

~~Chapter 3~~

## 4 FROM MATESHIP TO MISANTHROPY

Katharine Susannah Prichard, Herbert

Henry Handel Richardson, Xavier

The <sup>first</sup> ~~early~~ years of the twentieth century saw the birth of the Commonwealth of Australia and the publication of Henry Lawson's Joe Wilson and His Mates (1901) and Joseph Furphy's Such is Life (1903).

~~All~~ These events represent a kind of slender triumph of hope over experience, of faith in man over the harsh facts of existence - flood, drought and depression. Not so a book published about the same time - Barbara Baynton's Bush Studies (1902), which contains some of the starkest accounts ever written of the Australian bush and its effects on the people who lived in it. Other books published up to the end of the great war indicate the various ways in which Australians' ideas of themselves were developing. Mrs. Aeneas Gunn's We of the Never Never (1908) and Katherine Susannah Prichard's The Pioneers (1915) suggest both the sentimental idealisation of rural life and the development of a living relationship with the land which provide themes for such later novelists as Miles Franklin, Frank Dalby Davison and Prichard herself. Louis Stone's Jonah (1911) <sup>looks at</sup> ~~treats of~~ city life and the destruction of personality by material ambition - themes to be dealt with later by writers like Frank Hardy and Dal Stevens. Norman Lindsay's A Curate in Bohemia (1913) introduces the vitalist theme of the vigorous pursuit of the delights of the flesh. But perhaps the most important novel to strike out in a new

direction is Henry Handel Richardson's Australia Felix, which appeared in 1917,<sup>1</sup> and was to become the first volume of her trilogy, The Fortunes of Richard Mahony.

The story of Richard Mahony shows a man being destroyed by a combination of his own weakness and the malignancy of Australian Landscape and society. The English chapters show us that Mahony probably would have brought disaster on himself anywhere, but his own story is parallel to those of the chemist Tangye; the Glendinnings, father, son and wife; and John Turnham, each of whom is destroyed in his own way. <sup>The</sup> ~~This~~ destructive potency of the land itself is more than the evil of Clarke's System, which is after all man-made, even if it comes to represent a more generalised<sup>2</sup> force. The Fortunes of Richard Mahony shows man's resistance to an implacably hostile fate, which is at the very centre of things as they are in this continent. But whereas our attention in Richard Mahony is equally directed to evil fate and man's endurance, in Barbara Baynton's work our attention is concentrated almost entirely on the intrinsic evil of the environment.<sup>2</sup> ←

(NP) The most powerful of <sup>her</sup> ~~Barbara Baynton's~~ stories, "Scrammy 'And," epitomises<sup>2</sup> the rest, which are in a sense merely developments of the same

<sup>1</sup> Publication dates taken from Grahame Johnston, Annals of Australian Literature, London, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Baynton, Bush Studies, second edition, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965. First published, London, 1902.

idea. Baynton shares <sup>with Lawson</sup> the view of the bush as a terrifying environment, which is a constant background to <sup>his</sup> Lawson's stories, and which appears explicitly in such stories as "Brighten's Sister-in-Law" and "Water Them Geraniums." There is in Baynton's work, however, no refuge in humanity, for the bush isolates its inhabitants and leaves them defenceless against the violent, mad and cruel men whom it hides. Lawson hints at this in "The Drover's Wife," but his general tone is that humanity means comfort against the cruelties of nature and of time. In Baynton's story "The Chosen Vessel",<sup>3</sup> however, the coming of the stranger means tragedy. In "Scrammy 'And" the lurking threat is even more terrifying because it is known to the old man. Both the old shepherd and Scrammy 'And are creatures of the bush, both crazed by the years of isolation, both monomaniacally greedy to possess the shepherd's little hoard of gold. The shepherd holds our sympathy over his assailant because of his human attachment to ~~the mistress of the property~~ <sup>his master's</sup> ~~his mistress~~ <sup>young wife,</sup> and even more because of the link between him and his dog, which preserves an element of warmth and normality in the terrifying vastness of the bush. Yet this very element of normality is isolated by the events of the story, so that finally it is reduced to the broken-ribbed dog keeping the blowflies from his dead master. This is the final symbol of horror which the returning settler finds, and from which he shields his wife. Her return with her baby

<sup>3</sup>ib., pp. 72-92.  
<sup>4</sup>ib., pp. 132-40.

adds its own dimension of despair to the death of their shepherd, which has been brought about by the absence of the young couple from their selection so that their child can be born in safe surroundings. In "The Chosen Vessel" religious faith, and in "Scrammy 'And" love, lead to terror and death.

Even the two humorous stories in Baynton's collection breathe the same uncompanionable spirit. In "Bush Church"<sup>5</sup> the selectors and their families are united in a rather crude fellowship against the ineffectual parson. The humor<sup>u</sup> is heavy-handed, and includes such references as that to Polly - presumably a horse - being driven to death and eaten by wild pigs. "Billy Skywonkie"<sup>6</sup> is even grimmer. The picture of unrelenting heat, blasphemous and wretched bushmen, a vicious shanty and a loveless homestead is in keeping with the story of a bewildered and frightened woman who is rejected from her post as housekeeper because she is half Chinese. These stories differ from the others not so much because they are amusing<sup>3</sup> as because they deal with large numbers of people, rather than with a single person battling with the threatening bush. They are also the only two stories set in daylight. In each there is the same underlying savagery as in the other stories, but<sup>it is</sup> expressed ~~in these~~ through the people rather than through the lonely bush and its isolated human instruments. Yet in both stories it is clear that the people are what they are because of the land they live in and <sup>represent</sup> ~~express~~.

<sup>5</sup>ib., pp. 110-131.

<sup>6</sup>ib., pp. 93-109.

Baynton's stories embody a spirit of evil in the same way we have seen in the work of Clark.<sup>e</sup> But whereas in His Natural Life the association of ~~evil~~ with the convict system at least implied that ~~it~~<sup>the evil is</sup> was human in origin, ~~the evil~~<sup>it</sup> in Baynton's stories seems to arise from the nature of the land itself. In this it is like the horror which emanates from the loneliness of the bush in Lawson, but while in Lawson the people fight, however ineffectually, against their fate, in Baynton the evil has made men instruments of itself. The contrast with Furphy is more marked. No books more dissimilar in tone could be found than Bush Studies and Such is Life. Although the latter does have its elements of horror, as in the death of the swagman and the consequent death of Mary O'Halloran, these are set against the strength of human companionship and compassion which they arouse. In Baynton, the only quality which is set against the evil is the continuation of life, symbolised<sup>z</sup> in "Scrammy 'And" by the loyalty of the dog and the birth of the child. Arthur Phillips has suggested that this sombre vision in Baynton's stories arises from "the guilty sense that man has forced his will upon the earth without the hallowing of ritual," and that in this respect Baynton is ~~adumbrating~~<sup>foreshadowing</sup> Patrick White.<sup>31</sup> As Phillips suggests, the dream of what the land should have held has faded, and in its place all that is left is contempt and despair for the men it has moulded. This goes far beyond the mere sense of defeat in Lawson or Furphy.

<sup>7</sup>A.A. Phillips, The Australian Tradition, studies in a colonial culture, second edition (revised), Melbourne, 1966, p.81.

This sense of the land taking its own revenge to defeat the dream is invoked at the start of The Fortunes of Richard Mahony,<sup>8</sup> where the author, Henry Handel Richardson, writes of the land near Ballarat "lying stretched like some primeval monster in the sun, her breasts freely bared, ... [watching,] with a malignant eye, the efforts made by these puny mortals to tear their lips away." (p. 11). It is interesting to contrast this with the way Katherine Susannah Prichard sets her story in Black Opal,<sup>9</sup> which was written about the same time.<sup>10</sup> Although the opal-fields are set in some of Australia's most barren country, Prichard's imagery is that of the "coolebah", whose leaves "were bronze and gold in the sunshine", and of the song of the white-tail in its branches. (p. 9). A similar contrast emerges from the ways the two authors handle ordinary people. Mahony's story is marked by his distaste for the crowd about him, a distaste which isolates him and thus contributes to his eventual tragedy. But this distaste would seem to be shared by the author herself. Although she seems to have little time, for example, for the gold commissioner and his lackeys, whose licence hunt in Chapter I is described from the point of view of the diggers, there is little more sympathy for the mob passions of the public meeting in Chapter II, from

<sup>8</sup> London, 1930. First published in separate volumes, London, 1917, 1925, 1929.

<sup>9</sup> Sydney, 1946. First published, London, 1921.

<sup>10</sup> An author's note opposite the title page in the Sydney edition says that it was written in 1918.

which Mahony finally stalks out in disgust while the diggers greet a reference to authority with "a general howl of execration" (p. 25).

Richardson's attitude to this series of events, which culminates in the Eureka Stockade, is probably summed up in old Ocock's remark: (U) "A pack o' Tipperary boys spoilin' for a fight ... An' yet, blow me it I wouldn't 'a bin glad if one o' my two 'ad 'ad spunk enough to join 'em (U) (p. 98). There is here sympathy for the rebels as individuals, but not for their cause, and certainly not for people in the mass. On the other hand, Prichard's story is set moving by the opposition between the mateship of the gougers and the activities of the "rats" and other outsiders who break this code themselves and threaten to break it down even among the true men of the Ridge. The author's sympathy in this conflict is unequivocally with the miners who stand together.

Even the deaths with which the two novels open point up the contrast between their author's attitudes. The death at the start of Australia Felix is mentioned in the first sentence, in ironic contrast to the title. It is the death of an almost anonymous man, known only by his nickname of "Young Bill." The death is a virtually pointless incidental to the search for gold, an unobserved example of the land's vengeance, and it scarcely affects the activity of anyone else on the field except Bill's mate, Long Jim, for whom it is fortune's final blow. In Jim's reflections of how he met Bill and how they fared together, Bill is given enough character to make <sup>us</sup> ~~us~~ appreciate that the cave-in killed a person, not just a cipher, but we are told no more of his life than is necessary to make this

point. We learn more of Jim himself, whose continuing but destitute life, exiled from family and familiar village, is perhaps a greater betrayal of hope than Bill's death (pp. 5-7). By this opening, Richardson not only characterises<sup>z</sup> the cruelty of the land but also prepares us for a story in which men are exiled equally from the comfort of their past and from their aspirations for the future. Long Jim, destroyed both financially and spiritually by the land to which he has looked for his fortune, symbolises<sup>z</sup> the same fate which awaits his benefactor, Mahony himself.

