

## CALIFORNIA DREAMING: SELLING THE IRRIGATIONIST DREAM

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*Mildura was established in 1887 as a privately-funded irrigation settlement by two brothers, George and William Benjamin (W.B.) Chaffey. After success with smaller irrigation colonies in California, their arrival in Australia heralded the hope of a utopia-like transformation of the Australian landscape. As the current Federal government sets about buying back water allocations, it is timely to examine the origins of irrigation in Australia, and the aspirations that surrounded the irrigation philosophy. This article examines The Australian Irrigation Colonies illustrated, the advertising campaign used by the Chaffey family to lure people to their venture.*

In the *Age* on Saturday, 23 August, 2008, the two categories, Deers and Lambs, were floated in the leading article in 'Insight'. The Lambs represented the dryland farmers; the Deers those on intensely irrigated acreages. The article argued that the dryland farmers were in a far better position to work the land in a more environmentally sustainable fashion, than the irrigationists. The contest over farming practices between these two groups in Australia, is at least 137 years old. This dates back to 1871, when the entrepreneur Benjamin H. Dods, applied for a million acres from the Victorian government, upon which to construct his proposed diversion weir on the Goulbourn River, linking northern rivers via canals.

Dods appointed as Secretary to his company, Hugh McColl, publisher of a goldfields' newspaper, *Banner and Diggers Advocate*.<sup>1</sup> McColl had been impressed by the irrigationist literature coming from Western America's arid states, and was a very vocal and highly visible advocate for changing the water policy to embrace the tenets of the American approach. This centred on the yeoman farmer and intensive cultivation via irrigation. The young Alfred Deakin, then a member of the Victorian Legislative Assembly, in particular, was attracted by the yeomanry image, believing this community-based farming would attract the best type of people – he called them the 'picked people'<sup>2</sup> – and was won over by McColl's arguments.

Irrigationists saw themselves in opposition to the broad-acre farmers, who had prevailed in Australia, and felt a need to establish their legitimacy. Similarly, irrigationists in California had to contest the large land barons of the day which necessitated a strong consistent script of advocacy, centring on the yeoman ideal. This rhetoric relied on the colonizer's belief in their right to utilize the landscape and transform it according to their vision.

How much do we still see the landscape through the eyes of the colonizer? Do the irrigationists need to re-evaluate their stance in light of the current state of the Murray-Darling river system? Are the dry land farmers better placed to ride out the changes and fluctuations of weather patterns, and work more with the natural rhythms of our land? In this article, I posit that there is a need to re-evaluate the original logic embedded in the irrigationist philosophy, so that we may be better equipped to make decisions about the future direction of our farming procedures. Bruce Davidson has researched and written about farming practices in Australia, and he has questioned why the expensive choice of irrigating small acreages triumphed over the logic of broad-acre farming. He asks why

against all apparent reason, the irrigationists' optimistic vision dominated.<sup>3</sup> The answer, I argue, lies in the irrigationist philosophy's claims, encased in and enriched by compelling prose. This is no better illustrated than in the sales campaign conducted by George and William Benjamin Chaffey in 1887, designed to market their proposed irrigation colonies in Australia, which will be comprehensively examined in this article.

The push for irrigation in Australia was a controversial and strongly-contested one during the 1870s and 1880s. It centred on an ideology which attained the status of a quasi-political doctrine, with evangelical crusaders for irrigation on one side of the debate represented by McColl and Deakin, against the conservative, cautious and reasoned voices, like that of George Gordon, the Victorian Chief Engineer of Water Supply through much of the 1870s. Gordon, and his colleague Andrew Black, Assistant Surveyor-General, produced a series of reports into the water needs of rural Victoria. They chose to examine older irrigation schemes in other countries. In one report, a comparison was drawn between the Po Valley in Italy which had a similar climate and topography, however, their water supply was markedly different, as it came from the snows of the Alps. Gordon and Black acknowledged that permanent rivers like the Murray and Goulbourn may have some success in irrigation, but a lack of population would stymie attempts at large schemes. They thought that occasional irrigation along seasonal lines could be practiced at the northern part of the county of Rodney, in the northern plains, where it would have the best chance of success. The price of labour in other countries was also discussed, including both the construction of works and the agricultural labour which needed to be taken into account in any calculations. Irrigation works in older countries were considered part of the landscape as they had been there for so long and their cost had long since been absolved. Indeed, India's entire irrigated area was the size of that part of the north-west plains of Victoria known as the mallee scrub, which strengthened their belief in a cautionary approach,

*We believe that too sanguine views of its profitableness are often entertained from an under-estimate of the cost and an over-estimate of the results, arising from a want of information or due consideration of the conditions essential to success, and in the public interest we should be glad to see some of the questions we have touched upon thoroughly discussed.<sup>4</sup>*

