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Amid the crockery, leg irons, seeds and goats transported on the First Fleet were some 4000 volumes of religious material. Intended to transform the 736 convicts onboard from ‘felons into farmers’, this mixture of Bibles and pamphlets encouraged their fallen readers with ‘Dissuasions from Stealing’ and ‘Exhortations to Chastity’.¹ The convicts arrived in an area where ‘many of the rocks’ displayed engravings of ‘figures of men and birds’.² These images, numbering in their thousands and stretching back over 6000 years, testified to the rich heritage of the twenty-nine different clans who made up the Indigenous peoples of an area soon renamed Sydney.³ These intricate linguistic and visual networks of culture – including songs, paintings and ceremonial dancing, all with significance and meaning built up over many thousands of years – were utterly foreign to the new arrivals.⁴

Instead, the marines and convicts relied on expectations of this unknown place formed, almost exclusively, by what they had read rather than what they had seen. Novels, increasingly popular in Britain throughout the eighteenth century, were some of the most accessible and influential forms of literary imagining

for these new arrivals.⁵ And one of the most celebrated among them was *Robinson Crusoe*, published sixty years before the First Fleet landed. Written by the ‘seditious libeller’ and ‘spectacular bankrupt’ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* was the story of an imperial slaver shipwrecked on a ‘desolate solitary island’, who overcomes the adversity of his isolation.⁶ It would have proven a compelling fiction for Europeans like Watkin Tench, casting ‘an anxious eye’ onto a shoreline with ‘nothing but hills ... clothed with trees’ and pinpricked with ‘many fires’.⁷ The novel was also imbued with the racism of the period; the island’s local population are described as ‘savages’, vicious ‘man-eaters’ or loyal servants.⁸

Unsurprisingly then, early depictions of Australia’s Indigenous people tended to conform to these literary expectations, while their exploits were described in the florid language of an eighteenth-century gothic romance. So it was that Watkin Tench would quote the Wangal man Bennelong as declaring that one woman was ‘his property’, and that he would ‘part with her to no person whatsoever until my vengeance shall be glutted’.⁹

At the same time it is possible to track how the Indigenous people around Sydney integrated the new visitors into their own networks of literary understanding, with drawings of ‘European ships’ appearing in sites around the area.¹⁰ We can even read Bennelong’s own words, taken from a letter dictated a few years after his visit to Britain in 1792: ‘I am at home now. I hope Sir you send me anything you please Sir. Hope all are well in England.’ These differing forms of literary address, one formal and melodramatic, the other polite, conversational and immediate, suggest that from the start the colonisation of Australia was marked by the intersection of two ‘radically different’ ways of reading and writing the world.¹¹

The colonial authorities in London regarded the colonisation of Australia as above all ‘an experiment’ – one intended to reform and resettle convicts, creating a vast continent farm that

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could develop into a new society, not simply a jail.¹² The vision of improving settlers and convicts in this new outpost soon led to the creation of a number of schools, with Australian-born settlers recording much higher rates of literacy than their British counterparts within a few decades.¹³

Before long, in the words of one convict, books would prove ‘very valuable here’, and the first subscription library was established in 1826. However, early colonists remained hungry for stories of adventure; the only novels requested through the subscription library were the historical romances of Walter Scott, works that proved enduringly popular throughout the nineteenth century in Australia. The most popular local novel for many years was Henry Kingsley’s *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn*, a romantic saga of the changing fortunes of a family of English squatters in which a massacre of Indigenous people was depicted ‘off-stage’.¹⁴

The violence in *Geoffry Hamlyn* echoed a wider, more methodical erasure of Indigenous peoples. Alongside earlier massacres, the creation of ‘legal institutions and legal ideologies’ by the middle of the nineteenth century introduced a systematic process of dispossession of Aboriginal people. The banning of Indigenous people from schools, introduction of curfews, increased formal segregation, and establishment of controlling so-called ‘protection boards’ were all powerful tentacles in this new regime.¹⁵

They were also the fruits of the move towards Australian self-government in the decades after the gold rushes of the 1850s. Keen to emphasise the ability of local governments rather than the British Colonial Office to manage their own affairs, colonists came to rely on the policies and ‘language of colonial conquest and racial superiority’. The British parliament, keen to forestall a repeat of the Canadian armed uprisings of the 1830s, soon agreed to the demands for local representative parliaments,

figuring that new ‘free trade policies’ would work better than ‘tight governmental controls’ to bind the colony to the capital.¹⁶

The move towards colonial self-government, with its requirement of a ‘civilised political sphere’, led to the development of public libraries, galleries and museums.¹⁷ The most ambitious of these was the Melbourne Public Library, a place its founders hoped would ‘redeem their adopted country’, raising ‘her in the respect and admiration of civilised nations’. On its opening in 1852 the library possessed ‘not a single volume on Australian affairs’. It mixed imperial pride – hoping to foster ‘British institutions’ in ‘this remote quarter of the Queen’s Dominions’ – with more egalitarian impulses, making it accessible to anyone over the age of fourteen.¹⁸

At the same time the influx of British capital meant that over the next thirty years the Australian colonies generated enormous wealth, with white settlers enjoying some of the highest per-capita incomes in the world. Local governments used the new money and cheap British finance to build hospitals, orphanages and schools, and established widespread primary education from the 1870s. With the promise of new riches the number of colonists dramatically expanded from half a million in the 1840s to three and a half million by 1891; an expansion matched by book imports that increased fourfold from 1870 to 1884. British publishers were keen to profit from this boom in ‘avid readers’, with Australia soon surpassing India as their most profitable export market.¹⁹ After agreeing to divide the English-speaking market with their American counterparts at the 1886 Berne Convention, they claimed the country as their exclusive territory.

