

# Randolph the Reckless: Explorations in Australian Masculine Identity, 1889–1941

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**H**M. Green remarked that Randolph Bedford was almost as representative of the Australia of his day as Lawson or Furphy or Paterson (706). It is certainly the case that from the publication of his earliest *Bulletin* story in 1889 until his death in July 1941, Bedford was constantly before the eyes of the Australian reading public.<sup>1</sup> In this essay I argue the view that he principally offered his contemporaries a paradigm for Australian masculinity. The paradigm operated in the areas of male with male and male with female relationships, as well as in the political and financial spheres. Green's sense of Bedford as a writer of the 1890s can be supported, since it was in this decade and during Federation that his influence was paramount and most original. He offered extreme or expanded versions of masculine gender norms, sometimes resisting and at other times anticipating innovation. Aspects of the Bedford model persist in current concepts of Australian masculinity.

The model was embattled from the beginning, and increasingly vulnerable. In the decades before World War I, Bedford exemplified an extreme masculine autonomy, based on his exploits as a journalist and mining entrepreneur in the out-back and in Europe. He projected this image in the club and pub world of male interchange, which was his natural habitat, and which defined itself in the period as Bohemian and atheistic, against the opposing parameters of suburban responsibility and female and clerical support for temperance. In the early 1900s the Sydney-based Dawn and Dusk Club welcomed Bedford as one of a Heptarchy, so-called Torchbearers of Culture (Kirkpatrick 42). In Melbourne he founded the Ishmael Club, which met at Fasoli's Restaurant in Flinders Street. Ted, Ambrose and Will Dyson, and Lionel and Norman Lindsay were members. Poems which Bedford published in the *Bulletin* in 1904 explicate his notion of Ishmael as hero (e.g. 'Ballad of the Impenitent Thief'). They resurrect the romance of the Arabian desert horseman, a splendid if ephemeral lover, the resister of slavery and 'the smug Respectable.'

Bedford's male contemporaries responded to his varied self-imaginings with ambiguous enthusiasm. Reminiscences by his literary friends refer to exotic domi-

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1. Nearly 650 publications by Bedford are listed in the incomplete 'Bibliography', ed. Smith and Taylor, *LiN* 10.4 (1982/3): 106-64.

nance-submission rituals associated with boozing. Norman Lindsay recalls how Bedford greeted him at a pub in Elizabeth Street, Sydney, by wiping his boot down the front of Lindsay's suit. Lindsay leaned over, picked Bedford's handkerchief out of his coat pocket, wiped his clothes and boots on it, and threw it back (*Bohemians of the Bulletin* 105).

Bedford courted attention through a dominating physical presence. Representations by artists who knew him in his younger days further testify to an ambivalent masculine response. Lindsay's portrait in *Bohemians of the Bulletin*, first published in 1965, delights in Bedford's heavy frame and pugnacious bearing (100). His appearance in *The Magic Pudding* (1918) as Bunyip Bluegum, disguised (77), confirms Bedford's participation in the evolving national consciousness, but a degree of antagonism underlies the portrait's humour. A similar undertone is present in early newspaper drawings. Will Dyson's *Bulletin* portrait of 1906 retains an admonitory and paternal dignity, but caricatures in the *Bulletin* in September 1908 and by Harry Julius in December 1910, as well as David Low's sketch in the *Lone Hand* of May 1914, glory in the phallic pretentiousness of Bedford's aspirations to authorship and world travel. They are true to Bedford's account of his wanderings in England and Italy between 1901 and 1904, published as a series of *Bulletin* articles and collected in 1916 under the title, *Explorations in Civilisation*. By relocating the field of conquest in the colonisers' own countries, these articles impose an aggressively colonial system of values on Bedford's Old World experience. The distortions and extravagances of their author's masculine persona, possibly driven by his subliminal recognition of other men's reservations, made him a fit subject for the caricaturist's art. Moreover, Bedford's self-presentation perfectly matched the bumptious energy of the *Bulletin's* style.

