

Colonial Modernity, Native Species and E.J. Brady's 'The Friar-Bird's Sermon: An Australian Fable'

KEN GELDER
University of Melbourne

In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault writes extensively about the 18th century Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707-78), the 'father of taxonomy' who developed the Linnaean system of species classification in his famous *Systema Naturae* (1735)—a very short book, originally, that went through twelve, increasingly expanded editions during his lifetime. For Foucault, Linnaeus's efficient system of naming was designed to make species as visible or present as possible, arranged in terms of their resemblances (rather than their differences). This is the classificatory system of what Foucault calls the Classical Age. Earlier on, in the 16th century—and no doubt before—species were identified in another way, 'by the positive mark...they all bore: what distinguished the various species of birds, for instance, was not the differences that existed between them but the fact that this one hunted its food at night, that another lived on water, that yet another fed on living flesh' (144). The Classical Age, however, is about resemblances, not distinguishing features, bringing species together in a panoramic (even, panoptic) manner: 'To know what properly appertains to one individual is to have before one the classification [of]—or the possibility of classifying—all others' (144). The modern age, beginning around the end of the 18th century, inherits the Linnaean system of classification through resemblance, but adds the human sciences—anthropology, for example—and what Foucault calls the 'concept of "man"': to become self-reflexive, and historical. It is easy to see Linnaeus in this account as a kind of precursory figure, central to the Enlightenment but not quite part of the modern age: not least through the way that natural history, for Foucault, wipes history itself and historical reflexivity—and even, for that matter, language—away from the record.

Linnaeus is also important to Giorgio Agamben, one of a small number of Continental philosophers who might still be said to continue Foucault's genealogical project. Agamben reminds us that to think about species is already to think about systems of classification and visibility: the Latin etymology of *species* takes us back to a root word meaning 'to look, to see,' linking species to spectacle. For Agamben, the human sciences have always been present when it comes to thinking about species. His notion of the 'anthropological machine' draws a Foucauldian distinction between pre-modern and modern ways of distinguishing animal species from humans, although historically speaking it is difficult to say when or why the one became the other. In Agamben's account, Linnaeus put the anthropological machine to work, dividing animal from human while at the same time folding them together—to the extent that assumed human-animal distinctions become impossible to sustain. The animal fable is therefore an interesting genre to think about here. Are animal fables really about humans and human behaviour? This is the usual account of the animal fables of John Dryden and John Gay during the 18th century, the genre's 'golden age.' But can animal fables ever reflect on the condition of animals themselves, as species? This has increasingly been the view of literary critics who have discussed the more recent—modern—animal fables of Kafka, for example. For Margot Norris, Kafka uses the figure of the animal 'autoreferentially, to gesture towards its creatural ontology' (19). But for Chris Danta, Kafka's animal fables are always about 'the

human-animal relation' (132): even here, there is no escaping the logic of the 'anthropological machine.'

It is often noted that Linnaeus had an early kind of ecological view of the world, grasping 'the significance of food chains' and so on. Yet at the same time he believed in man's domination over nature. As Lisbet Koerner puts it, he thought that 'human activities improved the environment...A preromantic, he fancied bucolic culturescapes over pristine nature: his choice Swedish province was thickly-peopled, rich-soiled Scania, with its balmy climate, southern location, and fertile farms' (121). Patricia Fara explicitly connects Linnaeus to the expansion of empire, to mercantile imperialism and wealth creation. Although he didn't actually travel very much, his students did: one of them, Daniel Solander, worked as Joseph Banks's botanist and accompanied Banks on Captain Cook's first circumnavigation of the globe (1768-71). John Gascoigne has described Banks's adoration of Linnaeus at length in his book on Banks and the English Enlightenment. In fact, Linnaeus died on 10 January, 1788, just a week or two before the First Fleet landed at Botany Bay. He certainly had a profound effect on the development of natural history in Australia, something that did indeed tie him to the modern age. John Gould was an active member of the Linnaean Society of London, a taxidermist and zoological curator; his taxonomic work later influenced Darwin's theory of the transmutation of species (they collaborated, in fact) and his illustrations of bird species in particular were soon widely renowned, although often criticised aesthetically. Gould travelled to Australia with his wife in 1838 and went on to produce—among other things—a monumental seven volume collection, *The Birds of Australia* (1840-48), naming, classifying and sketching 186 native bird species as well as a large number of subspecies. This is literally a spectacular work, making species visible, bringing them to light. Colonisation, as we know, has destroyed the habitats of so many native species: by the time Gould produced his *Birds of Australia*, at least five newly discovered bird species were already extinct. But Gould's taxonomies also made many new species visible, all in a surprisingly short space of time: after colonisation. He also noted that some native bird populations had massively increased in the wake of colonial settlement: the black-tailed native hen, he wrote in *Handbook to the Birds of Australia* (1865), 'visited the colony of Swan River in 1833, and that of South Australia in 1840, in such countless myriads, that whole fields of corn were trodden down and destroyed in a single night' (5).

