

A BRIEF TAKE ON THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEL

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CHAPTER 1

The Colonial Period: Exploration, Confrontation and Description (1831–1874)

The colonial period was propitious for all types of non-fiction (memoirs, chronicles, annals, letters, personal diaries, accounts). It was a time when colonisers tried to define the geography of Australia and describe the conditions of living in the penal and settler colony.

The birth of the novel in Australia did not occur until the nineteenth century was well underway, even though, soon after the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, numerous writings tried to tell of the Australian experience to please a mainly British readership. These everyday descriptions, whether fictional or real, nourished or challenged the fantasies of conquering a new world and of establishing a new colony. The colonial writers wrote for a British readership who were keen to know what could be discovered in the Antipodes. Consequently, the stories gave specific details of the native flora and fauna, the exotic setting of the Australian bush, the living conditions of the convicts and, from the 1850s onwards, the thrilling adventures of the gold-diggers. The picturesque inspired many writers (as it did colonial painters who had come from Europe with an intellectual baggage and an artistic training that eventually proved ineffectual in translating the real Antipodes). The prosaic content of these writings was constructed analytically

and reflected, through an outsider's observations, the difficulties of life in a faraway colony. While the poets, like the painters, were ready to sublimate the Australian environment and its subjects as exotic objects of curiosity, the novelists tended to paint the picture black, or present the everyday unadorned. As with painting, there was no 'great master' due to the lack of competitive rivalry or interest in vying with other artistic talents. It is difficult to speak of 'literary genius' at this time.

The first Australian novel, *Quintus Servinton*, was published in Hobart in 1831 by an unknown author – it is now attributed to Henry Savery. It was not until 1842, when John George Lang's *Legends of Australia* appeared anonymously, that Australia could take pride in having published its first truly native novelist.

Crime and punishment

The penal system operated from 1787 onwards, when the first convicts were sent out to create the Australian colonies and to serve out their sentences. At that time, the British authorities, who wanted to relieve their already congested prisons, had deportation at their disposal. A petty theft was all it took for some 160,000 Europeans to be taken to the Antipodes where they would start a new life or end it banished for ever from their homeland. It was an onerous imposition for the government even if it was driven by economic logic. A maritime and harbour base had to be established for Great Britain's commercial enterprises in the East (for example, trading in tea, otter skins, linen and hemp). In the early period, more than 60% of the population of the penal colonies was made up of convicts. The rest of the population included administrators, government officials, officers and soldiers, including prostitutes.

As has already been mentioned, the 'first Australian novel' to be published is considered to have been *Quintus Servinton*. Other stories, sometimes with illustrations, such as *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales* (1844) by Louisa Anne Meredith, recount the life of convicts only as a sideline and concentrate more on

the experiences of the free colonial society busy discovering the new environment. Some authors, such as Alexander Harris and Charles Rowcroft, were more pragmatic in their aims. For example, the didactic concern of Rowcroft's *Tales of the Colonies* (1843) and *Settlers and Convicts* (1852) by Harris allowed future immigrants to expect difficulties of integration by giving an abundance of advice on how to overcome obstacles and avoid many disappointments when settling in the country.

There were three stock characters in literature of the convict system: the convict, the bushranger, and the 'new chum'. This colloquial term was derived from the prison environment, and goes back to the time of the 'newly embarked convict' who appears in the novel *Ralph Rashleigh*, written in the late 1840s by James Tucker, but whose original manuscript was not published until 1952. In the 1840s, a 'new chum' came to mean a recent free migrant, especially someone who came to the colonies to grow rich from the experience, as portrayed by the main character in Paul Wenz's *Diary of a New Chum* (1908). This character is similar in some ways to the 'colonial experienter', an Englishman of noble birth sent to the colonies in order to acquire professional experience. Literature of the convict system* gave expression to different perspectives on the conditions endured by the convicts. Sometimes, they were presented as rounded characters with a great deal of psychological detail; at other times, they were just stock characters. Each novelist gave their vision of what was known as 'the system'.

