

***The Anthology of Colonial Australian Adventure Fiction.* Eds. Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver.**

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Midway through reading this anthology I was contacted by Paul Lockyer, a journalist of many years experience with the ABC, who was interested in what I might have to say about Lasseter and the legend of the lost reef of gold. We discussed this for a while and then Lockyer mentioned enthusiastically that he was travelling that afternoon to work on follow up material to the video documentary, *Return to Lake Eyre*, which had combined stunning footage of Lake Eyre in flood with Lockyer's sensitive and intelligent commentary on the region and its inhabitants. Tragically, the helicopter in which he was a passenger crashed and Lockyer, cameraman John Bean and pilot Gary Ticehurst were killed.

We sometimes believe that modern technology has tamed the outback. Death by accident or privation seems a relative rarity. Yet reports still trickle in of jackeroos who have died after losing the track, or international tourists stranded and skeletonised in their bogged cars. The bush is still a dangerous place, where the line between successful adventure and quick disaster can be very fine. In the age before mechanical transport where a knocked up horse or bad fall from one could mean death, the line was that much finer. Certainly, *The Anthology of Colonial Australian Adventure Fiction* has its share of sudden death and disaster from causes natural or otherwise. In many stories the gloomy nature of the bush is emphasised; it is a place of loneliness, despair, guilt and betrayal. Lasseter, who was abandoned by his exploration party and died in a cave near the Northern Territory and Western Australian border, left a tattered diary that finds its equivalent in the anthology inclusion, Charles Junor's 'Dead Men's Tales', which also involves a lost gold mine. Lasseter is a peculiarly belated version of these lost gold mine stories; indeed he was probably inspired by this sub-genre and may have added 'Harold Bell' to his name as a tribute to Harold Bell Wright, the popular American author of *The Mine with the Iron Door* (1923), a lost mine fiction.

Rider Haggard must bear some responsibility for these Australian adventure stories, if not real incarnations such as Lasseter. It is quite difficult to gauge the full extent of Haggard's influence, except to note that it was electric. *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and *She* (1887) have left a legacy in fantasy and science fiction literature well into the twentieth century besides their more obvious influence on adventure fiction. Adventure writing for Haggard and a few fellow travellers such as Andrew Lang was a conscious attempt to remove literature from the field of the feminine, reinvigorating fiction with manly concerns. The decadence and degeneration of urban life could not be resisted by sentimental or realist novels with their focus on the emotional and interior life of the characters; these fictions could only further feminise male readers. In lieu of actual travelling and adventure, reading 'King Romance' might toughen the sinews. There are reasons to believe that this association of adventure romance and the masculine did not carry unproblematically to Australia. Most notably, Susan Sheridan has suggested that masculine realism was established in opposition to romance which became associated with the popular and the feminine. While Antipodean adventure fiction shares with its British companions a plethora of barely suppressed anxieties about place, race and identity, it freely conflates underground fantasy realms with the hard-bitten realism of *The Bulletin* mode in a way peculiar to the Australian branch of adventure fiction.

Containing seventeen short tales organised chronologically, the anthology covers the years 1861-1928. The choice to present complete stories rather than extracts has its advantages as well as disadvantages. Completeness allows the readers the conventional enjoyment of suspense, reversal and conclusion, though character development is sketchy given the brevity of the stories and is not a priority of the genre in any case. The choice of providing complete tales rather than extracts means that the anthology elides the role of the novel in Australian adventure fiction. George Firth Scott's *The Last Lemurian: A Westralian Romance*, James Hogan's *The Lost Explorer: An Australian Story* (c1890), Alexander McDonald's *The Lost Explorers: A Story of the Trackless Desert* (1906) and Rosa Praed's *Fugitive Anne: A Romance of the Unexplored Bush* (1902) are just a few of the novels that helped forge this genre in Australia. These and other examples of the genre have been analysed in Robert Dixon's crucial *Writing the Colonial Adventure* (1995), yet it would be rewarding to see extracts of these works, at least, in print form. But there is nothing more disagreeable (or inevitable) than a review of an anthology that takes issues with the method of inclusion and so I shall turn to the stories.