On the other hand, the death which starts the action of Black Opal is subordinated to the description of the mourners, whose respects to the dead symbolise<sup>z</sup> the comfort which, through their companionship, they render to the living. The physical death of the woman is not treated in detail, and her passing is soon forgotten by the little community (p. 10), but we are told most emphatically of her last command, which transfers the obligation for her daughter's care from her shiftless husband to another miner, and thus provides motivation for the continuing action (p. 8). This command is later explained as the mother's desire for Sophie "to grow up on the Ridge and to realise all the potentialities of real and deep happiness were there" (p. 24). It is this belief in the possibility of deep happiness arising from a working relationship with the land and the people who work with it which <sup>inspires</sup> informs Prichard's work and provides the basis for a faith in the future of the country which is far different from the desperate hopes of Lawson or the ironic aspirations of Furphy.

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Richardson's novel differs utterly from Prichard's in its social ambience. Whereas the characters in Prichard's novels, at least until her disastrously unsuccessful Subtle Flame,<sup>7</sup> ~~it~~ are largely men who work with their hands, Richardson's world is that of the middle classes who, in their struggle to achieve affluence, had neither time nor thought to spare for those of their contemporaries who failed. They might help them by active charity, as <sup>Mahony</sup> Mary ~~helped~~ her sister-in-law and the brood of children Ned <sup>s</sup> sired but failed <sup>s</sup> to support, but Ned and his wife are significantly omitted from entertainments at their wealthy relatives' establishment (p. 316). Ned and Purdy virtually drop out of the story during their years of misfortune, and when Mahony's final crash comes Mary is conscious that, while ties of gratitude may enable her to call on particular individuals for help, she is no longer a member of their society (pp. 946-7), even if on her visit to Melbourne her friends ignore this fact for the time and accept her in her old role (p. 957). The Mahonys, by reason of their character and upbringing, belong only within this world, and share its values and prejudices, although not its manners. Their sympathies are strictly limited by their station in life, so that Tangye's misanthropy (pp. 304-9) and Miss Julia's independence (pp. 534-5) are alike offensive.

The society of Richardson's novel is characterised<sup>2</sup> by a "sense of uncertainty" (p. 540) which, rather than drawing men together, isolates each in his individual pursuit of fortune. ~~It~~ <sup>This sense</sup> is exemplified in the novel by Devine, formerly the Mahonys' market gardener, who, apparently through

pure good chance (p. 281), attains great fortune and high office. Its values are typified by John Turnham who attains the same sort of wealth and power through hard effort, before <sup>a</sup>the chance of illness strikes him down in his prime. Turnham is a self-made man who scorns the gentility and learning of the old country and insists that the members of his own family learn sometimes to put their shoulders to the wheel (p. 79). This attitude is later to cost him his only son, who disappears off to sea, and <sup>40</sup>leave John asking of his life's endeavours "cui bono?" (p. 526). John's life is built on the assumption that man can succeed in anything he sets his mind to, and that the colony in particular provides an opportunity for any man of determination to build his fortune in defiance of nature - human or wider - which exists only to be coerced and improved. (p. 115). But the culmination of Turnham's career leads us to question the strictly secular and individual will on which it is based. His premature death denies him his knighthood, his son and heir has already been driven from home by Turnham's lack of understanding, his daughters and fortune are alienated by his last infatuation and marriage. Yet in his defiant end as an unrelenting atheist asking no pardons of life he comes close to providing his own justification. The reader shares Mahony's own feeling, "Well done, John ... well done!" (p. 649).

Against our admiration for the robust and wilful individual who has profited <sup>t</sup>from the rape of this virgin continent, however, we have to set the picture Tangye has given us of these individuals in mass.

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The modern sort, the sort that gets on in this country, is a prime hand at cuttin' his coat to suit his cloth; for all that the stop-at-homes, like the writer o' that line and other ancients, prate about the Ethiopian's hide or the leopard and his spots ... Yes, doctor, there's only one breed that flourishes, and you don't need me to tell you which it is. Here they lie ... dreamin' o' their money-bags, and their dividends, and their profits, and how they'll diddle and swindle one another afresh, as soon as the sun gets up tomorrow. Harder 'n nails they are, and as sharp as needles. You ask me why I do my walkin' out in the night-time? It's so's to avoid the sight o' their mean little eyes, and their greedy, graspin' faces. (pp. 305-6)

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This description of the prosperous colonists in the mass could also be taken to apply specifically to Henry Ocock. Henry first sets Mahony on the path to fortune, and it is to him that Mary turns at the end of the novel, first to find her a post, and later to rescue Richard from the asylum. Yet Henry agrees to seek Richard's release only after <sup>r</sup>May rounds on him and points out to him the hear<sup>t</sup>lessness, cruelty and egoism which have been built into his career at the <sup>a</sup>scrifice of Agnes, his wife (pp. 965-6). This is the same view of Ocock which Richard has held much earlier, when he has seen that "the obligation which bore on your ordinary mortal - a sense of honesty, of responsibility to one's fellows, the soft pull of domestic ties - did not trouble Ocock " (p. 367).

Ocock has the qualities needed for success in this country, but Richardson constantly reminds us of the human cost of this success. Mahony's insight into Ocock's character is prompted by his memory of his first involvement with the lawyer, who saved Richard's solvency by winning a court case at the cost of the plaintiff's last hopes. Not justice, but superior wit won a case which had the plaintiff "wincing and flushing in the

witness-box" and sent him home broken-heartedly to slit the gizzards of his pet rabbits, and left him "A poor old derelict - the amen to a life which, like most lives, had once been flush with promise " (p. 117). A trial is to play a significant part also in Mahony's collapse (pp. 871-86). The pattern continues whereby success and failure are dealt as by blind chance, and yet success for one means disaster for another.

Yet Richardson is not concerned solely with the material fortunes of her characters. Just as Mary obtains a sort of triumph even in the poverty of the book's last chapters, so we twice go behind the facade of Ocock's worldly success to glimpse the finer man who has been <sup>all</sup> ~~at~~ but destroyed by the way he has conducted his ruthless climb to power. <sup>occasions</sup> The first of these <sup>is</sup> when Mary visits him in Ballarat, and he opens his heart about his wife (pp. 561-2). The second is when she revives these memories to shame him into helping her husband (pp. 965-6). On the other hand, people like Sir Jake and Lady Devine retain their natural kindness despite their rise in status, although even here we find that the servants have to pay the price for Lady Devine's social pretensions (p. 516).

Despite these slight variations, the underlying pattern of the book is clear. Only the coarse and the ruthless succeed in this savage land. The rigours of the country weed out the unfit and create a society which is in many ways healthier and more exciting than the stuffy gentility and false pride we see in the English chapters of the second book of the trilogy, The Way Home. There is, however, no room in this society for the finer qualities of civilisation<sup>Z</sup>. It is characterised<sup>Z</sup> by the material display of the

squattocracy, by the "urbane and unworldly", "non-progressive, anti-modern" intellectual life which revolves around the bishop, who is later to prove himself a pharisee who prefers not to see rather than to be disturbed, and by the legal luminaries with their "keen, ugly faces and scathingly witty tongues". It is a society where "fortunes were still notoriously precarious", and it is characterised<sup>7</sup> by an uncertainty that "had bitten too deep ever to be got out of the blood" (p. 540). Within this society Mahony is free to follow his intellectually shallow interest in spiritualism, but this activity, like those followed by his contemporaries, does little more than conceal from its followers the fact that their fortunes are all rooted in the commerce and industry which are followed with such success by men like Ocock and Turnham. Mahony not only forgets the ambiguous beginnings of his prosperity, but allows himself to become absorbed in his artificial pursuits and inner life until he loses control of his destiny. In pursuing the desires of his mind for higher activity, he forgets his human judgment, is talked by Purdy into committing his fortunes to the care of a rég<sup>o</sup>ue (pp. 672-5), and is ruined.

Yet this fate has waited for Mahony from the first pages of the novel. The land has no tolerance for one with his thin-skinned pride and aloofness. Success demands that a man absorb himself in the country, even at the cost of his essential self. Purdy does this, until at his marriage, engineered by Mary, he appears in a "check the squares of which could have been counted from across the road," "obese, loose-mouthed, with an eye grown shifty from over-reaching his fellow men" (p. 634). Yet Purdy had been

Richard's <sup>0</sup>eldest friend, they had shared childhood and youth, and, if different in disposition, had seemed united in breeding. Purdy, however, coarsened and vulgarised <sup>2</sup>by the colony, as well as causing the misplacement of Mahony's fortunes, is destined to gain control over Tilly's money (p. 889), and finally goads Richard towards the verge of his mental collapse (p. 910). Significantly, Purdy is the prosecutor in Richard's courtroom dream in Barambogie (p. 872). His very unpleasantness is the strength ~~to succeed~~ <sup>enable him to and which</sup> which accuses Richard of failure. ~~On the other hand,~~ Richard constantly retreats further into himself, away from the spiritual buffeting of the land, until, like Tangye in the first book, or Young Bill of the Proem <sup>1</sup>with "his lily-white hands and finicky speech" (p. 8), who is nevertheless crushed to death <sup>1</sup>/ Mahony too is destroyed.

The Fortunes of Richard Mahony is, of course, much more than an emigrant novel chronicling the way the land destroys its colonists. It is a study in pride, and a psychological case-study of developing insanity. Kenneth Stewart sees this as its integrating theme. <sup>8</sup> Stewart argues that as the actual circumstances of life become more oppressive Mahony becomes increasingly uncontrolled in his pursuit of a higher and more meaningful life. This pursuit starts with spiritualism and finishes with insanity. Vincent Buckley also suggests that the novel's strength is its account of Mahony's withdrawal from reality and psychic destruction in the

11 'Their Road to Life: a note on Richard Mahony and Walter Richardson,' Meanjin Quarterly, Vol. XXIX, No. 4, 1970, 505-8.

last volume, although he also duly notes the importance of the destructive social and natural environment.<sup>12 9</sup>

Jennifer Dallimore suggests that the themes of the land's harshness and Mahony's collapse 'exist uneasily together, and they give rise to what is perhaps its most important pre-occupation - the question of suffering and the very meaning of life itself.<sup>13 10</sup> She suggests that the shifting emphases of the novel and the largeness of the questions raised leave us with only a confused recognition of the issues involved. On the other hand, Dorothy Green sees in the very conflict between Richard's and Mary's attitudes the philosophical conflict which is at the centre of the novel.<sup>14 11</sup> Mahony represents the desire for change, symbolised<sup>15 12</sup> by the sea, and Mary the desire for the permanence of the land. The issue is resolved only with Mahony's burial beneath the earth within sound of the sea. Green has also argued that the religious and philosophical questions raised in the second book of the trilogy, The Way Home, form a foundation for the philosophical structure of the book.<sup>12</sup> Its real topic, according to

<sup>12</sup> Vincent Buckley Henry Handel Richardson, Melbourne, 1962 second edition, 1970, pp. 36, 38.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Fortunes of Richard Mahony' in Graham Johnston (ed.) Australian Literary Criticism, p. 148

<sup>14</sup> 'The Pilgrim Soul: the Philosophical Structure of The Fortunes of Richard Mahony,' Meanjin Quarterly, Vol. XXVIII, No. 3, 1969, 328-37.

