

**RACISM:**  
**The Australian Experience**

A STUDY OF RACE PREJUDICE IN AUSTRALIA

Edited by  
**F. S. STEVENS**

VOLUME 1  
**PREJUDICE AND XENOPHOBIA**

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## RACISM AND AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

H. O. McQueen

A marked variety of Australian Humour is the ill-treatment of Chinamen and the 'barracking' of afflicted persons. To have assaulted a Mongolian, stoned him, knocked him in the gutter, kicked him, and generally half-killed him, after probably having rifled his fruit cases, is the finest fun in the repertoire of the young Australian. It is so fine that it only has to be cleverly rendered in verse to greatly amuse the Old Australian, too.

—Bernard O'Dowd, 1897

It is over a decade since Bernard Smith<sup>1</sup> published his account of the change in European attitudes towards Australasia and its indigenous inhabitants. Partly through an examination of paintings and sketches, Smith demonstrated the replacement of a Rousseauian 'noble savage' by the harsh and degraded 'comic savage'. He thereby opened up the problems associated with the interpenetration of imperial expansion, racial notions and the creative arts. That this beginning has not been followed through into other areas such as fiction, poetry and film-making is indicated in the silence upon, or indeed the virtual denial of, the importance of racial themes in Australian life. In the brief space available here, it will be impossible to do more than point to some broad areas for research on the cultural responses to Australia's truly fateful meridian in the Anglo-Saxon-British-American-Empire sequence.

In his book, *Race and Racism*, Pierre L. van den Berghe identifies three main factors in the genesis of Western racism. Although he rightly rejects 'any simple, direct causal relationship', the impact of his analysis firmly established the consequence of economic exploitation in race prejudice. European settlement in Australia presented a conflict over land rights that was eventually resolved ideologically by the expulsion of the Aborigines from the human race and by the development of a *Herrenvolk* democracy in Australia. The physical confrontation on the expanding frontier became a stock-in-trade of nineteenth-century novelists dealing with Australia. As well as a bushfire, a flood and a lost child, there had to be an attack by Aborigines followed by a punitive expedition; Henry Kingsley's *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn* (1859) contains a typical example. Significantly, the 1928 film *History of White Australia* opens with just such an incident before proceeding to its main theme, the riots at *Lambling Flat*: the connection between fighting the blacks to gain the land and fighting the yellow hordes to retain it is quite explicit.

European penetration of the outback persisted well into the twentieth century, especially in the Northern Territory which is the setting for



two of Australia's most important race novels. Mrs. Aneas Gunn's *We of the Never-Never* was first published in 1908 and, according to H. M. Green, had sold over three hundred thousand copies by 1945. There is not an unkind word about the Aborigines in Mrs. Gunn's vocabulary. There is just unadulterated maternalism. The blacks (and the Chinese) are alternatively comic, sly, affectionate, loyal and useful—indeed somewhere between children and dogs whom the 'missus' learns to manage because she is genuinely fond of them. The hundreds of thousands of Australian children who read her book in school would not have been troubled by their country's treatment of its native people. She refers to killings and theft by the whites, but suggests that these occurred before the appearance of the Law. *We of the Never-Never* provided a popular ideological foundation for the official policies of protection and preservation. What else could one do with such pets?

Certainly Mrs. Gunns' readers would have learnt little of the situation chronicled in Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1937). The title of its first chapter, 'The Coming of the Dingoes', describes the arrival of the first whites and gives a good indication of Herbert's attitude and style. He is acutely aware of the frontier situation facing men 'so well equipped with lethal weapons and belief in the decency of their purpose as Anglo-Saxon builders of Empire'. There was little opportunity to develop an ideological gloss for the expropriation of these indigenes whose fierce resistance became the sufficient justification for their extermination. *Capricornia* makes it clear that race hatreds were immanent in the very act of settlement even if their articulation only appeared later. European invasion of Australia in 1788 brought its full complement of ideological reservists.

