

From Farmers Friend to Bin Chicken: The Australian White Ibis and Post-Federation Nation Building

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We are used to seeing the Australian White Ibis in cities and thinking of the journey of ibis as one of becoming urban from traditional wetlands across the Murray Darling Basin to the streetscapes of Australia's coastal towns and cities. This becoming urban journey of the Australian White Ibis, as we've argued elsewhere, is a story of adaptability that has also generated significant cultural notoriety, as witnessed by the phenomenon of the Bin Chicken. But this story of ibis migration to cities can reinforce a rather simplistic urban-wilderness divide that glosses over another important story of Ibis migration and adaptation. Long before the Ibis began migrating into Australia's coastal cities, driven by drought and wetland degradation, the Australian White Ibis and its close relative the Straw-necked Ibis, were adapting to the land management practices of white settler agriculture. Those practices were often at odds with the aspirations of Indigenous peoples whose country was being divided up for farming settlements.

In this presentation we consider this becoming rural journey of the Australian White Ibis and what this journey suggests about the contingent valuation of the ibis in Australia – regarded from the 1890s to the 1960s as a bird that is useful and, for many farmers and rural communities, sacred. Today's Bin Chicken, often regarded as an invasive pest, was yesterday's Farmers Friend, a purported ally in the fight against pests such as grasshoppers and locusts and an agent in helping to open up the country for the expansion of intensive agriculture.

As you'll hear from the description of Ibis at this time drawn from news reports from the 1990s to the 1960s – this becoming rural story is one that draws on the rich historical biography of the ibis – including the revered status and attendant cosmology of the bird in Ancient Egypt, represented by the ibis-headed God Thoth. Thoth was known as the “father of the sickle,” arguably a reference to the assistance the birds gave to farmers in eating locusts and other insect pests in the irrigated lands along the Nile. In ancient Egypt it was considered a good omen for ibis to visit a farmer's fields, and ibis that migrated into Egypt were regarded as harbingers of good luck.

This becoming rural story also spans two World Wars and a policy shift to resettle returned soldiers and their families in inland Australia. There was intensive settlement around the vast Murray Darling Basin. These settlers were widely regarded as ‘pioneer landholders’ whose presence on the land also coincided with the expansion of irrigation infrastructure such as dams and pipelines that had a significant impact on traditional ibis habitats over time. The becoming rural story of the ibis traces not only the adaptability of this native bird species to changing human-modified landscapes of white-settler agriculture but a shifting cultural landscape that reflected the deep importance placed on agriculture as key to the Australian economy and to the settler soldier and farmer as the battler-backbone of post-Federation nation building and consolidation, especially after WW1. As “the farmers’ friend” the Australian White Ibis, we argue, was implicated in this nationalist and colonialist discourse. Again, we iterate Indigenous Australian viewpoints were largely absented from this discourse.

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Faced with the prospect of yet another seasonal infestation of insect pests on local crops, in December 1946—shortly after World War II—the Rosenthal Shire Council in the Darling

Downs of southern Queensland petitioned the Federal Government “to import ibises from Egypt to wage war on grasshoppers.” The petition reflected a common belief that the Australian White Ibis migrated each year to Australia from Egypt before returning to Egypt to breed. The Councillors were unaware that the African Sacred Ibis had disappeared from Egypt in the mid-1800s. They could also not have forecast that even in the 21st century, many Australians would still assume that the Australian White Ibis was introduced and that the species had a sacred pedigree (the ibis-headed god Thoth). Australian White Ibis began their migrations into the country’s coastal cities in the 1970s and 1980s, impelled by degraded wetlands and the damming of rivers for irrigation and town water, as well as drought. But long before then, from the late colonial and post-Federation periods and well into the post-WWII era, the ibis was embraced on colonially marked agricultural land on account of its insect dispatching capacities. As such, to paraphrase Jamie Lorimer, in Australia’s non-Indigenous farmlands the concurrence of the ibis’s ecological rhythms with those of settler humans constituted the species’ ecological charisma. This is a distinct charisma from that enjoyed today by the urban bin chicken, for many human city siders a feral interloper, a trash animal, a dirty nuisance, for others a source of wonder, a focus of affiliation. It is also a distinct charisma to that emanating from Country, which as Fiona Probyn-Rapsey and Lynette Russell remind us, includes “epistemologies and kincentric relational ontologies of humans, animals, plants, water, rocks. Every place in Australia is Indigenous Country.”

