she would hear his axe all the morning, then the crash of the forest giant and how anxiously she would await the sound of the axe and renewed chopping’. Lucy also remembered the death of a man while rolling logs.
It is clear from the pattern of alienation … that every attempt was being made to select flat, open, lightly timbered, land with permanent water but well drained, unlike the southern lowlands along the coast to the west of Wilson’s Prom, and ready access to market. Only the outstanding soils of the Brandy Creek district disrupted this pattern …\textsuperscript{60}

Once the open flats were taken up, newcomers had no alternative but to select heavily forested land. While parts of these forests were admired for the magnificence of their trees and being picturesque and beautiful, few redeeming qualities could be found in the morasses.\textsuperscript{61}

Wetlands combined both of the colonists’ least favourite characteristics, being both closed and low. The copy of real estate agents illustrates this preference for high and dry land. McLennan described a lot at Shaving Point as having a ‘most elevated and salubrious position’, while a farm at Paynesville had ‘an unprecedented situation commanding a magnificent view of Jones Bay and the distant mountains. The healthy situation and other advantages of this farm can only be realised by personal inspection’.\textsuperscript{62} Descriptions published in various papers on walking trips in the mountains also linked height with health, and legal disputes about high land, lower lands and drainage also build up this picture.\textsuperscript{63} In his work on Gippsland, Don Watson noted that ‘it is the habit of explorers to compose their finest thoughts on hill tops, or at least to locate them there in their memoirs. Gullies do not encourage the sense of man’s domain, or favour a friendly communion with God’.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{60} Legg, ‘Arcadia or abandonment’, p. 180.
\textsuperscript{62} Both in \textit{Bairnsdale Advertiser}, 14 February 1882. See also, \textit{GT}, 5 October 1885, McLean and Co. auction notice for Mount View Estate at Tralargon; \textit{GT}, 15 July 1871, Victoria Hotel in Bourke St West Melbourne, advertising its ‘elevated’ position; \textit{GT}, 11 March 1873, Hawthorn Grammar School in Melbourne advertising the school as being in the healthiest suburb in Melbourne and ‘elevated and pleasant’.
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{GT}, 27 February 1891, ‘An Australian Midsummer Holiday by a Country Parson’; \textit{GT}, 25 May 1872, Land Board proceedings noting a dispute between Emson and Creaton over who had the high ground; \textit{GT}, 13 September 1873, Legal Intelligence, Traill vs Rosedale Shire; \textit{GT}, 9 May 1876, reprinting a letter from Sale Mayor to the District Surveyor opposing selection of high lands on the Sale Common.
The high/low dichotomy has been previously discussed in Chapter 4 in relation to floods, and the moral symbology of popular music and hymns that associated goodness with height, light and the sun. This high and low contrast is a regular motif in Christianity. The geographic structure of hell, purgatory and heaven in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is but one example of the association of low places with undesirable emotions. It is no accident that the Fifth Circle of Hell is a ‘dreary swampland, vaporous and malignant’ abutting the River Styx. The first epigraph referencing Dante shows that Victorian popular imagery was influenced by classical depictions of low muddy and undesirable places.

Low-lying, still waters were further reviled because of concerns that they could produce ill-health in humans. Before the acceptance of microbes, stagnant and polluted water was widely associated with the concept of miasma. While the actual mechanism by which disease was contracted was mistaken, the stink of stagnant water was the best evidence a person had to avoid illness. According to the *Water Atlas*, one litre of contaminated water infects the surrounding 10 litres, very similar to the theory of miasma so beloved by nineteenth-century scientists and reformers. So colonial Gippslanders were right to be worried, both in their own terms and on the evidence of modern science. Mortality statistics indicated that one quarter of Victorians could expect to die from miasmatic disease, including smallpox, scarlatina, diphtheria, typhus, cholera, influenza, dysentery and ague. None of these would be a pleasant way to die. Schmitt’s thesis on the Gippsland Hospital and approaches to typhoid, diphtheria and tuberculosis gives a picture of a community worried about the environmental contributors to disease but without the resources to manage them. Frederick Hagenauer, in charge of the Ramahyuck Aboriginal Mission, expressed the kind of apprehension about illness that would have been common:

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66 Giblett also discusses the use of swamp imagery by popular Victorian writers like Charles Dickens. For example, Pip from *Great Expectations* was born in a swamp.
68 This figure is derived from Statistics of the Colony of Victoria for the year 1864, vital Statistics etc, in Victoria, Legislative Assembly, *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly and Papers*, First Session 1866. It gave deaths from all sources from independence up to 1864. The yearly average of deaths from miasmatic causes varied from a low of 22 per cent to a high of 37 per cent.
Another reason for gratitude has been, and still is, that whilst almost every part of Victoria and especially Gippsland has been visited by illness of different kinds, no disease has come near the station and all are enjoying good health. This may be partly accounted for by the healthy situation of the place, but perhaps also to the protection and mercy of God whose loving kindness has no end.

The phrase ‘healthy situation’ is indicative of the belief that the environment impacts upon health in important ways. To a modern reader this sounds quaint, used as we are to the powerful effects of antibiotics. David Servan-Schreiber suggests that the twentieth-century revolution in healthcare obliterated other aspects of healthcare that had been important in medical practice for centuries, such as considerations of diet, location and the doctor/patient relationship. The consensus was that a healthy place was high, dry and well ventilated. The local and regional papers in Gippsland regularly reported on polluted water and their attendant health problems. This example from the *Morwell Advertiser* of 7 February 1890 is typical:

*In a little town like Boolarra (where, by the way, Health officer visits are like Angels, few and far between) a stagnant pool is allowed to remain unattended to, and the inhabitants are compelled to ‘breathe contagion to the world’ as Hamlet puts it. Directly behind Clarke’s Hall, a place of public amusement, this dirty pond is allowed to remain. What wonder that Mr. Biles has had the misfortune to have to send his daughter to Melbourne, suffering from typhoid in its most malignant form.*

There is a small counter strand in European history that has valued stillness. For example, the monks that settled at Glastonbury in the fourth century were attracted to the wetlands there because they provided a place of retreat and contemplation. Well-known European myths and legends engage the use of a reflective pool as part of the storyline, with the most

