

Killing the Narrator: National Differences in Adaptations of *Robbery Under Arms*

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Rolf Boldrewood's bushranging novel *Robbery Under Arms* is among the handful of Australian texts to have been repeatedly adapted for stage and screen.¹ The very popular stage melodrama version by Garnet Walch and Alfred Dampier, first performed in 1890, was followed in 1907 by one of the earliest Australian feature films, produced by the theatrical entrepreneur Charles McMahon. In 1911 Dampier's daughter Lily and her husband Alfred Rolfe made another silent film version of *Robbery Under Arms* under the title *Captain Starlight*, presumably to distinguish it from McMahon's film. (Fotheringham lviii) Actor Kenneth Brampton, however, went back to the original title for his 1920 silent film, which he also directed as well as writing the script and playing the leading role of Captain Starlight. There was then a hiatus until 1957, when Jack Lee directed a sound and technicolour film version of the novel for the English Rank Organisation. This was followed in 1985 by another Australian adaptation, produced by Jock Blair, and released in separate versions for film and television.

This essay will mainly focus on why, of all the adaptations of *Robbery Under Arms*, the 1957 English film takes the very radical step of killing off Dick Marston, the novel's narrator. An adaptation to another medium of a previously existing text can be seen as a materialised reading, one determined not only by the particular technologies, legal regulations and generic conventions prevailing at the time the adaptation is made, each of which places constraints on what can be represented, but by assumptions about audience expectations and values. The latter, like the former, change over time but to what extent do they also reflect national differences?

One major difference between England and Australia, it has often been claimed, can be seen in attitudes to the police force. Whether one wishes to attribute this to Australia's convict past, to the bungling attempts by members of the force to capture bushrangers during the nineteenth century or to later well-established cases of police corruption,

Australians, so it's said, have a much more cynical attitude to the police than do the English. This cynical attitude has also been seen as part of a supposed much wider Australian distrust of and rebellion against authority and those who symbolise or serve it.

As a police magistrate himself, Rolf Boldrewood became very incensed at claims that *Robbery Under Arms* encouraged young Australians to break the law. His narrator, Dick Marston, supposedly writing the story in prison as he awaits the carrying out of his death sentence, devotes many pages to regretting his vocational choice of the sanguinary track of the bushranger. And Boldrewood's police are generally presented sympathetically; true, they fail to recognise the wily gentleman bushranger Captain Starlight when he is right under their noses, but that is attributed more to Starlight's great skills as an actor than to police stupidity. The narrative reserves its harshest treatment for the non-professionals, such as the bounty-hunters who are shot by old Ben Marston and other "bad" bushrangers, though significantly the "good" bushrangers – Starlight and the younger Marstons – are not involved.

When *Robbery Under Arms* was adapted for the stage in 1890 by Walch and Dampier, the generic conventions of stage melodrama meant that they needed to find a villain. Their choice fell on the lesser of the two main policemen in the novel, Sub-Inspector Goring, who in the opening scene of the play harasses Aileen Marston in the way characteristic of all melodrama villains: threatening to arrest her father if she refuses to let him have his way with her. In the novel one of the bounty-hunters harasses Aileen, so provoking her father into shooting him. In both cases there are obvious echoes of the harassment of Kate Kelly by a member of the police force, supposedly one of the factors leading to her brothers becoming bushrangers. The stage version, then, merely dispenses with Boldrewood's attempted whitewashing of the police. Significantly, it is a middle-ranking officer who is corrupt, rather than the police system as a whole. One of the conventions of nineteenth-century melodrama is that villains tend to come from the middle class rather than the aristocracy: to be the naval captain rather than the Admiral of the Fleet, for example. So a senior authority figure is still available to restore order and harmony at the end and to see that the villains are suitably punished, as Police Inspector Sir Ferdinand Moringier does in Dampier and Walch's *Robbery Under Arms*.

The large amount of slap-stick humour that is also a standard feature of nineteenth-century melodrama – a feature generally overlooked in modern assumptions about the genre – is provided in this stage adaptation by two Irish new-chum policemen, plus an equally stereotyped old maid. These three comic characters proved so popular that they were included, often with only minimal changes to their names, dialogue and actions, in the very large number of versions of the story of the Kelly Gang presented to Australian audiences both on the stage and in early silent films immediately preceding Federation and in the two decades afterwards (Fotheringham lii–liv).

As I've already indicated, one of the major differences between the film version of *Robbery Under Arms* made in Australia in 1957 by the J Arthur Rank Organisation, and

all earlier and later adaptations of this novel, is the decision to kill off the narrator, Dick Marston, who in the novel is the only member of the gang to survive. I believe the reason for this lies in Dick's being the novel's strongest embodiment of an Australian identity – the most original and influential feature of the narrative is that it is told in Dick's distinctively Australian vernacular voice. Hence for the Australian audiences for whom Boldrewood was originally writing, it is important that Dick is the one who survives; equally, however, his distinctive Australianness makes Dick dispensable in a film primarily aimed at an English audience and made during the 1950s. After all, he does carry on with two girls at the same time, even though one is a "good" girl and the other a "bad" one. In contrast to Dick's brashness, overt sexuality and rebellion against authority, his brother Jim is portrayed as closer to an English audience's presumed ideal – he is a good domestic man, devoted to his one true love, and merely led astray by his older brother and father.