Armed invasions of Australia were later to acquire a different racial aspect and to produce their own literary genre of the Japanese horde sweeping down to rape our wives and eat our children. A good deal of this pre-1914 invasion literature appeared in *The Bulletin* and its monthly companion *Lone Hand*. C. H. Kirmess's novel *The Australian Crisis* (1909) was serialised in *The Bulletin* and the continuing message of this invasion literature is epitomised in its concluding sentence: '*Australia is the precious front buckle in the white girdle of power and progress encircling the globe*'. Poets such as Bernard O'Dowd and Arthur Adams wrote of the need 'To guard the future from exotic blight' and pleaded for '*One Hour—to Arm*' since:—

Along the frontier of our North

The Yellow lightning shudders forth;

Henry Lawson played Cassandra with Asian invasions threats as in '*The Old, Old Story*'—

Beware of the East, O Christian, for the sake of your fairest  
and best;

It is written, and written, remembered, *that the tide of invasion  
goes West.*

Australia's film industry was not idle, and, in 1913, Raymond Longford directed *Australia Calls* in which twenty thousand Japanese invade New South Wales while the populace are on the beach or at the races.<sup>2</sup>

With the fall of Singapore, Australia passed from being the 'FRONT BUCKLE' of the British Empire to become the launching pad for United States imperialism's military push against its Japanese rival. The dark forebodings of half-a-century were fulfilled when Asian hordes swept

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over New Guinea and bombed Darwin. In the midst of this race-war its literary precursors were not forgotten:—

That reddish veil o'er the face  
of nigh-hag East is drawn . . .  
Flames new disaster for the race?  
Or can it be the dawn?

'So wrote Bernard O'Dowd', said John Curtin. 'I see 1942 as a year in which we will know the answer.'

Examination of the impact of the war on racial attitudes has not begun but when it is, works such as Neville Shute's *A Town Like Alice* and Lawson Glassop's *The Rats in New Guinea*, as well as straight forward autobiographical accounts like Rohan Rivett's *Behind Bamboo* should occupy a deal of attention. In the Foreword to the 1955 edition of *The Naked Island*, Russell Braddon explains that 'It was written to tell the world what sort of people the Japanese can be. It was written to explain what they did during the war and what they might well do again'. By 1958 when a sequel, *End of a Hate*, appeared Braddon had modified his views:—

'Once I hated anyone who was Japanese simply because he came from Japan. Now I can no longer hate individuals. But I can still hate their culture . . . and I can still fear the logical outcome of their intense and fanatic nationalism . . .'

It will be necessary to trace out the evolution of this response up to where Kenneth Harrison could have *The Brave Japanese* published in 1966. Equally important will be an investigation of the ways in which racism has been subsumed into the legitimacy of anti-communism as in Vietnam.

Some indication of the resilience of racial imagery from the first Pacific war can be gauged from a recent anti-Vietnam poem in the Communist Party's paper *Tribune* (16 December 1970). The authoress compares the war against Japan with the war in Vietnam and supports the former because:—

. . . then a yellow dragon clawed  
The naked shoulders of our shores;

Apart from the general point, these lines are interesting for their revival of the Henry Lawson-Norman Lindsay imagery of Australian maidenhood under assault from bestial Asia. The preponderance of autobiographical over fictional accounts of Japanese prisoner-of-war camps results from the inability of Australian authors to create Japanese guards who are convincing characters. Either the guards lack all semblance of human status or they are seen as the universal soldier with a wife and kids at home, thus devoid of any Japanese content whatsoever.

Imperial chauvinism did not necessarily demand explicit denigration of non-Europeans. It could just as easily be expressed in the affirmation of the positive virtues of white, especially Anglo-Saxon, culture. There are traces of this in the music of Percy Grainger, that paradoxically Australian-cosmopolitan; for instance his *Warrior's* suite which Roger Covell finds suitable for a 'muscular' 'saga of particularly North European temperament'. Subsequent pride in what O'Dowd described as the 'coming Sun-God's Race' dominates the ballet *The Display*. In figurative drawings it is to be found in the work of Norman Lindsay and Hugh McCrae; Lindsay's cartoons often confronted Siegfried-style males and their fulsome virgins with the vile oriental. Naked Anzacs, like so many anti-



podean Hectors, peopled the canvasses of the war artists after 1915. In 1931, the art critic J. S. MacDonald declared in praise of Arthur Streeton: 'If we choose we can yet be the elect of the world, the last of the pastoralists, the thoroughbred Aryans in all their nobility... For we are not only a nation, but a race, and both occupy a particular territory and spring from a specific soil.'

