

Representations of ‘The Bush’ in the Poetry of Charles Harpur

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This essay was inspired by two very different events I attended in January 2013. The first was a production of the stage adaptation by dramatist Andrew Bovell of Kate Grenville’s novel *The Secret River* (2005) at the Sydney Theatre. For me, the stage version was more successful than the book because it made much more of an attempt to represent both sides of the story. The inclusion of an Aboriginal family alongside the white settler family that is the main focus of the novel allowed for a fuller representation of their initial happiness and sense of belonging in their country, in contrast to the strangeness and fear felt by the whites. As the play progresses, the increasingly savage changes inflicted on the Aboriginal family and their way of life by the newcomers are brought graphically home to the audience. A few days later I attended a small lunch in Canberra, organised by Paul Eggert to celebrate the 200th birthday of poet Charles Harpur. Harpur was born in Windsor, on the Hawkesbury River in 1813, just a year earlier than the events in *The Secret River* were supposedly taking place. I therefore thought it would be interesting to compare representations of the bush in his poetry with those found in the novel, especially as adapted for the stage.

A highlight of the stage version of *The Secret River* was a magnificent painted backdrop with a large gumtree at centre stage. The set highlighted the beauty and grandeur of the bush, a place where the Aboriginal family was living happily in harmony with their land. The white family, in contrast, is shown to have a range of responses to their new surroundings. For Will Thornhill land represents the status denied to him in England, so the bush is something that needs to be cleared as quickly as possible to demonstrate his ownership through the planting of crops. For his wife Sal, the bush is a fearful place, somewhere that must be endured until she can return to London, which remains home to her. Only their younger son Dick, born on the voyage to Australia, seems responsive to the bush as a place of new experiences and delights; he is depicted playing happily with the Aboriginal children and beginning to learn their language.

Like Dick, Charles Harpur grew up on the Hawkesbury knowing no other home but the small settlement at Windsor and playing in the surrounding bush. Many of his poems celebrate the Australian bush in all its variety, as in ‘Old Billowy Hawkesbury,’ ‘The Bush Fire,’ ‘A Mid-Summer Noon in the Australian Forest’ and ‘A Storm in the Mountains.’ The latter poem was apparently based on his being out alone in a storm when aged eleven, an experience that determined Harpur to become a poet. As the poet is reminded in ‘The Dream by the Fountain,’ ‘the Muse of the evergreen Forest,’ that is, the Australian countryside, had been an inspiration to him ‘Ev’n in the days when thy boyhood thou worest.’ After a period when the poet had lived in the city and been ‘Lured into error by false-smiling faces,’ the Muse rejoices to find him back in his ‘beautiful Country’ and tells him:

Listen, rejoined one; I promise thee glory
Such as shall rise like the day-star apart.
To brighten the source of Australia’s broad story.
But for this thou must give to the future thy heart!

Be then the Bard of thy Country! O rather
 Should such be thy choice than a monarchy wide!
 Lo, 'tis the land of the grave of thy father!
 'Tis the cradle of Liberty!—Think, and decide. (Perkins ed. 266)

As this poem demonstrates, Harpur's aim was to write 'a new continent into literature,' to use the words of the Nobel Committee when awarding the Literature prize to Patrick White many years later. The future has been slower in recognising Harpur's achievement, despite the work of past scholars, especially the late Elizabeth Perkins. A major electronic edition of Harpur's poetry now under way with ARC funding and being led by Paul Eggert with assistance from myself will, when completed, help to make his poetry more accessible and so better known. Most critical discussion of Harpur's poetry had tended to focus on just a few of his works, especially 'The Creek of the Four Graves.' This focus, among other things, gives an emphasis to just one aspect of his work, and also to the most negative of the many representations of Aborigines found in Harpur's poetry. While in this poem they are depicted through the eyes of the settlers, and so seen as bloodthirsty savages, in many other poems Harpur presents Aborigines as victims of white exploitation and savagery, as in 'The Beautiful Squatter,' 'The Aboriginal Mother' and 'The Spectre of the Cattle Flat.'

