

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Climatic Crisis: Place, Taste and Race in Hardy Wilson's *Dawn of a New Civilization* (1929)

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In 1929, the Australian architect and author William Hardy Wilson (1881–1950) identified architectural practice within Australia as degenerate and in decline. He attributed this regression not to changing tastes or styles but to the increasing number of native-born architects and their long-term exposure to a subtropical or tropical climate. Wilson believed that Australia's warmer climates negatively affected the nation's future capacity for innovation and invention and the development of national style. Central to Wilson's thesis was the proposition that climate was the primary determinant of artistic agency. The importance of this idea was twofold. First, it enabled Wilson to develop a critique of the White Australia policies which were introduced in 1901 and which grew in influence in the early decades of twentieth-century Australia. Second, it helped Wilson to locate Australian architectural practice within a global theory of civilisation. In documenting the crisis that Wilson saw within the architecture of Australia, the paper considers this aspect of his work in detail for the first time.

In Australia it had been proclaimed that man is not necessarily overcome by the effects of climate, and that he may continue to dwell in lands under adverse climatic conditions without risk of deteriorating. But man has never achieved superiority over climate, and is still in the position that he occupied in his first civilized days. The effects of an irresistible force of nature cannot be altered by man's ingenuity. He always was, and always must be, subservient to its power.

—Hardy Wilson 1929: 224

In 1929, the Australian-born architect William Hardy Wilson (1881–1950) argued that the incapacity of the Australian people for 'beauty' and 'creativity'—their failure to build a culture of 'taste' and to invent a new and national architectural style—revealed a crisis that would continue to corrupt the architecture produced by the newly federated nation. Wilson developed this thesis in his unconventional text, *The Dawn of a New Civilization*, a self-published novel that traced the aesthetic awakening of a young and Australian-born architect, given the name Richard Le Measurer, and his attempts to develop 'a new architecture in his native land' (Wilson 1929: 10). Autobiographical in nature, in that Richard's architectural and artistic projects, training, travels and writings mirrored Wilson's own, Wilson used his book to express his discontent with the architectural practice of early twentieth-century Australia (Fig. 1).¹ Inverting the paradigm of progress attached to Australia's colonisation and more recent federation—the union in 1901 of the six British yet self-governed colo-



Fig. 1: Harold Cazneaux, Hardy Wilson at his desk at Purulia, Warrawee, New South Wales, 1921. National Library of Australia, PIC/11872/92 LOC Album 1126/2.

nies of New South Wales, Tasmania, Queensland, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia—Wilson identified the architecture of colonial Australia as being of a greater quality than that which was produced in his own age. He attributed this decline not to changing tastes or styles but to the increasing number of native-born architects and their long-term exposure to a subtropical and tropical climate (Walker 2005; Harrison 1999).

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The contribution of Wilson's writings to the historiography on Australian architecture is widely acknowledged (Boyd 1960; Freeland 1968; Willis & Goad 2008; Edwards 2001). His visual study, *Old Colonial Architecture in New South Wales and Tasmania* (1924), demonstrates an early appreciation for the buildings of Georgian Australia, architecture 'reviled' up to the 1890s for its associations, in the imagination of the Australian public, with convicts and criminality (Willis and Goad 2008: 11–12).² Other texts, including *The Dawn of a New Civilization* and *Grecian and Chinese Architecture* (1937), offer an early introduction of Asia into the image of Australian architecture (Fung & Jackson 1996; Edwards 2001) by reminding the Australian people 'that they live[d] in warm Asian waters' (Boyd 1960: 72). These later writings also reveal a discourse that has subsequently been described as 'monstrous', both in the prejudices they reveal and in the failure of Wilson's biographers to acknowledge the presence of such themes within his work (Fung & Jackson 1996: 64).

Absent, however, from the above is an acknowledgement of Wilson's interest in the influence of climate on architecture and civilisation. This aspect of Wilson's work is significant. For Wilson, it is the climate and geographical location of a region which determined artistic agency—the capacity of a people for creativity, invention and innovation. This idea offers a rationale for both Wilson's celebration of the architecture of China and colonial Australia, a fact commonly overlooked, and the crisis facing Australian architecture in his own age. The influence of climate on architecture also located Australian architecture for Wilson within a global theory of civilisation. The architecture of Australia and the climatic crisis it had reached mirrored for Wilson an inevitable 'pause' in the global course of civilisation. The solution he proposed for the Australian context, one seeking reinvigoration via the architecture of China, also mapped out the next step forward for world architecture.

Crisis

The central character of Wilson's novel, Richard Le Measurer, following a seven-year absence from Australia spent informally studying art and architecture in Britain and mainland Europe, returns to Australia where he is confronted with an architectural culture in decline. Prior to his departure, the 'untrained eye' of this native-born architect perceived the architectural productions of his country as modern and innovative (Wilson 1929: 10). Yet on Richard's return, and in possession of a newly acquired understanding of the 'art of architecture', learned in the rooms of the Chelsea Arts Club and through extensive European and American travel (chapters 2 to 5), the buildings of his hometown now appear to the young architect as 'without a trace of architectural quality in them' (Wilson 1929: 2–5). Questioning whether the 'feeling for beauty' and 'creativity' was 'less awakened in Australia than in England', he concludes that the local buildings demonstrate a 'triumph of the lowest form of art over mankind's instinctive feeling for beauty' (Wilson 1929: 65).

