Tropes of Dispossession: The Political Unconscious of 'The Land Question' in Colonial Australian Satire

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'The Land Question', that is, the question of who should have access to the land, has long been a feature of political and social life in Australia. The debate surrounding the *Mabo* and *Wik* decisions in recent years, recalls an earlier manifestation of the land question in New South Wales in the mid-nineteenth century. Politics at the time was dominated by conflict between loose-knit groupings of self-styled 'liberals' and 'conservatives'. Liberals argued that 'the poor man', a rhetorical figure for the unemployed and propertiless, was denied access to the land (Buck 163). This was a consequence of the imperial Waste Lands Occupation Act of 1846, legislation which liberals believed had 'locked up' the land on behalf of wealthy pastoral interests by endowing the pastoral lessees—the squatters—with pre-emptive rights of purchase. The result, argued the liberal firebrand Dr John Dunmore Lang in the New South Wales parliament in October 1860, was that 'a great change came over the spirit of our colonial dream. Instead of the systematic encouragement which the Government had given to the occupation of the land for the purpose of cultivation, every difficulty imaginable was from that period thrown in the way of the cultivator' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 October 1860). Following the defeat of the conservative and pastoral interests in the election of 1860 a liberal ministry under the premiership of Charles Cowper passed the Robertson Land Acts of 1861, which introduced the principle of 'free selection before survey', designed to allow 'the poor man' to possess and cultivate land. This legislation, which allowed any person to enter the Crown land squatting runs of a pastoralist and 'select' an area, prior to survey, in order to establish a farm and buy land in freehold from the Crown, was bitterly opposed by conservative pastoral interests (King 130).

It was in this milieu that a tradition of political rhetoric and satire emerged in the newspapers of New South Wales. Writers supporting the liberal or radical cause, such as Daniel Deniehy and Henry Kendall, produced witty satirical prose. *The Poor Man*, a political satire published serially in the *Sydney Mail* from 12 March to 17 September 1864, represented the conservative position on the land question. This example of popular literature contributed to a conservative political discourse which asserted not only that the working classes were harmed by legislative attempts to turn them into property owners, but that they were in fact protected by dispossession. It is our argument that the terms of this discourse, particularly the assertion that because poor free selectors had failed to cultivate their land they forfeited any claim to its tenure, alluded to arguments previously used to justify the dispossession of Aborigines of their land in New South Wales.

We will examine *The Poor Man* serial not only in relation to the immediate context of its production and reception in the early 1860s but also in relation to early nineteenth-century disputes about the Aborigines' land tenure. A useful model of how *The*

Poor Man both reflects and represses these historical referents is Fredric Jameson's formulation of the 'political unconscious'. Jameson proposes that by studying how a narrative specifically represses history, a reader can analyse its collective denial of historical contradictions (Jameson 20). *The Poor Man* serial conducts the debate about the poor free selectors' right to possess land by using strategies similar to those used to deny the Aborigines a right of tenure, in particular by using the topos of cultivation. In this manner the satire encouraged a reader to conclude that the poor working man, who had little or no experience of cultivation, had no right to possess property in New South Wales. The political discourse of the satire (like parliamentary debates about free selection in the early 1860s) pointedly excludes specific reference to the Aborigines from the land question. This repression masks the contradiction that the use of cultivation as a touchstone to determine the right to property could also be used against pastoralists and squatters.

The immediate context of the production and reception of *The Poor Man* serial lay in the taxation debates of 1864. A conservative faction ministry, under the premiership of James Martin, came to power on 16 October 1863 and replaced the previous liberal ministry which had passed the Robertson Land Acts. In 1864 when liberals, in opposition, invoked the interest of 'the poor man' when criticising the Martin government's proposed taxes on a range of goods, including rum, salt, tea, and shoes, conservatives responded with derision not only in parliament but also in the popular press. *The Poor Man* serial articulated the conservatives' defence of the proposed taxes by recalling the Robertson Land Acts, legislation that had provided a previous occasion for liberals to champion the poor man's interests. The fictitious authorial narrator of the political satire, Mr Redde Pepper, is a wealthy Sydney land owner who, because he sympathises with the poor man, supports the liberals' arguments that the poor man should own and cultivate land. Pepper associated parliamentary debates about the land question in 1861 with those on taxation in 1864. When he heard 'that the poor man's boots were taxed under the same iniquitous tariff that placed an impost on his favourite liquor [rum]', Mr Pepper 'remembered with triumph, that it was for the poor man that the Land Act was passed; that it was for him free selection was originated and made law' ('*The Poor Man*', *Sydney Mail*, 19 March 1864). In order to cast doubt upon the validity of the liberals' criticism of proposed taxes, the satire purports to reflect the actual outcome in 1864 of the liberals' previous intercession in 1861 on behalf of the poor man. This is achieved in the satire by narrating a sequence of meetings that the narrator has with free selectors. Mr Pepper promises the reader to find the poor man 'to take him *in situ*, and to show him to the world as he really is. I would visit him in his home ... and would narrate his wrongs, his grievances, and his doleful position, in terms that should draw tears even from the hard-hearted citizens of Sydney' ('*The Poor Man*', *Sydney Mail*, 19 March 1864). The satire ridicules the naïveté of Mr Pepper's liberal sentiments. Indeed the irony is driven home by the fact that even the free selectors whom Pepper meets dismiss the liberals' arguments as foolish errors. As a result the satire purports to reflect the free selectors' agreement with the conservatives' position on the land law.

