

Drought, Endurance and 'The Way Things Were': The Lived Experience of Climate and Climate Change in the Mallee

Deb Anderson¹

No one wants to believe that it's going to be dry ... I mean, as much as they listen—and they listen—to what the experts say, there's always that dream in the back of their mind that they'll be wrong and that ... we will get good rain and ... go back to the way things were.

Pam Elliott, 2006

Rural histories of the Mallee have presented spirited sagas of community perseverance in 'battling' a harsh climate. As Tom Griffiths notes, the very word 'Mallee' became 'synonymous for heroic, even bloody-minded settlement' (21). 'Opened up' from the mid-1800s with the establishment and subsequent collapse of pastoralism, and expanded in the wholesale clearing of the mallee forest and advance of dryland (or rain-fed) agriculture from the early twentieth century, European occupation of the semi-arid Mallee has been narrated predominantly as an ongoing struggle on a frontier beset by environmental extremes. Indeed, the Mallee has been singled out as a poignant case of 'struggle country': from photographer Bill Boyd's celebration of settler egalitarianism in *Having A Go* (Bate) to the championing of rural optimism in *The Way It Was* (Torpey)—a collection of *Argus* news articles on Mallee settlers' 'unquenchable faith in the country' (as stated on the book's cover)—to Rhona van Veldhuisen's *Pipe Dreams*, a history of water supply in the Wimmera-Mallee region, 'where coping with disastrous drought was part of the pioneer lifestyle' (cover).

Droughts, much like floods, bushfires and cyclones, have punctuated Australian rural, regional and national histories. As Neil Barr and John Cary write, Australian land use since the import of European agriculture has been a 200-year struggle to 'green' a brown land—'from the early attempts to recreate England in the land of exiles, through the dreams of a sturdy yeomanry and of turning the coastal streams inland, to the search for new crop and pasture species better

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suited to our climate' (3). Drought has played a central role in the ongoing social construction of a 'harsh' and 'unpredictable' climate and the mythologizing of rural battlers, shaping foundational narratives of struggle and hope. 'Drought', in this context, can be viewed as a cultural term whose primary connotations are less related to rainfall than to an overarching, mythic narrative of endurance. As CSIRO scientist John Williams argued recently, the Australian psyche remained dominated by 'dreams of water' (40). In 2003 he pointed critically to how such 'dreams' shaped ideas on rural sustainability: 'The critical need is not to drought-proof the inland, for that is impossible. It is to myth-proof Australians' (42). Arguably, however, cultural engagement with climate is under constant renegotiation. Further, as historians have argued, 'recognising the power of myth' opens the door to a broader historical approach (Samuel and Thompson 21).

In this paper, I draw upon oral history material gathered from members of drought-stricken Mallee dryland farm communities in a bid to bring into relief changing cultural conceptions of drought and climate change.² Fortuitously, the timing of my research in a period of recurrent drought in southeast Australia, between 2004 and 2007, has enabled the capture of significant moments of reflection and self-reflexivity, marked in public discourse by a pronounced shift in beliefs on drought and climate change. Amid the tide of empirical data being produced on climate and the scientific projections for increasingly severe and frequent droughts in Australia, intensifying a divisive debate over rural futures, the oral histories gathered in the Mallee revealed conceptions of climate embedded in narratives not only of historical rural endurance. These were also narratives of dwelling in uncertainty, even of existential crisis, as rural change (socio-economic, structural, environmental) posed a threat to the identity of Mallee dryland farming people. In these tales of endurance and uncertainty both scientific expertise *and* lived experience were considered valid but inherently partial forms of knowledge.

Here I explore the oral history of just one informant, that of Mallee resident Pam Elliott, whose narrative sheds light on the interplay of lived experience and scientific knowledge in constructing place- and identity-based responses to climate. During the period of my research Pam was working on reception at the Mallee Research Station, the local research arm of the Victorian Government's Department of Primary Industries (DPI). A significant part of her job involved fielding calls from farmers and others from across the dryland agricultural region, and linking those callers to a DPI staff member with expertise in their topic of

² The research was conducted on a Melbourne Research Scholarship (2003-2007), which was a joint sponsorship provided by the Australian Centre (University of Melbourne) and the Technology and Sustainable Futures division of Museum Victoria. Participants were advised from the outset that their recorded histories were to be utilised in my doctoral research, then stored in perpetuity as an oral-historical state resource at Museum Victoria.

interest. Many a farmer had called seeking guidance on weather and climate. In Pam's oral-history narrative, discourses of lived experience and community perceptions of climate intersect with scientific knowledge. Critically, her narrative reveals that discourse on drought *as* climate change has the power to disrupt a narrative of mythic community solidarity. Pam's story alternated between a battler history of Mallee endurance and a more troubling contemplation of a land of evaporating promise.