Richard's critique encompasses the architecture of Australia's principal cities encountered on his return from

Europe, including Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne, the state capitals of Western Australia, South Australia and Victoria respectively, and all ports of call. Richard reserves his harshest criticism, however, for Wilson's hometown of Sydney, capital of New South Wales and the first location of white settlement within the continent. Describing the architecture of Sydney as 'deplorable' and the local architects as knowing 'little of their art'—their capacity to secure commissions dependent solely 'on an ability to manage finances and the business of building'—he also concludes that 'Imagination' was a quality lacking in the city's buildings. They revealed 'the minds of a people who have utility, but not beauty' at the heart of 'their conception of architecture'. To Richard's 'eyes [now] accustomed to European vigour, indolence appeared to be destroying man's efforts to build a civilisation in the land at the end of the ancient world' (Wilson 1929: 66–67).

The Australian continent is estimated to have been settled by Australia's Indigenous peoples some fifty to sixty thousand years ago (Evans 2007; Veth & O'Connor 2013). The colonisation of the continent by the British is significantly more recent, dating to the late eighteenth century. Originating with the establishment of a penal colony at Port Jackson (present-day Sydney) in 1788, the new colony of New South Wales was quickly followed by a number of sister colonies. British in their governance and institutional structures, these included Van Diemen's Land (present-day Tasmania), a remote island lying to the south of the continent, first settled in 1803 as a site of secondary punishment (for convicts who reoffended within Australia) and established as a colony in its own right in 1824; Western Australia, first settled in 1827 and later proclaimed a penal colony in 1849, the first convicts arriving in 1850; South Australia, a British province and free settlement established in 1836, becoming a crown colony in 1842; Victoria, a small region which initially fell under the governance of New South Wales but which achieved separation in 1851; and Queensland, first settled in 1824 as a site of secondary punishment, which split from New South Wales in 1859. Independently governed, yet seeking a greater degree of autonomy from Britain, the six colonies achieved federation in 1901 to form the Commonwealth of Australia.

The first colonists of the early nineteenth century, Wilson argues, had produced designs of better architectural quality than 'any which had been erected since those pioneering days', and the subsequent degeneration of Australian architecture was gradual, occurring over many decades of white settlement (Wilson 1929: 229–30 & 71). Wilson attributed this decline to a series of factors. The first was a problem of race and what he described as the 'uncreativity' of the nation's British stock. Suggesting that the British people were primarily 'imitative', in that they borrowed from work 'born on the [European] continent', rather than create and invent for themselves, Wilson also characterised English architecture as insular and inward-looking, unconcerned with its architectural or social context (Wilson 1929: 122–23). The result, Wilson observed, was a practice that was visually eclectic, asymmetrical and varied. Wilson deemed this style to be appro-

priate to Britain in that it mirrored both the geographical circumstances of the nation—its island context—and the character of the British people:

That queer independence of outlook, which makes the English people feel apart from all others and the Englishman apart from his neighbours, fencing himself off with a wall round his garden, wherein he feels himself secure, and which marks buildings placed side by side in the same block, giving them different heights and designs, and nothing whatever to do with each other, as though they felt their independence and sought to shut out their neighbours, irrespective of their appearance as a whole, being concerned alone with their own. (Wilson 1929: 18)

The character of English architecture, Wilson suggested, could be contrasted with that of its nearest continental neighbour, France, where symmetry, unity and ‘balanced blocks’ demonstrated a desire to ‘act in unison with other minds’ (Wilson, 1929: 28–29). Acknowledging the appropriateness of an insular style for Britain, Wilson went on to question the viability of its transferral to Australia. As a continent rather than an island, Australia presented an altered geographical context. More importantly, it was also geographically remote from mainland Europe, a distance that prevented the sort of contact long established between the British people and their primary creative source, the European continent:

Thereafter architecture steadily declined, and as architects came to Australia from the Homeland they found more difficulty in designing as well as they were accustomed as the proportion of native born Australians increased. The inherited uncreativity of the people was without ideas on which to base building enterprises, and the race was helpless to create architecture when no continent existed as a guide. (Wilson 1929: 229–30).

Since he describes the Australian population as ‘ninety-six per cent ... British stock’, it is not surprising that Wilson also attributed an unimaginative character to those who were native born (Wilson 1929: 93). The increasing number of native-born architects offered an additional rationale for Australia’s architectural decline. Suggesting that the British-born migrant, whose numbers were high in the early years of white settlement, had the advantage of memory and ‘association’, Wilson also noted that this facility was unavailable to the native architect who had never travelled beyond Australia’s shores (Wilson 1929: 229–30):

The race was not creative, being accustomed heretofore to take its ideas from the continent of Europe, and when these ideas were removed it fell back on the memory of work that existed in England, which they imitated as well they could. In doing this they revealed that a feeling for beauty in architecture is

not inherited by the race. It was to be acquired from the Continent, and when this source is no longer available it has to fall back on itself, having nothing save the memory of work in the old conditions under which it lived. (Wilson 1929: 66–67)

Such concerns are reflected in the narrative that Wilson develops in his novel. Wilson gives his central character the name ‘Le Measurer’ to refer not only to the profession of architect (‘the measurer’) but also to the nature of the practice as it had evolved within Australia. Architecture there, Wilson suggests, was primarily concerned with the mechanical tasks of building (measuring and surveying) rather than the creative agency associated with the higher art of architecture (Edwards 2001). Richard’s awareness of such distinctions, despite his local architectural training, is made possible only by his departure from Australia and subsequent travel abroad.³ Because he was born in Australia, Richard is denied the associations on which the émigré architect could rely. Rather, it is only through contact with the architectural work of other countries, specifically the continental nations of France, Italy and America, that his understanding of and capacity for beauty is awakened.⁴ Yet on his return to Australia, despite his newly acquired sensibility, an artistic architecture continues to remain beyond his reach.

