

“The Poetry of Heaven”: The Polar Star and the Southern Cross

Constellation in Australian Poetry, 1833—1899

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Introduction

The “Polar Star” figured as a recognisable celestial marker during the Victorian period, adopting many metonymic guises in the English Victorian imagination including as a design principle, “a changeling polar star” (Mitford 252) and an architectural motif, rosettes decorating some Gothic Cathedrals “each represent[ing] a central or polar star” (Behun 22). Other representations included maritime structures, such as the Bell-Rock Tower, a lighthouse erected at the mouth of a harbour in the ancient township of Arbroath, Scotland, “termed the mariner’s polar star that steers him past death and certain destruction” (Sands 48). Verse-writing too embraced the potential of the polar star motif as metonymic device, with English Romantic poet John Keats’ (1795–1821) “test of invention,” the long poem, representing for him “the *Polar Star of Poetry*” (Keats 35).

But the Victorians also drew rich inspiration for their artistic and literary mythologising of the polar star from contemporary efforts to explore a northwest passage to Asia “*by passing over the north pole*” (Silliman 101). The British fascination with the discovery of the Northwest Passage had its origins in the late 16th century, when, in 1585, English scientific navigator John Davis (c. 1550–1605), together with Adrian Gilbert (c. 1541–1628) and Sir Walter Raleigh (c. 1552–1618) were granted a patent by Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603) under the name of “[The Colleagues of the] Fellowship of the Discovery of the Northwest Passage” (Vincent 339). The lure of the North Pole thus preoccupied the Victorian imagination as the definitive “sublime point” (Silliman 102), the point at which all angular distances, longitudes and latitudes, meet.

Many examples of poetry throughout the period map the figurative emergence of the polar star as Gothic symbol of the sublime, inspiring a sense of profound “vastness”, or “Infinity”, and producing “the strongest emotion of which the mind is capable” (Burke, *Philosophical Inquiry* 112, 114). Being closest to the North Pole, “Polaris”—the “pole” star, the “polar” star, or the “North star”—as seen from the Northern Hemisphere, never set below the horizon, and therefore attracted metonymic power as “the seaman’s guide” (Vincent 371). Thus, the polar star linked the Victorian imagination with geographical orientation, and by extension, symbolised a navigational point mapping the distance between self and “home.” It is a sentiment British poet and peer George Gordon (Lord) Byron (1788–1824) immortalises in his poem “Lachin Y Gair” (“Dark Lochnagar”) (1807):

Ah! there my young footsteps in infancy wandered;
My cap was the bonnet, my cloak was the plaid;
On chieftains long perished my memory pondered,
As daily I strode through the pine-covered glade;
I sought not my home till the day’s dying glory
Gave place to the rays of the bright polar star (Moore 22)

The speaker in Byron's "Lachin Y Gair" relies on the polar star's appearance in the night sky as a beacon via which to navigate the journey home. The loss of the ability to sight that star as an orientational point is one which several women poets of the period experienced as a figurative loss of self. It is a celestial vision English poet and novelist Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802–1838), for instance, memorialised in the last lines she ever wrote. In "The Polar Star" (1839), composed during her voyage to Cape Coast, Western Africa, in 1838 (Blanchard 122), and published in *The New Monthly Magazine*, the poet noted "This star sinks below the horizon in certain latitudes," before confessing, "I watched it sink lower and lower every night, till at last it disappeared" (28–29):

A star has left the kindling sky—
A lovely northern light—
How many planets are on high!
But that has left the night.
I miss its bright familiar face,
It was a friend to me,
Associate with my native place,
And those beyond the sea.
It rose upon our English sky,
Shone o'er our English land,
And brought back many a loving eye,
And many a gentle hand.
It seem'd to answer to my thought,
It call'd the past to mind,
And with its welcome presence brought,
All I had left behind. (L.E.L 1839)

Underlying Landon's ostensibly optimistic verse runs a notable, and familiar, undercurrent of lament articulated best when she loses sight of this luminous orientational point off the coast of the southernmost region of the African continent:

But thou hast sunk below the wave,
Thy radiant place unknown;
I seem to stand beside a grave
And stand by it alone.

Writing in the following year, 1839, so powerfully did losing sight of the polar star grieve Landon's contemporary, English author Louisa Anne Meredith (1812–1895), during her journey to New South Wales from England, that she lamented in her journal:

Among the many strange changes which a passage from one side of the world to the other has shown me, I do not know one thing that I *felt* so much as the loss of the North Star. Night after night I watched it, sinking lower—lower ... it was like parting from my own loved home-faces over again (19).

And yet, alongside both Landon's longing for the symbolic power of this "shining orbit's" "loving rays," and Meredith's loss of the North Star as somehow akin to the parting of beloved "home-faces over again," were the contemporaneous theses that even for all "their intense blackness," celestial bodies affirm a kind of spatial awareness precisely because "all

these, as the European directs his eye towards the pole, announce that he is not very remote from his former antipodes, and he feels the emotions produced by an opposite firmament” (Davis 2). That star which had left Landon’s “kindling sky” was replaced for Meredith by a “new constellation of the southern hemisphere [which] seemed to my partial eyes far less splendid” (19). This “opposite firmament” characterising the night sky as seen from the latitudes below the equator was also one formally enshrined as a heraldic symbol in the Australian ecclesiastical consciousness by King William IV (1765–1837) in a declaration—an Exemplification of the Armorial Ensigns of the See—to the Lord Bishop of Australia, William Grant Broughton (1788–1853), in 1836, through the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Baron Glenelg (1778–1866). The ensign’s design comprised “Four stars of eight points in cross, representing the Crux Australis, or principal constellation of the Southern Hemisphere” (“Domestic Intelligence” 2).

The relation between the Southern Cross constellation and the topography of the Australian continent also resonated as a geographical trope appearing in more formal writings of the period, such as the theological commentary of English Egyptologist and biblical scholar Charles Wycliffe Goodwin’s (1817–1878):

Wherever dry land, or shallow lakes, or running stream appeared, from where Melville Island now spreads out its icy coast under the star of the pole, to where the arid plains of Australia lie solitary beneath the bright cross of the south, a rank, and luxuriant herbage cumbered every foot-breadth of the dank and steaming soil; and even to distant planets our earth must have shone through the enveloping cloud with a green and delicate ray. (Goodwin 3).

It is telling that in his project “to reconcile Genesis and geology” (Addinall 195), Goodwin reinforces this thesis by interlinking “the star of the pole” with “the bright cross of the South”—Crux, the Southern Cross constellation.¹ Here, Polaris is to north as Crux is to south, but the metaphor captures the dual and often contradictory points of reference for Australian colonials. Polaris symbolised the “Old World, signifying, England representing “home” while Crux reimagined the “New World,” signifying Australia, representing “not-at-home.” That Crux as celestial body afforded Australian colonials both a date-point and a landmark perhaps explains why the Southern Cross constellation was not only “best known to Australians,” but “adopted as their emblem” (“Notes from the Observatory” 6). And while Goodwin’s allusions typify references to Australia’s geographical remoteness, its arid topographical rankness—fecund but fetid—and “the dank and steaming soil” vividly fusty and torrid, it is itself an imaginative orientation privileging “the experience of the coloniser abroad” (Warwick 108). Thus, within the frame of colonial experiences of migration and settlement, poetry of the period meditating on both Polaris and Crux tracks a literary discourse of displacement in which conceptions of identity and home—between the familiar and the unfamiliar—challenge emergent conceptualisations of the relationship between geographical positioning and belongingness.