<sup>15</sup> 'Walter Lindesay Richardson: the Man, the Portrait and the Artist,' Meanjin Quarterly, Vol. XXIX, No. 1, 1970, 5-20.

Green, is not the scenery, but the "search for an answer to the riddle of existence." Green argues strongly that the novel can no longer be viewed in terms of the collapse of a personality through the agency of a tragic flaw.

The existence of these varying themes within the novel, however, does not in my opinion detract from the central importance of the land. The novel is one of defeat, and the fact that Mahony's prototype, Dr. Walter Richardson, was probably suffering from syphilis which today could be cured by means of penicillin does not detract from the hero<sup>10m</sup> with which Mahony accepts his fate in the last book.<sup>13</sup> Nor does the effectiveness of the concentrated interest of the last book imply that the earlier ones are diffuse. What finally happens to Mahony has happened to others earlier, and stands in contrast to the fortunes of such characters as Ned and Purdy. The intricate family chronicles of marriages and births which occupy so much of the novelist's, and Mary's, time take their part in the total structure as part of the rising fortunes and proliferating prosperity which characterise<sup>z</sup> the middle sections of the book, and are counterpointed by Mahony's recurring restlessness and John Turnham's death. They also provide the milieu in which Mary develops as a person and as a character in the novel. It is through her absorption in these affairs, which Mahony finds distracting and irritating, that she develops her independence from

<sup>16</sup> see Alan Stoller and R.H. Emmerson, 'The Fortunes of Walter Lindesay Richardson,' Mearjin Quarterly, Vol. XXIV, No. 1, 1970, 21-33.  
cf. Fortunes, pp. 881-884



her husband and loses the <sup>faint-heartedness</sup> ~~pusillanimity~~, although not the sentimentality, which characterises her in the first book. It is also true that, even if Tangye's diagnosis of Mahony's restlessness as inherent, and not the product of one country or society, is accurate (p. 305), ~~that~~ it is largely within the Australian environment that his restlessness is exercised, and that it is here that the fortunes are made and lost which send him back and forth across the globe.<sup>14</sup> If he has a home, it is here, as he discovers, ironically, in the second book, <sup>in Australia</sup> ~~More~~over, even if his restlessness, alienation from reality and final breakdown are physical rather than psychological in origin, Richardson presents them in the novel as a developing response to the environment. There are suggestions in the last book that it is a clinical illness which is driving him towards insanity,<sup>15</sup> but his reactions are constantly to the land and its people. In Barambogie towards the end of the novel, when Mary has left him alone and the practice withers (pp. 799, 810-5, 820-4), or when he lashes the horse in a furious reaction against the unbearable fact of existing in

~~There is an irony behind Tangye's advice to Mahony of which the chemist himself is unaware. He quotes the phrase 'Coelum, non animum, mutant, qui trans mare currunt' (Men change the sky, not their spirit, when they flee across the sea), as a diagnosis of Mahony's troubles, but the interpretation he gives is that they would both have been better never to have left home, as they cannot fit in with the ways of the new country. He advises Mahony to get away as soon as he can. The rest of the novel demonstrates, however, that Mahony's restless spirit will destroy him wherever he is. However, this does not alter the fact of the particular destructiveness of Australia, which finds a particularly ready victim in Mahony.~~

<sup>18</sup> e.g. pp. 880, 892, 897, 903.

time (pp. 852-4), just as when he collapses physically for the first time in Ballarat (p. 347), the author emphasise<sup>2</sup>s the unbearable heat of the Australian summer. Whatever one sees as the cause of Mahony's illness, its manifestation is portrayed as the revenge of the country.

Nor is it only in the last book that a strong thematic interest determines the structure. The same concerns bind together the <sup>apparently</sup> ~~apparently~~ random sequences of events much earlier in the novel. In Australia Felix, we see Mahony in his "palmy days" when the practice has become well-established and there are "No slack seasons for him now." (p. 321). Tangye's warning seems to be forgotten, yet the very thought of his prosperity seems to plunge him into gloom as he thinks of the work this entails. At this stage he meets an older doctor, Wakefield, who is going from a practice which met an untimely end in Warrnambool to an uncertain up-country practice at Walwala. This "pleasant-spoken man and intelligent - though with a somewhat down-at-heel look" (p. 322) is another of those foreshadowing<sup>s of</sup> ~~of~~ Mahoney's own eventual fate. But Mary discourages his idea of taking Wakefield on as an assistant, and he is left to cope alone with the demands made on him. Again his reflections on the popularity which has led to his success lead him to reflect on his hatred of the land and its people, and to believe that "to turn his back for ever, on place and people, would make him the happiest of mortals." (p. 325). This mood undermines the talk of his increasing prosperity and new grandeur, and counter<sup>†</sup> points his meeting with John Turnham in the same chapter. Turnham embodies the successful man who has accepted and worked with the ways of

the country, but while John goes on working at his documents in the railway carriage, Mahony merely gazes out the window at the flat, treeless country ... trapstones and clumps of tussock grass ... a solitary she-oak, most doleful of trees ... long, bare, red roads, straight as ruled lines, [which] ran back into the heart of the burnt-up, faded country " (pp. 328-9). It is impossible to separate Mahony's distaste for the people and his way of life from his dislike of the whole harsh country.

This outline of Mahony's simultaneously increasing prosperity and gloom is followed by the ~~similar~~ counterpointing of the glittering ball and Purdy's attempt to embrace Mary, which leads to the first real breach between Henry and Mary and the destruction of Richard's <sup>0</sup>eldest friendship. But even the preparations for the ball include suggestions of discord and worse. Richard has brought Mary the wrong coloured accessories, a trivial enough domestic misunderstanding, but indicative of a lack of communication and diverging preoccupations. This mishap, however, takes Mary to Agnes Glendinning, now Agnes Ocock. Here she encounters the casual indications of Henry's domination over Agnes, which is eventually to lead to her death in another continent; and <sup>Mary</sup>is reminded of the double tragedy which has already destroyed Agnes's first husband, the master of Dandaloo, in a Melbourne lunatic asylum, and their son in an inebriate's home (pp. 330-1). Again the superficial indications of success are undercut by hints of tragedy. The land takes its revenge.

Richard's breach with Purdy leads directly to his meditations on his own incapacity for friendship, and on the blight which the country's habit of hospitality brings to human affairs - for he blames <sup>on</sup> Mary's indiscriminate hospitality ~~for~~ (Purdy's offence.) He then reflects on his own physical collapse, which is a culmination of his own feverish thoughts, the heat of the land, and the pressure which does not leave him undisturbed even in the midst of his own domestic upheavals (pp. 343-347). Ironically, Mahoney's trouble gives Mary evidence, on this as on subsequent occasions, of the actual strength of his friends' support, but this is not something he is ever able to realise <sup>2</sup> or accept (p. 348). More seriously, this quarrel and illness marks the end of the mutual confidence between Richard and Mary (pp. 349-52). While this frees her to develop independently that strength which she is to need in the end, it also determines Mahony's journey into isolation. While Mary will be able to manage him in small things, and support him in his moments of collapse, he will henceforth continue to walk on his own. The independent spirit we have already seen has become confirmed as the central quality of his life, and the possibility of husband and wife growing towards a complementary relationship has vanished.

Mahony's return to health is followed by a second blighting of John Turnham's hopes with the death of Jinny and the continuing rebellion of his son (pp. 358-60). The first act we see Mahony performing, however, is in the following chapter, when he is forced to tell Henry Ocock of the canker which lies at the roots of <sup>Ocock's</sup> ~~his~~ contentment (p. 362). The discovery

of Agnes' drinking is counterpointed against a natural scene of perfect peace and natural harmony (p. 361). It is <sup>as</sup> if John Turnham's aspirations of controlling nature have been realised <sup>z</sup>, but once again the price has been paid in human suffering. The will which has enabled Henry Ocock to make his way is destroying his wife. But Mahony's revelation of this truth has ultimately disastrous consequences for himself. It leads to a breach between him and the lawyer who has so far managed his investments and thus produced his present affluence, and this in turn leads him to question the whole purpose of his life to date and so to make the first of ~~these~~ <sup>the</sup> upheavals which are eventually to ruin him (pp. 373-80). Thus the sequence which begins with indications of growing prosperity is brought to an end in destruction, although the blow is not to fall until the end of the next book, being postponed ironically by an upturn in mining fortunes in the very country whose dust he decides to shake from his heels.

In this sequence we see how the country combines with Mahony's nature to destroy his hopes. To place the whole blame on Mahony's nature is, however, to ignore the parallels of Agnes Glendinning, Henry Ocock and even John Turnham, as well as to ignore the fact that it is the delusory promises of gold-rich Australia that <sup>first kindled</sup> Mahony's restlessness ~~first~~ ~~led him~~, and that it is his colonial experience which is to unfit him for the "medieval provincialism" of England (p. 539). He has gained a share of prosperity and breathed a freer air, but the promises as fulfilled prove delusory. Both freedom and prosperity are to be taken from him because

of his inherent inability to accept their conditions, but it is the country which imposes the conditions, and reveals them only after the bargain is made.