There are three stories in the anthology which focus on the experience of the new chum. Horace Earle's cautionary tale of the goldfields sees a newly arrived digger, Ben, falling in with a couple of men who have apparently been robbed by bushrangers. They travel together to the Ballarat fields and commence work with variable success. The story is punctuated by a good deal of ethnographic detail about life at the diggings and some mechanical explanation of sinking holes in moist earth. With the assistance of a fourth digger they make a significant find and Ben declares that with the money he will return home, whereas the others plan a spree and consider establishing a pub at the diggings. The reader may here begin to suspect that Ben is to be fleeced. And, indeed, Ben falls ill with dysentery and is robbed of all possessions by the very men he had helped. If this seems a critique of the myth of mateship, one may be comforted by the conclusion in which the other diggers gather to help Ben, who recovers and continues digging in hopes of a successful return to Cornwall. The second new chum tale is of a foppish young gent arriving in Australia in order to take up his duties as an aide-de-camp to a colonial Governor. Author Douglas Sladen was the nephew of the former Premier of Victoria, Charles Sladen, and had been accepted into the 'upper' levels of Victorian society, as is the protagonist in his story. Sladen returned to England after five years of study and lecturing in Modern History at the University of Sydney and never again visited Australia, although he became a strong if stylistically conservative promoter of Australian literature in Britain. 'At the Melbourne Cup' was published for a British audience and plays up to some extent the eccentricity and open handedness of the colonial. The new chum loses only a small wager of two; the focus of the story is on his new friend Paget who is a terrible judge of horseflesh, yet who wins a fortune because the 'little chap' he relies on to make the bet alters Paget's pick for the Cup. The story is a detailed ethnographic study from the description of the tram journey to the parading (of the ladies) in the yard to the crowded train back into the city. Paget's profit allows him to propose to Miss Audley and so the story ends happily, although there may be some question as to whether a day at the Melbourne Cup really counts as an 'adventure' for the purposes of the anthology. The final new chum tale, Louis Becke's 'Julius Adolphus Jenkins's Christmas Alligator' is, as the name suggests, rather more adventurous. Like Paget, Jenkins gains his bride by making something of himself, and he achieves this as accidentally as did Paget, except the animal in question is now a crocodile rather than a horse. The humour of the story is generated in conventional 'new chum' fashion, as Jenkin's absurdly formal suits and his ideas of best bank behaviour run up against the Townsville locals and their familiar manner. The story ends in a

picaresque episode where Jenkins is carried away in a hut during a flood, and casts away his effete British trappings and finds his new manhood.

Then Julius Adolphus Jenkins, the ‘dude,’ the ‘howling new chum,’ and the ‘rank duffer,’ pulled himself together, and became a Man. (199)

Becke and Sladen’s tales show the length of the comic tradition to which O’Grady’s *They’re a Weird Mob* belongs, as well as the parodic possibilities of the genre.

Not all adventure stories have happy endings of course. Junor’s ‘Dean Man’s Tales’ records the adventures of Tweed and Redford who are given directions to a gold reef by an Aborigine they save from death. The gold source is somewhere east of Coolgardie and the duo experience extreme hardship in their search. They encounter William Baird, a Leichhardt-like lost explorer, who is worshipped as a deity by a tribe of cannibal Aborigines leading a meagre life in an oasis. The watercourse they inhabit contains thousands of years of alluvial gold deposits. Redford attempts to plum the depth of a pool in search of nuggets but a mysterious creature grabs an ankle and he barely escapes. Baird, who is not plagued by the mosquitoes that infest the river, reveals the reason for this immunity—he has leprosy. For this confession he is rewarded with a gunshot to the head by Redford who remarks that this was the best thing for him. On their painful and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to reach civilisation, Redford is found to be immune to snake venom and Tweed, who seems to have an unusual interest in the latest immunological research, reveals the reason—yes, leprosy again. What is now known as Hansen’s disease is described in the story as ‘the original legacy of incest and cannibalism, combined with fish diet’ (153); amusingly inaccurate, but immorality and the consumption of raw fish really were thought to be contributing factors, even after the discovery of the bacillus. The story concludes with Tweed recognising the handwriting on love letters Redford had been carrying. His unwelcome realisation is that Redford’s lover is ‘none other’ than Tweed’s wife who has written many letters mocking her weak husband. Any subsequent awkwardness is dissipated by the swift deaths of both men. Leprosy appears in Lala Fisher’s story in which a lost traveller bunks in for the night with a one-armed man who lives in seclusion. On reaching the station the traveller finds the man with whom he has slept is eluding police who wish to remove him to a leper colony. Leprosy became a staple of the adventure story, most notably perhaps in Conan Doyle’s ‘The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier’ and Jack London’s ‘Ko’alau the Leper’ but is found elsewhere as well. The connection with race is clear in Junor’s story, but in Fisher’s work the sufferer makes an eloquent case against the sequestration and forcible detention of those with the disease. The ending of the tale, however, where the traveller realises he has bunked with a victim of the disease is designed to cause that thrill of horror that produced the ‘leper colony’ solution in the first place.

