‘Anthropocentric utilitarian progressivism’?
A case study of popular attitudes, scientific knowledge and dominant belief systems influencing industrial and domestic pollution of the Merri Creek, 1835-1915

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Note on abbreviations: Many of my primary sources are drawn from the Victorian Papers Presented to Parliament (Legislative Assembly). Following the style used in Davison, Dunstan and McConville’s The Outcasts of Melbourne, I have abbreviated this to VPP (Victorian Parliamentary Papers). ‘MCCC’ refers to the Merri Creek Co-ordinating Committee; ‘MCMC’, to the Merri Creek Management Committee; ‘FOMC’, to the Friends of Merri Creek; ‘MMBW’, to the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works. ‘OED’ = (Shorter) Oxford English Dictionary.
‘Anthropocentric utilitarian progressivism’? A case study of popular attitudes, scientific knowledge and dominant belief systems influencing industrial and domestic pollution of the Merri Creek, 1835-1915.

Introduction

Few of the many Melbournians who walk or cycle beside the Merri today would be aware that little over a century ago, their predecessors labelled this same waterway ‘a common death dealing and stinking sewer’. The Merri Creek, which cuts a course between Heathcote Junction and Dights Falls through Melbourne’s north-eastern suburbs – Craigieburn, Somerton, Preston, Northcote, Coburg, Brunswick, Fitzroy – has suffered severe and prolonged environmental abuse at the hands of European settlers since 1835, when John Batman, having negotiated a treaty with the area’s traditional owners, the Woiworung, established himself (illegally) as the area’s first squatter and pastoralist. Subsequent uses of the creek have varied widely; since European settlement, the Merri has served – in some cases simultaneously – a number of purposes, including those of water source for domestic and agricultural use, town sewer, industrial waste dump, recreational setting, and, most recently, flagship for environmental crusaders. It has long been a source of disputes and disagreements between the various suburbs through which it runs; and conflicting uses of the creek, its surrounds and its resources, which have dogged its non-indigenous users from early colonial times, continue to complicate human relationships with the Merri today.

To describe the Merri as the most abused waterway in Victoria, though tempting, would be inaccurate. The Merri’s environmental history is on a par with that of most other urban watercourses in Victoria, and indeed differs little from stories of settler interaction with streams, rivers and creeks across Australia, America and Europe. On one level, certainly, the abuses have varied, in both nature and degree; watercourses have been straightened, dammed, drained, overfished, polluted, and altogether altered in every conceivable way, some suffering greater disturbances than others. But the mentality underlying their stories varies little. At the time of European settlement, settler societies
believed that the world was for human use and benefit, its resources there for the taking; failure to utilise these resources was considered waste. This prevailing view, despite isolated dissident voices, was not seriously questioned until perhaps thirty years ago. Our society has spent so long overlaying waterways with our own logic that we are now struggling to hear what one historian has elegantly termed ‘the logic of the river.’

The rise of environmental history has accompanied the rise of ecological consciousness. Historians have turned from conventional, ‘culture’-centred histories to the stories of landscapes and waterways, seeking to bridge the ‘nature-culture’ dichotomy which traditional historiography has tended to enforce. Under an empirical historiographical tradition, of the kind which until recently has dominated Western historical thought, ‘nature’ and natural phenomena are subordinated in historical writing to ‘culture’ and social artifice. Though the existence of ‘nature’ within empirical historiography is not disputed, ‘nature’ itself is seen as eternal, governed by immutable laws, and thus historyless; the environmental consequences of human actions are largely ignored by empirical historians, who consider them rather to fall into the realm of science than of history. Lately, however, changes to epistemological style and perspective have shifted the focus of historical study to a more balanced middle ground, centering not on the extremes of ‘nature’ or of ‘culture’, but on the relationship between the two. Humans, once the sole actors of historical drama, are gradually being reworked into a more holistic context, which considers people and place as both interdependent and reciprocally influential, and puts human relationships with nature into a cultural framework. It is within this endeavour that I locate my work.

Though a comprehensive environmental history of the Merri does not yet exist, parts of its story have been told in various places. Ian Bishop’s *The Merri Creek Study*, the most complete history of the Merri Creek to date, contains a valuable summary of the creek’s

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historical context, both pre- and post-European settlement. Suburban histories such as Richard Broome’s *Coburg: Between Two Creeks* and Andrew Lemon’s *The Northcote Side of the River* include aspects of the Merri’s story. Social histories – Bernard Barrett’s *The Inner Suburbs,* and the articles by John Lack and David Dunstan in *The Outcasts of Melbourne* – describe the repercussions of social issues for the natural world. Environmental histories of the larger Australian rivers, including George Seddon’s *Searching for the Snowy,* Paul Sinclair’s *The Murray: A River and its People,* and Tim Bonyhady’s ‘The Flood in the Darling,’ reveal significant and relevant trends in Australian environmental thought and policy, and are examples of sound research and sensitive writing in what remains a relatively new field. I include Donald Worster in this list; *Rivers of Empire* and ‘Thinking Like a River’, though American in focus, have influenced the development of subsequent river histories in Australia and elsewhere. Without any pretensions to the breadth and depth of these authors’ knowledge, or to the scope of the subject matter they cover, I hope that my own foray into their territory may contribute to the advancement of environmental historical knowledge, albeit in a small and localized way. I concur with Bishop that ‘the Merri Creek has assumed an importance out of proportion with its physical dimensions’; and I suggest that Worster’s recommendation to the makers of public water policy, for the development of a new ‘water ethic’ – ‘start with the local and specific rather than the general and grand’ – could equally be applied to writers of environmental history. Though microhistory is a

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12 Worster, "Thinking Like a River," 130.
technique by now well-established in cultural history, opportunities remain within the field of environmental history for greater application of the micro-study. Such studies, while they do not possess the epic grandeur of a sweeping historical narrative, have the potential to offer insights into issues of resource use, environmental awareness and ecological mentality which resonate well beyond the physical limits of the object of study.

A comprehensive environmental history of any waterway is an unwieldy entity; events and issues in its history overlap and recur, disappearing from one stretch of water only to reappear in another. Seddon, in the introduction to his environmental history of the Snowy, canvasses the range of options for structuring a river biography – geographic or historic sequence, natural history, history of land-use, perceptual history, or the autobiographical mode – outlining the problems of each. Geographic organization of the material is unhelpful – suburban boundaries are artificial constructs by which to divide up a waterway – and redundant, as geologically specific accounts of the Merri are written by proxy in local suburban histories. Strict chronological organisation is not altogether successful; periods of land use – pastoral, domestic, industrial, recreational – are not distinct, but overlap, hampering a neat division of the material. Thematic structuring, while convenient, encourages a tendency to omit details which do not fit neatly with the theme. Given the restrictions of this work, and the demands and difficulties of a full-scale environmental history, I have determined instead on a more focused investigation, which permits a study more specific in subject and in spatio-temporal scope.

I focus on the industrial and domestic pollution of the Merri under European settlement, paying particular attention to the noxious trades and sewage disposal practices of the Victorian era, and simultaneously locating this discussion within a broader context of

13 Of particular significance in this field are studies of mentalité by the Annalistes, including such works as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s Le Carnaval de Romans, 1579-1580 (1980) and Montaillou, village occitan (1975); Carlo Ginzburg’s Le fromage et les vers: L’univers d’un meunier du XVIe siècle (1980), and Fernand Braudel’s La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen a l’époque de Philippe II (1949). Eamon Duffy’s The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and rebellion in an English village (2001) is a more recent example.

14 Seddon, Searching for the Snowy, xx-xxxii.
other water resource issues in Australia during this period. My study centres on the intensification of the pollution problem following the population boom of the gold rush period; the corresponding increase in public discontent with the state of the Merri, culminating in a series of letters to local newspapers; and the nature and efficacy of individual and collective responses to these complaints. I place alongside the specific progression of the creek’s pollution problem a discussion of those social and economic conditions, those aspects of the prevailing mental climate, which allowed and even promoted settler abuses of water and water resources.

I argue that pollution of the Merri during this period represented merely one symptom of deep-rooted attitudes to the natural world and natural resources, traceable to three separate, though interlinked, strands of British colonial world-view: anthropocentric aspects of the colonists’ Christian religious traditions, which encouraged a belief that humans were separate from the rest of the natural world and entitled to use its resources solely for their own benefit; utilitarian views promoted in the first instance by Francis Bacon (1561-1626), whose scientific ideology promised a ‘manmade paradise’ through aggressive scientific modification of the natural world; and the belief – seventeenth-century in origin, nurtured by the Industrial Revolution, and cherished with particular fervour in nineteenth-century Australia – that Progress, particularly in its narrow sense as economic development, was both inevitable and uniformly positive. As an indication of the interconnected and symbiotic nature of these three elements, I label the prevailing mentality of the Victorian era 'anthropocentric utilitarian progressivism'. I demonstrate that the pollution problems resulting from these attitudes, while not peculiar to Australian waterways, were exacerbated in nineteenth-century Melbourne by factors including sudden rapid population expansion, underdeveloped infrastructure, and specific problems of local governance. Initial attempts to resolve pollution issues were not directed by ecological imperatives, but by anthropocentric concerns of public health and aesthetics – the result of a mentality which saw waterways as commodities rather than damageable entities with intrinsic value. I show that these preoccupations, to a large

extent, account for the partial, unsustainable and environmentally inadequate responses to pollution issues affecting the Merri and other suburban waterways.

