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GEOFFRY HAMLYN AND

THE AUSTRALIAN MYTH

J. D. McLaren

TWO DREAMS

There is probably no novel so disliked by nationalist Australian writers as Henry Kingsley's The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn.[1] It seems to contain the worst feature of English romanticism, not only about Australia, but about life. While better English novels explore the implications of class barriers, this accepts them. The convicts are all from the lower orders, and conversely the only decent members of the lower orders are the loyal family retainers. The gentry, who have failed in England - due, it is implied, to the rise of the tradesman[2] - arrive in Australia and effortlessly resume the reign of the squires. After slight brushes with fire, romance and bushrangers, in that order, the narrative returns comfortably to Devon, where the second generation is properly restored to its ancestral acres, helped by a little land speculation in gold-happy Melbourne.

In the course of this history, every clash between a gentleman and another is resolved in favor of the gentleman. The epitome of the gentry is, of course, young Sam Buckley, the accomplished horseman, fine bushman and brave fighter who was later satirized so bitterly by Furphy. But he is only the best of a bunch on whom the gods lavish wealth and success as a continuing tribute to their inherent superiority. The only exception to this rule is the fate of Mary Hawker and her son, which provides the mainspring for the action of the plot. Mary is so misguided as to prefer the son of a farmer to one of her own class, and the son born of this union is of course inferior to his fellows, despite the advantages of a fine station and gentle nurture to counteract the stains of heredity.

> The poor, puling little babe, born in misery and disaster, Mary Hawker's boy, Charles!
> . . . the smallest of all the lads, and perhaps the most unhappy. For the truth must be told: he was morose and uncertain in his temper; and although all the other boys bore with him most generously . . . yet he was hardly a favorite amongst them; and the poor boy, sometimes perceiving this, would withdraw from his play, and sulk alone, resisting all the sober, kind inducements of Sam, and the merry, impetuous persuasions of Jim, to return.[3]

There is here just possibly enough awareness of inner conflict to have made poor Charles the centre of interest in the novel, but Kingsley prefers to push this opportunity aside and

concentrate instead on the chain of circumstances which brings Charles and his father face to face, with the result that the father slays the son. It is significant that this event is treated pathetically rather than tragically, and that its function in the plot is to allow Mary at last to marry the remaining one of her childhood sweethearts and commence the breeding of a family of unsullied blood. It is also significant that the precipitating factor in the event should be a currency lad, 'the longest, brownest, stupidest of the Hawbuck family. The one who could spit farther than any of his brothers.'[4]

A source of even greater irritation to the nationalist reader is the author's preference of all things British. This appears not only in the plot, with its exaltation of the virtues of British stock and its eventual return to British shores, but also explicitly in the dialogue. Thus, when the younger generation are riding near the Murray Gates their thoughts turn to the American War of Independence, and Sam and Jim both declare their loyalty to the Queen's side if such a conflict should ever arise in Australia.

> "But I don't think those Americans were in the wrong; do you, Miss Brentwood?" said Sam.
> "Why no; I don't suppose that such a man as General Washington, for instance, would have had much to do with them, if they had been."

> "However," said Sam, "we are talking of what will never occur. To begin with, we could never stand alone against a great naval power. They would shut us up here to starve. We have everything to lose, and nothing to gain by a separation. I would hardly like, myself, for the sake of a few extra pounds taxes, to sell my birthright as an Englishman."
>
> "Conceive," said Alice, "being in some great European city, and being asked if you were British, having to say, No!"[5]

It is not merely the declaration of loyalty which is discomforting, for much the same could still be heard today among ~~the~~ Western District homes where Kingsley commenced his book.[6] It is rather the sense that, although the author may have hailed this land in a well-known passage as 'a new heaven and a new earth',[7] his characters' very sense of identity is tied up on the other side of the globe. For all his lyric ecstasy about the landscape, its only function is as a theatre for Englishmen to play out their domestic squabbles. The reference to Washington has a similar belittling effect in relation to the North American continent. By implicitly accepting him as an English squire it reduces the whole War of Independence to the status of a quarrel between neighboring shires.