In this article, I want to focus on Gould's identification of the friar bird, a native species that also seemed to be thriving in the wake of colonisation. Gould's descriptions of birds such as this bring history—and language—back into natural history by describing habitat and voice and so on, to the extent that they do indeed become visible in their colonial predicament. This is what Gould wrote about the common friar bird:

There are few birds more familiarly known in the colony of New South Wales than this remarkable species of Honey-eater: it is generally dispersed over the face of the country, both in the thick brushes near the coast and in the more open forests of the interior....From the fancied resemblance of its notes to those words, it has obtained from the Colonists the various names of 'Poor Soldier,' 'Pimlico,' 'Four o'clock,' etc. Its bare head and neck have also suggested the names of 'Friar Bird,' 'Monk,' 'Leather Head,' etc. (n.pag.).



John Gould, *The Common Friar Bird*

Local and visiting writers notice the friar bird early on: for example, William Howitt describes ‘the droll mimicries of the leatherhead’ in his 1857 novel, *Tallangetta, The Squatter’s Home* (22), as if it is already relatively well known. The friar bird quickly becomes a kind of ‘native companion’: a native version of Donna Haraway’s ‘companion species,’ familiar at one level, wild and remote at another. The root meaning of the word *companion*, Haraway reminds us, has to do with eating together, with sitting down as a group and sharing bread (17). The friar bird did indeed go on to eat its way through colonial settlements, an unwelcome guest at the table and now all-*too*-familiar to settlers. An article in the *Australian Town and Country Journal* near the end of the nineteenth century—on 4 April 1896—noted that ‘in one vineyard in the district [of Albury, NSW] from 70 to 120 leatherheads were shot each day, and this lasted for ten weeks. Since then they have increased in numbers, and at the present time are committing great havoc in the orchards in the Blue Mountains...’ (22). Here is a contradictory outcome of colonial settlement, which decimates or even eliminates some native species while increasing the populations of others: friar birds are abundant enough, here, to be a pest. The following week—on 13 April 1897—the *Launceston Examiner* published an article (‘My Bird Friends’) by a woman who chronicled her observations of a family of friar birds nesting in the

bush nearby, expressing something of the ambivalence—and consolation—of the idea of the ‘native companion’: ‘it is possible,’ she wrote, ‘to gain the affection and trust of the wild and uncaged birds, and such an affection is indeed a gem most precious’ (7).

In the same year—on Christmas Day, 1897—the *Australian Town and Country Journal* published a delightful story called ‘The Friar Bird’s Sermon: An Australian Fable,’ by the novelist, poet and socialist, Edwin J. Brady. ‘Like a shaven missionary of olden days, the Friar Bird journeyed along the ridges,’ the fable begins—giving us Gould’s image of the friar bird as ‘monk,’ but also putting the species into a narrative of colonisation as a civilising project. ‘He had composed an address to his people. There was a quiet waterhole where the bush dwellers often assembled, and thither he purposed’ (20). ‘The Friar Bird’s Sermon’ sees this missionary figure gather together a number of native species of birds, to talk to them about their future—and the future of colonial settlement. Most of all, the friar bird wants native birds to be more positive, more optimistic, not least as a way of ensuring their survival: ‘The moral well-being of a living parishioner, like the melancholy Morepoke [or tawny frogmouth owl]—who continually developed suicidal tendencies—was of more pressing import to him than the buried delinquencies of the Diprotodon, that extinct marsupial of the quaternary period’ (20). In part, this fable is a critical response to a couplet by the colonial poet Adam Lindsay Gordon (who also developed suicidal tendencies) which notoriously viewed the Australian landscape as lacking aesthetic beauty: ‘A land,’ Gordon wrote, ‘where bright blossoms are scentless, / And songless bright birds.’ Brady’s friar bird draws a number of native bird species together in order to offer a spirited defence of native lyrical beauty in colonial Australian settings:

‘As for the poet’s libellous accusation against our birds,’ continued the Friar, indignantly, ‘although I have a poor voice myself, I contend that my friend the Lyre Bird down there is an inspired songster...and his little brother, the Blue Wren, the superb warbler, is worthy to appear on any concert platform with Diva [Nellie] Melba and the Divine [Ada] Crossley, our illustrious countrywomen. Nor must I forget my absent comrade, the Magpie, whose liquid carol has so often awakened me from ambrosial dreams to the dewy delights of a scented spring. It gives me the hump!’ cried the Friar, unconsciously dropping into colonial slang, ‘to read such nonsense.’ (20)

In ‘The Friar-Bird’s Sermon,’ the various native bird species are all shown to be implicated in the colonial project: which makes the fable a satire of colonial life and but also a chronicle of its aspirations, of what the colony at this pre-Federation moment imagines it might become. The friar bird admonishes some of the birds he addresses, reminding them—as Federation looms large—that much depends on a positive attitude: ‘The continued melancholy of the Curlew,’ he says at one point, ‘is beginning to affect the literature of the nation. The local poet has already made his lugubrious wail part of a metrical stock-in-trade. If the Curlew cannot restrain his rank pessimism, why does he remain in the country? If Australia is not cheerful enough for him, let him go to Paraguay!’

Colonial optimism is important to this story, which is why the ‘suicidal tendencies’ of the mopoke—and the colonial poets—also have to be rejected. For Linnaeus (according to Foucault), species were shorn of history and language, to become visible in themselves or *as* themselves. For John Gould in the 1840s, history and language return as a way of situating native species in their colonial framework: of making them, recognisably, colonial (that is, recognisable *to* colonials, familiar). In E.J. Brady’s fable at the end of the 19th century, native species now generate a series of social and cultural effects; their voices infiltrate and influence

local literary culture, for example, as if the species themselves are now a kind of generic and ideological indicator of the mood of the times.

The friar bird lectures the other native bird species he assembles together on how to look forward to the future, and how to advance the nation. Hard work, self-improvement and social responsibility are all important to this fable: the Black Cockatoo ‘will never want for a meal while he can chop wood....;’ the Diamond Bird builds beautiful nests, although ‘Being a capitalist, as his name implies, he prefers to labour on individualistic lines’; ‘The Musk Duck, an agitator by nature, fondly imagines that it is democratic to be odorous, but therein he is ignorantly mistaken. True democracy and cleanliness of both mind and body should be forever inseparable!’ ‘The Friar-Bird’s Sermon’ is therefore primarily an animal fable in which each species seems to connote a human characteristic, ideologically wrapped up in the project—and aspirations - of late colonial modernity. An early precursor to this kind of story would of course be Chaucer’s ‘The Parliament of Fowls’ (1380s), which (through a dream vision) draws together a number of different kinds of birds—under the auspices of the goddess of Nature—and gives each bird species a place in the social hierarchy and a characteristic disposition: the crow is sad, for example, the eagle is aristocratic, the raven is wise, the duck is sceptical, the cuckoo is selfish, and so on. These are birds as human citizens: the workings of a *medieval* ‘anthropological machine,’ a fourteenth century taxonomy of species. Something similar happens in ‘The Friar-Bird’s Sermon’ 500 years later, bringing the classificatory system of Foucault’s Classical Age to bear on late colonial aspirations in Australia. And yet I also want to suggest that at the same time this fable does at least gesture towards what Margot Norris had called a ‘creatural ontology.’ Although it folds its native bird species into the colonial project, it simultaneously imagines a space where they can flourish as if colonial settlement had never happened. It opens up something that comes close to a bush ecology—remembering that the word ‘ecology’ was coined only a few decades earlier by the German zoologist, pantheist and Darwinian eugenicist Ernst Haeckel, gaining currency in English through the 1873 publication of his book, *The History of Creation*. Here, nature is precisely a ‘household’ (from *oikos*), an ‘economy,’ something to be managed: it is perhaps not surprising to find that ecology and economy are two sides of the same coin, coming together to provide a view of the natural world that was entirely consistent with the colonial project and the movement towards Federation and nationhood.