The novel’s narrative reveals an unexpected prejudice—one that appears to be directed at the Anglo-Saxon people—as well as cultural insecurities rooted in an awareness of the nation’s geographical isolation. Wilson also identifies a third and more significant concern: the degeneracy he perceived to be associated with Australia’s tropical and subtropical climates.⁵ Wilson examines this problem in the ninth chapter of his novel, when Richard visits, for the first time, the northern state of Queensland.

As Richard visits a number of the state’s coastal settlements Wilson gives voice to the ‘dangers’ he felt a hot and humid climate posed for ‘his race’ (Wilson 1929: 1). Comprising 1,730,648 square kilometres of land, Queensland spans the northeastern corner of the Australian continent. Its principal cities dot the state’s coastline (approximately 6,000 kilometres long) and include Brisbane, the state capital, and the Gold Coast in the Southeast, Rockhampton and Maryborough on the central coast, and Townsville and Cairns in the north. Queensland’s Cape York is the northern-most point of the Australian mainland. Varied in both geography and climate, the state is crossed by the Tropic of Capricorn (23 degrees 26 minutes south). Approximately one half of Queensland’s area is located to the north of this line.

Moving from north to south, from the tropics to the subtropics, Richard encounters a culture that was not only in decline but approaching a degenerate character:

The ship arrived at Thursday Island, which lies about ten degrees south of the Equator, where the northernmost settlement of Australia is established. The late spring day, like most days in that part of the world, was stifling hot. A British ship, engaged in surveying the northern coast, was the only vessel

in port, and was under canvas awnings to guard against the tropical heat. High on the beach lay a number of pearling luggers, the pearling industry having come to an end, and tied to the wharf was a ketch with an aboriginal crew, who were unloading sandalwood for the East. It was the only sign of an industry in Thursday Island. The place was desolate. It had reached that state which every European settlement is bound to reach when there is no energy save its own, which cannot maintain its energy in a tropical climate. (Wilson 1929: 114–15)

The image of decline continues as Richard moves southward. In the port of Townsville, the ‘feeling of stagnation’, which Richard first experiences at Thursday Island, persists, even though the ‘shops and houses were arranged in clean surroundings and beautiful trees overhung the footways’ (Wilson 1929: 117). An equally bleak summation is given for the port of Rockhampton, a town, Richard observes, located on the Tropic of Capricorn and corresponding in latitude with Hong Kong in China, Calcutta in India or Aswan in Egypt. Here, the ‘sun beat down in scorching rays’, the ‘air was still’ and the ‘human nature of white men ... revolted against the task of doing their work’ (Wilson 1929: 118). In Brisbane, in the state’s southeast, Richard discovered a city where the ‘standards of civilisation [were kept] upright’ by a population primarily from ‘Great Britain and the southern parts of Australia’. Yet the city’s subtropical climate had ensured an architecture that was crude and ‘shoddy’. The subtropical luxuriance of the trees and flowers of the city gardens offered the only aesthetic ‘retreat’ (Wilson 1929: 119).

The association of the tropics with degeneration and decline was a familiar one by the early decades of the twentieth century. As David Walker has argued in his essay ‘The Curse of the Tropics’ (2005), the relationship between racial character and climate was one of the foundational beliefs of nineteenth-century science, and the conviction that the tropics posed a significant danger for European settlement was widespread (Frenkel 1992; Harrison 1999; Johnson 1960). Within Australia, many essays published in the mainstream press in the final decades of the nineteenth century examined the consequences of the tropics on the health of both the colonist and the colony, linking the detrimental effects of climate (heat and humidity) to reduced energy levels, man’s incapacity for physical labour, fatigue and ultimately disease—factors primarily affecting the economic development of settlements (Taylor 1896; *Brisbane Courier* 1890). Some writers also considered the potential cultural outcomes of European settlement within a tropical context. In 1860, in a ‘Lecture on Climate’ delivered to the School of Arts in Brisbane by a Dr Barton, the writer suggested ‘high mental attainments’ and the ‘perfect development of the species’ were more commonly associated with living in a temperate climate (Barton 1860: 4). Another essay, ‘Climate and Character’, published in the *Brisbane Courier* in 1896, developed a parallel stance, and described the movement of people of European descent into Queensland as an ‘experiment

of momentous character’. Questioning whether ‘so great a transition can be made without more or less influencing the characteristics of the race’, the author also asked whether the conditions presented by such a context contained a ‘promise of higher attainment or the menace of deterioration’ (*Brisbane Courier* 1896: 4).