And discussed and debated they were, with the irrigationists' beliefs eventually triumphing. The ideology represented by McColl and Deakin, I have named the 'Irrigationist Philosophy' and have categorized it into three main components. First, it purveyed the romance of the yeoman farmer, representing civilized agricultural pursuits as it promised a family-friendly style of farming, close to townships and urban culture, unlike the isolation of the broad-acre farmer.<sup>5</sup> Second, the push of progress via technological innovation, symbolized by engineering feats, depicted modern adaptation and human evolution.<sup>6</sup> Third, the lure of doing 'God's work' by taming and opening up wild lands in order to transform the landscape to the human ideal, was compelling.<sup>7</sup>

These three points formed the centrepiece of the irrigationist literature, a highly-persuasive body of works designed to encourage settlers to the irrigation colonies of California. The Chaffey brothers, George and William Benjamin (W.B.), were Canadians who established the irrigation settlements of Mildura and Renmark, brought this marketing technique with them from California to Australia. *The Australian Irrigation Colonies Illustrated*, known colloquially as 'The Red Book' was distributed to the western world through agents established in England and the United States. It highlighted the attractive yeoman lifestyle, the scientific nature of the irrigated farming and the transformation of barren, dry land into well-ordered, green groves.

Against the euphoria this sales campaign created, the concerns of Gordon and Black were swept aside. Gordon, in particular, was very conscious that irrigation was an artificial construction which greatly changed the landscape, and continued to speak out against its large-scale implementation. He understood the importance that the Murray-Darling basin played as a drainage system for the continent, and urged against

pursuing large, irrigation settlements. He argued with Deakin on this issue, believing that Deakin did not appreciate the importance of drainage.<sup>8</sup> Gordon was also alarmed at the prospect of bringing large groups of people to a designated place, and then building irrigation around them. He believed gradual growth was more economically, environmentally and socially sustainable. Another major concern for him was the lack of a permanent water supply. Californian rivers relied on the melting waters of the snow-fields and no such large replenishing source existed in Victoria.<sup>9</sup>

McColl scoffed at Gordon's theories for sustainable irrigation, calling them 'Gordon's gutters'<sup>10</sup> and describing him as a 'departmental liability.'<sup>11</sup> But Gordon had in a fashion, seen the current predicament our iconic river system faces today. He understood that the dry-land farmers may have been in a better position to utilize the natural resources with a lighter touch, whereas the irrigationists were frantically redesigning an entire landscape. They were living on the land, not with it.

The colonizer's view was to improve on nature, to make the land abundant with European crops. This view saw water running out to the ocean as wasteful, when it could be harnessed for European settlers' use.<sup>12</sup> The stunted, mallee trees and shrubs were depicted as ugly and useless. When Deakin travelled to America to review the irrigation schemes there in 1885, he also wrote in similar terms, describing the sandy, barren landscapes suddenly interrupted by the productive, green oasis of an irrigation colony.

The early pattern of land settlement in Victoria, contributed to the attraction of the yeoman ideal. The regime of the squattocracy had created a sense of injustice with the settled land in this state being held by as few as 700 men.<sup>13</sup> Small, family-held farms peopled by hard-working, honest folk were far preferable to the vast landholdings of the squatters. The success of the irrigationist philosophy in Australia with its championing of the yeomanry, had its genesis in a variety of precursors, including the squattocracy, the selection movement generally and the stark conditions of eighteenth century urban life. The latter point led to the romanticisation of life in the fresh countryside, and the attendant autonomy that would come from one's own plot of land.

After the Chaffey brothers secured land agreements with the Victorian and South Australian governments, in order to build irrigation colonies at Mildura and Renmark, their first action was to advertise for settlers to populate these proposed townships. This was the very point Gordon had been critical of, fearing that the advent of people before irrigation, would be unsustainable from an environmental and financial perspective. However, a lavish advertising campaign was launched through the Red Book, presented as a crimson publication trimmed with gold, containing the hyperbolic prose of the irrigationist philosophy. The first issue of 100,000 copies measuring fifteen inches by eleven inches, and 1000 large copies measuring sixteen inches across and twenty inches down, were distributed "throughout the civilized world...chiefly amongst the more *enterprising and educated people*."<sup>14</sup>

The layout of its 127 pages is sophisticated, illustrated and detailed. The Red Book attracted much criticism from the members of the 1896 Mildura Royal Commission that was held after the Chaffey enterprises went into liquidation. It was noted that the book relied heavily on cultivating the assumption that their enterprises were government backed. They conveyed this in a number of ways, particularly with the strategy of using quotes from eminent people supported by extracts of their agreements with the governments of Victoria and South Australia.<sup>15</sup> Although the book was written in the first person by James E. Matthew Vincent, FRGS, it had the same style and tone as the Californian literature, revealing the Chaffey's influence, opinions and projections woven throughout. Vincent was a journalist from London, who was the Chief Commissioner for the Chaffey Irrigation Colonies in England.