Not long before Haeckel’s *The History of Creation*, the American conservationist George Perkins Marsh’s book *Man and Nature* (1864) had circulated through the Australian colonies, impacting in a different way on the development of colonial environmental thought by emphasising the capacity for humans to destroy the natural world. In *The Colonial Earth*, Tim Bonyhady looks at Marsh’s influence on attempts to prevent deforestation in Australia through the 1870s and into the 1890s (165). ‘Man is everywhere a disturbing agent,’ Marsh had written, speaking about colonial conquest and expansion, ‘Wherever he plants his foot, the harmonies of nature are turned to discords’ (36; cited in Cathcart, 159). In ‘The Friar-Bird’s Sermon,’ there are no humans, only birds with human characteristics. In particular, there are no Indigenous people: the story effectively rewrites Indigeneity as ‘native species,’ replacing histories of dispossession—of ‘discord’—with a lyrical assurance that native species have remained in their habitat in spite of everything, uninterrupted by (and remote from) colonial settlement. Here is the final paragraph of Brady’s fable, which in fact turns to some of the bird species chronicled and sketched in the last two books of John Gould’s *Birds of Australia*:

The Friar Bird, having closed his discourse, flapped his wings and departed. The sun had wheeled to the western verge, where billowed clouds, of changing

vermillion and gold, hung lazily. Down in the broad, saltwater inlet, mullet leaped and fell back, like bars of silver, with rhythmic splash to their native element. A White-breasted Grebe, the level beams lighting his glossy wings, skirted the shore; a Blue Heron, with long neck and heavy wings, flapping leisurely across, dropped gracefully on to the brown sound, and stood erect. The shadows of overhanging trees deepened in the water, the incoming sea breeze sighed in the mangroves, the sunlight withdrew from the surrounding hills, silently, gradually, and, up through the sombre trees, clear and majestic, rode the golden moon. (20)

All the human characteristics have disappeared from this evocative, lyrical passage, which puts its native birds to rest in a picturesque bush vista that would seem to float free of any traces of colonial settlement. Simon Ryan, however, has noted that the picturesque in colonial Australia—with its emphasis on the bountiful, on the abundance of, in this case, native fauna—is commonly associated with ‘future use-value’ and the production of wealth (71). We have already seen something of this association in Carl Linnaeus, a kind of proto-ecologist who nevertheless valued ‘fertile farms’ and the human development of rich Swedish landscapes. E.J. Brady went on to edit an important post-Federation literary journal, the *Native Companion* (January—December 1907), which among other things published Katherine Mansfield’s first short stories. Its covers featured paintings by various prominent artists at this time (Ruby Lindsay, Blamire Young, and others) of the broilga, the ‘native companion’—literally, a ‘native companion species’—portrayed as a kind of literary muse, an inspiration to the local writers assembled in the journal’s pages. A decade later, in 1918, Brady hoped to become famous with the publication of *Australia Unlimited*, a massive compendium—well over a thousand pages—that paid an enthusiastic tribute to Australia’s rural and industrial development from colonisation to the present day. Michael Cathcart describes this book as follows: ‘It was crammed with photographs and engravings of neat fields and homesteads, sun-baked farmers, flocks of woolly merinos, orchards straining with fruit, bustling rural townships and an inexhaustible supply of water pouring out of bores...’ (220). Brady argued that that Australia was fertile and abundant enough to support a population of 200 million; and he imagined a future that was entirely free from the kind of gloom and melancholy his friar bird had wanted to banish from the bush: a country filled with healthy, well-fed people, European in origin, without class distinctions, enjoying free education and high wages. Here is an extract from Brady’s ‘Introduction,’ which—as he begins to chronicle his extensive travels around Australia—brings late colonial optimism and the picturesque together in a breathless panegyric for progress-as-plenitude:

Everywhere...I found Wonder, Beauty, unequalled Resource. Under the arid seeming of the plains I saw the possibilities of a marvellous tilth. Barren hills poured out a golden recompense in minerals. The whole continent has proved to be a vast storehouse of undeveloped wealth.