Wilson’s novel expands on the above concerns in two ways. First, while initially focused on the climate of Queensland, he extended the degeneracy associated with the northern tropics to include the subtropical south, thus implicating most of the Australian continent (with the exception of Tasmania and the temperate inland ranges). Sydney, like the northern settlements of Brisbane, Rockhampton and Townsville, was for Wilson an ‘enervated’ city where ‘climate was the wild boar, and before its deadly attack, the city was sinking’ (Wilson 1929: 210–11). Second, Wilson’s interest in climate also focused on the issue of diminished creativity. Moving beyond the more common associations of climate with labour, health and economic development, Wilson’s interest settled on the future capacity of the emerging nation for innovation, taste and a productive aesthetic culture.

The impact of climate on creativity is perhaps best demonstrated in the novel’s account of Richard’s own artistic practices. As Richard tries to complete a series of drawings on colonial buildings of New South Wales and Tasmania, he ‘began to wonder about the climate of Sydney’. Noting that it ‘seemed too hot to preserve one’s energy’ and that at night, even when ‘clad in the lightest clothes’, and ‘without ... any physical exertion’, he became ‘drenched with perspiration’, Richard quickly concluded that it was ‘well-nigh impossible’ to continue his artistic activities under such environmental conditions. The architect’s labours were effectively thwarted by the heat and the humidity of the coastal city (Wilson 1929: 88).

Seeking to remove himself from this problematic environment, the young architect decides to build a home in the northern hills surrounding Sydney, where he deemed the climatic conditions more agreeable. ‘Life there seemed remote, but this did not bother him as long as he felt the climate would enable him to work steadily on his drawings’. The house, given the name of ‘Purulia’, the same name used by Wilson for his own home built in the same location in 1916, is soon completed. Here, immersed in the task before him, and ‘no longer hating the conditions of life under which he dwelt’, the work Richard produces quickly improves in both quality and quantity (Wilson 1929: 85–87).

Drawing on Wilson’s own experience of living in the inner city suburb of Darlinghurst followed by a move to the northern hills of Sydney, Wilson’s account of Richard’s relocation reveals the link he perceived between artistic agency and the climatic conditions of the environment in which it is produced. Wilson’s flat in Darlinghurst, shown in the photographic record as comfortable and tastefully furnished with collections of Asian art and antique furniture,⁶ a setting evocative of aesthetic capacity and connoisseurship, is rendered, like Richard’s inner city home, unproductive by the heat and humidity of Sydney’s coastal

climate. A remedy is achieved for both only with a relocation to the cooler hills of northern Sydney.

The change in climate, however, is achieved only by relocation rather than architectural design. Purulia itself, the new home designed by Richard, does not contribute in any way to the mediation or amelioration of the climate, a fact reinforced by the absence of any reference to design innovations within Wilson's account. While the house's enlarged eaves and verandahs are mentioned, they are not singled out. Nor is any other aspect of the building emphasised that responds explicitly to climate (Wilson 1929: 86–87). In a description of Wilson's own Purulia, which Wilson wrote following the completion of his home in 1916, the focus settles on the modern phenomenon of servantless living. Climatic concerns are notably absent in this earlier account (Wilson 1919).

Nevertheless, the move to northern Sydney is singled out by Wilson as a chance for the architect to create a genuinely artistic architecture. It offers Richard his first opportunity to 'work out a design ... without being obliged to consider the ideas of [those] who [know] nothing of architecture'. It is the placement of the building within the landscape, and the views thus generated, however, that aided the architect in achieving his goal, rather than the improved climatic conditions of the site (Wilson 1929: 86–87). In the novel, the garden and the views to the surrounding landscape are presented as the primary subject. Throughout his novel, Wilson also describes this landscape as threatening, as evoking 'a terror which is instinctive in mankind ... when placed in the depths of a dark forest' (Wilson 1929: 85–86). Recalling the sensations of the Longinian sublime, the landscape surrounding Purulia appears to offer Wilson an alternative aesthetic context for an architecture that sought to assert equivalent values (Plaats & De Lorenzo 2006).

In its exploration of climate, landscape and artistic agency, Wilson's novel recalls the earlier writings of the English historian Henry Thomas Buckle (1821–62). Developing an elaborate argument that linked climate, labour and economic wealth in his *History of Civilisation in England* (originally published in 1857 but reprinted in the early 1900s), Buckle also considered the 'influence of the natural world' on the development of religion, art and literature.⁷ Buckle identified certain 'Aspects of Nature' as the principal agents which determined this development. He divided these into two classes: those that are 'likely to excite the imagination'—natural phenomena that 'inspire feelings of terror or wonder' and reveal the 'insignificance and inferiority of man'—and those that 'address ... the logical operations of the intellect', where the 'works of nature are small and feeble' allowing man to assert his 'own power.' He also suggested that a balance of both was essential to the advancement of civilisation. The tropics, Buckle believed, formed a zone where the aspects of nature 'are most sublime, most terrible, and where Nature is, in every respect, most dangerous to man.' He also concluded that within such a setting the desired balance between imagination and reason could not be maintained (Buckle 1903: vol. 1, 85–86):

Indeed generally, in Asia, Africa, and America, the external world is more formidable than in Europe. This holds good not only of the fixed and permanent phenomena, such as mountains, and other great natural barriers, but also of occasional phenomena, such as earthquakes, tempests, hurricanes, pestilences; all of which are in those regions very frequent, and very disastrous. These constant and serious dangers produce effects analogous to those caused by the sublimity of Nature, in so far that in both cases there is a tendency to increase the imagination. For the peculiar province of the imagination being to deal with the unknown, every event which is unexplained, as well as important, is a direct stimulus to our imaginative faculties. In the tropics, events of this kind are more numerous than elsewhere; it therefore follows that in the tropics the imagination is most likely to triumph. (Buckle 1903: vol. 1, 87)

While the heat and humidity of the tropical climate are attributes intimately connected to man's capacity for physical labour and wealth generation, it was the terror evoked by the tropical setting, which unsettled a desired equilibrium between imagination and reason, that Buckle believed activated artistic agency. 'By "enflaming" the imagination, he wrote, "the tropical context also encouraged the supremacy of superstition," blinded "judgement", and circumscribed "the originality of the educated classes".' In doing so it undermined the balance necessary for the advancement of civilisation (Buckle 1903: vol. 1, 86).

