

LEMURIA and AUSTRALIAN DREAMS OF AN INLAND SEA

p.32

‘[T]he European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters.’

– J-P Sartre (1963)¹

Necronationalism

First, let’s talk about silence. In 1861, the explorers Robert O’Hara Burke and William Wills died of their own stubbornness in the country of the Yantruwanta people in remote South Australia. If success in exploration is measured by survival, then Burke and Wills were failures. Indeed, one common explanation for their mythologisation is that Australians, by dint of some Antipodean perversity, like to celebrate failure.² It’s a glib claim which makes the status of Phar Lap, Don Bradman and Betty Cuthbert a little difficult to explain. In fact, Burke and Wills became saints of a quintessentially Victorian cult which we can think of as ‘necronationalism’. The key to their veneration is not that they failed – but that they died in a place of profound silence. Their deaths gave a history, an act of self-sacrifice, to the blank map that obscured the countries and peoples of Aboriginal Australia.

Just as Africa was the ‘dark continent’ in the colonial imagination, so colonial Australia was the ‘silent continent’. From the moment the invaders arrived on Sydney Cove in 1788, they habitually represented the country as a somnolent wasteland which they would bring to life – mile by mile – with the ‘hum of industry’.³ But by the 1830s, the colonists had crossed a frontier beyond which the silence refused to retreat. This arid zone was a region of extremes, where explorers and settlers were gripped by the sense that they had entered into the silence and that it threatened them – as a force of death, solitude and timelessness.⁴ One of the trail-blazers of this journey into nothingness was the explorer Charles Sturt, who travelled inland believing that he had been sent by God to find a

¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, 1963, preface by J-P Sartre, p.26

² See discussion of the Burke and Wills statue on Lucy Tartan’s blog site <http://alldordinary2.blogspot.com/2005/10/statuary-friday-15.html>

³ This was a stock phrase. See, for example, David Collins’ description of the landing at Sydney Cove in his *An Account of the English Colony of New South Wales*, 1798, chapter 1.

⁴ I have argued this point in detail in ‘The Silent Continent’, Adam Shoemaker (ed), *A Sea Change: Australian Writing and Photography*, Sydney: SOCOG, 1998, pp.91–106

great Inland Sea in the centre of Australia, but who found only heat, despair and – as he said repeatedly – ‘a death like silence’.⁵

Sturt was heart-broken by his ordeal, describing a wilderness that was bleak, vacant and godless. But Australian painters, journalists and poets began to invest this geography of silence, this ‘Never-Never’, with a deep and melancholy sense of spirituality. They created a cult of landscape in which the German explorer Ludwig Leichhardt became the first martyr, after he vanished in the Northern Territory in 1848. Whether Leichhardt was killed by thirst or by the Aborigines didn’t much matter. His death was not treated as a misfortune. It was elevated into a spiritual mystery. We can think of it as the white man’s attempt to formulate a desert dreaming. As Randolph Stow wrote in 1969, Liechhardt was transformed by the mythmakers into one of those ‘lay saints’ who lie in the desert ‘stealing the wind’s voice’.⁶

p.33

The potent idea that the dead somehow animate the Australian bush has been an enduring one. It lies at the heart, for example, of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967), Joan Lindsay’s story of a group of girls who disappear on a school picnic. The novel and, more especially, Peter Weir’s iconic Australian film (1975) represent the girls as having been absorbed by the country in a way that is at once Aboriginal, timeless and erotic. So heart-warmingly sentimental is the patriotism of the film, that few people reflect on how problematic it is to sexualise dead teenagers in this way, or to treat the Aborigines as so utterly absent. And of course the dead Leichhardt himself was reinvented by Patrick White in the novel *Voss* (1957), where the woman Laura declares that ‘Voss did not die. He is there still... and always will be’.⁷

As Mark Byrne observes, this sensibility of death, silence and aridity has occupied a dominant place in white Australia’s relationship with the outback.⁸ I think of this as a ‘geography of silence’ – one of the defining characteristics of the nationalist legend of the 1890s, most strikingly in the outback writings of Henry Lawson and Barbara Baynton.

⁵ See for example Chapter VII of Sturt’s *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia*, where he repeated talks about his sense of solitude, loneliness and silence.

⁶ Randolph Stow, ‘The Singing Bones’ quoted by Roslynn Haynes, ‘Visions of the Desert in Literature, Visual Arts and Film’, Ann Hamblin (ed), *Visions of Future Landscapes*, Proceedings of 1999 Australian Academy of Science Fenner Conference on the Environment, 2–5 May 1999, Canberra. Bureau of Rural Sciences, Canberra, p.71

⁷ The image is not unique to Australia. Think of Rupert Brookes’ poem ‘The Soldier’, or the final image of the landmark BBC TV series *Edge of Darkness* (1985) in which the dying hero is transformed into a tree.