¹ Goodwin’s quote embodies a much larger doctrinal thesis critiquing the evidence (or not) of “divine revelation”—the idea that it is possible to address the creation story in the book of Genesis in the light of modern science (Craik 161).

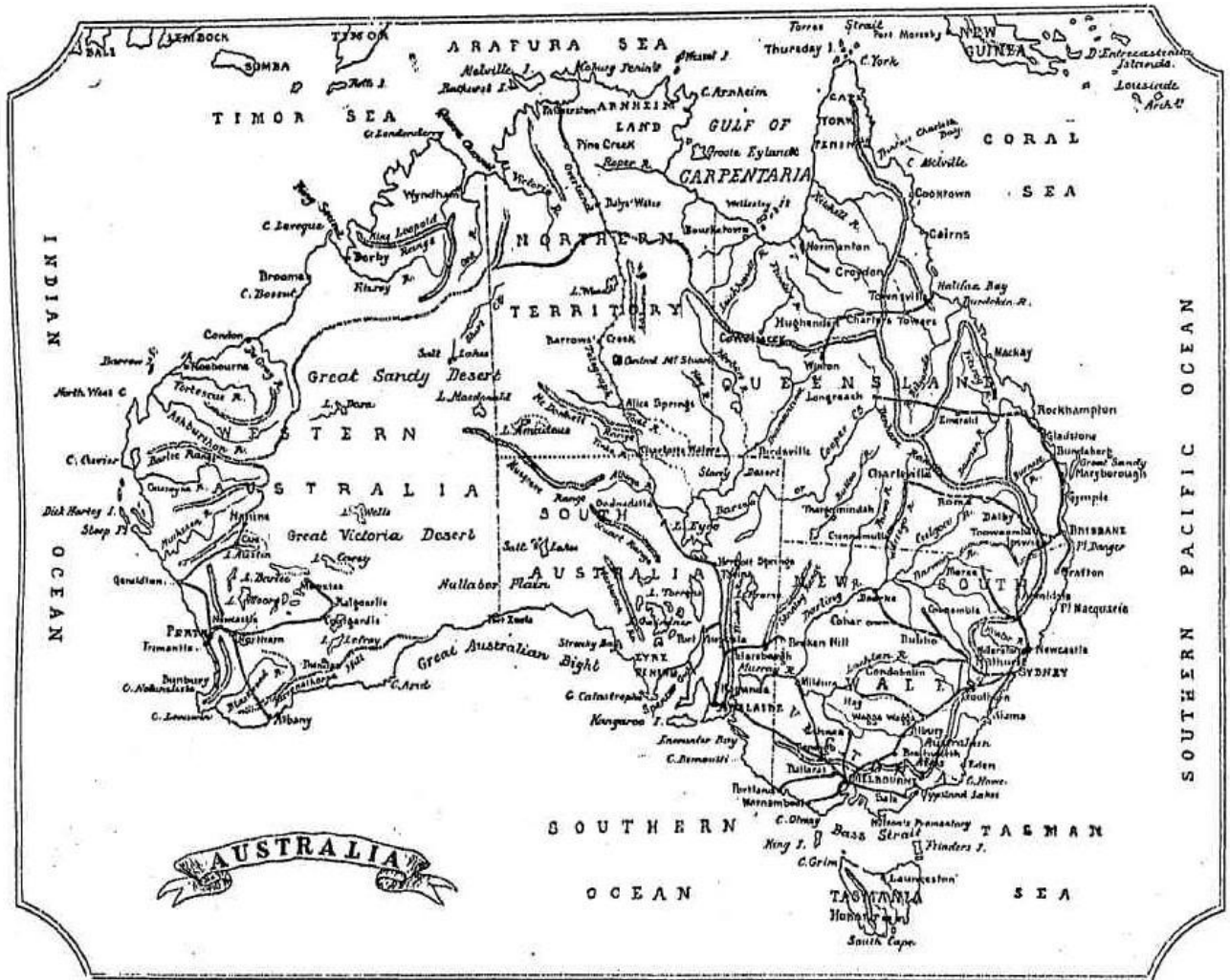


Fig. 1. Map of Australia (Ephrem 32).

Colonial Poetry and the Gothic

Australian colonial poetry employing the metonymic power of Polaris—"Old World" (England)—in opposition to Crux—"New World" (Australia)—presented a means by which to grapple with the past while conveying that past into the present through both historical backdrops and narrative disconnections. Familiar and shifting celestial bodies challenging traditional paradigms of orientation and place-ness underscored a kind of geographical terror which inspired contemporary poets in this period of colonisation to muse on "the experience of otherness" (Warwick 108), a form of contemplating the sublime quintessentially central to the Australian colonial Gothic. In these literary forms we see the precursors of tropes informing more latter-day ideals of the Australian Gothic—"fear-inspiring dramatic landscape imagery, dark uncanny hybrids of European and Indigenous mythology, images of violent horror, and a pervasive mood of melancholy" (Johnson 239)—but we also see something more: a less surveyed concept of the "image overhead" as a "celestial presence" (Craven 68).

Alexandra Warwick (108) contends that it is possible to divide colonial Gothic literature into two general themes, one taking "Britain as its setting and the other dealing with the experience of the coloniser abroad." The coloniser's gaze meditating on the night sky brings

into view how the coloniser's experience might change how they see their universe and their place in the world. The overhead sky as seen in the British setting is no longer a familiar thing. While the "gothic" as a literary concept is an umbrella term inspiring a variety of definitions—as a "hybrid form, incorporating and transforming other literary forms" (Botting 14); as "a discursive site crossing the genres" (Miles 176); and as a site of movement defined in part "by its ability to transport itself *across* forms and media" (Gamer 4)—Catherine Spooner (9) fittingly characterises its spatial undercurrents as epitomising a profound concern "with the past, conveyed through both historical settings and narrative interruptions of the past into the present."

The Symbolism of the Southern Cross in Australian Colonial Poetry

The sky as colonial Gothic space represented for settlers a non-earthbound expanse "unpredictably various, full of hidden ascents and descents, sudden turnings, [and] unexpected subspaces" (Wilt 10). Consider, for instance, the following two stanzas opening Henry Halloran's (1811–1893) fifteen stanza poem "Thought and Death" (1833):

I.

And shall I never rest again,
Thought will't thou ever be
The madd'ning vulture of my brain?
Worse than Prometheus' "rock and chain,"
Art thou fierce fiend to me;
My temples throb, and ache, and burn,
And vainly on my couch I turn.

II.

Deep in the starry noon of night,
My own quick tramp I hear,
It's echoes fill me with affright,
My shadow shoots before my sight,
Yet what have *I* to fear?
I see the star-strewn heaven with pain,
And wish that it were morn again (Halloran 4).

