

# Land of the Black Stump

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Let me commence by stating how happy I am to have the opportunity to come to Launceston and attend this seminar. It is almost twenty years since I first came to Launceston to teach at the University of Tasmania, or as the Launceston campus was then called, the TSIT. During my short stay in Launceston I had the good fortune to participate in the formation of the Launceston Historical Society. It is quite gratifying to see that this society is still going strong.

Since leaving Launceston I have lived in the former Victorian goldmining city of Bendigo, and have worked on the Bendigo and Melbourne campuses of LaTrobe University. In the past twenty years my research interests have focused on two major themes: the historical behaviour of the labour market and the historical evolution of rural and regional Australia. It is this second area that I will talk on today.

A number of years ago Professor Alan Mayne, then of Melbourne University and now of the University of South Australia, and myself worked together on an ARC funded project to look at family and community in the Victorian goldfields. The main research for this work was undertaken using the resources of the office of Births, Deaths and Marriages and the great collection of personal papers from the gold rush deposited in the State Library of Victoria. Fortunately as part of the project we engaged a research scholar from the United States to undertake a doctorate. Our student, now Dr Sara Martin, had an interest in material culture and examined a range of objects and buildings and told the story of the people who used and occupied these. This work got us out of the archives and into the field.

One of the great drives in central Victoria is the journey from Bendigo, via Maldon, Newstead and Smeaton Plains, to Ballarat. In the early stages of our family project, I undertook this journey on many occasions driving to the Ballarat branch of the Victorian Public Records Office. Driving from Newstead to Smeaton the countryside changes dramatically. Around Newstead the land is drier and one sees the typical vegetation of inland Australia – box woodlands. Around Smeaton the land is less timbered and often greener. The remains of extinct volcanoes dominate the skyline, and the basalt soils created by volcanic eruptions are rich agricultural country. And often by the side of the extinct volcanoes one can see the remains of Cornish beam pumps and the detritus of deep lead alluvial gold mining. Outside the town of Smeaton is the Andersons' flourmill. Once powered by a massive water wheel, the mill was built to grist flour for settlers who established farms in the late 1850s and early 1860s. Farmers in this region usually worked small farms. By the late 1860s – due to over-cropping – these were unviable and men and their families sold up and moved north on to the Northern and Wimmera plains. And their sons in turn moved into the Mallee and across the Murray into southern NSW.

Travelling through this country and trying to read the country convinced Alan and myself that historians had in recent years neglected rural and regional Australia, and we decided to get together a team of historians to explore the history of inland – The Land of the Black Stump. An inspiration for us was an essay written by the late John McCarty.

One of the great but forgotten stories of Australian history is the agricultural settlement of our nation. I am old enough to remember a school curriculum that celebrated this history. When I went to school we learnt about John Macarthur and his merino sheep, stump jump ploughs, the Sunshine Harvester and federation wheat. I suspect this story is little told today, and for a number of reasons.

First, the role of rural industry in the Australian economy has declined significantly. Although rural exports are still critical to our current account difficulties, agriculture's share of our gross domestic product has declined since the early twentieth century. The proportion of Australians living in rural Australia and provincial cities and towns has also declined sharply. In the case of my own family, my grandparents moved to Melbourne in the 1920s. My father spent his school holidays on family properties and even when I was growing up we visited family in the country. Since the war the link between the city and the country has lost much of its strength. Streams of migrants have settled in our major cities without any links to rural Australia.

Second, the recent crisis in rural Australia has cast doubt on the very process of settlement in rural Australia. Where I live many people have begun to wonder whether or not it will ever rain again. Environmental degradation of the Murray-Darling has led some of the more extreme conservationists to question whether or not European farming is a viable enterprise in Australia.<sup>1</sup> As a last point it is important to note that regional Australia still has a major, indeed crucial, economic role in Australia through the mining industry. Yet mining has become highly technical and high labour productivity has left a slighter imprint on the settlement of inland Australia than mining in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Geoffrey Blainey reminds us that Launceston was a wealthier mining town than Bendigo or Ballarat in the early twentieth century. I am not sure that the current mining boom will create cities of the likes of Launceston.