⁸ Mark Byrne, ‘The Australian Wound,’ *Eureka Street*, vol. 16. no. 4, 16 May 2006

Yet it was in that defining decade that a new type of nationalism attempted to wash away this national preoccupation with death and silence. The source of this optimism was the artesian water which was allowing the squatters to move deeper into the Aboriginal territories of Queensland and northern New South Wales. As squatters and government contractors continued to unleash the waters of the Great Artesian Basin, the dream of an irrigated Australia flooded into a series of bizarre books now known as the 'lost race' or Lemurian novels. These frontier adventure stories were buoyed by the utopian claim which boosters were making for irrigation. Hydroengineering would undo the shortcomings of nature. It would transform the silence Never-Never into a place of optimism and prosperity. It would make arid Australia sing.

Lemurian novels

The concept of Lemuria was coined in Britain in the 1860s, when several leading scientists proposed that a lost continent once joined India to Madagascar, thereby explaining similarities between the two places, including the presence of lemurs.⁹

In a culture where a fascination with the paranormal had become respectable, Lemuria and spiritualism were conjoined in a heady mixture by Madame Blavatsky, the co-founder of the Theosophical Society. In her monumental work *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), Blavatsky proclaimed that the lost continent of Lemuria had once spread, not across the Indian Ocean, but across the Pacific. No longer a continent of cute little mammals, her Lemuria was a land of monsters who had dominated the earth before the arrival of humans. When Lemuria sank in a great volcanic cataclysm, it left a few fragments where 'descendants of these half-animal tribes or races' survived. These included the 'Australian savages', whom she describe as –

a very low sub-race, begotten originally of animals, of monsters, whose very fossils are now resting miles under the sea floors, their stock has since existed in an environment strongly subjected to the *law of retardation*. Australia is one of the oldest lands now above the waters, and in the senile decrepitude of old age, its 'virgin soil'

p.34

⁹ David Hatcher Childress, *Lost Cities of Ancient Lemuria and the Pacific*, Adventurers Unlimited Press, Illinois, 1988, pp.7–8.

notwithstanding. It can produce no new forms, unless helped by new and fresh races, and artificial cultivation and breeding.’¹⁰

In short, Australia needed white people, irrigation and eugenics.

Blavatsky’s influence flowed deep into the whiteman’s water-dreaming. Alfred Deakin had a long association with theosophy and spiritualism, and knew Blavatsky personally.¹¹ And, as John Healy pointed out in his pioneering essay on the Lemurian novels, the books themselves were permeated by Blavatsky’s Aryan theories.¹² Indeed one of the first to be published was actually called *The Last Lemurian* (1891), written by George Firth Scott. Other books in this genre include J. F. Hogan’s *The Lost Explorer* (1890), Carlton Dawe’s *The Golden Lake* (1891), J. D. Hennessey’s *An Australian Bush Track* (1896),¹³ Ernest Favenc’s *The Secret of the Australian Desert* (1896), Rosa Praed’s *Fugitive Anne* (1902), Alexander MacDonald’s *The Lost Explorers* (1906), and William Sylvester Walker’s *The Silver Queen* (1908). There are also Lemurian elements in Simpson Newland’s *Blood Tracks of the Bush* (1900), Ernest Favenc’s story of two Dutch mutineers from the *Batavia* entitled *Marooned on Australia* (1905), and Erle Cox’s sci-fi story *Out of the Silence* (1925).

Unlike the nationalist bush literature of the *Bulletin*, the Lemurian novels were quite explicitly *imperial* stories. Their heroes were mostly stalwart British Australians with such manly Anglo-Saxon names as Bright Hartley, John Holdfast and – most upright of all – Dick Hardwicke.¹⁴ Like hundreds of similar ‘lost world’ novels written throughout the British Empire – notably in Africa – over the next fifty years,¹⁵ these books were propelled by themes, story lines and conventions defined by the British writer, Rider Haggard, in his bestsellers *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) and *She* (1887). These rollicking romances were steeped in

¹⁰ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: A Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* [1888], Aryan Theosophical Press, California, 1925, volume two, pp.141, 189, 193–7. Quotation from p.197, Blavatsky’s italics.

¹¹ Al Gabay, *The Mystic Life of Alfred Deakin*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p.24.

¹² J. J. Healy, ‘The Lemurian Nineties’, *Australian Literary Studies*, 8.3, 1978, p.311

¹³ Also published as *The Bush Track: A Story Of The Australian Bush*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1913. References are from this edition.

¹⁴ The first two are from *The Australian Bush Track*. Dick is the hero of *The Golden Lake*.