One of the crucial scenes in the 1957 film has no equivalent in the novel, though there, as in this film version, Jim and Dick determine to try to mend their ways by becoming gold diggers instead of bushrangers. At the diggings they meet the two Morrison sisters with whom they had previously had a fling in Melbourne; or, rather, Dick has had a fling with Kate Morrison, while Jim has fallen in love with her younger sister Jeannie. In both novel and film Jim and Jeannie get married and Dick tries to remain on good terms with Kate, by now married to someone else, to stop her giving them away. In an episode totally invented for the film, old Ben Marston, the bad bushranger Dan Moran, and Captain Starlight, the mysterious English aristocrat turned bushranger, hold up the goldfields bank. Moran shoots a bank teller and a woman is also accidentally killed. Dick, who has been saying his goodbyes to Kate before leaving for safety in America with Jim and Jeannie, rushes off to warn them. On the way, he is met by his true love, Grace Storefield. Kate, enraged to see them together after Dick had sworn he loved no one but her, reveals that Dick and Jim are the notorious Marston brothers. As members of Starlight's gang, they are believed responsible for the deaths at the bank, and a crowd of vigilantes rushes off to Jim and Jeannie's hut. Jim is found with a roll of banknotes, actually earned through his work on the diggings, but believed by his accusers to have been part of the proceeds of the robbery. A rope is produced and Jim is tied up, ready for a proposed lynching. At the last moment, two policemen arrive and assert their rights to the body of the prisoner. By now a large and angry crowd have gathered outside the hut, and Jim doubts that he will be able to get through it alive. But the senior policeman assures him that the diggers will never dare attack the sanctity of the "Queen's uniform". Sure enough, when the policemen emerge from the hut with their prisoner, the crowd parts to let them safely through.

One of the things that evidently attracted British filmmakers to Australia in the years immediately after the Second World War was that it gave them an opportunity to make English Westerns to try to compete with those from Hollywood which were proving so attractive to British audiences. So, with respect to its sets, costumes and

other visual codes, the 1957 film of *Robbery Under Arms* was very much Westernised. For example, in the scene I have just been describing, Jim and Jeannie's hut looks reasonably authentic from the outside but is nothing like an old bark hut inside, not to mention much roomier than it should be. And of course the attempted lynching is something seen in numerous American Westerns but not part of Australian history and certainly not to be found in Boldrewood's novel. But beneath this superficial Americanisation of the film, is an essential Englishness, also not part of *Robbery Under Arms*, and to be seen particularly in the policeman's comment about the Queen's uniform and the fact that the diggers do indeed part to let Jim and his police captors through. It is also significant that Dick, in this film version, is killed trying to rescue Jim from the police – in the novel he successfully rescues him, after shooting one of the troopers.

The opposition between the "bad" brother Dick and the "good" brother Jim set up in the 1957 film version of *Robbery Under Arms* is, in fact, remarkably like the one historian Marilyn Lake has suggested as informing the creation of the Australian bush legend. In her influential article "The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculinist Context", she sees the 1890s in Australia as having been a time of competing models of masculinity. These competing models were the Domestic Man, who looks after and provides for his wife and family, and the Lone Hand, who prefers a freer style of life, involving more casual sexual relations and plenty of drinking with his mates. The latter model, particularly promoted by those artists and writers associated with the nationalist *Bulletin*, came to be seen as the authentic Australian model of masculinity, with Domestic Man, in contrast, rejected as the English model. Clearly, the makers of the 1957 film of *Robbery Under Arms* seem to have assumed that their English audiences would identify more with Domestic Man than with the Lone Hand or the Currency Lad. Therefore, the film kills off both Dick and Starlight and allows Jim, as Domestic Man, to live.

In marked contrast to this 1957 version of *Robbery Under Arms*, which kills off the "Australian" hero in favour of a more English one, and also remakes Starlight, the English aristocrat of the novel, over into an American Lone Gun, is the 1985 Australian film and mini-series which have some obvious post-colonial elements: all the authority figures have English accents. So, of course, does Sam Neill as Captain Starlight, but in this adaptation he displays strongly anti-Imperialist views, in total contrast to the respect for the Queen's uniform proclaimed in the 1957 film. Dick Marston is very definitely the hero of this version and, as in the book, is the only member of the gang who survives. In the opening episode of Part 2 of the mini-series, Starlight and Dick are put on trial and then sentenced to Berrima Goal for their role in the great cattle robbery. When they arrive at Berrima, a young English trooper advises Starlight not to be a bad loser: "This Empire was built on good sportsmanship". Starlight responds: "On the contrary, me boy, it was built with the lash, the bayonet, and signin' fraudulent treaties with damn savages."² In the final version as screened, "damn" was changed to "innocent", so making Starlight an even more politically correct hero.