Working the central goldfields Alan Mayne and myself began to become interested in the history of inland Australia and its recent neglect by our colleagues. We were drawn back to the writings of the late John McCarty on what he called the inland corridor.<sup>2</sup> McCarty in turn wrote in response to the fourth volume of Manning Clark's *History of Australia – The Earth Abideth For Ever, 1851-1888*. In particular, he was drawn to the unremittingly depressing picture that Clark presented of rural life. Two chapters in his book – 'The Bush Barbarians' and 'Uproar in the Bush' – give Clark's take on rural life. In the last paragraph of 'The Bush Barbarians' he wrote:<sup>3</sup>

By 1880 it looked as though the ancient uncouth continent would destroy all human endeavours to create a class of small property owners between the big men and their employees. Once again as in the convict period, the bush had barbarized its would-be robbers and destroyers just as it had condemned the aborigines to a perpetual state of barbarism in the countless centuries before the coming of the white man. In the cities belief in progress had not been diminished by the survival of barbarism in the Australian bush.

McCarty claimed that this view of rural Australia depressed and saddened him. Although John was never a great empirical historian, he was a man who read widely, thought deeply and had a strong theoretical bent. McCarty was also by training an economist, a discipline sadly ignored by most young Australian historians in the present.

McCarty proposed an alternative model of rural Australia. He argued that to understand rural and regional Australia it was necessary to take a broad view. He asked his readers to imagine an inland corridor stretching from South Australia through Victoria and New South Wales into Queensland. In later formulations of his thesis he extended his corridor to the midlands of Tasmania and to the southwest of Western Australia. The three great export industries of nineteenth century Australia – mining, pastoralism and farming – were located in this corridor.

In framing the history of this corridor, McCarty suggested that one model might be to start with the family farm. The family farm was a dynamic institution that changed over the life cycle. Young men working on their father's farms provided labour in their late teens and early twenties. The farm was in equilibrium. Too many sons might disrupt

this balance and some would have to go off and seek labour elsewhere. They became the labour of the corridor – farm labourers, shearers and miners. When these men had accumulated sufficient capital they married and set up their own farms. When their children were young they had to hire in labour. As their elder sons reached late teens the need for outside labour declined. The farm was once again in equilibrium. But this period was challenged when their brothers joined in the farm's labour force. Someone had to leave and find work in the corridor or the city. The cycle started once again.

The family farm was the key, he argued, to writing the story of the inland corridor and it was a story he suggested that was one of movement towards prosperity and happiness.

Although some of McCarty's ideas on the corridor surfaced in *Australians 1888*,<sup>4</sup> McCarty did not take up his own challenge to write a large-scale history of the inland corridor. And towards the end of his life his interests drifted towards business history.

Now there is much in McCarty's view of rural or inland Australia that I do not accept. In particular he attacked Marxist historians of the 1950s and 1960s who emphasized class conflict on the frontier – the great shearers' strikes of the 1890s and the industrial turbulence at Broken Hill in the 1890s and the early twentieth century. While not a Marxist, I would not want to down play the bitterness of the great Broken Hill strikes and I also have written on the exploitation of rural labour<sup>5</sup>. Yet in the past few years I have become more and more convinced that the family is central to the settlement of inland Australia. And I have become and more and more convinced that for a large segment of the rural population the story of settlement was one of progress towards happiness.

One of the more persistent images of rural Australia is that of the male frontier. On the frontier men far outnumbered women and they created a masculine culture of mateship and hard drinking. When women do appear on the frontier they are often like Henry Lawson's *The Drover's Wife*, lonely battlers. Such images might make good literature, but they present only part of the complexity of the social structure of rural and regional Australia. Let me illustrate this first with the example of the Victorian goldfields. I suspect my argument applies equally well to the story of mining elsewhere, including Broken Hill and Launceston.