The opening two stanzas of "Thought and Death" (1833) set the scene for a unique thematic example of the conception of the overhead sky as Gothic space in the colonial imagination. The poem's speaker alludes to the relentless thoughts of a restless mind—throbbing, aching, burning—as a punishment crueller than the chains binding the Greek Titan Prometheus to a rock, an eagle feasting upon his liver daily. Vainly upon his couch the speaker turns, the thoughts of his mind wandering for a moment in the direction of the overhead: "Deep in the starry noon of night," echoes of the narrator's quickened footfalls fill the speaker with momentary "affright." Dark shadows spring forth in this seemingly alien space, external, and unknown, fleetingly perhaps evoking in the poet's imagination "a species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (123), in the words of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). As the poem is a mediation of the nature of "thought" and "death," Halloran consistently draws on various allusions to the overhead—heaven, nightfall, stars ("glorious orbs of night"), and the planets (earth, "Bright Venus" and "Jove")

[Jupiter])—as powerful metonymic devices alluding to humanity, mortality, and “How little [man] has known of mind.” What the narrator of Halloran’s poem sees when he divines the “star-strewn-heaven” from the Southern Hemisphere is an arrangement of celestial bodies strangely familiar but also foreign and puzzling: known but unknown; recognisable while unrecognisable. It is a fear exemplified by seeing “the star-strewn heaven with pain / And wish[ing] that it were morn again.” Halloran is only one of many colonial poets engaged in contemplating the overhead sky as unfamiliar thing: a gothic space that effectively defeats the poet’s efforts to separate him/herself from it.

I’ve wandered ‘neath thy midnight sky,
In bright effulgence beaming,
And watching the Southern cross in high,
The starry radiance gleaming;
But other stars o’er my household grave,
Their silent watch are keeping,
And my heart has crossed the far blue waves,
To where my loved are sleeping. (S 16)

Here, the poem “Song” (1843), published under the initial “S,” fashions a geographical space identifiably Australian under the beacon of the Southern Cross. The narrator’s verse is a lamentation, a yearning for home, and while noting the starry radiance of the Southern cross on high, the “silent watch” of those other stars above the speaker’s “household grave,” inspires only melancholy. The poet’s heart seeks solace elsewhere, reaching toward a place far across the blue waves, back to where familiar loved ones lay dreaming.

Such references in colonial poetry to the Southern Cross located Australia as an Antipodean point; a place opposite to England, with its two pointers—Alpha Centauri and Beta Centauri (belonging to the constellation of Centaurus)—used literally and metaphorically as a navigational device to locate the South Pole (Maher 2014). The poem “Song” lyrically expresses a settler’s sense of longing for the familiar and displacement at its loss. Placed against this context, colonial poetry utters “the extreme practical importance of the polar star” (Serviss 4), on the one hand, while embracing the Southern Cross constellation as typifying Australia (Nemo 5)—“symbolising at once Republicanism, Federalism and resistance” (National Library of Australia “Replica,” 10)—on the other. Poetic visions of star gazing toward the Southern night sky vacillate between the orbital reality of celestial markers, and the influences of Gothic romanticism from which it drew; a “cult of the Gothic”, to use Tom Duggett’s term, and “a sub-set of literary and social practices ... that might be called ‘Gothic culture’” (8).

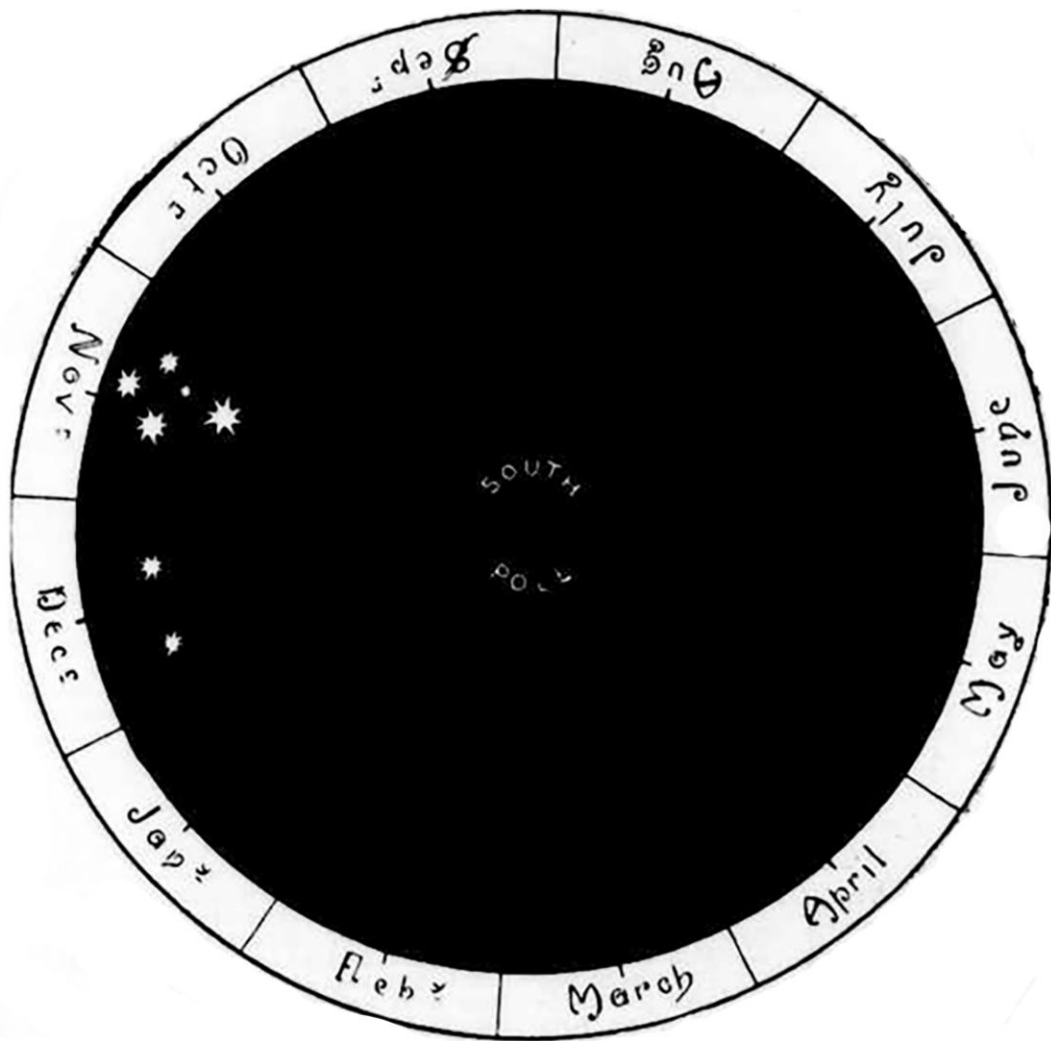


Fig. 2. An illustration of “The Southern Cross”² published in *Australian Town and Country Journal* in 1897 (28).

Jane Taylor (2021) has argued that the Southern Cross is the oldest of all Australia’s symbols, dating its iconographical origins as a stand in for Australia well before both European settlement and the infamous Eureka Stockade insurrection in 1854. Over two decades before that rebellion, for instance, the vast separateness of Australia was a point of interest for J. Davis in his article entitled “The Southern Celestial Hemisphere: At Sydney and Swan River” (1832), originally published in several English journals and reprinted in Australian newspapers and journals shortly thereafter. Believing that the stars expressed the “poetry of heaven,” capable of capturing the “feelings of the intellectual observer” more forcefully than botany or the land (89), Davis asserted that the meridian altitude of the sun for settlers on the Swan River, at Fremantle, in Western Australia, for instance, changed depending on the season. “In these regions it [wa]s impossible for the colonists to contemplate the starry heavens and not recognise from their physiognomy that [...] The north polar star and its

² “The diagram serves to show the position of the Cross at 9 p.m. throughout the year, by so turning it that the name of the month is towards the spectator. Then taking it as a picture, that is with the nearest side as the bottom and the further as the top, it represents the Cross at 9 p.m. It also will tell the position for every hour.”

asterism is hidden for ever from his sight” (2). It is the turning of “heav’nly orbs with ease” (Blackmore 67) because here, in the Southern Hemisphere, “Two stars, the north polar star and the south polar star, directly opposite each other, were the axles upon which the firmament turned its endless round” (Wright 31).