To argue that the relation between Australia and its colonists is central, and that this relationship is seen through the focus of Richard Mahony, is not to argue that the book is perfect in its integration. Some of the writer's energies are dissipated in the family chronicle, and there is some uncertainty of emphasis between Mahony's restless personality and the way in which this personality is destroyed by the country. More seriously, for a book with such scope in its aspirations, as a chronicle in time and space and as an enquiry into the meaning of life, its social range is severely limited to the middle classes. We only glimpse the social life of the squattocracy at Dandaloo, or see it treated in general in 'The Way Home' when the author describes the society to which Richard has returned (pp 539-40). Although the book grows from the goldfields of Ballarat, the only diggers we get to know are Long Jim and Purdy himself. The working and managerial classes are represented by Ned and Jerry, but we learn nothing of their lives except that they have dropped out of the wealthy set to which Richard and Mary <sup>aspire</sup> ~~attain~~. For a novel which seeks to discover what life is all about, the life is rather restricted.

Yet for all these limitations in the novel, and others which have been pointed to in its language, in places where the author fails to separate herself from the character, or allows her own sentimentality to obscure her grasp

of her essential subject<sup>19</sup>, it remains a significant response to the Australian experience. The horror of its final chapters, ~~and~~ particularly those which show Richard alone at Barambogie and at the mercy of his captors in the asylum, have the horror of Clarke or Baynton. But they also develop further than Clarke the idea of the logical trap. Whereas in Clarke the trap is the System, in Richardson the system of the mental asylum, with the initial assumption which makes any cruelty possible, is only a development of the isolating horror which has steadily cut Richard off from any consoling or supporting contact with his fellow humans, and from which he finds refuge only in the sheltered imbecility of his last months. The point of this horror, which in its way looks forward to the world of Nineteen Eighty-Four, is that Richardson sees it as arising from an inherent quality of life which <sup>although</sup> is revealed particularly by the Australian experience, ~~but which~~ is not merely socially determined and therefore remediable. The horror is faced by Richard, who is therefore destroyed by it; it is evaded by Mary, who therefore has no resources to meet the ~~Camus-like~~ challenge of her child's meaningless death, although she refuses to take refuge in the spiritualist subterfuges with which Richard seeks to evade this particular blow (pp. 795, 804). Eventually, however, each obtains the strength he needs, Richard by accepting himself (pp. 882-4), Mary by <sup>absorbing herself in the daily round</sup> ~~accepting the quotidian task~~. In so doing, however, she makes herself insensitive to the inner needs of the

<sup>19</sup> ~~see Buckley, op.cit.~~

children to whose support, with that of her husband, she has devoted herself.<sup>20</sup> Yet the suffering itself, together with the contrariety of Richard's and Mary's responses, raises the metaphysical questions which give the novel a dimension new in Australian fiction.

Despite the seriousness with which Henry Handel Richardson's father, and the novelist herself, may have pursued the questions of spiritualism,<sup>15</sup><sup>21</sup> the metaphysical heart of The Fortunes of Richard Mahony is not to be found in Richard's spiritualist speculations, which are shallow and treated satirically, but in the questions which he evades by his speculations and Mary by her absorption in the moment. These questions are implicit to the novel from the beginning, and are made unavoidable by the sufferings of the last book of the trilogy. They are grappled with most explicitly by Mary after her baby's death (pp. 794-6), and by Mahony when he rejects the idea of suicide (pp. 881-4). Mahony finds his answer in the moment of illumination in the moonlight, which has a reality only for him and seems to offer him little strength in the times to come. Mary finds no answer, except implicitly in her final acceptance of the inevitable (p. 979). But these answers need not be accepted as those of the novelist. The novel merely raises the questions, most urgently. If it lacks the anger against an unjust social system which can be found in earlier Australian works, it also lacks the acceptance of defeat

<sup>20</sup>see ~~ib.~~ p. 970, cf. her treatment of Johnny Turnham, p. 196.  
But cf. also her understanding of Johnny's ambitions, pp. 359-6.

<sup>21</sup>see Green, Stewart, ~~opera citata~~



implicit in the nostalgia of Lawson or the ironic amusement of Furphy. It also avoids the bitter rejection and nihilism of Baynton, for if it fiercely questions life it is equally fiercely committed<sup>t</sup> to the actuality of life and everything it implies.

Yet although the novel is committed to finding the meaning of a life which is largely shaped and lived in Australia, it remains un-<sup>A</sup>Australian in its feeling. This is partly because the European element of the book, although comparatively small in extent, and ultimately rejected as irrelevant to what Mahony has become, is nevertheless a significant theme in the whole. Mahony's personality was formed from Irish pride and Irish poverty, and all his aspirations are derived from British notions of gentility. His restlessness is explicitly associated with his search for somewhere he will be at home, a product of a consciousness divided between Britain and the antip<sup>o</sup>odes. This is a theme explored by Martin Boyd in The Montforts, published in 1928,<sup>22</sup> but Boyd is not concerned as much with destruction as with the search for a satisfying life. His characters derive satisfaction from each continent, although neither is sufficient in itself. Mahony, more of a perfectionist, finds each<sup>place</sup> intolerable because<sup>neither can</sup> it ~~cannot~~ satisfy all his needs. Nor does Boyd have the same sense of evil we can find in Richardson. Boyd shows bad characters who do wrong things, but they are bad and wrong because

<sup>22</sup>Martin Boyd, The Montforts, revised edition, Adelaide, 1963. First published London, 1928, under pseudonym 'Martin Mills'.

they depart from a humane ideal. Richardson, finding suffering everywhere, and discovering both Mahony's lofty speculations, and Mary's practical kindness inadequate in the face of it, questions the possibility of an ideal.

A novel published earlier than The Fortunes of Richard Mahony, Louis Stone's Jonah,<sup>23</sup> also seems at first to have something in common with Richardson's novel. It is concerned with urban rather than rural life, and the figure of the corrupt hunchback has connotations of evil. But the evil is essentially social in origin, and arises from Jonah making choices on the basis of false values, and being destroyed as a consequence. Moreover, Jonah's spiritual destruction, and Ada's physical destruction, are set against the wholesome image of Chook and Pinkey earning an honest sufficiency by hard work, love and decency. The energy of the book comes from its affectionate treatment of the world of the larrikins, whose love of life is distorted by Jonah's greed, but the novel's moral universe is a poetically just one where the good are rewarded and the evil eventually go empty away. The dimension of purposeless suffering which we find in Mahony is completely lacking. The world of Louis Stone, for all its urban setting, is fundamentally the same as that celebrated in rural writing like that of Mary E. Fullerton or Mary Gilmore.<sup>24</sup> Fullerton's

<sup>23</sup>Louis Stone, Jonah, third Australian edition, Sydney, 1965. First published London, 1911.

<sup>24</sup>Mary E. Fullerton, Barkhouse Days, Melbourne, 1964. First published Melbourne, 1921. Mary Gilmore Old Days Old Ways, 1934, More Recollections, 1935, in Dymphna Cusack, T. Inglis Moore and Barrie Ovenden (eds.) Mary Gilmore, a Tribute, Sydney, 1965.

memoirs have the setting and nostalgia of Lawson, but all the edges have been blurred, and drought and loneliness and fear have almost disappeared. We could infer them from ~~the lives~~<sup>lives</sup> of some of the adults which are described, but they are all seen through the eyes of a child whose parents wrapped her in an impregnable cocoon of security against the chances of the wider world. Something of this same atmosphere exists in Mary Gilmore's work, although she writes with clear insight about the terrible happenings of her youth. Her memories of a tribe of aborigines are blighted by the knowledge that they were exterminated soon after (p. 131). Memories of her father's mateship with his neighbours are overlaid by his ambiguous position in the class struggle, and by the threats of violence and death in this struggle (pp. 113-4). In a couple of paragraphs about a woman outwitting a bushfire (pp. 75-7) she conjures up the same spirit of lonely defiance that Lawson achieves in stories like "The Drover's Wife." But the context of all of these descriptions is admiration for the past and for the victories achieved, even if she admits that terrible things were done in the process, particularly to the land and its original inhabitants. Her work is a call to draw on the strength and courage of the past in order to do still better in the future.

Although the work of Gilmore and Fullerton is not fiction, it serves to show the way in which the subject matter and ~~the~~ nostalgia of Lawson and the nationalism of Furphy survived to form the basis of a kind of patriotic optimism. At its best, this attitude appears in the work of Frank Dalby Davison, whose Manshy shows an understanding for the countryside, and an

understanding of the relationship between the environment and its creatures.<sup>19</sup>

The theme of the book reflects both a distrust of man's encroachment on nature and the countryman's admiration for the loner. The admiration of the ordinary man has now become an appreciation of the need of each creature to develop according to its essential nature. The qualities which Davison admires in the cow which is the central character of Manshy are those he discovers in the man and dog of Dusty or in the people of his short stories.<sup>20</sup> Yet Davison is also unsentimentally aware of the way in which the fulfilling of the various desires of different creatures brings them into conflict with each other, and of the consequently ambiguous relationship between man and the nature he seeks to control.

... Jim took his axe and put in a scarf on the side of the trunk towards which the tree would fall. His blade cut through the yellow sapweed into the red heart beneath ... Jim placed his own blows with speed and precision - taking delight in the way the broad chips sprang from beneath his axe. The one (Bert, the boy) was youth striving towards the pinnacle of manhood's skill - the other was advancing years assuring itself that those powers were still at its control.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Frank Dalby Davison, Manshy, Sydney, 1931. It should be noted however, that Davison also has an understanding of the tragic conflicts of life and the unpredictability of fate. See Hume Dow, Frank Dalby Davison, Melbourne, 1971, pp. 9-10 and elsewhere, for a full discussion of this element of Davison's work.

- <sup>26</sup> Frank Dalby Davison ~~Forever Morning~~, Sydney, p. 113

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[ This is an example of the pleasure Davison takes in the creature fulfilling itself in simple, but skilful, physical accomplishment. But the fulfilment of the one - the man - requires the destruction of the other - the tree. In the same episode, Davison shows us Jim Brunton reflecting on the strange nature of his tie to the land, whereby the pleasure he takes in his accomplishment of clearing and farming generates a love for the very bush he destroys. Yet this physical struggle to overcome enables the man to discover his true nature. Jim's daughter reflects on the difference between the city-dwellers, "People who had gone so far from the soil from which they sprung that it was strange to them," and the men of the bush who understood "the mighty joy of bringing the primal energies of nature to their needs." (p. 114). This joy is discovered in such actions as driving a dray, riding a horse, felling a tree or ploughing a field. Although Davison's bush is not an easy place, and although his settlers, like Jim Brunton, can be defeated by it, it is no longer a place of despair. His characters are at home in the bush, Its very hardships provide the means by which they discover their true selves.