The language used was florid and unfettered, clearly aimed at exciting people with the promise of sunny lands and ordered schemes, a new way forward for civilization,

*a scheme, in brief, of what may rightly be styled model or scientific colonization, it having been entered upon under the auspices of enlightened colonial statesmanship, and being carried out with the co-operation of thoroughly competent, honourable, and energetic leaders*<sup>16</sup>

The concept of these irrigation settlements was represented as standing apart from average, selfish business practices, positing the Chaffey's vision as laced with Christian ethics and 'chivalric pleasure...in the general contentment...instead of class hatred'<sup>17</sup> and managed to link the poets Tennyson and Burns into the mix. This association was made by claiming that just like Tennyson and Burns, 'all true poets have so confidently sung, where "each man finds his own in all men's good."<sup>18</sup> The work continually appealed to a higher state of existence, one where the best of humanity would flourish and maintained that the people who responded to this vision, would naturally be of the highest calibre seeking to establish this Chaffey-type Utopia.

Criticism was directed at the 'extreme slowness'<sup>19</sup> of Australian development as it was claimed that it only kept pace with consumption and a more vigorous, entrepreneurial approach was required. This was to be one of the talents that the Chaffeys would bring, the 'thoroughgoing, comprehensive, capable style for which the American pioneer is noted'<sup>20</sup> which was followed by swipes at the unscientific approach of Australians. In contrast to this ignominy, the Chaffeys claimed themselves as the architects of 'the most artistically developed colony in Southern California,'<sup>21</sup> a skill they would utilize in these new settlements. It was a contradictory approach, claiming American status when scientific innovation was called for, but Canadian nationalism when issues of morality or motive were an issue.

Short histories of the areas were detailed but the emphasis was on describing the river system and the surrounding countryside. Much was made of providing measurements, particularly square miles and gallons of water, which gave the strong impression of calculation and analysis. It did not state how these calculations were devised on a local level but did make reference to a Scottish Geographical work that used a generic measuring formula.<sup>22</sup> The landscape was described in strongly evocative prose utilizing words such as 'brimming river reaches...luxuriantly-wooded...picturesquely rugged'<sup>23</sup> which even taking into account the amount of logging which has been done, since this description was written, does not describe the country which exists today. Mallee scrub dominates the landscape and the arid dryness of the summer months is palpable. The tri-state Royal Commission held in 1902 described the land prior to irrigation in these terms, 'the land in its virgin state being, practically, valueless red sandy loam covered with mallee and blue bush, with an average rainfall of less than eleven inches.'<sup>24</sup> The colonisers' gaze of superimposing the possible over the actual, was very much in evidence in these descriptions.

The Red Book claimed that position of Victoria corresponded with that of California and that it shared isothermal lines with such places as Bordeaux, Bologna and Madrid. The essence of the vineyards and orchards of these places was being alluded to as part of the potential that the Chaffeys were able to envisage. Their key to success was the irrigational skill of George Chaffey who was touted as a genius, responsible for the unique engineering techniques evident in the irrigational works. The emphasis throughout the Red Book was on the transformation skills of water via irrigation and the plethora of opportunities that it ushered in. Deakin was quoted as comparing the Californian soils to 'The rich sandy loam of our mallee country'<sup>25</sup> and the *Australasian* reported that the general opinion declared that it was 'Just the soil for irrigation.'<sup>26</sup> Testimony was a strong and consistent selling tool used throughout the publication.

The Australia that these new settlers would encounter had absolute goodwill towards their endeavours, with the claim that even the press was favourably inclined towards the two developments.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it was implied that all of the people from both states were highly supportive and keen for their success. The Victorian Railways took out a full one page advertisement, which detailed their expenditure on creating rail

networks and revealed the number of passengers that had been transported over a year and the amount of tonnage of goods that had been carted. The advantages of working for the railways were explained and included the recruiting procedures that were to be followed. Mostly though, the significance of the railways was emphasized as a means of transporting produce to markets both national and international, although the river would be the main transport route in the short term. This gave the illusion that the connection of the railways was *a fait accompli*, when in reality it was 1903 before the railway came to Mildura.

Reference was again made to the short-sightedness of the original white settlers, and their lack of knowledge about irrigation lamented as this area 'would have been converted into *an immense Paradise*'<sup>28</sup> if this technique had been implemented earlier. Irrigation was posited as both easily achieved and life-changing. The tone implicitly conveyed the message that the experts had arrived whilst explicitly stating the wealth-creating opportunities that await those who could also envision the Chaffeys' plan.

An analysis of the agreements with the two States was discussed, with emphasis on the security for the settler. The Chaffeys, it determined, were committed to providing irrigation to the blocks they sold as well as the maintenance of all machinery needed to achieve this. They were also required to make roads, tramways, canals, drains, bridges and to set aside land in both settlements for the building and maintenance of two agricultural colleges. If the enterprise collapsed, the two governments were bound to resume possession of the land that had not been sold inferring that the settlement would continue, without actually giving a government guarantee. The Victorian Agreement was discussed and the claim was made that 'in the Victorian Parliament, it was officially stated that the Chaffey grant was alone and exceptional in its character, and that the special Act under which it was made would not enable any further grant to be made of a similar kind.'<sup>29</sup> This claim created urgency – a sense that this style of venture would never be offered in Victoria again, hence an opportunity missed could never be reclaimed. In this way, the setting out of the material displayed an intelligent awareness of sales psychology.