¹⁵ See D. Hammond, Dorothy and Alta Jablow, *The Africa that Never Was: Four Centuries of British Writing about Africa*, Twayne, NY, 1977, p.102.

theosophical notions of race and history and were avidly read in Australia.¹⁶

The set-up for most of the stories is more or less the same. The searing desert has isolated the inhabitants of a fabulous lost world for thousands of years. Now a group of white travellers sets out to cross the desert in search of this ancient civilisation lured by the promise of gold and treasure. The lost races vary in detail, but they are usually people who preceded present-day Aborigines. In *Fugitive Anne*, they are a tall, beautiful, red-skinned people called the Aca, who have a flair for architecture and sculpture, and a penchant for human sacrifice. We are told that they show ‘no trace of Aboriginal admixture’, that they are ‘civilised men, not savages’.¹⁷

Sometimes, as in *An Australian Bush Track* and *The Golden Lake*, the lost races are the remnants of an advanced Aboriginal civilisation, prompting the hero of *The Golden Lake* to reflect that ‘the Australian black had not always been the demoralised brute he appears to us in these later times. Heaven only knows what he might not have been in the far-off ages when most of the now civilised world was a howling waste.’¹⁸ Sometimes, there are two rival tribes. In *The Secret of the Australian Desert* one of the lost races is a technologically advanced Aboriginal group, the other is a superior Asiatic people.

But in all cases, the lost tribes are living amidst the remnants of ancient customs, occult beliefs and a sophisticated technology created in the distant past (there are lots of secret trap-doors and hydraulic gizmos in these stories). Always, the tribe’s civilisation has atrophied, degenerating into warfare, superstition or cannibalism – as the heroes of *The Golden Lake* discover to their horror:

The she-fiends had ceased their infernal gyrations only through sheer exhaustion, and were led or dragged back to the circle... In a few moments a strong smell of burning flesh assailed our nostrils.
“My God, they’re cannibals!”

¹⁶ Library records show that in 1901 Rider Haggard was in Australian readers’ top ten authors: Tim Dolan, ‘The Secret Reading Life of Us’ in Brian Matthews (ed.), *Readers, Writers and Publishers*, Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2004, pp. 115–133

¹⁷ Rosa Praed, *Fugitive Anne: A Romance of the Unexplored Bush*, London: John Long, 1902. Ebook: <http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/ozlit/pdf/p00072.pdf>, pp. 72, 151, 125.

¹⁸ Dawe. Carlton, *The Golden Lake, or, The marvellous history of a journey through the great lone land of Australia*, E. A. Petherick, Melbourne, 1891. Ebook: <http://purl.library.usyd.edu.au/setis/id/dawgold> p.150.

It was Dick's voice, and he bounded like a rocket from his seat...¹⁹

Along the way, the white heroes deal with evil witchdoctors, beautiful white women who are captives of the tribe, degenerate half-castes, hidden chambers filled with gold, human sacrifice and volcanoes which erupt in the nick of time to scare off native armies.

Time and the Inland Sea

The Golden Lake is the story of three white men and an Aborigine led by Dick Hardwicke who set off in search of a great lost civilisation beyond the treacherous deserts of Western Australia. At the outset, Dick's cousin, Archie, senses that spiritual forces are stirring in this wilderness:

I often wonder if the desert through which the Israelites marched was half so weird and solemn, half so beautiful, in its magnificent desolation. For there is a weird and terrific beauty in these vast stretches of loneliness; they seem to bring you nearer to Him, and the fate of all earthly things.²⁰

p.36

This is still recognisable as the silent desert of Charles Sturt, or the landscape of 'weird melancholy' famously lamented by Marcus Clarke in his 1876 preface to the poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon. But as dawn breaks in the wilderness, Archie senses a new tide of history:

Like a blood-red sea the desert lay before us, weirdly, horribly solemn; a sea over which the ghosts of ships and the ghosts of men might revel for eternity.²¹

This ancient inland sea belongs to an epic age before the Aborigines, when monsters roamed the earth, and men were warriors and heroes.

In the late 1880s, this same inland sea was surfacing elsewhere in Australian literature. Barcroft Boake was a wiry, young Sydney man who'd spent his early twenties droving, up country. As he wrote to his father, he was prey to the same suicidal despair which occasionally oppressed Haggard's hero, Allan Quartermain.²² It was no melancholic

¹⁹ *The Golden Lake*, p.152

²⁰ *The Golden Lake*, p.33

²¹ *The Golden Lake*, p.33

²² Letter quoted in A. G. Stephens, 'Barcroft Boake: a memoir', the afterword to Barcroft Boake, *Where the Dead Men Lie and Other Poems*, Angus and Robertson 1897. Ebook:

pose. In 1892, Boake hanged himself from a she-oak on Folly Point, on Sydney's Middle Harbour. He was 26.

