

“Nature Was Breathing with Joy”: The Ecological Writing of Louis Becke

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“When the Muse comes
She doesn’t tell you to write;
She says get up for a minute,
I’ve something to show you,
stand here.”

Michael Goldman, in Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

“The ocean is a wilderness,” understood the mid-nineteenth century American naturalist and essayist Henry David Thoreau, “reaching around the globe, wilder than a Bengal jungle, and fuller of monsters, washing the very wharves of our cities and the gardens of our sea-side residences” (184). Thoreau perceived the ocean and its inhabitants as part of the global natural environment that connects us all, and so too did the Australian writer Louis Becke who, during the period between 1870 and 1890, lived, worked, and travelled through the South Pacific region before later writing about it. As a writer who was thoroughly acquainted with the vast ocean and its inhabitants, with islands, beaches, rivers, and with the air above them, Becke knew with Thoreau that we were connected by and participated in a universal natural environment, one that had the potential to transform us if we were prepared to engage with it by “watching, learning, and wondering.” Even lonely atolls in the South Pacific, he wrote, were “full of attractions and life, and of many good things to delight the mind” for those who wanted to “learn something of the joy and great wonders of Nature,” and Becke was willing to learn about and then later to share that joy and wonder with his readers (“The Loneliness of It” 59). Crossing the lagoon on the island of Nukufetau in a canoe one morning just before dawn, inhaling the scent of blossom after rain, watching frigate birds hunting fish around him, hearing the thunder of the surf on the outlying reef, he felt “Nature was breathing with joy” (“Fisher Folk” 50). Back in Queensland, when holding a fish up to the sunlight and seeing the flashes of grey and silver interspersed with specks of iridescent blue on its head, back, and sides, his heart “beat fast with delight” as he remembered a French priest on a Pacific island who knew this same fish by its Breton name of “ombre chevalier,” and that it was also known in Scotland and England as a grayling (“Ombre Chevalier” 180–81). In a moment of epiphany, Becke perceived a universal wilderness, and as he creates a literary ecosystem of the imagination, he invites us to share that natural environment with him, to participate with him in a relationship with it.

In *The World in Which We Occur*, Neil W. Browne advocates that crucial roles are played within an environment not only by the biology of non-human creatures but also by the cultures of human creatures, and he uses the term “ecological writing” for the imaginative articulation of that participation between the human and the non-human. He maintains that because literature has a major role and responsibility in our understanding of ecology as part of “the art of knowing,” it can be a means of inquiry through which we can learn and be enlightened (2, 7). I propose that Louis Becke was an ecological writer who articulated our relationship with the non-human in nature, and in doing so he opened wide the windows of knowledge into the South Pacific region which was at that time little-known to the European world. As someone who lived and worked there, Becke had a unique perception of the region’s

natural environments as vibrant, living ecologies within which people sustainably managed natural resources in order to survive. His ecological writing about the South Pacific at the turn of the twentieth century was among the first of that genre published for a broad, non-scientific international readership, especially by an Australian—an international significance that was ultimately recognised when in 1908 he became the first known Australian-born person to be elected as a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society in London, no small feat for a former beach-combing boy from Port Macquarie.

By the time he died in 1913, Louis Becke was Australia's most internationally renowned writer of the South Pacific region, referred to as "the Rudyard Kipling of Australia" and even as the writer who introduced the Pacific to Europe (Becke, "Interviewed" 3). As my research has revealed, during a short writing career of barely twenty years he created an oeuvre of over 350 stories, serialised novels, and articles, many of which were collected into some 35 volumes of fiction and non-fiction. According to Nicholas Halter, Becke's "international popularity and influence on public ideas of the Pacific region were exceptional," and he had an unprecedented reputation among critics and readers alike for veracity and realism (379). Raised as the son of a civil magistrate, Becke had a Huckleberry Finn-type childhood, roaming, fishing rod in hand, with his brothers and friends along the local beaches, creeks, and rivers of the Port Macquarie area where the "long lines of curving beach and wooded bay and rocky cape and headland were still dearer to our hearts, and were with us in our dreams" ("Bay O' Fundy Days" 2). They grew up in touch with their natural environment, where "bush and beach and sea and sky talked to our boyish hearts, and made us feel it was joy to live," before Becke departed aboard a ship for San Francisco when only fourteen (18). Returning eighteen months later, he quickly seized the opportunity to sail for Samoa, after which he continued to live and work throughout the South Pacific for the following two decades, primarily as an island trader and ship's supercargo, until forced back to Sydney by ill-health. There, he was invited by the editor of *The Bulletin*, J. F. Archibald, to write down his experiences, beginning a successful international writing career.