There is no doubt that the great gold rushes to Victoria created a society dominated by men. By the early 1850s Victoria had a strange demographic structure: it was a society dominated by young men aged from their early twenties into their early forties. Women made up only about a fifth of the population and, compared with home, children and the elderly were conspicuously absent. This strange society frightened many evangelical Christians and they worried that the young men would never settle down. Their worries were groundless. For a start a significant proportion of the migrants came with their families. Often these tended to be families fleeing the declining copper mines of Cornwall. Moreover migrants often travelled in family groups. We have for example the family correspondence of Thomas and James Hoey who journeyed to Australia with their sister Margaret Buckie and her husband John Buckie in 1852. Within a year James Hoey wrote home to Scotland seeking permission for his sister Maggie Brown to join him in Australia. When Maggie fell ill her sister Jane rushed to the colony to care for her. She in turn met an old Scottish friend (Andrew Hamilton), whom she married. For over ten years this Hoey-Buckie-Brown and Hamilton circle lived near one another and worked together. Few migrants have left us with the rich correspondence of this circle but when one undertakes genealogical studies numerous cases of similar patterns of chain and family migration are revealed.<sup>6</sup>

I am part of the infamous baby boom generation of the post-war years, and there is no doubt that a similar phenomenon took place in nineteenth century Australia. By 1861 marriage was virtually universal among women and marriage rates far exceeded those

in contemporary England, Scotland and Ireland. Although these women did not marry significantly later than their contemporaries in the UK, the fact that so many married, combined with high fertility rates within marriage, led to a population explosion. The impact of this demographic revolution reverberated for the remainder of the century.<sup>7</sup>

The demographic revolution of the early 1860s threw up a major challenge: how was this young and rapidly growing population to be housed? Curiously the answer to this family conundrum emerged out of the aftermath of that decidedly male event – Eureka. After the battle at Eureka the Victorian government replaced the gold tax with a licence to dig for gold. In time, attached to this licence to dig was a licence to acquire crown land on which to build a residence. This eventually became a form of tenure known as the miner's residence area.<sup>8</sup>

Under the residence area families could occupy areas of up to a quarter acre in mining districts for nominal annual rents. Upon this land they could build a house. In most cases houses were constructed of wood, but mud-brick and stone were also used for construction. On the goldfields a significant proportion of the population was Cornish, and the miner's residence area enabled the importation of the Cornish tradition of owner-building. The miner's residence area became a major form of tenure on the goldfields. In the 1870s as many as 70 per cent of houses were on residence areas and as late as 1891 the proportion was around 30 per cent. As well as shelter, the large size of many residence areas enabled mining families to grow fruit trees and vegetables and to keep chooks. These activities became critical when unemployment rose among miners.<sup>9</sup>

Victoria was the cradle of mining customs and law in the nineteenth century and after 1870 men moved out of Victoria into new fields. In the 1870s migration took place to the more northern reaches of McCarty's corridor – Charters Towers. They later moved to Cobar and Broken Hill in New South Wales, to Beaconsfield and the west coast in Tasmania, and to the great gold fields of Western Australia. Men took with them attitudes formed in Victoria most importantly – trade unionism – but the administrative machinery pioneered in Victoria was often transferred to later fields. It is likely that the miner's right travelled inter-state; it was certainly adopted at Broken Hill.<sup>10</sup>

One of our best accounts of the movement of men and families along McCarty's corridor is the diary of Richard Pope. Richard Pope was born in Cornwall and entered mines at St Just in Cornwall. On reaching adulthood, he ignored his father's strictures and sailed for the United States. Here he mined in Virginia, Michigan and Illinois. Returning to Cornwall he married and leaving his young bride Mary Anne behind he again sailed for the US. On his return he settled down to domestic life working with his father in Ireland. When his father died in 1867, the wanderlust struck him again and with a family of six children he set out for Ballarat in 1868. After a year working in the deep leads of the Ballarat district, he settled in Bendigo during the boom of 1871. He worked in Bendigo until 1886, when he moved to the Barrier Ranges. At first Pope travelled with two of his unmarried children and most of his work was on minor lodes just outside of Broken Hill.<sup>11</sup>

Broken Hill has a reputation for being a rough mining town, but it was also home to many mining families. His eldest daughter, who had married an up-and-coming mining manager, James Hebbard, preceded Richard Pope to the Barrier Ranges and the Hebbards established a household in the centre of Broken Hill in the late 1880s. By 1889 Pope joined his daughter and son-in-law in Broken Hill and established a house on a miner's right close to the centre of the emerging city. He then cut his ties with Bendigo and called for his wife, Mary Anne, and other children to join him on the Hill. By the late 1880s, Pope's large family included a number of sons who were capable of working, and the family operated as a unit, pooling their wages. They soon acquired a second house at Broken Hill. When his eldest son married Pope let out this house to

the young couple. By the mid 1890s, the Pope clan had established several households at Broken Hill. They also had family links to relatives who remained in Bendigo and those who migrated to one of the other major mining areas of the inland corridor – Moonta-Wallaroo.