In the Chaffeys' Ontario development in California, the whole township had been planned and laid out featuring a broad, tree-lined central boulevard all of which it was claimed had been achieved in two years. Much was made of the 'extraordinary wealth of vegetable growth...uniform neatness, arrangement, and general style and finish'<sup>30</sup> of the Californian concern. The same was proposed for these new settlements facilitated by the Chaffey brothers' experience, wisdom and scientific approach to land development. This information would lead to the assumption that the speed and comprehensiveness of the Californian developments would be emulated here, and the time spent by settlers in establishing themselves, kept to a minimum. Again, the claim of a prompt, efficient service was an effective marketing tool.

Essential to the success of this development was the calibre of person that this venture would attract, 'namely, the industrious, temperate, thrifty, intelligent, skilful, cleanly, and good living of all classes'<sup>31</sup>. These would not be labourers' towns as every labour-saving device and piece of machinery that could be mustered would be utilized with the emphasis on using one's mind and judgement over brawn. The book claimed that there would be an early establishment of a 'literary and social club'<sup>32</sup>. These points were obvious attempts to lure those with means and money to help ensure growth in the settlements. Indeed, the outrageous claim was made that the bright, sunny climate was excellent for one's health, as it did not have 'exhausting heat'<sup>33</sup> - an outrageous claim as the area is well known for recording the consistently highest temperatures in the state.

There was a claim that irrigation had water that was 'fertilising water'<sup>34</sup> as it carried 'dissolved and suspended matter...powerfully efficient in promoting plant growth'<sup>35</sup> This was supported by the claim that any purchaser of ten acres or more could 'enjoy...*a permanent and ample* supply of water'<sup>36</sup> due to the abundance of water in the Murray River. Hence, in the replication of the Chief Engineer of Water Supply's report in the Red Book, the section that detailed that the river was so low he was unable to access Mildura

by boat, was omitted. This also augured badly for the transportation of produce to market. Hyperbole was effectively used to allay any well-deserved concerns, even stating that irrigation provided 'great means of preventing a failure of crops'<sup>37</sup>.

The Chaffey brothers declared that they would reside permanently in these settlements for the remainder of their lives, dispensing their knowledge and sharing their skills as required.<sup>38</sup> Their commitment to the prosperity of these two towns was therefore considered unquestionable, reinforcing that sense of security for the prospective settler. Proof of their capacity rested heavily on their development of Ontario, California as the land there, according to 'competent judges'<sup>39</sup> would be worth £200 an acre in less than ten years time.

It was predicted that the land was highly suited to the growth of vines and wine-making. They point out that Australian wines went to the English markets with low duty rates that promoted a desire for the product. Once again testimony was used, 'With time and care Australia ought to be the vineyard of the world,' remarks Sir Charles Dilke<sup>40</sup> to convince the reader of the validity of investing their money, time and future in these settlements. California had also developed wines and found strong markets which, the claim was made, had resulted in a rise of the product's price by 100 per cent. This constant comparison to their American achievement was an effective marketing device, as it provided a concrete vision of the future of Mildura and Renmark both from a wealth creation prospective as well as a cultural one.

Another claim was the fruit-growing potential of the two areas, gilding this vision with the prediction of a growing domestic market for fruit due to the Australian heat.<sup>41</sup> This was a constant throughout the Red Book – the careful consideration given to marketing the produce, or, at least, the projection of the veneer of consideration. For example, they stated that the quality of this fruit would be superior due to irrigation, thereby ensuring a higher price for the fruit of the district. It was claimed that the Chaffey Brothers had a strong knowledge of current practices of keeping fruit fresh which would open up international markets, especially England. This vagueness of expression whilst utilizing the words 'scientific', 'machinery' and 'techniques' were common strategies throughout the work, as it hinted that the brothers had a superior knowledge of progressive farming practices that the layman could not comprehend without the brothers' guidance. Again, it fitted with the irrigationist philosophy's projection of engineering transforming the landscape.

Full pages were devoted to scenic sketches of the Murray River at both Renmark and Mildura, highlighting the natural beauty, the gum trees and the cliffs. Steamboats were depicted verifying the riverboat trade essential for produce to reach its markets. Melbourne was also represented, showcasing tall, elegant buildings and busy, prosperous people. Parliament House in Melbourne was sketched, with men of substance standing in the foreground. A hill-top view of Sydney showed the harbour busy with boats as did a sketch of the ocean at Glenelg in South Australia. Pictures of the wharves at Port Pirie, Williamstown and Melbourne provided visual evidence of the sound sea merchant trade that operated in Australia. Other sketches showed crops growing under irrigation, such as orange groves. No mention was made, however, of where these crops actually were, but it was inferred that they were Ontario groves. The visual images supported the florid prose and the claims it contained. Sweeping, unsubstantiated statements were used as vehicles for 'facts'.