Primary sources for this study include extracts from the Victorian Parliamentary Papers (also, for comparative purposes, from the British Parliamentary Papers); the former, in particular the Royal Commissions on Noxious Trades (1870) and on Melbourne’s Sanitary Condition (1889), have proved rich in both factual details and perceptual insights. Reports, editorials and letters from suburban and metropolitan newspapers – the *Northcote Leader*, Collingwood and Fitzroy *Mercury*, *Argus* and *Age* – though generally briefer and often requiring cross-referencing and/or in-depth contextual knowledge, have also furnished some valuable insights into colonial beliefs and attitudes. Original philosophical and theological texts have been used, principally in the first chapter, to substantiate my theoretical position.

I have divided this work into three roughly chronological chapters. The first, ‘Causes’, examines the early stages of white settlement along the Merri, and the various land uses characterising settler interactions with the creek during the nineteenth century, focusing particularly on the rise, following the gold rush, of those industries classified in the nineteenth century as ‘noxious trades’. I preface this examination with an investigation of those strands of theological, scientific and economic thought which characterised Victorian colonial society, and which influenced settler attitudes to, and treatment of, Melbourne’s waterways. My second chapter, ‘Crisis’, focuses on the period between 1880-1900, when public discontent with the state of the Merri became prominent; I investigate the reasons for this widespread concern, and the range of suggestions offered for solving the pollution problem, questioning the extent to which these suggested solutions reflect the anthropocentric utilitarian progressivism inherent in community attitudes to water resources at this time. The third and final chapter, entitled ‘Consequences’, traces the ongoing effects of this period of public disenchantment, and the changing ways in which local councils and other government bodies attempted to counteract industrial and domestic pollution of the Merri; I examine the tenacity of anthropocentric, utilitarian and progressive attitudes within this period of change, and
investigate the contributions of additional factors, internal and external, to the pollution problem and its solution.

Indigenous relationships with the Merri have already been covered in detail, most recently in Isabel Ellender and Peter Christiansen’s *People of the Merri Merri*;\(^\text{16}\) in any case, there is an argument that this task is best done by the Aboriginal people themselves. My intention is to offer, through a study of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pollution of Melbourne’s urban and suburban waterways, an insight into settler experiences of the Merri Creek: their attitudes to it, their usage and treatment of it, and the social and environmental consequences. I hope that readers of this history may discover an increased interest in, and respect for, the creek which has had so profound an influence on the development of Melbourne, and has undergone so much at the hands of the city’s inhabitants.

\(^{16}\) Isabel Ellender and Peter Christiansen, *People of the Merri Merri: The Wurundjeri in Colonial Days* (East Brunswick, Vic.: Merri Creek Management Committee, 2001).
Ch. 1: Causes

‘Rivers’, declared the Collingwood Mercury in 1887, asserting its right to pollute the Merri and Yarra indiscriminately with industrial wastes and municipal sewage, ‘are Nature’s outlets … it is questionable whether the finest scheme that man can devise for the disposal of sewerage, could equal, on the score of health, the one here provided by nature’. What attitudes and understandings could serve to justify this abuse of the creek which had been, when Batman encountered it in 1835, ‘a lovely stream of water’? To understand the specifics of the Merri’s environmental history, it is necessary first to examine the origin and development of the individual components of that tripartite compound – ‘anthropocentric utilitarian progressivism’ – which forms the conceptual framework for this study.

‘Anthropocentrism’, a much-used term, is rarely defined, though its multiple connotations necessitate a precise definition. The OED defines ‘an anthropocentric view or doctrine’ as ‘[c]entring in humans; regarding humanity as the central fact of the universe’. Thus defined, anthropocentrism may be contrasted either with theocentrism – that is, an understanding of the world which places God centrally – or with biocentrism and/or ecocentrism, both of which posit equal value and validity for all living things. Anthropocentrism per se may be considered morally neutral. Positive anthropocentrism might suggest that humans, rather than an external deity, should take responsibility for human actions; negative anthropocentrism, that human good justifies indiscriminate exploitation of the non-human world. For the purposes of this essay, ‘anthropocentrism’

17 Ibid., 18.
will be interpreted as the belief that human beings are intrinsically superior to other living creatures, and that their needs and wants are consequently of paramount importance.  

Claims such as those of Worster and Lynn White Jr., which portray Christianity as the world’s most anthropocentric belief system – Worster asserts that the Judeo-Christian religious tradition has been ‘of all the major religions in the world … the most insistently anti-natural’ – while popular, are imprecise and inaccurate. Firstly, anthropocentric beliefs did not originate from, and were not confined to, Judeo-Christian belief systems. Keith Thomas notes that classical philosophers such as Aristotle and the Stoics had promoted similar attitudes well before the advent of Christianity, and further observes that anthropocentrism ‘was not peculiar to Western Europe’; the Mayan, Chinese and Near Eastern cultures were all ‘capable of destroying their environment without the aid of Christianity’. More importantly, though, exponents of the supposed ‘anthropocentrism’ of the Christian tradition tend to forget that Christian anthropocentrism has not been a uniform characteristic of the religion from its inception, but has developed, in both quality and extent, over time. Strictly speaking, pre-Enlightenment Christian theology was theocentric rather than anthropocentric; God was placed centrally, with all other creatures, including humans, occupying subordinate positions. Early theologians such as Augustine (354-430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225?-1274) proposed a continuum of ‘levels’ of the soul, describing a progression from plants to animals to humans, to celestial beings. Although they ranked humans above other creatures – Aquinas asserted that ‘[t]he highest degree of life … is in man’, and that ‘lower creatures serve

23 Ibid., 24.
the higher, as the creatures below man provide for his welfare; they saw innate worth in all living creatures, as creations of God; Aquinas even suggested that all creatures were created equal in value:

God in the beginning made creatures different and unequal, according to his wisdom that the universe might be fully rounded. This he did without injustice and without presupposing a difference of merit in the things created.

By asserting that only God was worthy of worship, the early theologians established a divine/non-divine rather than a human/non-human dichotomy. Some pre-Enlightenment theologians even displayed a Darwinian slant: ‘man too, like other animals, belongs within a particular genus and species’, declared Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*. Pre-Enlightenment theology per se cannot therefore be used to justify an arrogantly anthropocentric elevation of human significance.

Anthropocentrism in its damaging form was given its greatest impetus in Western thought by the seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes. His defining statement, ‘I think, therefore I am,’ was used to deny non-humans the possession, not only of souls, but of existence itself. The publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) and *Descent of Man* (1871) threw British theology into conflict, and sent Christians unable to accept evolutionary theory grasping after unequivocal statements of human uniqueness, further strengthening the perceived human/non-human dichotomy in fundamentalist Christian thought. Damaging anthropocentrism in Western thought, both Christian and non-Christian, was thus particularly strong following the Enlightenment.

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26 Ibid., 13.
27 Ibid., 9.
28 Ibid., 13.
30 Note, however, that orthodox theologians from Irenaeus onward were careful to avoid the trap of Gnosticism, which suggested that the world and its creatures were evil, ruled by evil powers unrelated to the most-high, unknown God of the new testament. See the Appendix on Gnosticism in Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 265-73.
31 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Cosmogony*, 133.
Considered individually, neither anthropocentrism, utilitarianism nor progressivism are necessarily productive of environmentally destructive attitudes. Anthropocentrism, Mary Midgley argues, is not incompatible with environmentalism:

> [P]eople do right, not wrong, to have a particular regard for their own kin and their own species. From a practical angle, this recognition does not harm green causes, because the measures needed today to save the human race are, by and large, the same measures that are needed to save the rest of the biosphere. There simply is no lifeboat option by which human beings can save themselves alone ... 33

Utilitarianism in its original form – ‘the greatest good of the greatest number’ – was not inherently anthropocentric; John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), founder of the Utilitarian Society, explicitly stated that ‘an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments’ might be, by the observance of the Greatest Happiness Principle, ‘secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation’.34 His contemporary and fellow utilitarian, Jeremy Bentham, acknowledged the necessity of extending ethical consideration to non-humans: ‘The question is not, can they reason or can they talk, but can they suffer.’35 Expressions of utilitarian theory in colonial Melbourne tended to confine themselves to considerations of human good;36 yet even an anthropocentrically restricted utilitarianism, while unpalatable from a contemporary environmental-ethical standpoint, need not produce objectionable outcomes. Following Midgley’s reasoning, ‘the greatest good of the greatest number’ for the non-human world is, in the long term at least, preconditional to achieving the same goal for humans.

