

**'BLUSHING UNSEEN': AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE
PUBLISHED IN REGIONAL NEWSPAPERS OF THE
1840S**

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My title comes from two once very well-known lines from Thomas Gray's 1750 poem 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard':

Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

In the first half of the nineteenth century these lines were frequently quoted by writers discussing the future of Australian literature and still have relevance in relation to material published in early regional newspapers. Thanks to the work of Elizabeth Morrison, Ken Stewart and others, the significance of newspapers, including country newspapers, as places of publication for nineteenth-century Australian writers is now well established. For poets in particular, newspapers and magazines offered about the only form of publication since British publishers were not interested in Australian poetry and book publication in Australia could only be achieved at the author's expense or by subscription. Poetry makes up much of the literature from the 1840s that I will be discussing here, though a surprisingly large amount of original fiction and non-fiction also appeared in these newspapers. In nearly all cases, though of considerable literary and historical interest, this material is still 'blushing unseen' in the dusty pages, or microfilm reels, of the papers concerned.

It is appropriate that we are meeting today in a Victorian country town, since another Victorian country town was the birthplace of Australia's first non-metropolitan newspaper, the *Geelong Advertiser*, in 1840. This is quite remarkable, given that the Port Phillip District was settled so much later than other areas, but indicates something of its very rapid growth, even before the gold discoveries. The *Advertiser* was clearly also the product of a quite remarkable man, James Harrison, its first editor. A detailed account of his career can be found in Elizabeth Morrison's excellent chapter in *Disreputable Profession: Journalists and Journalism in Colonial Australia*, edited by Denis Cryle, so I refer only briefly to it here. Harrison, probably best known today as a pioneer of refrigeration, is a classic example of the nineteenth-century belief in the power of education and the press. A Scottish fisherman's son, he attended Evening College in Glasgow while an apprentice printer, and came to Sydney under the auspices of the Tegg family. In 1838 he moved to Melbourne to work for John Pascoe Fawkner, who commissioned him to found and edit the *Advertiser*. Like most early editors,

especially in the country, Harrison also sold stationery and books, and did jobbing printing.

From its foundation on 21 November 1840 until the end of 1849, the *Geelong Advertiser* published 135 original poems. Interestingly, about half of them dealt with local issues, a much higher percentage than was usual with original poems printed in Sydney papers. Among the *Advertiser's* poems were a number of humorous or satirical ditties on local affairs and characters, verses in praise of life in the bush and celebrations of the future freedom and prosperity of Australia. One of the best comic songs, typical of many in this period in lamenting the woes of the bush squatter under the new land regime of Governor Gipps, was H.B.'s 1846 'Song of the Bush'. A parody of Thomas Hood's well-known 'Song of the Shirt' from 1843, it opened

By the side of a dried-up creek,
 In the glare of a scorching sun,
 A squatter was squatting upon a log,
 Surveying his parched-up run -
 Squat - squat - squat!
 With visage grizzly and gaunt,
 With a rueful look at his wretched hut,
 He sang this dolorous chaunt,
 Squat - squat - squat!
 From weary year to year,
 And squat - squat - squat!
 In continual dread and fear.
 It's O! to be rock,
 Or an oyster attached to that;
 For a tenure fixed I then would have,
 But now I can only squat!¹

The most prolific Geelong poet of this period, and one of the few who can be identified, was George Wright who mainly wrote in praise of bush life, and also contributed prose pieces. One of these, 'Bush Yarns. Denny O'Brien's Last Spree' (8 October 1845) is a comic piece about an Irishman (naturally) who is cured of excessive drinking by some local Aborigines who playfully claim they are going to eat him. This story is of particular interest for its framing description of a bush camp and comments on the bushman's fondness for yarning:

in no place are yarns so varied or interesting as on the camping ground, at the water hole, or the crossing place of the creek, when teams are unyoked and the camp fire's blaze sends up its golden shower high above the loftiest boughs, and makes the smooth bark of the slender white gum

1. This poem is reprinted in *The Penguin Book of Australian Ballads*, edited by Philip Butters and Elizabeth Webby (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1993) p.102-104.

gleam in its light like pillars of marble, the weary bushmen spread their rugs on the turf, old friends meet, each puts in his tale to interest his companions, and this yarning, tea drinking and smoking, often keeps them awake, forgetful of their fatigue, until long after the witching hour has past, when one by one they droop from the reclining posture, and stretched on the ground fall asleep.