Representations of the bush in Harpur's poetry also vary according to the genre and purpose of a particular poem. Here I focus on two major poems about which there has been very little critical discussion, 'Lost in the Bush' and 'The Kangaroo Hunt.' 'Lost in the Bush' was first published in the *Australasian Chronicle* on 12 November 1842. As with most of Harpur's poems it was later revised, though not as heavily as many others, with some eighteen lines added in 1851 and a further sixteen in 1863. As the title indicates, its subject is one of the earliest treatments of a theme that was to become very common in Australian Literature, though here it is an adult who is lost and not a child, as in later accounts by Marcus Clarke, Joseph Furphy and many others. In Harpur's time it was still easy for adults to get lost in the bush and, indeed, in 'The Spectre of the Cattle Flat' the action is precipitated by a stockman's murder of an Aborigine who had guided him back to his hut upon the promise of a knife in exchange, a promise the stockman never intended to keep. In 'Lost in the Bush,' Will, a settler who has presumably not been in Australia for very long, gets himself lost and so has to spend a night in the bush terrorised by what he fears might be lurking in the dark. Will's attitude to the bush is close to that of Sal in *The Secret River* and certainly not to be equated with Harpur's own. This is a comic poem, whose model would seem to be the late eighteenth-century English poet George Crabbe rather than Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge. Like Crabbe's tales of rural life in England, 'Lost in the Bush' is written in heroic couplets, with the Gothic touches exploited in 'The Spectre of the Cattle Flat' here being employed by Harpur for comic purposes in order to send up the fear and ignorance of English settlers like Will:

Now thickest glooms blank every forest path,
 And like a large Cyclopic eye in wrath,
 One only star glares redly down, as seen
 Up through a rent in heaven's dun cloudy screen:
 Which gap, slow crossing, like a dim-drawn streak,
 The owl pours forward his funereal shriek
 Sounds of strange waters through the turmoil vast
 Of the wide dark woods, dash over in the blast;
 Or the lank dingo's long and weary cry
 Comes wildly wailing from some covert nigh. (Perkins ed. 202)

In the following lines, possums, wild cats, bidawongs and kangaroos join in the midnight revels, while curlews add their mournful notes to the scene:

Or the spare curlews that from all points meet
 In nightly gatherings fugitive and fleet—
 That half ubiquitous appear to be,
 Now near, now distant, interthrongingly—
 Send suddenly upward in the hollow gale
 Cries dismal,—drear as those of Spectres pale
 That round some scene of wholesale murder wail! (Perkins ed. 202–03)

I was reminded by this that an alternative title for Barbara Banyton's well-known story 'The Chosen Vessel' was 'What the Curlew Cried!' (Krimmer and Lawson eds. xiii). Harpur appears to have been the first to make this association between the curlew's cry and murder. Among its exaggerated Gothic touches, 'Lost in the Bush' includes much original observation of the behaviour of Australian fauna. There is also some nice use of the Australian vernacular by Will's wife Peg who, wondering why he has not come home, exclaims: "He's boozing somewhere—but I'll comb him down!" (Perkins ed. 202). Since this is a comic poem, Will survives the night rather than expires; as morning finally arrives, he hears a dog barking and follows the sound to where:

A rude Lodge, dim and picture-like, is seen,
 There where a clearing from yon hill spreads out,
 With stumps all dotted, not yet fenced about;
 Thither he hastens, and is welcomed there,
 Consoled and fed with hospitable care,
 And when the sun shall crown the wintry day,
 His host can set him on his homeward way. (Perkins ed. 204)

'The Kangaroo Hunt' or, to give it its full title, 'A Morning in the Mountains: A Descriptive Poem in Six Parts by Charles Harpur, An Australian' is a much more ambitious piece that demonstrates Harpur's delight in and careful observations of the Australian landscape, animals and especially birds. The whole poem was never published in his lifetime, appearing in print for the first time in Elizabeth Perkins's 1984 edition of Harpur's poetical works. In her preface to this edition, Perkins regretted that constraints of space meant she was unable to include details of the various versions of many of the poems. She partly rectified this in the later and equally valuable *Analytical Finding List* of Harpur's poems that she prepared with Elizabeth Holt, published in 2002. It includes a chronological listing of all the published and manuscript versions of each poem. In relation to 'The Kangaroo Hunt,' however, I disagree with their listing of a short untitled poem published in the *Sydney Monitor* for 22 November 1834 as the earliest version of this poem (53). While this untitled poem does describe a kangaroo hunt, it is one where the hunters are mounted on horses, rather than being on foot as in 'The Kangaroo Hunt.' There, as also in 'The Creek of the Four Graves,' Harpur specifically notes that horses were rare because expensive in the early decades of settlement. It is also true that Harpur had had dealings with Edward Smith Hall, editor of the *Monitor*, some six months earlier in 1834 when he arrived clutching the manuscript of his play in blank verse, 'The Tragedy of Donohoe.' Hall was eventually to publish extracts from the play in the *Monitor* in February 1835 (Normington-Rawling 41–43). The poem about kangaroo hunting published the previous November had carried an editorial note: 'To encourage a novice we insert the above— it is a sample of *rhyme* but not of poetry.' In the eighteen months before