The high rates of local literacy also contributed to a nationwide explosion in the number of Australian newspapers, with some 600 different titles established by 1890. Those with the largest circulations included newspapers such as *The Age*,

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the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph*, mixing partisan politics with moral uplift. In competition with these daily newspapers was a string of often more politically radical illustrated magazines, impatient to puncture the self-importance of the newspapers' moral mission.²⁰

One writer who managed to effectively straddle both the expectations of daily newspapers and little magazines was the journalist and playwright Marcus Clarke. He had a diverse set of interests, ranging from the Australian landscape to the moral toll of violent punishment, concerns he expanded on in his regular column, 'The Peripatetic Philosopher'. Conscious of his prominent position in an emergent Australian literary culture, Clarke was one of the first to try and define an Australian national literary identity, describing the local landscape as a world of 'the Grotesque, the Weird', a distinctiveness that enabled 'the dweller in the wilderness' to recognise 'the subtle charm of this fantastic land of monstrosities'.²¹

Despite an intermittent stammer and a fused left shoulder, Clarke was an enthusiastic author from a young age, writing poetry with his childhood friend and later famous poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. However, Clarke's privileged upbringing in London soon came undone, with his father's unexpected death in 1862 orphaning the boy and revealing little in the way of an inheritance.²² Leaving Britain for the opportunities of Australia, Clarke spent a few unenthusiastic years working in a bank in Melbourne, before attempting life as a stockman while writing articles for local newspapers. Well educated and fluent in French, Clarke soon began work as a journalist for the Melbourne *Argus*. There he would develop an interest in Australia's convict history, with the *Argus* sending him to Port Arthur to report on the 'superannuated convicts' living there, twenty years after the end of transportation. The condition of these men – the 'jetsam of the great transportation wave' – outraged Clarke, who researched

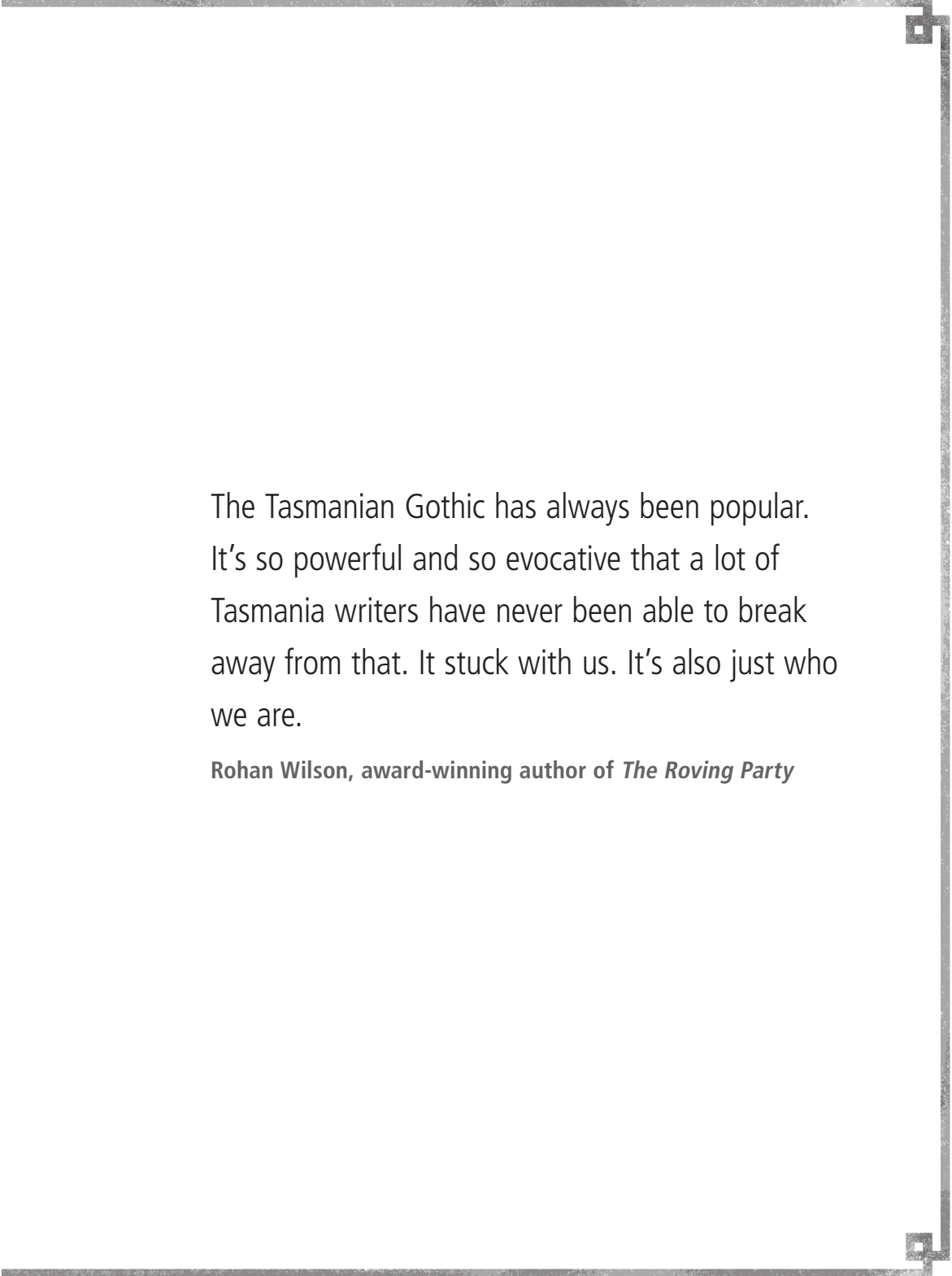


MARCUS CLARKE,
(COPYRIGHT)

Author of "For the Term of His Natural Life," &c., &c.

S. Milbourn Junr Glenelg,
South Australia.

Marcus Clarke, 1874. (Samuel Milbourn Jnr, State Library of Victoria)



The Tasmanian Gothic has always been popular. It's so powerful and so evocative that a lot of Tasmania writers have never been able to break away from that. It stuck with us. It's also just who we are.