During that career, he also lived in England, Ireland, and France, while travelling widely through the United States, Canada, and the West Indies. As well as being published in England, Australia, and America, his work was translated into other languages such as French, German, Swedish, and Russian. He cultivated a number of significant literary and social associations, such as with Australians A. B. "Banjo" Paterson, who also acted as his solicitor, and Thomas Alexander Browne (aka Rolf Boldrewood) who thought highly enough of his work at the beginning of Becke's career to plagiarise it in his 1894 novel *A Modern Buccaneer*, for which he eventually had to publicly apologise (de Serville 247–60). Once he began to travel, he met American authors Stephen Crane and Mark Twain, the latter declaring himself a dedicated reader ("Tramp" 4), and he and his family were neighbours and friends of Rudyard Kipling and of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. One-time British Under Secretary of State, George Herbert, 13th Earl of Pembroke, was a personal friend who wrote the Introduction to Becke's first book, *By Reef and Palm*, as was Archibald Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery and British Prime Minister in the mid-1890s, and Australia's first Prime Minister Edmund Barton (Day 48–49).

Becke's significant body of ecological writing is based on his detailed regional knowledge gained from personal experience. Often couched in lyrical prose, it reveals themes and concerns that remain relevant into the current era and so deserves a new appreciation of the kind referred to by poet and essayist Adrienne Rich as re-visioning: "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (35). Much of this work was originally written for significant British journals such as *The Field*, *Chambers Journal*, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, and *Leisure Hour*, and later syndicated to Australian and American periodicals and newspapers. Most, but not all, of it was eventually included in one

or other of his books. Frequently writing in the first person, Becke stands both inside and outside his text: outside in that his writing is based on observations of ecological relationships between the human and non-human in the Pacific environment, inside in that his writing is part of his re-creation of self, of his “I,” in relation to that environment. Becke’s writing is both process and product as he captures a particular time in his past and re-envisions it in prose as a crucial period when his life took on a new direction and purpose. By using the first person, Becke breaks down barriers between reader, observer, and a place that is now distant in time as well as perception. The “I” reminds us of the close personal relationships that Becke had with events, places, people, and the natural environment, and so it is both imaginative and literal.

Becke’s “I” can be the imaginative persona acting as a filter through which he perceives events and environment, enabling him to observe from a distance while also inviting the reader in. At the same time, the reader is aware that the “I” can also be literal, although sometimes more literal than others. We know that he was physically in the South Pacific region at particular periods and that he did participate in certain events because of his accounts in surviving letters, such as those published in Nicholas Thomas and Richard Eves’s *Bad Colonists*, for example, or from his comments about Ellis Island marine life that were critically reviewed by Donald Gilbert Kennedy in his 1931 *Field Notes on the Culture of Vaitupu: Ellis Islands*. However, Becke does sometimes deliberately manipulate dates, places, and people to allow him creative space in which to flex his fiction writing muscles and escape the chains of historical fact. Nevertheless, his vivid, first-person narratives invite us to participate in his ecosystem of the imagination that enlightens us about Pacific ecologies in which there is close participation between human and non-human.