After WW1 state and federal governments agreed to coordinate efforts to re-settle returned soldiers and their families on small farms in order to open up and develop the interior for intensive agriculture. At the time Australian officials held fast to the yeoman ideal – a romantic belief in the virtue of agricultural labour and activity and the societal value of small-scale farming communities. Popular images of the sturdy, independent yeoman merged with

that of the noble, patriotic digger to create a powerful symbolic character: the soldier settler, a worthy figure capable of promoting social stability and economic productivity. Soldier settlements were intensively developed across the Murray Darling Basin. Whilst there were great hardships associated with small plots, lack of irrigation, pests and crop diseases, and many families left the land, soldier resettlement continued after WW2. Such settlers were widely regarded as pioneer landholders, whose presence on the land underwrote the expansion of irrigation infrastructure such as dams, pipelines and weirs. These were the settler enterprises to which the “valuable” ibis was enlisted in terms of viability, sustainability and reliable support. As noted in a 1914 newspaper article: “I ... draw attention to the bird as an active and constant friend to the farmer, the grazier, and the gardener.”

A selection of newspaper headlines from shortly after Federation to the middle of the twentieth century indicates how widespread was the positive reputation of ibis among farming and rural communities across Australia’s eastern states and in southwestern Western Australia: “Grasshopper and Ibis” (1905), “A Valuable Bird The Ibis” (1917), “Ibis Invade Narrabri” (1934), “Ibis Attack ‘Hoppers Moree” (1935), “Ibis to the Rescue” (1937), “Ibis War on Caterpillars in Junabee District” (1942), “Ibis War on Grasshoppers” (1946), “Ibis Blitz on ‘Hoppers” (1947), “Ibis Arrive for Duty on Lower Macleay” (1954), “Ibis Invade Northam” (1963). Notable among the headlines is the widespread use of military metaphors to denote both the predations of ibis on a range of agricultural pests and ibis flock movements more generally. The Australian White Ibis and the Straw-necked Ibis alike were considered to be at war with insects on behalf of settler colonial farming enterprise and were thus lauded as key allies of settler farmers. As noted in a 1914 newspaper article: “the value of the ibis to the farmer is no new discovery, and that as we occupy a country infested with similar insect plagues to those in Egypt and are blessed with the same means of combating them, we should

do everything in our power to protect these sacred birds and encourage them to increase and multiply.” This was a common refrain in newspapers for some 60 years. Egypt was also familiar to many Australians during WW1 as the first place that many soldiers were shipped to after leaving Australia. Images of diggers camped at the pyramids for training and tales of larrikin escapades in Cairo at this time created a sense of patriotic familiarity. This was reinforced by the 19th century fascination with Egyptology; the pyramids were already a notable tourist attraction.

Another feature of the appearances of ibis in rural and regional Australian newspapers from the 1890s up to the 1960s is how often the reports focused on the comings and goings of ibis flocks in relation to insect infestations. The reports were of great interest to farmers, given that the arrival of ibis meant the possibility of a sustained ibis attack on the insects that each year ravaged a range of crops. One example of such news stories appeared in the *Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative* (NSW), dated December 1938: “A MESSAGE states that large flocks of ibis are following the ‘hoppers now prevalent in parts of the Wellington district. As many as 300 of the birds have been noticed in one flock over Arthurville way.” An account of ibis as a valuable bird to farmers, which is the earliest published Australian plea to protect the ibis as did the Egyptians, comes from the *Wagga Wagga Express* (NSW) in 1893:

Last summer a river bend paddock was perfectly infested with black crickets, when one fine morning a flock of some thousands of ibis came and besieged the place the result being that in a day or so no crickets were to be seen, those who escaped the birds hiding themselves under logs and bark, on the removal of which they would give one timid and sinister glance and scurry away into cracks and holes in the ground. The ibis prey

... voraciously on grasshoppers and other insects, and no doubt it was on this account that the wise men of Egypt saw the wisdom of protecting these useful birds.

A report from 1923 about ibis in north-western Victoria encapsulated the high regard by which ibis were held among farmers: “In speaking of their value as insectivorous birds a friend who is a grazier put it in a practical way. ‘Every one of them is worth a pound a head.’ What he meant was simply this—that in grass saved from caterpillars to be eaten by stock it was worth his while to pay £1 for every ibis that would remain on his land for even a part of the year.” The notion that ibis had a financial value to farmers was a common theme in news reports. An article from 1917 is notable for the astronomical numbers of grasshoppers that ibis in the NSW Riverina district were calculated to consume per day:

At the ibis rookeries in Riverina, where flocks aggregating over 200,000 of these birds have been seen, it was proved by dissection that the average meal per day for each young bird was 2000 young grasshoppers. If the reader will just consider for a moment what this means, he will be able to appreciate the value of the ibis as an enemy of insect pests. On that basis, 200,000 would thus consume 400,000,000 grasshoppers a day! ... The writer has always believed that this is unquestionably the most valuable of all insect-eating birds indigenous to Australia.

Noting the widespread presence of white ibis in the watercourse between the Gwyder and Barton Rivers, representatives of the Royal Australian Ornithological Union who were camped on the watercourse in 1933 had some advice for local graziers: “The ibis ... eats freshwater snails, which are the hosts of the liver fluke. Fluke is a sheep trouble that has been causing much inconvenience to graziers and a campaign is to be inaugurated throughout the north-west of NSW to teach the graziers what a friend they have in the ibis in this regard.”