Rohan Wilson, award-winning author of *The Roving Party*

the ‘horrors of the convict settlement’ and then began work on the novel for which he is best known, *Term of His Natural Life*: a bleak romantic saga of Australia’s early convict years.²³ Inspired by *Geoffry Hamlyn*, a book he described as ‘the best Australian novel that has been, and probably will be written’, and Charles Dickens’s ‘romance of reality’, Clarke sought to balance fiction with historical accuracy. Published as a serial in the *Australasian Journal* from 1870 to 1872, Clarke’s 27-part story expanded to an enormous 370,000 words and proved hugely popular. The success of his serial did little to improve his precarious finances, however, and Clarke, now married and with a growing family, accepted a job as a clerk in the Melbourne Public Library. There, while maintaining his prodigious output as a journalist, he slimmed down his vast serial into a still sizeable, and much darker, 200,000-word novel.²⁴

This latter novel begins its story in London in 1827 where we’re introduced to Richard Devine, witnessing his mother’s confession to his apparent father, Sir Richard Devine, that their son’s biological father is another man. Enraged, Richard’s father banishes him from the house, while soon afterwards young Richard discovers the corpse of Lord Bellasis, his biological father, on Hampstead Heath. Seeing Sir Richard walking away from the crime scene, Richard is wrongfully arrested for Bellasis’s murder, and, after giving the name Rufus Dawes to avoid controversy, is sentenced to transportation. Sir Richard dies soon after from a heart attack, perishing before he can amend his will. His untimely death means that the now disappeared Richard and his cousin Maurice Frere are both disinherited. Frere has been commissioned as an army lieutenant in Australia, travelling there on the same ship as Dawes.

Onboard Dawes is wrongly implicated in a shipboard mutiny, found guilty and given another life sentence. Sent to the dreaded Macquarie Harbour penal settlement, Dawes’s attempts at escape

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earn him even more severe punishment. After five years Frere arrives in Macquarie Harbour to close the prison and move the convicts by ship to Port Arthur. The majority of the convicts are to sail on a larger boat with Frere's commanding officer Captain Vickers, while Vickers's wife and daughter Sylvia will travel on a smaller boat with some soldiers and a handful of convicts.

The convicts manage to seize the smaller boat, marooning the Vickers family and Frere, who are rescued by Dawes, following his own abandoned escape attempt. After building a boat that ensures the small group's escape and survival, Dawes is betrayed by Frere who claims all the credit, a ploy made possible by the death of Mrs Vickers on the journey, and by Sylvia's amnesia.

By 1838 Frere is engaged to Sylvia while Dawes, due to his escape attempt, is imprisoned in Port Arthur. Even more brutal than Macquarie Harbour, Port Arthur is a bleak place, with the alcoholic priest, the Reverend James North, offering little comfort. Disastrously for Dawes the convict John Rex, who looks like him, escapes Port Arthur, arrives in London and assumes Dawes's identity, attempting to claim his inheritance.

The book's final section is set in 1846 on Norfolk Island, where Frere has been appointed the commander and Dawes has survived for the last five years. The marriage of Sylvia and Frere is an unhappy one. Sylvia is disgusted by Frere's ruthless brutality and finds herself confiding in North and feeling drawn to Dawes. Rex, who has assumed Dawes's identity, is tracked down in London and when confronted admits to having killed Lord Bellasis, following a quarrel after Bellasis refused to recognise him as his other illegitimate son. Back on Norfolk Island Dawes manages to escape on a departing boat dressed in North's cloak and hat, the same boat that Sylvia has boarded resolving to leave her husband. During a great gale Sylvia seeks out the man she thinks is North, but on recognising Dawes she remembers that she survived as a child thanks to his resourcefulness. The

storm soon destroys the boat but as the dawn rises the following morning two bodies are wrapped in the ship's rigging with the man's arms 'clasped round the body of the woman', and her head lying on his breast.

Criticised in the Victorian parliament as 'all sharks, bulldogs, and lacerated flesh' and 'unfit to be read in a decent house', Clarke's gloomy novel was a popular success, selling some 45,000 copies and being translated into a number of languages. In subsequent years the novel's 'unremitting sense of horror' and brutal images of convict life led some local literary critics to overlook it, believing that there were 'aspects of Australian history that should be left forgotten'.²⁵ The influential 1930s critic Nettie Palmer believed *His Natural Life* to be only one 'of the solid novels' of the nineteenth century written for 'an overseas public' rather than an Australian audience.²⁶

Read today, the excesses of *His Natural Life* display a rare sophistication, leading some critics to position the novel as part of Clarke's broader interrogation of the ability for 'humanity' and 'civilisation' to 'survive without religious belief', while critiquing the ethical underpinnings of a British empire that was still in the process of establishing penal colonies.²⁷ As Nicholas Birns has argued, *His Natural Life* portrays Australia as an ethical upside-down where the cruel are rewarded and the merciful are punished.²⁸ For Clarke these paradoxes were the product of the convict system and entwined with the colonies' racial policies, particularly the 'extermination, known as the Black War' in Tasmania.²⁹ In his own way, Clarke helped to establish the reputation of a ruthless, obscured violence at the core of an Australian fictive life, influencing later narratives about the early years of Australia's colonisation.

The final years of Clarke's life were as frenetic as ever. Though a highly productive author, Clarke was, like his father, financially reckless, with a mischievous satirical desire to send up

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the members of the local wealthy elite that he hungered to join. One of Clarke's 1879 articles questioning whether the advance of science had made Christianity irrelevant led senior clergy to accuse him of atheism. His adaptation of W.S. Gilbert's satirical play *The Happy Land* in 1880 led the Victorian premier to ban its production. Despite the decision of *The Age* and *The Argus* to print the play in full as a protest, Clarke's position at the Public Library, and the regular income he needed to support his wife and six children, became increasingly untenable. Nonetheless he continued to toe a dangerous line, with one contemporary remembering 'his radicalism' as 'very red', and was overlooked for his expected promotion to chief librarian. Having borrowed heavily on the expectation of the position Clarke fell into bankruptcy again, developed pleurisy and died within a week. He was only thirty-five. On his deathbed Clarke 'beckoned for pencil and paper', according to a friend, passing 'his hand over them as if writing'; even as he slipped out of consciousness Clarke's 'hand continued moving with increasing velocity'.³⁰