Sighting the Southern Cross constellation accommodated instituting a new marker of topographical place that both captured and accentuated, to some degree, the anxiety experienced by the coloniser abroad in the “Newest New World.”³ During the mid-1850s, for instance, many of the original colonisers—“the earliest European inhabitants [who] raised a roof in this newest New World”—were still living (“Australian Independence” 2). Indeed, it was from their viewpoint that colonisers began distinguishing the geographical strangeness of Australia’s topographical location by recognising the winter and summer solstices, with the north polar star’s relevance no longer the primary point of orientation (unlike in England). Moreover, the sheer expanse of the Australian continent meant that colonisers on the western shores interpreted their understanding of place using cardinal points that differed significantly to those residing on Australia’s eastern seaboard.

While Crux (Latin, *cross*) is the smallest constellation in the night sky, the Southern Cross is easily identifiable by the kite-shaped cross pattern made by its five stars (see Figure 2). It was a distinctive constellation, near the south celestial pole, that “came to symbolise the discovery of new celestial regions, which proved—at least to the naked eye—to have even richer variety of stars than the northern sky” (Lachière-Rey and Luminet 91).⁴ For instance, while for his last voyage into the unknown in *Inferno*, Ulysses determines to navigate south-westerly until he could see “the stars/of the other pole” (Canto 26), Dante Alighieri (c. 1265–1321) refers to Crux—“four stars”—(Southern Cross) many times in *The Divine Comedy* (1321):

To the right hand, I turned and fixed my mind
Upon the other Pole, and saw four stars
Ne-er seen before save by the primal people.
Rejoicing in their flamelets seemed the heaven.
O thou septentrional and widowed site,
Because thou art deprived of seeing these! (Alighieri 2)

It is here that Ulysses encounters “an old man alone,” personified thus:

³ The term, ‘Newest New World,’ was apparently first coined by the London *Times* in its article “The Gold Discovery” (2). In the Australian colonies, the term is first coined by the South Australian *Leader* (“The Newest New World” 5), when the colony of Victoria separated from New South Wales in 1851, gaining complete independence.

⁴ German explorer and naturalist, Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), in *Cosmos: Sketch of a Physical Descriptin of the Universe* (1849), attributed to the Southern Cross “a peculiar character of importance” (666) dating such significance back to the beginning of the 16th century, observing of the constellation: “It has been observed at what hour of the night, in different seasons, the Cross of the South is erect, or inclined. It is a time-piece that advances very regularly near four minutes a day, and no other group of stars exhibits, to the naked eye, an observation of time so easily made” (Humboldt 22).

A long beard and with white hair intermingled
 He wore, in semblance like unto the tresses,
 Of which a double list fell on his breast.
 The rays of the four consecrated stars
 Did so adorn his countenance with light,
 That him I saw as were the sun in front. (Alighieri 2)

In *Divine Comedy*, while the four stars of the Southern Cross are figurative of the four cardinal virtues—Justice, Prudence, Fortitude and Temperance (Alighieri 171–72, 173, 224)⁵—scholars attribute to Florentine navigator Andrea Corsali (1487–?) the earliest reference to Crux as a cross. In 1517, Corsali reportedly described the configuration as “a wondrous cross (croce maravigliosa)” (Walker 235), claiming, it “is so beautiful, that, it appears to me, no other heavenly sign can be compared with it” (Lester and Foster 158).

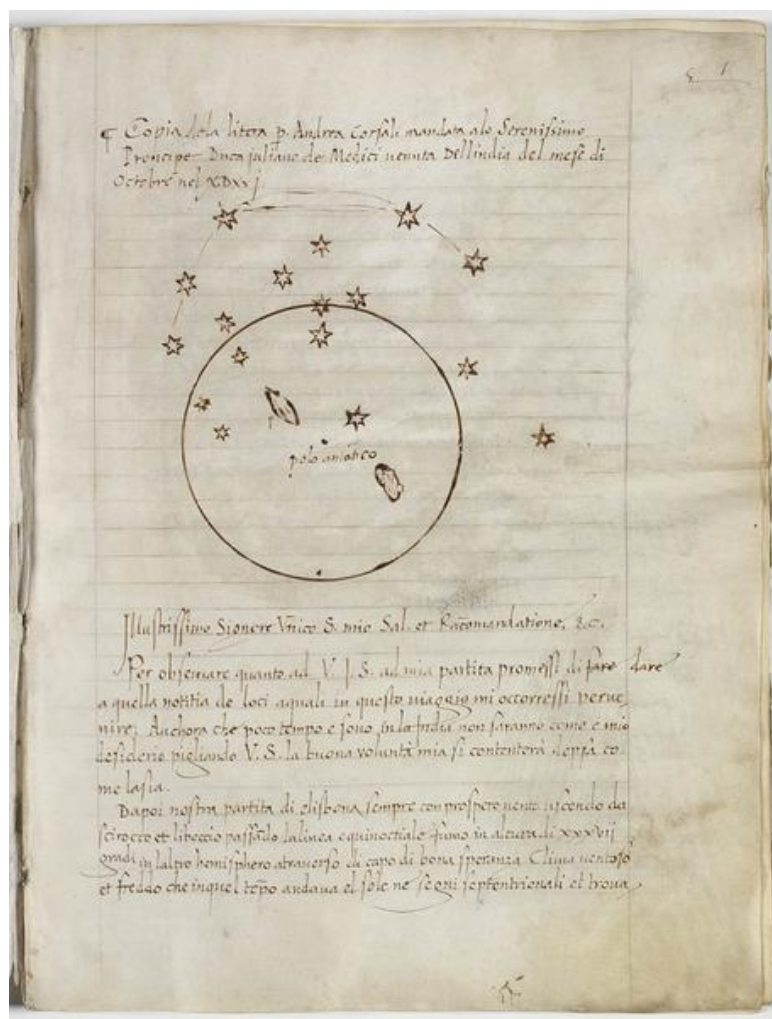


Fig. 3. The manuscript is a contemporary copy of “Lettera di Andrea Corsali allo Illustrissimo Signore Duca Giuliano de Medici, Venuta Dellindia del mese di Ottobre Nel M.D. XVI.” It was prepared for Andrea Gritti, Doge of Venice from 1523. It provides the only known narrative of a Portuguese voyage in 1515 down the African coast,

⁵ I include page numbers in the above text, but these pages comprise Wadsworth’s notes to his translation of *The Divine Comedy*, 173 (n 31). Wadsworth also quotes directly from Alexander von Humboldt’s *Personal Narrative*, 1822, p. 22: e.g., 171–72 (n 23).

around the Cape of Good Hope, and into the Southern and Indian Oceans, making landfall at Goa on the Indian coast, later travelling down to Cochin at the foot of India. After rounding the Cape, Corsali observed the curious behaviour of an unrecorded group of Stars (the Southern Cross) which he described and illustrated in this letter, which was sent from Cochin to his patron, Giuliano de Medici, in Florence.⁶

Questions of geographical orientation therefore lie at the heart of the expression of the Southern Cross constellation in colonial poetry. This is because the position of the sun, moon, and planets are all located in different points when observed in the southern hemisphere, compared to northern latitudes, rendering the position of the Australian observer exactly reversed. The following stanzas from Henry Parkes's (1815–1896) romantic ode to lost love, written in 1841, entitled "Unhappy Love" (4), aptly expresses this literary figuring of displaced self with a twinge of Gothic longing:

I've "crossed earth's central line," and dwelt
 In oriental lands;
 Where wealth and honour have been dealt
 Into my willing hands
 I've wander'd where the Southern Cross
 Glows o'er the Antipodes,
 Far following the lone albatross
 O'er isle-besprinkled seas.
 But never, 'midst Antarctic storms,
 When ocean's wrath was swelling
 Or 'mid th' equator's burning calms,
 Have I forgot my Helen.
 And time shall leave thy beauty's trace
 Still fresh in memory,
 Through Scotia's hills of Helen's face
 I never more shall see.