The film, *Birth of White Australia* laid great stress on the British origins of White Australia and the importance of the British race. This was underlined even more in the official New South Wales documentary, *A Nation is Built* (1938) which celebrated the 150 years of British occupation and described Sydney as 'the second white city of the Empire'. The film opens by telling the audience that Australia is a new 'anglo-Saxon empire under the Southern Cross' and ends with the singing of 'God who made thee mighty'. Identification with the higher races thus proceeded in many forms: from a submergence within the Empire to the proclamation of Australia as the final bastion and/or noblest development of the race; from accepting a tradition dating back to Athens or even Wodin, to restricting their lineage to British squires. But whatever its characteristics, a privileged position for White Australia remained its foundation.

Because of its contributions of wool and gold, nineteenth-century Australia occupied an economically advantageous position in the world capitalist system from which the labouring classes benefited, since there was also a chronic labour shortage in the colonies.<sup>3</sup> There can be no doubting the importance of economic competition from coloureds as a factor contributing to the intensity of anti-Asian feeling in Australia. Yet to suppose that occasional attempts to lower wages by introducing Asians 'caused' racism in Australia, would be to misunderstand totally its historic experience. Rather it was an imperial vision of a British arcady on Austral's shores that inhibited employers from attempting to increase their share of the surplus value by indenturing Asians. Where the natural increase in surplus value was small, however, as in the sugar industry, they were obliged to introduce kanakas. Chinese did come for gold and sometimes stayed to work in the pastoral industry, which absorbed a good deal of capital in the 1870s and 1880s, so that there was some necessity to keep wages down.

The activities of the Chinamen who came in the gold rushes and stayed to become market-gardeners or bush-workers permeated much Australian culture. Henry Handel Richardson's *Australia Felix* (1917) reproduces the attitudes of the diggers in Victoria and takes her account into areas of psychological fear of Chinamen in small children. In the film *History of White Australia*, the Chinese are pictured as possessing every conceivable vice. The print held in the National Library has been put together from the various reels without editing, so that its chronology is entirely absent. The resultant surrealist montage only adds to the impact of the racism which is demonstrated as Chinamen proceed to wash in the drinking water, attack a white girl, rob tents and burn down the dance hall.

Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* (written 1897, published 1903) contains a number of derogatory remarks about Chinamen (and even more vicious comments on Aborigines) as well as a couple of long accounts of their nefarious exploits. Despite continuing references to 'Yellow agonies' and 'leprous Mongolians', Furphy treats the Chinese he encoun-

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ters with a degree of amused detachment, although he makes it clear that the rest of his company take a harsher line. Also set in the Riverina was Price Warung's 'The Last of the Wombat Barge' which appeared in *The Bulletin*, 20 December 1890. It deals with Captain Kingsley who employs a Chinese crew comprising of 'Ah Fats, Ah Leans and Moy Sins', and who becomes so wealthy from the money he saves on their wages that he takes a holiday to Melbourne where his appearance on the beach reveals that he has leprosy. In case the reader has missed the moral, Warung concludes that 'When a white man clutches poles, and ropes, and fenders after Chinese paws had slimed over them, what could he expect but that some of the slime would stick?'

This connection between leprosy and Chinese labour was made in 'Banjo' Paterson's *Travelling Down the Castlereagh*:

'We shear non-union here' says he. 'I call it scab', says I,  
I looked along the shearing-board before I turned to go,  
There was eight or ten dashed Chinamen a-shearing in a row,  
So its shift, boys shift! There wasn't the slightest doubt  
It's time to make a shift with the leprosy about.

