



CIVILIZATION IN THE WILDERNESS: THE HOMESTEAD IN
THE AUSTRALIAN COLONIAL NOVEL 1830-1860

ELAINE M. BARKER, BA (Hons.)

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Department of English
The University of Adelaide

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ABSTRACT

To European eyes the homestead was a symbol of a settled civilized society in the Australian hinterland in the earlier nineteenth century. It was powerful enough to catch the imagination of creative writers when they selected settings in the Antipodes and chose to identify with a population isolated both from the urban centres of the Australian littoral and from Europe itself. This thesis considers the influences which helped shape these narratives. It examines, above all, how the image of the European dwelling emerges as central to such texts. Although these pastoral romances must be considered minor Victorian fiction, they may be termed the earlier colonial novels in the context of Australian literature. Three decades permit over fifty of them to be studied. Paintings from the period and other contemporary works, fiction and non-fiction, help throw light on my findings.

Novelists concerned themselves with the attempt to convert what was perceived to be a wilderness into a pastoral landscape. Projected here is an interest in a society undergoing transition. In this colonial life, the private and personal tend to be suppressed in the face of social and communal preoccupations, and problems of personal identity are subordinated to those relating to an evolving society; further, such an emphasis is mirrored in the focus on the homestead's spatial areas. Certain manifestations of contemporary reality in and around these fictional locations are set aside in place of an idealized and romanticized presentation of colonial society: one where the ethos of middle-class family life in the

homeland of early Victorian times prevails. A conservative impulse and a simple moral vision permeate these narratives. However, while patriotism and nostalgia for the mother culture are apparent, one detects an early expression of Australian nationalism and the emergence of a spirit which is distinctly Australian. Importantly, these texts give insight into the way in which certain elements of colonial experience are beginning to assume mythic status.

The aim of my study is to demonstrate the way in which genre, narrative structure, settings and themes have been employed to emphasize particular - and often favoured - aspects of colonial settlement. My thesis acknowledges the contribution made by these nineteenth century novelists to Australian literature and because their works are little known it is my hope that this study will go some way in redressing the situation.

STATEMENT

I hereby affirm that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for an award of any other degree or diploma in any other university; nor, to the best of my knowledge and belief, does it contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text or notes.

ELAINE M. BARKER

NAME: ELAINE M. BARKER COURSE: MASTER OF ARTS

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

SIGNED: _____ DATE: 3rd February 1993

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Note: Literature as historical evidence of a period.

At a time when Australians are looking to their cultural origins with renewed interest it is tempting to see these nineteenth century works as providing evidence of historical and sociological processes. The hazards of using literature for such purposes is much debated, and it is the subject of some well-judged comment by Peter Laslett.¹ This historian observes that both artist and audience will be exercising their imaginations, that they 'will exaggerate, colour up and tone down for aesthetic effect, for subjective, psychological reasons, and must end by suppressing some things and inventing others'. Of necessity, authors are selective. The creative writer, then, offers 'reflections to be shared by his readers rather than mirror-like reflectiveness of the society which they shared together'. Laslett goes on to state: 'The subject matter of imaginative literature shows forth above all what engaged the minds of the generation of the author'. Another historian, Richard White, affirms similarly that 'there have been countless attempts to get Australia down on paper and to catch its essence'; any such attempt, even so, 'is more likely to reflect the hopes, fears or needs of its inventor'.²

I turn now to George Watson who asserts that the novel was 'the dominant literary form of the Victorians' - a factor which is widely held to be valid.³ 'Nobody', Watson believes, 'would now attempt an account of Victorian civilization without considering it'. And he adds that the 'usual Victorian view was not much different ...'. Watson's The English Ideology is an examination of the culture of Victorian times

- 1 Peter Laslett, 'The Wrong Way Through the Telescope: A Note on Literary Evidence in Sociology and in Historical Sociology', British Journal of Sociology, 27.3(1976):324,328.
- 2 Richard White, Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980 (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1981)viii.
- 3 George Watson, The English Ideology (London: Lane, 1973) 256. Cf. Louis Cazamian, The Social Novel in England 1830-1850, trans. Martin Fido (1903; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) 5-7. Theological works were, however, more numerous. See Cazamian 307.

(a period into which the majority of these narratives fall) and he argues incisively for the value of the contemporary novel as a record of social history. In this regard he writes: 'The difference between "fact" and "fiction" is not the same as that between truth and falsehood'. There is a further important element. 'The Victorians did not merely expect novels to be accurate: they demanded that they should be so'. Victorian novels 'were seen, by their earliest readers, as direct sources of social knowledge'. Watson considers that the social fiction of the nineteenth century 'achieves high contemporaneity by the 1850s and 1860s'.⁴ Laslett, likewise, offers the revealing comment that the novelist wishing to succeed in the Victorian era had to be well aware of the temper of the times.⁵

Even although one discerns a reliance on highly-coloured events and, in addition, a reluctance to set down the less desirable facets of colonial existence, there is a strong sense that the texts studied here are greatly revealing of colonial culture. Accordingly, I am in agreement with Hergenhan when he states: 'Through imaginative recreation, fiction can offer this kind of living picture to complement the studies of historians which necessarily have different aims'.⁶

Here it is worthwhile turning to the thoughts expressed by the authors themselves. In gravely-worded Preface or Foreword writers pledged the truth of their fictions; promised narratives which educated while they entertained. Even allowing for the topicality of this literary ploy it can be said that such a stance is fundamental to these

4 Watson 4-5.

5 Laslett 334.

6 Laurie Hergenhan, Unnatural Lives. Studies in Australian Fiction about the Convicts, from James Tucker to Patrick White (St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1983) 5.

texts. Two interwoven lines of development are therefore in evidence, the one educative and turning on historical, political and social realities; the other entertaining and more obviously shaped to artistic purpose. Elements of the romance proliferate, but with an underpinning of careful documentation. In the most competent works, of course, these factors will coalesce. My contention is that although the evidence is selective, it is possible to say that the body of prose fiction studied here affords an invaluable insight into many aspects of colonial culture, into the spirit of the times, and into attitudes and values of the period.