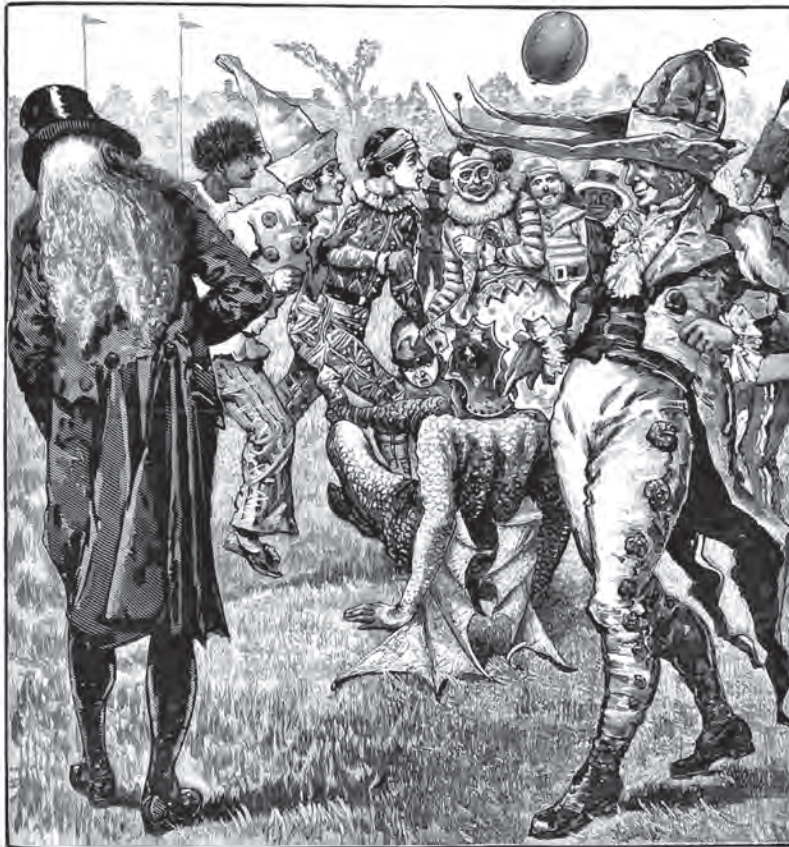
The death of the 'hardworking young genius' was mourned by many as 'the most serious loss that Australian literature has yet sustained'. *His Natural Life* was praised as a 'masterpiece' and 'the greatest of Australian novels, written in Australia by a settled Australian'.³¹ Unscrupulous publishers capitalised on his demise to edit and re-release the novel under the title *For the Term of His Natural Life* in 1885.³² His death meant that his young family were left destitute, with his wife proving unsuccessful in petitioning parliament for a pension.³³ In desperation his theatrical colleagues staged a costumed football match to raise money for his family, running and kicking in 'parti-coloured dresses' appearing like 'the silent figures of the Waxworks exhibition' transformed into 'wild life and energetic action'. They raised some £74 and staged an entertainment, something of their own 'weird grotesque', that Clarke himself might have taken much pleasure in describing.³⁴

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THE COSTUME FOOTBALL MATCH.

The costume football match organised to raise money for Marcus Clarke's family.
(*Australasian Sketcher*, 10 September 1881, State Library of Victoria)

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A few months after Clarke's death, another Australian writer – also struggling to support his large family on a limited government income – began work on a very different novel about violent criminals. Thomas Browne was a magistrate who wrote adventure stories for local magazines and was known as a 'good fellow' and 'honest even if he was not especially clever'.³⁵ Born in London and enriched by his father's Australian business success, Browne's life changed with the sudden death of his father. He launched into a relatively prosperous life as a squatter in Victoria, all the while supporting his mother and six unmarried sisters, and persevered despite his 'early armed encounters with the Aborigines'. With a bad drought crippling his pastoral career Browne turned to the magistracy and became a mining commissioner for the small wealthy goldfields around Gulgong in New South Wales. Desperate to provide for his family, Browne shifted his energies to writing adventure stories for Australian magazines, which proved far more profitable than his earlier tomes on local agriculture like the *Australasian Grazier's Guide*. To protect his identity Browne wrote as Rolf Boldrewood, a pen name gleaned from a poem by his favourite author, Walter Scott.³⁶

After moving from Gulgong to the more profitable magistracy of Dubbo in 1881, Browne, heeding the advice of his friend George Cox, decided to start work on 'a sensational novel' of Australia's bushrangers, pointing out that 'a man with eight children and a limited income must do all he can'. Starting early one morning in the Dubbo courthouse in the late summer of 1882, Browne wrote a story that drew on his own experiences of being bailed up by a bushranger twenty years earlier, as well as stories from friends and newspaper reports. His decision to serialise and publish a novel describing the adventures of the lovable bushranger Dick Marston, titled *Robbery Under Arms*, was unexpected for an officer of justice and key defender of the nascent settler establishment in Australia. Because it was

presumably too scandalous for his usual publishers, the *Sydney Mail* published the first story, with Browne churning out the subsequent chapters at night. Released between July 1882 and August 1883, just two years after the hanging of Ned Kelly, Browne's serialised novel was immensely popular, capturing a wider readership than his earlier work.³⁷ Written in a recognisably Australian vernacular, Browne's serials converted the violence and dangers of Australia's settlement into a ripping yarn of adventure and derring-do, transforming the experience of many settlers into a recognisable romance with vicious bushrangers reimagined as noble, heroic figures.

During its serialisation *Robbery Under Arms* was admired for its lifelike accuracy, with the narrative proving to be, in the words of one journalist, 'as clear, as distinct, as personal' as if it had been part of their own life.³⁸ Despite the popularity of the serials, six years passed before they were condensed and released as a complete novel by the British publisher Macmillan, with the book proving an immediate bestseller in Australia and Great Britain.³⁹

'My name's Dick Marston, Sydney-side native,' the novel begins, with a jailed Marston telling his life story as a warning to readers against pursuing a life as a bushranger. His father and brother Jim lead Marston into crime, joining together with the patrician Captain Starlight to drive a herd of stolen cattle from New South Wales to South Australia. Dick and Jim spend their money on a spree in Melbourne, meeting the sisters Kate and Jeanine Morrison, but Dick and Starlight are captured and jailed as they attempt to return to the family farm.