In order to meet 'the poor man' Mr Pepper pursues a path that leads from Sydney to unsurveyed lands where he encounter three families of free selectors. None of the free selectors fulfils the idealistic portrait of an honest, prospering agriculturist that, according to conservatives, liberals had promised would result when the poor man gained access to his own land. One free selector, Peter Jackson, himself complains to Mr Pepper that what the liberals failed to provide for when amending the land law was

the limited savings and credit available to a poor free selector. Having invested all his savings buying and clearing his property, Jackson cannot afford to put it under cultivation. As a result he stands to lose his starving family as well as his property. The example of Jackson is presented in the satire as proof of the false logic of the Robertson Land Acts, which, Mr Pepper notes, according to liberals, such as John Robertson himself, were a means not only to make the poor man 'the equal of those by whom he had been so long down trodden', the pastoralists, but more importantly to make the poor man independent through 'the cultivation of the soil' (*'The Poor Man', Sydney Mail*, 25 June 1864). Jackson is evidence that the new land law did not transform poor men into independent property owners who could cultivate their own land.

By claiming to reflect sympathetically the life of the poor man three years after he had the opportunity to become a free selector, the political satire purported to prove that the poor man had not benefited from his life on the land as a small scale agriculturist. In the conservative political satire, 'cultivation' serves as a metaphor to explain what the free selectors lack, that is, culture and a productive life within a social structure. During parliamentary debates conservatives proposed other ways of situating the working classes on the land based on the assumption that the poor man must be located within a well-defined class system. For example, when debating the Crown Lands Alienation Bill in the New South Wales parliament in October 1860, Mr Moriarty advised that mechanics of the working class could be best situated under the guidance of a class of gentlemen land owners; he explained that

> He had seen a little of the squatting districts of this country within the last twelve months, and he had seen what he believed to be, under some circumstances, a very happy state of things. He had seen a gentleman occupy a small area of land, managing personally all his concerns, and showing an example of industry and sobriety to all the men employed under him. These men were, he thought as happily circumstanced as any poor labouring man could be, comfortably housed, rations *ad libitum*, and a farm at their disposal to cultivate when they wished to supply themselves with superfluities. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 October 1860)

Rather than owning property, conservatives argued, the poor man would be happiest living and working on a gentleman's land. In such circumstances, the gentleman would cultivate the poor man's character while the latter cultivated the gentleman's land. Similarly the satire argued that by nature and by experience the poor man was unable to cultivate his land and thereby forfeited any 'right' to own land. As well, the satire implicitly argued that a poor man, such as Peter Jackson, now would not be impoverished but instead protected by dispossession.

What is the origin of the satire's usage of 'cultivation', particularly in relation to its discourse about land tenure? Cultivation of the bush, in liberal political discourse, was the means to transform the poorer classes of workers into prosperous members of the propertied class. In the satire, Mr Pepper voices the ideas and idioms that liberal political discourse associated with 'cultivation'. He reminds the reader that the Honourable John Robertson

> expressly instituted free selection for the purpose of encouraging *cultivation*, and so making smiling fields where once were *desert* places and happy homes where once were only haunts of the kangaroo and wallabi ... It was entirely and solely for the poor man—to give him the equal of those by whom he had been so long down trodden—to put him in possession of his *birthright*—the *land*—which was

> his property by right, as much as it was that of the wealthiest.
> ('*The Poor Man*', *Sydney Mail*, 25 June 1864; emphasis added)

The conjunction of the idioms 'cultivation', 'desert', 'the land' and 'birthright' alludes pointedly to debates about the land law in the 1830s. Many jurists in the 1830s attempted to justify the English claim to possession of every inch of Australia by citing William Blackstone, who in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* differentiated colonies won by conquest and treaty from others where 'lands are claimed by right of occupancy only, by finding them *desert* and *uncultivated*, and peopling them from the mother countries' (Blackstone I: 104). This was an assumption shared by liberals and conservatives who debated the land question in the late 1850s and early 1860s. Moreover it is accepted by Mr Pepper who imagines that the poor man by cultivating the land could transform 'desert places', as he describes them, inhabited previously only by kangaroos and wallabi. The land, to his mind, was unpeopled or desert until squatters and pastoralists arrived on it. In the 1830s, parliamentary and popular political discourse spoke in similar terms when contending that the Aborigines did not have a claim to the land because the land belonged to the man who first cultivated it.