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Pam Elliott's was one of 22 oral-history narratives derived over four years of interviewing Mallee residents about their lived experience of drought and their perceptions of climate change.³ My choice to focus primarily on a single person's oral-history narrative in this essay was pragmatic, since Pam's experience explicitly mediates between the scientific discourse of the DPI and local Mallee residents' lived experience of drought. But it also allows space for the richness of detail Pam offered, to analyse the ways discourse on lived experience of climate defines and localises the identities of people and place.

My research, which began in 2003, formed a case study in ongoing dialogue between interviewer and interviewees, prompted by timing, environment and politics. Initially, I intended to wrap up the fieldwork phase in the summer of 2005. By that autumn, however, about half of Australia's arable land was drought-affected. Forecasters predicted 'catastrophic' economic consequences, which included wiping up to a third off Australia's forecast economic growth (Lee). In the Mallee and across the Australian grain-belt, farmers' hopes for crop yields were fading by the day. As then Prime Minister John Howard declared the drought one of the worst 'in our history' (Schubert), discourse on prolonged drought began to fuse with discourse on a far greater, global phenomenon: climate change.

Declarations of drought and government announcements that those afflicted would receive social welfare 'relief payments' made national news headlines on a near-daily basis. As the dry conditions lingered, the historical and meteorological record books were rewritten. Sociologists Brad West and Philip Smith noted in their study of media, political and popular discourses on Australian drought that, in the 100 years to 1995, 'droughts were consistently

³ I initially used contacts established by Museum Victoria to locate potential subjects in August 2004. Thereafter, I located interviewees through 'cold calling' or by referral from initial interviewees. I sought a cross-section of perspectives from people in a number of industries and public services. This resulted in a group of 22 interviewees, who typically wore several 'hats' in life: farmers, financial counsellors, members of poverty action and social welfare groups, members of local government, a newspaper editor, a nurse, educators, administrators, agronomists, researchers and people involved in various community-driven organisations dedicated to social and environmental sustainability. Interviews were recorded and conducted face-to-face, on average once a year for three years, between September 2004 and February 2007.

defined as unexpectedly severe in their intensity or duration' (94). As had happened many times before, in 2005 Australia was pronounced as suffering one of the worst droughts on record.

When I returned to the Mallee in February 2006 and 2007, talk of uncertainty about climate change peppered discussion on drought. The interviewees began reflecting on their earlier observations. Some doubted themselves. Others doubted the climate science. All doubted the politicians who had weighed in heavily on climate change debate as a federal election year drew closer. Interviewees were realigning ideas about the past, present and future, reconciling knowledge of climate gained through experience with more abstract ideas received through science and the media.

In this context, this paper utilises oral testimony for its power to challenge accepted categories of rural history. Recollections of a 'golden age' of agriculture still loom large in Australian rural historiography (Davison and Brodie). However, few academic studies have focused on rural people's lived experience of climate—the prominent exception is Daniela Stehlik, Ian Gray and Geoffrey Lawrence's *Drought in the 1990s: Australian Farm Families' Experiences*—and there was little published on drought as a cultural concept as recently as 2003, when I began this project (in stark contrast to the swell in interest in the topic since).⁴ By contrast with the 'golden age' histories, popular narratives of crisis and uncertainty have dominated rural Australia for decades. Significantly, those narratives have encompassed struggles with the environmental effects of agricultural practices—the removal of too much vegetative cover, followed by inappropriate land use; soil erosion and degradation through salinisation; loss of biodiversity (Hopgood v)—as well as the impacts of broader economic restructuring upon rural industries (see, for example, Gray and Lawrence). As rural sociologists Lisa Bourke and Stewart Lockie noted in 2001, once-bold introductory statements on rural crisis have become 'so commonplace as to seem clichéd' for scholars concerned with ascertaining the causes of social, economic and environmental decay in the Australian countryside (1).