Starlight's Indigenous companion Warrigal breaks the pair out of jail with the help of Dick's brother Jim, and the band start a new life as bushrangers, hiding out in the remote valley of Terrible Hollow. Lured out by the riches of nearby goldfields, Dick is betrayed by an unhappily married Kate Morrison who is

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jealous of Dick's newfound love for the local woman Grace, with the gang only narrowly escaping capture. Retreating to Terrible Hollow they start a new round of bushranging, expanding their gang with a group of other men, all modelled on famous real-life bushrangers such as Ben Hall. The new gang commit a spree of successful robberies before deciding to flee to America. But as the bushrangers make their way to Queensland, where they think they will be safe, they are betrayed once more by Kate and Warrigal. During a gun battle with the police both Jim and Starlight die while Dick is captured. In a twist of fate Dick's sentence is commuted thanks to the efforts of the old neighbour of his family farm, now made wealthy and respectable. Leaving jail after twelve years Dick moves to Queensland and marries Grace.

When the edited *Robbery Under Arms* was re-released to the public in 1889, it proved even more popular than Browne's serial. The first print run of fifty copies to reach Bathurst sold out in two hours and the novel was hailed in *The Argus* as an 'Australian classic'; *The Age* praised the novel's 'unmistakable air of verisimilitude' and branded Boldrewood 'the Homer of the bush'.⁴⁰ Some reviewers, however, were concerned by Boldrewood's apparent sympathies for bushrangers, with one noting that it was 'a curious comment' on Australian history that 'the heroes of our best novels are convicts and bushrangers'. British reviewers were also worried that the audience could admire or even be sympathetic to the bushranging Marstons, though they otherwise approved of 'a capital story full of wild adventure and startling incident'.⁴¹ Boldrewood rejected the accusations of misplaced sympathy and exaggeration, writing that 'much of the narrative is literally true' and verifiable by official records, insisting his life in Australia was 'a guarantee for fidelity as to local colour and descriptive detail'.⁴²

Despite the book's persistent popularity, with the novel reprinted some thirty times in the fifty years after first

publication, *Robbery Under Arms* was dismissed by many Australian critics. Dick Marston's overbearing moralising and Browne's imperialist and conservative politics relegated the novel to something of an antique curio, described by one critic in the 1980s as 'an old-fashioned English romance with an Australian setting and vernacular language'.⁴³ More recently critical opinions have shifted, reappraising the novel's narrator as 'perhaps the first thoroughly Australian character in fiction', with Marston's colloquial language and Browne's reliance on 'Australian vernacular as a literary style' marking the work as 'ground-breaking'.⁴⁴ Browne's efforts to romanticise the figure of the bushranger have also come under closer scrutiny, in particular his portrayal of them as productive members of the community rather than outlaws who were 'feral and primitive, and wantonly cruel'.⁴⁵

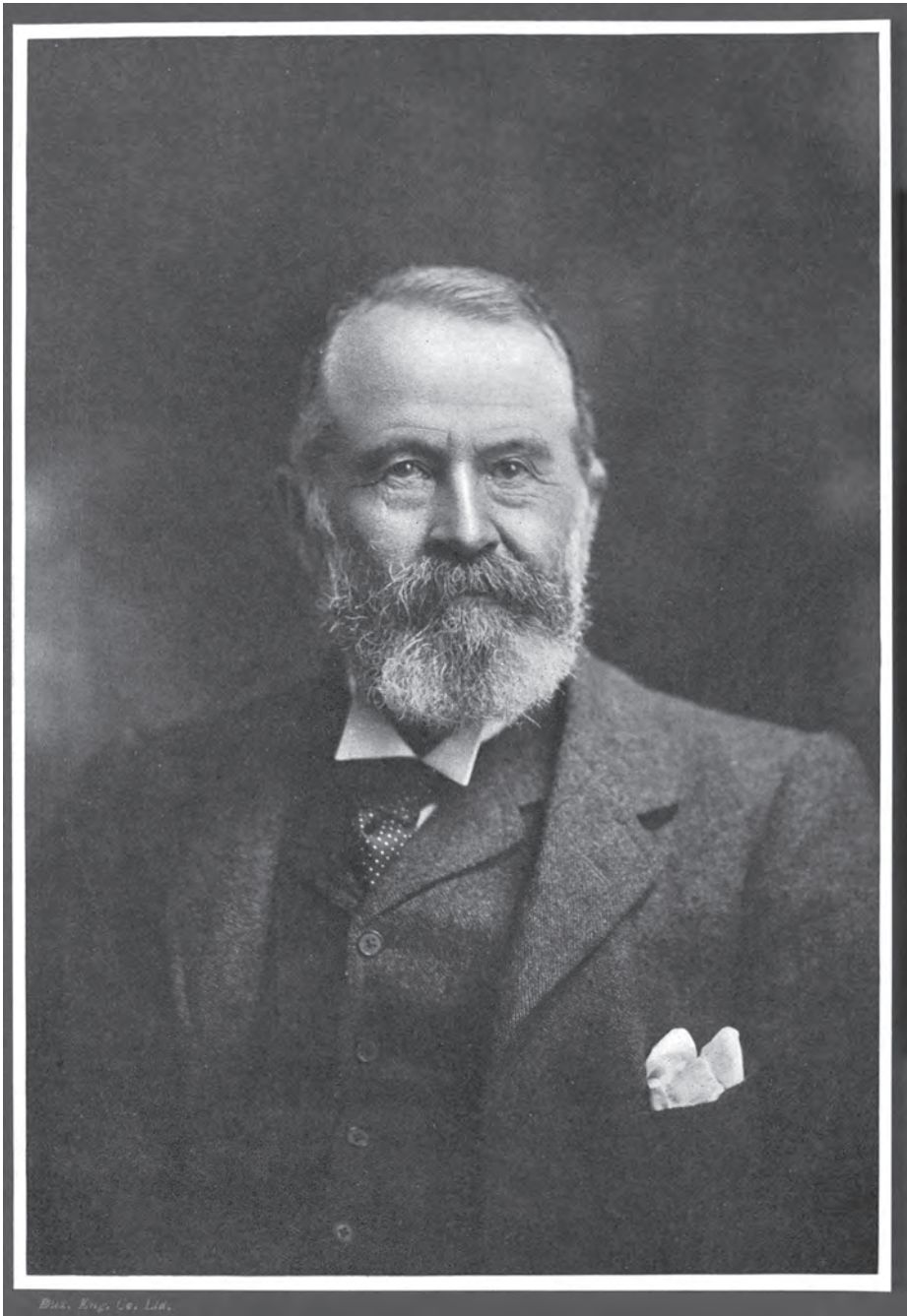
Robbery Under Arms is a novel that is best understood as part of the movement towards self-government in Australia, emphasising how colonial 'civilisation' had tamed its wilder, violent history. In this way the book reclaimed the bushranger as a symbol of a national identity. In Browne's book he was not a sign of the savage violence of the colonial frontier world, but rather a symbol of an embryonic national-cultural maturity, a trope that has been tirelessly revisited in Australian films, books and paintings over the subsequent years. Browne's violent, romantic outlaw driven by poverty and injustice was soon established as an international archetype, becoming a model for the American Westerns churned out in the years to come.⁴⁶