The first Australian novel pioneered convict literature by depicting the prisoners' hellish existence. Henry Savery, who came from Somerset, thought that Australian culture had to break away from the English model. Paradoxically, his story was destined exclusively for the British reading public. The historic novel's subtitle, *A tale founded on incidents of real occurrence*, made no mystery of the obvious autobiographical nature of the work, and this led to the author being identified. *Quintus Servinton* prepared

Panoramic view of literature of the convict system

Literature of the convict system flourished during the colonial period because of its topical subject matter, which was of particular interest to British readers. In substance, it had three aims: to speak about the carceral system, making it understood and exposing its evil nature; to evoke melodramatically the life of its escapees; and, conversely, to recount the lives of those convicts able to start a new life by being offered redemption in the colony. More generally, convict literature can be divided into two opposing viewpoints: anti-abolitionist and pro-abolitionist. The anti-abolitionists thought that mere deportation to the Antipodes was too soft a punishment for the villainous. They argued about this lack of severity and pointed to the paltry results from forced labour; in other words, they imagined that the convicts enjoyed an almost enviable existence. In contrast, the pro-abolitionist authors were disposed to do away with this system of servitude. Their novels depicted a colony characterised by violence and deprivation (including the disastrous undertaking of wiping out the Aboriginal population), emphasising the evils of imprisonment and the difficulty of successfully integrating in a coercive and harsh world. This population of convicts, thugs and harlots branded future generations with infamy – the shame known as ‘the stain’ ingrained in the Australian psyche.

The abundant source for literature of the convict system dried up at the beginning of the twentieth century because the reading public had changed: the ever-increasing number of native-born Australians did not want to be reminded of their origins. However, in the 1960s and onwards, when Australia was gaining in confidence, this historic period of the early days of servitude once again provided inspiration for notable writers, including Thomas Keneally with *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967) and *The Playmaker* (1987); Jessica Anderson who produced *The Commandant* (1975); Patrick White with his novel *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976); David Malouf and his *Remembering Babylon* (1993); Peter Carey with *Jack Maggs* (1997); Christopher Koch with *Out of Ireland* (1999); Richard Flanagan with *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001) and Kate Grenville with *The Secret River* (2005) as well as *The Lieutenant* (2008).

the ground for literature of this period and its archetypal pattern of condemnation–expiation–liberation. This fictive biography, at the crossroads of colonial and picaresque novels, opens with the meeting of an anonymous author recovering from an illness and the source of his subject matter, the sixty-year-old Quintus who entrusts him with a manuscript about the first forty years of his life. The author fictionalises the eponymous character, whose life is told from its very beginning (*ab ovo*). Most of the action takes place in England, with the last quarter of the book set mainly in Australia. The protagonist Quintus lives a prosperous life in England; he murmurs sweet nothings to various women until he falls in love with Emily Clifton, whom he marries. Later he is found guilty of forgery and the use of forgeries – crimes that entail arrest and the death penalty which he avoids *in extremis*. By a lucky twist of fate, his sentence is commuted to deportation. His exemplary good behaviour allows him to atone for his sins in Australia in the company of his wife Emily and their son Olivant. The couple experience highs and lows as he carries out his sentence before being granted freedom in his early forties, as had been predicted. Eventually, he returns to Devon in England where he spends the rest of his life in tranquillity. This moralistic story can be read as an allegorical religious fable and does not speak highly of the British Empire. Rather, it denounces the emerging society that was based on a system of bondage controlled by an imperial power.

Caroline Leakey's *The Broad Arrow* (1859), published under the pseudonym of Oline Keese, is typical of what some call the 'anti-system' novel. It starts with an unjust act, for the heroine Maida is in prison having been wrongly convicted of killing a child. She is deported to Van Diemen's Land, where she is condemned to a life of servitude working for the Evelyn family. She dies after being the victim of countless humiliations. Based on Christian values, this pro-abolitionist melodrama reinforces the ideology that saw convicts as more sinned against than sinning.

After reading *The Broad Arrow*, London-born author Marcus

Andrew Hislop Clarke was inspired to begin the novel that would eventually crown him with glory, *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874).^{*} He had left England for Australia at the age of seventeen. Abolitionist in the same way as Leakey, he fought against the wretched conditions of the convict system. An author of plays, novels and short stories, he was inspired by Sir Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Marcus Clarke was particularly appreciated for his irony and satire and his ability to depict characters with striking verisimilitude. It is not an exaggeration to claim that Marcus Clarke establishes the convict genre within the literary canon with his anti-system novel *For the Term of His Natural Life*, an enormous literary success that over the years has eclipsed the remainder of his literary output. This well-documented novel owes much to Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862) and *It Is Never Too Late to Mend* (1856) by Charles Reade. A whole series of stories followed in the tradition of *His Natural Life*, such as *For Her Natural Life* (1876) by Eliza Winstanley, *Moondyne* (1879) by John Boyle O'Reilly, and later *The Escape of the Notorious Sir William Heans* (1919) by William Gosse Hay.

Fear of an alien environment: Between discovery and exoticism

Travellers, government officials, notables and emigrants flooded Great Britain with circumstantial descriptions of Australia and its non-native population. In order to gain any credibility and to be read at the time, Australian authors had to remain faithful to the literary template set by the imperial government, at the risk of being taken for epigones writing 'in the style of ...'.