Wright was perhaps also the author of a group of bush tales by 'A Bushman' which appeared in the *Advertiser* during 1848 and 1849. These also give detailed accounts of bush life, sometimes as a frame for a more conventional story set elsewhere. 'A Master's Man. An Original Story. By a Bushman', 10-14 June 1848, for example, is one of the best early stories published in Australia, and again contains interesting remarks on the bushman's fondness for yarning. The longer 'The Interior As It Is', serialised between 17 March and 17 April 1849, describes the colonial adventures of Major Fyreter, a would-be squatter, and his man Jerry Dunn, another of the comic yet clever Irishmen so common in fiction of this period. During their wanderings, they encounter such characters as Mrs Slasher, an Australian-born woman who knows nothing of art, poetry or novels but can talk at length on cows and horses; they attend the ironically-described sale of 'Starveall', a sheep station at Bathurst, and undergo an attack by bushrangers. Finally, Fyreter meets Miss Bidy Blue, whose much more attractive conversational range, including references to Byron, Tom Moore, Burns and Goldsmith, induces him to marry her, and to settle down near Mount Macedon.

Rather more conventional in their style and plot, but still interesting for their use of local material, are several other serialised stories which appeared in the *Advertiser* during 1848. Two show early attempts to use Aboriginals as central characters, along the lines of James Fenimore Cooper's then highly popular novels featuring Native Americans. This influence is clearly apparent even in the title of 'Ngalooka, the Bride of a Brave. A Tale of the Mindy's Lake', 14-25 January 1848. A more accurate description of Aboriginal life can be found in 'Waroon the Strong. A Tale Illustrative of the Times of Buckley', 15-26 April 1848. Both, however, demonstrate the very strong interest in writing on local topics, which is such a feature of the original fiction and poetry published in the early years of the *Geelong Advertiser*. It would be interesting to see to what extent this survived into the 1850s and the turmoil of the early gold rushes.

Despite the much earlier beginning of settlement in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales, the area's first newspaper, the *Hunter River Gazette and Journal of Agriculture, Commerce, Politics and News*, did not begin publication until 11 December 1841 and expired on 25 June 1842, after publishing only a few local poems. Its successor, the *Mailand Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, appeared for the first time on 7 January 1843. Although not as encouraging to local writers as the *Geelong Advertiser*, the *Mercury* had published eighty-nine original poems by the end of 1849, more than half of them by Charles Harpur

who was living near Singleton for much of the 1840s. Thirty-eight poems by Harpur were published in the second half of 1846 alone, all under the heading 'Poems by Charles Harpur', numbered, and introduced by a 'General Preface' in which Harpur set out his poetic credo. Although many of these poems had been published before in Sydney papers, this *Maitland Mercury* publication is particularly important as one of Harpur's first attempts to collect his poems together.

Recognition of Harpur as a local poet of significance is also to be found in one of the best comic poems of the period, which appeared in the *Maitland Mercury* on 22 July 1846. 'Ode to Tallow' by A.T., a graphic account of some of the financial effects of the severe drought and depression of the early 1840s, opens

Who can forget when Hughes and Hosking fell,
 What dire mishap commercial men befell;
 Bankrupt were all - insolvent every grade,
 Protested bills damn'd up the streams of trade.
 Credit was dear, and confidence was gone,
 Each dealer diddled, and each merchant done.
 Our ships dismayed'd lay in Cockle Bay,
 Our seamen starving walked the silent quay.
 Commerce neglected pined upon the strand,
 Her employ here forsook her nerveless hand.
 At once the price of beef became so low
 No ox of soul to slaughter now would go;
 In dudgeon high he sought his leafy den,
 Distaining thus to feed the souls of men.
 The harmless muttons, as in days of yore,
 Gave wool for bed and board, but gave no more.
 No shepherd caroll'd blythely o'er the ground,
 But sought his hut, and silence reign'd around.
 The tattered squatters dropt the lantern jaw,
 And all was mute save auctions, bills, and law.
 O grant me, muse, in Harpur's stanzas wild,
 To sing who first, who last, their schedules filed.
 Nay, gentle muse, I will not give thee pain,
 Thou much eschewest to sing of sordid gain.
 Bootless it were, and profitless to know -
 The HERALD'S pages told us long ago.