The success of *Robbery Under Arms* guaranteed Browne's career as an adventure novelist and provided him with a modicum of fame. After resigning from the magistracy in 1895 he spent much of his retirement in the Melbourne Club, writing another seventeen novels in fifteen years. Browne's wife and sister also capitalised on the family brand of Boldrewood, writing their own



ROBBERY UNDER ARMS, No. 6.—Bushrangers at bay. Capture and death of "Starlight" and the Marstons.
"Rainbow rears up, gives one spring, and falls backward with a crash."

A plate from *Robbery Under Arms*, illustrated by Charles E Hammond. (State Library of Victoria)



Bull. Eng. Co. Ltd.

Thomas Alexander Browne, otherwise known as Rolf Boldrewood, 1912. (State Library of Victoria)

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adventure stories, all dutifully published by Macmillan. A few years before he died in 1915, Browne wrote that he had ‘enjoyed on the whole a very happy life’. He was buried in Brighton cemetery in Melbourne.

Not long after the release of *Robbery Under Arms* the economic boom of the late nineteenth century in Australia came to a sudden halt. The near-bankruptcy and bailout of the Baring investment bank, crushed by unexpected defaults of substantial Argentinian debts, spooked British investors. In response they began to turn off the easy credit on which colonial governments had relied to create the institutions of civil society. This collapse, combined with steep worldwide declines in the price of export staples such as wool, contributed to the failure of a number of local banks and led to unparalleled unemployment and deprivation in Australia. The great strikes of the 1890s failed to ensure better pay or conditions, further feeding the political turmoil and disintegration of living standards. For Australia’s Indigenous population, the 1890s also marked a tightening squeeze of the ‘protection’ regimes, with the growing advocacy for the removal of ‘half-caste’ children and new restrictive laws.

Charged by these economic catastrophes, Australian settler nationalism – mixing ‘a passionate commitment to British culture’ with ‘an interest in Australian national identity’ – began to grow in popularity during the 1880s and 1890s. The federation of the colonies of Australia developed ‘a substantial popular following’ among the country’s young and increasingly literate population.⁴⁷

A plethora of local newspapers and magazines also fed these national and cultural ambitions, with *The Bulletin* emerging as the most strident and widely read. Established in 1880 and adopting the ‘simplicity and snappiness’ of the ‘new journalism’ of the late nineteenth century, *The Bulletin* soon emerged as ‘Australia’s most popular magazine’.⁴⁸ Buying out his partners to

take over the journal in 1886, co-founder J.F. Archibald made *The Bulletin* in the image of his own republican, nationalist agenda and established its front-page slogan as ‘Australia for the Australians’.⁴⁹ Archibald opened the magazine to submissions by unpublished authors, leading to the magazine discovering and publishing some of the best-known Australian writers of the period, including A.B. ‘Banjo’ Paterson, Henry Lawson, Steele Rudd, Barbara Baynton and Ethel Turner. Keen to discover the ‘real Australia’, Archibald and his literary editor A.G. Stephens proved effective advocates for a white settler Australian national identity, one that they argued was present in a symbolic democratic, egalitarian male bush-worker.⁵⁰

Despite this nationalistic ferment, the control of British publishers over the Australian book market was consolidated by their formation of an exclusive cartel through the 1900 Net Book Agreement.⁵¹ The agreement was among British publishers to set uniform retail book prices and standard royalty rates; it established that authors of ‘colonial editions’ would earn only a third of their British counterparts.⁵² With the heft of their pooled resources, the publishers were able to intimidate booksellers into accepting the ‘colonial’ books marked for export and their agreed prices.

Designed to ensure greater profits for British publishers, the result for Australian businesses seeking to expand into book publishing was disastrous. Flooding the local market with cheaper and more accessible British books, the cartel squeezed out new local publishers and hobbled the beginnings of a literary cultural infrastructure. As a consequence, Australian authors, right up until the disintegration of the agreement in the 1960s, earned significantly lower royalties than their British counterparts and were often forced to leave the country if they wished to continue their careers as writers. Australian readers might have been happy to enjoy lower-priced books, but it would prove an enduring

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difficulty to read books about Australian life written by their fellow Australians.

A number of the new Australian writers were caught in this trap between an assertive nationalism and the difficulties of publishing locally during the tumultuous 1890s, but none more so than Henry Lawson. The only child of a wayward Norwegian father, Neils Larsen, and a determined and ambitious mother, Louisa Albury, Henry Lawson was nine years old before he attended school, leaving just three years later to work with his father as a labourer.⁵³ Partially deaf from adolescence, Lawson supported himself with a series of odd jobs while submitting short verses to local periodicals, encouraged by his mother's success as the publisher of the influential feminist magazine *The Dawn*. A writer who grew up on the serials of Clarke and Boldrewood, Lawson wrote short stories that mixed romance and realism, and which have subsequently loomed long over Australian fiction and culture. With the endorsement of his stories by socialists, conservatives and cultural nationalists, it is quixotic if not impossible to disentangle Lawson's fiction from his cultural symbolism. And as the first Australian writer to receive a state funeral and to appear on the nation's banknotes, any discussion of Lawson is inextricable from the memorialisation of the man himself.