Climate, Race and the Course of Civilisation

Inherent to Buckle's thesis is the identification of the tropics as a site of both creativity, or heightened imagination, and a decline that threatened western civilisation. Positioning climate at the centre of his thesis on both cultural degeneration and artistic agency, Wilson shared Buckle's contradiction. For Wilson, it is the scorching sun, heat and humidity of Queensland, and more generally of subtropical and tropical Australia, that enervated and exhausted man, reduced his capacity for manual labour and undermined the industry necessary for the progress and advancement of civilisation. When developing his case against the state of Queensland in his novel, he turns to this problem first. At Thursday Island, the absence of 'industry' and idle 'pearling luggers' are the initial objects of Wilson's critique, while at the port of Rockhampton his attention settles on the inactivity of striking wharf workers. His criticism is, however, not centred on the men themselves, but on their environmental context. Suggesting that the wharf workers would 'gradually sink in the scale of human beings' and that their 'attitude to work ... lowered ... the standard by which man had built up civilization', he also believes that it would be 'futile to protest against such attitudes' as this 'would happen whether they worked or were idle'. Fair-skinned men from Europe, he concluded, 'cannot live in these tropical localities, without sinking back on the hard-fought road of progress' (Wilson 1929: 114–18).

The absence of distinct seasons, particularly cold winters, in Queensland's tropical locations also worked against such advancement (Wilson 1929: 263–4). While Wilson acknowledges that the 'summer in New York is a trying time of year, much more trying than in Sydney', any negative affects of such hot summers were counteracted for him by the city's cold winters. 'The lack of any cold in [the Australian] winter produced enervation. An Englishman called a few nights ago, and he had no overcoat. It was too warm for him, while I shivered at the gate' (Wilson 1929: 220). Wilson supported Canberra, the newly created Federal Capital of Australia (est. 1913) and the nation's first inland city, because its cold winter was viewed as desirable:

Already stories had begun to flow about the heat in summer, and the piercing cold of the wind in winter, which destroyed the pleasantness of life in the Federal capital on its high plateau. He began to imagine that the energy of Chicago might develop there, and secretly he prayed that the winds would blow away slothfulness and snow quicken action. (Wilson 1929: 232)

Set against Wilson's belief in the value of the cold climate and its capacity to reinvigorate is his conviction that creativity originated in regions 'where the influence of the sun is dominant'. This 'sphere of creativeness' centred on a 'warm belt', or subtropical area, directly north of the Tropic of Cancer, and a 'corresponding ring' south of the Tropic of Capricorn (Wilson 1929: 127–28). While cold climates nurtured the energy that drove progress and industry, 'creativeness', or creativity, grew weaker the farther one retreated from subtropical regions. The expression of 'creativeness' was essential to the advancement of civilisation. 'A nation with a stock of energetic people, in a land free from climatic enervation', Wilson suggested, 'would not be able to maintain a high civilization unless it came in contact with a creative race in the sun-belt'. The opposite was also true; due to the physiological problem of neurasthenia, 'creativeness' could not be maintained in the 'warm belt' without an injection of energy from cooler, northern climes (Wilson 1929: 263–65).

The enervation of the white man by tropical and subtropical climates and Wilson's association of artistic agency with these same regions appear to motivate his celebration of the architecture of colonial New South Wales and Tasmania. Defined by their cold climate, the British were an energetic and vigorous race who nevertheless lacked the creativity of a people born in warmer climes. By borrowing from the architectural traditions of mainland Europe, and specifically those of the Mediterranean countries, the English, Wilson argued, were able to balance this deficiency. The transplantation of British architecture to the colonial context of Australia, however, severed these creative ties. While architectural quality was initially maintained by the British-born architect, who could draw upon association and memory—demonstrated for Wilson by the quality of Australia's early Georgian architecture—the rising number

of native-born, and trained, architects, who lacked access to such mental resources, ensured an inevitable decline in the region's architectural traditions. Australia's subtropical and tropical climates complicated matters further. Stripping the British colonist of his 'energy' and making him 'slothful' and 'indifferent', large portions of Australia's climate not only contributed to the decline of the nation's architecture but also threatened the very viability of white settlement. 'If this persisted long enough, an end must be reached', Wilson suggests, 'when the planting of a British stock in Sydney would be accounted a failure' (Wilson 1929: 71).