By way of comparison with Becke, we can see a modern example of an author’s use of “I” by which they invite the reader to participate in an ecosystem of the imagination, in this case to engage with them about polar ecology, in Barry Lopez’s seminal work, *Arctic Dreams*. “As I traveled,” he writes, “I came to believe that people’s desires and aspirations were as much a part of the land as the wind, solitary animals, and the bright fields of stone and tundra.” Yet, he also understands that the physical land exists apart from these desires and aspirations and that despite our efforts, it will continue to transcend our efforts to find our place within it, so that we disassemble and reassemble various parts of it as we attempt to construct something familiar, which will dispel our sense of estrangement (xxii–iii). Although in a different time and place, Louis Becke’s “I” also invites us into his ecosystem of the imagination where he invites us to participate with him to find the familiar within the South Pacific environment, to discover our place there. Becke understood that the desires and aspirations of the people he encountered, often embodied in his literary characters, whether they were Islanders or from other places, were as much a part of his environment as the reefs, the wind, the plants, the animals, or the ocean itself. Yet he also understood that these islands existed as a physical environment separate from humanity: they had existed before people, and they would continue to exist (and often in much better condition) after people had gone.

Becke sometimes lived on islands where he was the sole white person, and occasionally he was the first white person to be resident on an island. Of the many Pacific islands that he visited, he lived for the longest periods on four in particular, and so his ecological writing about islands understandably focuses on Nanomanga and neighbouring Nukufetau in what is now Tuvalu (formerly the Ellis Islands), Kusaie (or Kosrae) in the Federated States of Micronesia (formerly Caroline Islands), and Niue, now a self-governing state that is part of the realm of Aotearoa New Zealand. Claiming to have learned about sustainable natural resource management as a young boy from Australian First Nations people, Becke certainly demonstrated a curiosity and intelligence about the relationships between Islanders and their natural environment that was unusual for a colonial era trader. On a remote Pacific island,

natural resources typically closely relate to landform and meteorology. Not every island can sustain a variety of food crops, and on islands where limited size, unsuitable climate, or lack of topsoil govern what can be grown, such as varieties of *taro* or *pulaka* (root crops), breadfruit, coconuts, bananas, or pandanus fruit, it was the reef and the sea during Becke's period (i.e. before fast boats and aircraft landing fields) that were the principal sources of marine food crops such as fish, shellfish, octopus, and turtle, all of which were harvested with as much attention to daily and seasonal rounds as that given by any farmer on land (Kennedy 104). Although life on Pacific islands could appear deceptively easy, relaxed, and happy to the casual visitor compared to the hard grind of Western industrialised labour, Becke knew from lived experience that in reality survival out here was due to constant, arduous, and frequently dangerous work. After all, a shark can kill you just as efficiently as a machine tool, and you could starve on an island, in an era before radios and mobile phones, if you had not given some serious thought to disaster planning, for the South Pacific region can suffer from storms, droughts, floods, and consequent crop, food, and water shortages just like any urban environment.

In 1907, Becke received a letter of complaint from a young Scotsman who, despite Becke's earlier attempts to discourage him, had convinced himself he could make his fortune as a trader in the Pacific Islands on a shoe-string budget, only to fail miserably. The young greenhorn had been sent by one of the minor trading firms in Fiji to Atafu, the smallest of three atolls that constitute the nation of Tokelau, north of Samoa and east of Tuvalu. Although Atafu is made up of 52 islets, the two largest of which are Atafu and Alofi, most are too small to be inhabited. The total land area of the entire Atafu group is only 2.5 square kilometres, although their lagoon is about fifteen square kilometres, with the highest point above sea level being approximately five metres: not much protection considering it is within the tropical cyclone region. Unaccustomed to miniature marine environments, this young Scotsman was unimpressed and disillusioned, to say the least. Atafu was, he declared, just "a miserable chain of coral reefs with a pool of salt water in the middle," covered in palm trees "to hide the gross affront it gives to the intelligent mind by being termed an island." If that wasn't bad enough, he perceived the Islanders as surly, hypocritical, and unhealthy, complaining that not only was there little to do during the day when he wasn't working but walk the beach while staring at the horizon hoping to see a ship, he couldn't sleep at night for the pounding of the Pacific rollers on the reef! As he apparently did not make any effort to learn the local language nor to relate to his natural environment, he was completely isolated and left to despair at "the loneliness—the utter loneliness—of the life" ("Loneliness" 57–58).