Boldrewood, a very staunch Anglo-Australian as the recent biography by Paul de Serville emphasises, would no doubt have been horrified to hear his aristocratic English hero attacking the British Empire in this way. This scene, along with the multiple images of Queen Victoria which have figured in the earlier trial, indicates that we are seeing a very 1980s nationalist version of Boldrewood's novel, where even Starlight has been Australianised in attitude if not in accent. This had in fact already been done by Dampier and Walch in their 1890 melodrama version, where the famous opening lines of the novel are applied not to Dick but to Starlight, during an early exchange between the Marston brothers:

Dick: A man that can ride anything; anything that was ever lapped in horsehide.

Jim: Swims like a musk-duck.

Dick: Tracks like a myall blackfellow.

Jim: Jumps like a red kangaroo. (Fotheringham 14–15)

Appropriately, this Australianised 1890 Starlight is allowed to live and to marry Aileen Marston. In contrast, Aileen is almost entirely missing from the 1957 film which is even less interested in currency lasses than in currency lads, as shown by the fact that her name is given in the cast list as Eileen. (The Irish elements of the novel of course are totally omitted, as in the earlier Ealing Studios version of *Eureka Stockade* (1949) where Peter Lalor is played by Chips Rafferty as Australian rather than Irish.)

Kenneth Brampton's 1920 silent film version of *Robbery* includes a touching death scene for himself as Starlight but allows both Jim and Dick Marston to live. In the words of ScreenSound Australia's summary: "Following a long term of imprisonment, the brothers emerge to start a new life with their patiently waiting sweethearts." Because of objections to and censoring of earlier bushranging films, Brampton went to great lengths to emphasise the moral of the story, through the use of intertitles such as "The bad men were punished, and that is as it should be" and "The women suffered as is their lot". With Starlight dead, Aileen is left to become a nun, as in the novel; the film closes with a vignette of her "teaching all the little children".

So Boldrewood's decision to have three male protagonists has proved very useful for subsequent adaptors of his novel, allowing them to vary the ending according to what they perceive as the main values and interests of their respective audiences. Boldrewood's use of what are in effect three heroes relates I believe to the fact that the narrative operates on three different levels, which is also a large part of its appeal. Most obviously, there are the traditional Gothic and romance elements, particularly associated with the exotic and mysterious figure of Starlight. But then there are the realistic, historical and local elements, particularly associated with Dick, and especially his vernacular narrative. And finally there are the moral elements, especially associated with Jim, the innocent who suffers for the guilty. As already noted, Boldrewood was very concerned to

stress the moral of his story, so in the novel it is necessary for Jim to die, as well as Starlight, whose mysterious origins must always remain unknown.

For the 1890s melodrama audiences, too, Jim is expendable. His death allows the moral still to be made: breaking the law must be seen to have some unfortunate consequences. But the loss of Jim does not detract very much from the conventional happy ending where, as well as Dick finally being reunited with the patient Grace Storefield, the Australianised Starlight is allowed to marry the currency lass. By the 1920s, authorities were greatly concerned about the bad moral influence the many bushranging films being made in Australia might be having on the young. So the Brampton version of *Robbery Under Arms* has a heavy emphasis on the moral lesson at its beginning and end. Here, however, it is the woman who suffers; the film ends with Aileen as a nun, teaching all the little children not to be bad. Starlight has earlier died in Warrigal's arms but both brothers are allowed to go on to forge a new life. In 1957, it seems to have been sexual morality rather than crime that weighed most heavily on the adaptors' minds, so the good domestic man Jim is allowed to live while the coarse colonial Dick is shot, in addition to the Lone Gun Starlight.

Ironically, for most of the English reviewers, the main problem with the 1957 adaptation was that Starlight, as played by Peter Finch, was not sufficiently emphasised. While Boldrewood had been able to get away with a novel with three heroes, the constraints of adaptation meant that the focus needed to fall more clearly on one or the other of them. In the 1890 melodrama and the 1920 silent film, Starlight was definitely the hero, even though he was allowed to live in the first and killed off in the second. But the English 1957 film was made very much within the conventions of the Hollywood Western, with Starlight played as a Lone Gun rather than an aristocratic Englishman. Since the novel's narrator, Dick Marston, appears to have been seen as too brash and crude to become the alternative hero, as he clearly is in the highly nationalist 1985 Australian mini-series, that role went by default to Jim Marston. The result is a very odd beast indeed: a film based on an Australian classic, which combines Australian scenery, American genre conventions and English moral values.

Endnotes

1. Others include Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life*, Steele Rudd's *On Our Selection*, C J Dennis's *The Sentimental Bloke* and Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians*.
2. Thanks to Donna Coates for providing me with a copy of the unpublished script of the mini-series.

Works Cited

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