Here, Parkes' representation of the Southern Cross, having "crossed earth's central line," appears to function literally and metaphorically as an ambiguous point of orientation capturing a moment in time. As a love poem, the speaker attempts to hold in his mind the image and memory of his beautiful Helen. Yet, as the metonymic power of the Southern Cross in this poem allegorises a navigational marker tracing the vast distance between the speaker and the object of his love, a gothic undercurrent characterises the image as one of melancholic loss: "Through Scotia's hills of Helen's face / I never more shall see." Parkes' Southern Cross constellation is also somewhat gothic in its appearance in the sky, glowing as it does "o'er the Antipodes." From his position in the southern hemisphere, Parkes lyricises South as a cardinal direction by identifying the Southern Cross because, unlike the North Celestial Pole, there is no star near the South Celestial Pole. Crux is forever visible, constantly tracking a never-ending circle and always visible above the horizon when viewed from Australia's southern regions as an observer commented in 1897:

⁶ "Andrea Corsali - Letter to Giuliano de Medici, 1516, with additional material, 1989." State Library of New South Wales. Call number: Safe 1/239, Reference code: 439838.
https://digital.sl.nsw.gov.au/delivery/StreamGate?dps_dvs=1740460769326~315&dps_pid=F (accessed 24 June 2025). Approval for reproduction confirmed by the Bruce & Joy Reid Foundation. Acknowledgements: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales and Courtesy Bruce and Joy Reid Foundation.

It is a small constellation, but it is noticeable because it has four bright stars in the form of a cross. It is not a true cross, because the arms are not quite at right angles to the shaft, but the brightness of the stars that compose it amply compensates for any defect in shape.

It has three very bright stars Alpha [Acrux], of first magnitude; Beta [Mimosa] and Gamma [Gacrux], of second magnitude; and Delta [Imai], of third magnitude. Two much more conspicuous stars—Alpha Centauri and Beta Centauri—not far away to the east, are known as the pointers, because a line drawn through them passes through the northern limb of the Cross, and so makes it easily found (“The Southern Cross” 3).

In winter the Southern Cross is high in the sky while in the summer, when the position of the Southern Cross is low, it is upside-down (Ball 184). From Perth in Western Australia to Sydney, New South Wales colonials theorised that the constellations of the Southern Hemisphere were “disposed in new forms, superlatively brilliant; immense nebulae in round masses, assuming the splendour of the Milky Way, for their intense blackness” (Davis 2).

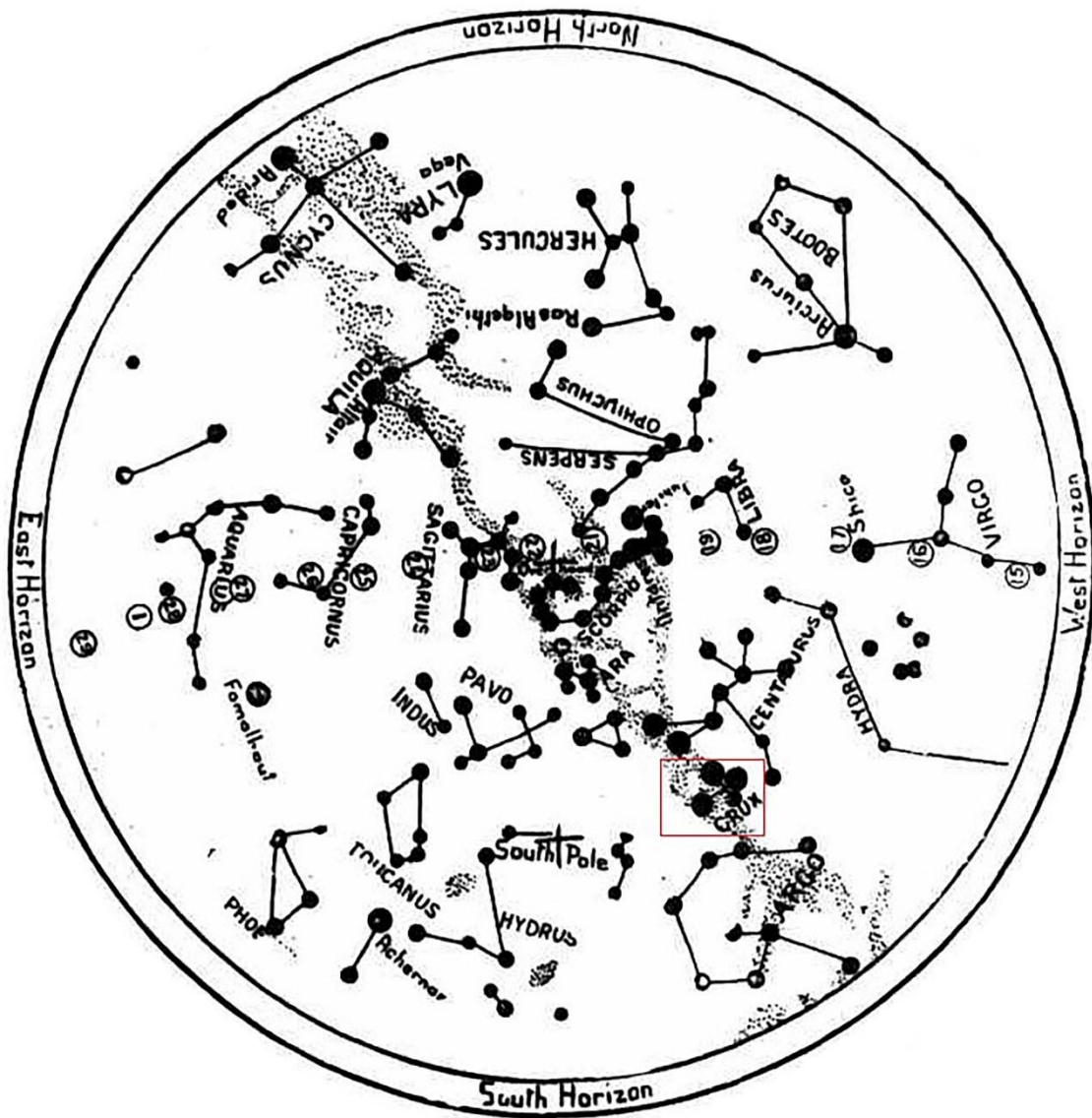


Fig. 4. Illustration of “The Southern Heavens in August” in an edition of the *Sydney Mail* in 1912 showing Crux (46).