Nor is the message of Australian Nature uttered in tones of predominant melancholy, as many alien souls have affected to believe.... Australia, in itself, is nowhere depressing.... To the sane, healthy native-born it is a mother of everlasting youth and beauty, and the freest, richest, happiest land on earth. (14)

Australia Unlimited calls for an extensive and systematic expansion of white settlement—Brady seems to have supported the ‘White Australia’ policy wholeheartedly—in order to bring cultivation to every corner of the country. The last section of the book pays tribute to ‘The Australian Pastoral Industry’ and its founding fathers, and their ability to graze sheep and cattle

even in the harshest environments. Abundance is everywhere, and not least amongst native species: so much so, that they can be hunted, shot and eaten without restraint:

The black duck is a fine table bird, a fast flyer, and, where he has been disturbed by shooters, very shy....I have shot them on Northern Queensland lagoons, on the rivers and swamps of the Territory, in western Queensland, all over New South Wales and eastern Victoria....Wood duck I found plentiful in the upper reaches of the northern rivers in New South Wales and throughout the Riverina. On my motor-boat journey down the Murray River, I shot scores of them on the banks and sand pits. Magpie geese in the Territory I have found so plentiful that when they rose from the swamps one saw the shadow of the mob passing over the ground like the shadow of a cloud drifting across a field.' (135-6)

The sheer abundance of native birds after colonisation means hunting, too, can be 'unlimited': scarcity and restraint, ideologically associated with pessimism and 'melancholy,' simply do not figure in Brady's book. Here, native birds are 'game' and perfectly suited to the table, giving quite a different meaning to Haraway's 'companion species': 'The superb king parrot, the crimson lory, and the rosella,' he writes, 'are grain-eaters, whose flesh is excellent' (138). Peter Christoff has noted that colonial legislation protecting native species from hunters developed sporadically throughout the late nineteenth century and after Federation, gaining traction only after 1920 (209). But Tim Bonyhady has described various earlier, significant attempts to restrict the licences of hunters in Australia: for example, the appeals for bird protection in 1888 by the ornithologist A.J. Campbell, which he argued was of national importance (213). Influenced by John Gould's work, Campbell was an avid collector and classifier of native birds' eggs; he went on to publish the two-volume *Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds* (1900)—where the aim was to preserve bird species, not eliminate them. For Brady, on the other hand, shooting and eating native birds is an organic, natural way of inhabiting, and celebrating, a nation overflowing with 'resources.' The more often settlers did this, the less dependent they would be on introduced domesticated species such as chickens (which is why Brady is keen to stress how good native birds taste at the table). From this perspective, the protection of native species is almost beside the point: 'curiously enough,' he writes, as if it is a sort of inexplicable anomaly, 'one may not shoot on Sunday' (140). Despite its investment in sheer plenitude, however, *Australia Unlimited* sold poorly; Sarah Mirams suggests that Brady's secular investment in 'the redemptive power of rural life' was out of step with the realities of the times (281). More recent environmentally-conscious views of Brady's book have been particularly harsh. For Tim Flannery, *Australia Unlimited* fed on 'the prejudices of insularity, self-delusion' (30), while Lionel Frost suggests (although it seems less likely) that Brady 'inspired government policies of forest clearance' (Mirams, 271). In hindsight, we can certainly see that Brady offered a delusional account of a future, settled Australia, one that was oblivious to the possibility of native species extinction precisely because it invested so ideologically in their natural abundance.

It might seem as if Brady's 'The Friar-Bird's Sermon'—with its vision of native bird species assembling together in a space blissfully free from colonial settlement and exuberant shooters—could not be more different from *Australia Unlimited*. But let me return to Michel Foucault and his comments at the beginning of *The Order of Things*. Here, he famously mentions an essay by Jorge Luis Borges which describes 'a certain Chinese encyclopaedia' that classifies its species in such an absurd way that one is unable, as Foucault puts it, 'to find a place of residence for them' (xviii). It is as if they are without a habitat, a home, an ecology—and an economy, a use-value. Foucault then contrasts this irrational, fragmentary list with the

fable, a literary form that imagines a utopian place that is somehow already familiar, homely: 'a fantastic, untroubled region...where life is easy, even though the road to [it] is chimerical' (xviii). Utopias, Foucault perceptively writes, 'permit fables'; and the fable 'affords consolation' (xviii). 'The Friar-Bird's Sermon' has exactly this in common with *Australia Unlimited*. While the latter unfolds a fabulous vision of future abundance, land development, productivity and expansion, the former offers the colonial project a reassuring quasi-ecological vision of native species, with the birds immersed in their habitat as if it is and has always been (even after colonisation) an 'untroubled region.' What is interesting about these two otherwise very different texts is just how easily they can sit alongside each other, as fantasy projections of colonial life as it might have been or might yet become. They are both fables in Foucault's sense; far from contradicting each other, they each provided the kinds of consolation that nation-builders needed in order to proceed.

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