Supporting a thesis of climatic degeneration, Wilson attached the idea of civilisation to a climatic and geographical context rather than a racial one. Throughout *The Dawn of Civilization*, Wilson regularly refers to the idea of a 'superior' people (Wilson 1929: 127, 265, 269). For Wilson the quality of a person is ultimately determined by climate. While the 'white [man] was harassed by the heat', he was, in Wilson's opinion 'the more vigorous type' due to his cooler climatic origins. 'His superiority', he suggests, 'seems to be due to the cooler latitudes, which have enabled him to improve the energy of the species'. Showing 'superiority' over the tropical/subtropical 'native', the white man had the potential to 'dominate in the tropics' (Wilson 1929: 127). Yet, while the native of tropical regions was enervated by the climate, this did not, in Wilson's opinion, result in 'physical inferiority'. Rather, it simply limited the ability of the people to 'perform those tasks by which a nation maintains itself'. Remove the person from the tropical context and such capacity would be quickly restored (Wilson 1929: 265). Likewise, the long-term occupation of the world's warmer climes by people originating from cooler latitudes would quickly eliminate any advantage that this group initially held. 'In the long run', Wilson suggested, 'the white[s], would reach the same level' of enervation and decline as the native peoples experienced (Wilson 1929: 127).

Wilson's thesis suggests that the differences that distinguished 'the races of mankind were slight' (Wilson 1929: 94), and promotes a fluid and malleable theory of race, one which allowed both improvement and degeneration. Depending on the climatic context, all 'men' could be vigorous or enervated, 'primitive' or civilised.⁸ In this single proposition lay the key to both Wilson's interest in the architecture of northern China—a country where Europe has not dominated because the climate was similarly conducive to energy—and the Georgian architecture of early colonial Australia; architecture produced by the British colonist prior to 'his' climatic decline (Wilson 1929: 276).

To better understand the motive behind Wilson's thesis, his text needs to be situated within two broader debates. The first is Wilson's critique of the White Australia policies which were introduced in 1901 and which remained influential up to the 1970s. The second was his desire to position Australian architecture (and the arts more generally) within a global theory of civilisation rather than a nationalist discourse focused on identity.

Introduced in the first sitting of the new Parliament for the Commonwealth of Australia, the White Australia policies incorporated the *Immigration Restrictions Act* and the *Pacific Islands Labourer Act* of 1901. Both were designed to privilege British labour and migration over other, and specifically non-white, ethnicities. While the *Immigration Restrictions Act* targeted Chinese and Japanese migration into Australia, the *Pacific Islands Labourer Act* sought to prevent the importation of both legal and 'blackbirded' labour (coercive 'recruitment' or kidnapping resulting in indentured servitude) from the Pacific Islands to work the sugar plantations in northern Australia. Both acts imposed restrictions on migration and also enabled the removal of 'prohibited' immigrants, those that had arrived prior to the legislated bills. The *Pacific Islands Labourer Act* alone resulted in the removal of 7,500 Pacific Islanders who worked mostly on plantations in Queensland. Entry into Australia by Pacific Islanders was fully prohibited in 1904. While amendments were made to the acts in 1949, the policies were not fully dismantled until the 1970s (Evans, Saunders & Cronin 1988).

Seeking to install white and specifically 'British' labour into the tropical regions of Australia, the adherents of the *Pacific Islands Labourer Act* rejected the environmental premise underpinning Wilson's thesis of climatic degeneration. Advocates of the White Australia policies drew instead upon theories of biological difference to distinguish between the races. In doing so they effectively sidestepped the climatic concerns Wilson believed affected Australia's development. Substituting climatic theories of difference, a conception that was common to the eighteenth century, with biological propositions, an approach developed in the nineteenth century by Victorian theorists on race, was a strategy that had previously aided Britain's territorial interests (Harrison 1999). Breaking the association between race and climate, and identifying difference and superiority with specific biological attributes, also negated questions about the viability of white settlement within the world's tropical and subtropical regions.

Parallel strategies were also evident within early twentieth-century Australia. As Anderson (2002) and Evans (2007) have independently argued, scientific and medical writers of the period had 'boosted a vision of virile whites defeating the sickness and neurasthenia in the [Australian] tropics'. This could be achieved, suggested Anton Breinl and Ralph Cilento (directors of the Australian Institute of Tropical Medicine), through the exclusion of Melanesians and Asians from the tropical north and the segregation of Aboriginal people. Combining the eugenic and medical ideals of 'racial purity' and 'immaculate' hygiene would facilitate a 'new variety of human species' and a 'higher type' of white Australian—a 'tropical type.' (Evans 2007: 173–75).

Clinging to an environmental definition of race, Wilson was concerned that this approach ignored the danger of the continent's climatic threat:

One party of men hurled criticism at another, and over them the sun looked down in pitiless rays

of uncaring heat. No word must be uttered from either side in criticism of the land of their choice. Australia for Australians was everywhere the parrot-like cry, and the future was rapidly developing which would end in downfall unless the danger was faced. (Wilson 1929: 118)

Wilson argued that 'no European nation can profitably maintain itself in [such] latitudes without labour from the tropics'; all ideas of working such regions with labour that was not 'tropical' was 'bound to fail'. He concluded that 'under the White Australia Policy', which failed to support imported labour, 'there [was] no alternative' but to hold much of the land that was available within Australia 'empty and unused' (Wilson 1929: 115–17, 226):