33 Midgley, "The End of Anthropocentrism?,” 111.
36 See, for example, article on the Victorian Protection Movement in the Geelong Advertiser, 2 February 1859, cited in Frank Crowley, A Documentary History of Australia, 6 vols., vol. 2: Colonial Australia 1841-1874 (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson Australia, 1980), 386-7.: ‘the true policy of a Government is to take all the circumstances of the country and so to use them as to confer the greatest good on the greatest number.’  Also the ‘Free Trade Catechism’ in Empire, Sydney, 25 January 1864, cited in Crowley, Documentary History of Australia, 472-4.: ‘the legitimate end and aim of all Governments … is the greatest good of the greatest number.’
Progressivism, defined as a doctrine ‘characterised by progress or advance, especially to a better state or condition’, remains morally neutral until we determine the nature of that better state or condition to which the progressivist aspires. In colonial Melbourne, however, ‘progress’ was generally taken to refer principally to economic development. The Argus, reporting in 1857 on ‘The Wealth and Progress of Victoria’, referred to the virtual doubling of ‘the quantity of land under cultivation’ in the colony as ‘great progress’, and presented tables of Victorian gold production from 1852-56, and exports and imports between 1851 and 1855, as ‘a few of the most prominent features of our wonderful progress’. Sir Henry Parkes represented the existence of ‘numberless sources of wealth which would be developed by one powerful wealthy government which are not likely to be developed or matured by the provincial governments which now exist’ as one of his strongest arguments for federation. The worship of ‘progress’, thus narrowly interpreted, led to the development of a ‘wealth-at-all-costs’ mentality which, particularly within the context of the (largely industrial) Victorian-era mechanisms of wealth generation, proved inimical to the protection and preservation of water and other resources.

Neither anthropocentrism, utilitarianism, nor progressivism alone would have been sufficient to produce the virulently anti-ecological mindset of the Victorian era. This was rather generated from a melding, within eighteenth- and nineteenth-century settler societies, of narrow interpretations of all three component ‘isms’; it is to the end-product of this process, ‘anthropocentric utilitarian progressivism’, that I attribute a large portion of the responsibility for the pollution and environmental degradation of the Merri Creek and other waterways during the nineteenth century.

The relevance of anthropocentric utilitarian progressivism extends beyond Melbournians’ pollution of the Merri. Worster’s ‘The Kingdom, the Power, and the Water’ serves to demonstrate the extremes to which this combination of ideas could lead. In Utah, settled

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37 Oxford English Dictionary, 2362.
38 Argus, Melbourne, 1 July 1857, cited in Crowley, Documentary History of Australia, 348-51.
by Mormons during the nineteenth century, irrigation acquired virtually the status of a religion; the labour and social co-ordination required for the successful installation of large-scale irrigation works were construed simultaneously as a ‘redemption’ of the ‘sterile’ desert of the West for agricultural purposes and ‘a work of self-redemption for humanity’. Journalist William Smythe perceived in the control exerted over nature by Utah’s irrigation systems the realisation of ‘man’s partnership with God’, the Mormon scientist and educator John A. Widstoe, who believed that ‘[t]he destiny of the man is to possess the whole earth; and the destiny of the earth is to be subject to man’, saw the achievements of Utah’s irrigation community as a fulfillment of human duty, a step towards the ideal of complete domination. Worster summarises the ‘irrigation myth’ as ‘a story … of creating a better social as well as environmental order … an affirmation of technology as a divinely ordained instrument of domination over the natural world.’

Similar attitudes within an Australian context are evident in J. A. Alexander’s biography of Canadian-Australian irrigation pioneer George Chaffey (1848-1932). Alexander describes Chaffey as ‘a man of destiny marked out to be foremost in the grand struggle of progress against stagnation’, and claims that irrigation during Chaffey’s lifetime ‘was making civilization blossom where barbarism had so long blighted the land’. The foreword, by Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce, expounds a rose-tinted progressive view of human-environment relationships in Australia: ‘Nature with a prodigal hand has bestowed her bounties on Australia … the problem of Australia’s unsettled interior is not one of unproductive land … water conservation and supply can make the land “yield forth its increase.”’ Bruce praises Chaffey’s ‘genius and

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40 Mormonism, though not generally considered to belong to mainstream Christianity, is located strongly within the Christian tradition. Worster’s case study offers a useful comparison of attitudes to natural resources within nineteenth-century settler societies.
42 Ibid., 117.
43 William Smythe, cited in Ibid., 119.
44 John A. Widstoe, cited in Ibid.
47 Ibid., 10.
48 Ibid., foreword (n.p.).
enterprise’, asserting that ‘[Jonathan] Swift placed amongst the highest endeavors of mankind the capacity to make two blades of grass grow where only one grew before. Mr. George Chaffey has done better than that’.49 Like the Mormons of Utah, the Chaffeys50 were seen as heroic improvers of God’s creation.

Bonyhady’s ‘The Flood in the Darling’ offers additional evidence of anthropocentric, utilitarian and progressive sentiments. Pastoralists along the Darling, finding that they could not rely on the river for a constant water supply, looked to the conservation of flood waters to circumvent the restrictions of climate and environment; the general feeling was that nature should yield to man, not man to nature, and there was little patience with suggestions that stock numbers should be cut to prevent high stock losses during dry seasons.51 While pastoralists blamed ‘an unkind Providence’ for their woes,52 James Moorhouse, the Anglican Bishop of Melbourne, insisted that it was ‘absolutely impious to cry to God’ under the circumstances, and that practical measures for drought relief had been wilfully neglected by pastoralists attempting ‘to substitute religion for irrigation’.53 Henry Lawson’s 1899 poem, ‘The Song of the Darling River’, gave voice to the Darling only for it to lament the vanity of its efforts ‘To show the sign of the great All Giver, The Word to a people: O lock your river’.54 The common assumptions underlying these seemingly contrary positions were both anthropocentric-utilitarian – the earth’s resources having been designed by a benevolent deity for human use, the only question was the extent and manner in which human efforts should assist in their distribution and exploitation – and anthropocentric-progressive, perceiving the Australian environment as an opponent to be conquered by human ingenuity and technology. Contemporary newspapers, reporting the flood of 1890 which submerged Bourke, the ‘capital of the west’, in three feet of water, ignored the unwisdom of siting a major town on low ground near a flood-prone river, describing the floodwaters as an ‘enemy’ which

49 Ibid.
50 Several members of George Chaffey’s immediate family were also involved in irrigation works; his brother, William Benjamin Chaffey, worked in partnership with George from 1881-1896. See Ibid., 8-18.
52 Ibid., 292.
53 Bishop James Moorhouse, cited in Ibid., 292-94.
had ‘taken possession of the town’, and lauding the ‘heroic resistance’ of Bourke’s residents to ‘the watery invader’.55

Let us now turn from the general to the specific. How did anthropocentric utilitarian progressivism, evidently well established within both American and Australian settler societies, affect settlers’ use of, and attitudes to, the Merri Creek? Though in its earliest stages the history of the Merri under European settlement was not dissimilar to that of the Darling, their situations became more unlike with time. Melbourne and its industries developed in tandem; the Merri and other suburban waterways, relinquishing their status as water supplies for pastoral and agricultural purposes, gradually took on the role of town sewers, receiving the waste products of innumerable noxious trades and the sewage of whole municipalities. Despite the changes in function, however, the same anthropocentric, utilitarian and progressive attitudes persisted.

The earliest European use of the Merri was for pastoral and agricultural purposes. Batman, the first European to claim possession of the area, was a pastoralist, and during the early years of Melbourne’s establishment the Merri was used primarily as a water supply for graziers, orchards, dairy farmers and market gardeners, as well as for domestic use. Development progressed slowly at first; Melbourne was named by Royal Proclamation of William IV in 1837, and when Hoddle and Russell began surveying the city in June of that year, they reported light land use along the Merri and Darebin Creeks – one house, and a little grazing land.56 In the following year, the area was divided into agricultural allotments and auctions held;57 purchasers used the land primarily for pastoral purposes, many grazing cattle or sheep beside the creek. From the beginning the Merri was regarded in a utilitarian-progressive light – a commodity, to be used for maximum economic gain. Prior to the 1883 Land Act, which required ‘retention in public ownership of a water frontage reserve along many rivers and creeks’,58 owners of properties with creek frontage had ownership extending to the middle of the creek; the

55 From the Argus and Australasian, 1890, cited in Ibid., 288.
56 Bishop, Merri Creek Study, 14.
57 Ibid. Appendix 4: ‘Map: Melbourne and Suburbs’ includes names of landowners of property with Merri Creek frontage.
Act was not retrospective, so landowners who had purchased before 1883 retained exclusive water rights until the 1905 Water Act vested ‘ownership of the bed and banks of any river, creek, lake, or watercourse’ in the Crown. Nor was unpurchased land exempt from use; the crown lands of Clifton Hill and the vacant paddocks of East Collingwood were grazed under lease by metropolitan butchers. Other areas were used for dairy farming; in Northcote, Preston and Coburg, orchards and Chinese market gardens were common. Water from the creek was used to irrigate market gardens until at least the 1970s.