Other communities within and outside Australia were tacitly excluded in media reports of ibis movements and rookeries. Indigenous Australians were absented from the news reports on ibis and farmers' friend discourse. An item in the *Murrumbidgee Irrigator* (NSW), dated December 29 1916, spoke of a massive ibis rookery near Kerang in Victoria, largely comprising Straw-necked ibis, but also including Australian White Ibis: "Here tens of thousands of ibis are nesting and bringing out their broods of young. The birds belong to the darker species known as the straw-necked ibis. A few white ones are also to be seen, but, following our Australian national policy, they keep strictly to themselves." The last sentence is a remarkable allusion to the White Australia Policy and its racial hierarchies and exclusions. Today it is difficult to know whether to read this news item as a statement of support for, or as a sardonic comment on, the policy itself.

The ibis was especially significant in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area (MIA) in NSW in the early 1900s as an icon of the productive enterprises that characterised a region whose livelihood depended on irrigation, a key nation-building priority after Federation. A central administrative authority in the MIA was the NSW Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission, which dominated canning practices and cultural life in the MIA after it was established in 1916. The Commission was responsible for a government-run cannery and its canned fruit brand, called Ibis, which were said to "illustrate more than mere words could ever do, what a wonderful thing irrigation, properly applied, really is." Ibis canned fruit was sold in Australia and overseas. The ibis was central to the branding and supplied the logo. Problems for the Ibis brand, however, occurred in 1922 on export of Ibis canned fruit to Java and Egypt where locals thought the cans contained ibis meat and refused to buy them, thus prompting a change to the labels used—the removal of the ibis logo. So popular was the ibis

in rural Australia that there was even a suggestion in 1919 from one Mr Erskine to change the name of the Griffith Irrigation Area to Ibis. The idea was enthusiastically endorsed by a Mr Abbott of Murulla, who in a letter to the *Sydney Stock and Station Journal* wrote: “The reckless destruction of birdlife in Australia is a sin which must be paid for to the uttermost farthing, as time goes on, and Mr. Erskine’s suggestion is certainly in the right direction.”

That noted, the reputation of ibis as the farmers’ friend is counterpointed by the longstanding practice of shooting ibis for sport or for food. Indeed, according to Steven White, the history of British colonization in Australia is a catalogue of wanton destruction of native wildlife, whose number included the ibis. Larger animals and birds were “butchered on a large scale” as the pastoral usage of land increased, resulting in what commentators refer to “as the fauna wars of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.” As one contemporary British visitor noted in 1905 “most Australians “care little for their own native fauna which they regarded as vermin to be destroyed at every opportunity.”

Nonetheless, there were calls to protect some native species, and these resulted in legislation in some Australian colonies, with more to follow after Federation. As numerous media reports on the shooting of ibis make clear, the ibis was a notable subject of early conservation developments and discussions. Despite legislative protection in some states (Qld, Victoria and NSW) the shooting of ibis was a newsworthy occurrence in all eastern states from federation until the 1950s, and it provided an opportunity for newspaper writers to editorialise on the benefits of conserving the ibis given its sacred provenance and its usefulness to the agricultural sector. Such was the concern on the part of the Queensland State Government about the ongoing shooting of ibis that in February 1940 the Queensland Minister for Agriculture and Stock, a Mr F. W. Bulcock, launched the official “Spare the

Ibis” Campaign. This government-sponsored campaign was a response to ibis conservation backdropped by World War II in which widespread efforts were made to support the agricultural sector while managing agricultural pests.

There is an alternative reading of ibis as the farmers’ friend that we have discussed today, and that is, as settler colonists modified the land for a range of agricultural enterprises, so too did the ibis take advantage of these changes. Thus, the ibis story of adaptation to foraging on settler modified farmland is also legible as one of becoming rural. That status required ibis to move beyond traditional wetlands and to find new modes of sustenance in crop lands and areas converted to grassland for sheep and cattle raising. This becoming rural status persists inland despite the degradations of inland water systems that impelled the ibis to move into coastal towns and cities and to embark on becoming urban in the late 20th century. It is useful to conclude by comparing these two instances of ecological charisma, one formed in rural areas, the other formed in urban settings. Becoming rural places commercial value on ibis as an appropriated ally of the settler colonist and farmer, while becoming urban implicates ibis in a discourse of trash-pest or bin chicken status that rubs up against newer forms of pro-ibis human affiliation and affection.

CUT: In 1971 Australia signed on to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands - the first International Convention of its kind to seek conservation and sustainable use of significant wetlands to preserve the habitat of waterfowl. In that decade Ibis were beginning to be sighted in coastal towns and cities on the eastern seaboard. A new Ibis migration had begun as this native bird adapted once again to another human modified Australian landscape.