Not so, protested Becke in his published reply. If his correspondent had not been so focussed on his profit margin, he might have been better able to develop a relationship with his surrounding natural environment instead of perceiving it as the enemy. For the person "who has the courage and good intent to seek to learn something of the joy and great wonders of Nature," Becke advised, even a small atoll like this was "full of attractions and life." You could spend many hours or months in "watching, learning, and wondering" (59). Having been in similar situations more than once, Becke was not just expounding armchair philosophy here. He knew of what he was writing, and he illustrates his point with reference to his time on Nanomanga. The smallest island of the Ellis group (now Tuvalu), it was a reef island about the same area and population as Atafu, similarly low-lying and also prone to cyclones and sea level surges, where Becke had been unexpectedly stranded for eleven months when his relief ship didn't arrive. However, instead of despairing, Becke became an active member of the community and a student of the island's ecology.

A prolific reader across a broad range of subjects, Becke would enhance his knowledge when back in Australia by meeting with naturalists, lexicographers, and ethnographers, such as Frederick William Christian who consulted Becke about the Nan Madol ruins on Pohnpei (xii).

Armed with such information, Becke understandably claimed that he seldom experienced a dull day out in the Pacific, even when stranded on an island such as Nanomanga that you could circumnavigate on foot in three hours. The Nanomangans had an impressive traditional reputation as deep-sea fishermen, and as a man who was always at home with fishing line in hand, Becke retained fond memories of his time there during which he learned much from the kind-hearted Nanomangans, such as traditional fishing techniques for shark and nocturnal flying fish, for landing an octopus using cowrie shells tied to a line as bait, even for climbing palm trees and then creating various products from palm fibre such as rope and sandals ("Loneliness" 103). In the American author Norman Maclean's powerful evocation of a personal relationship with fishing, *A River Runs Through It* (1976) he recalls that for his family "there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing" (1), and the same could have been said of Louis Becke, for whom fishing *was* his religion. Whether he was off the coast of Australia, on the banks of some tidal river, in the lagoon of a Pacific atoll, or out on the vast Pacific Ocean with Islanders in an outrigger canoe, he fished and was always open to learning more. If he'd had the time to write a Pacific version of Isaac Walton's *The Compleat Angler*, he surely would have done it. Instead, he wrote a substantial body of articles about his fishing experiences, at least a dozen of which were published in the authoritative British nature magazine *The Field*.

After his time on Nanomanga, Becke moved to the trading post on neighbouring Nukufetau in early 1881 at a time when there was intense fishing rivalry between these two islands. The reef-less Nanomangans, who were experts in launching their canoes directly into the heavy surf off their narrow coral shelf, claimed to be the best deep-sea canoeists and fishermen in the island group. The Nukufetauans, on the other hand, had to carry or paddle their canoes some distance to reach the narrow channel through their reef and so naturally didn't see the point in venturing into open water except at night for flying fish, especially since they had a spacious and smooth lagoon that provided food. Baby bonito would swim into that lagoon in vast numbers for only ten days once a year, prompting a rush by the islanders into the lagoon where they would suspend finely-meshed nets from groups of canoes as they encircled the schools of bonito, as well as the fish that accompanied them such as large rock cod, enormous black eels, and the salmon-like *utu*, before herding them ashore. "Oh the delight of urging a light canoe over the glassy water of an island lagoon," Becke rhapsodises, participating imaginatively with his surrounding natural place, "and watching the changing colours and strange, grotesque shapes of the coral trees and plants of the wondrous garden beneath . . . and the lazy, many-hued rock fish in the darker depths beneath." A lagoon of the "deepest, loveliest blue," he mused, it was customarily "as calm and quiet as an infant sleeping on its mother's bosom" ("Fisher Folk" 49).