The young man's desolation is palpable in his gloomy necro-nationalist classic poem, 'Where the Dead Men Lie', in which 'the wastes of the Never-Never' are haunted by the ghosts of bushmen. But out-bush he also found moments of consolation and transcendence. His trance poem 'A Vision Out West' is a revelation, reminiscent of Coleridge's 'Ballad of Kublai Khan' (1816), in which a lonely drover overlooks a plain bathed in moonlight. As a ghostly expanse of Mitchell grass ripples in the night breeze, the plain is transformed into a

...wide ocean stricken dumb,
Whose rollers move for ever on, though sullenly, with fettered wills,
To break in voiceless wrath upon the crumbled bases of far hills.

Here, where normally 'silence reigns supreme', the drover hears a 'silent sermon'. All is not as it appears, the voice seems to say: 'never risk the substance for its dim reflex'. In this land without time, a ghostly history reveals itself – a distant past where primeval sea-monsters 'patrol the spectral sea':

Trailing along their slimy length in thirst for one another's blood,
Writhing in ponderous trials of strength, as once they did before the
flood.

As the creatures vanish beneath the Coleridgean foam, a great battle ship heaves into view 'thickly manned by dim, dead men of Asian breed' a 'dusky, fierce-eyed warrior crew, of fluttering cloth and flashing steel'.

These in turn fade into the moonlight, to be replaced by a glorious city surrounded by farmland. This is a future created by the hydroengineer, where –

Man hath taught Nature how to bring a mantle of perennial green–
Hewing canals whose banks are fringed by willows bending deeply
down
To water flowing yellow-tinged beneath the moon toward the town–
Filling from mighty reservoirs, sunk in the hollows of the plain,

p.37

That flood the fields without a pause though Summer should withhold
her rain.

As the sun rises, this ‘home of nations yet unborn’ melts away. But the drover has seen the destiny of British Australia, an irrigated utopia rising from the waves of the ancient Inland Sea.²³

In fact, visions of the lost Inland Sea swirl through the pages of the Lemurian novels. In Ernest Favenc’s *The Secret of the Australian Desert* (1896) the sea appears to another three white adventurers (again aided by an Aboriginal tracker). As they battle through the arid scrub, they discover an ancient carving of an anchor on a tree, and ask excitedly, ‘are we going to reach the much-talked-of inland sea and find a race of sailor men in possession?’

In *An Australian Bush Track*, our heroes have ridden through the unforgiving bush until they arrive at a homestead on the shores of a great lake. For Sir Charles Dawson, ‘The sight of that cool inland sea, after the long journey through the bush, had awakened memories of the old land [i.e. England]’. Towards the end of the book, when the adventurers escape from the lost tribe, they find that their getaway is blocked because rain has transformed the surrounding desert into a ‘strange, temporary inland sea’.²⁴

In *The Golden Lake*, the heroes know they are on the right trail when they discover a cave full of exotic golden sculptures and conclude that they were carved long ago by a superior race who ‘dwelt on the shores of an idyllic inland sea.’²⁵ And when the explorers reach their goal, they find lost tribe living beside a spectacular inland sea called the ‘Golden Lake’. (That name equates the nation-building power of water with the transformation which gold had already achieved in the eastern colonies, and which had just started to work its magic in the west, where the novel is set.) Similarly in *Fugitive Anne*, we are repeatedly told that the lost race are the land-locked survivors of a great civilisation which once flourished on the shores of the vanished ‘inland sea.’²⁶

²³ *Where the Dead Men Lie and Other Poems*, p.18. Van Ikin notes the resonance of the inland sea in this poem in ‘Dreams, Visions, Utopias’, Laurie Hergenhan (ed), *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, Ringwood: Penguin, 1988, p.257

²⁴ *The Bush Track*, pp. 185, 314.

²⁵ *The Golden Lake*, pp. 90, 92

²⁶ We are told, with a sense of wonder and paradox, that the desert was once a sea on pp. 33, 104, 142, 153, 171, 204, 305 (three times), and an ‘inland sea’ on pp. 71, 104 and 135.

As Susan Martin and I have argued, the Lemurian novels were part of a broader nationalist project to place the lost Inland Sea of Charles Sturt at the heart of the Australian imagination. The advocates of hydro-engineering dreamed of a federated and irrigated Australia. For them, the Inland Sea was the most potent symbol of the hopes which had been silenced by the desert. Now, in the age of irrigation and artesian bores, these water dreamers had a seductive message. The inland sea, which nature had allowed to evaporate, could be restored to central Australia by the skill of the hydroengineers.²⁷ The ethos which two decades later E. J. Brady would popularise in his visionary *Australia Unlimited* (1918) was beginning to challenge the geography of silence.

p.38

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. The desert had resisted white Australia's colonial ambitions for one hundred years. The Lemurian heroes had first to demonstrate that British pluck, assisted by native knowledge, could finally triumph over the fatal geography of silence. To put it another way, the white man's water dreaming had set out to replace his desert dreaming. In order to bring development and prosperity to inland Australia, our heroes had first to be tried by ordeal. Thus, in *The Golden Lake*, Dick Hardwicke and his companions are assaulted in the desert by poisonous bull-ants, by a wild grassfire, by wild Aborigines and by a dust-storm which engulfs them 'as though it bore on its dusky wings millions of infernal spirits.'²⁸

