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**Miegunyah Student Project Award Project Report 2023**

*This report is the outcome of a 2023 Miegunyah Student Project Award, and is the result of independent research undertaken by the student.*

**Tree Murder and War Trauma: Emotions and Early Conservation in Interwar Australia**

Amongst the numerous objects housed in the Russell and Mab Grimwade ‘Miegunyah’ collection, is an original illustration by Will Dyson. The illustration, which initially appeared



Fig. 1 *Please don't cut down the tree, it's where I live*, Will Dyson, 1927, The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest, 1973.

in the *Herald* on 13 August, 1927,<sup>1</sup> depicts a “tree-murderer”, axe in hand, looking up in surprise at the spirit of Beauty emerging from a nearby tree. To the casual viewer, such an image may be surprising given popular notions of 1920s materialism. To some, it may call to mind

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<sup>1</sup>Will Dyson, “A Plea For Our Trees,” *Herald*, August 13, 1927, [nla.gov.au/nla.news-article244192356](http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article244192356).

contemporary conservation discourses. However, as my research uncovered, Dyson's illustration was part of complex debates and meanings assigned to early conservation efforts.

How the work came to be part of the 'Miegunyah' collection is a story of its own.

Although Will Dyson came from a rural, working class family background,<sup>2</sup> by the 1920s he was connected not only to Australia's bohemian subculture, but to men such as C.E.W. Bean and Keith Murdoch through their military service in World War I.<sup>3</sup> Although its simple inscription to Russell gives no indication of why the original illustration was given to Russell, it seems likely that Dyson and Grimwade were known to each other through family and mutual friends. Though he had a falling out with Norman Lindsay, Dyson had married Lindsay's sister Ruby and remained close friends with other members of the Lindsay family.<sup>4</sup> The connection between Grimwade and Dyson likely came through Daryl Lindsay, Russell Grimwade's friend and neighbour.<sup>5</sup> Though Grimwade's interest in conservation was not necessarily fully shared by Dyson,<sup>6</sup> the men shared nationalist tendencies.<sup>7</sup> It is these overlapping nationalist affinities, which found expression in early conservation and urban greening, that seem likely to have brought the illustration to the 'Miegunyah' Collection.

### **Beyond Conservation: The Politics of Broken Men**

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<sup>2</sup>Vale Lindsay, "William Henry (Will) Dyson (1880-1938)," Australian Dictionary of Biography (Australian National University, 1981), [https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dyson-william-henrywill6074#:~:text=William%20Henry%20Dyson%\(18802D1938,supported%20Edward%20\(Ted\).](https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/dyson-william-henrywill6074#:~:text=William%20Henry%20Dyson%(18802D1938,supported%20Edward%20(Ted).)

<sup>3</sup>On Dyson's extensive personal connections, see Ross McMullin, *Will Dyson: Australia's Radical Genius* (Carlton North: Scribe, 2006).

<sup>4</sup>Ross McMullin, *Will Dyson: Australia's Radical Genius* (Carlton North: Scribe, 2006), 78–79.

<sup>5</sup>J.R. Poynter, *Russell Grimwade* (Carlton: Miegunyah Press, 1967), 142.

<sup>6</sup>On Grimwade and the Australian Forest League see Poynter, *Russell Grimwade*, 209-217.

<sup>7</sup>McMullin, *Australia's Radical Genius*, 136; Poynter, *Russell Grimwade*, 210.

Chroniclers of World War I, including Will Dyson and C.E.W. Bean, placed extensive emphasis on the role of the bush in forming an idealised national type: the young white man familiar who embodied the Anzac myth. The connection between the bush and white Australian achieved special significance during World War I. Bean, for instance, framed the prototypical Anzac as a “child of nature.”<sup>8</sup> Dyson often referenced the bush in his war writing, referring to soldiers as carrying with them “the odours of our bush,” or being “boys thinking of Australian summer” on the winter battlefields of France.<sup>9</sup> In these narratives, the blasted European environment— ripped apart by modern technology, and linked explicitly to winter, wickedness and environmental degradation— became the enemy, and a symbol to those back home of the inevitable outcome of civilisational conflict.

With soldier repatriation commencing in 1919, new fears surrounding their capacity to be reincorporated back into Australian society arose. Men struggled with both physical disability and the prevalence of trauma-related disorders: on occasion by turning to religion, but more often by turning to drinking, gambling, sex workers and, in some cases, ultimately to suicide.<sup>10</sup> Servicemen also struggled with material concerns. Men who had enlisted in their youth, particularly those who were underage, found themselves lacking the skills necessary to find employment.<sup>11</sup> Indigenous servicemen and their families found their war gratuities paid to the

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<sup>8</sup>C.E.W. Bean, *The Story of Anzac*, 11th ed., vol. 1 (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1919), 46-48.