In the context of these writers, the work of Henry Handel Richardson seems ~~an~~ alien or a sport. Although she shares their despair in the face of an hostile continent, she has none of their nostalgia and none of their affection for the common man. <sup>like Stone and Davison convey</sup> ~~The writers who follow in this tradition have those qualities, and particularly~~ the feeling that the ordinary man, worker or farmer, is the truest man, and they also share a sense of optimism about man's future. Yet, in the same year that the final volume

of Richardson's trilogy, Ultima Thule, appeared, a novel was published by <sup>a</sup> ~~one of the~~ social realists which seemed to combine the classically Australian regard for the common people with a tragic view of the possibilities of human life.<sup>22</sup> Although Katherine<sup>a</sup> Susannah Prichard's Coonardoo deals with serious social problems, there is no suggestion that there could have been a social solution to the fate of the heroine. Given the totally different frames of reference within which she and Hugh Watt live, there <sup>is</sup> ~~was~~ no possibility of their troubles being resolved. Certainly, these frames of reference are socially created, and in a different and ideal society the problem may never have arisen, but the novel is concerned with the actual, not the ideal. What it does suggest is that, given life as it is, Coonardoo's fate <sup>is</sup> ~~was~~ inevitable.

It is no accident that the intrusion of this tragic note into the realist writing coincides with the inclusion of the aborigines within the range of the author's sympathies. In earlier writing the aborigine appears as anything from noble savage to figure of fun, but rarely as an ordinary person.<sup>23</sup> Characteristic <sup>is</sup> perhaps the attitude of Lawson.

# ———  
K She had been ill with a fever. She prayed to God to send her assistance. God sent Black Mary - the "whitest" gin in all the land. Or, at least, God sent "Jimmy" first, and he sent black Mary. He put his black face round the door post, took in the situation at a glance and said cheerfully: "All right Missis - I bring my old woman, she down alonga creek." <sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Katherine Susannah Prichard Coonardoo, A & R Sydney, Pacific Books, 1971. First published London, 1929.

<sup>23</sup> See Russel Ward, The Australian Legend, Sydney, 1958, pp. 186-9.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Lawson 'The Drover's Wife,' in While the Billy Boils, Sydney, 1896, p. 132. Stones 12.64

The emphasis here is on the kindness of the aborigine, and his readiness to respond to the need of another human. But this minimum element of common humanity is all that is recognised<sup>Z</sup>. The repetition of the word 'black' emphasises<sup>Z</sup> the difference which makes the incident worthy of mention, and the anecdote comes from a section of the tale which starts, "She is used to being alone" and finishes, "She rode nineteen miles for assistance, carrying the dead child." (pp. 131-2). The aborigine is only an element in an isolating environment.

Behind the neglect of the aborigine in our literature lies the historical dilemma of the white settler in Australia. Whether he was gentleman, believing himself the bearer of European civilisation<sup>Z</sup> to antipodean savagery, or idealist, hoping to shed the evils of Europe in a new society based on human freedom, his aims could be achieved only by displacing the original inhabitants. The aborigine steadfastly refused to conform to the man of reason's model of the noble savage, and the hopeful aspirations of men like Phillip and similarly minded authorities in other colonies proved impracticable. The situation is summed up by An Emigrant Mechanic, who writes :

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At length, when the nature of our position at those distant and unguarded out-stations came to be better understood, together with the necessity of submitting to either vast loss of stock or of continuing this system of migration over the boundary; and especially when the incorrigibility of the blacks, by anything contained in the Protectorate scheme, was made evident, the original and customary course of things was permitted to return. The matter fell into its true and old form, from which it should never have been disturbed: a question of intimidation (nothing more)

between the musket and the spear. And every black's common sense solves this question so readily and correctly and uniformly, that the simple consciousness of its being the true and only question is sufficient at any time to bring them into a state of submission. And if we want any more than that, if we want a league of peace on equal grounds, really there is no road but that we give up their land and forsake their country ... if they are to be intimidated, it must be by something that is more prompt and effective than their own spear, and less dilatory than our law. <sup>30</sup> 25

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Although this passage is uncharacteristic in its frank admission of the basis of the problem in mutually exclusive interests, its air of smug superiority is all too common. The same tone pervades Rolf Boldrewood, with his ruthless determination to master the aborigines, and E.M. Curr, with his much more high-minded interest in assisting them to learn the ways of civilisation, and <sup>2</sup>an interest which was to lead to the Protectorate of which the Mechanic complains. <sup>26</sup> ~~31~~ In none of the writers is there any questioning of the right of the white men to occupy the aborigine's lands, and therefore the conduct of the natives is (either seen) as hostile and to be thwarted by force, or strange and inexplicable and to be altered, by kindness if possible, <sup>by</sup> ~~for~~ force if necessary.

<sup>30</sup> 'An Emigrant Mechanic' (Alexander Harris) Settlers and Convicts, Melbourne, 1964, First published London, 1847.

<sup>31</sup> 'Rolf Boldrewood', Early Melbourne Memories, ed. C.E. Sayers, Melbourne, 1969. First published Melbourne, 1884.  
E.M. Curr, Recollections of Squatting in Victoria, ed. H.W. Forster; Melbourne, 1965. First published Melbourne, 1883.



By the time Prichard wrote, however, the situation had changed and attitudes were starting to change. Daisy Bates was already at work among the fringe-dwellers and the broken tribes.<sup>32</sup> Anthropologists were carrying out serious studies which enabled the aborigines to be understood in their own terms.<sup>27</sup> Mary Gilmore's work, in many of her poems and particularly in stories like "White Sails and Dampier's Disease",<sup>34</sup> shows the way in which attitudes had changed from superiority to guilt. Mrs. Aeneas Gunn combined a sense of white superiority with a romanticisation<sup>2</sup> of the native, but her work both indicated and promoted the softening in conventional attitudes.<sup>29</sup><sup>35</sup> The aborigine is therefore not just a part of a landscape which has defeated human hopes, but another victim. But ~~the~~<sup>he</sup> ~~aborigine~~ suffers not because of an hostile environment - in fact, later writers realise<sup>2</sup> that, compared with the white man, he utilis<sup>2</sup>ed his environment remarkably well - but because of the historical situation. This change in focus produces a greater concentration on man rather than on nature as the cause of disaster, although nature can certainly abet man's compulsion to destroy himself. While Coonardoo neither has nor aspires to the scope of The Fortunes of Richard Mahony, the author's broader

<sup>32</sup> Australian Encyclopedia, Sydney, 1958, Vol.I, 453-4.

<sup>33</sup> ib. Vol.I, 95-6, 206-7.

<sup>34</sup> Gilmore, op.cit., p.68.

<sup>35</sup> (Mrs) Aeneas Gunn, The Little Black Princess, London, 1905; We of the Never Never, London, 1908.

sympathies and her awareness of the historical processes which create the human dilemma enable her to achieve a surer grasp of her subject than Richardson achieves until the last book of her trilogy.

Russel Ward, <sup>in The Australian Legend,</sup> ~~has~~ commented on the way later Australian bushmen came to acknowledge their indebtedness to the aborigines, who had both taught them essential bush skills and become their master in some European-derived arts of the cattle station. Ward associates this with the <sup>h</sup>busman's "adaptation to, and mastery of, the outback environment."<sup>36</sup> In <sup>a</sup>Katherine Prichard's Coonardoo, we see this respect for aboriginal skills both in the attitude of Mrs. Bessie and her son to the people who work, live on and belong to their station, "Wytaliba," and in the portraits of Warieda, song-maker and horsebreaker, and of Coonardoo herself. The white man's respect for the aborigines effects a reconciliation with the land, and he comes to share their love for it, and for the life which is lived on it. It is this which the city girl, Jessica, cannot understand, and so Mrs. Bessie is pleased that she decides to abandon Hugh and return to where she belongs .

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K She was sorry for the girl who had not found beauty and peace in the long quiet days and work of Wytaliba. Bare and hard the life was; but Mrs. Bessie loved every phase of it, every line of the trees, every light and colour of red earth and pale blue sky, dove-grey mulga, and white-barked creek gum-trees with their long dark pointed leaves. (p. 52)

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<sup>36</sup>Russel Ward, op. cit., p. 186.

This is neither the idealist view of the environment as a challenge to be mastered in order to build a better way of life, nor the realist view of it as an asset to be utilised. <sup>z</sup> <sup>yet</sup> These are the <sup>very</sup> limitations in the vision of the two white women Hugh brings to Wytaliba to share his life. Jessica, the sentimentalist, finds no beauty; Mollie, the realist, dislikes the hardships and is unable to understand why Hugh continues to battle them out far too long, "when you could have sold out at a handsome profit years and years ago" (p. 176). But the attitude of the book, expressed particularly through Hugh and his mother, is essentially romantic. The life of the station is worthwhile, not despite its hardships but because of them. Beneath the struggle with the banks and the droughts, and giving him the strength to cope, is Hugh's bond with the land itself, expressed through the natives. Even when he is travelling on the boat to Geraldton he understands that Wytaliba is where he belongs.

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Wytaliba was a mirage on the horizon of his consciousness. All the distraught passion, loneliness and suffering, beyond the flowing miles of plain and tableland.

He could hear the blacks singing beside their camp-fires in the dark, the frail eerie melodies winging over the dark plains, under a wide sky on which the stars were as dim as rock crystals. That throbbing on one note, flight, fall and reiterated rhythm and melody quivering, infiltrating had always stirred and excited him. He told himself he liked to hear the blacks on Wytaliba singing, because it showed they were happy; life was good to them.

But there was more in it than that. The blacks' singing was a communication, a language of the senses, remote and aboriginal. Infinitely, irresistably Hugh felt it. Always he could hear Coonardoo singing above the rest of the women. (p. 71)

Although this passage is given a rational explanation as part of Hugh's fever-induced delirium, and although his joy in it is explained as a desire to see people happy, the spirit of the writing is that of a mystical attachment to the land. Coonardoo is a symbol of this bond, and when she goes, Hugh finally succumbs and Wytaliba is abandoned.

Prichard uses her novel as a plea for social justice towards the aborigines. ~~So~~ <sup>their</sup> she contrasts the treatment of the aborigines on Wytaliba with the "terrible stories of shootings, and the abuse of native women in the early days," and the "Poor degraded wretches, treated like dogs, worse than dogs ... on stations farther south and nearer the coast. Dirty, diseased, ill natured, lost to their tribal laws and customs, he had seen them, remnants of a dying race, ..." (p. 100). But Hugh comes to appreciate these questions of justice through his interwoven love for the country and its people. The nature of this attachment is the real subject of the novel.