Between 1852 and 1854 the gold rush brought large numbers of people to Collingwood, Fitzroy and Brunswick, prompting major sub-division in these suburbs. The first important discovery of gold in Victoria was made at Buninyong in August 1851; later in the same month, gold was uncovered at Ballarat. Within the year, Victorian diggers were joined by hundreds more from across the colonial borders, while a staggering 7,000 gold seekers arrived from overseas. The rapid and substantial increase in Melbourne’s population imposed further demands on the city’s already overstrained watercourses; before the turning-on of the Yan Yean reservoir in December 1857, Melbourne’s inhabitants had ‘relied almost exclusively’ on the Yarra and other smaller local creeks as daily water sources. In some suburbs the waiting was further prolonged; the Northcote area was first connected to the Yan Yean water supply in 1869, prior to which the Merri, supplemented by storage tanks and wells, had been the primary source of water for settlers along its course. For most Melburnians the connection to a (theoretically, at least) pure water supply could not come too soon; the pollution of the Yarra, by

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59 Ibid., 35.
60 Bishop, Merri Creek Study, 14.
61 Ibid., 18.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 14.
67 Bishop, Merri Creek Study, 17.
68 For a detailed discussion of concerns, particularly during the latter half of the nineteenth century, regarding the quality of the Yan Yean water supply, see Tony Dingle and Helen Doyle, Yan Yean: A
noxious trade industries on the Collingwood Flat and in Richmond’, had been a subject of controversy since the 1840s.69 By-laws were passed by the Council of Melbourne in 1844 and 1847 ‘for the protection of the river from impurities’; in 1855 the Legislature, at the urgings of the Council, passed an Act against the pollution of the Upper Yarra, and ‘successfully opposed the attempts of the Collingwood Municipality to get the Act omitted from the Statute Book’.70 However, the battle won in theory was largely lost in practice; by 1881, due to ‘local indisposition to enforce it, and the inexpediency of [the] Council’s interfering beyond the City limits’, the Act of 1855 was considered ‘a mere dead letter’.71 Industrialists along both the Merri and Yarra continually defied attempts to curb their polluting activities.

Suburban dwellers along the Merri continued to use the creek for washing clothes during these years; fishing and swimming remained popular recreations in its ‘beauty spots’. At the same time, however, the creek was being contaminated by leakage of raw sewage from unsealed and poorly constructed cesspits – most areas in the Merri Catchment remained unsewered during the nineteenth century.72 By 1875, ‘after the most persistent efforts on the part of the authorities’,73 a pan service had been introduced and cesspits banned in most municipalities, but this did not eliminate contamination of the creek. At the East Collingwood manure depot, established in 1861, nightsoil was mixed with dirt, the product to be used as farm manure. However, the yards in which the accumulated nightsoil was dried were not contained in any way, so much of it was washed into the creek by rain.74 The Merri was also deliberately contaminated by institutions such as the Pentridge Gaol, which until 1891 discharged the sewage of its 700 inmates untreated into the creek.75

69 Bishop, Merri Creek Study, 17, Dunstan, "Dirt and Disease," 144.
71 Ibid.
72 Barrett, Inner Suburbs, 75-6.
75 Broome, Coburg: Between Two Creeks, 141-42.
By the 1880s it was becoming increasingly clear that industrialisation along the Merri was leading to pollution on a scale with which the creek simply could not cope. The creek’s first industrial enterprise – John Dight’s flour mill, established in 1839 near the Yarra-Merri confluence – was joined in the 1850s by a swathe of noxious industries: meat and hide processing plants, slaughter houses, meat works, public abattoirs, wool washeries, fellmongeries and tanneries grew up in tandem with the booming post-rush population. Collingwood was the principal site of these industries, but several noxious trade works were also set up in Preston and Coburg in the late 1880s, while Northcote housed a boot factory, a tannery and several piggeries.

The meat and meat by-products industries caused ‘nuisances’ wherever they were established, but in Melbourne the condition of the noxious trades was exacerbated by additional factors. Lack suggests that a combination of circumstances – ‘Victorian prosperity, the immaturity of colonial manufacturing and the absence of local markets [for meat by-products]’ – resulted in colonial slaughtering practices which, compared to British techniques, were ‘careless and wasteful’. Heads, feet, hides and pelts, blood, offal and stomach contents were not collected and reserved for subsequent processing, but were thrown down together on the factory floor, and later discharged into local watercourses – ‘the most obvious, convenient and cheap method of disposing of industrial, street and household drainage’. The warmer climate accelerated putrefaction, resulting in yet more refuse. Melbourne’s slaughter industries generated far more waste than those in Britain, and attempts to reduce the nuisance resulting from this waste were negligible. The 1870 Royal Commission on Noxious Trades condemned the ‘carelessness’ and ‘neglect’ of Melbourne’s noxious trade establishments, noting that ‘for such carelessness no excuse could be offered … by firm and judicious management … the greater portion of the evils which we have noticed might be avoided.’

76 Bishop, Merri Creek Study, 18.
77 Ibid., 19. See Appendices 3 and 4 for locations of noxious trades in Melbourne’s northern suburbs.
79 Ibid., 175, 91.
lamented that the Yarra, which ‘should be a fine stream of pure drinkable water, available to our citizens for the healthy recreations of bathing and boating, and whose banks should afford a pleasant promenade’, was being polluted with sewage and animal refuse. Their concerns, though purely anthropocentric-utilitarian, at least expressed a genuine utilitarianism; the industrialists’ practices, on the other hand, benefiting themselves at the expense of others, smacked rather of individualistic neo-liberal capitalism. Progressivism, though, was certainly active within the noxious trades; the Commissioners explicitly noted ‘a general feeling that no capital should be expended except on works which were wholly unavoidable.’

Obsessed, to the exclusion of all other considerations, with money-making, Melbourne’s industrialists became notorious for flouting attempts to curb their indiscriminate polluting. The wealth and power of many industrial magnates, and their prominent positions in municipal councils, coupled with Victoria’s convoluted system of government, rendered their opponents virtually helpless. Alderman Thomas O’Grady’s report on the state of the Yarra in 1881 voiced the despair of those opposed to the fouling of the city’s waterways:

In furnishing this Report, what is most discouraging to your Committee is that there is in it nothing new. They have again and again for years past subjected themselves to observation of the same sickening sights and smells, have exhausted epithets of disgust in describing them, and used every argument which could suggest itself to induce a remedy.

O’Grady’s report recommended the cessation of ‘slaughtering at the abattoirs on the Merri Creek and the Yarra’, the withholding of license renewals of ‘lands upon the lower Yarra used … for the carrying on of noxious trades’, and the insistence that ‘all manufacturers carrying on business upon the banks of the river … conduct their businesses, and deal with the refuse liquid therefrom, in the same manner as if in England they would be compelled to do by the provisions of the law for the purification of rivers’. The Report noted that ‘the whole of these businesses, now carried on upon the

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81 Ibid., ix.
82 Ibid., x.
84 Ibid., 173.
Upper Yarra, have been established or extended since the date named, in defiance and contempt of the law … to any complaint about vested rights or hardship, it may be replied that no more is now asked by your Committee than would, for sanatory [sic] reasons, be enforced in England’. O’Grady’s perception that Melbourne’s industrialists enjoyed greater legal freedom than their British counterparts was not wholly unjustified; British law had confronted ‘nuisances’ as early as 1848, and by 1855 had introduced a comprehensive Nuisance Removal Act, which ‘imposed penalties on pollution … of any streams or reservoirs … and dealt with noxious trades’ – although the gulf between theory and practice in Britain may perhaps have exceeded O’Grady’s estimations.

Despite public and governmental awareness and indignation, Melbourne’s polluting industrialists continued to evade retribution. Frederick James Gomm, town clerk of Footscray, in 1889 expressed the difficulties of enforcing prosecutions: to begin with, the Yarra Pollution Act did not protect the tributaries; then it was ‘a difficult matter to cancel a licence when once issued’; and refusal to issue a licence could result in legal challenges: Gomm recalled that ‘[i]n one instance we refused to issue a licence, and were compelled to issue it. They took it to the Supreme Court … we could not refuse to issue it’. He further lamented the ineffectiveness even of implemented sanitary regulations: ‘We have taken proceedings several times against the lessee of one of those houses – Charles Alexander, of Collingwood notoriety. He has always managed to gain the day through some quibble or legal flaw. We have never been able to deal with him properly.’ Many industrialists who did not challenge the system openly practised only a minimal compliance; referring to the disposal of garbage and offal, Gomm asserted, ‘Some portions of the animals are washed down through the drain into the river. These drains are supposed to have catches to stop the flow into the river, and they do lower

85 Ibid., 173-74.
88 Ibid., 290.
these catches when anybody is about; but when his back is turned the catches are raised, and the whole is swept into the river."\textsuperscript{89}

These issues were not confined to Footscray, and it is therefore not surprising that the noxious trades of Preston, Northcote, Coburg and Collingwood, despite growing public opposition, persisted in polluting the lower reaches of the Merri. Pelts, heads, legs, offal and blood were discharged directly into the water, or reached the creek via natural and artificial drainage systems. Byproducts of the tanneries, including grease, soaps, sodas, lime and softening solutions, were also consigned to the creek. Increasing quantities of these various pollutants,\textsuperscript{90} combined with continued removal of water for irrigation purposes, meant that the Merri was unable either to absorb or to carry away the filth with which it was inundated. The colonists’ obsession with economic progress, combined with anthropocentric-utilitarian preconceptions which permitted them to use natural watercourses as drains, was propelling them towards unparalleled and catastrophic pollution. How long could the colony’s vaunted economic development continue to overshadow the disastrous human consequences of a dead river and its filth-choked tributaries? At what point did the citizens of Melbourne recognise a crisis?