If we take a broad sweep – both geographically and temporally – of McCarty's inland corridor, the years 1840 to around 1920, witnessed a massive economic and social change in regional Australia. In the 1840s southern Australia, from Hobart to Queensland, was the domain of the large-scale pastoralists, and agriculture had a very slight imprint on the landscape. The major cereal producing area at the beginning of our period was Tasmania. By the beginning of the 1920s the family farm ruled regional Australia, a position it has maintained until the present – although there are signs of severe distress due to prolonged drought and the farming population faces the crucial demographic problem of an ageing workforce.<sup>12</sup>

In looking at the history of this development, it seems to me that historians have not followed the broad sweep and have too often looked at isolated areas or time frames. Bill Gammage's history of Narrandera shire is frequently cited as one of the best examples of the genre of local history. However, while it devotes several chapters to the struggle between selectors and squatters, it deals very lightly with the eventual victory of the family farmer when the economic cycle turned against wool in favour of wheat.<sup>13</sup> In my own state John McQuilton has depicted the Kelly outbreak as a consequence of a culture of poverty that resulted from the failings of the selection acts and the battle between selectors and squatters. Yet if one moves beyond the 1860s and 1870s, one finds in the north of Victoria the emergence of viable rural communities in the 1880s in which the Irish and Irish Catholics were remarkably successful in obtaining land.<sup>14</sup>

A more fruitful approach, I feel, is to turn to the historical writings of scholars who have been involved in agriculture as agricultural economists or agricultural scientists. By the nature of their work these professionals have personal experience of dealing with farmers and travelling through the country. I would still direct interested readers to such classics as Sir Samuel Wadham's *Land Utilization in Australia* and the work of the late Bruce Davidson, *A History of European farming in Australia*.<sup>15</sup>

Both men clearly understood rural Australia in a way that most professionally trained historians have not. John McCarty in his original exposition of the inland corridor suggested that most historians were more comfortable on their suburban patios than in rural Australia. Yet untrained as historians, these scholars from other disciplines have generally relied on the published literature and there is a need for professional historians to return to the rich manuscript literature and recreate the experience of life in rural Australia. My own research suggests that the family remains a pivotal place to look at rural Australia. Let me illustrate this with some of the evidence we have gathered for our Black Stump Project.

In the 1850s gold initiated a mass wave of migration to the Australian colonies. In the case of Victoria, where we now have detailed demographic evidence, we know these were a fairly mixed group. Britain was the principal source of migration but there were significant streams from Europe – particularly Germany – and from China. In my own city of Bendigo about one in five of the population was Chinese at the 1857 census. Most of the counties of England were represented among the migrant stream – and there was a spread between the northern, industrial counties and London and the agricultural counties of southern England. The Southwest was an extremely important source of men moving from the Cornish mineral fields. The Scottish were particularly well represented with migrants from the more industrialized areas of low lands. In inland Australia the Irish were a significant cohort of settlers; my own family came from Galway but the two major counties providing settlers were Clare and Tipperary. I am

convinced that it is crucial to acknowledge that a large proportion of what became the rural Irish moved after the famine, and at a time when Irish farming was moving towards a more commercially focused farming. Ned Kelly's family might have been transported to Tasmania in the distressed 1840s; my own family and most Australian Irish came well after the famine with a modern commercial bent that fitted them well for the conditions of Australia. They came to an agriculture that was born modern.<sup>16</sup>

I think the same arguments could be made about other groups who took up agriculture in Australia. It is simply wrong to state, as John McQuilton has done, that settlers in rural Australia lacked farming experience. The evidence we have suggests that migrants who moved into rural areas were born in rural areas. Londoners, for example, were under-represented in rural regions. Many of the rural migrants came from a background of commercially based cereal growing. The Germans coming from Prussia exemplified this.