Constantly throughout the Red Book, the rejuvenating properties of irrigation were propounded, holding out promises of increasing yields by as much as 'fourfold'.<sup>42</sup> Evidence of this was provided by comments from Mr. J.L. Dow, Victorian Minister of Lands and Agriculture and one of the original group to tour the Californian settlement with Alfred Deakin. He stated that 'The most productive portions are those in which the rainfall is so deficient that it has to be supplemented by means of irrigation.'<sup>43</sup> He was also quoted extolling the advantages of the proposed agricultural colleges, as vehicles through which to raise the standard of agricultural practice in Australia.<sup>44</sup> Dow, however, was borrowing money from George

Chaffey to advance his own interests in property development. He grossly over-borrowed, eventually being charged with fraud and in 1893 was declared bankrupt. Dow was one of the major supporters of the Chaffey's agreement with the Victorian government.<sup>45</sup>

As previously mentioned, one of the strengths of the Red Book's sales pitch was the use of testimony, so the chapter entitled 'REMARKS OF AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC MEN ON IRRIGATION AND THE IRRIGATION COLONIES'<sup>46</sup> delivered a powerfully persuasive banter. The first commendation derived from a memorandum provided to the Royal Commission on Water Supply by the eloquent Alfred Deakin who was the Chief Secretary and Minister of Water Supply in Victoria. He asserted that irrigation was best suited to grapes and fruit stating that 'Twenty acres under vines or fruit trees are preferred to 160 acres under grain.'<sup>47</sup> He highlighted the advantages of this style of agriculture as it allowed for less labour thereby ensuring less stress and more leisure time. He appeared to base this on the intensive nature of this style of cultivation and the size of the land which needed to be tended comparing an acre of raisins to five acres of wheat and inferred that labour requirements were concomitant with land size. Deakin himself used vague terms to convey his message, such as 'The clearest heads in California consider the over-production of wine or raisins an impossibility.'<sup>48</sup> He also made the very optimistic statement that 'with irrigation there are no bad seasons'<sup>49</sup> which completely ignored the damaging effects of unwanted rain or searing sun damage. He pushed his belief in the yeomanry, emphasizing the benefits of reduced isolation from the community, which allowed not only family participation in farming production, but children to attend schools and participate generally in town events.

The next opinion came from the Walter Madden, MLA from a recent lecture he delivered in Horsham, Victoria. He also asserted that the yield could increase four-fold and that irrigation allowed the same yield to come from twenty acres as from one hundred unirrigated. The Commissioner of Crown Lands for South Australia, the Honorable J. Coles was quoted from his remarks in moving the second reading of the Chaffey Bill in the South Australian Parliament, and again, the scientific knowledge of the Chaffey's was emphasized, proof of which was provided by the development of Ontario.

The Bishop of Ballarat, Bishop Thornton provided an essay on his recent visit to Mildura, where he found an oasis with beautiful scenery, where previously he had believed there to be 'a frightful wilderness'.<sup>50</sup> Human qualities were given to inanimate objects, such as 'noble stream'<sup>51</sup> and a lyrical description of the landscape was used, lulling the reader into believing that the Bishop had entered paradise. The men he met there were of the best in intelligence and manners and he extolled the virtues of this 'theatre of grand experiment...in the interest of human happiness.'<sup>52</sup> He also stated that irrigation quadrupled value, in keeping with the Chaffey sales line. But his interest was more to paint the picture of life at Mildura, concentrating on the joys of working for oneself and the harmony of like-minded people, than to talk of great wealth. A strong tribute was made to the industriousness of the Chaffey brothers, differentiating them from Americans and stressing that they were British Canadians, therefore they were more trustworthy holding similar values as other British people.

The next chapter discussed the Murray River itself and other irrigation settlements along its passage.<sup>53</sup> The reader was taken on the riverboat ride from Echuca down river to Mildura and Renmark, with the now very familiar florid prose describing the flora, fauna and landscape, a whole paragraph, for example, devoted to the behaviour of the kingfisher. The attention was then turned to the writer's fellow passengers, particularly an English solicitor who was interested in not only plying his profession but also in growing fruit himself. Comments were made on the special opportunities that were available to those settlers who arrived first in new ventures - an excellent strategy through which to create urgency in the prospective buyer.

It was the tranquility of the Murray experience that was constantly propounded:

*as we remorselessly penetrate the serene and long-drawn-out solitude of the Murray, and in the enjoyment of a moonlight radiance which intensifies this solemn stillness to an almost painful degree of keen and absorbing sensation.*<sup>54</sup>

This was an excellent example of the tortured prose which laced the text. The sparsity of Aboriginal people was couched in terms of a positive aspect, with those who did reside in the area, it was stated, treated well by the Colonial authorities who supplied them with all the necessities they required such as food and clothing. A negative experience of one young man was cited, that led to the general consensus that Aboriginal people would therefore be extinct within a few years.<sup>55</sup> This was in stark contrast to the description of young white Australian men who apparently reached maturity early and acted with business insight and confidence with which they were naturally imbued. This negation of the first Australians, was implicit in the irrigationist literature.