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72 *GT*, 13 September 1870, report of the Avon Shire Council meeting of Sept 12; *Castner’s Rural Australian*, March 1876, p. 17; *GT*, 1 January 1876, Bairnsdale correspondent; *GT*, 11 September 1876, Toongabbie correspondent; *GT*, 11 October 1876, Letter from ‘Public Improvements’; *GT*, 11 November 1881, health report to Sale Council; *GDN*, 4 April 1890, Bairnsdale Inspector of Nuisances; *GT*, 25 February 1887; *GT*, 9 October 1891, Sale Council health officer reports; *GT*, 5 March 1896, Sale Council correspondence from F Chaafe; *GT*, 13 January 1898, report by Dr Chapman to Avon Shire Council.
famous being the tale of Narcissus and Echo. The Book of Common Prayer has the famous saying ‘be still and know that I am God’, while in the Bible, God is again described as ‘a small still voice’. Yet, Gippsland’s colonisers were anything but still. As Chapter 5 demonstrated, their wholehearted faith was in movement and progress.

The overwhelming impression from diaries and day books is one of constant movement and activity. Settlers were constantly on the move, getting their goods flowing into the colonial economy and maintaining their social relationships. Gippsland’s muddy roads presented a major impediment. Writing about Warragul, Francis Barfus said:

> After rain the roads are practically impassable. A friend of mine, a German clergyman in Melbourne gave up his intention of visiting several friends who are settled in this district on one occasion when he beheld the roads leading to the forest deep in mud and mire. He probably remembered the words of Schuller ‘Let man not be tempted by the Gods nor wish to behold what they have kindly clothed in darkness and terror.’

Their preachers were equally as mobile. Rev. CJ Chambers, reflecting on his time as the vicar at Yarragon wrote:

> Today, theorists, learning by experience have reclaimed and transformed the water [of Moe Swamp] into a glorious blessing. No need now for the Minister of religion to seek the privilege of keeping his appointments by riding along the railway track.

Francis Hales’s extended trip through Gippsland made him saddle sore and bone weary. Later clergymen with smaller areas still travelled regularly, alternating services throughout their district.

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73 Book of Common Prayer; King James Bible, 1 Kings, 19:12.
75 Francis Barfus, A Visit to the Mission Station Ramahyuck, SLV, MS 12645, box 3486/3, p. 4.
77 For example, Diary of Rev. Thomas Moorhouse quoted in Traralgon and District Historical Society Bi Monthly Bulletin, vol. 1, no. 1, March 1970. Extract of his diary from Sunday 17 August 1879: ‘Service this morning was at 10 o’clock. The weather was very rough. It rained nearly all the morning but we had a good attendance not withstanding. My horse being ready I rode off immediately to Flynn’s Creek. Called at Mr Sykes for a cup of tea, and he rode on with me to the Church. The storm kept people away, and only four of us were present … I came on to Traralgon through mud and water to the Presbyterian church, being very few present’.
The King family papers are a testimony to the constant travel that went with the squatting occupation. In 1849, an economically challenging year, King and his men were regularly travelling to Port Albert taking skins, tallow and live animals to port and taking delivery of supplies. Buckley’s life is a constant round of movement, shifting stock on his run or moving stock across the entire region. Even selectors, who signed on for a settled agricultural life, never stayed still. This was especially the case for men who had to take supplementary work cutting bark, or transporting goods, until they could get a return from their farms. Men of other professions were also on the move, especially government staff like surveyors or land commissioners. The only pool of stillness in all this relentless activity was the Sabbath, regularly observed by the majority.

It is possible to link this constant movement with the dislike for swamps at both a practical and metaphorical level. Spurning stillness outside suggests spurned stillness inside. Slowing down and being still creates space for questioning, for peering into the reflective mirror of the catchment’s waters. But Gippslanders show little evidence of self reflection about the process of colonising a foreign country. As the definition of ecological perception in Chapter 1 showed, the capacity to reflect is critical to understanding ecological processes. Having committed to the colonial endeavour, it was important to retain the certainty that they had ‘permission’ from God to subdue and remake the catchment and civilise the natives. Of all the farms created in the catchment, perhaps the Ramahyuck mission holds up the most revealing mirror. Just as Gippslanders tried to channel and tame the waters of the catchment and make them conform to preset ideas of usefulness, regularity and predictability, so it was with the surviving Kurnai. In his annual report in 1877, Rev. Hagenauer took pride in quoting the findings of the royal commission, which reported:

> Everything in and about the Ramahyuck Mission was found in a faultless state of order. The children were cleanly and well clad, and many of them educated up to a standard that would compare favourably with schools frequented by white children. The adults were also found to have acquired industrious and well regulated habits. Not only are the Blacks on this station well cared for and ably instructed in those arts that pertain to industrious rural life, but they are taught to be contented and happy.

78 For an example of metaphorical stagnation, see GT, 30 December 1895, editorial: ‘The true cause of stagnation which has hung over this portion of Gippsland during the past year or two is that the people drifted into easy and idle ways’.

79 Letter from Rev. F Hagenauer to Mr Hamilton, 5 October 1877, Letterbooks of FA Hagenauer, vol. 2.
The Ramahyuck mission, with its near cottages and grid layout, was the antithesis of the supposedly random and meaningless life the Kurnai had pursued amongst the wetlands.

Given that activity and movement was the unspoken creed of settlers, it is no wonder they reserved such loathing for the morasses, swamps and bogs that caused prolonged trouble for travellers. Copeland said that ‘the bush tracks would bog a duck’. Nearly every reminiscence of pioneering days contains an account about mud and morasses and the difficulty of travelling through them. ‘Instead of trying to find a suitable mode of transport for the wetland,’ Giblett writes, ‘the western response has been largely the attempt to cross the marsh by building roads through it or around it or to canalise it in order to provide a means of communication through it.’

Government officers discussed this ‘problem’ in their reports. Skene and Smythe wrote in 1874 that:

> For a distance of eight miles from the part just described [Melbourne to Brandy Creek] the road over which the rich chocolate soil showed marks everywhere of difficulties met and overcome by travellers in wet weather – holes where wheels had been buried to the axle, and deep ruts partly filled with dust.