You might then argue that Australian conditions were different. And so they were. Yet one of the keys to understanding rural settlement is to appreciate that it was a process of learning and adaptation to Australian conditions. McCarty's corridor thesis is the key to unravelling this aspect of settlement.

Pastoralists settled south eastern Australia in a remarkably rapid manner. By the late 1840s, as I have said, the open lands of Tasmania and the south eastern mainland were occupied by pastoralists and their flocks of sheep. First attempts at cereal growing took place in Tasmania, and over the next eighty years agriculture moved inland in stages. By the 1850s Tasmania was challenged by settlers in South Australia. Under Wakefielden notions of settlement, agricultural land was opened around Adelaide. And markets for this were provided by the Victorian goldfields. Early South Australian agriculture highlighted a feature of Australian agriculture that persists till the present – the use of labour saving technology and a relentless drive to increase productivity. In the case of South Australia farmers were quick to use the indigenous invention of the stripper. The success of SA had severe ramifications for Tasmania, and made its cereal farming unproductive.<sup>17</sup>

Under the population pressures in the wake of the gold rushes, Victorians pushed for the sale of land and then for selection on credit terms. Agriculture emerged first in the counties surrounding Melbourne and in the central goldfields. By the early 1860s the Smeaton plains was the wheat bowl of Victoria.

Sale of land at competitive auction and the problems in the early land acts ensured that the first farms in Victoria were small. By the mid-1860s farmers were facing problems with soil exhaustion and rust in their crops. The solution lay in moving north. In the 1870s southern farmers moved to the virtually treeless plains of the Wimmera or to the open woodlands of the Northern plains. Another stream moved south into the great forests of Gippsland. Yet it was not only Victorians who were on the move – South Australians, particularly Germans, moved into the Wimmera, and to a lesser extent into the southern Riverina. And moving was a process of acquiring and transporting skills. The Germans brought into the Wimmera their broad acre Prussian background and the experience of dry land farming in South Australia.

It was at the point of moving that role of family became absolutely essential and settlement was a family activity. Movement often took place when children reached early adulthood. There were two reasons for this: they could provide labour and just as importantly they could take up land. And this applied to both sons and daughters. The pattern was then for the family to select land as a family unit and to clear and improve this as a family group. The whole exercise was often underwritten by the sale of the father's southern or South Australian farm. In the past few years I have been assiduously collecting diaries – either from libraries or from the field – which allows us to build up a picture of this process in considerable detail. The process is also well

documented in a vast archival resource of lands files and rate records, and this was the great age of the local paper.

As part of the Black Stump project I have been building up detailed pictures of both families and communities. Now I am not going to deny that thousands faced great hardship in settling and that many left in despair. Yet Clarke's image of the ancient uncouth continent chalking up its victims does little justice to the resolve and perseverance of this generation of settlers. First, they built communities of sober citizens who built schools, mechanics' institutions and churches. And when we read their diaries, we find that they are social creatures meeting regularly for sports, for religious services and to lobby the politicians for roads, bridges and railways. Diaries also show neighbours sharing labour, sharing machinery and often food. The women in these communities are not the social isolates like Lawson's *Drover's Wife*. They are moving about visiting and entertaining and helping out at vital junctures such as births.

Moreover I would argue that they were an acquisitive lot and one thing that emerges from rate books is the gradual accumulation of property. Families denied land ownership in Southern England, in Ireland and Germany, obtained the proud status of freeholders.

The process of moving continued and, indeed, gained pace in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Massive expansion of the pastoral frontier in the 1870s and 1880s led to a financial crisis among the Australian sheep kings. By the 1890s the process of buying land in southern New South Wales and the improvement of properties, fencing and water supply, saddled pastoralists with debt. At the same time the expansion of the Australian wool clip led to a drop in prices. It now made more sense to grow wheat than wool, or at least to combine the two industries. Regional newspapers carried advertisements of pastoral runs for sale.