Australia covers an area equal to the size of Europe without Russia. It is populated by less than seven millions of people, who are settled mostly in the coastal districts because the central portion has too little rainfall to support more than a handful. This small population is prevented from settling in the northernmost part because of its hot climate. The British breed has proved a virile stock, and therefore that portion which had settled in Australia should not fear an inflow from the tropical north. In this region labour from the tropics could be installed under white direction, and in the land to the south, which is too hot for northern Europeans, people from southern Europe could be settled, and the British stock moved if necessary, to a more congenial latitude. Climate is always the ruling power in the destinies of mankind. (Wilson 1929: 117)

In his novel, Wilson questions the viability of the White Australia policies and attacks the proposition of biological difference. In doing so he was able to argue that the degeneration and improvement of all races depended on their environmental context. As a result, Wilson developed the thesis that the contemporary practice of Australian architecture had succumbed to subtropical degeneration, and that the architecture of colonial Australia and northern China (design traditions which were free from enervation) should be celebrated. Wilson's thesis also allowed him to position Australian architecture within a global thesis of civilisation rather than a nationalist or imperial discourse of progress (Dixon 1986; Hirst 2013). Yet in doing so, he was unable to avoid the imperialism or territorial advantage that the latter supported.

The development of artistic agency—invention, imagination and creativity—and the advancement of civilisation was, for Wilson, a global phenomenon, dependent on intercultural contact and engagement. This was, however, not centred on the expression of national or cultural traits, ideas linked to racial identity or ethnicity, but on geographical location and climatic characteristics. By locating creativeness in the 'sun belt' of the subtropics and 'energy' or 'vigour' in temperate or cool latitudes, Wilson, recalling

the earlier climatic theories of Buckle, also equated civilisation with the balance of these two values. He argued that this had been achieved historically by a movement of people and ideas from the north to the south: the 'energy which is bred in the colder climates flows into the hotter [and commonly enervated] countries' to stimulate and reinvigorate their populations (Wilson 1929: 97). Such intercultural, or interclimatic, movements, Wilson observed, had sustained civilisation, creativity and the arts over the course of history. Colonisation had continued to facilitate this north–south and climatic course:

The spread of civilization has advanced since the earliest times of which we have knowledge. From Asia and Egypt it spread into Greece, and over Europe, when it was continued to America and, finally, over most of the world. In the first modern stages, Italy, Spain and Portugal spread the seed abroad. Then Spain and Portugal lost their power, and the work continued by the French, the Dutch and the British, Germany and the United States played a part in this immense movement, which is far from completed. There can be no doubt that the object of mankind is to spread civilization over the earth. It has been a steady advance. Short periods of darkness have shadowed Europe after the downfall of nations in creative land, but recovery was effected and the spread continued. (Wilson 1929: 267)

The north had first developed a civilised culture by borrowing from the creativity of the south, Wilson believed. These same southern precincts had, however, ultimately declined 'under the effects of the sun', and the world's great southern civilisations were, in Wilson's opinion, now dead. While the north had retained its energy and vigour, the death of southern civilisations also ensured the north could no longer access or borrow from southern creativity. Arguing that a 'superior people' were essential to the 'support of civilisation' and that creativity was essential to superiority, Wilson also associated the absence of creativity within a society with cultural decline. Without a viable source of creativity, due to the enervation of the south, northern countries, such as Britain and mainland Europe, had 'reached the end of the last movement'. The global progress of civilisation, like the architecture of Australia, had come to an 'inevitable pause' (Wilson 1929: 266–70, 90):

All signs show that we have arrived at one of those great changes when mankind moves from one period of creativeness, which has come to an end, towards another, which has not appeared. This period of transition means trials and failures before success is accomplished. The desire for creativeness is universal. (Wilson 1929: 264)

To generate the dawn of a new civilisation, a new model had to be developed. However, Wilson argued, this new

system had once again to 'originate within the belt where every civilization has been founded'—the subtropical regions north of the Tropic of Cancer and south of the Tropic of Capricorn (Wilson 1929: 266). For Wilson, this new source of creativity, which would revive the arts globally, was to be found in the arts of China. A vigorous 'civilisation' that was 'fed from the north' and 'not enervated by climate', China offered for Wilson new opportunities to revitalise the arts of the western world and bring into being a new period of innovation and invention (Wilson 1929: 277–78).

The recommendations Wilson made for the continuity of a global civilisation mirrored those that he suggested for Australia. Located primarily within the sunbelt—the subtropics south of the Tropic of Capricorn—Australia had the potential to become a new source of creativity and invention. Colonised and subsequently settled by the British, however, the resultant culture had succumbed through tropical enervation. It was now forced to seek new sources of creativity and energy to guarantee both the superiority of the Australian people and the advancement of civilisation. Wilson suggested Australia look to its nearest source of creativity: the architecture and art of China.

In *The Dawn of a New Civilization*, the realisation of this idea is achieved in the final architectural project undertaken by Wilson's central character. Richard builds a summer house for Professor Pymble, a project that parallels the one Wilson built for Professor Waterhouse in 1927, the Tea House at Eryldene (**Fig. 2**). Richard's project consists of a small pavilion modelled on the T'ang dynasty style with Doric columns. Painted in vermillion red and capped in gold, flanking the pavilion are two flagpoles in vermillion, 'somewhat after the Chinese fashion [of] flying a red and blue dragon' (Wilson 1929: 239).