The action of ~~the novel~~ <sup>Coonardoo</sup> is a steady movement from harmony to disintegration. The disintegration is brought about by the failure of Mrs. Bessie and, in his turn, Hugh, to give themselves completely to the country. Their attitude to the aborigines is strictly just and kind, and is contrasted with that of their neighbour Sam Geary, whose near-rape of Coonardoo is responsible for Hugh rejecting her, breaking his bond with the land and with the Wytaliba aborigines, and thus precipitating the final tragedy of the book (pp. 176-89). Yet in one important way Sam Geary is closer to the truth than the idealistic Hugh, whose memory of his mother

and dislike for Geary prevent him taking the final step to accepting the aborigines as a part of himself, and acknowledging Coonardoo as the "force in the background of his life ... Something primitive, fundamental, nearer than he to the source of things: the well in the shadows." (p. 109). Rather than accept this as a fact, <sup>rather</sup> than acknowledge that Sam Geary is right when he says "You can only weather this country ... you can only beat it on its own terms." (p. 141), he tries to contain himself, to live by his own strength, and is defeated. The irony of this is that in all but this one matter, where his stubborn pride and schoolboy sense of honour blind him to the truth, his understanding of and love for the country are incomparably greater than Geary's.

Coonardoo opens on a note of harmony, as Coonardoo sits and sings as she waits for Youie (Hugh) to come out to play. But the first interruption to this harmony is about to occur, as the buggy is on its way to take Hugh away from Wytaliba to school. The ideals of the school will be one of the things which subsequently keep Hugh and Coonardoo apart. During Hugh's schooling Coonardoo will be given in marriage and will bear her first children, and from his school circle Hugh will bring back his first fiancée. The single world of childhood will be disrupted as each individual is bound into the ways of his separate culture. But these seeds of disruption are scarcely evident in these early chapters as we see Mrs. Bessie at the height of her powers, ordering the natives in the household, preparing them to look after Hugh when she is gone, running the station, and being invited to witness the native ceremonies where they

celebrate the "excitement and mystery" of life. Mrs. Bessie, however, is not able completely to accept these ceremonies - she had "fits of loathing for the blacks," and was "disgusted by practices she thought immoral." Although she could understand a consciousness of sex which was "impersonal, universal, of a religious mysticism," she could not accept it, particularly when it touched her own affairs (pp. 20-1). The seeds of Hugh's tragedy are being sown.

The ideal relationship is epitomised<sup>z</sup> early in the book in the account of the horse<sup>^</sup>breaking. Jessica is at this time staying at Wyaliba to see if she likes the life before consenting to marry Hugh. While she watches with Hugh, Warieda approaches the horse.

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K Imperious, irresistible ... something swaggering, gallant, of a triumphant lover, in his attitude. His hand going straight to the brain communicated the spell of man, in language of the flesh, an old forgotten flow of instincts ... Gently, every gesture slow, restrained, he rubbed her between the eyes, under the forelock, along the nose; the little mare snuffled the dark hand, reassuring, sleeking and rubbing her ... And Warieda talked murmurously. (p. 48)

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This balance of gentleness and strength, sympathy and control, represents the ideal of the book.

But the ideal is achieved only precariously. Mrs. Bessie dies, leaving Hugh desolate, but Coonardoo, true to her mistress' command, looks after him, and bears him a son, who is to be a shameful pride in his life. Hugh, however, turns his back on Coonardoo and brings back Molly, who bears him daughters, and whose narrow but stubborn outlook

robs him of human sympathy and drives him in on himself beyond the reach of communion except with Coonardoo and Warieda. The latter, however, dies just after Molly departs with her children for the coast. He takes Coonardoo into his house, but refuses to take her to himself, and so exposes her as prey to Sam Geary. The brief dream of companionship in his old age which is prompted by the return of his daughter, Phyllis, is destroyed when she follows the urgings of nature and marries Billy Gale, Geary's head stockman. Ironically, just as the seasons turn good again and the "Faint, thymey fragrance of nydey drifted out from bushes near the uloo," Hugh discovers that Coonardoo has been ravished by Geary, and drives her from his camp and property. This finally destroys his link with the country. The remaining years, told in a few pages, show Coonardoo driven by disease and debauchery until she returns to the now abandoned homestead to die. Meanwhile, Hugh loses the confidence of his aborigines, loses the battle with the bank, and finally loses his son (pp. 200-21). His inability to accept Coonardoo, and his failure to discover any other person to share his innermost life, have destroyed everything.

Although Hugh Watt is a much less complicated man than Richard Mahony, his fate is in some ways more complex. Mahony's tragedy arises from a failure of his personality, a total inability to accept the conditions of life. Australia is in fact the agent of his destruction, but his restless spirit would undoubtedly have led him eventually to some equally incompatible environment. His only hope of avoiding his fate would have been to have

retained sufficient wealth to insulate himself completely from his surroundings and from any demands made on him, yet he lacked the ability to apply himself to the tasks of either gaining or retaining wealth. It could come to him only in a fickle land like Australia, and even <sup>here</sup> ~~there~~ it was obtained by the efforts of others. The loss came similarly, through the deceptive fickleness of fortune and through his own restlessness in changing the agent of his affairs. Tragedy, therefore, is inherent in the nature of the man, and we are concerned with contemplating its progress rather than speculating on the all too obvious cause.

The cause of Hugh Watt's tragedy is, however, much closer to a single tragic flaw in an otherwise sufficient character. The land does not conspire with his own nature to destroy him, but he turns away from his true self, breaks his link with the land, and is thus destroyed. The land does not mock his hopes, but he, owing to what he brings from outside, is unable to fulfil them. Yet the end is not inevitable. All the time we feel that there is a possibility he will realise <sup>z</sup> ~~se~~ what he is doing and have the courage to proclaim what he needs and boldly take Coonardoo and acknowledge his son. Yet he is locked in the historical circumstance which makes such an action possible only for a Geary, who can do it ~~only~~ because he looks on his women and children with contempt. Geary therefore destroys his manhood, while Hugh preserves his at the cost of everything else which is dear to him. Yet at the end of the book the land and its aboriginal people still wait for someone who will have learnt to accept them - possibly Phyllis or her family. It is not the land which has



defeated the people, but the people who have failed to accept the possibilities the land offers. In this sense, therefore, the novel is an affirmation of faith.

If a romantic belief in the land and its eventual capacity to bring out the best in man underlies the tragedy of Coonardoo, no such hope redeems the bitter irony of Xavier Herbert's Capricornia.<sup>30</sup> In this book, published a decade after Coonardoo, men and nature are well matched in their destructive savagery, although nature is redeemed by moments of splendour, while man rather oscillates between the savage, the futile and the pathetic. Not the least element of the book's bitterness is that it is man's best qualities which destroy him. Thus Ned Krater leads a life of satisfying selfishness, finishing in a last brutal and defiant bloodletting (pp. 32-5), while the good-natured Tim O'Cannon is destroyed by his own generosity, with subsequent disastrous effects on his dependants (pp. 168-78). Yet although the novel is largely a chronicle of failure, its final effect remains ambiguous. Its energy, and its delight in the human comedy, are such that in its succession of denials of the efficacy of any ideals there is perhaps ultimately more hope than in Lawson's gently resigned acquiescence or even Prichard's staunch but slightly unreal optimism.

Herbert's attitude to his subject is seen at the beginning of Chapter VII, ~~Seven~~, where he is describing Oscar Shillingworth's love of his property,

<sup>37</sup>Xavier Herbert, Capricornia, third edition, Sydney, 1956.  
First published, Sydney, 1938.

a love which, to the confusion of his wife, goes beyond economic values.

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At times he loved it best in Wet Season - when the creeks were running and the swamps were full - when the multi-coloured schisty rocks split golden waterfalls - when the scarlet plains were under water, green with wild rice, swarming with Siberian snipe - when the billabong were brimming and the water-lilies blooming and the nuttaguls shoulding loudest - when the bull-grass towered ten feet high, clothing hills and choking gullies - when every tree was flowering and most were draped with crimson mistletoe and droning with humming-birds and native bees - when the cattle wandered a land of plenty, fat and sleek, till the buffalo<sup>o</sup>-flies and marsh-flies came and drove them mad, so that they ran and ran to leanness, often to their death - when mosquitoes and a hundred other breeds of maddening insects were there to test a man's endurance - when from hour to hour luke-warm showers drenched the steaming earth, till one was sodden to the bone and mildewed to the marrow and moved to pray, as Oscar always was when he had had enough of it, for that which he had formerly cursed - the Dry! the good old Dry! - when the grasses yellowed, browned, dried into tinder, burst into spontaneous flame - when harsh wind rioted with choking dust and the billabongs became mere muddy holes where cattle pawed for water - when gaunt drought loafed about a desert ... then one prayed for the Wet again, or if one's heart was small, packed up and left this Capricornia that fools down South called the Land of Opportunity, and went back and said that nothing was done by halves up there except the works of puny man. (p. 81)

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This paragraph - a single unstructured sentence - reflects the exuberance which Herbert finds in his Capricornia, and of which the destruction is but a part. It is nature here which judges man, finding his heart small and his works puny. Nature is beyond man's measure, and <sup>moves</sup> ~~turns~~ in the turning of a phrase from the proliferation of beauty to the proliferation of pain and death through too great bounty, and then to the opposite of dearth. But Herbert's contempt for both those who leave the North and for

"the fools down South" who know nothing of what they talk, betrays his own love of this land and its challenge. The challenge is not "Opportunity", but rather the possibility of being a man worthy of the country. Few of his characters glimpse this possibility, and none - except, perhaps, Kurrinua, the native leader and warrior who is murdered by Ned Krater in the first chapter (p. 6) - even glimpse it.

