
Reviewed by Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted (Eastern Washington University)

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Commissioned by Yan Gao

For scholars interested in the missteps of Australia’s politicians and media outlets when addressing flood management and development, this text is required reading. The author, Margaret Cook, offers a detailed, all-encompassing narrative of settlement along the Brisbane River catchment. Her history begins with the era of settler colonialism in 1823—with a brief nod to the Indigenous peoples who first inhabited the basin—and concludes in an updated edition with the 2022 flood. For those versed in water history, all the well-trodden themes are here, including the dismissal of traditional ecological knowledge found among Indigenous peoples; the failure of urban populations to consider floodplain management; the short-term memory of developers and urban residents when rebuilding in flood-prone areas; the misplaced faith in technology to control a river’s proclivity to flooding; and the role of news outlets, developers, and urban planners in promoting settlement in the Brisbane River’s floodplain. This is a common history when modernity with all its technological hubris constructs an urban landscape in an uncooperative riverine environment. Similarities, such as New Orleans’ checkered past of flooding and rebuilding, offer comparisons with Brisbane and Ipswich. For water historians, Cook’s history provides an impressive case study, packed with data and details as she chronicles settlement along the Brisbane River.

In addition to river studies, Cook’s text adds to scholarly works on British colonization schemes. Retracing British actions when arriving to the region in the early 1800s, Cook recounts a familiar tale. For example, rather than accepting the names for area rivers, the newcomers renamed them. Further, the environmental practices of the Turrbal and Jagera were dismissed, even though “for 60,000 years [they] had a spiritual connection with the country, respecting and accommodating the river’s life cycles” (p. x). Consistent in their approach to other foreign lands, British per-
ceptions and interactions with the Brisbane watershed persevered up to the present. The goal of controlling the river to facilitate settlement always resurfaced despite devastating floods that resulted in the loss of life and financial losses in the millions.

Two of the worst floods occurred in 1893 and 1974. In Cook’s retelling, the 1893 flood altered the relationship between residents and the river. The loss of life was great with numerous accounts of people unable to escape the floodwaters. Cook also includes tales of survivors. Cook’s collection of first-hand accounts is impressive and gives the reader a sense of the trauma that floods induce. But the flood also had financial implications as Cook claims that the flood left Queensland “financially crippled” (p. 35). After 1893, the river and surrounding area became part of the hydraulic fraternity where dam building ensured flood prevention and a trajectory of development and prosperity. An era of “flood immunity” characterized the thinking of those living within the Brisbane River catchment. So as engineers prescribed hydraulic alternatives to a free-flowing river and an undeveloped floodplain, the Somerset Dam was completed in 1959. Yet another devastating flood occurred in 1974, during which lives were lost and economic losses were crushing. But as Cook points out, instead of questioning the wisdom of building on the floodplain, memories were short-lived and riverfront property would again attract developers and buyers. Instead of regulating urban growth, another dam, the Wivenhoe Dam was constructed. The cycle of flooding, lamenting the devastation, only to rebuild with the promise of technological fixes continued with more flooding in 2011 and 2022.

The literature on urban flooding is growing, and Cook’s themes of developers’ rush to rebuild coupled with a fleeting memory of the horrific damage residents endured is witnessed in multiple urban settings.[1] Further, Cook’s discussion of where to assign blame for the failure of the Somerset Dam to prevent flooding echoes other flood narratives as politicians alternate blame on engineers and inadequate warning systems. The incongruity of doubting technology’s ability to thwart the river’s disposition to overflow only to envision a future where technology, whether through an improved dam or better data, remains a constant as climate change exacerbates the potential for flooding in the Brisbane River catchment. With an array of first-person accounts and data to support the severity of each flood and the resulting human and financial impacts, Cook’s work adds to our understanding of contemporary urban riverine landscapes in the Anthropocene era.