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} As an example of the scale of this pollution, the 1870 Royal Commission notes that ‘from six wool-scouring establishments … upwards of one hundred and sixty tons of undeodorized animal and earthy matter annually find their way into the stream, in addition to the suds from some twenty tons of soap’. "Royal Commission - Noxious Trades," xi.
Ch. 2: Crisis

The colonists’ diverse uses of the Merri strike us as mutually incompatible. The same conclusion increasingly forced itself upon the public consciousness during the nineteenth century, as the problems of industrialisation and urban sanitation became progressively more intrusive. While the search for measures to ameliorate, if not immediately to solve, these dilemmas was slow and halting, it was passionately pursued; Dunstan, citing the ‘vociferous and prolonged debate’ surrounding public-health issues during the latter half of the nineteenth century, asserts that while there ‘were many reasons for Melbourne’s tardy response to the sanitary problem … apathy was not one of them.’

It would be idealistic, however, to suggest that Melbourne’s sanitary reformers saw practices such as industrial and domestic waste disposal in waterways as intrinsically wrong. Concerns with water pollution at this time were purely anthropocentric; polluted waterways were a danger to human health, and a blot on Melbourne’s reputation, but the effects on the waterways themselves were scarcely considered. According to the dominant anthropocentric/utilitarian/progressive mentality, rivers, whether for waste disposal, irrigation, drinking water or recreation, existed to be used: ‘water not harnessed to human purposes was considered to have run to waste.’

E. G. Fitzgibbon, the long-standing and highly respected town clerk of Melbourne, declared in 1889 that he could see ‘no objection’ to using the Saltwater (Maribyrnong) River as a drain: ‘Seeing that the river is of salt water, and not potable, I do not look upon [it] at all with the same consideration as I should if it were a fresh-water river, the water of which was capable of being drunk.’ While the consequences, for human health and aesthetic values, of large-scale waste disposal in urban waterways were deplored, the moral rectitude of such behaviour, except as it endangered human wellbeing, was not brought into question.

Paradoxically, the proximity of waterways like the Yarra and Merri to densely populated areas, at first their undoing, came to work to their advantage. Their centrality, their

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91 Dunstan, "Dirt and Disease," 141.
94 "Royal Commission - Sanitary Condition of Melbourne," 239.
prominence in the metropolis attracted public attention, where pollution confined to more remote areas would almost certainly have been ignored. The colonists’ propensity to isolate, rather than deal with, the worst offences of industrial society was characteristic of their anthropocentrism – pollution removed from human proximity was unexceptionable – and of their progressivist beliefs in the inevitability and the essential rightness of industrial and economic expansion, with consequent unwillingness to confront its less beneficial aspects.95

Ignoring the problem eventually ceased to be an option. In March 1881 the governor of Victoria, Lord Normandy, wrote to the minister responsible for public health, complaining of ‘the extreme inconvenience experienced at Government House from the stench which arises from the Yarra’,96 and recommending that ‘no time … be lost in instituting a proper inquiry into the origin of the nuisance, and taking such steps as may be necessary for its removal’.97 Similarly, in London, the abnormally hot summer of 1858 had produced the ‘great stink’ that motivated British sanitary reform.98 The issues of water pollution and urban sanitation first took on a renewed impetus in the governmental mind when Melbourne’s most influential figures began to find themselves personally affected. Yet improvement was slow in coming, even under these dire circumstances. Seven years saw no change in the Yarra’s condition; essayist and journalist Alexander Sutherland, in his Victoria and its Metropolis (1888), referred to the ‘black current of the Yarra’, describing, with a kind of ghoulish relish, ‘the stench from the gas bubbles that burst on its surface after arising from the foul decay at its filthy bed’.99 Astonishingly, his was no pamphlet of social reform, but ‘one of the most lavish of colonial tomes of self-congratulation.’100 Intent upon praising Melbourne’s ‘metropolitan vastness’, Sutherland accepted the sickening pollution of its waterways as
an inevitable consequence of urban progress, asking, ‘Are not all great cities so 
environed?’ No considerations of environmental damage would have troubled the 
minds of Melbourne’s colonials, had it been possible to dispose of waste in the city’s 
waterways without either endangering the public health or compromising superficial 
aesthetic values.

Between 1890 and 1891, public discontent with the state of the Merri Creek was given 
expression in no uncertain terms through editorials and letters in the Northcote Leader. 
In May 1890, an editorial article entitled ‘Polluting the Merri Creek’ complained of ‘a 
most offensive odour arising from the Merri Creek, in close proximity to St. George’s 
Road bridge.’ The writer described, at this location, ‘a large quantity of rabbit scalps 
and other noxious matter ... in a seething state of rottenness,’ adding that ‘[t]he practice 
of depositing filthy garbage in this watercourse demands instant attention, and should at 
one be put a stop to.’ Concerns about aquatic pollution were not new by this stage, as 
is indicated by the writer’s congratulation of the Central Board of Health for ‘becoming 
alive to the urgent necessity of putting a stop to the extremely culpable and dangerous 
practice of converting this natural watercourse into a common death dealing and stinking 
sewer.’

The author’s primary concern was with the dangers posed to human health and safety. 
He declared that ‘the lives of residents in the immediate vicinity of this filthy receptacle 
[are] placed in imminent peril’ by its polluted condition; furthermore, ‘the foul and putrid 
matter naturally and necessarily finds its way into the River Yarra, thus adding to the 
foetid and dangerous character of that already slimy stream.’ The threat posed to 
Melbourne’s local and international reputation by the polluted state of the Merri and 
Yarra provided additional motivation; the writer applauded the Government’s recent 
proposal to ‘wipe out the stigma of Melbourne being the most prolific centre of stinks in 
the Southern hemisphere’ via the creation of an extensive new hydraulically engineered

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101 Sutherland, *Victoria and Its Metropolis*, 542.
102 Northcote Leader, 24 May 1890, 2.
103 Ibid.
104 Northcote Leader, 24 May 1890, p.2.
105 Ibid.
sanitation system. He berated as ‘fatuous ... almost past comprehension’ the Preston Shire Council’s proposal for a new local drainage scheme to be diverted into the creek, asserting that ‘the Merri Creek, of all the watercourses within the metropolitan area, is about the most unsuitable for such a purpose. In summer it is little more than a chain of waterholes ... [t]hen again, the bed and sides of the creek are porus [sic] and rocky, thereby providing effective “traps” for noxious matter” – conclusions echoed in the 1890 ‘Report on the Sanitary Condition of Melbourne’, whose author noted that the Merri, ‘which receives sewage from a large population, is in dry weather nothing better than a series of gigantic open stagnant cesspools ... sewage sludge in large bulk lies in it opposite the mouth of the Reilly-Street drain.’ The ambivalence of the editor is intriguing; he implicitly approved the ‘natural’, yet censured the use of the Merri as a sewer on utilitarian rather than ethical grounds – the creek was ‘unsuitable for’ sewage disposal, not undeserving of it.

The suggested solution of ‘flushing’ drainage channels more frequently indicates that concern for the state of the Merri and other waterways at this time had little to do with ecological considerations; as long as the offensive matter was removed elsewhere, Melburnians had few qualms about its effects on other ecosystems downstream. Indeed, a similar suggestion followed the Governor’s letter of complaint in 1881; Henry Hoyt suggested in a letter to the Argus that ‘the highly unsatisfactory condition of the banks and of the bed of the [Yarra] river’ contributed in great part to its vile stench:

Owing to the banks having been so long neglected, and allowed to break away into corners, causing backwaters and eddies, owing to their being choked up with a network of willow branches and other brushwood, and owing to the bed of the stream being covered with snags, the whole course of this portion of the river acts like a series of traps to catch and retain the countless vilenesses ... which rot and fester in the sun to the intolerable nuisance of those dwelling near.”

Hoyt declared that if the river were ‘thoroughly snagged and the banks properly trimmed ... these disgusting objects might at least be swept freely down into the sea, and not

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106 Ibid.  
107 Ibid.  
109 Argus, 6 Apr 1881, 7.
remain, probably for months, poisoning the atmosphere all round them. This could easily be done, and at very little cost." In this instance, both progressive and anthropocentric concerns came into play; the proposed de-snagging and trimming of banks was promoted as particularly desirable because it was *cost-effective* – progressivism saw economic and financial concerns as central – while anthropocentrism did not care what became of the ‘disgusting’ by-products of industrial society, provided they were directed elsewhere. Once again we are confronted with the colonial strategy of avoiding, rather than confronting, negative issues.