The animus of silence: Ludwig Leichhardt

Just as Dick and his companions are about to die of thirst, they stumble into a small oasis, where they drink deeply and find food. But they realise that death is still stalking them when they see its signature blazed on a tree: 'L.-1849'. They have stepped into the tracks of Ludwig Leichhardt. As our narrator Archie writes gloomily: 'There was something ghostly in the knowledge that he had trodden that very spot so many years before, and that the sole relic of him was the half-obliterated carving on the tree.'²⁹

So these novels were written at a time when two great principles were struggling for the heart of Australia. One was the Never-Never – the necronationalism which celebrated Leichhardt, Burke and Wills and

²⁷ Michael Cathcart and Susan K. Martin, 'Sealing the Inland: Fiction and Hydro-Engineering in Nineteenth Century Australia', unpublished paper presented at the Cultural Practice and the Environment Series, University of Melbourne, 1991

²⁸ *The Golden Lake*, p.50

²⁹ *The Golden Lake*, p.62

death. The other was the spirit of Australian Unlimited – which linked optimism, hydro-engineering and civilisation. Leichhardt haunts these stories as if he is the animus of the desert which our heroes are determined to overcome. Thus *Fugitive Anne* opens on a coastal steamer ominously named the (misspelt) *Leichhardt*. In *The Lost Explorer* (1890), we know that our heroes have triumphed over the silence when they rescue Leichhardt himself from the clutches of the lost race who have held him prisoner. Meanwhile, the heroes of *The Secret of the Australian Desert* discover an Irishman who is the sole survivor of Leichhardt's party. Lacking the civilised mental armour of the British, the wretched fellow has degenerated into a Mr Kurtz figure whom the Aborigines revere as Mur-Fee – a warning of the dangers of going native. Another 'sole survivor' of Leichhardt's expedition appears in Simpson Newland's melodrama, *Blood Tracks of the Bush* (1900). This survivor is an old man named John Smith. On the edge of death, he tells our hero how, thirty years earlier he and Leichhardt discovered a mountainous pillar erupting with water in the middle of the desert. Smith reveals that, at the base of the pillar, there is a cave filled with the artefacts and gold of a 'lost race'. That cave is Leichhardt's final resting place. What's more the water which spouts from the pillar drains away into the earth, feeding the Great Artesian Basin. In the literature of water-dreaming, it is this splendidly phallic mound-spring, rather than the morbid legend of Leichhardt, which symbolised the essence of the Australia which is coming into being. The 'hum of industry' took on a new voice – the voice of water gushing from the earth.

p.39

Artesian transformations

It's no accident that, when the heroes of *Fugitive Anne* enter the hidden city of the Aca, the first sound they hear is a subterranean river bubbling to the surface. This city lies beneath a great stone Tortoise called Aak, which is sacred to the Aca – and which we, as readers, understand is an evocation of the inland sea on whose shores their civilisation once flourished. As our heroine Anne discovers, beyond this Tortoise there is a hidden valley, watered by a river which has 'forced its subterranean way beneath the desert sands'. This river has worked a miracle in the desert:

[I]t wandered through fields of Indian corn, hemp, flax, and vegetables, and irrigated plantations of cocoa, bananas, palms, and many other tropical products, including a species of aloe, from which they learned later that fibre cloth and a spiritous liquor,

similar to Mexican mescal, were obtained... Along the river banks were belts of scrub, and in the clearing nestled wooden homesteads, the dwellings of goatherds and farmers...³⁰

This power of groundwater to sustain a civilisation also saturates *The Last Lemurian* (1898) by George Firth Scott, in which the lost tribe worship a half-man, half-reptile named the Bunyip – the ‘last Lemurian’. The Bunyip lives in a pool fed by a spring in central Australia. This pool, in turn, lies at the heart of a network of underground rivers through which the Bunyip can swim to Aboriginal waterholes right across the continent.³¹ The moment our white heroes see the Bunyip emerge from the pool, they shoot him dead. Over his corpse, they convince the Queen of the lost tribe to worship *them*, the superior white men – and to supply them with gold. The ideological point couldn’t be sharper. Artesian water is the life-force of Australia. Now it has been rescued from Aboriginal superstition – and the transformation of inland Australia is about to start.

p.40

The sceptic might object that this is reading too much into these books, They are, after all, *Boy’s Own* romps. Isn’t it gilding the lily to read them as manifestos for a new ideology of nation-building based on irrigation and artesian water? Well, no. The writers themselves make it quite clear – by the most gung-ho acts of authorial intervention – that these are works of water dreaming. In *The Golden Lake*, Dick Hardwicke is standing by the oasis when he makes the statement which expresses the hope which permeates all these books:

‘No fear of starving here,’ said Dick. ‘Ah, what a country this could be if only it had more water.’³²

Likewise, in *The Australian Bush Track*, one of the heroes, an Englishman, announces his belief that, ‘like the United States of America, every portion of it will one day be settled and cultivated’. That promise is offered by artesian water:

‘This continent contains all the natural conditions necessary for the formation of a great and productive country; but they need to be manipulated artificially by the intelligence and industry of man. You have a splendid land, but in many parts no water, except by boring for it...’³³

³⁰ *Fugitive Anne*, p.187–8

³¹ G. Firth Scott, *The Last Lemurian: A Westralian Romance*, London: James Bowden, 1898, pp.55–9

³² *The Golden Lake*, p.60

³³ *The Bush Track*, p.187

The same confidence occurs in *The Secret of the Australian Desert*, when Ernest Favenc gives one his characters a speech which tells us that –

‘if the artesian water is found to extend throughout the interior it will change the whole face of the Australian earth in time ... I believe the end of the century will see it settled from east to west throughout.’³⁴

These tales of ancient hydraulic civilisations surviving beyond the deserts – and surviving beyond the timeless lethargy of Aboriginality – are assertions of optimism. As Dick Hardwicke asks, when he discovers the fabulous treasures of a lost race,

‘...who knows what the people of this island might not have been? Their past is dead. The world shall never know their history, therefore it doubts whether they ever had one, forgetting that if events repeat themselves, as they say they do, what is to-day might have been thousands of years ago...’³⁵

Such talk liberated water-dreamers from an idea they found utterly stultifying: that central Australia had always been the timeless domain of silence, desert and Aborigines. As John Healy observed, the Lemurian tales ‘open up Australia as a continent *in* space and time, as a continent *of* space and time.’³⁶ If the water dreamers could imagine a civilised past – before the Never-Never and the Aborigines – then it was easier to imagine a civilised future.

p.41

White optimism

In his influential book *Writing the Colonial Adventure* (1995), Robert Dixon develops a sophisticated analysis of these books which runs counter to this reading. He argues that the exuberance of the novels actually masks a deep colonial ‘anxiety’ about race, miscegenation and the perils of going native. He sees both the Aborigines and the lost races as posing a threat to white Australia’s sense of its own racial integrity and superiority. My own view is that Dixon is detecting anxieties and contradictions which are certainly present in the Haggard prototypes, but which are not the primary driver of the Australian stories. As Melissa

³⁴ Ernest Favenc, *The Secret of the Australian Desert*, London: Blackie, [1896], p.213. See also the final page of his *History of Australian Exploration from 1788 to 1888*, Turner and Henderson, Sydney, 1888, for his view that the ‘apparently unlimited artesian supply’ in Queensland would place Australian ‘among the recognised powers of the world.’

³⁵ *The Golden Lake*, p.89

³⁶ J. J. Healy, ‘The Lemurian Nineties’, p.311

Bellanta observes in her marvellously clarifying essay on the books, Dixon's account is more influenced by postcolonial theory than by an empirical engagement with the Australian context. As Bellanta puts it, far from being anxious, the novels actually express an 'optimistic belief in the miraculous'. The writers treat 'the lost race as inspiration for their nationalist endeavour' to use irrigation to create a 'fertile utopia'.³⁷

If anything, the racial swagger of these novels makes a bold contrast with the anxiety that white civilisation may be overpowered by savagery and silence that we really do find in such writers as Lawson, Patrick White or Manning Clark. Or think of the paintings of Albert Tucker, which frequently represent white men as if the bush has chiselled them into hunks of stone or wood. In the Lemurian novels, an Irishman or (in *Fugitive Anne*) a Scandinavian might be reduced to elemental silence by the land, or corrupted by the savagery of its people. But not a British man or woman. Never. For them, the superiority of the white race is absolute and self-evident. Thus, when our heroes finally reach the Golden Lake, they see a native about to ravish a white girl in canoe. Dick Hardwicke shoots the native and rescues the girl. She looks at Dick with 'admiration and awe' and she immediately recognises that she shares the superior quality of whiteness, observing that—

she supposed men with white faces were different from those with black. "I am white too," she added, and as if to prove the truth of her words she rolled up her sleeve and showed a beautiful milk-white arm... She looked at Dick and smiled. "I am very different from the other women of the village," she said. "Their faces are black, as black as the sky when there is no moon, when there is no star. I used sometimes to wish I was like them," she continued; "but now I have seen you two I am glad my face is white."³⁸

p.42

What's more, she tells them, the black women among whom she has grown up have frequently envied her white skin and her golden hair. In short, she instinctively expresses the white supremacy which is an underlying constant of the Lemurian novels.