This undercurrent of opposition and displacement in the poems of Halloran and Parkes (and so some degree in the travel writing of Langdon and Meredith) is quite distinct from the category of writing identified by William Lenz as “Antarctic Gothic” (Lenz 30–38), but in many ways comparable to imagining Antarctica as what Elizabeth Leane (59) identifies as a “gothic locale.” Although Lenz identifies “Antarctic Gothic” as a narrative technique in American sea fiction, using Edgar Allen Poe’s “Arthur Gordon Pym” as an example, the importance of Antarctic ephemera and source material as expressing a mode of the gothic is germane to an examination of colonial poetry in this period (30–38). While, for instance, Irish poet Thomas Kibble Hervey’s poem “Australia” is the first known example to declare that Australia was “destined to act a mighty part upon the theatre of the world” (Hervey xxi), “Australia” (1824) predated the first Antarctic poem—James Croxall Palmer’s “Thulia: A Tale of the Antarctic” (1843) (Truswell 23)—by almost two decades. It is possible therefore to read Hervey’s poem as characterising a literary technique situating the concept of the “gothic locale” as a place above (Leane 59). Consider, for instance, this section of verse:

Where mountain snows, by ages piled on high,
 And glacier turrets, towering to the sky,
 Return, in dazzling hues, the rushing light,
 And shine, like moons, along the brow of night;
 Where on the zenith smiles the polar star;⁷
 While cold the sun looks dimly from afar,
 Obliquely scans the drear horizon round,
 And flings *Periscian* shadows⁸ on the ground: —
 Or, where he flashes summer through the sky,
 While all its blooms forth beneath his eye;
 Where faints the magnet “mid the burning zone,”⁹
 Rul’d by a power mysterious as its own
 Where glow the midnight waves in liquid flame,
 And heaven is gemm’d with stars without a name (Hervey 6).

This series of rhyming couplets appear convincing as an example perpetuating the traditional trope of the Australian landscape as a darkly sublime and dangerous netherworld impossible to contemplate without awe. Threatening the viewer is the recognition of a terrestrial nightmare realised as living reality; “Rul’d by a power mysterious as its own / Where glow the midnight waves in liquid flame / And heaven is gemm’d with stars without a name.” Hervey draws on the symbolic currency of an Australian gothic netherworld: a sublime and chilling landscape intersecting the celestial and terrestrial. “Where glow the midnight waves in liquid flame” seems to bring visions of Aurora Australis to mind, a phenomenon believed by the writer of one report in 1833 “unknown in so low a latitude of the opposite hemisphere, and which from the known vicinity of icebergs to us in these seas” (“No Title”). Hervey exploits that moment of “indeterminate relation” to quote Weiskel (ix), placing the reader in such a proximity to the sublime so as to be able to confront terror at a tolerable psychosomatic distance while also allowing some degree of gratification in the fear and awe of terror itself (ix): “While all its blooms forth beneath his eye / Where faints the magnet “mid the burning zone.”

The principal concept of unease inherent in poetically delineating a land “in which nature seems to delight in transgressing her usual law” (Hervey 243) is therefore existential and bodily: a threat of the loss of rational meaning and spatial awareness:

What must be the emotions of that man who first stands upon the point of the earth’s axis! Who, no longer partaking of the revolution, in circles of latitude, slowly revolves on the axis of his own body, once in twenty-four hours—to whom the sun does not rise or set, but, moving in a course very oblique to the horizon, makes scarcely perceptible progress in twenty-four hours, and at the end of three months, when he has attained his noon, is only 23° 28’, on the arc of a vertical circle, above the horizon—to whom longitude is extinct, and who can move in no possible direction but south—to whom the stars are blank, and to whom the polar star, could he see it, would appear in the zenith (Silliman 101–102).

⁷ From the position of the North Celestial Pole only the stars of the northern hemisphere are visible and in the same position the north polar star immediately overhead (Hervey 45).

⁸ The daytime effect in a polar circle of one’s shadow moving across all cardinal points (Hervey 45).

⁹ The effect of the intensity to the magnetic quality gradually diminishing when approaching the equator (Hervey 45).

This foreboding—slowly revolving on the axis of one’s own body “once in twenty-four hours”—seemingly inspired colonial poets, in gazing upward toward the overhead space, to contemplate geographical confusion by casting the landscape underneath the heavens as an alien and unpredictable terrain.

Conventional theories of terror attributed to Edmund Burke, particularly Burke’s *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1759), contended that without the ability to hurt the sublime dissipates. For Burke, in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (58–59), “whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.” Burke identifies these terrible objects—“objects of terror,” the source of the sublime—in the poetics of the Gothic. Features of geography and the landscape in *A Philosophical Inquiry* ... represent sources of the sublime precisely because of their great vastness. Looking down from a precipice (128), a rock formation or mountain peak hundreds of yards in height (127), rugged and broken surfaces (128), an immense dark and gloomy (149) mountain (140), represent only a few examples of Burke’s characteristically gothic landscape motifs. However, even Burke intersects the terrestrial and the celestial in the conception of the gothic landscape in claiming the “apparent confusion” of the stars “giv[ing] them the advantage of a sort of infinity,” and the excessive loudness of sounds (151) emanating from skies, with its noises “of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder” awakening “a great and awful sensation in the mind” (151). Indeed, for Burke, that the stars lie “in such apparent confusion” (140), and the apparent disorder of these heavenly bodies excites an idea of grandeur, and by extension magnificence, renders them a vivid source of the gothic sublime.

It is interesting therefore that the motif of isolation and displacement represented in early poetic musings on the Polar star—such as Landon’s “The Polar Star” (1839)—found a symbolic counterpoint in the burgeoning growth in poetry privileging the emblematic qualities of the Southern Cross. Following Henry Parkes’ “Unhappy Love” (1841) with its line “I’ve wander’d where the Southern Cross / Glows o’er the Antipodes,” were the many other verse forms making the break away from the polar star as gothic motif of sublimity to fashioning the Southern Cross constellation as an emblem of muscular nation-building. The first stanza of Martin Farquhar Tupper’s (1810–1889) poem “Advance Australia! An Anthem Embodying the Christian Heraldry of a New Nation” (9), published in 1853 for instance, claimed:

Advance, Australia!—on, speed on,—
 Stout old England’s brave young son;
 Advance! set forth that standard on high,
 Thy bright “Southern Cross” on the southerly sky:
 Push forward the banner of Freedom and Truth
 In the freshness of hope and the fervor of youth;
 And gain, as prizes of zeal in the van,
 The glory of God, and the welfare of man.

The verse is alive with action and movement, advancing, speeding on, pushing forward; allegorically signalling cultural progress and nation building. The poem also stresses geographical orientation, not by looking north, but by acknowledging the southerly cartographical space: “Thy bright ‘Southern Cross’ on the southerly sky.” Tupper’s

sentiments of onward-ness are taken up in a poem published in the *Illustrated Sydney News* of 1854 under the name “Ignotus” entitled “An Anglo-Australian Song” (6). Like Tupper, Ignotus too draws on the unification theme of the night skies in bringing together the “Old” and “New” worlds via a nationalistic, albeit figurative conversation about Australian place:

Of words and deeds, that are not dead,
 And thoughts, a noble band,
 And blood for freedom freely shed,
 To leaven all the land.—
 The English Cross shines bright by day,
 The Southern Cross by night;
 And we will ever bless their sway
 Of alternating light.
 Adopted of Australia, we
 Our new love fast will hold;
 And not the less devotedly
 For cherishing the old. (6)

Here, the “English Cross,” Polaris, “shines bright by day,” while the Southern Cross, Crux, shines by night; fittingly symbolising a union of the old with the “Newest New World,” strident in its expression of leavening “all the land.” Blood freely shed modified the land of the Southern Cross, permeating as sense of identity and transforming colonial ideals of self for the better.