To assume that such attitudes were universally accepted would, however, be unjust. Alderman O’Grady’s 1881 report on the Yarra, while it too recommended de-snagging of the river as an interim measure, displayed remarkable vision in its further proposals for the health of the city’s waterways; O’Grady’s long-term solution was for the formation of ‘an elective body’, with the powers to implement the construction of ‘a system of main drains, which shall intercept the drainage, keep it out of the river, and conduct it to where it can be used as a fertiliser and cleared of its impurities’. In the meantime, O’Grady contended, all industries along the banks of the river should be compelled to comply with recognised non-pollution standards; he condemned the guilty parties for their selfishness, avarice and short-sightedness, insisting that ‘these manufacturers should not, for their gain, be allowed to filch with impunity from the air and water, which are everybody’s property, the most valuable qualities of purity and wholesomeness’. O’Grady’s conclusion is a clarion call for responsible use of natural resources:

>[I]n lieu of being treated as a common sewer ... the Yarra Yarra should be recognised as nature’s most valuable boon to the district – a possession to be lovingly cared for and conserved, purity restored to its waters, and the varied beauty of its banks cultured into loveliness, making the river a source of health, pride, and pleasure to the inhabitants and of admiration to strangers.\footnote{113}{Ibid.}

\footnote{110}{Ibid.}
\footnote{111}{O’Grady, "Report - Condition of the River Yarra," 5.}
\footnote{112}{Ibid., 6.}
O’Grady’s motivations remain essentially anthropocentric, as evinced by his descriptions of the Yarra as ‘everybody’s property’ and ‘a possession’; he, too, displayed a curious ambivalence regarding the natural, simultaneously recommending the conservation of ‘nature’s most valuable boon’ and its improvement by human intervention (‘cultured into loveliness’). Nevertheless, his comments express a sense of custodianship, and an appreciation of the non-utilitarian, extra-monetary aspects of urban waterways, which were wholly alien to the progressivist mentality he denounced.

In mid-1891 a complaint appeared in the Herald. Its author, G. J., complained of ‘the abominable stench arising from the Merri Creek, near the St George’s-road bridge … a common source of complaint by residents of Northcote.’ His complaint was that ‘the banks of the creek are made a repository for dead animals’, and he elaborated: ‘Just now the atmosphere of the neighborhood is poisoned by the presence on the banks of a dead horse, which has been permitted to lie on the spot to rot and decay for the past fortnight.’ Having accused the various municipalities through which the creek passes of ‘shunt[ing] the responsibility from one to the other, with the result that nothing is done to remedy the nuisance’, G. J. concluded: ‘No wonder that typhoid fever, diphtheria and other zymotic diseases are prevalent in and around Marvellous Melbourne.’ Again, the primary concern was with the risk posed to human health, although aesthetic issues were an additional factor.

Interestingly, an answer to G. J.’s letter from the town clerk, W. G. Swift, was published the following day, not in the Herald, but the Northcote Leader; so rapid a response to a seemingly standard complaint suggests particular sensitivity on the part of the respondent, but the exact reason for this remains a matter for speculation. Dead animals, Swift declared, were immediately dealt with by the appropriate authority, and were not in fact ‘the main cause of the offensive smell from the Creek’; this he attributed to ‘the offensive drainage which is directed into it,’ adding that ‘in this matter Northcote is the least offender, the most offensive and greater quantities of objectionable matter coming

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114 Herald, 5 Jun 1891(n.p.).
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
from the other municipalities, which make it their common sewer, and we being at the lower end of the creek get the benefit of it.\textsuperscript{117} Despite Swift’s evident awareness of the ‘flow-on’ nature of water pollution, and the effects of accumulated wastes from upstream regions on downstream locations, he too recommended as ‘[the] only ... way of alleviating the nuisance’ sending ‘some of the surplus water from the reservoir ... down the Merri Creek [to] flush it well out.’\textsuperscript{118} Unlike most other advocates of ‘flushing’, however, Swift saw his proposed solution as temporary only, concluding with the comment that ‘[i]f this [flushing] were done periodically possibly we would be able to get along until the Metropolitan Board of Works intercepts all drainage from flowing into the creek.’\textsuperscript{119}

Attempts to improve the Merri were considered at this time, but – with the exception of minor stopgap measures, such as the removal of boulders from parts of the creek bed to facilitate stream-flow\textsuperscript{120} – progressed no farther than estimations of cost, due to conflicts and disagreements between the Merri municipalities.\textsuperscript{121} The necessity for an holistic solution to the problem was certainly recognised: the author of the \textit{Northcote Leader} editorial commented that ‘[a]ll suburbs within the metropolitan area will benefit ... from this great national undertaking [construction of a comprehensive metropolitan sanitation system], and should rather aid in carrying it out than in starting little schemes of their own, which would be obsolete as soon as completed.’\textsuperscript{122} Those to whom the decision fell, however, were unable to reach agreement; like Swift, they avoided the accusation of ‘shunting responsibility’ on the grounds that ‘each municipality has its own boundaries and only has jurisdiction within such.’\textsuperscript{123} Nor did all municipalities admit the necessity of an holistic system: ‘[W]hat are the merits of the scheme?’ queried the \textit{Mercury} in 1887. ‘That upon the proper and efficient drainage of large cities depends the health of the inhabitants is a truth which is known to all, but is it not possible for the various organizations to carry out their own drainage works satisfactorily, without allowing an

\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Northcote Leader}, 6 Jun 1891, 7.
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Northcote Leader}, 6 Jun 1891, 7.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{120} Lemon, \textit{The Northcote Side of the River}, 151.
\textsuperscript{121} Bishop, \textit{Merri Creek Study}, 20.
\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Northcote Leader}, 24 May 1890, 2.
\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Northcote Leader}, 6 Jun 1891, 7.
irresponsible body to interfere with them?” In the face of overwhelming evidence from other contemporary sources, it is difficult to support the contention that the Collingwood drainage works were indeed ‘satisfactory’. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to underestimate the difficulties of achieving a large-scale solution to a large-scale problem; even today, despite improved communication and increased understanding of environmental issues, attempts to improve the health of the Murray River continue to encounter obstacles which confounded the civic fathers of late nineteenth-century Melbourne.

These mitigating factors notwithstanding, it is evident that Cannon’s assessment of Victorian-era practices to combat soil erosion – ‘the vain chasing of effects instead of basic causes’ – could equally be applied to philosophies of water management during the Victorian era. Attempts to manage the pollution of Melbourne’s waterways pre-1889 were incomplete and unsatisfactory, largely because the dominant colonial mindset did not see such pollution as intrinsically wrong, condemning it only when its effects became personally intrusive. Long-term, holistic solutions did not sit easily with an anthropocentric/utilitarian/progressive worldview, which preferred the simplicity and (perceived) economic superiority of localised quick-fixes. It was concern for public health which finally galvanised the colonial powers into action; environmental considerations could never have effected substantial change during this period, and the benefits, to the Merri and other urban waterways, of the 1889 Royal Commission into the Sanitary Condition of Melbourne were purely incidental to more anthropocentric concerns.

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Ch. 3: Consequences

The 1889 Royal Commission was the real turning point in the Merri’s history; it condemned the disgusting condition of the city’s waterways, and asserted that ‘nothing short of a complete system of underground drainage will satisfy the requirements of Melbourne.’\(^{126}\) Consequent to this, the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works was created by an Act of Parliament in December 1890,\(^{127}\) and in 1891 began operations, embarking upon the installation of a comprehensive sewerage system for the metropolis. By 1897 the Board had constructed two main sewers, one north and one south of the Yarra, which joined at the Spotswood pumping station; in August 1897, the first house was connected to the sewerage mains; by 1900 28,300 connections had been made, and by 1907 the city, for practical purposes, was fully sewered.\(^{128}\)

It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of this achievement. ‘Sewerage,’ states Lemon simply, ‘was the creek’s salvation’.\(^{129}\) The sewerage mains installed by the Board of Works increasingly channelled away the worst of the pollution from the Merri and its neighbour watercourses, gradually improving the state of their waters; by the last summer before the war, the *Northcote Leader* was able to report that no-one had complained about the creek that season.\(^{130}\)

Even with the metropolis sewered, however, the Merri’s condition remained far from ideal. Melbourne’s noxious trade industries, which had routinely flouted the laws intended to curb their polluting activities, were in no hurry to fall into line; a report on the metropolitan noxious trades in 1911 found that many of the establishments examined remained ‘offensive and insanitary’.\(^{131}\) Complaints from residents in the Merri catchment

\(^{126}\) “Royal Commission - Sanitary Condition of Melbourne,” xv.


\(^{130}\) Ibid.

\(^{131}\) “Report of the Board Upon the Stock Markets, Stock Yards, Abattoirs, and Noxious Trades within the Metropolitan Area,” in *VPP II* (1911), 8.
continued, and in May 1910 ‘the municipalities sought the assistance of the Government’ regarding the ‘offensive’ nature of the Merri, and were promised £2,000 ‘on condition that the municipalities abutting on the creek contributed another £1,000’. The *Argus* reported a proposal for the construction of ‘a concrete channel in the bed of the creek to prevent the drainage stagnating’, a procedure which has more recently been applied to other urban creeks, with disastrous consequences for flow regime and creekside vegetation. However, a subsequent municipal conference exposed divisions between the local councils: while Northcote and Collingwood agreed to contribute according to ‘the recommendation of the conference ... Preston, the principal contributor of offensive drainage to the creek, refuse[d] to pay anything towards the cost of the work.’ It is ironic that the inefficiency and infighting of local municipalities, a contributing factor to so many of the Merri’s problems, became in this case its saviour from a doom far bleaker and more permanent than that of pollution. Those who have encountered the lifeless concrete drain which was once the Moonee Ponds Creek can only be thankful for the lack of agreement and long-term vision, the inability to co-operate and the prevailing self-interest of the local councils, which paradoxically served to preserve the Merri from a similar fate.