From these assumptions of superiority flows inevitably the novel's condescension towards both aborigines and bushrangers. The aborigines are seen as merely colorful extras, supplying a little exotic vocabulary for the delectation of English readers, but eventually being put in their place with a gallant charge when they hit back at those who are occupying their country. The author's ambiguity to them is shown by the fact that the man they spear has been their champion, James Stockbridge, but his championship has been limited to urging that they be treated humanely, and has not extended to attempting to view the situation through their eyes.[8] Similarly, the bushrangers and their companions among the convicts and hutkeepers are not presented as individual characters so much as personalities whose function is to provide an opportunity for bold action on the part of the squatters and their friends.

All these qualities of the book can be explained if it is accepted that the author is writing a romance, not a realistic novel. Whereas the novelist proper is concerned with the elucidation of character through action, the romancer is interested in ideal characters, exciting action and exotic settings. Consequently, although Geoffry Hamlyn has all the properties of the bush story, it has none of the reality. The bushfire, vividly as it is described, is not a grimy, fatiguing reality, but the occasion for an exciting ride. Similarly, the actual process of settling on the land is almost completely

omitted. We see the patriarchs arrive with their herds in the 'new heaven, new earth' chapter; two chapters later the Major entertains his neighbors for Christmas with every appearance of affluence; two more chapters and his Baroona station has its own homestead, complete with a garden, deep verandas, French windows and a cellar stocked with claret.[9] Although the subsequent adventures take us several times to the borders of the wilderness, this is always for a set piece of action - the encounter with the aborigines or the fight with the bushrangers - rather than for any everyday business. The latter is transacted either within doors, in surroundings differing in no way from an English county house, or in parklike country which offers no obstacle to human activity.

It is this lack of any sense of encounter with the country which seems to require that the author import conflict with men instead. The country seems to need man's seal put on it to make it his own. This feeling is most evident during the ride when the young people discuss the War of Independence. There is a feeling that this virgin continent has still to be made over through great deeds.

> They were coming through the lower pass, and turned to look back on the beautiful rock-walled amphitheatre, sleeping peaceful and still under the afternoon sun. The next time (so it happened) that Sam and Jim looked at that scene together, was under very different circumstances. Now the fronds of the fern-trees were scarce moved in the summer's

> breeze, and all was as silent as the grave. They saw it all again - when every fern tuft blazed with musketry, and the ancient cliffs echoed with the shouts of fighting, and the screams of dying men and horses.[10]

The key to the passage is the word 'sleeping'. To Kingsley, the land is still waiting for history to begin, and the only history he can conceive is the history of battle. The land itself is not a part of the drama, and he has no sense of the struggle which was required to make real the dreams of the settlers, nor of the change which the struggle would make to these dreams.

The faults and virtues of Kingsley's work have been dealt with elsewhere.[11] His lack of interest in the struggle for the land is not in itself a deficiency, and his work undoubtedly shows a fresh apprehension of the native beauties of the river tablelands. The question raised by Geoffry Hamlyn, however, is not merely its status as a novel, but also the way in which it represents the shaping of the Australian imagination. For the book cannot be dismissed as merely the romantic product of a visiting Englishman if in fact the attitudes it expresses were derived from and have continued to be held by a wide range of Australians themselves.

Certainly, the notion of Australia as a promised land is deeply embedded in its history. Manning Clarke, in his History of Australia, chronicles the dreams invested in these

shores by Spanish Catholics, Dutch traders and English politicians.[12] In the actual process of settlement, these aspirations were transmuted into the baronial dreams of the colonial magnates, the visions of a prosperous community of the governors, the hopes of personal wealth of the traders and the dreams of sufficiency of the workers. Although Geoffry Hamlyn gives expression chiefly to the first of these dreams, we see glimpses of the others in the references to Melbourne.[13] Moreover, the casual nature of establishing lordly rights over broad acres which we find in Kingsley is parallelled in such a sober example of emigrant literature as Alexander Harris' Settlers and Convicts.[14] Harris is realistically aware of the hazards of settlement, and devotes a chapter to providing an awful example of failure, together with advice on how to avoid the same fate. Harris' improvident settler is, in fact, unfortunately like Hamlyn's heroes Major Buckley and Captain Brentwood. He has an excellent bloodhorse and long experience in the army. However, it is not this which causes his downfall, but his complete disinclination to work and his indifference to the practical necessities of settlement. Although Hamlyn does not consider these matters worthy of discussion, he does leave the reader room to infer that his settlers put considerable effort into their properties during the sixteen years which elapse

between their arrival and the main events of the Australian part of his novel.