³⁷ Bellanta develops her rebuttal of Dixon in some detail. Her excellent article won the Australian Historical Association 2005 prize for best postgraduate essay. (Melissa Bellanta, 'Fabulating the Australian Desert: Australia's Lost Race Romances, 1890–1908', *Philament*, no.3, April 2004 online). I am in broad agreement with her reading.

³⁸ *The Golden Lake*, p.116

Aborigines and death

So what of the Aborigines? Several of our heroes are travelling with Aboriginal guides, who have uncanny tracking and hunting skills. But the white men are always better riders, better rifle-shots and less prone to blood-lust in a battle. The novels draw a clear distinction between the noble Aborigines, who have thrown in their lot with the settlers, and the 'wild' Aborigines who continue to 'make trouble'.

In the 1890s and 1900s, slaughter on the frontier was a vigorous theme of popular culture. The actual extent of this violence is now the subject of a rather malicious historical argument. I'm convinced that the novels throw light on the central point of the dispute. Of course, novels are by definition works of the imagination: they are made up. But these books *are* preoccupied with the Aboriginal massacres in a way that suggests that bloodshed on the frontier was part of the currency of the 1890s. Indeed several novels of this period contain set pieces in which the authors or their characters debate the morality of this violence. The classic South Australian novel *Paving the Way* (1893), by squatter and politician Simpson Newland, opens with a scene based on an incident in which Aborigines killed the survivors a wrecked ship called the *Maria*. In the novel, one boy survives. In adulthood, he becomes a squatter and engages in bloody gun battles with terrifying, wild Aborigines, whom he has every reason to hate. Yet when Newland interrupts his story to tell us that such gun-battles were a bloody reality of the frontier, he also tells us that 'it cannot be disputed that the white man was the aggressor'.³⁹

p.32

Less sympathetic to the Aborigines is *On the Fringe of the Never-Never* (1909) by pioneer H. K. Bloxham, a long-time mayor of Bourke. In his forward, Bloxham writes, 'The events narrated in this book are, in the main, true to life. The people were well known in and around Bourke, New South Wales, in the early seventies'. These people include a pioneer named William Gray, who's introduced to us as a bit of a character who had 'administered drastic punishment with rifle and revolver' to Aborigines 'on more than one occasion', and who tells his companions that 'The only way to deal with wild blacks in a new country is to shoot down all the bucks on sight.' His companions are less trigger-happy. But when they are attacked by the Aborigines whose lands they have come to

³⁹ See discussion in Robert Foster, Rick Hosking, Amanda Nettelbeck, *Fatal Collisions: The South Australian Frontier*, Kent Town: Wakefield, 2001, Chapter 2. Newland's second novel *Blood Tracks of the Bush* (1900) was even more violent.

take, the bushmen have little choice but to join with Gray and shoot them down.

p.43

Two—six— ten—fifteen of the rushing savages tossed up their arms and dropped headlong, or sprang into the air and fell on their backs. Still the rest of the howling devils flung themselves forward. Five more were laid low.

But the fighting is soon over. The white moderates are vindicated when the cunning Aboriginal chief Warradonga agrees to bargain. In return for tobacco and provisions, he shows the white men ‘all over the country’ and leads them ‘directly to the waterholes.’⁴⁰ It’s impossible to read a novelist’s motives with any certainty. But my sense is that Bloxham is simply trying to make stories out of his experiences on the frontier – in the manner of the American wild west. The battle for the frontier is part of the adventure, in which brave men settled a dispute over land as brave men do.

In the Lemurian novels too, the white man who enters Aboriginal territory does well to carry a gun. In these adventures, the battle for the waterholes is often critical to the action. And, as John Docker points out, most of the books are pleased to see the ‘dusky cannibals’ bite the dust.⁴¹

But in *Fugitive Anne*, Rosa Praed’s sympathy is with the Aborigines. Given her own life-story, this is a remarkable position. Rosa Praed was no armchair novelist. One of her formative experiences occurred when she was a six-year-old girl, living in her family’s dirt-floor hut on Aboriginal country in central Queensland. On 27 October 1857, local Yiman tribesmen slaughtered seven members of the neighbouring Fraser family and three of their employees. It was reported that the girls and women had been raped and the boys and men mutilated. Twenty-five years later, Rosa’s father told her how he had led a uniformed vigilante squad who slaughtered blacks in reprisal. Scholars put the Aboriginal death toll somewhere between 150 and 500.⁴² Even Keith Windschuttle concedes that, in this case, ‘There is documentary evidence that the local police pursued the offenders and needed very little provocation to shoot

⁴⁰ H. K. Bloxham, *On the Fringe of the Never-Never*, Sydney: NSW Bookstall Co. 1909. Quotes from Foreword and pp. 4, 66, 80, 83

⁴¹ John Docker, *The Nervous Nineties: Australian cultural life in the 1890s*, South Melbourne: OUP, 1991, p.225