In March 1911 the *Argus* reported a fresh proposal for improvement of the creek: ‘Mr. J. G. Membrey, M.L.A., urged the councils to take some definite action in the matter. With the bed of the creek purified, he said the creek banks could be made one of the beauty spots of Melbourne.’ Whether Membrey’s efforts stemmed from a genuine appreciation of the Merri’s aesthetic potential, or were merely a desperate attempt to spur the local councils into action, they were insufficient. A resolution was passed following the 1911 municipal conference:

‘That this conference does not consider it advisable to do only a portion of the work of improving the Merri Creek, as suggested, but would urge that the Government be approached with a request

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132 *Argus*, 18 May 1910, 8.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
136 *Argus*, 2 March 1911, 9.
to have the whole work carried out, the money required to be raised by the Government, the municipalities to repay interest and sinking fund on one-third of the total cost, the proportions to be paid by the municipalities to be decided subsequently by the Minister of Public Works.\textsuperscript{137}

Laudable long-term vision or more shunting of responsibilities? Perhaps elements of both were present in the minds of the councillors. Whatever their motives, no consensus was reached. Bishop states that ‘[b]etween March and December of 1911 several conferences took place, but no plans were finalized ... [f]or many years subsequent, residents complained of the offensive state of the creek’.\textsuperscript{138}

Why, when the state of the Merri was assailing the public consciousness at a pitch of urgency impossible to ignore, and when public and governmental condemnation of its indiscriminate pollution were stridently expressed, were the steps taken to ameliorate its condition so little and so late? Can we attribute the responsibility for this inaction entirely to anthropocentric utilitarian progressivism, or were there additional factors at work? Contemporaries tended to blame the local municipalities, accusing them of evading their responsibilities, and of protecting the interests of local industries at the expense of public health and safety. To a certain extent, this was true; a notable case study is furnished by Barrett’s history of Collingwood, \textit{The Inner Suburbs}.\textsuperscript{139}

Collingwood’s councillors from 1860-1890 were ‘oriented towards industry, particularly towards riverside noxious trades … since these were Collingwood’s staple industries’.\textsuperscript{140}

The East Collingwood Council was dominated by Protectionist-tradesman candidates who repeatedly nominated one another for council, and voted for each other’s motions on issues of local economic development.\textsuperscript{141} As noted earlier, Collingwood and Richmond members of the Legislative Assembly consistently attacked pollution laws throughout the 1860s, and on more than one occasion succeeded in striking out the Yarra pollution clauses, though these were later reinserted.\textsuperscript{142} Though Collingwood should perhaps be regarded as an extreme example – Dunstan cautions that ‘[f]ew other districts had quite

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{138} Bishop, \textit{Merri Creek Study}, 20.
\textsuperscript{139} Barrett, \textit{Inner Suburbs}, 92-109.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 106.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 100-1.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 109.
the same drainage problems … or the same elite of powerful polluting industrialists143 – the same fundamental attitudes, the same worship of industrial progress and economic prosperity at the expense of public and environmental wellbeing, can be extrapolated to any of the municipalities for which industrial concerns were a prominent source of revenue.

It would, however, be unfair to lay the responsibility for governmental inaction solely at the door of the municipalities. While the legal right to build its own water supply and sewers had been granted to the newly incorporated town of Melbourne during the 1850s, the finances necessary for these endeavours had not been forthcoming.144 The Melbourne Corporation, which until 1853 had held responsibility for issues of water supply and sewerage, was, Dunstan suggests, ‘unfairly blamed for the insanitary state of the city since it had lost the important powers necessary to tackle the real problem’.145 Its replacement body, the board of commissioners of Sewers and Water Supply, had successfully installed the Yan Yean water supply system by 1857, but sewers, more difficult and more costly to build, remained an unaccomplished aim throughout most of the nineteenth century. Financing the sewerage of Melbourne would have required the use of revenue surplus from Yan Yean water, but the substantial numbers of country members in the Victorian State Parliament consistently opposed this notion; Dingle and Rasmussen suggest that they saw it as ‘excessive spending’ on the ‘wealthy metropolis’.146

Suburban councils were divided in their opinions of a comprehensive sewerage system; while some welcomed the improvement as long overdue, others fought bitterly against it. Chief among the latter was Collingwood, whose municipal representatives feared and resented the proposed Metropolitan Board of Works as a body who would usurp their own powers; ‘not being so largely interested as themselves, [the Board] would not study their [suburban Councils’] interests so well, and the expenditure would not be a fair

143 Dunstan, "Dirt and Disease," 142.
144 Dingle and Rasmussen, Vital Connections, 18.
145 Dunstan, "Dirt and Disease," 148.
146 Dingle and Rasmussen, Vital Connections, 18.
Collingwood Council, moreover, having previously installed a local drainage system, resisted the suggestion of a comprehensive scheme which would subsume theirs: ‘to suppose that Collingwood would favor [sic] a scheme which renders useless the splendid system of drainage constructed at such an enormous cost, in order to fall in with the vagaries of a few luminaries in Melbourne, is asking too much’, declared the *Mercury* in 1887.\textsuperscript{148} Clearly, the fear of losing independent control of works and finances formed a large part of their concern.

Such strident suburban opposition to a metropolitan sewerage system suggests that there is a great deal of truth in Dunstan’s assessment of the situation; the real problem, as he sees it – ‘the great impediment to effective action’ – was ‘municipal fragmentation’.\textsuperscript{149} In 1854, the Victorian government had allowed the new goldrush communities ‘a measure of self-government’; the following year, suburban areas adjacent to the city proper – among them South and North Melbourne, East Collingwood, and Fitzroy – were permitted to break away from the Melbourne Corporation and form themselves into new, independent municipalities.\textsuperscript{150} These districts, separated from each other at the time of their formation by parklands, swamps and watercourses, grew gradually less distinct over time; the inner suburbs had become by the 1880s ‘a large urban mass clustered around a built-up central business district’.\textsuperscript{151} Local government in these areas became increasingly inappropriate as an administrative structure, particularly for water supply and sewerage provision; installing and maintaining such services was beyond the power of municipal authorities, both financially and logistically, yet local councils remained reluctant to resign their independence. FitzGibbon, Melbourne’s town clerk from 1856-91, in 1903 was reported to have said that ‘the whole question of separation … was a good thing at the time the suburbs broke away, but a bad thing for all time afterwards. It was a great many years before the municipalities could be brought to see the necessity of a central administrative body such as the Metropolitan Board, and even to-day there [are]
frequent squabbles between adjoining councils"152 FitzGibbon, who, though he had succeeded in abolishing cesspools in favour of the pan system, ‘at no time [regarded] this as more than a palliative’,153 mooted a proposal for a metropolitan board of works on the London model as early as 1865;154 the 1881 ‘Report of the Health Committee’ pleaded for ‘a system of main drains, which shall intercept the drainage’;155 yet it was a further ten years before the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works was brought into being.

Economic factors were significant in both the creation and the resolution of Melbourne’s water pollution problems. The conduct of Melbourne’s noxious trades during this period testified to ‘the worship of economic progress through unfettered private enterprise … [s]hortage of capital and the struggle for profit meant proprietors begrudged spending money on efficient apparatus, and were contemptuous of the comfort and health of their neighbours’.156 They were equally contemptuous of the waterways they were so grossly polluting. Employees of the noxious trades endured the filthy conditions their occupations generated rather than risk unemployment and financial ruin; their employers, many of whom were prominent members of local councils, vehemently opposed any efforts to curb their production and disposal of noxious waste, again from primarily economic motives. Melbourne’s industrialists, true anthropocentric utilitarian progressivists, took no account of considerations which they did not connect with their relentless pursuit of progress and prosperity.

The same combination of anthropocentric, utilitarian and progressivist philosophies which pervaded Melbourne’s industries also tainted its governmental bodies, both local and state. The Merri municipalities, as we have seen, wrangled over their financial contributions to ameliorative measures for the creek. Even the members of the Royal Sanitary Commission were obsessed with costs and figures; the accompanying Minutes of Evidence record several witnesses reminding their interrogators that money was not

153 Ibid.
154 Dunstan, "Dirt and Disease," 149.
156 Lack, "Worst Smelbourne,'" 173.
the only concern at stake. W.A. Sinclair’s suggestion that the installation of a mains sewerage system in Melbourne was delayed principally because such a system remained uneconomic in comparison with manual disposal until the late 1880s, though somewhat simplistic, is essentially accurate. Certainly, the importance of monetary considerations to Melbourne’s ‘plutocratic elite’ was accepted as fact by their contemporaries. Dr Gresswell concluded his 1890 report on the ‘Sanitary Condition and Sanitary Administration of Melbourne and Suburbs’ with an appeal to the board members in which economic considerations were more prominent even than moral ones; the amounts of preventable sickness and preventable mortality ‘[u]nder present circumstances’ represented, he claimed, ‘hundreds of thousands of pounds sterling yearly … A sound state of sanitary defence cannot be obtained without the expenditure of money; and the choice lies between sickness and death on the one hand and what is, after all, a relatively small outlay on the other’. We may conclude with Dunstan that the reform of public health in the metropolis was substantially governed by ‘market structures and values’.