In the wetter western parts of the catchments, complaints about bad roads and poor drainage abound. Two examples are characteristic of this tone. In May 1897, the Sale Borough Council received a petition from 19 ratepayers, requesting repairs to culverts and a footpath to be gravelled ‘so that their children could get to town dry-footed which is impossible during the greater part of the year’. Councillor Coverdale spoke in support. Since the village settlers had fenced off their allotments, pedestrians were forced to keep to the road ‘which was little better than a swamp’. In 1886 the Morwell Advertiser commented on the state of the road outside Mr Date’s blacksmith shop:

80 Copeland, Path of progress, p. 332.
81 Giblett, Postmodern wetlands, p. 18.
82 Report on the physical character and resources of Gippsland, by the Surveyor General and the Secretary for Mines, with a Map and Geological Section, 1874, John Ferres, Govt Printer, p. 19.
83 GT, 13 May 1897. For an earlier example of a similar problem of fencing and bogs, see GT, 11 October 1876, Rosedale correspondent: ‘People are never satisfied. Complaints were made some time since of a large landholder in this vicinity having unfenced roads running through his property, and now that he has commenced to fence the roads off, the gentle public are wroth because they cant get comfortably along them. Where, for instance, a swampy place existed, and it was possible until lately to make a short detour and avoid the difficulty, fences compel the traveller to “keep to the road” and suffer the bogging or whatever else may be attendant thereon.’
It would be difficult to find a greater quagmire in all the country around. What is extremely nice about it is that the public generally have no idea of the spongy nature of the ‘earthworks’ and so they are taken by surprise when they reach the centre and realize with the utmost felicity that they are gradually sinking a few feet below the surface. We have gone through the experience and enjoyed it exceedingly.\(^8\)

Gippsland’s muddy roads stood in the way of settlers’ desire for firm and reliable roads of communication and commerce. Mud was also a domestic nightmare for women, trying to keep clothes and houses clean. Maggie Lamb wrote in her diary with satisfaction how she was able to get all the family out of the house, so that she was ‘able to scrub out in safety as no one was about to keep walking in and out’.\(^8\)

Behind these complaints was a deeper level of worry, one that reflects a metaphorical understanding of the problem. No one was immune from the mud. Schoolchildren, farmers carrying produce to markets, dairy farmers getting to the creamery, the shire engineer; all faced this obstacle to their daily work. Mud was nothing if not democratic! Mud interfered with the orderly, planned and defined round of life that colonial Gippslanders were trying to build. When your horse fell into a bog on the way to the railway to send butter to Melbourne, you not only faced inconvenience, and probably expense, it was also a reminder that you were not really the one in command. Mud destabilised more than the material body. It also destabilised one’s ambitions and goals. The sticky, oozing, soft, unpredictable and unformed character of mud unsettled the settlers, especially those living in the heavily forested western portions of the catchment. Mud prevents a purposeful making of one’s way. Instead, it produces floundering, an anathema to these progress-oriented pioneers.

One of the world’s most famous texts, and one highly important to devoted Christians, is called *Pilgrim’s Progress*. This text bequeathed the phrase ‘slough of despond’, which equates the physical floundering caused by mud with a symbolic floundering. The book is a parable for finding Christian faith in God. The slough of despond is the first obstacle that

\(^8\) Morwell Advertiser, 27 November 1886. Other examples of complaints about stagnant waters include *GT*, 23 August 1870, report of the Avon Shire Council meeting of Monday 22 August: correspondence from JM Clark complaining of stagnant water opposite his hotel, granted 1,000 yards of earth. See also fn. 59.

\(^8\) Diary of Maggie Lamb, Saturday 15 January 1910, CGS, 05317.
Christian meets after having abandoned his wife, children and home. He struggles to extricate himself from it because he is burdened down with sin. There are a couple of uses of the term ‘slough’ or the phrase ‘slough of despond’ which lend credence to this connection between mud and stagnation in nineteenth century Gippsland. Most often they were in connection with Punt Lane in Sale, and generally after a flood. The year 1870, already discussed in Chapter 5, yielded three references by the *Gippsland Times*. One of these made a direct comparison to Bunyan’s character, Christian:

> We have been told by a gentleman who has lately crossed from Longford to this town that, like Christian in the Slough of Despond, he walled for a time in the Punt Lane, being grievously bedaubed with dirt, and only succeeded in getting out of his difficulty by the help of a good Samaritan who was journeying by the same road. Anyone who from choice would live at Latrobe bridge must have extraordinary amphibious instincts.

The phrase ‘grievously bedaubed with dirt’ is a direct quote from the text. One Gippslander recorded in his diary reading *Pilgrim’s Progress* with his future wife. Less than a month later, he resolved to give up dancing because he believed it sinful, indicating that Christian’s tale is taken seriously by this couple at least. As a place in the landscape where water apparently ceases to move, swamps and morasses were both physical impediments to the flow of people, goods and stock, and they represented a fear of spiritual stagnation.

Swamps, bogs and drains could indeed be dangerous places. Without clear paths, it was easy to get lost. Children were particularly vulnerable. They were often sent out to find straying animals, and as feed was normally good in such places, this combination was too often lethal. Kate Robinson drowned in a waterhole after being chased by an angry goat, and a young boy (only identified in the paper as Jones), who was searching for a horse

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86 *GT*, 28 May 1870, a horse got stuck in the ‘slough’ and while trying to extricate itself fell over the embankment. The report did not state whether the horse sustained injuries. *GT*, 12 July 1870, the Rosedale Road Board received a letter from Mr MacMahon who said his address was the ‘Slough of Despond’. He was requesting drainage works, which were approved.

87 *GT*, 28 June 1870.

88 Diary of Alf Broome, 4 September 1887, for the reference to *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and 4 August 1887 for the dancing. For another example of the use of the term slough of despond in relation to crime, see *GT*, 4 October 1861.
in the Cowarr Backwater, also drowned.\textsuperscript{89} One of Catherine Currie’s children, Katie, saved the family’s black mare, Bess, when she got trapped in a waterhole.\textsuperscript{90} Later, the drowning of Catherine’s daughter ultimately sent her mother to the Yarra Bend Asylum.