Alexander Harris' narrative is perhaps, through the very practicality of its tone and purpose, an even greater tribute to the strength of the Australian dream than is Kingsley's more high-blooded tale. Harris, writing as an Emigrant Mechanic, sees society from below. His companions are the shepherds and hutkeepers who appear in Geoffry Hamlyn only as loyal retainers like William Lee and Dick, or as white savages waiting on the redeeming powers of the gentlemanly and muscular parson.[15] Yet Harris' story is an account of the way in which a man, starting with nothing more than the ability to work hard, can attain to wealth and property. His journey in search of a suitable station is described more elaborately than the parallel event in Kingsley, but it is essentially of the same kind, and shows the same disregard for the rights of the original inhabitants.[16] The description of the station site itself could, apart from the cattleman's eye for the practical siting of hut and yards, come from Geoffry Hamlyn.

> . . . - a fine tract of flats of good grass, open timbered, and stretching a good mile and a half along a creek side, with fine clear downs on the left backing the flats, and a steep stony ridge rising immediately from the farther bank of the creek to thick forest land, so peculiarly desirable for cattle in either very hot or very cold weather. About the middle there was an

> excellent broad easy hill for the hut and the stock-yard; and just opposite, on the hilly side of the creek, a gap in the range leading up to another tract of flat, with plenty of water and open ground for a considerable distance.[17]

This blending of the practical and the idyllic can also be found in some of the explorers' accounts. For example, Major Mitchell in Australia Felix:

> July 13. - We had at length discovered a country ready for the immediate reception of civilized man; and destined perhaps to become eventually a portion of a great empire. Unencumbered by too much wood, it yet possessed enough for all purposes . . . Of this Eden I was the first European to explore its mountains and streams - to behold its scenery - to investigate its geological character, and, by my survey, to develop those natural advantages, certain to become, at no distant date, of vast importance to a new people . . .[18]

The blending of rational and romantic is characteristic, as is the peculiar moral limitation of the vision. The sources of racism can be discerned in the way the romantic imagination warps the vision of the scientist so that the only dream for a new land is a new nation perpetuating the stereotypes of the old. It only required the touch of the practical to disappear to give us the 'new heaven . . . new earth' of Geoffry Hamlyn.

This new heaven could, of course, be established only after the expulsion of the earlier inhabitants. Kingsley, as we have seen, merely alludes to this, and the main stress

of conflict in his book is on the encounter between gentlemen and bushrangers. Writers who had actually engaged in the process of settlement were, naturally, more aware of the real struggles for occupation. Alexander Harris devotes two chapters and some of his concluding 'Remarks at Large' to the subject. He is well aware of the moral truth that the white race is 'robbing another of its land and its means of subsistence', and has the grace to be revolted at the hypocrisy with which the white race then seeks to evangelize the blacks whom it is dispossessing.[19] He also recognizes, however, that the conflict follows inevitably on the fact of settlement, and that 'The blacks cannot be conciliated unless by giving up their country.' If this course is not to be followed, he argues, open violence must be accepted, or the worse remedy of poisoning will be resorted to. 'If they are to be intimidated, it must be by something more prompt and effective than their own spear, and less dilatory than our law.'[20] This surrender to necessity he justifies in an appeal to the fashionable doctrine of social progress: 'I believe . . . that the force of contrareity in extrinsic things is the secret law of subjective intelligent progress and so of social progress at large.'[21] So the rights of the Aborigines are surrendered to a tortuous abstraction.