The land offers its challenge to Oscar Shillingsworth in the chapter which this passage introduces. Up until this stage, Oscar has seemed a cipher of respectability beside his ne'er-do-well but likeable brother Mark, father of the half-caste Norman ("Nawnim"). In this chapter, however, Norman thwarts his father's efforts to get rid of him and is dumped with Oscar, who also tries to dispose of his unwanted and shameful relation. However, Mark flees from his responsibility and a series of circumstances closes off any other solution, and Oscar is led to take Norman into his home. He is partly prepared to do this by the case put by Peter Differ for the intelligence and understanding of the aborigine (pp. 69-74). In this, Differ argues that the aborigine differs from the whiteman chiefly because he has learnt to curb his greed and because he lives by a simple code of brotherhood. In the natural order of the North, these qualities, originally elicited by the land itself, enabled him to survive, but in the <sup>e</sup>fact of white civilisation<sup>z</sup> they have proved crippling handicaps. It is clear from this that Herbert sees evil as coming primarily from the human element, but in this case Oscar, induced by a growing affection for Norman, as well as by Differ's arguments, which he

scarcely understands, accepts the challenge which the land brings him. The enhancement of his moral stature is matched by Mark's loss of it consequent on his desertion.

Ostensibly, the subject of Herbert's novel is the colour problems in the Northern Territory, and certainly his novel contains a passionate plea for a greater appreciation of the finer qualities of the Aboriginal and a <sup>2</sup>realisation of the cruelty and destructiveness of white <sup>2</sup>civilisation. Yet the natives and half-castes we see are rarely worthy of our respect. The positive side of Herbert's case is put in the arguments of Peter Differ (pp. 69-74) and Andy McRandy (pp. 286-9), and by the example of Norman himself. Seeing Norman alongside Yellow Elbert, Oscar <sup>2</sup>realises the difference which can be made by environment and treatment as an equal.

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K They compared as the sun and a piece of cheese. It was not only in rich attire that made Norman what he looked. He had been fed the best of food for sixteen years, had slept on decent beds, had walked the earth like a man, not slunk like a mongrel dog with kicks to harry him. Had he stood there naked the comparison would be just the same, though no doubt the stir would have been greater. (p. 198)

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Norman's problem is to retain his dignity and self-regard in the face of white men who insist on regarding him as a "yellow-feller" and therefore outside the bounds of <sup>2</sup>civilised conduct. To do this he must accept himself as part-aboriginal, or he will suffer the fate of Charles Ket, whose refusal to acknowledge what he is provokes rebuffs and eventually drives him in bitterness outside any human communion (p. 388). Yet, while Herbert suggests

that a man must go his own way with "carelessness of what others thought of it", there is nowhere any suggestion that this can be other than the white way. The natives we see in the book are debased mission and station natives who, even when they appear in their savage splendour and give succour, offer no lasting fellowship. Norman is delighted to be found and looked after by the natives, but once back in civilisation<sup>z</sup> he leaves them at the edge of the clearing and returns to what he regards as his natural habitat, proud of his adventure but indignantly denying any suggestion that he has gone walkabout (p. 274). Significantly, his later wanderings are alone, but even these weave a web of circumstantial evidence which threatens to destroy him either by execution or by depriving him of the property which is the only basis for his place in established society, and therefore his only chance of avoiding the fate of Yellow Elbert, Charles Ket or Tocky, other half-castes who go beyond the bounds the "Masters of Mankind" have set for them, and who consequently are destroyed.

Yet although Herbert's commitment to this theme of equality is undeniable, it is by no means the most important element of the book. Norman does struggle to some sort of success at the close of the novel, but this is shadowed by the established vagaries of season and economy and by the presence of his shiftless father, whose present steady employment and fidelity to Heather we can scarcely believe will last. But more importantly, the laughter of the final scene is completely destroyed by Norman's discovery of the bodies of Tocky and her baby daughter in the tank

to which he had directed her for safety from the troopers. The last sound in the book is the cry of the crow, "Kah! - Kah! - Kaaaaah!" (p. 448). This desolate comment on the prospects of human happiness is also a savage comment on the human weakness which has enabled Norman to build his prosperity in complete forgetfulness of the girl whom even the Shouter, cynical southern lawyer, had described as a "poor miserable outcast waif", and offered to defend, if necessary, at his own expense (p. 444). When Norman's fate depends on her word, he is anxious enough about her whereabouts, but once he is free his concern is purely material. He, and the reader, ignore Tocky until she is recalled by a fluttering piece of blue cloth. "Great thing of us forgot"

This final scene points to something more important in the novel than the subsidiary themes of racial injustice, political stupidity, or official dereliction of duty. Vincent Buckley has suggested that the author's view is basically anarchic, and that "the total impression of the book is one of great creative energy battling against a universe of appalling waste and, being unable to master that waste, coming to terms with it through a comic mode".<sup>38</sup> Brian Kiernan writes that "The energizing principle of this world is its destructiveness and at the end we are left with the sense only of this world continuing in its tragi-comic way to further unbalance

<sup>38</sup> Vincent Buckley, 'Capricornia,' in Grahame Johnston (ed.) Australian Literary Criticism, Melbourne, 1962, 186. First published in Meanjin, Vol. XIV, No. 1, 1960.

the relationships between man and man, society and Nature.<sup>32</sup> But the cruel yet casual death of Tocky seems to go beyond mere destructiveness or anarchy to complete nihilism.

There is no need to emphasise<sup>2</sup> the constant undertone of violence which runs through the novel. Of the characters listed at the beginning of the book, no less than nineteen die during its course, and no more than two of these could be described as dying through natural causes, unassisted by drink, violence or the peculiar diseases of the North. In addition, there are the eight men killed in the railway smash for which Frank McLash is responsible (pp. 306-8); the violent handling of the cattle at Red Ochre (pp. 228-31); and the global destruction of the Great War, which is used as a counterpoint to Humbolt Lace's attempts to marry off the now-pregnant Connie Differ and<sup>to</sup> Yeller Elbert's stabbing of Jock Driver (pp. 93-102). This human violence first appears in the opening chapter of the book when Herbert describes the process of settling Capricornia, and is paralleled both by the institutionalised<sup>2</sup> violence of the systems of law and order and the unpredictable fury of nature.

Against the fact of violence Herbert is able to set only the human comedy. This appears most obviously in his novelist's voice, by which he detaches himself from the events sufficiently to take a fierce joy in them.

<sup>39</sup> Brian Kiernan, 'Xavier Herbert: Capricornia,' Australian Literary Studies, Vol. IV, No. 4, 1970, 360-70.

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In the 223-Mile Smash eight men were killed and sixteen badly injured. Fortunately - that is in the opinion of the majority left to discuss it - six of the dead were only Greeks, and most of the injured were the same. Frank and Ket and Paddy Pickandle and Jack Ramble and Joe Mooch and the shunter were taken to the police-station and questioned and detained for several hours while communication was made with town. Paddy Pickandle was in a highly excited state ... The shunter also had much to say, though he was feeling very depressed, having sustained in his fall a broken wrist, a sprained ankle, a gash in the head, and a fractured rib. Ramble and Mooch said very little, and nothing to incriminate the crew. Ket flew into a violent rage when Paddy spoke out. He had to be restrained. Frank, dazed throughout the journey back from the scene of the disaster, when questioned broke down and wept. Shattered was his precious dream of driving trans-continental trains. (p. 309)

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The shaping of the narrative seems to be random, as Herbert figuratively casts his eye around the characters and their reactions. The short sentences keep the pace going while presenting each fact for our separate consideration. But behind the detailing of each reaction there is a moral framework of judgment. The characters judge themselves as their preoccupations determine their conduct, but the invitation to our judgment comes from the barely stated facts of death at the novel's beginning, to which no one again alludes. It is the irrelevance of the proceedings which makes Herbert's comment. Yet, despite the implicit cruelty, the energy of the writing conveys the pleasure he takes in watching the behaviour of each of his characters.

This pleasure, however, is not one that springs from liking, but rather the pleasure the spectator takes in an entertainment. There are both more and less sympathetic characters, so that we feel drawn to Oscar



or Heather, at least at times, while on the whole we are repelled by Dr. Aintee or the Rev. Hollower. However, for most of the novel our attention is invited to action rather than character. When life runs to a seemingly random pattern, we might detest the behaviour of Ned Krater and admire that of Kurrinua (pp. 4-6), but we also have to admire Krater's will and endurance, particularly on his last voyage (pp. 32-5). Moreover, we are told that the Rev. Hollower, distastefully narrow as he may be, at least exhibits a generosity which others were not prepared to show (pp. 218, 219). Yet, if he compares favourably with the doctor and the nurses, their behaviour is also human and pardonable. Nor are even the most sympathetic characters without blemish. Tim O'Cannon regards his admirable wife with contempt (pp. 141-2), and treats her with abominable rudeness when he discovers the affair between Cedric and Maud (pp. 146-7). Yet, if there is a hero in the book, it is O'Cannon, whose foolish pride enables him to defy the world, albeit unsuccessfully.

The death of Tim O'Cannon has been dealt with by Buckley in the essay referred to above, in which he points out that it is the best qualities of O'Cannon - his devotion to his family, his generosity - which cause his death as he catches his feet in the Christmas presents he is taking home, and is thus unable to leap clear of the train which runs him down.<sup>40</sup> The

<sup>40</sup> Buckley, *op. cit.* pp. 177-8.

irony of Tim's fate is made more pointed by the idyllic setting in which it occurs, "down the gleaming grassy track, today not a rusty one but silver, two slender bars of silver laid on a green velvet mat," (p. 175) This is the land of Capricornia at its best, and it betrays the man most fitted to receive its blessings.

The story of Tim O'Cannon and his garrison gives us in micro-cosm the vision of the whole novel. Tim himself is a comic figure, the patriotic sergeant-major who never goes to war, but he is also tragic. His aspirations are mocked by a capricious fate which in turn destroys his eldest daughter, his prosperity, and then, when it has taken all else, himself. The fall of his ~~little~~ family is the more serious because of the heights to which he very nearly lifted them. For all the vigor<sup>u</sup> and gusto with which the story is told, it is hard to find it comic in the light of the immediate and ultimate fates of his dependants. Yet the eventual collapse of his little world is already foreshadowed during the celebrations for the end of the war, when super-patriot Tim brings his wife Blossom and his family to the festivities ~~with him~~ and finds that even then they are still spurned (pp. 130-131). The comedy here is not a part of the vision of life so much as a way of coping with the pain.

One of the ways in which Herbert makes his vision tolerable is to keep all the people at a distance, so that we see their behavior<sup>u</sup> without ever sharing their thoughts. So, for example, we can bear Mrs. McLash's weeping for her Pride and Joy, the otherwise unattractive Frank, because although she has the reality of a person we might meet, we have known her

only from the outside, and so her emotion is a spectacle, not something we experience ourselves (p. 427). This is largely true of all the characters in the book except Norman and, to some extent, Charles Ket. We also share Tocky's fears during her wanderings (pp. 349-51, 399-401), and Tim O'Cannon's delight in his surroundings as he sets out from home on the morning he finds Tocky and her mother (pp. 155-6), and again on the fatal morning before he is struck by the train (p. 175). These are all characters whose fate is beyond the power of comedy to contain.