Similarly, the last stanza of Peter Jefferson Wallace’s (1839–1929) poem, written in 1860, “Oh, Australia, the Land of My Heart” (4) glorifies the confirmation of a firm sense of Australian place under the literal and metaphoric emblem of the Southern Cross:

Then three cheers for the flag of Australia the blest,
 Three cheers for the “Southern Cross.” Long may it be
 The guide to the mariner’s signet of rest
 Then hurrah! for Australia, the *land of the free*.¹⁰

In Wallace’s poem, the Southern Cross finds its pinnacle as an icon of distinctive Australia-ness alongside rallying cries mobilising colonial patriotism directed at the land of the free. Verse forms of this type took as their inspiration the so-called “Eureka Stockade” insurrection. Taking place on 3 December 1854, mustering some five hundred prospectors—“diggers”¹¹—on the Ballarat goldfields in Victoria, its purpose was a revolt against the corrupt and inequitable issuing of miners’ licences and license fees regulated by colonial authorities. Under the leadership of an Irish-Australian rebel named Peter Lalor (1827–1889):

A flag bearing the device of the Southern Cross, was hoisted as the standard of freedom. The diggers place themselves beneath its centre, and they were sworn by Lalor on their knees to conquer or die for their rights and liberties (“Parliamentary Portraits” 1).

¹⁰ For the obituary of Peter Jefferson Wallace, see *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 July 1928, 12.

¹¹ “Diggers” is a colloquial term meaning miners or gold prospectors.

Raffaello Carboni (1817–1875), whom Lalor had assigned the task of organising foreigners behind the stockade, described the design of the flag in a self-authored booklet entitled *The Eureka Stockade: The Consequence of Some Pirates Wanting on Quarter-Deck a Rebellion* (1855) as having “a blue background, on which, in silver, the four principal stars of the constellation of the Southern Cross were shown” (Withers 1). Swearing allegiance to the cause via this “standard of freedom” thus reconceptualises the celestial insignia once marking an alien and hostile land, into an emblem of freedom worth fighting for. The trepidation of the oppressive overhead from which the Southern Cross originates is thus also reconceptualised as a vanquishment against the prohibitions of colonial administration and government forces.

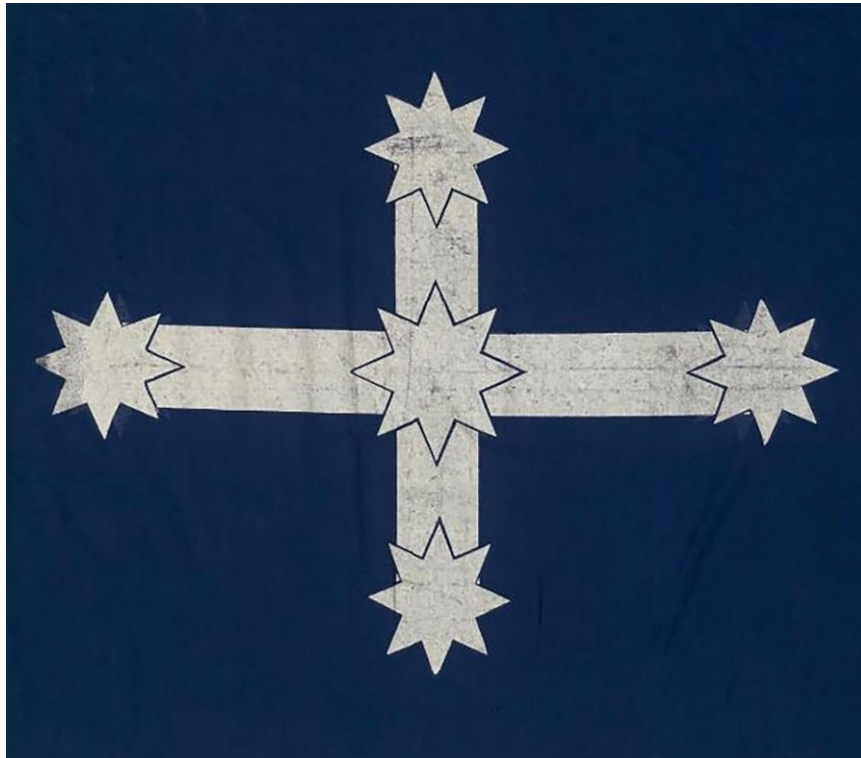


Fig. 5. Replica of the flag flown by the miners at the Eureka Stockade, 1854 (National Library of Australia).¹²

A poem written by E Scholefield, published in 1869, perfectly captures the protest spirit of this iconography in the poem “The Southern Cross. Volunteers’ Song” (5):

When the distant horizon is black as the night,
 And the muttering thunder is heard from afar;
 When the nations are rousing and arming for fight,
 And the gloom on their visage gives token of war,

We must rush to the standard and fight for our land;
 We must guard ourselves strongly e’er foes can appear;

¹² National Library of Australia, “Replica of the flag flown by the miners at the Eureka Stockade, 1854.” Also see “Eureka Flag Mystery Solved?”

We must march on together, a patriot band,
No strangers to courage, but strangers to fear.

For we come from a land with a long brilliant past,
Whose ground seldom echoed the proud foeman's tread,
Whose sons never quailed, but would fight to the last,
And either be victors or lie with the dead.
The home of our fathers guards only possession,
She asks not alliance, she seeks for no friend,
She wishes not conquest, resists but aggression;
The cry of our home is "We arm to defend!"

And thou—Cross of the South—shall thy brightness e'er pale
When the foe seeks thy stars with his own flag to blend?
When the red fire of war lights up mountain and vale
Will no patriots then echo—"We arm to defend?"
Yes, this land has her sons of the same race of freemen;
We seek but our right, and we never will lend
Our glorious cross to the arms of our foemen.
"By that sign we will conquer"—"We arm to defend!"

The poem offers a literary illustration of Ken Gelder's (56) assertion that "[c]olonial Australian gothic fiction and poetry often intervenes directly in the process of nation-building and settlement in Australia." Here, we see traces of a gothic pattern of classic doubling: where once the North polar star evoked the Imperial centre, now the South polar star allegorises colonialism and the "Newest New World." Even from the era of the early 1830s, when Polaris first took on the qualities of duality within the rhetoric of colonial nation-building as "the polar star of emigration,"¹³ the celestial motif also captured, according to the editor of *The Colonist* (1), the national spirit of "this great South Land."