November 1834, however, Harpur had had five much more substantial poems published in three other Sydney newspapers so could hardly be described as a novice. Moreover, all of these poems had titles and were signed with his name or his initials. By 1834, kangaroo hunting was a recognised colonial pastime; indeed, a poem about it, entitled 'Colonial Hunt,' had appeared in the *Sydney Gazette* as early as 16 June 1805 (Webby 1).

In including this 1834 anonymous and untitled poem in their *Analytical Finding List*, though the poem itself does not appear in Perkins's 1984 edition of Harpur, Holt and Perkins were perhaps influenced by Harpur's claims that 'The Kangaroo Hunt' not only related an incident from his youth but was written at a young age. But, as Paul Kane and others have noted, later in life Harpur was keen to represent his first published poems as having been composed earlier than they actually were, giving his date of birth as 1817 rather than 1813 (Kane 51). In 1860, in a note accompanying the publication of half of 'The Kangaroo Hunt' in the *Australian Home Companion*, he wrote: 'It will be seen, no doubt from the tenor of many of these notes, as well as from much of the text itself, that this Kangaroo Hunt of mine, was a juvenile performance.' This note does not appear in Perkins's edition, as it was omitted from later manuscript versions of the poem.

The first appearance in print of any of 'The Kangaroo Hunt,' an extract from Part III, was in Sydney's *Weekly Register* for 18 November 1843, at a time and in a place where many of Harpur's major works had their first airing, together with many of his political satires. He was then 30, and the 81 lines were printed under the title 'Australian Scenery. (From "The Kangaroo Hunt", an unpublished poem).' The poem was accompanied by two of the prose notes that, although accompanying many other poems by Harpur, are a particular feature of this one. When these lines appeared in print again in 1860, however, this part of the poem had been considerably extended by the addition of detailed descriptions of Australian birds, accompanied by further extensive prose notes about them.

In 1860, the first three parts of 'The Kangaroo Hunt' were serialised in seven instalments in the *Australian Home Companion*, running from late June to early November. The November extract ended with a 'To be continued' and there is nothing to indicate why this did not occur as the journal was published until the end of September 1861, with shorter poems by Harpur continuing to appear until June of that year. While, following Harpur's usual practice, especially with his more major poems, some changes continued to be made to the poem in the three manuscript versions dating from the 1860s, these are minimal in comparison to those made between 1843 and 1860. As with other major poems first published during the 1840s, a comparison of the 1843 and 1860 versions of Part III of 'The Kangaroo Hunt' suggests that Harpur had the structure of the poem clear in his mind but later added many significant details as well as more extended descriptions. Likewise, the earliest version of 'The Creek of the Four Graves,' serialised in the *Weekly Register* on 9, 16 and 23 August 1845, was only half as long as the final manuscript version of 1867. And the earliest version of 'The World and the Soul,' published as 'Geologia' in the *Atlas* on 4 September 1847, consisted of only 48 lines as against 216 in the 1867 manuscript.

The section of 'The Kangaroo Hunt' published in 1843 ran to 81 lines; the same section in the 1867 manuscript has 124. Most of the additional material occurs in a much more detailed description of the birds disturbed by the hunters as they push further into the bush and enter 'a belt of cedars tall' undertwined with brushwood and vines. The 1843 version devoted only 3 lines to the brightly coloured parrots frightened from the trees:

And the parrot tribes unfold
 Their pointed wings of verdant gold—
 Like a volant chrysolite:

It is particularly interesting to see how Harpur used some of the same images in later versions of the poem but elaborated them to provide a much more detailed description of a specific parrot that is now given an Aboriginal name. Notice, too, how ‘pinions washed with verdant gold’ is a more exact description of the birds’ wings, while the extended context provided for the final image makes it much more effective:

And the yerowalas unfold
 Up in the cedar’s branching height
 Their pinions washed with verdant gold,
 Then fleetly flaming to the light
 Under some gleaming strip of sky,
 Each one singly hits the eye
 Like a volant chrysolite! (Perkins, ed. 471–72)

This is followed by equally colourful descriptions of the rosella, the scarlet satin bird and the king parrot, all missing from the 1843 version of the poem. Many of the birds mentioned in 1843 are also now given more accurate names, with the ‘dove’ becoming the ‘pigeon,’ the ‘jay’ the ‘rook,’ the ‘chaffer’ the ‘yellow-bill’ and the ‘ground-parrot’ the ‘ground parrakeet.’ The inclusion of so many new birds also meant an expansion of the prose notes accompanying this section of the poem. There Harpur tells us that ‘Yerowala is an aboriginal name of the blue-mountain parrot—the most splendid, to my thinking, of all our parrots.’ (Perkins ed. 501). In an early article comparing Harpur’s descriptions of Australian birds with those found in John Gould’s *Birds of Australia* (1841–48), Robert Dixon suggests that the yerowala ‘appears to be the *Trichoglossus Swainsonii* of Gould, Swainson’s Lorikeet, the Blue Mountain Parrot, or the Rainbow Lorikeet (*Birds* vol. v.)’ (Dixon 322). Harpur’s use of an Indigenous name for this bird, one not recorded by Gould, along with others elsewhere in the poem and notes, indicates that he had some knowledge of Aboriginal languages. Unlike Gould, too, he was aware that different names were given to the same bird or animal by different Indigenous language groups. Elsewhere, for example, he writes:

Bidawong is an aboriginal name of the animal which the Colonists have called the flying squirrel. I say *an* aboriginal name, because almost every tribe of Blacks has a different set of names for our indigenous animals. The bidawong, like the kindyne, is a noctivagant animal, and less like the European quadruped after which it has been partly named by the early Colonists, than that circumstance would import to persons unacquainted with its actual appearance. (Perkins ed. 495)

So, while there is no evidence to suggest that, like the young Dick Thornhill, Harpur played with Indigenous children when young, it is clear that, unlike many other settlers, he did gain some understanding of their culture and languages and felt that Indigenous names were more appropriate for local fauna than misleading English ones. In his note on the scarlet satin bird Harpur records that it is a rare bird and likely soon to become extinct along with many others. He blames this on the increase of goannas following the removal of ‘the former lords of the soil’ from their country, and recommends that settlers should learn to eat them since ‘when

baked as the Blacks bake them . . . they have an exceedingly rich and stomach-provoking savour' (Perkins ed. 502).

Robert Dixon's article from 1980 remains the most substantial reading of 'The Kangaroo Hunt.' As well as noting Harpur's detailed observations of Australian animals and birds, ones precisely located in particular habitats, and comparing them to Gould's, Dixon also describes the different types of country represented in the poem. Thus, in Part I, the narrator takes us to the top of 'an eminent hill sublime,' from which it is possible to gain a prospect of one 'of the newer settlements on the banks of our inland streams,' to quote from Harpur's 1863 Preface (Perkins ed. 455). As Dixon notes, the birds described in this section, including the brown thrush, the bell-bird and the whip bird, are 'birds of the ravine that are more often heard than seen, and most of the details about their physical appearance and arboreal habits are appropriately introduced only in the notes' (Dixon 319). In Part II, a group of young hunters meet and leave the settlement. Like the landscapes of the poem, they are a representative bunch, including men from England, Scotland and Ireland, but mostly ones 'born and nurtured in the land' who are represented not only as 'Taller and straighter than the rest' but better able to cope with the demands of the hunt (Perkins ed. 465). As they move into the bush, they first encounter birds found nearer to human settlements, such as the kookaburra and the wood pigeon, followed by lyre birds, owls, bell-birds, and hawks as they move further into the mountains. Eventually, in Part III, they are deep into the bush and disturb the rosellas and other bright birds discussed earlier. Finally, in Part IV they come upon some kangaroos and the hunt proper begins though, in order to prolong the poem, in Part V, the hounds take a wrong path, so the poor kangaroo is not run to ground until Part VI.