On the other hand, the bravado of his nationalist enterprises and attitudes, which included a denigration of English in comparison with Australian literature, and a classing of Victor Daley with Shakespeare and Tennyson ('Books I Remember', *Lone Hand* 1 May 1913: 80) could not fail to excite genuine admiration and affection. Bedford embodied and heightened a masculine model for bridging the awkward transition years be-



*Randolph Bedford*

tween the bushman's reputedly pristine, physical and uncomplicated existence and the urban and industrialised society which Australia was rapidly becoming. In this way he fulfilled the role of torch-bearer which had been symbolically allocated to him. In contrast with Norman, Lionel Lindsay wholeheartedly adopted Bedford as mentor, accompanying the older man in his European travels, and selecting his wife from among Bedford's entourage in Italy. Their friendship lasted until Bedford's death. Bedford's posthumously-published autobiography, *Naught to Thirty-Three*, refers to numerous male friends and acquaintances, many distinguished, in all walks of life. All of his novels and many of his stories and poems revert in favourable terms to the tried mateship theme, often transposed to city life, and involving actual or surrogate fathers and sons. The sheer enthusiasm and voluminous excess of Bedford's versions of mateship vitalise and proliferate the possibilities of the theme.

If Bedford's highly visible masculine model was embattled on the one hand by an ambivalence of masculine response, it was besieged on the other by his reluctant acknowledgment of female emotional and sexual power, and by a sense of domestic responsibility. Contemporary reports reveal how his personal style marginalised the feminine and alienated women. Vance Palmer states that his landlady in London remembered Bedford with a shudder: 'He was a boisterous man with a voice and laugh that shook the whole house' (98). If Lionel Lindsay was enthusiastic about Bedford, and Norman ambivalent, Norman's wife, Rose, was clear about her antipathy: 'He had a rude, familiar manner to women and his wit was of the viperish order . . . He was fat with a beaked nose and the eyes of an eagle. He stepped lightly as fat men often do, and seldom took his great slouch-hat off because he had a bald head' (27).

Bedford's many publications were implicated in the strenuous denial of the feminine which was a major obstacle to Australian cultural maturity in the early decades of the twentieth century. Writing under a male pseudonym, a contemporary female commentator succeeded in airing this perspective. In a Red Page article of 1923, 'Cecil Warren' claimed that writers like Palmer are 'badly handicapped' by 'that very sex-limitation of which they speak.' Bedford, she wrote, 'seems to us women to blunder through life and literature like an elephant in a bric-à-brac bazaar' ('Literature and Women', *Bulletin* 7 June 1923).

Bedford's writings continually revisit the dream of an untrammelled masculine freedom, proper to boyhood, but redolent in its literary manifestations of cultural immaturity. His most characteristic fiction pivots on the point where the dream of a simplified masculine autonomy encounters the feminine, which it alternately romanticises and vilifies under the madonna-whore dichotomy. Bedford's version of the dichotomy nevertheless encompasses the complication of husbandly guilt, and, most distinctively, a deeply-rooted sense of the feminine as destructive. In his fiction published before World War I this is often moderated in its turn by a feeling that male potency contributes to its destruction through its own excess.

Bedford's first novel, *True Eyes and the Whirlwind*, published in London in 1903, retraces, under the persona of Billy Pagan, his youthful picaresque adventures,

which were inspired by the romance of the bush. His second novel, *The Snare of Strength* (1905), opens with a bizarre rite of passage, in which the protagonist, another Bedford *alter ego*, George Gifford, and his mates, conquer an octopus at a beach near Sydney:

The three men ran ashore and again impaled the octopus, which had wriggled off the spear. They were as primitive as their nakedness; their nudity, their strength, the hunting and the fight had stripped from them the last vestige of civilization. Here was an enemy scotched already and now to be killed. They stooped around it and laughed – three splendid savages exultant over the fallen; man suddenly discovering his dominion over the beasts as in the beginning of the world. (5)

In recalling a presumed heroic exuberance of Paradise before the invention of Eve, the scene evokes a continuing masculinist idyll of Western cultures.

Following their differing elaborations of masculine freedom, the plots of both Bedford's early novels lead into an encounter with the feminine, introduced in each case through their protagonists' passionate heterosexuality, which was clearly integral also to their author. *True Eyes* develops what was to become a frequent Bedfordian theme of matrimonial devotion, disrupted when a child dies while Billy is out bush on a gratuitous adventure, but ending in a conditional reconciliation. *The Snare of Strength* develops Bedford's sense of the feminine as destructive, when Gifford's political career is wrecked by an innocent meeting with a married woman. In attempting romantically to abduct his lost fiancée, the patriotically named Australia Field, he breaks his back and dies at the end of a night-long gallop. The fact that his stallion, Flash, has to be destroyed is clearly symbolic.

