Shifting Currents:
A history of rivers, control and change

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Certificate of Authorship / Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Damian Lucas
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Abbreviations

CRCC = Clarence River Country Council - Flood Mitigation Authority  
CSIRO = Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation  
CVFN = Clarence Valley Field Naturalists  
EPA = Environmental Protection Authority  
GL = Giga litre (1000 mega litres)  
MDBC = Murray-Darling Basin Commission  
ML = mega litre (1000 litres)  
NPWS = National Parks and Wildlife Service

Conversions

This thesis uses the measurements quoted in primary material. Conversions are provided below.

1 acre = 0.405 hectares  
1 inch = 25.4 millimetres  
1 foot = 30.5 centimetres  
1 mile = 1.61 kilometres  
1 pound = 0.45 kilograms
Abstract

The benefits and costs of controlling rivers – building dams, controlling floods, extracting water – are constantly contested.

Modifying rivers has brought great benefit to communities, fulfilling important community goals – supporting profitable commercial activities and providing a basis for vibrant communities. However modifying rivers has also had negative consequences – in particular, a decline in the quality and quantity of water. These impacts have undermined valued aspects of rivers (such as fish habitat) and have also caused decline in commercial activities (such as fishing and floodplain grazing).

This thesis explores the ways that these contending perceptions of modification work out on the ground in rural communities. How are the benefits of modification recognised? How are the negative consequences of modification noticed and measured? Under what conditions are the benefits of modification reassessed? These are important questions in the current moment as our society reassesses the past modification of rivers and attempts to move towards more sustainable use of natural resources.

This thesis explores this topic by undertaking in depth case-studies of two distinctive riverine environments: one coastal, the Clarence River in luscious coastal northern New South Wales; and one inland, the Balonne River, at the top of the Murray-Darling Basin, in semi-arid south-west Queensland. The case studies explore responses to modification of the rivers in two periods: the post-war decades – a time of widespread support for modification, and recent decades – a time of widespread recognition of the negative consequences of development.

The thesis investigates perceptions of modification at three different scales: (i) groups within localities – the ways that modification is perceived by local groups with contrasting physical and conceptual interactions with the rivers (such as graziers, fishers, irrigators, Aboriginal people, ecologists and engineers); (ii) regional communities – which are constituted by groups with differing interests, and (iii) governments – which have the role of managing the long-term health of the economy and the environment, despite the long-term goals often being contested.

This thesis provides insights into the ways that our complex society grapples with the possibility, and effects, of modifying the natural environment. This thesis suggests that local conditions – the actual local physical environment and local social conditions – shape the ways that modification of rivers is supported, challenged and reassessed. However, both local social conditions and the environment are constantly changing, often in surprising ways. Therefore outcomes are always an interaction between different levels of interest groups and the environment itself.
Dedication

To Jess, the bravest person I know.

To my parents Ruth and Leo, both keen storytellers, who have always supported my storytelling endeavours.
A thesis is a big project, many people have contributed to this project or supported my work towards completing this thesis.

The basis of this thesis is a series of life history interviews with residents of the Clarence and Balonne regions, many people shared with me their experiences of living in these places and their analysis of how these areas have changed. The generosity and candour of the interviewees made this history possible. In the Clarence region in particular I would like to thank: Gillian Mears, Linki and Pauline Gordon, Roy Bowling, Stan Mussared, Greg Clancy, Peter Cummins, Bruce Salquist, Della Walker, Caroline French, Irene Daley, Megan Edwards, Diana Behanzie and Noeline Grace. In the Balonne region I would like to thank: Leith Boully, Reg Betts, Tom and Noel Crothers, Sandra Davis (now deceased), Kevin Waters and in Moree, John Williams and Susie Spencer. The bibliography lists all the people who contributed interviews to this project.

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Heather Goodall has been the primary supervisor for this thesis. Heather has continually worked to find ways to make this intellectual work sustainable, meaningful and progressing towards completion. I thank her for her insightful and considered teaching.

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The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at UTS, has provided a physical and intellectual home for this work. I would like to acknowledge the support of all my colleagues there. UTS has provided an environment interested in academic scholarship that engages with contemporary politics, and supportive of innovative ways to communicate scholarly research. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the support of fellow post-grads - Kate Evans, Stephen Gapps, JoAnne Dungan, Yuji Sone and Natalie Apouchtine – who have a shared interest in this particular kind of intellectual work.
Fellow researchers, from around Australia with a shared interests in history, people and place – Jo Kijas, Ruth Lane, Paul Sinclair and Sam Wells - have provided consistent support for this project. Early drafts of this thesis were workshopped at the ‘Writing Histories: Imagination and Narration’ Visiting Scholars Program at the Centre for Cross Cultural Research, ANU. I thank the convenors, Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath and participants for their comments.

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