Becke often found himself "lost in admiring wonder" at Islander skill, courage, and resourcefulness while fishing, whether within their reef or out at sea beyond sight of their island. Becke was aware that he was on the cusp of a time when traditional fishing equipment was being superseded by Western materials such as steel hooks, and techniques were changing accordingly, and so he was conscious of witnessing traditional cultural practices ("Deep-Sea Fishing" 113). When fishing for the huge rock cod, for example, he saw islanders dive down to the hole where the fish was sheltering and literally place the bait on the hook in front of the cod's mouth, so that they could haul it in as soon as it took the bait, and before it could spread its fins and lock itself into the crevice. The people of the Gilbert Islands, now Kiribati, were expert nocturnal catchers of flying fish, setting out with palm leaf torches in a fleet of 30 to 40 outrigger canoes, each with a crew of five: two paddlers, a steersman, one man with a torch and one with the net. Once out at sea, they would split into two groups which, after lighting the torches, would then work towards each other, scooping dazzled fish lying on the surface into the net while being careful to catch only the amount they needed ("Deep-Sea Fishing" 114–18).

Becke was always ready to acknowledge that he learned much about the oceanic environment as a student of Pacific Islanders, and that he owed a debt of gratitude to the Nanomangans in particular for the marine knowledge they shared with him because, during his many years in Oceania, “deep-sea fishing has been something more than a mere hobby—it has been a delight and solace” (“The Pala” 185).

Becke didn’t always write about fish, however. He also wrote about birds but, unlike his attitude to fish, his opinion about killing them altered later in life as he became more of an amateur ornithologist and less a hunter. As a younger man, including during his time in the Islands when he hunted for both food and sport, Becke was a confirmed bird shooter, but his attitude changed profoundly after living in France with his family in the early twentieth century. In his memoir *Sketches from Normandy*, he describes his horror at the rural French custom of shooting any and every bird that came within range: “owls, sparrows, cuckoos, painted finches, martins, blackbirds, thrushes, and even swallows,” and even the occasional bird dog (20). The consequent birdlife devastation was such that some songbirds were in danger of extinction, so rare even then in some areas that Becke was immediately struck by the silence (26). The Islanders had known better, he declared, never hunting birds during the egg incubation season and never more than they needed at any time. Nanomanga, for example, was a nesting site for thousands of sooty or wideawake terns that the islanders took great care to conserve because, although they were a natural food source, they only laid one egg at a time. Consequently, the Nanomangans only killed the large adults, not the chicks, and were careful to preserve eggs in order to maintain population numbers. Although typically ground nesters, Becke observed that terns on Nanomanga attempted to avoid robber crabs by laying their one egg on a broad leaf to which it would stick in a moderate breeze, but strong winds could still shake the eggs loose to the ground where they would be eaten by the crabs, and so the Islanders also hunted the crabs for food to reduce their numbers and so sustain the bird population (“Loneliness” 67–68). Frigate birds were also numerous on Nanomanga, and Becke records that some would be caught when young and trained by hand-feeding to be messenger birds: a type of Pacific homing pigeon that would carry important messages back to their home island. Becke claims to have once tested the bird’s abilities, exchanging two messenger frigate birds with the trader on Niutao. They sent one bird on the forty-eight-hour voyage to Niutao by ship, only for it to take a mere two hours to fly home (“Katafa” 119–20). Pigeons were numerous on many Pacific atolls, living on the buds of coconut palms and the blossom of the pandanus, and the birds were a traditional food source. When Becke arrived on Nanomanga, however, he discovered that their pigeons had all flown to a neighbouring island for refuge because the islanders had gained access to firearms and were shooting them indiscriminately. Becke promptly initiated a pigeon conservation scheme by persuading the Nanomangans to stop shooting pigeons for a year. When the birds subsequently returned, he advised the island council to limit their catch to four birds a person per week. As a result, pigeon numbers actually increased (“Loneliness” 69–70).