To make sense of Lawson, whose stories were first published in various Sydney-based magazines and newspapers, it helps to turn to *While the Billy Boils*, his collected short stories first published in 1896. The product, much like the works of Clarke and Boldrewood, of an Australian literary economy that printed far more magazines and newspapers than books, it is a testament to the limitations and ambitions of Australian publishing. Although not a novel strictly defined, *While the Billy Boils* was a landmark in Australian literary history and its narrative

consistency and diversity of interrelated characters, with their ‘acceptance of hardship, of youth lost, of passions put behind, of comic consolations’, makes the book comprehensible under a looser category of a novel.⁵⁴

Lawson was nearing the mid-point of a bad run at the beginning of the 1890s. Even as his short stories grew in notoriety, his alcoholism and bad luck meant that he struggled to find stable work as a journalist. Conscious of Lawson’s impending dissolution J.F. Archibald commissioned him in 1892 to travel to the drought-affected areas around Bourke in New South Wales, hoping to encourage him to produce some stories for *The Bulletin*. A professional lucky break, Lawson’s trip produced a string of works for *The Bulletin* and others, but Lawson, while ‘making a “living”’ was ‘tired of it all’, and decided to try once more to convince a publisher to print a selection of his short stories.⁵⁵

Conscious of the huge success of Banjo Paterson’s collection of poems *The Man from Snowy River and Other Verses* with Angus & Robertson in 1895, Lawson approached the budding publisher who soon agreed to publish a ‘volume or volumes’ of his poetry and stories. Throughout 1895 Lawson worked with Angus & Robertson’s editor Arthur Jose to amend and rewrite his stories, signing the final agreement for the book in June 1896. Yet in putting together a short story collection, Angus & Robertson and Jose sought to emulate Rudyard Kipling’s success, an indication of the inescapability of British culture in even the most nationalist of Australian texts.⁵⁶

During these months of re-editing his stories Lawson met and quickly married Bertha Brecht, the daughter of a prominent radical bookseller. The marriage would prove a disaster, but in its first promising months she coaxed Lawson to abandon his drinking companions in Sydney and to make a fresh start in Western Australia. Although it took only four months for them to abandon this scheme, it was while Lawson and Brecht were



Henry Lawson, 1915. (William Johnson, State Library of NSW)

on the other side of the country that his book was published in August 1896.

The best known of these stories are ‘The Drover’s Wife’, first published in 1892, and ‘The Union Buries Its Dead’, from 1893. ‘The Drover’s Wife’ is a compact tale of a mother and her young children who live in a two-roomed house of ‘slabs, and stringybark’, as she waits for her drover husband to return. Their surroundings are claustrophobic: there is ‘bush all round – bush with no horizon’. When a deadly black snake – ‘a black brute, five feet long’ – disappears under the floor of the hut, the woman stays up all night with the family dog Alligator while the children sleep; she is terrified that it will come into the hut. Near dawn the snake appears; she and Alligator kill it and she tosses it on the fire. Her son cries, ‘Mother, I won’t never go drovin’, blarst me if I do!’

‘The Union Buries Its Dead’ is equally bleak and tense. It describes the funeral of an unknown drowned ‘union man’ in Bourke. Even though ‘more than two-thirds’ of the funeral party were too drunk, a small group follows the hearse to the graveyard. The procession and funeral are both comic and pitiful, with attendees sharing cynical jokes and the publican forlornly holding a hat over the priest’s head to shelter him from the heat. In this story a grim, hot and dusty Australia is contrasted with the fanfare of romantic fictional deaths, with one attendee ironically quoting ‘Byronic verses suitable to the occasion’ and the narrator commenting that he left out the sentimental, romantic clichés of ‘wattle’, the ‘heart-broken old mate’ and the ‘sad Australian sunset’ as none were there. When the man is laid to rest, the burial plate reads ‘James Tyson’, only for the narrator to reveal it ‘wasn’t his real name’, just one he went by.

With Angus & Robertson’s savvy owner George Robertson drumming up its publicity, *While the Billy Boils* attracted swarms of critical interest, with more than 250 reviews, and

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emerged as a steady hit, selling 5000 copies by March of 1897. Lawson's collection, with his 'natural' realism, was praised for its 'exceptional value' and its 'naked, native-born' emergence 'from actual things'. Reviewers of this dark collection of stories recognised the 'utter hopelessness' of his pessimism and his ability to undermine 'any idea of romance that the reader may have associated with the Australian bush'. Conservative critics, however, chided Lawson for his focus on the human 'flotsam strewn about the country', men who were 'such a trouble to society and such a burden on the Government'.⁵⁷

The most critical review of the book came from unexpected quarters: *The Bulletin* literary critic A.G. Stephens wrote that although Lawson possessed 'a touch of genius', his 'quaint, simple style' produced artless 'sketches' too rough to be considered 'something like literature'. They were instead a 'haphazard mixture' which 'jolts the mind like an unexpected bottom-step', resembling little more than 'a bad cook's ragout'.⁵⁸

Lawson's 'quaint' realism would prove, however, a lead-weight on his fiction, often considered a mirror-like reflection of his 'native land'.⁵⁹ Historians like Russel Ward would later argue that 'it is not necessary to construct from documents a detailed picture of the bushman of the last decades of the nineteenth century' since Lawson had already drawn them 'from life'.⁶⁰ Radical nationalist Vance Palmer asserted that Lawson's stories established 'a tradition of democratic writing', one which 'has affected the work of nearly all who have come after him'.⁶¹ Not 'only one of the best of all Australian writers', Lawson was even hailed as 'the most Australian of them all'.⁶² Lawson-as-symbol was claimed by progressives, who attributed his popularity to his expression of the ideals of the rising labour movement and by conservatives who hoped to render him 'above or beyond politics'.⁶³

Lawson's politics were always murky. Like many of his companions he supported socialism, yet his stories display some



Henry Lawson, 1915. (William Johnson, State Library of NSW)

Lawson's short stories are so good. They say something about Australia that no one has said before. They are very simply told, they shimmer with oddity and disquiet. He is capable of looking at Australianness and Australian space in ways that accommodate both what is wonderful about it and what is disturbing about it.