Adventure stories require the protagonist to defeat the enemy. These may be remorseless bushrangers, in the case of James Borlase’s ‘Cambromatta Station’, which shows a self-conscious avoidance of the already well-worn rut of the bushranger genre, by having the protagonist *not* marry the girl he saves. Aborigines are often brought in to serve as villains, although in the short stories in the anthology the joyful but strangely antiseptic slaughter of ‘blacks’ that is found in some of the adventure novels is not present. Instead, the brutality is carefully detailed with the Aboriginal victims sometimes being given full subjectivity, looking back at their killer with a full range of emotion and capacity for suffering. Borlase’s tale reflects on the casual carnage of the frontier and the fact that the sensational novels of adventure, squalid ‘hut fictions’ as they are described, do not convey the full terror of blood spilled in defence of property or through revenge. In many stories, however, the Aborigines

have already been massacred and their remains give a gothic resonance to the landscape. Francis Adam's tale 'The Last of the Bushrangers', as its title suggests, records the decline of bushranging as it attempts to cope with telegraphy and modern policing. The more sensitive of the two bushrangers, Pilsbury, feels deeply uneasy as he gazes at the bones of Aborigines slaughtered, little knowing his faithless companion is about to dispatch him in a similar manner. The guilty busman is a well known trope by the 1890s and is repeated in Favenc's story where a hut-keeper is decoyed by a cattle duffer pretending to be the ghost of the man who gave Murderer's Camp its name, and who hanged himself, haunted past reason by his aboriginal victims.

Hume Nisbet's 'A Queensland Iliad' is a curiosity in that there is not much of the racial sensitivity Nisbet exhibited in some of his other writing. Rather, Aborigines are here the implacable savages of the adventure genre, and the plight of the besieged and lonely shepherd generates sympathy. The story suggests the shepherd wishes a sexual relationship with the twelve year old Aboriginal girl who visits, but before she can return he is killed, like his sheep, by natives. The discovery of the bleached bones of the girl, presumably killed by her tribe, serve as the denouement of the tale, and they join the bones of the shepherd's horse, his sheep and even the bone-like arms of the gum trees in a death soaked landscape.

Labour relations make a somewhat unexpected appearance in Guy Boothby's 'Billy Binks – Hero', which is also set in Queensland. Boothby came from South Australian establishment stock, but found few avenues for his ambition in Australia. The story here is a vicious reflection on unionism whose members are nothing more than 'well armed and mounted' riff-raff who torture the eponymous child hero to death. The story was not published until 1898 when much of the fervour of the strike of 1891 had declined, yet it is still extreme in its sentiments. Boothby thankfully left the defamatory fictionalisation of the labour movement and spent the rest of his short life in England writing 'Dr. Nikola' novels which helped to invent the myths that surround Nikola Tesla.

An obvious problem for collectors of adventure writing is finding female writers in such a masculinised genre. Ellen Liston's 'Cousin Lucy's Story' is the tale of the wife of a local policeman who helps a prisoner to escape the law. Harry Miles, the prisoner, was jailed for the justified murder of a man who had debauched Miles' innocent sister. Lucy Hunter helps him escape and later engineers the reunion of brother and sister in New York. The female protagonist is active and daring, displaying initiative and judgment that contradicts her husband's public role, yet it is all achieved from within a traditional position of respectability. Laura Palmer-Archer's 'My Visit to a Woolshed' seems something of a desperate choice since the story is just what the title suggests, and is devoid of any adventure.

This anthology joins Weaver and Gelder's other collections of Australian romance, gothic and crime tales. Altogether these are serving a valuable cultural function in bringing older authors and stories back to visibility. But the stories are entertaining in their own right, and *Colonial Australian Adventure Fiction* does not lack for 'ripping yarns' full of the excitement, danger and the unexpected, as well as the anxiety, brutality and guilt of the colonial process.

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