After further description of the woes of the depression, the poet hails the genius who discovered that it was possible to 'boil down' sheep that were otherwise worthless into tallow, before concluding

Now list, my masters, if not all employed
 In lauding Leichhardt, or in buttering Boyd;

The travelling Doctor has his share of bays,
 And squatting Ben enjoys his meed of praise.
 Shall fat's discoverer then our praises lack,
 Who fills our belly, and who clothes our back?
 To him who raised Australia from the dust
 Decree a statue, or a least a bust.²

A number of other country papers appeared in areas fairly close to Sydney – Windsor and Parramatta – during the 1840s, all of which published some original literary material, mostly by local writers and with a strong reference to local affairs. Time, however, restricts me to speaking only of the papers in what we would now think of as the 'real bush': the *Bathurst Advocate*, first issued on 5 February 1848, and the *Goulburn Herald and County of Argyle Advertiser*, which began publication a few months later, on 1 July 1848. Both also made their columns very open to local writers, with the *Advocate* publishing just over a hundred original poems by the end of 1849, more than half on Australian topics. Poems on aspects of bush life were again plentiful amongst these, as were humorous pieces on current events and local personalities and controversies. Fewer original poems appeared in the *Goulburn Herald*, and fewer of these dealt specifically with local issues, in part because one of the most prolific of the poets published, 'Ella' of Goulburn, favoured more lyrical treatments of subjects like memory, flowers and, of course, love and lost love.

These three New South Wales country papers, while not publishing as much original fiction as the *Geelong Advertiser*, all included some interesting pieces. The *Maitland Mercury's* 1847 series by 'M.' headed 'Life in the Bush' was closest in theme to some of the bush items in the *Advertiser*, even if less well-written. The first of these, 'A Squatter', 3 February 1847, did, however, give a lively and amusing account of the finding and establishment of a station. 'Shewing that Fortunes are Not Made So Easily or So Readily as Many People Imagine' (3 April) and 'Squatter Commences Farmer: Variations and Reflections' (7 July) are rather more long-winded but still provide some valuable insights into early bush life.

The *Bathurst Advocate* included a great deal of original prose, not always on local subjects. 'Maria Mildred; or the Irish Orphan. By a Resident of the Bush', said to be from 'our own district', was serialised from 25 March to 5 August 1848. It was, as the title might suggest, a highly melodramatic tale, complete with a wicked uncle, a forged will, an attempted murder, smuggling and all the other essential Gothic paraphernalia. This type of cliché-stuffed fiction was, however, later well satirised in 'Reading for the Bush', 21 April 1849, which opens

SUCH is the unprecedented demand for novels that our booksellers are utterly unable to meet the wants of their customers. Every novel, from the adventures of Old Mother Hubbard and Her Riding Cap, to Colman's

2. Also printed in *The Penguin Book of Australian Ballads*, p.105-106.

last is eagerly bought up, and fairly devoured by the Corydons and the Phillisses of the bush. The Boy in the Dog Star pitying the distressed condition of readingless shepherds and stock-keepers, is determined upon sending down from his lofty position a series of epitomised tales of the most startling and thrilling character. He offers as a specimen

TIM FLANNAGAN'S LOVE. - VOL 1ST.

Tim Flannagan's birth and childhood are then rapidly summarised, as a prelude to his falling in love with Betsy: 'At first meeting, under stringy-bark, snake jumped up - tried to bite, but didn't - Tim cut snake's head off with stockwhip - Betsy very much in love after that.' Unfortunately, Betsy's father is wealthy and Tim is not, so he sets off for California to try to remedy this. 'VOL 2ND' summarises all his adventures there and on his trip back to Australia, leading of course to 'VOL 3RD':

Tim lands. Tim goes to public house, gets drunk. Tim robbed of some cash. Tim starts for the bush. Drays, bullocks, camping, blacks, snakes, &c. Tim meets Betsy's father hunted by mad bullock. - Tim knocks bullock down with big stone. Betsy's father grateful - Tim strikes iron while hot and pops question second time; accepted. Tim flings up hat and jumps Jim Crow. Tim goes to Betsy - finds her in kitchen. Tim tells all his love - Betsy blushes, cries, laughs, scolds, slaps him on cheek - says naughty man, how can you talk so. Tim goes for banns. Great wedding - seven bullocks and thirteen sheep killed - fine dinner - punch - party groggy - 10 o'clock at night - We won't go home till morning. Feather beds.