⁴² McCann, Andrew, "Unknown Australia: Rosa Praed's Vanished Race," *Australian Literary Studies* 22.1 (May 2005), pp. 37-50. Scholars differ on the number killed, see Patricia Clarke, *Rosa! Rosa! A Life of Rosa Praed, novelist and spiritualist*, Melbourne: MUP, 1999, p.18.

most they caught.’⁴³ The massacre of the settlers is horrifically played out in *Fugitive Anne*. But, in an extraordinary act of empathy, Praed’s heroine flees from the avengers – in this case the Native Police – because she knows they will kill the Aboriginal boy who is her companion. Like Simpson Newland, Praed believed that the bloodshed was provoked by the cruelty of the squatters. Indeed she has Anne tell the story of a squatter who murdered Aborigines by giving them poisoned puddings on Christmas day. ‘Was it any wonder, she thought, that afterwards white men were speared from behind gum-trees, and that there were murders on the lonely stations?’⁴⁴

In *The Golden Lake*, however, the ‘niggers’ are blood thirsty demons. In the midst of a furious battle, Archie is about to be speared by a terrifying Aboriginal warrior when Dick Hardwicke intervenes:

Bang!

With a wild cry the savage fell dead upon me. Dick had shot him not a moment too soon.

I disencumbered myself of the objectionable carcass.

“I am once more your debtor, Dick.”

“A close shave, old chap...”⁴⁵

p.44

There is no parody or irony here. In *The Golden Lake*, frontier violence is the brutal – even thrilling – price of the clash between white civilisation and Aboriginal savagery.

In *The Last Lemurian* too, the violence is an inevitable consequence of colonisation. And when our hero Dick Halwood (yes – another Dick) and his companion shoot the Aborigines down, Dick confesses that ‘it was with a feeling of savage delight that I pressed the trigger home’.⁴⁶ But later, Dick’s bloodlust gives way to nausea, which makes, he says, ‘the work we had done a hideous nightmare to me.’ And the next day, Dick is sick at heart when he sees the ‘gruesome’ corpses of his victims.⁴⁷ So Dick is a decent man. A civilised man. Indeed we are invited to feel that it

⁴³ Keith Windschuttle, ‘The truth about our Aboriginal history,’ National Press Club, Canberra 19 April 2001, <http://www.sydneyline.com/National%20Press%20Club%20debate.htm>

⁴⁴ *Fugitive Anne*, p.46. Some reports claim that the Aborigines who killed the Frasers were retaliating after their own women were raped by whites – this seems to have been a common scenario. See McCann, p.38. Perversely, in her own memoirs, Praed makes the discredited claim that the violence was often provoked by the Aborigines’ hunger for the flesh of the white man. Mrs Campbell Praed, *My Australian Girlhood: Sketches and Impressions of Bush Life*, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1902, p.27

⁴⁵ *The Golden Lake*, p.73

⁴⁶ *The Last Lemurian*, p.31–2 (cf. *King Solomon’s Mines*, Ch. 14)

⁴⁷ *The Last Lemurian*, p.33

is Dick – and not the slain Aborigines – who is the real victim of the battle.

In the USA, the battles on the frontier produced the legends and mythologies of the wild west. Thanks to novels, comic books and movies, generations of children across the world knew of the Sioux, the Cheyenne and the Apache. They knew of gun fights and scalplings and of valiant native warriors like Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, and of ‘Indian fighters’ like Daniel Boone. But while the racial conflicts of the American frontier were mythologised, the frontier conflicts in Australia were forgotten by mainstream culture. Indeed, my generation of Australians grew up playing ‘cowboys and Indians’ not ‘squatters and Aborigines’.

The Lemurian novels presented exactly this kind of mythology, but it was one which failed to take hold in the white Australian imagination, which preferred forgetting to mythologising. These novels arise from quite different ideas of geography and development from those which shaped ‘the legend of the Nineties’. They belong to a world of Boy Scouts, Francis Drake and the Charge of the Light Brigade. But most fundamentally, they are British-Australian stories. And what makes them distinctive is their uncomplicated optimism about the future of White Australia, their trust that the key to that future lay beneath the earth in the Great Australian Basin, and their attempts to grapple with the deadly impact of colonisation on Aborigines who resisted.

Michael Cathcart

The Australian Centre
School of Historical Studies
The University of Melbourne
Victoria
Australia

Michael Cathcart, ‘Lemuria and Australian Dreams of an Inland Sea’, *Lemuria*, Winter 2006, vol.1 no.1, Dayanand College, Ajmer, India, pp.32–47



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

CATHCART, M

Title:

Lemuria and Australian Dreams of an Inland Sea

Date:

2006

Citation:

CATHCART, M. (2006). Lemuria and Australian Dreams of an Inland Sea. Lemuria, 1, pp.32-47

Publication Status:

Published

Persistent Link:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/33510>

File Description:

Lemuria and Australian dreams of an inland sea