In the 1890s successful settlers in Victoria and South Australia pushed into the dense mallee of both colonies and moved across the border into New South Wales and took land on former pastoral estates. This last great move of the frontier was facilitated by a number of technological developments – the American seed-drill, the combine-harvester, the use of super-phosphate and improved seed varieties. Sons of an earlier generation of settlers moved away from their fathers' farms and started afresh. The two decades of the new century saw a massive expansion of Australian farming and the consolidation of the family farm as the central economic unit in Australian agriculture. This was not the work of Bush Barbarians.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*, Allen Lane, New York, 2005, in particular, Chapter 13 'Mining Australia'. For a more measured response by Australian agricultural scientists see Neil Barr and John Cary, *Greening a Brown Land: The Australian Search for Sustainable Land Use*, Macmillan Education Australia, Melbourne, 1992, and John W Cooke, 'European Settlement in the Victorian Mallee: a Brief overview', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, vol.118, no 2, pp 295–303.

<sup>2</sup> J.W. McCarty, 'The Inland Corridor', *Australia 1888*, Bulletin No. 5 September 1980.

<sup>3</sup> F C M H Clark, *A History of Australia, IV, The Earth Abideth For Ever, 1851–1888*, University of Melbourne Press, Melbourne, 1978, pp. 218-219.

<sup>4</sup> Graeme Davison, J.W. McCarty and Ailsa McLeary, *Australians 1888*, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, Sydney 1987. See chapter 6, 'The Social Map'.

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- <sup>5</sup> Charles Fahey, 'Abusing the Horses and Exploiting the Labourer' *Labour History*, No.65, November 1993.
- <sup>6</sup> See Brown Family Papers, Australian Joint Copying Project, Miscellaneous Series, reels 858-863.
- <sup>7</sup> See A. R. Hall, 'Some Long Period Effects of the Kinked Age Distribution of the Population of Australia, 1861-1961', *Economic Record*, 1963.
- <sup>8</sup> See Ralph Birrell, *Staking a Claim: Gold and the Development of Victorian Mining Law*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p.91.
- <sup>9</sup> For the Cornish in Victoria see Charles Fahey, 'From St Just to St Just Point: Cornish Migration to Nineteenth-century Victoria'; Philip Payton, *Cornish Studies*, 15, University of Exeter Press, Exeter, 2007.
- <sup>10</sup> See Andrew Reeves, 'Trade Unionism and the Australian Mining Industry: The Influence of Central Victorian Goldminers, 1870-1920', in Keir Reeves and David Nichols, *Deeper Leads: New Approaches to Victorian Goldfields History*, BHS Publishing, Ballarat, 2007.
- <sup>11</sup> Diary of Richard Pope, Australian Manuscripts Collection, Ms. 11918, State Library of Victoria.
- <sup>12</sup> See Neil Barr, *The Micro-Dynamics of Change in Australian Agriculture: 1976-2001*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 2004.
- <sup>13</sup> Bill Gammage, Narrandera Shire, Narrandera Shire Council, Narrandera, 1986, twentieth century farming in this book is covered in one Chapter, 'Making a Quid'.
- <sup>14</sup> John McQuilton, *The Kelly Outbreak 1878-1880, The Geographical Dimensions of Social Banditry*, University of Melbourne Press, Melbourne, 1979. For the success of the Irish see Charles Fahey, 'A Fine Country for the Irish', *Australian Journal of Irish Studies*, Volume 4, Special Issue, Remembered Nations, Imagined Republics.
- <sup>15</sup> Sir Samuel Wadham, R. Kent Wilson and Joyce Wood, *Land Utilization in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1957; Bruce R Davidson, *European Farming in Australia: An Economic History of Australian Farming*, Elsevier, Amsterdam, 1981.
- <sup>16</sup> For some of the preliminary results of this project see Charles Fahey, 'Moving North: Technological Change, Land Holding and the Development of Agriculture in Victoria 1870-1914', in Alan Mayne, *Beyond the Black Stump: Histories of Outback Australia*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2008.
- <sup>17</sup> The classic account of agricultural settlement in South Australia is Donald Meinig, *On the Margins of the Good Earth: The South Australian Wheat Frontier, 1869-1884*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1962. See also Lionel Frost, 'The Correll Family and Technological Change in Australian Agriculture', *Agricultural History*, vol 75 no 2, 2001, pp 228-9.