It was an early hint of a future change of heart. Only a year before his death, Becke wrote a short piece for the Outdoor Australia section of the *Sydney Mail* in reply to an earlier article by another writer condemning the killing of Australian birds for plumage that was being used to adorn hats. Becke confessed that he now deeply regretted the “reckless slaughter” of local birds he had carried out for this same purpose as a young boy hunter for whom “nothing in bird life was sacred.” His residence in Normandy and Brittany had been a revelation to him, he asserted, as was the time he had spent in the beautiful woods and copses of West Sussex in the company of the renowned ornithological editor of *The Field*, J. E. Harting. As he listened to the birdsong and the murmur of streams, and saw the beauty of the countryside, Becke experienced another personal epiphany, resolving “that never again would I destroy a songbird or any other bird of plumage” (“Slaughter of Birds” 26). Years after his time in the Pacific, he was still watching and learning within the natural environment.

While Becke's ecological writing is predominantly set among South Pacific islands, a smaller collection is set among the natural environment of the New South Wales littoral: an area with which Becke had a life-long familiarity. Here, even though his "I" might be that of a proficient outdoorsman, it is typically characterised as someone still humble in the presence of nature, willing to learn about their environment from the people and wildlife in it. Sensitive to the needs and situation of First Nations people, Becke was critical of Australian settlers who employed them as servants and fencing and timber-felling labourers because those settlers were "too lazy to work hard themselves," and then they treated the Indigenous people cruelly, failing to provide them with shelter, and paying them only in cheap government blankets, "bad rum, black ration sugar and worthless tea." In contrast, he maintained that he and his brothers had always respected First Nations people and were in turn rewarded by being taught "much woodcraft and of the ways of animals and birds" ("Lots O' Time" 284). It is probable, then, because Becke's experience with his natural environment was guided and enhanced from an early age through relationships with Indigenous inhabitants, he took that attitude with him into the South Pacific where he continued to learn local languages and study traditional cultures in order to maintain a similar interactive relationship with Islanders in their environment.

For Becke, such relationships could lead to personal transformation if you were willing to be immersed in them, to be open and even responsive to epiphanies such as that experienced by the American author Annie Dillard who, coming unexpectedly on a tree lit up by the sun, exclaimed, "I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until that moment I was lifted and struck" (35). In Becke's story "'Five-Head' Creek," for example, his narrator experiences a transforming epiphany in the rain. Having been hired to restore the fencing and water supply on a grazing property near the coast, he arrives to find the place drought-stricken and smelling of death. Initially disgusted, he wants to finish his work and leave as soon as possible, but he remains open to a relationship with the natural environment and chooses to sleep outside under the stars, where he is subsequently rewarded when the local wildlife warns him of the approach of a drought-breaking downpour. Rather than seeking shelter that would insulate and isolate him from nature, he continues to choose a personal relationship with it by standing naked in the rain, symbolically baptised by it as it brings "hope and vigour and promise of life" to a dying earth and to him, while washing away the layer of dirt that has been acting as a barrier to his relationship with the natural environment. As he subsequently learns to care about and appreciate that environment, he is inwardly transformed, refusing to needlessly shoot birdlife, criticising settlers for killing emus, and affirming his friendship and readiness to learn from First Nations people camped nearby. They in turn share information that enables him to store food as the wet season sets in. However, Becke is not a writer of romantic idealism; he is realistically aware of the imperfect human condition, and his narrator ultimately commits a sin within this potential Eden. Angered when the First Nations camp dogs threaten his food supply, he poisons some of them and, consequently, the deeply offended people abandon him during the night. With his relationship to the natural environment now destroyed, he leaves the area (181–202).