In one of the earliest urban novels of Australian life, Louis Stone's *Jonah* (1911), the combination of economic competition and disease appears when we are told that one of the characters, Chook, views the Chinese Market-gardeners as 'the scum of the earth, less than human, taking the bread out of his mouth, selling cheaply because they lived like vermin...'

Chinamen were not perceived initially as low-wage workers, and only afterwards as dirty and diseased. From their arrival, they presented a total picture in which the parts complemented each other. One of these parts remains to be examined—sexual phobias and fantasies. The imbalance of the sexes in frontier Australia resulted in prostitution and homosexuality;<sup>4</sup> the alternative being 'Black Velvet', of which Herbert's *Capricornia* gives the most straightforward account:—

'Mark was trying to excuse himself for seeing beauty in a creature of a type he had been taught to look upon as a travesty of normal humanity.'

Eventually Mark chose a young Aborigine girl until 'he found (she) was with child. He sent her away, refusing to believe that the child was his...'

The ballad 'Sam Holt', which was first published in *The Bulletin* on 26 March 1881, gives a popular picture:—

Oh! don't you remember Black Alice, Sam Holt—  
Black Alice so dusky and dark—  
That Warrego gin with a straw through her nose,  
and teeth like a Moreton Bay shark;  
The villainous sheep-wash tobacco she smoked...

The psychological inhibitions which underlay the unsatisfactory nature of interracial sexual relations are presented in Katherine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929) where Hugh Watt destroys himself because of the revulsion he experiences after his liaison with Coonardoo.

The essentially furtive and harsh nature of these sexual encounters should be considered in examining the idealised conception of white women that arises in the literature of the outback and in the white males' fear that coloureds, both Aborigines and Chinese, had little in



their minds other than the rape of white women. It would be difficult to imagine a more explicit statement of the interplay of racial and sexual fantasies than Lawson's:—

I see the stricken city fall . . .  
The pure girl to the leper's kiss—  
God, give us faith, for Christ's own sake,  
To kill our womankind ere this.  
(‘To Be Amused’)

The rape scene in the film *Jedda* (1955) could remain uncensored because those involved were black, for whom such behaviour was natural rather than immoral. Indeed the animalism which rape evokes in the popular consciousness could well have made the sequence highly moralistic in its appeal.

With the beginning of imperialism's defeat in the first world war, there came a change of attitudes towards coloured people, who were refusing to be ignored or over-ruled. This penetrated into Australia and found expression in the novels of Prichard and Herbert as well as Vance Palmer's *The Man Hamilton* (1928). But there still has not been a fully successful presentation of a full-blood in the fiction of a white novelist. Eleanor Dark comes close with Bennelong in *The Timeless Land* (1944) but the circumstances which make this possible are indicative of the difficulties involved. Bennelong is an historical figure from whose life Mrs. Dark could draw; the novel is set in the earliest days of settlement when the ‘noble savage’ concept retained influence over the colony's rulers; moreover, this is Bennelong's time and place. The result is a slightly idealised figure whose fate is nonetheless sealed as these special conditions diminish.

Alf Dubbo in Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) is only incidentally an aborigine whose racial origins are used as another example of being an outsider. At no point does Alf become a whole man, because he is detached from his time and his place by White's ‘algebraic symbolism’. This puppet quality is equally apparent in Peter Mathers' riotously inventive *Trap* (1966).

For all his empathy with Aborigines, Donald Stuart's principal concern in *The Driven* (1961) and *Yarialie* (1962) is to show the virtues of racial mixing:—

‘... a generation of people with their roots in the country, people who have all the forward-thrusting attributes of the European and the wise love of the country the old blackfellow always had ... they'll be the real people of the Nor-West.’

By accepting this as his final solution to racial conflict, Stuart denies himself the chance of writing of Aborigines as equal yet different human beings. He has had to avoid this literary problem because its resolution in Australian social practice remains remote.<sup>5</sup>

No matter how inadequate one considers the achievements of Australian novelists, their record of dealing with the Aborigine as an important theme in Australian life is in every way more honourable than that of the historians who, as Professor Stanner pointed out in *After the Dreaming*, have largely ignored them. Significantly, it has been that most literary of historians, Manning Clark, who has done most to restore the Aborigines to their place in the post-1788 history of Australia.