The consequences of drought were canvassed as the enemy of Australian development with Bishop Barry being quoted as well as the Bishop of Manchester, Dr Moorhouse who believed that the answer was 'Irrigation...an affair of practical politics.'<sup>56</sup> The gently undulating countryside would be conducive to the Chaffey plan of elevation of water in stages from the river for irrigation purposes – or so it was subtly implied.<sup>57</sup> Allusions were made to another creation to equal 'marvellous Melbourne' or 'beautiful Ballarat'<sup>58</sup>, due once again to that advertising stalwart of the "fertilising waters" of the Murray. This led to an inordinate amount of leisure time where the gentlemanly retreats of 'conversation, reading, writing letters...good music and singing'<sup>59</sup> could pass the time. Evidence of this cultural atmosphere was to be found at the old Mildura Homestead, the original residence of the Chaffey brothers, where a well-stocked library even produced a copy of the *Edinburgh Magazine*.

From Mildura the voyage continued on the steamer the Gem, which contained a "good-sized saloon, smoking-room, and ladies' room, with a piano"<sup>60</sup> which provided a quite civilized journey. Another traveller was the storekeeper from Mildura who was travelling to Adelaide and Melbourne to replenish his supplies. The writer conducted a discussion with him about the cost of housing inland but was reassured that due to the availability of water transport, outlays were kept to a minimum with the 'cost of a two-roomed weather-board house, each room 12 ft. by 12ft estimated at £40.'<sup>61</sup> On the way to Renmark a few stops were made to bring supplies to the squatting stations and the vastness of these land holdings was discussed. So vast in fact, that it was only a small amount of land, by comparison it stated, which was given to the Chaffey's 'creating a field of prosperous settlement for many thousands of human beings'<sup>62</sup>. Reference was made to 'the stringent conditions under which this grant has been accepted'<sup>63</sup> along with constant salutations to the Chaffey vision.

When they arrived at Renmark, the first comment was about the beautiful river bend upon which Renmark was situated.<sup>64</sup> Again the nature of intensive irrigation farming was canvassed, comparing it to sheep stations, wheat farms and sugar plantations where it was suggested, large amounts of money needed to be outlaid to secure land, equipment and labour. In this way the uniqueness of this settlement was kept uppermost in the reader's mind, as a positive aspect rather than a negative one. The American-style yeomanry farming practice was constantly applauded:

*At the Irrigation Colonies, the secret will be to make the most of the smallest possible area, and one man of superior skill, industry, and perseverance, experienced in the tending of vines and fruit trees, may make as much profit out ten acres as a less efficient worker would make out of twenty or thirty.*<sup>65</sup>

The penultimate chapter was concerned with detailing the Chaffey brothers work in California, which included an interview with the *Melbourne Argus*. Their work in building the community of Etiwanda, California was highlighted with claims that it was here that the foundation of their technical and scientific knowledge was consolidated before developing Ontario.<sup>66</sup> Much was made of the Chaffey Agricultural College at Ontario which had just recently been handed over to the University of Southern California. This apparently philanthropic gesture, required that land was set aside not only upon which to build the college but also land to be used as a revenue base for future maintenance of the college, the point made that 'the value of the real estate had increased so much that the remaining endowment was then worth as much as the original gift.'<sup>67</sup> The ethos of philanthropic endowments was a fairly revolutionary one for Australia, and was used to great effect in the advertising literature.

In their interview with the *Melbourne Argus* the Chaffey's claimed to have conducted in Mildura soil analysis comparisons with California, and 'have tested, weighed, [and] figured everything right out.'<sup>68</sup> Alfred Deakin was quoted again, this time alluding to the advantages of a sea change, away from city life. Every angle of inducement to come to the irrigation colony had been utilized. The concept of the civilized nature of this style of cultivation was reiterated, using the image of people from all classes and age groups living side-by-side in gentle harmony as 'an industry suited to the most intelligent and refined people'<sup>69</sup>

The last chapter was devoted to government reports which described the progress of the irrigation colonies. There was also a focus on the strength of the Australian economy with particular attention on the Victorian and South Australian revenues. As an example of the prosperity open to enterprising people, a case study was made of the firm Robert Harper & Co., who had also advertised in the Red Book. The business was established by its namesake in Melbourne who also happened to be a member of the Legislative Assembly in Victoria and dealt in making foodstuffs such as mustard from raw produce. Branches of the business extended 'throughout the Colonies of Australasia.'<sup>70</sup> The exceptional growth and profitability were continuously emphasized, detailing the expansion to other cities, for 'It may be said truly that the history of this firm is an illustration of that of many other commercial houses in these lands.'<sup>71</sup>