GOOD NIGHT.

Not content only to parody current literary fashions, 'The Boy in the Dog Star's other contributions to the *Bathurst Advocate* included a parody of the proceedings at the 'Monthly Meeting of the Bathurst Association for the Advancement of Literature and Science', published on 25 March 1849; an untitled spoof of a supposed meeting of Bathurst suffragettes (14 April 1849); and, on 28 April 1849,

THE FUNOMETER.

'By means of the Funometer the quality of all kinds of jokes can be gauged with scientific precision.'

Extract from Sir Isaac Newton's Principles.

'The Funometer is the noblest scientific invention of modern times.' -
Sir John Hersc speech before the Brit.Ass. for the Ad. of Sci.

Impersonation of wit	130	The Boy in the Dog Star in his own estimation.
Sparking wit... ..	120	Punch, Man in the Moon, Shakespear

Flash wit... ..	110	Law reports in "Bell's Life in Sydney"
Emaciated wit... ..	100	Articles on the Ring in the Sporting Journals
Horrid wit... ..	90	The monstrosities of brother Jonothan
Capital wit... ..	80	Believing that all the Bathurst news in the "S.M.H." is true
Good jokes... ..	70	Promises to finish the new Bathurst Court House in the next 50 years
Foolish joke... ..	60	Chaliking "High Art" on the Bathurst Market Place
Everlasting joke... ..	50	A suit in Chancery
Half joke... ..	40	Denying yourself to the tailor when calls with your bill
Cart horse joke... ..	30	Common at public dinners, groggy evening parties, beer shops
Melancholy joke... ..	20	Mr Michie playing 2nd fiddle at the Cumberland election
No joke... ..	10	A lawyer and a doctor's bill sent in on one day
Zero... ..	0	Mr. Wentworth's jokes upon lotteries
Between Zero & Bathos	10	Mr. Justice - cracking bad jokes at the expense of a prisoner
Bathos... ..	20	The Attorney General badgering a ticket-of-leave witness
Heavy Bathos... ..	30	Poems in the "S.M.H." on death of Kennedy, &c.
Very heavy sleep-producing Bathos... ..	40	Leaders in "S.M.H."
Horrid Bathos... ..	50	Articles on democracy in the "Moreton Bay Courier"
Below Bathos... ..	60	The Colonial Secretary declaring that he felt an intense desire to promote the good of this colony

The *Goulburn Herald* printed four stories by a local woman writer, 'M.E.'. The first, 'Legend of Meredionalia', 12 August 1848, is unusual in being a well-written allegory, in which devils decide that the best way to conquer Australia will be through the sins of Intemperance and Pride. Her three later 'Australian Tales' provide amusing, ironical pictures of contemporary society. 'A True Tale of Australia', 21 October to 25 November 1848, describes the faithful Jessy following her Edward to Australia, only to find him engaged to another; there are

lively descriptions of emigration officials and of the voyage out, as well as some telling hits at colonial snobbery. 'How to Get Rid of a Wife', 9 December 1848, is a slighter, humorous tale of how a drunken woman is tricked on board a ship bound for England. 'The Nobleman', 10-24 February 1849, the best of the three, deals with an imposter who dupes another snobbish local family, by pretending that he is a lord and intends to marry their daughter. It also contains an interesting aside on prevailing attitudes to fiction at the time, when the daughter comments: 'Well, I have read of such things in the novels I get by stealth, father will not let me read them if he knows it, but I was always anxious to read novels since he ordered me not to do so'.

As this last example demonstrates, the original fiction and poetry published in early Australian regional newspapers offers much to historians of the book as well as historians of the bush. Given that depictions of life in the bush were for so long seen as constituting the only genuine Australian literature, it is a pity that nationalist literary historians were not aware that so much in this vein had been written at least 50 years before the 1890s. I trust that this brief account may motivate others to carry out further study of the fascinating contents and history of Australian country newspapers.

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