Oral stories of lived experience—of memory—offer us a powerful means to explore these tensions between the rural past and present.⁵ Perhaps historian Alessandro Portelli concretised this idea best in the assertion that oral stories 'communicate what history means to human beings' (42).

⁴ Works published since 2003, when I began my research project, include *Beyond Drought: People, Policy and Perspectives*, edited by Linda Courtenay Botterill and Melanie Fisher (2003), *A Change in the Weather: Climate and Culture in Australia*, edited by Tim Sherratt, Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin (2005), and Michael McKernan's *Drought: The Red Marauder* (2005).

⁵ Further, oral histories can elucidate the meaning of such a discourse of crisis. For, as historian Melissa Walker wrote of her edited collection of early twentieth-century oral histories of American farm women, people use stories not only to 'educate others about the past—their personal past and the way the larger historical past affected ordinary people'; 'they communicate ideas about how people *should* live their lives and about the range of possibilities for human beings in any given setting' (xvi).

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The Mallee is an ultra-productivist landscape: driven by forces of capital accumulation, the region is engaged in ever-larger-scale industrial agriculture. As the Mallee Catchment Management Authority states: 'Productive land is the backbone of the economy of the Mallee.' In Victoria, the Mallee covers about 39,300 km²—or about one-sixth of the state⁶—and it is here that about 2,000 dryland farmers produce half of Victoria's annual cereals crop, which is mostly wheat.⁷ Up to one million hectares of land is put in dryland crops each year, and this is achieved on an annual average of 200 to 500 millimetres of rain (Department of Primary Industries).

'Pine Hill', Pam's family's home, sits a few kilometres northwest of the grain-silo outpost of Walpeup, which in 2006 comprised about 100 residents, including those living on farms nearby (ABC Radio Mildura-Swan Hill). The house in which she grew up is surrounded by fields of cereals crop—or, when baking in the heat of summer, by vast paddocks of dirt, fragile and prone to drift. Picture it, she said with a wry smile: with one strong puff of wind, there'd be dust barrelling across the farm—and through the house 'no end' (2007). In recent years, Pam said, successive 'droughts' and 'lean years' of agricultural production had worn many local people down. Amid a marked shift in Australian public debate on climate change, particularly in 2006, the seasons were changing in ways that defied lived experience and local beliefs. Meanwhile, wheat-belt farmers were locked into an economic and technological treadmill of production and an associated cost-price squeeze, as declines in real prices for commodities on the global market drove farmers to continually increase production and efficiency (see, for example, Goodman and Redclift; Bell). For many Mallee farm families, Pam said, the 2006 season of farm production had been 'very trying'. She commented: 'The scariest thing is, we got through this year, but it's *next year*' (2007).

Pam was working on the Mallee Research Station's reception the Tuesday in February 2005 when I first visited Walpeup, and she participated in three oral history recordings over the next three years. By her final interview in 2007, she was working in financial administration at Walpeup Primary School.

She had lived in the Mallee all of her life. Born 30 kilometres away in Ouyen in 1966, she grew up at 'Pine Hill' wheat-sheep farm, attended Walpeup Primary and Ouyen Secondary schools, then undertook a hairdressing apprenticeship at

⁶ The Victorian Mallee (representing about 17.3% of Victoria's total area) is but a portion of Australian Mallee country, which supports semi-arid populations of eucalypts with a multi-stemmed habit (from which the region's name is derived). The semi-arid region also covers parts of New South Wales and South Australia, and extends across the Nullarbor through Western Australia. As such, the Mallee demarcates the edge of the Australian commercial cropping zone.

⁷ Farmers also crop barley, field peas, canola, oats, rye, corn, lupins and other pulses.

Ouyen. After a decade there, she married a local wheat farmer, Daryl, and returned to the Walpeup district. Recently, Pam, Daryl and their children moved back to 'Pine Hill'. 'My father actually [still] owns the property that we live on,' she said in 2005.

Also a mother, farmers' daughter, farmer's wife and a farmer herself, she conveyed affection for and attachment to the local community, one she noted had changed significantly in her lifetime. The size of agricultural equipment had increased with the size of farms, while the population of small towns dotted across the Mallee had shrunk dramatically. As she noted of Walpeup Primary: 'When I attended the same primary school, the numbers were huge ... lots of kids and lots of families ... I think when I was there, there was 63 students, and now there's 14' (2005).

