

'An Area of Disillusionment': World War One soldier settlement schemes and the Australian interwar environmental sensibility

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In 1943 professor of agriculture and member of the Australian Rural Reconstruction Commission Samuel Wadham argued that 'since 1922 the country side of Australia has been an area of disillusionment.' Historians often ascribe a sense of disillusion to the Australian interwar years, particularly as Australians faced the culminating international crises of the era: war, economic depression, and the rise of international fascism. What is most interesting about Wadham's quote, though, is that he ascribes a sense of disillusionment to place – particularly the Australian countryside. Could it be that that interwar disillusion, so often associated with the international political crises of the early twentieth century, was heightened in Australia by a distinctively local, environmental sense of disillusion?

This paper will argue that interwar environmental disillusion was partly the result of the failure of the last the last large-scale Australian attempt at closer settlement: World War One soldier settlement schemes. As a reward for war service, the Australian government settled thousands of, often inexperienced, soldiers on agricultural blocks across Australia. By the late 1920s it was clear that many returned soldiers were struggling to survive financially on insufficiently sized blocks on marginal land.

'The Gamblers' (1934), a short story by Henrietta Drake-Brockman, offers a fictionalised account of a 'typical' failed soldier settler situation; it touches on debt, poor living conditions, high cost of farm technology, and the relationship between war experience and life on the land. I use 'The Gamblers', along with a selection of other published works, to interrogate how failed soldier settler schemes influenced the broader Australian environmental and cultural imagination. The widespread failure of soldier settler schemes unsettled the notion that rural Australia had the capacity for closer, yeoman style, settlement, and called into question national myths about the resilience of the 'digger' and the 'bushman.'

Bio

Jayne Regan is a PhD student in the School of History at the Australian National University. Her thesis draws on history, literary history and collective biography to interrogate the ways that the white Australian literary community engaged with and imagined the landscape in interwar and wartime Australia. Jayne is also the manager of the journal *Australian Literary Studies*.