Bedford's most frequently anthologised story, 'Fourteen Fathoms by Quetta Rock', first published in New York in 1910 (*Sydney Mail*, 7 December 1910: 42, 53) narrates how Phil Regard, a diver and 'a fine, strong world-beater of a man', is crippled when he discovers the infidelity of the woman he loves. The story is typical of Bedford's fiction, in that it combines an intense appreciation for masculine physical and emotional vitality, with a deeply rooted sense of its vulnerability.

The stories and verse which Bedford published in the *Bulletin* before 1914 exemplify attitudes which he retained for much of his career, and which are still recognisable as constituents of the Australian masculine paradigm. Many pieces reject religion, or vilify missionaries and temperance advocates. Some poems take on a trade union gloss, giving a voice to oppressed labourers, 'the Christs of trade', such as firemen who power the steamers plying the Australian coasts ('The Christs of Trade', 'Westward Ho!'). Other writings commodify women whom Bedford judges as weak in their dealings with men (e.g. 'A Piece of Woman Nature', 'The Matchmaker') or idealise women who take on the characteristics of heroic bushmen ('The Vengeance of Ruby Julia'). There are also traditional poems of love longing or loss ('The Track to True Eyes', 'Bells and Trumpets'). Yet other writings romanticise the bush. A poem entitled 'In the Train – Melbourne to

Richmond' expresses the longing of the city worker for the bush in springtime, recalling an idyll of Bedford's past: 'Then, ah then! We had no children, no investments, and no wife' (14 October 1893:19). In a shift which demonstrates his understanding of the attitude which he habitually opposed, Bedford urges domestic responsibilities, 'with or without applause', on a soldier who abandoned wife and children to volunteer to serve in the Boer War ('In re Billy Keats').

In 1911 *Billy Pagan, Mining Engineer* became Bedford's first volume publication in Australia. The Holmes and Watson proxies, Billy Pagan and Harry Fleet, unconstrained by romantic or domestic involvement, wander remote parts of Australia, solving mining and investment frauds and mysteries. This was a belated retreat to Edenic pre-female fantasy, but other Bedford publications of the period testify to an increasing maturity of outlook. In January 1912 the *Bulletin* printed a photo of Bedford *without* the hat, together with a summary by himself of his accomplishments and moral discoveries to date ('Randolph Bedford Tells His Own Story'). The editor's introduction reasserted the established caricature: 'He is typically Australian in his crudeness, his audacity, his vigor [*sic*], his long-windedness, his self-confidence, his careless optimism.' However, Bedford's account of himself acknowledges disappointment in literary, political and mining ventures. Sadness is evident in an oblique reference to his separation from his wife, Mary Arrowsmith, which occurred at this time (Boland 242): 'I was ideally happy in my home; no man could have had better chances or messed them up more by attempting out of mere exuberance of strength to do too much.'

In the decade before the War, Bedford's sympathy for the working man, whose lot he had shared in his youth, crystallised into membership of the Labor Party. In 1917 his friend, E. G. Theodore, later Premier, nominated him for the Queensland Legislative Council. After the Council's abolition in 1922, Bedford won a bye-election for Warrego, a stronghold of the Australian Workers' Union in the Queensland Legislative Assembly. The mature Bedford cultivated a public image as responsible politician. This is epitomised in a photo, first published in the *Bulletin* Jubilee Number of 1930, and frequently reprinted in the *Worker*, where it accompanied a series of articles designed to appeal to the Warrego electorate. The photo contrasts sharply with the nationalistic and entrepreneurial assertiveness portrayed in the pre-War *Bulletin* and *Lone Hand* caricatures. Its sobriety signals a shift which occurred in the early 1930s in Bedford's publications, away from fiction and poetry, towards factual and polemical letters and articles.

Various contradictory impulses, many of which were relevant to the masculine paradigm which he continued to embody, were constrained by Bedford's later career as Labor politician. Before and during World War I, his nationalism remained, as it had been since the 1880s, home-based. Although travel within Australia and overseas continued to be a vital passion, an isolationist viewpoint informs his prolonged support for White Australia, Protection, and an Australian Republic (see, e.g. *Brisbane Courier* 15 February 1930: 20). His writings are atypical of the period in the respect they accord to Aborigines (see, e.g. *Bulletin* 10 February 1894: 17; *Courier Mail* 28 August 1937:20). The intense appreciation for

Australia which was Bedford's fundamental political principle sometimes produced surprising colourations in his world view.