Pam tied the decline in local farming population to agro-economic history, noting 'littler farmers couldn't survive, sold up and moved on' (2005). In other words, over time, economies of scale had forced smaller landholders out of business. Of those who 'survived', local families bought out their neighbours in order to expand their acreage (in theory, this meant bigger machinery became more cost-effective per acre): as Pam observed, 'People that didn't have a lot of land, but could survive on the land, now can't' (2005). And droughts had exacerbated the drop in the farm community population, she believed. She spoke of 'families who stuck it out for perhaps one or two seasons, but then it just got too tough' and of farmers who could survive a year 'having had a thunderstorm at the right time'. In these precarious economic circumstances, 'the littler farmers,' she emphasised, 'really find it hard' (2005).

Here Pam was outlining a battler discourse of agricultural and economic vulnerability that focused on issues of scale—smaller farms were considered more vulnerable to the hazards of climate, while global economic forces were perceived as determining futures for local people—and on her experience of witnessing the loss of social capital that accompanied the drop in farm community population. Small businesses and locally-based government and community services had dried up over the years, too. With fewer families to serve, government services were cut back or moved to larger service centres, while small businesses struggled to remain profitable.

Further, drought was portrayed as exceptional even as the community suffered long-term. She offered the example of sport, a community activity she believed to be very important to Mallee residents, for some residents, the main form of community participation. Yet Victoria-wide, more than fifty country football clubs have folded in the last 20 years, and Walpeup and Underbool clubs were recently forced to combine. Pam noted how the loss of sport effectively diminished the community:

Your football teams, your netball teams, your tennis teams, your cricket teams, all—sounds silly—but they all survive on us getting rain ... And those sorts of things, people start dropping out of, and there's your community *gone*. (2005; my emphasis)

This representation recasts the local community and its mythic solidarity as not only enduring droughts but as predating them.

Concurrently, however, Pam readily linked community life and livelihoods in an environment of 'extremes' and exceptions to a milieu of human hopes and anticipation:

—*Do you pray for rain?*

—Oh, I don't know whether 'pray' is the right word. I certainly know that rain is just, it's *the answer* ... to most things for us. (2005)

Indeed, she expressed a fascination for the Mallee agricultural environment's capacity for drama or 'extremity'. The effect of water on the dryland Mallee—through perceptions of rainfall, colour, fecundity and plant growth—was dramatic (warmth in the soil, as a by-product of hot days, was integral to the rapidity of groundcover transformation). Indeed, all interviewees in this project stressed the rapidity of this environmental transformation as part of what made Mallee country unique. Pam anthropomorphised the Mallee climate as capricious—'rain can be so choosy when/where it falls' (2005)—the drama of which could only be attested through lived experience, 'something you had to live through to know' (2005). Environmental conditions associated with drought, such as dust-storms, also impact severely on people's hopes and community morale, she said. And plagues of mice? 'There's nothing more *depressing* in the whole world,' she said.⁸

The 'depression' of enduring dry conditions lent an air of nostalgia to her retelling of rain. As Pam's account revealed, so jubilant was the experience of rain in the Mallee that people spoke of it with reverence; it was the benchmark of potential fecundity by which the Mallee was judged. Thus the hardest part of being in a drought was having the knowledge, grounded in local experience, of what the area *could be like* with rain. In this sense, the original settlers' dreams of the Mallee's 'exceptional' potential remained influential in the present.

⁸ Indeed, Mallee stories of mouse plagues can defy belief. Pam said: 'People see pictures and go "oh yeah, right"' (2005). One night at the family farm, she said, during a mouse plague in 1982, she saw the ground '*moving* with mice':

There was a story about this guy who had ironed a shirt to wear out that night. And by the time he'd turned off the iron and went to put it on, a mouse had actually eaten the shirt — because it was warm ... I mean, there was nothing for them to eat, so they'd just eat *anything* ... To have to live with that, you know, have to check your bed before you went to bed at night. I mean, we really physically couldn't keep them out of the house. (2005)

As can be seen, a 'local' identity-based response permeated Pam's descriptions of the Mallee landscape and the perceived vagaries of its climate. Such a response elevates an essentialist conception of 'community' in which specific characteristics of climate, geography, history and society—notably, of 'farm families'—underlie community formation. Lived experience of climate and its vagaries defined, *localised*, the identities of people and place. This gave primacy to local, community and family-oriented experience in the formation of knowledge on drought, which lingered as expertise within community-based responses to climate change. Arguably, the social decline Mallee communities were experiencing served not only to amplify nostalgia for the Mallee of the past but also to heighten local identity-based responses to the contemporary experience of change in the Mallee and projections for its future.