In this twinning we identify the Romantic allusion to the *doppelgänger* traceable to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Mysterious Mother*; "From the German "Doppel" meaning "double" or "duplicate." Refer[ing] to a second self or second personality sometimes, but not always, a physical twin" (Frank 343). Indeed, Crux, the "Cross of the South," perfectly extends the metaphor of duality then apparent in the colonial consciousness: not only displaced British subjects living in a colonial outpost, but a "great South Land,"—no longer the *terra incognita* of the globe."¹⁴

By the end of the 19th century, Anglo-Celtic colonials had for the most part succeeded in navigating the strangeness of Australia's geographical regions to accommodate a sense of hope, optimism, and colonial belonging. Upon Australia becoming an independent nation on January 1, 1901—also known as "Federation," after the British Parliament passed self-governing legislation for Australia's six colonies under the Commonwealth of Australia—George Essex Evans' "A Federal Song" (1899), with music by George Sampson, fêted the

¹³ The phrase used by Thomas Potter MacQueen in his pamphlet, "The State of the Nation, at the Close of 1830," and quoted by the editor of the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, "rejoiced to say," in 1831 (2).

¹⁴ A remark made by the editor of *The Colonist* [Sydney] in 1836 (1).

movement toward Australian independence and celebrated the motif of the star in the opening line:

In the greyness of the dawning we have seen the pilot - star,
In the whisper of the morning we have heard the yeas afar,
Shall we sleep and let them be—
When they call to you and me?—
Can we break the land asunder God has girdled with the sea?
Can we break the land asunder God has girdled with the sea?

“A Federal Song” symbolically unified not only a stylised Southern Cross with Australian patriotism but devised an alternative insignia ideologically signifying Australian place-ness.

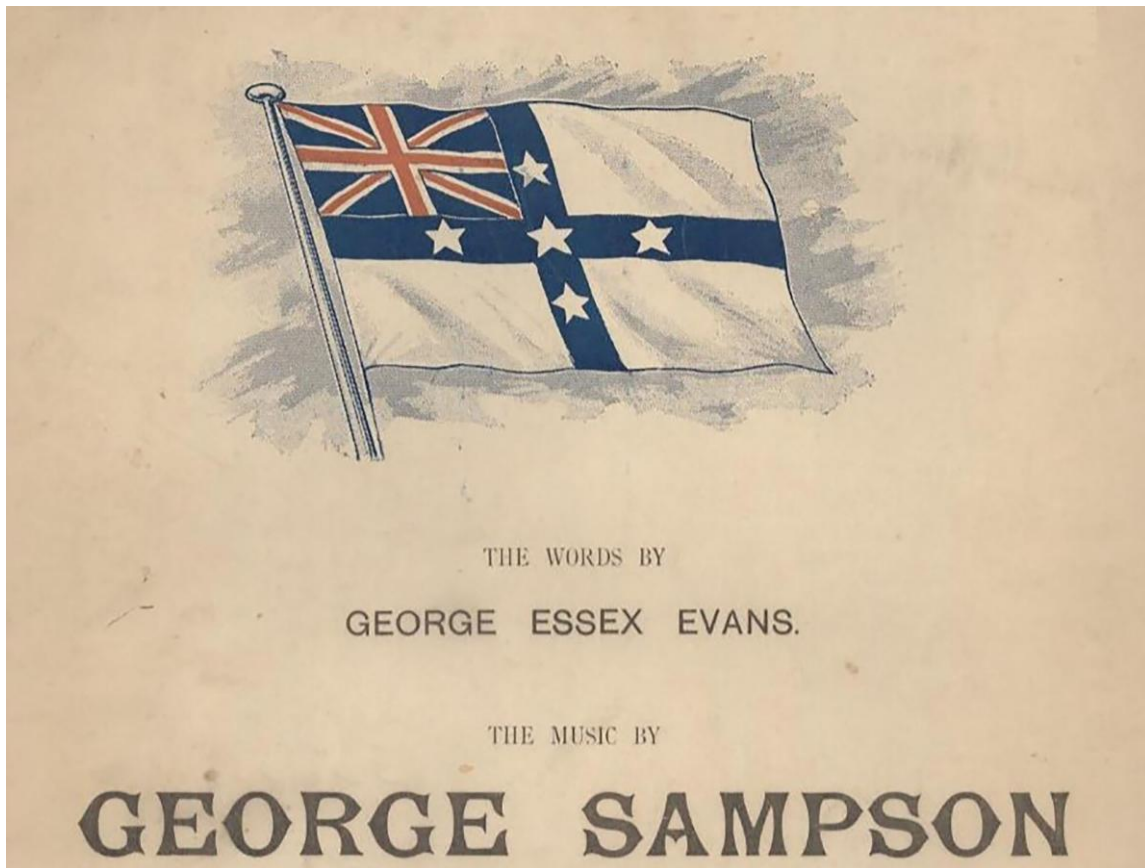


Fig. 6. The illustration of the Federation Flag gracing the front cover of a musical score entitled “A Federal Song” (1899)—with music by George Sampson (1861–1949) and words by the poet George Essex Evans (1863–1909).¹⁵

The metaphorical setting of the Polar Star’s former privileging as anchor in understanding Australian geographical positionality also seems allegorised in the following autobiographical passage by Ben Eagleton (12), of Beechworth Victoria in 1909 (capturing an incident during his voyage from London to Melbourne in around 1852):

We had lost sight of the Polar Star and as we ploughed our way through the South Atlantic Ocean, the seven stars outlining the constellation “The Great Bear,” more

¹⁵ The image is out of copyright and freely reproducible.

familiarly known to English rustics as “Charles’s Wain”—from its fanciful resemblance to a wain or wagon [sic] drawn by three horses—also sank beneath the northern horizon and instead a new hemisphere of brilliant stars opened out to our vision, among which majestically appeared the resplendent “Southern Cross.”

Conclusion

Australian colonial poetry offers a rich source of information when exploring the metonymic potency of the Polar Star and the Southern Cross Constellation as compelling symbols in the Victorian imagination. What these poems show is a unique manifestation of the gothic relatively underrepresented in the current scholarship examining the Australian gothic generally, and the colonial gothic in particular. In many ways analogous to the ancient artisans, colonial poets also “saw in the motions of the stars a predictability—an orderliness—that they could not see in the features and happenings on earth” (Yi-Fu Tuan 15). Yet in these poems, the aesthetic concept of the sublime appears to signify a visual experience of the Southern skies in lyric form specific to Australian place-ness. For selected poets, their task was not so much to bring the stars to earth, but to mediate the geographical limits of the Australian topography as a far-away place relative to the Imperial centre: “In the South a star is rising o’er an empire young in years” (Euill 4).

Within these poems, a thread of terror oscillates between the sublime and the beautiful. At times, poets mythologised the Polar Star as a guiding light; a shining beacon upon which to navigate life’s literal and figurative obstacles. At others, this same motif emerges in Australian colonial poetry as a Gothic emblem of obliquely sublime separateness. The lure of the North and South Celestial Poles as the definitive “sublime point”—the point at which all angular distances, longitudes and latitudes, actually meet—in many ways added to its potency as an object of terror allegorically reminding settlers of Australia’s remote disconnectedness, a strangeness of place impossible to contemplate without awe. This examination has drawn together the various symbolic imaginings of Polaris and Crux in colonial poetry for the purposes of demonstrating the similitudes between the Gothic sublime and the enmeshment of the star motifs in Australian colonial poetry as a discourse of displacement. While the figuring of Polaris and Crux in selected Australian poetry of the period—sometimes signalling North, sometimes South—remained openly ambiguous, neither one nor the other but sometimes both, each figuring presented poets with a literary trope pliable enough to accommodate colonial dualities; navigating the strangeness of Australia’s vast sense of place on the one hand, while somewhat contradictorily accommodating a sense of spatial acuity, place-ness, and colonial belonging on the other.

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