The fact that the Aborigines did not base their existence upon cultivation, some argued, provided a means to apply Blackstone's assertion to Australia. Cultivation as the means to prove 'possession' was used to evade other accepted legal and political theories of sovereignty and land tenure that clearly determined the Aborigines' possession of the land. For example, in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 7 November 1838 an anonymous column, titled 'Crown Lands', made a similar assertion. The article justified the appropriation of the land without determining land tenure by means of treaty by contrasting the examples of the indigenous people of America and Australia. There was, according to the article, no

> analogy between the two cases. The American Indians were divided into nations, having fixed localities—they cultivated the ground, and understood the right of property. Not so, however, with the natives of New Holland. This vast country was to *them* a common—they bestowed no labor upon the land—their ownership, their right, was nothing more than that of the Emu or the Kangaroo. They bestowed no labor upon the land and that—and that *only*—it is which gives a right of property in it. ('Crown Lands', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 November 1838)

As Henry Reynolds has explained, this popular argument that cultivation proved occupancy of land provided no basis in English or international law to dispossess occupants, such as the Aborigines. Indeed the argument failed to explain the claim to possess land made by Australian pastoralists most of whom did not cultivate their land. It was a deeply flawed argument that, in Reynolds's words, failed to account for many facts, including the fact that 'there was no legal obligation to cultivate freehold land' (Reynolds 75). In parliamentary debates about the land law liberals as well as conservatives ignored this fact. In order to establish the poor man's claim to possess land, the liberals noted that the pastoralists and squatters, who merely grazed animals on the land, did not fulfil the colonial dream of improving the land by putting it under crop. It was the poor man's role as a cultivator that in liberal political discourse identified an improvement that he could bring to the colony by becoming a free selector. The satire refutes this liberal argument, by having Mr Pepper tacitly refer to the fact that the free selectors had not successfully cultivated the land and as a result had not established a basis for their tenure of the land. Like the liberals in parliamentary

debate, the conservative satire set forth the topos connecting cultivation and land tenure without specific allusion to its use to dispossess the Aborigines.

One specific reference to Aborigines in *The Poor Man* reveals how the political unconscious of the satire facilitates an argument to 'dispossess' members of the working class who had become free selectors. The narrator interrupts his picturesque description of the bush surrounding a free selector's property in order to relate to the reader his companion's ethnographic report:

> 'That there,' said Jones, 'is the bangola palm. You wouldn't believe it to look at it, but that supplies the blacks with all their tinware ... or at least, what serves 'em for tinware. They make their drinking cups out of it, buckets to carry water any distance; yes, and even kettles to boil their fish in ... The saucepan doesn't last long to be sure, but then the tin shop is very handy, and very cheap in its prices.
> ('*The Poor Man*', *Sydney Mail*, 7 May 1864)

Without any comment on Jones's report, the attention of the narrator, Mr Pepper, returns to his driving interest, that is, how '[w]ith all this undergrowth ... the settler or free-selector, or whatever he was, had managed to get into the inextricable mass of vegetation to make his selection, and when made, how he had managed to begin his work' ('*The Poor Man*', *Sydney Mail*, 7 May 1864). The satire baldly asserts the self-sufficiency of Aborigines who, the reader is told, do not cultivate land but instead subsist by utilising available natural resources. This enabled the conservative discourse of the satire to propose that the dispute about ownership of the land concerned only Anglo-Celtic immigrants and their descendants. The historical contradiction that the political unconscious represses in the satire emerges when representing the Aborigines' life and life skills. Their means of existence is represented by the bangola palm. What the narrative represses is specific reference to the fact that not only free selection but also land runs held by pastoralists denied the Aborigines' rights to the means of their existence, the land on which the bangola palms grew.

The question that remains is how did the reflection of selected historical information, such as the Robertson Land Acts and free selection, and the repression of specific historical reference to the Aborigines' dispossession encourage the mid-nineteenth century readers of *The Poor Man* to interpret the narrative? We suggest that the political satire subtly encouraged the reader to read in terms of the absent referent, that is, to interpret the use of the idioms of desert and uncultivated land as a justification for dispossessing or denying the tenure of free selectors. The satire manages the historical contradiction of pastoralists, who did not put their land under crop, denying the land tenure of Aborigines and free selectors by repressing historical referents within a conventional narrative paradigm about an individual's personal hardship and courage. The 'battler' narratives displace specific historical reference to the vested interests of wealthy pastoralists and squatters in order to direct a reader's interest to what is presented as an obvious conclusion, namely, that the poor man would be better off if dispossessed of his free selection and then set to work under the supervision of a wealthy pastoralist. *The Poor Man* serial provides a narrative resolution that recommended to the reader the benefits to accrue from creating in New South Wales the English class system in which the poor man laboured on a gentleman's land. The individualist narratives about free selectors' failed efforts at land settlement, enable the satire to manage a real historical contradiction by repressing the reader's awareness of the fact that to use cultivation as a means to deny the poor man's land tenure in no way confirmed the pastoralists' and squatters' claims. The use of the topos of cultiva-

tion simultaneously represses reference to the dispossession of the Aborigines while relying on its supposed logic when justifying the dispossession of the working classes in New South Wales in the 1860s. The political unconscious of *The Poor Man* serial attempts, finally, to rewrite and revise the spirit of what John Dunmore Lang had referred to as 'the colonial dream'.

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