Stock often met their deaths in the morasses. George Auchterlonie recorded in his diary how one of his bullocks had been so weakened by its struggle to extricate itself from the mud that he offered the skin to his neighbour ‘for the trouble of killing him’. The fact that the backwaters and morasses acted as drought refuges, and that many farmers tried to increase their usefulness for grazing by sowing seed, contributed to this problem.\textsuperscript{91}

Another reason why wetlands caused such ire is that they are changeable, with water levels fluctuating seasonally. This is particularly a problem when it comes to systems of property. Western systems of property assume a uniformity that is highly at odds with how the hydrological system actually works. Vileisis identifies this misfit between property and ecology as a driving theme in her work on wetland destruction in the United States.\textsuperscript{92} Some Gippslanders recognised this, particularly those who opposed the cutting up and selling of Sale Common. In essence, they asked how was it possible to expect selectors to establish a farm based on the European style of agriculture, when at any time their land might change from dry to wet? In other words, how do you impose a fixed property and farming system on something that fluctuates? The extremely wet year of 1870 illuminated this problem. In one of the earlier floods of that year, the \textit{Gippsland Times} commented:

\begin{quote}

The flooded state of these localities for the past two or three days must have convinced all those who had a doubt on the subject that three fourths of the area are wholly unsuited to the purposes of settlement. People may select these lands – \textit{waters} just now would be the true descriptive word – if they please …\textsuperscript{93}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{89}{For Kate Robinson, see \textit{GT}, 23 January 1869; for Jones see \textit{GT}, 29 April 1870. See also \textit{GFJ}, 2 August 1887; \textit{GT}, 8 March 1897, Charles Smith, age 21 months, drowns in a drain opposite the Port Albert PO.}
\footnotetext{90}{Diary of Catherine Curry, 8 October 1882.}
\footnotetext{91}{Diary of George Glen Auchterlonie, 16 September 1871, ‘Sowing grass in the back waters’, and 21 July 1873.}
\footnotetext{92}{A Vileisis, \textit{Discovering the unknown landscape: A history of America’s wetlands}, IslandPress, Washington DC, 1997, p. 5.}
\footnotetext{93}{\textit{GT}, 26 March 1870, emphasis in original.}
\end{footnotes}
When the next flood came, the paper wrote:

Of course the Chinese gardeners in the north west backwater were obliged to leave their dwellings, which became surrounded, and many of the residents on the Common had to clear out – a forcible illustration of the utility of the common for agricultural or residential purposes. It is unlikely after this that the land will ever be coveted for purposes other than what it now fulfils – those of grazing.94

The colonial project had as one of its cores the extension of private property systems to the Australian landscape. As Sheryl Breen notes, ‘from Plato to Locke and Marx, conceptions of property have been central to our visions of political liberty, equality and order’.95 The idea of the possession of one’s private and productive estate has been cherished for generations and was an especially strong motivator of the selection era.

The imposition of the Western ideal of property and ownership over the catchment caused a number of problems for selectors, because it attempted to place a uniform grid and uniform rules over a geographic space that was, manifestly, not uniform. And it was the areas of wetness where it was the most liable to change. Wetlands shrink in summer and expand in winter, while creeks and rivers change course. Floodplains flood. The residents of Bundalaguah understood this in 1870 when they opposed their common being thrown open for selection. It was a ‘dangerous locality’, not providing the kind of certainty needed for success and profit.96

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94 GT, 19 April 1870. The topic of a definition of a morass arose again in GT, 7 May 1870, when the newspaper reported on a deputation made to the minister about which morass lands and which high lands were included in lands thrown open for selection.


96 GT, 30 April 1870.
The final reason for the dislike of still waters was their negative impact on agriculture. Rich, productive lands meant dry lands. The *Morwell Advertiser* could not have put it plainer than this:

Fixed Facts in Agriculture: One: No lands can be preserved in a high state of fertility unless clover and grass are cultivated [text illegible]. Two: Deep ploughing greatly improves the productive powers of a variety of soils that is not wet. Three: Subsoiling sound lands, that, land that is not wet, is eminently conducive to increased production. Four: All wet land should be drained. Five: Draining of wet lands and marshes adds to their value by making them produce more and better crops and producing them earlier. Six: To manure or lime wet lands is to throw, manure, lime and labour away.

This was only echoing sentiments expressed nearly two decades previously by the *Gippsland Times* on behalf of those objecting to the selection of morass lands. ‘There can be neither wisdom nor kindness in encouraging agriculturalists to take up land for cultivation that is neither fit for ploughing and seed sowing or safe as a place of residence.’ At the same time, settlers knew from long experience in their home countries that drained swamps provided highly desirable soil for intensive horticultural enterprises. There is a good reason why the Rhine has lost 90 per cent of its floodplain, largely to agriculture. One of the additional benefits of the creation of the permanent entrance to the Lakes was the transformation of morass lands abutting the Latrobe and Avon rivers into ‘rich summer and autumn pasturages’, thanks to a 21-inch drop in the level of Lake Wellington.

In this section, I have discussed how Gippslanders found places of slow and still waters to be an impediment. While they had some distinct advantages and were regularly used, on balance Gippslanders found swamps, morasses and boggy land to be a great deal of trouble. There were multiple reasons for this intense dislike. Physically, they impeded movement and sight, and therefore increased danger to travellers. They could harbour vermin and criminals. They were thought to be unhealthy places of bad air and tainted water, endangering life and health.

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97 GT, 18 January 1886, editorial on draining the Heart morass.
98 Morwell Advertiser, 5 February 1887.
99 GT, 23 April 1870.
101 GT, 13 August 1896.
Taken collectively, these physical characteristics were endowed with symbolic distaste. They were low in the landscape, symbolising the inability to see forward. Their ability to slow people down became symbolic for emotional, economic and spiritual stagnation. Finally, by being neither land nor water, they refuted the boundaries that colonial settlers attempted to impose on them.