'The Kangaroo Hunt' is not a poem one reads for its exciting story; indeed, it is not a narrative poem but, as indicated in its title, and explained in Harpur's Preface, a descriptive one. What is described is less the hunt itself than the locations in which it takes place, complete with characteristic flora and fauna. In particular, by devoting so much of the first three parts to describing a variety of birds, Harpur was deliberately countering prevailing myths about Australian birds, ones that would be a long time dying. As late as 1870, Adam Lindsay Gordon was referring in 'A Dedication' to his *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes* to Australia as a land with 'songless bright birds' (Wilkes ed. 61). In contrast, Harpur's first note begins: 'It is a very prevalent, but an erroneous notion, that the birds of Australia are almost destitute of song,' before going on to a long description of the songs of the magpie, the butcher bird and many others, ending: 'In newly settled localities, of a Spring or Autumn morning, I have heard the whole forest vocally alive and as it were electric, with the wild, shrill, intermixing paeon of birds, than which, in many instances, nothing could be more sweet and joyous, or taking them altogether, more primitively exhilarating.' (Perkins ed. 491–92)

Likewise, the poem as a whole seems intended, if not perhaps so consciously, to give the lie to the supposed monotony of the bush by describing first a panoramic scene and then detailed accounts of different localities and their characteristic plants, birds and animals. In addition to talking up the Australian bush, Harpur was also deliberately talking up the abilities of those who, like himself, were the sons and daughters of convicts, in the face of the prejudices and 'erroneous notions' of his time. In a note to Part V, where the hunters are described, he is slightly apologetic about what might be read as his 'quasi national glorification' of his countrymen, before characteristically justifying this in terms of their potential if given a proper education:

Our career as a race should be full of boldness and invention, and as little imitative as possible. . . . a good System of *national* Education is our prime desideratum; and that in preparing the way for and devising the plan of such a System, we must in no wise fail to be true to ourselves and to our children. (Perkins ed. 506)

In the final section of *The Secret River*, we meet the now wealthy William Thornhill living in his grand stone house but far from happy as he sits ‘watching, waiting, while the dusk gathered in the valley, scanning the trees and the silent rocks’ (Grenville 334). He is, Grenville implies, haunted by the absence of the Aboriginal families who once populated the land. Another absence is Thornhill’s son Dick, who had befriended them, and who cannot forgive his father for his part in their massacre. In consequence, Thornhill ‘had lost something that he had never known to value until it was gone’ (Grenville 326). While the novel, in keeping with its central focus on Thornhill’s perspective, ends with an emphasis on what he has lost, the stage adaptation of *The Secret River* closed with a heartbreaking lament sung by Ursula Yovich, who had been used as narrator throughout the production, so helping to place Grenville’s story within an Indigenous frame. We see Ngalamalum, played by Trevor Jamieson, who at the beginning of the play was the proud, strong and handsome head of his family, reduced to a crippled and crazed solitary figure. Here it is very clear that the greatest loss has been that inflicted on him and his people by the white settlers. Hence, for me, the stage version of *The Secret River* was a much more powerful and moving retelling of the secret history of Australia than the novel on which it was based.

While he remained a poor man all his life, like Will Thornhill, Charles Harpur ended as a far from happy one. He too had lost a son, who had accidentally shot himself in 1867 while out hunting; shortly afterwards he sat down and wrote his own epitaph, which began: ‘Here lies Charles Harpur, who at fifty years of age came to the conclusion, that he was living in a sham age, under a sham Government, and amongst sham friends, and that any World whatever must therefore be a better world than theirs’ (Normington-Rawling 297). He died the following year, trusting to the future to deliver the better world he dreamed of as well as sympathetic and appreciative readers of his poems.

It is now nearly 150 years since Harpur died; if he were to return to Australia today would it still seem to him as much a place of shams as it had in 1867? Certainly, we are no nearer to realising his vision of a national commitment to a high-quality system of education that would help allow all those living in Australia to reach their full potential. Given his evident love of Australia’s unique birds and animals, Harpur would also be disappointed to find that the extinction of native fauna he noted in ‘The Kangaroo Hunt’ as already happening during his lifetime shows no signs of ceasing. As an ardent republican, he would also be surprised to find the Queen of England still in place as Australia’s head of state. And no doubt he would be disappointed to find that the poems into which he had poured so much time, care and love, were still little known or read. It is to be hoped that, when completed, the new electronic edition of Charles Harpur’s poems will finally achieve for him what he longed for but failed to find during his life, an international readership and appropriate critical acclaim.

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