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Pam acknowledged that 'everyone's version of drought is different' (2005) and believed her views on climate were shaped by her time working at the Department of Primary Industries' Mallee Research Station. Critically, she had played a local role in the application of scientific expertise, and considered that this experience made her 'more aware' of the many and varied perceptions of climate and climate change in the Mallee (2006).⁹ Thus, in Pam's account of drought, discourses of lived experience and of community perceptions of climate intersect with scientific knowledge.

Yet Pam's story retained an emphasis on defining droughts through impacts on *community*, and this contrasted, at times sharply, with the meanings associated with drought in much of the MRS and broader DPI literature, with its fundamental focus on agricultural productivity and efficiency, and on the production of technical, scientific and economic knowledge to support those goals: in other words, seeking to identify and convert potential climate knowledge into a 'value-added reality' (Glantz 47).

A drought classified as 'severe' occurs in Australia once in every 18 years. But, as climatologist Janette Lindesay (39) has noted, a widely accepted definition of drought remains elusive: there exist at least 150 drought definitions (Lindesay 30). Exposure to drought (determined by the meteorology and climatology of a region) and vulnerability to drought (determined by human activity) were key

⁹ Pam said she followed the weather daily on the Internet, on websites such as that provided by the Bureau of Meteorology, for forecasts, as well as the Royal Australian Navy. She listened regularly to ABC Radio (including Horsham 594AM and Murray Valley (Swan Hill) 102.1FM stations), which she said had 'good reception' in the Walpeup district. She read the *Herald-Sun* daily newspaper and the Ouyen-based *North West Express* (a member of the Victorian Country Press Association, it also produces an agricultural supplement called *Mallee Ag. News*, devoted to issues of agricultural research and government policy). She noted that her husband read the rural-issues-based *Weekly Times*, as well as the South Australian weekly *Stock Journal* (also known as 'the farmer's Bible'; South Australia's only rural weekly).

elements to consider in defining drought (39). As the editors of the anthology *Beyond Drought*, Linda Courtenay Botterill and Melanie Fisher, observe, drought can be 'meteorological, hydrological, agricultural and/or socio-economic'(3).¹⁰ Indeed, there are many different stakeholders and each defines drought and views its impacts differently.

It is rather telling, however, that the bulk of literature on the Australian climate remains tied to agricultural production and economic policy concerns. In Australia and elsewhere in the world, governments have traditionally seen drought as a natural disaster, 'recognised as basically crisis management' (Heathcote 19). Critically, in the past two decades, a shift in the management of drought has been gradually reflected in policy discourse—in tandem with the privatisation of agricultural governance in Western cultures per se, focusing on the individual rather than society as the site of regulation (Higgins and Lawrence 5)—away from a welfare-oriented discourse to that of risk management.

Since the early 1990s, in counterpoint to ongoing predominantly political and agro-economic efforts to *redefine* what 'drought' means, rural sociologists have focused on interpreting the predicaments faced by farm communities from their own perspectives. My work similarly seeks to engage local perspectives. In particular, I argue we need to delve deeper into the cultural bases of unresolved tensions over land and water use. In my work, this means probing the discursive ambivalence that pervades debate on rural futures in Australia. Certainly, this means debunking the myths of sustainability promoted in ascendant neoliberal ways of defining drought and climate, which reinforce the ideology of productivism and the hegemony of the agri-capitalist system (as Lawrence, Cheshire and Ackroyd Richards ask: 'Is "sustainable capitalism" a contradiction in terms?' (233)). It also means considering discourse on drought as a site where

¹⁰ As Lindsay notes, the '*concept of drought* is best understood when definitions are given in general terms'. An agricultural definition might concern 'a protracted period of deficient precipitation resulting in extensive damage to crops, resulting in loss of yield'. However, vastly different definitions would be required for applications such as urban water provision, hydro-electric power generation or wildlife management (31). On this basis, Lindsay outlines the following operational definitions (32-38):

Meteorological: Defined on the degree of dryness, compared to some average rainfall amount, and duration of dry period. 'Periods of meteorological drought,' she wrote, 'are identified on the basis of relating actual precipitation departures from average amounts on monthly, seasonal or annual time scales' for a particular region.