Responding to mud

Civilisation, as we fondly imagine it, and drainage, the conscious art of alteration to the hydrological features of a place, are closely related. The practice of drainage, to facilitate agriculture and the creation of urban settlements, was pivotal to the development of ancient civilisations. Drainage is also usually regarded as a good thing, such as Nace’s assertion that ‘the Romans emerged from barbarism and achieved civilization under the influence of the Etruscans, who were masters of the arts of swamp drainage and irrigation’. It is only in recent decades, under the influence of the fifth version of the hydrological cycle, when the cumulative environmental impacts of wetland loss has become more clear, that this assumption has been questioned.

102 Williams, *Draining of the Somerset Levels*, p. 3.
103 In the *Handbook of ancient water technology*, Wilson provides a brief summary of lake, marsh and land drainage up to the Roman period, while noting that pre-Roman drainage techniques are poorly studied. Drainage of lakes can be dated as early as the Bronze Age in the Lake Kopais Basin in central Greece, when an 11 km by 18 km lake was drained for agriculture. In the second century AD, Roman soldiers in North Africa were set to work to drain marshes to settle colonists and make money, p. 309. Numbers of private profit schemes of marsh drainage have been identified throughout Roman Europe, while those undertaken in England appear to have been state led. Land drainage was of a more medium scale and mostly appears to have been undertaken by individual owners. Works to improve drainage of vineyards and orchards have been identified during archaeological works and various agricultural writers of the time give detailed descriptions of different types. See Wilson in O Wikander (ed.), *Handbook of ancient water technology*, Technology and Change in History, vol. 2, Brill, Leiden, 2000, pp. 304–11.
Emigrants to Gippsland from Europe or America were certainly familiar with drainage. In Europe, drainage of wetland areas increased from around the 1500s, with examples in many countries.\textsuperscript{105} Virtually every country in Europe had at least one iconic drainage project, and many hundreds of smaller ones. While discussing draining at The Heart run near Sale, the \textit{Gippsland Times} compared the catchment to Holland. Using drainage work in Lake Haarlem completed in the late 1850s as the comparison, drainage saw a ‘dangerous lake’ transformed into an ordered and productive landscape of orchards and gardens.\textsuperscript{106}

Colonial Gippslanders wanted prosperity and progress, and transport, water supply and an expanding agricultural sector were the yardsticks of their progress. Practically, this meant firm, dry roads, well-made bridges and ground that would not rot their crops:

\begin{quote}
We must make the lands more profitable than by their existence in their pristine covering, this is the age of science and advancement and we must progress with both, or forever remain in the same state we are now in. We well know we cannot all be agriculturalists, but at the same time we know that agriculture is the foundation of progressiveness.\textsuperscript{107}
\end{quote}

Above all they feared stagnation, and wetlands symbolised this fear. Their collective actions were largely about changing the hydrological cycle: to rechannel water where it spread over the landscape, to create permanent, moderate flow in defined channels wherever possible. In short, they drained and reclaimed. That drainage equalled improvement was an automatic assumption which colonial Gippslanders supported, and regularly put into practice.

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{106} \textit{GT}, 18 January 1886.
\item \textsuperscript{107} \textit{GT}, 21 August 1861.
\end{enumerate}
As demonstrated above, wetlands held a mixture of positive and negative qualities. Which of these prevailed for individuals was largely a function of their particular circumstances. Collectively in Gippsland, the negative qualities held sway. This was not necessarily the case for other parts of Victoria. The deliberations of the government’s Professional Board on Swamp Reclamation in 1865 gives an illustration of this geographically modified approach.108 The board reported in 1866, rejecting a number of applications in other regions of Victoria but approving all those in Gippsland.109 The board based their rejection on climatic considerations. They concluded that the generally drier climate of the western and northwestern regions of Victoria meant that the wetlands performed greater service to a larger number of people through their ability to supply water and moderate the climate around them:

They arrest the rapid conduction of that water to the sea, and render less unequal the summer and winter discharges of the streams which are fed by these swamps … In nearly every case the general interests of the public would be more promoted by raising the levels of the water in these swamps by dams than by lowering those levels by drains.110

This public benefit was considered more significant than the benefit that would accrue to the aspiring lessees. Gippsland’s higher rainfall thus worked in squatter’s interests. Dow notes that the Gippsland applicants were primarily using the application process to both frustrate the selection process, and retain the valuable drought refuges under their own control.111 They had no real intention of draining. William Pearson

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108 Section 38 of the 1865 Land Act allowed people to lease swamps for a period of 21 years in order to facilitate drainage. The board was composed of Charles Ligar, Clement Hodgkinson and Robert Brough Smyth. Of the three, Hodgkinson had the most experience with water, having been involved with water supply for Melbourne, by being on the Board of Health and giving advice to Sir John Coode. HW Nunn, ‘Hodgkinson, Clement (1818–1893)’, Australian Dictionary of Biography, vol. 4, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1972, pp. 403–4.
110 Report of the Professional Board on Reclamation of Swamps, p. 4.
111 Reminiscences of William Blennerhasset, about the Bengworden and Meerlieu district from 1876. ‘When the selectors took up land they curtailed the squatters’ runs. They were often pushed into the sandy scrub. Surveyors were influenced to survey the land into the 3 cornered blocks so the cockies would have too much fencing to do. A junction of 6 roads at the Meerlieu school corner was one example.’ East Gippsland Historical Society Newsletter, vol. 1 no. 11. For other examples of squatters attempting to frustrate the selection process, see V Wardy, Beneath blue hills: A history of Mewburn Park, Tinamba and Riverlea, Kapana Press, Bairnsdale, 1994, p. 7; Diary of Patrick Coady Buckley, 25 May 1869, 13 and 14 July 1871 and 1 October 1871, CGS, 2806.
of Kilmany Park became embroiled in a parliamentary enquiry over his actions in relation to the morass lands in the Wurruk district. Despite allegations of corruption and dummying, Pearson’s wealth and social influence eventually held sway after four years. He retained the morass.112

For agriculturalists, a different attitude prevailed. Wet lands were undesirable for agriculture, and drainage was regularly discussed and undertaken. Like European nations, Gippslanders had their iconic projects, as well as many smaller ones. The two key projects that required massive investment by the state were the drainage of Koo-Wee-Rup Swamp and the Moe Swamp. Koo-Wee-Rup lies in Gippsland, but, as it is not part of the GLC, it is not considered here.113