It should be noted that the first Australian writers, whether they were English- or Australian-born, did not adopt an Australian viewpoint, but a British expatriate's perspective. Well-written British novels were quite rare except for those written by a few authors like Henry Savery, Marcus Clarke and Henry Kingsley. These writings used a rich vision-related vocabulary

**Low-angle shot of *For the Term of His Natural Life*
by Marcus Clarke**

For the Term of His Natural Life or *His Natural Life* (1874) is the nineteenth-century novel *par excellence* of the genre inspired by the convict system. The action takes place in the first half of that century (1827–1846), starting in England and ending in Australia. It tells the story of the tragic fate of Richard Devine, condemned for the term of his natural life for a crime he did not commit. He is deported to Tasmania to live in exile. In his new life, he changes his name to Rufus Dawes to protect a family secret. When he is accused of murder, he has to betray his mother's secret in order to free himself from his predicament. *For the Term of His Natural Life* recounts the tribulations of an unfortunate man who, from one misadventure to another, is unjustly sentenced to serving out his punishment at the penal settlements of Macquarie Harbour, Port Arthur and Norfolk Island. The reader sees Rufus evolve in a picaresque manner from one escape to the next in the middle of a sadistic, sordid world where corporal punishment, homosexual rape and even cannibalism are the fate of prisoners in the system. The protagonist ends up discovering the person responsible for the theft of which he was originally accused. By a cruel twist of fate, just when Rufus Dawes envisages a better life with his beloved Sylvia, who fled with him to Norfolk Island, their boat is caught in a storm and is wrecked, causing them to drown. In the first version, the hero suffers a less tragic end. He is the embodiment of the humanistic convictions held by the author, who was convinced that mankind could survive independent of the Divine.

This novel's Dickensian plot, based on too many coincidences, was severely criticised for its lack of realism, despite the entertaining quality of its briskly moving action. Marred by a melodramatic tone, it has, nevertheless, since its original publication in serial form (in the monthly *Australian Journal* from March 1871 to June 1872), been consistently successful, including musical and cinematic adaptation (a silent film in 1927, reconstructed in 1981; a musical in 2003 and a televised mini-series in 1982).

and were characterised by themes of exoticism linked to travel and discovery. Some productions, especially numerous poems of the time, were written in the romantic style.

Confronted with a new environment, novelists either did not attribute any charm to it and tended to emphasise its diabolic nature by means of hellish descriptions, or gave it a seductive, picturesque beauty that was completely artificial. It is true that, as a general rule, the gaze of the nineteenth-century European observer did not brighten when confronted with the uniformity and aridity of the Australian bush. Some were even disappointed that the animals could not be domesticated to alleviate the tedium of Australian life. It is obvious that this existential ennui stimulated the start of the picaresque adventure novel.

The picaresque tradition is continued with *Ralph Rashleigh* (1952), which was subtitled *The life of an exile* and supposedly written by the convict James Tucker. Both memoir and picaresque novel, it records the adventures of Rashleigh, a convict who finds himself involved in a gang of bushrangers and whose imprudence is reflected in his surname (rashly).

The colonial romance

Appropriated from a British tradition, the colonial romance is an avatar of the period, at the crossroads of the realist novel and romanticism. In short, the hero or heroine in search of an ideal encounters a path full of potential pitfalls. Published mainly in London, often in three-decker form, this literary subgenre was highly popular with women writers engaging lightly with the game of love and chance while being deeply interested in the question of origins. The British reader deliberately ignored the lack of credibility of these stories, filled with repetition to emphasise their documentary value. They were taken for touristic guides to Australia.

Henry Kingsley began the genre with *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*. It was later taken up by Rolf Boldrewood with

Robbery Under Arms and by Mrs Rosa Praed. From all the evidence, Henry Kingsley's perception was Eurocentric and phallogocentric. He depicted Australia as an El Dorado where his English characters looked to rebuild their fortunes, which they were able to enjoy once they returned to their native country. *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn* (1859) shows the influence of the Australian dream in the minds of the British. Like most novels of the period, it starts in an English county and takes a long time to arrive on Australian soil. The writer recounts the prosperous and happy life of foreigners in a land of plenty and promise. This idyllic vision of colonisation is seen in descriptions of the happiness derived from living the rustic life characterised by the daily rhythm of farm activities: raising cattle (which was at its height in the 1830s), shearing sheep, branding beasts and so on. Confrontation with Aboriginal groups and brigands – incarnations of evil – justified the colonisers determined to enjoy the fruits of their labour.