Hydrological: Defined in terms of the effect of below-average rainfall on water supply (stream flow, reservoir/lake levels, ground water levels and recharge rates).

Agricultural: Linking the characteristics of meteorological and hydrological drought with agricultural impacts. 'A good definition of agricultural drought,' Lindsay wrote, 'should be able to account for the variable susceptibility of crops during different stages of crop development, from emergence to maturity.' Typically, she added, the agricultural sector was first affected; thus agricultural definitions of drought have gained some precedence in Australia.

Socio-economic: In short, she wrote, 'when water supply is unable to meet economic demand due to weather-related factors'.

local and external, community and political, agrarian and scientific forms of knowledge on climate intersect. In this sense, Pam's story is illustrative of how discourse on climate sits at an intersection of biography, culture and social structure.

In Pam's narrative, rather than circumscribe drought as an agro-economic or political or even meteorological 'event', drought (and the broader 'Mallee climate') was defined chiefly in terms of lived experience and the perceived impact upon the fabric of community and family life, upon rural communities in general and on her local community of Walpeup in particular.¹¹ In short, she spoke of enduring drought as a way of life. To survive in dryland Mallee farming, you *survived on little—even on hope*. She said: 'It definitely takes a certain kinda person who can, you know, *make do* ... survive on little bits and pieces and just hoping that, yeah, the next year will be a better one' (2005). Pam's account, similar to other documented Mallee histories, emphasised a somewhat 'unrealistic' settler discourse on drought, where drought is seen as exceptional, unfortunate, even disastrous, rather than a 'normal' aspect of the local climate. By the same token, however, this discourse provided the backdrop to a 'real' picture of human tenacity and inventiveness in 'hanging on'.

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Battling and risk-taking are no longer enough.

Ian Gray and Geoffrey Lawrence, 165

A poignant sense of uncertainty over Mallee futures emerged amid Pam's historical narrative of endurance, however. In Pam's follow-up interviews in February of 2006 and 2007, her uncertainty appeared to materialise and harden into present or very-near-future circumstance, as the perception of the impacts of climate change loomed ever larger in her narrative (although this presented itself predominantly as a projection, a story told in the future tense). What kind of future was possible? For how long? *How?* She said: 'How do you *not* walk off... If this is how it's gonna be, why stay?' (2007)

The climate is always changing, yet as the Bureau of Meteorology (2008) noted, short-term variations in climate are 'easily noticed by people', while the detection

¹¹ It could be argued that the conception of drought as community stressor, prevalent in Pam's interview (and that of all people interviewed for this project), was more directly related to levels of local community involvement. A recent Victorian Government study of indicators of 'community strength' in local government areas reported that, while no single measure could give an overall picture of community involvement in Victorian municipalities, there existed higher levels of community activity in rural areas than regional centres, with even lower levels in metropolitan Melbourne. The Department for Victorian Communities study (2005) indicated 'levels of community activity' based on the percentage of each council's population that had participated in a community event during the past six months. The Mildura Rural City Council, which encompassed Walpeup, reported participation of between 63 and 70 percent (8). Regardless, Pam's focus on community urged us to see drought not just as an agricultural, economic or political issue, but as a social issue and a perceived cause of social problems.

of long-term climate change requires 'long, good quality climate records'. In Pam's story, however, there was one example where decades of local experience provided evidence for long-term climate change, in relation to folk wisdom on annual crop sowing times. In spite of the local truism 'sow on Anzac Day, come what may', Pam said the annual 'dry' of the summer months had been extending further through autumn and into the winter months. This meant farmers did not get the conventional seasonal 'break' of autumn rains (the start of the annual cropping cycle), when cereals are sown with phosphorous fertilizer (this process can take several weeks, usually between May and mid-June).