The Moe Swamp area was universally decried for causing trouble to travellers. It covered the area from Yarragon to the banks of the Latrobe River. Adams described the Moe River as being a series of lagoons spreading up to 5 kilometres in width.114 With its permanent pools, soft soils and thick vegetation of paperbark, ti-tree and sword grass, it is not hard to understand the special loathing that travellers reserved for it. In 1849 Tyers wrote, at length, to his superiors in Melbourne about the best way to spend his limited road-making funds:

> It seems to me that the Moe Swamp cannot be avoided except by crossing the Narracan Rivulet near the present bridge – that is in between the junction of the Moe with the Narracan and that of the Rivulet with the La Trobe (a distance perhaps of no less than a hundred yards) and that this [word illegible] is the key between Melbourne and Gippsland – its improvement should be first effected.115

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112 J Power, ‘Squatters and selectors: An historical geography of the central Gippsland Plains 1840–1880’, BA Hons (Geography) thesis, University of Melbourne, 1979, p. 53; and VPP, 1876, vol. 25, p. 1873. The furore about Kilmany Park is exhaustively discussed in the local papers. GT, 6 and 27 June 1876, 20 and 27 September 1876 and 18 and 22 December 1876.

113 It lies in the Lang Lang catchment, which drains into Westernport. Because it was closer to Melbourne, this area became more densely settled earlier, which prompted calls for drainage earlier than at Moe. The first attempts to drain Koo-Wee-Rup date from 1857 and were by private individuals, which failed because of the size of the area, approximately 4,000 ha. K Sher, ‘Catchment management and littoral consequences: A case study approach from Victoria, Australia’, BA Hons (Geography) thesis, Monash University, 1986, p. 23.

114 Adams, So tall the trees, p. 21.

115 Letter from CJ Tyers to David Lennox, Superintendent of Bridges, 9 July 1849. SLV, MSM 157–8.
Figure 6.6: Selections in the parishes of Warragul, Moe, Yarragon and Narracan in 1883. Moe Swamp is not delineated except on the south by the main road.

Figure 6.7: Parish map of Yarragon, 1908.

The bottom section of the map depicts the now drained and regularised landscape of the Moe Swamp. The bottom, relatively straight line is the main road, while the next is the main drain. Sandwiched in between is the contour drain.

He went into detail describing how soft the bottom of the creek was, how low the surrounding floodplain was, the shape and strength of the banks, and known flood heights, from which he concluded that to ‘render this road available throughout the year’, three quarters of a mile of road and bridges would have to be elevated above the bank level of Narracan by 4–5 feet. This work alone, he said, would take the entire budget, and he did not bother to list other places that were troublesome to travellers.

Tyers wrote in 1849, well before the gold rushes and the Land Selection Acts brought an influx of new migrants. Moe Swamp continued to be a source of aggravation for all travellers. The first formal moves to drain Moe Swamp date from 1881, when the Narracan Shire president called a meeting to approach the government for support. This was prompted by the influx of new residents brought by the railway, and by a perceived shortage of land, girded by the longstanding knowledge that drained swamps usually have fertile soils. The precedent of Koo-Wee-Rup encouraged the lobbying process, but it took until 1888 for the first contracts to be let. The intervening seven years were taken up with surveying and design work.

By the time the work commenced, the colony was in the grip of a major depression. The reclamation works became a way of addressing high unemployment, but even with extra labour available, progress was slow. As late as 1897, election candidate AC Groom told a meeting in Moe ‘that it was scandalous that a vast tract of country like the Moe Swamp was lying unoccupied’ and that ‘in its present state it was a detriment to the country’.

116 Moe and District Historical Society, *A Pictorial History of Moe and District*, Moe City Council, Moe, 1988, p. 112. According to Hans Faubel, George Auchterlonie was present at this meeting, *Coach News*, vol. 4, no. 2, December 1986, p. 3. For an example of general discussion on fertility of wetland soils, see *GM*, 7 April 1877, ‘The soil on the bank of the swamp near Foster St bridge must be very fertile judging by the sample of fine potatoes sent for the inspection of the Borough councillors on Thursday evening. They were grown in Mr Morris’ garden and the second crop of the same patch of land this year’.


Groom failed to realise that the Moe Swamp was a valuable ecological asset. The interest in converting swamps and morasses into agricultural lands indicates a basic understanding of hydrology, certainly of the movement of organic matter in rivers and its removal in wetlands. Beyond this, there is no evidence of any interest, appreciation or understanding of the other functions that wetlands perform. They filter out sediment and recycle nutrients, thus providing food for a wide range of flora and fauna. They also mitigate floods, and prevent erosion, by providing a space where water can spread out and slow down. When the Moe Main Drain was constructed from the raw material of the Moe Swamp, it removed approximately 5,000 ha of space where these functions could be performed.

In 1898, some of the drained lands were released. The general mood seemed to one of anticipating a boom, but it would not be long before the forces of hydrology would show themselves to be greater than the forces of men.

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As with the Koo-Wee-Rup Swamp, the initial drainage designs were soon found to be inadequate. When a large flood hit in April 1900, the swamp was back to its old self. The engineering works had proved completely incapable of restraining the hydrological cycle. Having sold the lots, the government was now forced to commit to another major round of construction to solve the problem it had just created. The bigger, better system simply shifted the problem downstream. In the following years, farmers along the Latrobe River began to complain that floods were worse, because of the greater amount of water being discharged at greater velocity.

There is also substantial evidence for smaller-scale drainage works across the GLC, beginning soon after settlement. The most voluminous evidence comes from newspaper reports of council meetings or the popular country tours of journalists and visitors. ‘Clodhopper’ from the Morwell Advertiser said of land around Traralgon:

This soil, although poor in quality in its natural state, may be made into really good arable land, that would increase its value to a wonderful extent for cultivation or for grass, and this may be done almost wholly by draining.\textsuperscript{120}

In his lengthy discourse, he explicitly linked life with flowing water and death with stagnant water. Local papers included a wide range of information about agricultural matters designed to help selectors. This often included advice on draining. Agricultural shows performed a similar function. ‘Progress’ wrote to the Gippsland Times pleading for the show organisers to expand the display of drainage materials, because ‘I know of scarcely any district where there is so much land requiring thorough drainage as Gippsland, and yet there was nothing in the shape of drainage pipes to be found at the late show’.\textsuperscript{121} At least two popular almanacs included drainage advice. In 1864 Dr LL Smith’s Medical Almanac advised readers that:

Next to the character of soil, stands in importance the facility for easy drainage, and no matter how tempting the position or quality of the soil is, let this be regarded as an essential requirement. If practicable, select only land the condition of which you have had the opportunity of observing in winter. In the absence of this

\textsuperscript{120} Morwell Advertiser, 25 June 1887.
\textsuperscript{121} GT, 9 April 1870.
knowledge, be careful to note if cattle have left the marks of their feet visible in deep indentations, colonially termed ‘glue pots’. If so it has arisen from the water lodging on the ground during winter; and such land where no natural inclination for drainage exists, should be avoided as totally unfit for horticulture.

