

Bushfires a chance to restore our national character

[Henry Ergas](#) 12:00AM January 6, 2020



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

As the children, “running and running, running to a standstill”, brought news to the volunteer firefighters in Patrick White’s *The Tree of Man* of yet another outbreak in the terrifying fire at Durilgai, “passionate volumes of smoke towered above the bush, and in that smoke (writhed) dark, indistinguishable bodies, as if something were being translated forcibly into space”.

Exhausted and “hollow-eyed” from having “looked into the depths of the fire that day”, the volunteers were nonetheless “drawn on mercilessly to the fire that was running up the trees and falling from the elbows, to roll among the dead bracken in balls of the same protean fire, to shatter into sparks, to divide and join, but whatever form disguised in, always burning. In the midst of such unity of purpose the fighters did not stand a

chance."

Yet the men pushed on, having "discovered in the earth an austere beauty that they now loved with a sad love that comes when it is already too late, reconciled to the lives they are leaving behind, as they ride between the black trees, and the yellow light lowers, and the animals begin to run towards them, instead of away".

They had, in their "simplicity", "smelled the ashes, and knew": that the flames were part of this land's "austere beauty"; that ever since that land had come into being, it was the flames that had allowed the "many dead things in the landscape"—"the grey skeletons of old trees, an old weak cow that had stuck in the mud, the lizards that life had left belly upwards"—to be "reborn as new life"; and that in bringing "the barbaric blaze" under control, they needed, and wanted, to rely on themselves, neither seeking nor expecting help.

In the "end (that) was no end", amid the silence of the trees standing as though in an anonymous assembly of eternal figures representing humanity, they could see "a little wisp of white cloud", hear "the shoots of green thought" and at last inscribe, in "the poem of death, the poem of life". The poem, one might suggest, of Australia.

Now, some 70 years later, with bushfires again taking their horrific toll, that poem echoes in the nation's shock and grief. The hard reality White found in the country he had only recently rediscovered remains unchanged: this timeless land has always been, and always will be, subject to cataclysms thrown at it by nature.

But that scarcely means everything has stayed the same. The fictional township White described was a small hamlet surrounded by the isolated properties of struggling farmers. Today, Durilgai and its myriad counterparts would be thick with holiday homes and commercial properties, nested in the glorious, but unforgiving, Australian bush.

Little wonder the devastation inflicted by natural disasters has soared. Indeed, it is the incessant increases in the exposed population and property, rather than any rise in the frequency or severity of the hazards, that have caused the growth in the losses catastrophes impose, as Professor John McAneney, Australia's leading analyst of long-term trends in the risks arising from natural disasters, and his colleague, Dr Ryan Compton from Risk Frontiers, have shown.

Even this season's losses, as widespread as they are, would likely be low by the standards of the great fires of earlier years were it not for the enormous expansion in the number of people and the value of the property in the most vulnerable areas.

This is, in other words, a pyre we have largely built for ourselves on the most dangerous of foundations. Moreover, it is a pyre that continues to mount, as the consequences of poor land-use planning are compounded by allowing uninsured or underinsured properties to escape the costs of their presence in highly risk-prone places.

And with the rising density of people and property, higher temperatures and stronger, more erratic winds making hazard reduction burning inherently more perilous, the accumulation of fuel loads will increase the likelihood of blazes that burn for months on end.

Halting and reversing that trend is the issue we need to face. This is not a matter of escalating our already enormous commitment to emissions reduction; rather, the question is to confront deadly threats that are, at this point, entirely locked in and that can only be dealt with by dramatically reducing exposure to risk.

Steering the nation towards the political choices that requires will hardly be easy. After all, it is not just the extent of settlement that has changed since *The Tree of Man* was published in 1955; it is also the Australian spirit, which White so memorably evoked.

Yes, its traces remain, notably in the volunteer firefighters whose devastating losses we mourn. But their sacrifice and bravery merely make the chorus of petulance all the more deafening.

Gone is the quiet dignity in the face of adversity, which used to be the hallmark of the national character.

Instead, judging by social media, many thousands think valour lies in making rude gestures at the Prime Minister. Gone with it is any pretence of civility.

And gone too is the realism that allowed Australians to prosper in a harsh land, learning each time disaster struck and rebuilding on the charred remains of the past.

In part that merely reflects the world we are in: a world that knows more, but remembers less, than at any time in human history. With memory wiped out by immediacy, the sheer scale of each natural disaster, and its closeness to the people and places we love, overwhelms any perspective.

The perception we are on the edge of the apocalypse then feeds frenzied demands for pointless gestures.

But if those demands have resonated in recent weeks it is also because there has been a failure of leadership.

No doubt coping with natural disasters is primarily a state, rather than federal responsibility.

However, that distinction vanished years ago. As the crisis spread Australians expected the Prime Minister to unify, inspire and reassure.

Instead, with much of the cabinet and the bureaucracy on holiday, the commonwealth's response was too often grudging, piecemeal and ham-fisted. A persistent undercurrent of defensiveness, and at times of

divisiveness, made things worse.

Whether that has changed will be tested in the days ahead. So too will be whether the Australian spirit, with its intimate connections to this continent's inescapable realities, can find renewal in the shadow of catastrophe.

"It is not natural that emptiness shall prevail," wrote White towards the close of *The Tree of Man*: "it will fill eventually, whether with water, or children, or dust, or spirit." Now, as then, the choice is ours to make.