Harris' conscience is not quite stilled by these reflections, however. His attachment to the principles of

happiness and human rights prevents him welcoming the establishment of a new feudalism in the former tribal lands; he prefers the older dream of a sturdy yeomanry of smallholders, who will incidentally ameliorate the injustice of their occupation by providing useful employment for the surviving natives.[22] The remarkable quality of Harris' account is the way in which he perceives that the Australian dream of a new democracy is inevitably rooted in an act of gross injustice.

The heirs of this dream could not permit themselves a similar honesty. E.M. Curr, in so many ways a humane and likable man, is unable to comprehend how the happy tribes of the mid-Murray disintegrated so soon after his settlement, and implies some inner debility in the native race as the cause.[23] Rolf Boldrewood, Kingsley's admirer and the man who is said to have encouraged him to write Geoffry Hamlyn,[24] has suppressed any guilt feelings by the simple process of excluding Aborigines from the human comity.

Boldrewood's recollections, although they were written a quarter of a century later than Geoffry Hamlyn, are significant as being a realistic account of the same stage of settlement that Kingsley romanticizes, and as being the views of one of the class and group of men among whom he was living when he commenced his novel and with whom his fictional narrator and heroes are identified. We can even recognize Sam Buckley's

accents when Boldrewood, recalling his decision to stay and fight for his run, rather than abandon it to the blacks, explains that 'It would hardly have been English to do the latter.'[25] At least Harris uses necessity to justify a similar decision. In the light of attitude, Boldrewood's moralistic resolve to delay his attack until the natives 'have done something to deserve it'[26] seems nothing more than a manifestation of the gentlemanly code which served to maintain the settlers' certainty of their own superiority.

The complete perversion of the settlers' moral perceptions appears in the account Boldrewood gives at second hand of a punitive raid conducted by one of his neighbors against a party of Aborigines who have carried off his sheep.

> . . . And shortly too sure an indication of the reckless greed and cruelty of the savage was furnished.
>
> Passing round an angular ridge of boulders, suddenly they came upon about a hundred young sheep, which had been left behind. 'But why are they all lying down?' said one of the party.
>
> The tracker paused, and, lifting up a hind-leg of one of the helpless brutes, showed without speech that the limb was useless.
>
> The robbers had dislocated the hind legs as a simple preventive of locomotion; to insure their being in the same place when it should please their captors to return and eat them.
>
> 'I never felt so wolfish in my life', said Mr. Cox to me, afterwards, 'as when I saw the poor things turn up their eyes reproachfully as they lay, as if imploring our assistance.'

Consequently, when the party comes up with the natives, Mr. Cox thoroughly enjoys the sport of revenge.

> 'It was the first time I had ever levelled a gun at my fellow man . . . I did so without regret or hesitation in this instance. I never remember having the feeling that I could not miss so strong in me - except in snipe shooting. I distinctly remember knocking over <u>three</u> blacks, two men and a boy, with one discharge of my double barrel.'[27]

Boldrewood does not accomplish this savagery without considerable effort. When he first mentions the aborigines, it is with reasonable detachment.[28] However, he then starts to recount tales of atrocity which give substance to his friends' warnings that he should 'keep the blacks at a distance.'[29] These warnings, as he is 'young and foolish', he disregards, so giving the reader further evidence of his innocence. Nevertheless, this innocence is combined with a certain romantic practicality, as the settlers carry guns with them 'as might the border settlers in "Injun" territory.'[30] In case we miss the reference, two pages later he draws an explicit parallel between a murderous old Scot and Deerfoot. Although a couple of pages later he is defending his neighbors and himself as 'philanthropists' and scholars,[31] the zeal with which he recounts episodes like the casual double murder belies his own protestations.[32] The protestations are necessary however in order to suppress guilt. The savagery with which he relates the battle is motivated by his belief that his goodwill has been betrayed. This ability to see themselves

as the injured party was necessary to the settlers' maintenance of their self-esteem.

However, although this kind of conflict could be justified, it could not be ennobled even by as fine a story-teller as Rolf Boldrewood. If the victors were to enjoy their possessions, they had to construct a new myth so that they could feel that the land was truly theirs. It is to this need for an ennobling and justificatory myth of the land that The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn appeals. It is precisely because Kingsley replaced the grim realities of settlement with a myth celebrating the triumph of good over evil that his myth was so appealing.