In his 1895 edition, Dr LL Smith included a helpful table to calculate the pipes required to drain an acre of land at various widths of trenches.\textsuperscript{122} Stevens and Bartholomew’s almanac for 1867 gave detailed instructions for drainage, covering location, direction of feeder channels, depth, width and materials.\textsuperscript{123}

While the majority saw the benefits to be gained from drainage, it was also expensive. Some squatters had undertaken works, such as Lemuel Bolden at Lake Wellington. Mary Ann Barton’s memory of Bolden on their arrival on the selection was that he was sarcastic, probably angry that others were to benefit from his outlay.\textsuperscript{124} Around Gormandale, the cashed up Horsley brothers employed men and bullock teams to drain their swamp-dominated property and set about breeding horses for the Indian Army. Adjacent landholders followed their example.\textsuperscript{125}

In the series by the \textit{Gippsland Mercury} of prominent farms in 1882, all important improvements including drainage were noted, such as at Park House, which had been flood prone until the works were completed.\textsuperscript{126} Hezekiah Harrison supervised 20 Chinese workers on the Airlie estate, cutting drains and undertaking other work like cutting thistles, but this scale of employment tended to be the exception. Large families could achieve something similar.\textsuperscript{127} Goulding notes in her article on the

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\textsuperscript{122} Dr LL Smith’s Almanac, 1864 edition and 1895 edition.
\textsuperscript{123} Stevens and Bartholomew’s Sandhurst, Castlemaine, Echuca, Maldon, Dunolly, Maryborough, Back Creek, and Avoca district directory for 1867, p. 63.
\textsuperscript{125} K Huffer, ‘Dedicated to the pioneers of Gormandale: To those who succeeded and those who failed’, Typescript, NLA Npf994.56 H889, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{126} J Hales & J Little (eds), Gippsland estates 1882: A series of articles which appeared in the Gippsland Mercury from January to August 1882, Maffra and District Historical Society Bulletin, Supplementary Issue no. 4, Maffra, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{127} JW Leslie & HC Cowie, The wind still blows: Extracts from the diaries of Rev WS Login, Mrs H Harrison and Mrs W Montgomery, the authors, Sale, p. 90; East Gippsland Historical Society Newsletter, 1980, vol. 1, no. 7, p. 8. William and Jane Jennings of Estella Park, Broadlands, initially selected 80 acres in 1867, then a second 97 acres. ‘They worked the land as a family group, clearing, draining cultivating and improving’; they bought out failed neighbours.
Aboriginal people of east Gippsland (which includes Swan Reach) that Aboriginals were often employed to drain, in addition to a wide range of other farm tasks.\(^{128}\)

Some farmers cooperated in ventures to share the costs involved. The *Gippsland Farmer’s Journal* observed that at Tyers:

> An effort is to be made to drain a further proportion of the swamp and bring it under cultivation. Three or four of the selectors, whose holdings abut the flooded land, talk of combining to cut another large drain, shall carry off the surplus water into the Latrobe.\(^{129}\)

Pooling of resources and labours was a logical way of addressing the problem that wetlands and wetlands posed for selectors. The second epigraph commends another joint approach for the drainage the Heart Morass. Given that many settlers were inexperienced and had little money, a joint approach would have been beneficial. While the extant diaries don’t provide evidence of cooperative draining, they do provide plenty of evidence of cooperation on nearly every other aspect of farm life so it seems likely that settlers worked together to drain land.

The *Morwell Advertiser* told its readers that:

> Of course, drainage is an expensive operation, but it can be effectively done at a much less cost were other materials than pipes used. At this very time there are under drains, freely running, which were sunk twenty years since and filled with tea scrub, stones being laid upon a layer of scrub to within eight inches of the surface. Let stock owners bear this in mind, that ten acres of artificial grasses upon well drained land will yield more and better food than fifty acres of undrained, uncared for grass land.\(^{130}\)

Diary evidence tends to support the less expensive version of draining. Buckley employed small-scale, hand-dug drainage on his run, draining water away from his house and from key grain paddocks. John Disher wrote on 11 October 1869 that he was ‘clearing drains outside the garden and clearing around cottage’.\(^{131}\) It is reasonable to assume that Aleck

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\(^{129}\) *GFJ*, 27 January 1887.

\(^{130}\) *Morwell Advertiser*, 5 February 1887.

McMillan’s shorthand ‘at home all day working about the garden’, which crops up regularly in his diary in 1870, would have included draining off the accumulated waters from that very wet year. He also discusses forming paths in the garden and around the house, in order to allow family and servants to get from garden to house with dry feet. Alf Broome at the Nicholson makes three references to digging drains through the run of his diary, mostly to drain water from his orchard.132

The patchiness of references to drainage in surviving diaries must be interpreted in light of what stage each farmer was at, where the farm was and the type of weather at the time of recording. Most of the diaries that have survived are generally of a brief nature, a paragraph per day at most, and only in exceptional circumstances do they say more. This is understandable given how physical their work was and how tired they must have been. For instance, Margaret McCann kept a diary beginning in 1894 and her entries rarely went over two or three sentences. She lived at Stradbroke, where the soil becomes more sandy, free draining and coastal in character. Her common refrain is a plea for rain, hardly a situation when drainage would be required. For selectors just starting out, it would have been a matter of first things first. Providing a watertight house and barn, followed by clearing were the essential tasks. Draining would have come later, but as the diaries do not generally have long runs, it is not possible to say how much time farmers devoted to forming draining systems.