Solutions of long-term viability were also hampered by public disregard for – or, perhaps more accurately, ignorance of – environmental destruction. Scientific theory of the early twentieth century supported the popular belief that rivers were ‘self-purifying’; F.F. Longley, in his The Pollution of Streams and other Natural Waters in Australia (1923) wrote:

The use of the streams of Australia as vehicles for the reception, transmission, and ultimate disposal of sewage and liquid waste by means of dilution and ultimate oxidation is

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157 See, for example, ‘Sanitary Condition of Melbourne’, VPP II, 1889, 6: Commission: ‘Lawson Tait says, “The latter [double-pan system] pays better than any other. Indeed, it is the only one that pays at all.” Is that justifiable?’ Witness, C. Barlow: ‘I should say that statement might be correct in dealing with the small amount of sewage that is dealt with; but really the great principle to be sought after is to get rid of the sewage. The question of paying is of minor consideration’. Also, 10: Commission: ‘From a paying point of view, would it not make a difference if it were found that this climate necessitated emptying the pans three times a week; would it not convert it into a loss instead of a paying thing?’ Witness, Sir J. Farmer: ‘It would make a difference, but if it was a necessity, the profit would not come into the question.’
159 Dunstan, “Dirt and Disease,” 171.
161 Dunstan, "Dirt and Disease," 171.
recognised as sound in principle and safe in practise, if kept within proper limitations. The ability of a natural body of water to oxidise and destroy substances through the action of various physical, chemical and biological processes represent [sic] a natural resource which should be utilized as far as this can be done with safety and without offence.162

That these opinions enjoyed a wider currency amongst the general populace from earlier times is evident from the writings of Charles Kingsley, British author and clergyman, who included in his novel The Water Babies (1863) a poem describing the transition of a river from pure stream to polluted sewer, and thence to its final mingling with the supposedly ‘taintless’ ocean.163 The second stanza demonstrates considerable insight into the nature of urban water pollution:

Dank and foul, dank and foul,
By the smoky town in its murky cowl;
Foul and dank, foul and dank,
By wharf and sewer and slimy bank;
Darker and darker the further I go,
Baser and baser the richer I grow;
Who dare sport with the sin-defiled?
Shrink from me, turn from me, mother and child.164

Kingsley’s description of the polluted river as ‘sin-defiled’ suggests an interesting moral dimension to his understanding of pollution issues. The third stanza, though, which describes a river transformed – ‘Free and strong, free and strong, Cleansing my streams as I hurry along …’ – clearly implies that this transformation has somehow been miraculously effected by the river itself.165 To do Kingsley justice, we must remember that scientific and theological understandings current during his lifetime, though they

164 Ibid.
165 Ibid. In fact, Sinclair explains, river systems do not purify themselves, though they have the capacity to absorb ‘a degree of sewage and liquid waste depending on their existing level of environmental health … as they are degraded their capacity to dilute waste diminishes.’ Sinclair, The Murray, 99. Note that Kingsley’s description would not have done for Melbourne’s rivers, which by civil engineer James Mansergh’s account were ‘very sluggish as they approach the sea … extremely foul and unsightly.’ James Mansergh, “Report on the Sewerage and Sewage Disposal of the Proposed Melbourne Metropolitan District,” in VPP IV (1890), 11.
might refer to ‘Nature’ as an entity, did not necessarily consider it as intrinsically damageable. Diluted, imperceptible or distant pollution was of little or no concern to Kingsley and his contemporaries, because such pollution was not considered to affect human beings; once again, anthropocentrism was the order of the day. The effects of pollution on non-humans were ignored unless the situation were extraordinary. The 1881 ‘Report of the Health Committee’ noted that in 1877, ‘special notice was drawn to the pollution of the Yarra by the death of thousands of fish in the river’, but without any implication of particular ethical significance. Reports, in the Argus, of a similar event in 1869 condemned the deaths of ‘the finny tribe’ on economic-utilitarian grounds, as a waste of resources: many of the dead fish, it was claimed, ‘would have delighted an angler to catch, and an epicure to breakfast upon’. From an anthropocentric perspective of public health, also, these deaths were deplored: ‘water so poisoned must be dangerous to those who use it or even boat upon it’. But the fate of the fish themselves merited no regret; the ‘myriads of small fish’, many dead, the others ‘swimming with difficulty, gasping for air’, were merely ‘a remarkable phenomenon’. Mass deaths of the aquatic denizens of Melbourne’s waterways were matters for concern only as they indicated that the river’s condition was unsafe for humans.

Even clearly perceptible pollution was shrugged off on occasion by interested parties; the Mercury in 1887 dismissed contemptuously ‘the pollution [of the Yarra], as it pleases the fastidious to term it’, contending that the deleterious effects to public health of such pollution were ‘denied even by eminent medical testimony; and even had it been so, the commingling of the “salt sea waves” consequent upon the removal of the falls, would do away with the evil.’ Such claims, though corroborated by contemporary scientific theory, were the product of selfish motives and vested interests; they exemplify the effects of ‘anthropocentric utilitarian progressivism’, which in its extreme form served to blind its adherents to all but economic concerns, allowing them to contradict, blatantly

167 Argus, 6 Feb 1869, 5.
168 Ibid.
169 Argus, 5 Feb 1869, 5.
170 Mercury, 2 Sept 1887 (n.p.).
and publicly, the observations of suburban dwellers and of governmental authorities alike.

The saga of the Merri’s degradation and abuse is by no means concluded, a fact that a progressivist history might miss. Of the three ‘isms’ upon which I have based this study, the third, progressivism, remains inherent in much contemporary scholarship. The real evil of such progressivism lies in its tendency to discourage introspection and self-reflection. Vague generalisations about the environmentally irresponsible behaviours of previous generations promote the elision of inconvenient details of modern society into the past, and the projection, onto our forebears, of attitudes which are still rampant today. We, as a society, continue to exploit the natural world to a degree with which the ravages of previous societies cannot compare. By acknowledging, rather than disregarding, the ecological failings of contemporary society, the careful environmental historian avoids accusations of progressivist complacency and of patronising past societies.

For the Merri, the picture remains bleak. As recently as 1991, Nufarm Ltd in Fawkner was identified as the source of serious dioxin contamination; two years later, a spill at the Pacific Inks factory in Preston contaminated stormwater and dyed the Merri a violent blue.171 Runoff from surrounding suburban streets contributes car oil, animal faeces and assorted litter to the creek’s waters.172 Local organisations such as the MCMC and FOMC are to be lauded for their continued efforts to protect the Merri from further ecological degeneration; but the continuing pollution of the creek indicates only too clearly that the combination of anthropocentric, utilitarian and progressivist attitudes which lay behind the atrocities of domestic and industrial pollution perpetrated during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries upon the Merri and other suburban waterways have not yet run their course.

171 The Age, 6 Nov 1995 (n.p.).
Conclusion

The factors underlying the pollution crisis of the Merri during the Victorian era are complex and intertwined; they do not lend themselves to simple explanation. Certainly, the dominant mentalities of the era – the settlers’ heritage from their British stock – explain much. Arrogant post-Enlightenment anthropocentrism, eighteenth-century British utilitarianism, and the worship of industrial and economic progress combined to foster and promote settler exploitation and abuse of waterways and other ‘natural resources’. But these beliefs, aggressive and persistent as they were, cannot wholly account for the disastrous pollution of the Merri and other watercourses, nor for the delay in finding and implementing solutions to the pollution problem. Larger, more impersonal forces were simultaneously at work. The furious growth of Melbourne’s population immediately following the goldrush era, which could not have been predicted by the town’s earliest planners, placed intolerable pressures on the limited resources, inchoate governmental structures, and rudimentary technologies of the new metropolis. Infrastructure simply could not keep pace with the needs of the booming populace; in some cases, attempts to meet these needs created further problems.

The delegation of governmental powers to independent municipalities during the goldrush years, while initially well-intentioned, came to undermine attempts to combat Melbourne’s sanitation problems; local councils fought amongst themselves, lacking sufficient finance (and, in some cases, sufficient motivation) to effect more than token gestures towards cleaning up their waterways, yet reluctant to give up their independence for fear of the political and economic consequences. Limited understandings of the nature and effects of water pollution on river ecosystems, and the blatant disregard for any but economic considerations exhibited by powerful colonial industrialists, further exacerbated the difficulties and restrictions of achieving long-term change for the Merri and other urban watercourses.

173 A fraught term in itself, since it encourages the view that the non-human environment exists only to provide for human needs.
Descriptions of dominant social trends, generalisations merely, cannot characterise each member of a society with equal accuracy; moreover, a simple explanation of any historical phenomenon is rarely a complete one. The concept of ‘anthropocentric utilitarian progressivism’, in itself a useful tool for understanding the Merri’s history, nevertheless requires the consideration of other factors - government and population issues, technological capabilities and comprehension of environmental issues – to produce an adequate explanation for the condition of the Merri Creek during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
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