Charles Ket represents what, in less propitious circumstances, Norman might have been, and Herbert takes considerable care to fill in both his history and the inner workings of his mind. When we first meet him at the mustering on Red Ochre we learn of his past, when he was able to establish himself in white society on the strength of his abilities until, after his ancestry had been discovered, he was rejected by the very criteria he himself had so strenuously upheld (pp. 225-6). This has driven him in on himself, but when he believes that Oscar is accepting him as a man he responds with extravagant hopes, only to exact a bitter revenge when he finds he has been mistaken. There is no comedy about the description of his vengeance, which exposes the similar falsity of Norman's pretensions and helps to precipitate him on his course to the edge of ruin and disgrace.

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K

He laughed again, and turning to Oscar, said, "That's how old Oscar got this one, the one't's name was No-Name. His old man put him in a bag and tried to lose him. Oscar picked him up and took him home. Ain't that so, Mister Shillingworth?" Again he laughed and said to the guests, "And his old man murdered an inoffensive old Chow for thirty quid - Oh the high and mighty Shillingworth! "

Norman rushed at him and struck him on the jaw. He fell in a heap, senseless. (p. 253)

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There is neither comedy nor vitality in this passage, just old ills combining to destroy the present euphoria. Ket's refusal to accept himself and ignore the opinion of others, Norman's arrogant assumption of superiority, Oscar's cowardice in hiding Norman's origins from him, and the failure of anyone to recognise Ket as a human being and to see what has been happening to him, all play a part in cutting through the social conventions and revealing the unpleasant truth of destructive pride, intolerance and bitterness on which they rest.

The only consistently developed character in the novel is Norman Shillingworth. Even on his first significant appearance, when he is taken from Flying Fox and then by the Copper Creek train to be delivered to Jock Driver, he becomes the centre of consciousness through whom the reader sees the events.

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K

He had no time to recall the desolation. Scarcely had he recovered from the welcome when the locomotive came. It came horribly, rumbling and grumbling and clanking and hissing, all the more horribly because it could not be seen. All the piccaninnies stiffened. Their faces became blank. Their eyes widened and assumed expressions of sightlessness

that told of full sensory powers flung into the one of tense audition. The locomotive stopped, so close that its hot breath choked the listeners and its frightful noises entered their very hearts.

A terrible voice - "Good-o-ease-up! "

Hssssssssssss! (p. 52)

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Although the vocabulary is adult, the consciousness is that of the child. This is necessary to prepare us to accept the blind terror which shortly afterwards enables him to escape from Jock Driver's plans and establish himself with Oscar.

It is, however, in the latter part of the book that the treatment of Norman differs markedly from that given to the other characters. This indicates a difference in the nature of the author's interest in him. By the time the Shillingworths return to the North after the Great War, the author has said almost all there is to be said about the way life is seen to be. The first section of the book describes the coming of the whites, and is focussed on the image of the dingo and the person of Ned Krater. The second section shows us how this environment treats its subjects, first through the contrasting patterns of the two newcomers, Mark and Oscar Shillingworth, and then in the fate of Tim O'Cannon. These particular stories are amplified and reinforced in the lives of others and in the scenes of Compound, railway and camp, but the story of Tim both focusses and epitomises<sup>z</sup> them all. If the first section showed<sup>s</sup> us what the white men did to the land, this<sup>episode</sup> shows us what the land does to the men. But after the tragedy of Tim there could be little more than repetition. What the rest of

the novel does is to change our stance from that of spectator to that of participant by enabling us to share the experience of one man trying to shape the pattern of life according to his own will.

Norman's education in the ways of Capricornia can be divided into two stages. In the first, he assumes that he can force life to fit his expectations. This assumption is destroyed by a series of blows as he learns the implications of his color<sup>u</sup> and of the country. He discovers that he is the son, not of a Javanese princess, but of a gin. Sydney Gigney teaches him that he is not good enough for white girls. (pp. 256-8). Then, caught through his own blindness by the Wet, he finds that he needs the skill of the aborigines to survive in the wilderness (pp. 269-70). He is rejected by his foster-sister, discovers the truth about his father, and is finally left alone by the death of Oscar.

If the first stage of Norman's education has been the discovery of the truth about himself, the second stage is the discovery of his true self. He finds this when he goes in search of his real father, wanders in the wilds with Tocky, defends his father on one murder charge and himself on another, and then in the moment of restored prosperity encounters the remains of Tocky and his child in the tank. Compared with the earlier sections, this<sup>one</sup> is rather diffuse, and interest is kept moving by a complex plot and by the introduction of such new characters as the Shouter and <sup>by</sup> the return to the spectator style of the earlier part of the book. It is uncertain whether Norman learns the truth about himself or whether he continues to evade it as he has attempted to evade Tocky, but there is

no doubt that the Norman who is revealed to the reader is a much hollower person than the grand young man <sup>who defies</sup> ~~defying~~ the world in the centre chapters. His attempt to find a pattern in life <sup>has failed</sup> ~~has failed~~ as singularly as his attempt to impose <sup>a pattern on</sup> ~~it~~. All that remains is the cry of the crow. The final impression of the novel is not that of a universe where destructiveness is matched by creative vigour, but rather of one where the rich variety of life is finally brought to nothing. Not only are the helpless, like Tocky, and the good, like Tim O'Cannon, destroyed, but even the more or less likable, like Mark or Norman himself, betray their fellows and are sapped of vigour and purpose.

Herbert's Capricornia is not, of course, the Northern Territory, let alone Australia. It is an imaginative world of his own created from the elements of his experience in northern Australia. But, although at times he does contrast Capricornia with the effete world of the South, it does stand in his novel for the Australia of his imagination. This is made explicit in Chapter <sup>XXIV</sup> ~~Twenty-Four~~, when Andy McRandy talks of "the Great Bunyip, the Spirit of this Southern Land of ours, the Lord of your Aboriginal forefathers from the beginnin' of time, and now the Lord of us who's growin' up in your forefathers' place and goin' the same old manly carefree way ... " (p. 283). The very distinction Andy makes between the tameable South and the wild North emphasises <sup>z</sup> Herbert's point that the North is the true, the archetypal Australia. Andy then expresses the belief that the peculiar ethos of Australia can be found in its national song, "Waltzing Matilda," with its tribal views on property. There is, however,

nothing in the action of the novel to validate this belief, ~~but~~ the belief in Australia as a special place is implied both by Norman's futile attempt to escape to Singapore (p. 328) and, ironically, by Ket's delight to be back on "that best of good earth, Australia" (p. 403) after his attempted flight by dinghy to the Indies.

Capricornia can, therefore, be taken as Xavier Herbert's Australia, and it is certainly a place he delights in. If he is deeply cynical about its past and about its society, when he speaks explicitly through McRandy or Differ he seems optimistic about the future. Yet in the novel there are no grounds for such optimism. His world is one which temporarily entrances with its vigour, but ultimately proves sterile. For all his apparent enjoyment of the turbulence of life, Herbert finds even less meaning in it than does <sup>Patrick</sup> White in his earliest writing.

The world of each of these <sup>discussed in this chapter</sup> ~~writers~~ <sup>z</sup> writers - Prichard, Richardson, Herbert - is recognisably that of Clarke and Lawson and Furphy. Like the earlier writers, they are concerned with life as it is now rather than with metaphysical implications. This is true even of Richardson, who takes as her central character a man who himself is explicitly concerned with spiritual questions. The final justification for his life, however, and that of Mary, is in his last two words, "Dear wife!" (p. 985). These words point to a relationship which has, however precariously, survived.

Similarly, in Prichard's novel it is the relationship of Coonardoo and Hughie, and in Capricornia of Oscar and Norman, which achieve value in



the face of fate, even although in all three novels fate ultimately proves stronger. In acknowledging the power of fate the three novelists also admit the possibility of tragedy. They no longer turn aside to nostalgia or dreams of mateship to avoid the implications of the world as they see it. The acceptance of tragedy, of the gap between ~~men's~~ aspirations and their achievements, makes a crucial difference between this world and that of their immediate predecessors, for it involves a <sup>realisation</sup> of the precariousness of human relationships. This <sup>realisation</sup> leads to a pessimism, which in Herbert verges on nihilism as men and nature combine to destroy everything of value they ever discover. Man's need for companionship becomes his greatest vulnerability, and instead of looking to his mates for support he finds in them too often only betrayal.

These writers also share with their predecessors an air of provinciality. This is most marked in Prichard, who is also closest to ~~the tradition of~~ <sup>the</sup> idealised Australianism of Gilmore or Davison. Her world is that of the outback, <sup>while</sup> ~~with~~ the cities on the fringe <sup>are seen</sup> as agents of foreign contamination and destruction. In Herbert's novel, the outside world presents an illusion of escape, in the form of Singapore and the islands, and a place to avoid the real problems for a while, as Oscar, Marigold and Norman do in Sydney. Otherwise, it is an extension of Capricornia, with the <sup>great</sup> ~~war~~ merely another form of the violence which <sup>characterises</sup> ~~characterises~~ the action of the novel. <sup>33</sup> Yet Herbert, in his concern for

<sup>41</sup> When Herbert turned his attention to Sydney during the second world war in Soldiers' Women (Sydney, 1961) he portrayed the city as the same kind of violent jungle he had shown in the north in Capricornia, but with little of humour or affection to balance it.

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life as it is rather than for life as it happens to be in Australia, is perhaps the most cosmopolitan of the three. He writes of the life he knows, but he uses it to examine universal themes. His Australianism is not so much theme as manner, a concentration on the outer rather than the inner life and a distrust of any form of sophistication.

Richardson, on the other hand, appears cosmopolitan. Her central character five times crosses the world, and is concerned with some of the leading intellectual questions of his day. Yet, although a leader in colonial society, the England he returns to is that of the provinces. His own background is decayed Irish gentility, and the Edinburgh in which he trained, then one of the world's leading medical schools, is no more than a name in the book. His very concern to maintain his intellectual pursuits is a mark of provincial pretension. In chronicling his life, Henry Handel Richardson's emphasis is not on the wider question of how a man must live, but on the narrower one of how a man can live in Australia.