Hence, it is the unending regularity of references to drainage in council reports that is the most reliable guide to breadth of local drainage practices. Councils engage in local drainage construction and maintenance works continuously throughout the time period.133 The decision to drain commits residents to an unending expenditure. This is hardly new. Histories of Dutch drainage constantly emphasise the maintenance duties required

132 Diary of Patrick Coady Buckley, 20 October 1870, 21 December 1870, 19 July 1871 and 17 November 1971; Diary of Aleck McMillan, 19 August, 3 and 27 September 1870; Diary of Charles Alfred Broome, 14 November 1882, dug round the fruit trees in the orchard, 17 May 1884, dug a drain by the orchard, 5 June 1899, digging drains at the barn – wet weather.
133 GT, 23 January 1869, Shire of Avon has four tenders advertised: one for draining and repairing the road to Clydebank and the other three are for culvert construction and maintenance on other roads. GT, 1 June 1869, Shire of Bairnsdale lets eight tenders for work, six of which involve an element of water management, either drainage of a road or construction of culverts.
to keep dikes in good repair.\textsuperscript{134} The desire to remake local hydrology by keeping water moving did, however, have the effect of keeping money circulating throughout the local economy. Local contractors and labourers profited from the community’s dislike of still and stagnant waters.

Appropriate drainage in the catchment’s urban areas was seen as a sign of progress and achievement. As early as 1861 the \textit{Gippsland Times} was calling for it during election campaigns: ‘Our other requirements are paltry in comparison to this [opening the entrance]; nevertheless they require attention. We require safe and commodious public buildings, we require our roads clearing and our streets draining.’\textsuperscript{135} The \textit{Gippsland Farmer’s Journal} disparaged the state of roads in Traralgon in 1887, and called for street lighting to prevent residents falling into the numerous holes and bogs. It reported the findings of the inspector of the Central Board of Health in 1887, which criticised both Traralgon’s and Morwell’s drainage. In fact, the streets of Traralgon were so bad that the Glenmaggie correspondent to the paper dubbed it Mudditown.\textsuperscript{136} In 1897 the Maffra Shire Engineer complained that:

\begin{quote}
For its size and its prospects of expansion in the near future, Maffra is one of the worst drained towns in Victoria. Leaving out all minor considerations such as ease of travelling and comfort to pedestrians, some change must be urged in the interests of health.\textsuperscript{137}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{135} \textit{GT}, 14 August 1861.

\textsuperscript{136} \textit{GFJ}, 23 June 1887, and 1 July 1887 for the Glenmaggie comment.

\textsuperscript{137} \textit{GT}, 18 February 1897.
Examples of the dominance of water management in local government budgets are easy to find. In January 1869, the Avon Shire’s four advertised tenders were all to drain and maintain roads. In June 1869, the Shire of Bairnsdale advertised eight tenders, of which six were for road draining and culvert construction. The 1870 budget for the Sale Borough Council included works for ‘repairs to streets and rectifying water tables at 10d per chain’. Under the Health Acts, councils employed inspectors of nuisances whose job was to maintain public health by serving notices on residents who were causing a problem. Mr French of the Club Hotel in Sale received one such notice, and took such exception to it that he wrote a lengthy objection to it to the paper, detailing the cleanliness of his operations. He blamed residents further up Raymond St who, he claimed, had not installed drainage and the council for getting the levels wrong.

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138 *GT*, 23 January 1869, 1 June 1869 and 22 February 1870.
139 *GT*, 31 May 1870.
It is reasonable to expect numerous complaints from Sale given its low-lying topography, but mountainous towns also had their share of urban drainage headaches. The *Walhalla Chronicle* described its streets as a ‘sea of mud’ and requested the young men to ride slowly, so that ladies’ attire did not become splattered.\(^{140}\) Drainage works drained council resources, with the purse never being equal to the need. The *Walhalla Chronicle* reported the ‘gruesome’ state of roads leading to the town from Moe and Toongabbie. Using an appropriate metaphor, the chronicle claimed that the special grant of £1,300 received for both was ‘a mere drop in the ocean and would be swamped on a few chains of corduroy’. The editor took the opportunity again to call for a rail line, which were not subject to the bogs and swamps that bedevilled road travellers.\(^ {141}\)

### Conclusion

In the whole study period, the only voices in the GLC raised against rural drainage were those who wanted to keep the morasses for grazing. Mostly, people thought that agriculture was a better use for such fertile soils, and the need for town drainage was never questioned. Settlers had a largely self-serving interest in using or eradicating wetlands: What can I get from here? How can this place serve my ends? Given the culturally and religiously entrenched perceptions about swamps as places of darkness, danger and illness, this utilitarian and individualistic approach was the norm.

To convert a swamp into farmland was economically beneficial to individuals in the short term, and was widely supported in the community as a public service. With so little incentive to look at the morasses in a different way, they could not possibly know that they started in train a series of environmental changes that would jeopardise the Lakes system. The interest in converting swamps and morasses into agricultural lands indicates a simplistic understanding of hydrology, certainly of the movement of organic matter, nutrients and sediments in rivers and their removal in wetlands. Beyond this, there is no evidence at all of any interest, appreciation or understanding of the many ecological functions that wetlands perform.\(^ {142}\) That is, until a natural disaster struck.

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\(^ {140}\) *Walhalla Chronicle*, 19 November 1897.

\(^ {141}\) *Walhalla Chronicle*, 16 June 1899.

\(^ {142}\) Bullock & Acreman, ‘The role of wetlands in the hydrological cycle’, pp. 358–89.
During drought, fire and flood, Gippsland’s swamps and morasses suddenly seemed valuable. Sadly, this appreciation faded with the return of moderate conditions. Ecological knowledge gained in hard times didn’t survive good times.

By supporting and encouraging the destruction of Moe Swamp and the myriad of other small swamps, colonial Gippslanders were proclaiming that they knew better than nature. The still, reflective surface of the swamp showed a people who were vain and arrogant, but with little reason to justify that position. It also shows a people who were trying to do the best for themselves with the knowledge they had. Reality, no doubt, lies somewhere between these two extremes.