<sup>9</sup>Will Dyson, *Australia at War: A Winter Record* (London: Cecil Palmer & Hayward, 1918), 9, 21.

<sup>10</sup>Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with The Legend* (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2013), 45–49.

<sup>11</sup>Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, 131–36.

Protector of Aborigines, and were often denied access to the soldier-settler schemes that would have granted them limited land rights.<sup>12</sup>

The rise of public discourses around “tree-murder” represent a response to the threat of unruly emotions amongst returned servicemen. At war with the creeping threat of “civilisation” and Bolshevism represented by unhygienic urban living, including interracial connections, immorality, and sexual depravity, urban greening advocates launched a moral campaign against the working class diggers considered vulnerable to communist ideology.<sup>13</sup> Landscape gardener Edna Walling’s articles, taken up by the Herald throughout July 1927, advocated that Melbourne be made a “city embowered with trees” to “raise the spirits and stir the sense of beauty”<sup>14</sup>—the word inked by Dyson onto his own Dryad. The goal was to create a spirit of harmony and softness, smoothing the rough edges from returned servicemen and stabilising civic society.

Urban concerns were easily parlayed into fears about the destruction of Australian forests. Early environmental protectionism connected the “passing” of the wilderness to nationalist rhetoric, tying its protection to patriotic “place-bonding” and a healthy separation

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<sup>12</sup>A.I.F., Base Records Office, “Aboriginal Serviceman’s War Gratuity Paid To ‘Protector Of Aborigines’,” National Archives of Australia, 1922, [www.naa.gov.au/students-and-teachers/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/war/world-war-i/aboriginal-servicemans-war-gratuity-paid-protector-aborigines](http://www.naa.gov.au/students-and-teachers/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/war/world-war-i/aboriginal-servicemans-war-gratuity-paid-protector-aborigines); Department of Veterans’ Affairs, “Indigenous Australians At War,” Department of Veteran’s Affairs (Australian Government, January 30, 2020), [www.dva.gov.au/newsroom/media-centre/media-backgrounders/indigenous-australians-war](http://www.dva.gov.au/newsroom/media-centre/media-backgrounders/indigenous-australians-war).

<sup>13</sup>Martin Crotty, “Making The Australian Male: Middle-Class Masculinity 1870-1920,” 2001, 17; Paul Fox, “Architects And Garden Suburbs: The Politics Of Melbourne’s Interwar Suburban Landscapes,” *Landscape Review* 16, no. 2 (2016): 21; Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, 136.

<sup>14</sup>The Herald, “Garland Our City With Trees,” *The Herald*, August 11, 1927, [nla.gov.au/nla.news-page26536025](http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-page26536025); Edna Walling, “Tree Murder As A Fine Art,” *The Herald*, July 16, 1927, [nla.gov.au/nla.news-article243963579](http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article243963579).

from Britain.<sup>15</sup> The rise of the forestry movement following the formation of the Australian Forest League in 1912 used such ideals in their campaign to outcompete the agricultural industry for access to natural resources.<sup>16</sup> Concurrent with urban greening, therefore, the Australian press published pieces that reinforced the link between men's emotional state and the bush, signified by healthy camaraderie and, in poems like "Silent Forest" juxtaposed against the "imprisonment" of the urban environment.<sup>17</sup>

This connection between war, urban greening and conservation movements is suggested by Grimwade's possession of Dyson's original illustration. The connections between the two men, though difficult to trace, suggests that Dyson understood the urban greening project as one fundamentally linked to Grimwade's personal focus on forest preservation. For Dyson, himself a traumatised survivor of World War I and its fallout, this understanding of the bush as regenerative in character seems clear. Such political and social linkages, however, offer a reminder of the importance of contextualising the past and understanding it on its own terms. Rather than a simple expression of commitment to environmental protection, it is bound up in a complex discussion around nationalism, civic belonging and the stifling of political debate.

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<sup>15</sup>Warwick Frost, "Australia Unlimited? Environmental Debate in The Age of Catastrophe, 1910-1939," *Environment And History* 10, no. 3 (2004): 293; J.M. Powell, "Environment-Identity Convergences In Australia, 1880-1950," *(Dis)Placing Empire*, 2017, 123-24; Michael Williams, "Ecology, Imperialism And Deforestation," *Ecology And Empire: Environmental History Of Settler Societies*, 1997, 215-16.

<sup>16</sup>Frost, "Australia," 296; Fiona Paisley, "Mock Justice: World Conservation and Australian Aborigines in Interwar Switzerland," *Transforming Cultures Ejournal* 3, no. 1 (2008); Williams, "Ecology," 215-16.

<sup>17</sup>Ballarat Star, "Silent Forest," December 15, 1921, [nla.gov.au/nla.news-article219325122](http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article219325122); Weekly Times, "Forest Magic," October 1, 1927, [nla.gov.au/nla.news-article224377341](http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article224377341).

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