Geordie Williamson, chief literary critic of *The Australian* and winner of the 2011 Pascall Prize for criticism

suspicion of trade unionism, criticising in one article ‘wide-spread bush-union egotism and clannishness’.⁶⁴ Often linked closely to *The Bulletin* and Archibald’s cultural ambitions, Lawson’s relationship with the magazine was complicated, with only half of his stories appearing there, and doing little to earn him easy praise from Stephens.

Considered a cultural nationalist with a self-described ‘heart full of love for Australia’, Lawson would jokingly advise in January 1899 that ‘any young Australian writer whose talents have been recognised’ had better ‘go steerage, stow away, swim, and seek London, Yankeeland or Timbuctoo’ or ‘shoot himself carefully with the aid of a looking-glass’ rather than ‘stay in Australia’.⁶⁵ Lawson’s realism then, as Paul Eggert has argued, ‘helped to imagine an Australian environment’ but had little interest in depicting an Australian ‘exceptionalism’. This interpretation gels with the peak of Lawson’s influence from the late 1950s until the end of the 1980s, when the nationalist Lawson symbol was at its most potent.⁶⁶ Since then Lawson’s stories continue to prove fruitful ground, with his best-known story ‘The Drover’s Wife’ readapted by writers, including Frank Moorhouse and Murray Bail, the playwright Leah Purcell and the artist Russell Drysdale.

Following the publication of *While the Billy Boils*, Lawson and Bertha followed their abortive trip to Western Australia with a visit to New Zealand. Lawson, sober and writing more consistently, eventually grew frustrated by the isolation of the South Island and the couple drifted back to Sydney.

After publishing two more works with Angus & Robertson Lawson managed to persuade the Governor of New South Wales and George Robertson, among others, to pay for him to travel to London to pursue his literary career. After arriving, Lawson met with some success with *Joe Wilson and His Mates*, a book considered by Joseph Conrad as ‘beyond praise’.⁶⁷ The move would prove too much for his already fractured marriage,

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however; Bertha was committed to Bethlehem Royal Hospital for several months, and Lawson had slunk back to Australia by 1902. After her husband attempted suicide at the end of that year, Bertha sued for divorce, accusing Lawson of assault.⁶⁸

By this point Lawson's alcoholism was out of control and he had fallen into poverty. Unable to rekindle earlier literary success, Lawson's writing steadily declined and he was jailed several times for failing to pay maintenance for his children. Much of his writing during his later years was melodramatic and uneven, although his jingoistic poetry celebrating the First World War would prove popular.

The much older Mrs Isabel Byers, George Robertson and a few friends cared for Lawson in his final years. When he died in September 1922, Lawson was given a state funeral with crowds lining the streets, keen to view the coffin of the dissipated 'realist' of the Australian bush.

Lawson's life was a powerful example of an author's reputation enduring in a culture's memory, even as the relevance of their writing fades. Books, made up of paper, glue and cardboard, are fragile objects. They can prove less resilient and are subject to the unpredictability of physical or cultural endurance. Books rot, burn or tear, and without efforts to preserve them, our ability to understand the experiences, ideas and social expectations that they articulated are all too easily diminished. There were other, more immediate problems of course for Clarke, Boldrewood and Lawson. Financial threats haunted them all and despite a literate population hungry for their writing, they struggled against the lopsided imperial economics of the day. A haphazard Australian publishing infrastructure, along with the hesitant state institutions, meant that for most of their lives the odds were stacked against them. That they managed to write and publish widely is a testament to them, and they have enriched our

comprehension of the experiences and fictions of the first century of Australia's European colonisation. Their works articulated and popularised some of the recurring tropes of Australian fiction and culture, of convict brutality and debonair bushrangers, down-on-their-luck swaggies and a rugged bush landscape. The survival of their works has enriched our understanding of the beginnings of local literature and has enabled later readers to unpick the ways in which Australian life is filtered through its fiction, something that the myopia of the present can all too readily obscure.

One man well attuned to the threat of a disappearing literary record in nineteenth-century Australia was the wealthy eccentric and obsessive book collector David Scott Mitchell. After his father's death in 1869, delivering a sizeable inheritance, Mitchell devoted himself to amassing 'a copy of every document relating to Australia'. Eventually amounting to some 30,000 works, 'the largest purely Australian collection in existence', Mitchell struggled to fit them all in his seven-bedroom Darlinghurst home. Towards the end of his life Mitchell managed to extract from the New South Wales government the construction of a separate Mitchell public library in return for his collection, a library that Mitchell hoped would 'enable future historians to write the history of Australia'.⁶⁹ 'The main object of my life', as he described it, his collection is often regarded as Australia's greatest cultural bequest.

Mitchell's library and the Melbourne Public Library were two contrasts in this regard. The Australian books, poems and novels that were dismissed as frivolous by the 'cultural evangelists' and founders of the Public Library were the very things that would prove most vital to Mitchell.⁷⁰ It's a contrast that indicates the ways in which the early institutions of Australian culture were torn between an insistence on their connection to imperial British culture and a desire to protect the heritage of an emergent Australian literature.

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Yet despite the sentimental nationalism of the final decades of the nineteenth century, Mitchell was regarded as a lonely eccentric, amassing a cultural legacy that seemed of idiosyncratic value.⁷¹ Fortunately his example was one that resonated beyond his collection, offering a model for those eager to preserve an Australian literary heritage. His library would in time prove a home and a hub for many Australian writers, who would draw on this enormous collection for their own historical and fictional research. The works that were written and researched there continued in some senses Mitchell's quest, with each new book and each unlikely voice expanding and remaking Australian literature, broadening and deepening a distinctive literary cultural legacy.