The 1896 Mildura Royal Commission reviewing the failure of the Chaffey brothers' companies, found that nearly all the original Chaffey money had been spent on the production of the Red Book, 'of an average of 4,000 pounds per annum, extending over eight years, but by far the greater proportion was expended in the first years of the settlement.'<sup>72</sup> This had severely crippled their resources. James T. Gibson was questioned at this Commission, and he stated that his main inducement to buy land in Mildura, was the representation of Vincent in London, verified in the Red Book. His enthusiasm was such, that he became an agent for the Chaffey brothers in Edinburgh, for a 2.5 per cent commission, enthusiastically giving away copies of the Red Book to all enquiries. The Red Book was made readily and freely available in towns throughout England and Scotland in most hotels, and Gibson affirmed that when questioned about the Victorian government's role, 'If a man asked me I would refer him to the Red Book.'<sup>73</sup> The effective marketing campaign had lured people who had never before worked the land, such as Thomas Charles Rawlings, a hotel-keeper in England.<sup>74</sup> He testified that 'I saw the Chaffey Brothers' red book, and that induced me to settle here...The red book was my guide.'<sup>75</sup> With its over-exuberant prose, rash predictions and utopian visions, people had been convinced.

Towards the end of the Red Book, reference was made to the first report which generated the irrigation colonies, which had emanated from the Royal Commission upon Water Supply in Victoria led by Alfred Deakin. Again, this provided proof of the legitimacy of irrigation, stamped with government authority. There was also discussion as to the virtues of the late Hugh McColl M.P., as evidence of the strength of the irrigationist vision. In this way, the irrigationist movement was given a tradition, a sense of historical trajectory, which caught the readers in its sense of destiny.

The Red Book was an extensive, well-honed and highly persuasive marketing campaign. It had many of the hallmarks of modern advertising: it created a need; it instilled urgency; it contained comforting testimonies and it used the authenticity of prominent people's recommendations. Comparisons could be made with contemporary land developers whose building concepts can be accompanied by glossy publications. It exemplified and encapsulated the irrigationist philosophy in all of its facets - beckoning the yeoman to transform arid lands utilizing engineering technology.

The core of our popular history still circles Ward's<sup>76</sup> iconic bushman and all things "country", which reveals our need to view ourselves through our relationship with the land. In many ways, this is a dichotomous affair – trying to seek our identity through its tough grandeur and open freedom, but conversely, finding our struggle to tame this land fortifies one of our strongest foundation myths as Australians.

Environmentally, economically and aesthetically irrigation could be considered a failure. In Mildura today, many of the small time blockies, in effect, the yeomanry, have been advised to reconsider their future as they have become non-competitive. The irrigationists' dream appears unsustainable, evidenced by the mature vines being left unpruned or uprooted, orange orchards left unwatered and dying, and "blockies" retiring due to a lack of certainty of water supply. Gordon was right – irrigation in this semi-arid country, was unsustainable, economically and environmentally.

Yet, alarmingly, large corporate farmers are still planting acres upon acres of vines, using computer controlled watering systems, where the exact amount of water for each plant is calculated and delivered. Water trading has become a lucrative industry, with real estate agencies generating more money as water brokers, than through property deals. As the evidence of environmental degradation significantly attributable to irrigation grows, the "blockies" demand their right to farm their land, and complain of reduced water allocations.

The mission of the irrigationists to transform the landscape and live in a horticultural garden, seems still to speak to the dreams of many people. Although there are government policies to buy back water in an attempt to keep the fragile river system healthy, the views of many are still entrenched in the aspirations and beliefs of the irrigationist philosophy. They may not be subscribing to the God's work principle today, but the farmers are still keen to transform the landscape. The appeal of the yeomanry still dominates and the belief in the right to live that life, held strongly. Also, the commitment to the progressive nature of technology is displayed in the embracing of new water systems that provide a more efficient dispersal of water. But to gain an efficiency of procedure is not enough to restore the balance.

I am not advocating a return to a perceived wilderness, but for a sustainable hybrid landscape.<sup>77</sup> The best way to attain a balance, is to adopt farming practices that best fit the natural environment and climatic conditions. To achieve this, intense, small-acre farming needs to be conducted in areas of higher rainfall and dry-land farming should seek to adopt best production practice and tread lightly in this semi-arid country. This appears to be commonsense, but there are many who still envisage the dream expounded in The Red Book, and are reluctant to relinquish it. The power of the irrigationist philosophy, still holds sway.

## Endnotes

- 1 Valerie Yule, 'McCull, Hugh (1819-1885)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 5, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1974), 131-132.
- 2 Deakin writing in 1893 quoted in J.A. Alexander, *The Life of George Chaffey: A Story of Irrigation Beginnings in California and Australia*, (Melbourne: McMillan & Co., 1928), 83.
- 3 B. R. Davidson, *European Farming in Australia*, (Amsterdam: Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, 1981), 161
- 4 G. Gordon & A. Black, *Supply of Water to the Northern Plains, Irrigation First Report*, (Melbourne: John Ferres, Government Printer, 22 September, 1882), 11.