Even in the years of rampant militarism and pro-British sentiment, and in 1917, when he farewelled a soldier son of his own (*Bulletin* 15 November 1917: 40), he maintained an anti-imperialist and even pacifist stance. In the *Worker* he passionately opposed conscription, and his *Bulletin* poems of the period attribute wars to misguidance by clergy and kings. 'A Prayer for Widows' deplores the lives of the many war widows, 'all plump and youthful – roses in wintry weeds' (*Bulletin* 14 January, 1915: 3). While Bedford's professed egalitarianism and genuine compassion for the downtrodden arguably remained features of the Australian model of masculinity, he never incorporated the crucial Anzac modification of soldierly self-sacrifice into his idea of manhood, which in this respect was overtaken by events.

The situation was little altered with the advent of World War II. In a series of letters exchanged in the *Bulletin* from January to March 1928, Bedford berated British financial arrangements with Australia and predicted that America, which he admired as a model of republican government, 'will be our only ally worth anything in a war with Japan, if such ever happens' (*Bulletin* 5 January 1928:13). He had often aired these same views from 1896 to 1909, in his journal, the *Clarion*. After hostilities commenced, Bedford conformed, with reservations, to majority sentiment, even publishing, in the week before he died, his first poem about a war zone, inspired by a radio broadcast from a soldier and nurse in the Middle East (*Courier Mail* 28 June 1941: 6). His last prose publication, in the *Courier Mail* of 28 December 1940, is, however, pacifist in intent, questioning the prospects for a lasting just peace and 'the prevention of suffering by the helpless', in a world of purposeless cruelty and complacent acceptance of individuals' lust for power.

The feature most at odds with Bedford's Labor and union persona was an extravagant entrepreneurial ambition. This is captured in Tom Glover's *Bulletin* caricature of 6 October 1927 (22), where it is unsoftened by any nationalist bravado. Bedford's many, often grandiose, mining and pastoral schemes, adroitly summarised by Boland in the *ADB*, spanned the whole period of his literary and journalistic productivity, from 1888 to the 1930s. He achieved some notable successes. Blainey recounts how in the 1920s Bedford pegged mining leases on and around the original Mt. Isa site, floating gadfly companies which Mt. Isa Mines were forced to buy out (93–99, 132–35). Inexhaustible enthusiasm for capitalist ventures and adventures is a distinguishing feature of Bedford's writing about the Australian frontier. The regularity of his publications and the steadiness of his Parliamentary career are nevertheless to be explained partly by his need for money to service debts, which are often hinted at in his writings. For example, 'A Swarm of Locusts', published in the *Bulletin* in December 1927, tells the story of Dan Peberdy, whose boyhood caning at school for playing with a locusts becomes prophetic of a life of exploitation by a large family and consequent indebtedness. At last, like the earlier Bedfordian personae, George Gifford and Phil Regard, Dan succumbs to paralysis: 'And Dan lay there quiet and shrivelled, the mere

wing-case of a man – a field stripped and withered. It is a tragedy to be born green.' Like Dan, Bedford died insolvent.

Bedford's ebulliently masculine self-presentation as an entrepreneur masked a very different financial reality. His continuing indebtedness no doubt contributed to his reservations about masculine strength in relation to women, and even more to his realisation that the pose of masculine strength enjoined by a capitalist society was to a degree illusory.

This short survey reveals the multiplicity and contradictions contained within the masculine model which Bedford proclaimed. His highly visible activities contributed to the distinctively Australian masculinity being formulated in ideology during the 1890s and in the period of Federation. It is obvious nevertheless that the exaggerations of his model, so readily seized on by artists, were partly conditioned by an ambiguous contemporary reception. Bedford's paradigm adhered to the established frontier image of manhood in its utopian, or defensively apartheid, exclusion of the domestic and the feminine, but was even more intensely pub-oriented, irreligious and anti-clerical. His continuing efforts to write the feminine realistically into his masculinised fiction were also distinctive, although his attitude to this procedure grew increasingly pessimistic over time. The masculine model he offered was new in that, through his first-hand knowledge of mining ventures, it succeeded in blending the emerging modern image of entrepreneur with the boyish adventurous spirit of Australian frontier literature.

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