Pam emphasised the value of lived experience—in defining what 'the local' is and what 'drought' means—in understanding how people conceived of climate change. Simultaneously, she noted how people were (and she herself was) negotiating the value of scientific data on the likelihood of more frequent and severe droughts in the Mallee:

You get your older people [who] say, 'Oh you know, we've lived through this. It'll come good.' But you don't get many experts—doesn't seem to be many experts saying ... 'it'll be right'. (2006)

Yet even as that delay in seasonal 'break' was undercutting inter-generational, traditional knowledge on climate, breadth of lived experience was still considered critical in understanding the local climate and variations in inter-annual and inter-decadal 'cycles' of weather:

Certainly a lot of your older people will say that they have noticed changes ... that they've never known ... the heat for as many days, or to be dry for as many days... [These are] people who have been around for 70 years ... They've *lived* it, and they've experienced it. (2006)

In effect, this reproduced conflict over a perceived lay-expert divide, both within the local community and without, in that primary experience outweighed secondary or external (scientific) expertise. At the same time, Pam perceived the uptake of external expert knowledge as depending on age and experience (or 'what they've *lived*' (2006)), with the highest uptake of the advice being by younger or 'newer' farmers, who were 'certainly changing their ways, getting ready for perhaps not as much rain and later seasons and, yeah, perhaps preparing the soil better so that it all doesn't blow away ... *because* of what the experts are saying' (2006).

Thus she alluded to ongoing tensions between the status accorded to local knowledge and the authority assigned to empirical and scientific knowledge in defining the notion of expertise. In discussions of climate change, people were negotiating not only structures of knowledge, but also of social power—or perceptions of disempowerment (implying the degree of isolation rural communities felt from institutional power). Pam pointed to how the reception

of external expertise remained out of step with the prevailing cultural practice of learning through localised, lived experience of climate.

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The concept of 'expertise' has social as well as intellectual dimensions, as sociologist Rosemary McKechnie notes in her work on public interpretations of science. McKechnie draws attention to how the layperson *and* scientist are active participants in defining expertise and in giving the very concept of expertise 'substance' (127). Debates over modernity and globalism have called into question the meaning of powerful concepts such as expertise, risk and science. 'Within those debates,' McKechnie wrote, 'the "local" has assumed new significance in constituting identity-based responses' (126). Further, as risk theorist Ulrich Beck argues, environmental processes are 'peculiarly open to social definition and construction'; similarly, conceptions of climate are grounds for '*definitional struggles*' (129; Beck's emphasis).

My analysis of Pam's oral history reveals the acute difficulty people have in safely negotiating the local political terrain given the already evident potential for social division based on conflict over political agendas (real or imagined) behind discourse on environmental knowledge. That process of negotiation shapes what she—and many of the other people interviewed for this oral history project—view as politically possible in light of climate change (particularly when Mallee dryland farming communities are in decline). Moreover, Pam's narrative evokes what oral historian Michael Frisch has termed 'multivalence': 'the holding of different values at the same time without implying confusion, contradiction, or even paradox' (par 19). As this essay has suggested, Pam's narrative reaffirms *and* brings into question dominant ideas on the past—a twentieth-century agricultural 'settler history'—and a present marked by a rapid increase in public debate on the impacts of climate change. Arguably, then, the rise of a discourse of environmental crisis relating to climate change has offered people new ways of interpreting their own historical narratives.

And yet, where 'drought' has lingered as integral to the Mallee's remembered past, climate change may have forced little more than its recontextualisation. For 'enduring drought' still formed a dominant strategy of identity through which people re-asserted their lived experience of change, their ability to adapt or provide resistance to it. As sociologist Barbara Adam has pointed out, 'tradition constitutes *renewal* at every moment of active reconstruction of past beliefs and commitments' (137). In the Mallee, people clung to the hope that farming conditions would, as Pam Elliott put it, 'go back to the way things were' (2006). It seemed that the more the future 'predefined' the present, the more intense was people's concern with the past. In light of imminent and rapid climate change, the people of the Mallee were gearing up to endure *more*.

Deb Anderson is a scholar at the Australian Centre, the University of Melbourne. After graduating from the University of Queensland in 1995, she spent several years working with/alienated by the news press, in Australia and abroad, before returning to university in 2003 to pursue an interest in rural, environmental and cultural studies. Her doctoral project has created a new collection of oral histories for Museum Victoria on the lived experience of drought and climate change. She lives in Melbourne with her cat Wallaby and works for The Age, but 'home' is still the family farm on which she grew up, in tropical north Queensland.

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