Another common thread in flood narratives occurs when politicians and media outlets wrestle with the aftermath of disastrous floods and frame the event in militaristic terms. The river became an enemy; Cook quotes newspaper articles, such as one in the Australian, which referenced this “angry version of the river,” after the 1974 flood (p. 106). The “emotive language” returned following the 2011 flood when a local newspaper stated that “Mother Nature seemed to be winning the war” and referenced other similar warlike imagery (p. 165). But while Cook perceives the comments as further evidence of a belief in the separation of humans and nature, another interpretation might be that the river is viewed as possessing agency in its role as an adversary. Citing the warlike imagery, however, offers another link to river narratives, again broadening the context of Cook’s work. In the Soviet Union, Soviet leaders often referred to major public works programs in adversarial terms as they conquered major rivers, such as the Volga or the Don. Modern hydraulic empires often posited nature as an enemy to be mastered and reengineered.

Yet, despite a century of shortcomings, Cook ends with a glimmer of hope for the twenty-first century. After the 2011 and 2022 floods, government reactions included the creation of the
Queensland Reconstruction Authority (QRA), which was charged with “disaster recovery and resilience policy in the state” (p. 217). Under this mandate, floodplain mapping began with a floodplain management plan in 2019—a recognition of the importance of a nonstructural approach to living in flood-prone areas. The QRA also administers the Resilient Homes Fund, a government-backed initiative to buy homes from residents living in the floodplain. Upon purchase, local councils rezone the land “non-habitable use” (p. 219). In her closing, Cook suggests a future where residents adapt to living in a flood-prone environment—particularly as intense rainfall, prompted by climate change, exacerbates flooding—instead of a mindset bent on reengineering an ecological regime where flooding is an integral part. Her counsel, however, extends beyond the Brisbane River catchment as all of us should ponder adaptive strategies in a world where the environment is increasingly fragile.

Cook’s knowledge of the river and its environs is daunting and the only improvement to the text would have been placing this study within the growing literature of river and flood histories. For example, in Katrina: A History, 1915-2015, Andy Horowitz demonstrates how the consequences of Hurricane Katrina were predictable as residents built homes in floodplain areas, resulting in their own increased vulnerability to flooding while robbing the Mississippi River of wetlands to absorb flood waters. Further, within the literature of river histories is the growing attention to urban rivers, with themes that complement Cook’s study. [2] Reference to the literature would have enhanced Cook’s study, particularly as climate warming ensures an increase in intense flooding; flooding along the Brisbane River has become part of a global phenomenon. In addition, the reader would have benefited from the inclusion of additional maps, particularly for the major floods of 1893, 1974, and 2011. Maps that point to the flooded areas for each flood would have complemented the extensive data that Cook cites. But the photographs are an excellent addition, with visual evidence of the damage, embellishing the first-hand accounts.

These minor points aside, A River with a City Problem is part of a larger story as it contributes to the well-established field of river histories and literature. Cook’s comprehensive treatment of the Brisbane River catchment will inform future studies as scholars seek to reveal past follies of flood control and practitioners seek to develop and secure riverfront properties. For scholars, Cook adds to multiple flood narrative themes. Beginning with the legacy of British imperialism, Cook reveals a refusal to acknowledge the traditional ecological knowledge of Indigenous peoples, a blind faith in technology, and inability to fathom the intricacies of foreign landscapes. By the twentieth century, settler communities were part of the larger global agenda to modernize, furthered by a built infrastructure of public works, supported by burgeoning bureaucracies steeped in data. Of course, underlying these predilections was the pursuit by a growing population for homes in the catchment area with residents possessing short memory spans of the perils of building on a floodplain and developers all too keen on unregulated development.

Cook’s study will be of especial interest to scholars in water history and public policy. However, this work also has an appeal for nonacademic audiences, including policymakers and political leaders.

Notes


[2]. Stephane Castonguay and Matthew Evenden, eds., Urban Rivers: Remaking Rivers, Cities and Space in Europe and North America (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012); and Martin Knoll, Rivers Lost, Rivers Regained:

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