- 5 Ian Tyrrell, *True Gardens of the Gods: Californian-Australian Environmental Reform 1860-1930*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 38.
- 6 Nancy Langston, *Where Land and Water Meet: A Western Landscape Transformed*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 3.
- 7 J.M. Powell, *Environmental Management in Australia, 1788-1914*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1976), 54.
- 8 George Gordon, 'American and Australian Irrigation', *Transactions and proceedings of the Victorian Engineers' Association, 1883-1885*, Primary Source Document.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Colin Swinburne Martin, *Irrigation and Closer Settlement in the Shepparton District 1836-1906*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1955), 44
- 11 Ibid., 33
- 12 Paul Sinclair, *The Murray: A River and its People*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 33.
- 13 Neil Barr & John Cary, *Greening a Brown Land: The Australian Search for Sustainable Land Use*, (Melbourne: MacMillan, 1999), 169
- 14 Copy of the Prospectus to print this publication copied in *Renmark Newspaper Slips 1886 - 1889*. This is a replica of a leather-bound tome which contained an eclectic collection of newspaper cuttings, official documents, and a copy of the Red Book presented to Lloyd Thomson, a significant contributor to the Mildura community and great-grandson of Mrs Miessner, the original owner of the Renmark Hotel. It is a bound volume of photocopies.
- 15 *Report of the Mildura Royal Commission*, (Melbourne: Robt. S. Bain Government Printer, 1896), xi
- 16 A replica of the Red Book correctly named *The Australian Irrigation Colonies Illustrated*, a reproduction edition printed by the Sunraysia Daily, Mildura. The original edition was printed by Unwin Brothers in London in 1888.
- 17 Reproduction of *The Australian Irrigation Colonies*, Sunraysia Daily, Mildura, 3
- 18 Ibid., 3
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid., 5
- 23 Ibid., 7
- 24 Commissioners, *1902 Interstate Royal Commission on the River Murray, representing the States of New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia*, (Melbourne: Sands & McDougall Limited Printers, 1902).
- 25 *The Australian Irrigation Colonies*, 7
- 26 Ibid
- 27 The Chaffey's often used journalists to promote their ideas.
- 28 *The Australian Irrigation Colonies*, 9
- 29 Ibid., 15
- 30 Ibid., 19
- 31 Ibid., 21
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid., 25
- 35 Ibid., 35
- 36 Ibid., 27
- 37 Ibid
- 38 W.B. Chaffey did reside for the rest of his life at Mildura, affectionately being referred to as 'the boss.' He enjoyed an elevated status within both communities, being presented with a Model T Ford by them in the 1920s. George Chaffey left Australia upon going bankrupt but was involved in the development of another irrigation colony in America, Imperial Valley. He was again involved in controversy with this project.
- 39 *The Australian Irrigation Colonies*, 27
- 40 Ibid., 31
- 41 Ibid., 33
- 42 Ibid., 57
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid.. 58 The Agricultural Colleges were a philanthropic concept the Chaffey's imported from America.

- 45 Raymond Wright, *A People's Counsel: A History of the Parliament of Victoria 1856-1990*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992), 100. Wright accused Dow of 'ramming the necessary legislation through Parliament' to support the Mildura plan.
- 46 *The Australian Irrigation Colonies*, 69
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid., 69
- 49 Ibid., 71
- 50 Ibid., 73
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 The Chaffey settlements were unique in that private monies were being used as opposed to government funds. Previous attempts funded by government had not met with initial success, such as Echuca.
- 54 *The Australian Irrigation Colonies*, 87
- 55 Ibid., 91
- 56 Ibid., 95
- 57 This was one of the areas of criticism in the Royal Commission for Mildura which I would like to explore in another article.
- 58 *The Australian Irrigation Colonies*, 95
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Ibid., 97
- 61 Ibid., 97
- 62 Ibid., 98
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 This is one of the contrasting features between Mildura and Renmark; Renmark faces the beautiful river view while Mildura turns away. This is partly due to the location of the railway at Mildura and will be resolved once the proposed Marina is built.
- 65 *The Australian Irrigation Colonies*, 99
- 66 In both Mildura and Renmark there are streets named after these two settlements.
- 67 *Australian Irrigation Colonies*, 105
- 68 Ibid., 106
- 69 Ibid., 111
- 70 Ibid., 116
- 71 Ibid., 117
- 72 *Report of the Mildura Royal Commission*, viii
- 73 Ibid., 69
- 74 Ibid., 13
- 75 Ibid., p.13
- 76 Russell Ward, *The Australian Legend*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1966).
- 77 Richard White, 'From Wilderness to Hybrid Landscapes: The Cultural Turn in Environmental History', *The Historian*, vol. 66.3, (September, 2004).