Becke's use of "I" also invites the reader to participate in a relationship with natural place. According to the philosopher of space and place, Edward S. Casey, places are not so much what we might see or recollect, but "what we feel *with* and *around*, *under* and *above*, *before* and *behind* ourselves," and Becke's characters often experience this connectedness with their place (313). In a story that may be semi-autobiographical, "Dulce Est Desipere In Loco," Becke's malaria-stricken protagonist is recuperating at a friend's family homestead approximately fifty kilometres inland from Crescent Head on the New South Wales coast. By the fourth night, unable to sleep while being wracked by fever dreams, he is craving his familiar coastal place. "How I loathed the bush," he declares, "and the heat, and the curse of myriad flies, and the jarring notes of horse and cattle bells" (82). This monotonously monochrome

bush landscape is far away from his beloved littoral, “where the verdure is green and bird’s notes are sounding all around you from dawn till dark,” an attitude which explains why Becke wrote little about the Outback (85). His protagonist’s relationship with the cool sea and the surf is in fact so essential to his being that he considers it a maternal one (86). Confined in a place where there is no cold water, his desire focuses on “quarts, gallons, buckets of it,” a craving that Becke emphasises by repeating the words “cool” or “cold” eleven times in two pages. His poetic use of sibilants invites the reader to share the sound of the sea that haunts his protagonist’s mind: “Ah! The sea, the cool, cool sea, and the swish and swirl of the foaming surf, and the hard, wet sand, whereon I could lie and let it lave my fever-heated body from head to toe” (83). Finally, he flees the homestead one night in desperation, eventually stumbling in the dark into a creek in which he plunges and drinks deeply. Once again, Becke uses the trope of baptism as his character washes away the traces and bounds of roof and wall and society in order to be healed and transformed by the clean water, fresh air, and the beauty of the bush that surrounds him. He awakens next morning renewed and feeling at one with the natural environment. Sensing the very earth beneath him, he watches and listens as nature wakes around him and then, guided by the creek, he sets out through the trackless bush towards the sea, along the way finding a derelict homestead by a lagoon where nature again provides for him with edible berries and lemons that help to lower his fever. As he nears the coast, he feels himself gaining health and strength with every step until he finally arrives on the beach where, seeing and hearing the Pacific surf thundering against the headland, he realises that now, here, he is at last content (87). To attain this peace, though, he has needed to relinquish civilisation and its sickness, literally wash it away, and be willing to participate in a relationship with the natural environment that not only heals but ultimately transforms.

In Becke’s story “Night,” his protagonist also discovers that the natural environment can be a sustaining and healing force while he is suffering the ravages of malarial fever. Attempting to escape society, he walks some twenty kilometres along a beach until he finds a place to camp among “the forest of lofty gums and ironbarks, and clumps of graceful bangalow palms, with tiny, brawling streams and the sweet notes of birds, and the rustle of the swaying canopy of green overhead answered by the call of the sea” (38). Here he makes a bed of grass, boils the billy on a campfire, catches some fish, then fries and eats them using a strip of bark as a plate. Then, he wanders down to the water’s edge to dip his feet in the phosphorescent water while watching as “the myriad stars came out until the sky and sea and sleeping mountain forest and shining beach made the world very beautiful and sweet” (41). Despite being surrounded by such beauty, however, he still feels miserable until he arrives back at camp to find a mare and foal waiting for him. Gaining their trust, he feeds them, and they stay together until sunrise. Then he realises that he has been healed and renewed by this experience with them.

An amateur naturalist, hiker, and outdoorsman from childhood who experienced years of living and working throughout the South Pacific, Louis Becke was uniquely positioned to write about his perceptions of and relationships with the natural environment. As a late nineteenth century ecological writer, Becke introduced sustainable environment management to readers long before it became part of modern conversation. He understood that the natural environment, terrestrial and oceanic, connects us all, and that by participating in it through a literary ecosystem of the imagination or our own personal experience, witnessing and learning, we can enhance our understanding of the complex interactions between human cultures and the natural world. We too can experience epiphanies that open a window to our natural environment through which we could, if we only stopped to listen, hear Nature breathing with joy. I’ve something to show you, Becke promises. Stand here.

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