Wilson offers Richard's pavilion as a way forward not only for Australian architecture but for civilisation itself. The architecture of China promised creativity and reinvigoration, a way past the enervation and degeneration experienced by countries within the sunbelt. By aligning Australia's crisis with the 'pause' that confronted the course of world 'civilisation', and offering a solution to both, Wilson was then able to locate Australian architectural practice at the centre rather than the periphery (a consequence of the nation's colonial background and geographical location) of world culture. In this regard, Australian architecture had the potential to act as the next step forward. Finally, by entangling civilisation with climate, Wilson separated the role of climate in Australian architecture from the representation of regional uniqueness—that which distinguished the Australian people and their architecture from Britain. He thus gives representation to a global problem: the pause in civilisation and the identification of a way forward. The nineteenth-century discourse on biological difference is replaced with one of climatic difference, a thesis which permitted the degeneration or improvement of all races and offered a rationale for Wilson's simultaneous yet seemingly contradictory celebration of the architecture of colonial Australia and China.



Fig. 2: Harold Cazneaux, Chinese Tea House, Eryldene, Gordon, New South Wales, ca. 1930. National Library of Australia, PIC/8893/6 LOC Cold Store PIC HC Box 14.

Conclusion

By separating Australia and the world into climatic regions that either supported creativity or did not, Wilson established a geographical hierarchy for the arts and innovation. Wilson gave priority to the Australia's temperate south, regions free from the humidity of the coastal seaboard and supported by cold and rejuvenating winters. For Wilson, it is the possibility of new cities on the continent's inland ranges, such as the newly founded federal capital of Canberra, that offered the best opportunity for the architectural culture of the nation to move forward. The established cities of both the eastern and western seaboard—including Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Perth—had already succumbed to a climatic crisis and a degeneration of the arts.

Yet the model proposed by Wilson was neither static nor fixed. Though enervated and in decline, all hope was not lost. For the most part located, as Australia was, within the subtropics, or 'sunbelt'—the geographical origin of all creativity and innovation—the continent also promised a new age of imagination. If it were stimulated by borrowed sources—the architecture of China—the desirable flow between innovation and reason, creativity and energy, hot and cold, could once again be restored.

Giving priority to climate in his theory of artistic agency and civilisation, Wilson side-stepped nineteenth-century theories on race and biological difference. Climate rather than racial distinctiveness determined superiority in Wil-

son's theory of civilisation. In making this distinction, Wilson was able to critique the role of race in Australian politics and expressions of national identity, as they were then demonstrated by the White Australia policies. Wilson's climatic interests also offered him an opportunity to locate Australian architecture within a global theory of civilisation. For Wilson, the Australian situation mirrored more broadly the 'inevitable pause' that confronted civilisation as a whole, and the Australian situation also demonstrated a potential way forward. Yet perhaps the greatest interest of Wilson's thesis for the present-day reader is his attachment of climate to artistic agency, innovation and invention. He associates advancement of architectural culture and the development of an Australian style with specific climatic regions, with priority given to the continent's temperate southeast but excluding Australia's tropical north and subtropics. Wilson replaces the hierarchies of the White Australia policies with an alternative order, one in which difference and value were assigned according to climatic context. The influence of this proposition and its continuity in the historiography of Australian architecture (or architecture more generally) is one that has yet to be examined.

Notes

- ¹ The autobiographical nature of the text is first acknowledged by Cecil Palmer in 1929, printer of Wilson's book. Palmer's review was published in the *Sydney*

Morning Herald, June 8, 1929, p. 10. See Edwards (2001) for the acceptance of this view. Due to the autobiographical nature of the text, Richard's experiences and opinions are thus taken in this essay to be also those of Wilson. The homes occupied by Richard in Darlinghurst and the northern hills of Sydney are a reference to those occupied by Wilson in the same locations.

² Wilson mentions this text in *The Dawn* to illustrate the problem climate posed as he formulated his opinions on artistic production in Australia. This connection is considered further in the paper.

³ In the opening pages of the novel Richard's training is explained as an 'apprenticeship to a firm of architects in the city'. This is most likely a reference to the Sydney firm of Kent & Budden where Wilson completed his articles; he then worked as an articulated apprentice. Overall, this training would have been primarily technical. In these pages, Wilson also says Richard is president of the Architectural Students Society of New South Wales (Wilson 1929: 10; Edwards 2001: 36–37).

⁴ The French character of Richard's surname is possibly a reference to the importance of such 'continental' contact.

⁵ The want of creativeness demonstrated by the Australian people was for Wilson not enough to explain the 'dreadfulness into which [their architecture] had sunk' (Wilson 1929: 70–71).

⁶ Henry King (1855–1923), Interior of Hardy Wilson's flat in Liverpool Street, Darlinghurst, New South Wales, 1912, black and white photograph. <http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/34160563>

⁷ For a discussion of Buckle's theories on labour, see Walker 2005: 93.

⁸ Wilson's thesis of 'race' and the capacity it gave for all people to move along a scale of civilisation is the context for Wilson's only reference to Australia's indigenous peoples. Suggesting that the 'Aboriginals of Australia were perhaps the most primitive people in the modern world', he goes on to describe the case of a 'full-blooded aboriginal', a former tribal chief, who was 'busy with the invention of perpetual motion machines'. The man's work demonstrated his arrival in 'one bound, from the Stone Age to lead in European civilisation, for the idea of the perpetual-motion machine is still one of the leading conundrums of the world'. In exploring this problem, this 'gentleman of the Stone Age' had 'reached the forefront of civilisation' (Wilson 1929: 94–95).

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