The expatriate English writer Rolf Boldrewood, whose real name was Thomas Browne, enjoyed great success with his legendary tale of the bush, *Robbery Under Arms* (1888)*. This marked the beginning of the bushranging novel. Like Boldrewood, Rosa Praed wrote in the tradition of the colonial romance begun by Henry Kingsley, while belonging chronologically to the nationalist literary stream. Born in Queensland and drawing on her own life experience, she evoked a woman's life and the world of the Australian farm in some forty novels published mainly between 1880 and 1916. *Policy and Passion* is her most popular work. *Paving the Way* (1893), a novel of colonial South Australia by Simpson Newland has proved to be an enduring success.

Fraught with naivety, these novels foreshadowed the realism used by the *Bulletin* writers and contributed to the rise of a national consciousness by highlighting the specific nature of Australian culture.

Close-up of *Robbery Under Arms* by Rolf Boldrewood

It is curious that Thomas Alexander Browne, 'Rolf Boldrewood', a former grazier who became a police magistrate in the gold mining town of Gulgong, and eventually goldfields commissioner, conceived this story within a pastoral setting at a time when Australia was emerging as essentially an urban nation. It was probably the hanging in 1880 of the well-known Australian Robin Hood, Ned Kelly, that provided the motive for writing *Robbery Under Arms* (1888) in the style of Sir Walter Scott. The story, full of romantic idealism, exemplifies the difficulty writers experienced in understanding the reality of the country.

Its narrator Dick Marston, son of a convict and guilty of organised crime, recounts from his prison cell his past exploits as a bushranger. Influenced by their ex-convict father, Dick and his brother join a gang led by Captain Starlight, a notorious criminal who eventually dies in a gunfight. Their initiation into crime begins in South Australia, where they sell a herd of cattle they had stolen in Queensland. Going from crime to arrest, interrupted with a short period of adventures in the goldfields, Dick's epic journey ends when he is involved in a shooting match which costs him his freedom. His downfall is however caused by a woman, Kate Morrison, who could not bear to see him with a rival, Grace Storefield. Kate takes her revenge by collaborating with the authorities, a step which hastens her husband's imprisonment. At first he is condemned to death; then his sentence is commuted to twelve years in prison, at the end of which he asks Grace to marry him.

The story was inspired by the life experiences of the most famous Australian bushrangers, such as Ben Hall, Frank Gardiner, John Gilbert and Daniel Morgan, who had become symbols of rebellion. By defying authority and the law, they won the heart of Australians who enjoyed the bushrangers' rebelling against the repressive system. The squatter, a pejorative term initially used to describe people who 'occupied a tract of land' and ran sheep and cattle 'obtained, generally, in very nefarious ways' (G.A. Wilkes, *A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms*), was the sworn enemy of the bushranger.

Feminine writing and feminism

It would seem that, ever from the birth of the Australian novel, a degree of gender equality existed, since the book published after *Quintus Servinton* was *Woman's Love* (1832) by Mary Leman Grimstone (who was born and died in the nineteenth century). Because this work had been finished in Hobart four years earlier, well before the publication of *Quintus Servinton*, it deserves to be recognised as the first novel written in Australia.

It is not necessary here to dwell on a self-published novel like *The Guardian* (1838) by Anna Maria Bunn, though it is worth noting that, despite their difficulty in finding publishers at this time, women felt a deep need to express themselves or to find in writing a way out from their often painful existence.

Mary Vidal published a novel with some Australian content, *The Cabramatta Store* (1850), and another *Bengala* (1860), but both were written in her native England where she had returned. In *Clara Morison* (1854)*, Catherine Helen Spence, a Scottish-born suffragette, recounted the tribulations of a determined and accomplished woman who chose her destiny rather than allowing herself to be submerged by life's circumstances.

Ada Cambridge, who began publishing her stories in 1875, sits between the colonial period and the next phase of Australian writing – having blended colonial romance with the concerns of female fiction. Author of twenty novels, she is also the first female Australian poet worthy of the title. Her reputation was affected for a long time because of her having specialised in romances, of the style written by Rosa Praed. Indisputably, her forte was her description of the Australian landscape. But her weakness lay in her banal plots that relied mainly on syrupy love stories. More recently, feminist criticism has recognised Cambridge's primary concerns, including the denunciation of the iniquitous treatment and servile conditions of Australian women in Victorian society. The most politically committed of her novels are: *A Marked Man* (1890), *The Three Miss Kings* (1891), *Not All in Vain* (1892) and *Materfamilias* (1898).