Another emergence of stories through Aboriginal *Cat Falling*, whom are Guinea, th in their o unwise th Australian. Some ind obtained fr

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Another feature of the era of imperialist defeat has been the emergence of Aboriginal authors. The first of these needed to tell their stories through the skill of Europeans, as in Douglas Lockwood's *I the Aboriginal* (1962). More recently there have been Colin Johnston's *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) and Kath Walker's verse (1964 and 1966); both of whom are only part-Aboriginal. Unlike the people of Papua and New Guinea, the Australian indigenes have still not been permitted to speak in their own voice, to create their own written culture. It would be unwise therefore to be unduly optimistic about the state of racism in Australian culture in both senses of the word—the arts and the life-style. Some indication of the subtler persistence of racist notions can be obtained from an examination of two post-1950 examples.

As the crowning achievement of Australia's film making, *Jedda* demands detailed analysis. Despite the initial intrusiveness of a narrator, which is foreign to the dictates of a visual medium, *Jedda* quickly encompasses this distraction as it unfolds its genuinely Aristotelean dimensions. The station blacks provide an inarticulate chorus who exert their strength through the rival life-style they offer. To the European audience they are often figures of disgust and fun: one fat old gin puts a clean dress on over a dirty one. Jedda's white foster parents represent opposing views on the best treatment for the Aborigines. The wife believes that they *ought* to be changed—civilised—for their own good and presents a typically do-gooder mentality. The husband disagrees and, within the range of views which the film offers, has the best outlook, as he accepts the validity of tribal life, encourages walk-about to retain their pride of race and deprecates the fringe-dwellers.

Throughout the film, Jedda is pictured as innately non-white in her emotions and desires. When she rejects shoes and schooling, this is attributed to her 'heart being with her own people' rather than to the cross-cultural refusal of children to be restricted. In other words, a normal human attribute is invested with special racial connotations. She is taught the piano but as she plays 'In An English Country Garden', the primitive urges of her subconscious well up until the delicate melody has been transposed into a raucous tribal chant.

Enter Prometheus. A superb wild fella comes to the station. Jedda is fascinated by his physical and psychological power and he eventually sings her to his fire. But her white upbringing won't permit her to run away with him, so he takes her by force. There is no taboo—white, black or natural—that he will not break. He is the complete realisation of Camus's definition of 'man' as that force who denies Gods and defies dictators. He has escaped from prison in Darwin where he was being held for murder; armed only with a small knife he kills a crocodile; finally he defies his tribal elders for which he is sung to death. At first he rejects this as blackfellas' rubbish, but eventually succumbs and falls to his death dragging Jedda with him. The film ends with the narrator suggesting that her death was a just punishment for attempting to go against her black nature: the inelectable fate of the Greeks has become racial. Yet within this racist context, Robert Tudawali, who played the wild fella, has created the only genuine Aboriginal human being in the entire artistic output of Australia.

Popular fiction, such as the detective novels of Arthur Upfield, can reveal two areas of information. They provide positive information of

what racial ideas were receiving re-inforcement through mass culture; and negatively they show which ideas were inoffensive, that is, constituted the conventional wisdom on race. Upfield's *The Will of the Tribe* (1962) fulfils both these criteria. The half-caste Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte is described as 'the man who could think like an Aborigine and reason like a white man'. He says of himself, 'I am only half-black, and yet I too have felt the pull towards my mother's race. It's tremendously powerful, as its effects on so many promising Aborigine scholars witness.' The pre-human implications of this are spelt out when Bony says to a full-blood—'An affinity with the animal. You all have that. Even I.'

Australia's arts no longer proclaim doctrines of race-war and there are instances of real insight and some indication of expression by Aborigines themselves. But the gaps remain the dominant aspects: neither Aborigine nor European has been able to write of an Aborigine in a way that does not demean his racial integrity or diminish his humanity. To this extent, literature remains a barometer of Australian society.

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