

Ecologies of the Beachcomber in Colonial Australian Literature

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In his 1964 article ‘Beachcombers and Castaways,’ the well-known British anthropologist H E Maude writes ‘probably we would all know a beachcomber if we were to see one, yet he is hard to define as a type.’ He describes the OED definition—‘a settler on the islands of the Pacific, living by pearl-fishing, etc., and often by less reputable means’—as ‘reasonably accurate,’ before giving a detailed history of those figures who had ‘voluntarily or perforce’ become integrated into the Indigenous communities of the South Sea Islands from the 1780s to the 1850s (255).¹ Many beachcombers were escaped convicts or deserting sailors seeking freedom from hardship by retreating to places popularly conceived as natural paradises. These days, however, Maude’s account of the beachcomber as part castaway, part vagabond is no longer quite so familiar. Beachcombing has become associated with scanning the shoreline to collect shipwrecked objects or natural specimens washed up by the sea. It is accompanied by a variety of environmental investments including expertise in tidal patterns, species identification, conservation, and an intimacy with the coastal landscape described by Rachel Carson, in *The Edge of the Sea* (1955), as a deep ‘fascination born of inner-meaning and significance’ (xiii). This article explores the beachcomber’s changing relationships to island settings and their local species in stories and memoirs by the colonial Australian author Louis Becke, as well as in later non-fiction works by writer and naturalist E J Banfield. It suggests that Banfield’s 1908 book, *The Confessions of a Beachcomber*, marks a self-conscious transformation of this figure from tropical-island fugitive to ecological recluse.

Beachcomber literature is defined by its exotic island settings and its cast of savage native tribesmen, sensuous island women, and the fugitive, often dissolute white loafers and traders who live among them. It forms a significant part of what Melissa Bellanta has called an ‘explosion of adventure-romance published in Britain in the *fin-de-siecle* period, the most popular of which were written from outposts of Empire: Rudyard Kipling in India, Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific, Rider Haggard in South Africa’ (Bellanta, n.pag).² The colonial author Louis Becke is the most prolific Australian writer of beachcomber fiction, for which—like Herman Melville in the Marquesas, R L Stevenson and others—he drew upon his first-hand experiences of island living. Becke grew up in Sydney and stowed away to Samoa at the age of sixteen, afterwards sailing with the notorious pirate, Captain W H ‘Bully’ Hayes, who became an important figure in his fiction. In their 1898 collection of essays, *The Development of Australian Literature*, the well-known local critics Alexander Sutherland and Henry Gyles Turner note Becke’s reputation as a kind of Stevenson of the southern oceans. ‘Becke’s South Sea Island stories, when published in Sydney,’ they write,

created such a sensation that local critics united to proclaim him as the superior of Robert Louis Stevenson! Such a comparison with one of the most perfect masters of English is an outrage. Though there is some strong writing in Becke’s stories, and an abundance of local picturesqueness, they are on the whole coarse in tone and fleshly

in colour. Many of them positively reek with gore, and nearly all are unpleasantly free in their pictures of a very loose morality (104).

Becke's first short story, 'Tis in the Blood,' was published in the *Sydney Bulletin* in 1893, and reproduced in his first collection of stories, *By Reef and Palm* the following year. A second collection of stories, *The Ebbing of the Tide*, appeared in 1896—just two years after Stevenson's *The Ebb-Tide*—and this article will explore some stories from these early volumes. It is true that they have an 'abundance of picturesqueness' and that they 'reek with gore' and display a 'very loose morality'; but it is the juxtaposition of these elements—of sex and violence in a paradisiacal setting—that is crucial to their specific recipe for masculine adventure beyond the high-seas. Becke's tales are nostalgic for the beachcomber's heyday and romanticise what is described at the beginning of 'Auriki Reef,' as the 'old wild days down there ... among the brown people who dwell on the white beaches under the shade of the swaying palms' (325).

His opening descriptions of the various islands and atolls that provide his settings all follow a similar pattern—observing clear shallow lagoons, pristine beaches and verdant palms. Forest vegetation is generally depicted as an undifferentiated belt of emerald green with coconut palms the only designated plant species, while specific bird and animal life goes unmentioned. In other words, these openings are often impressionistic—snapshots taken from a ship, some distance from the shore. At the same time, the regional knowledge they rely on is utterly specific, giving a sense of the narrative voice itself as belonging to a beachcomber. This is a beachcomber describing beachcombers, a figure that is simultaneously an insider and an outsider, possessing an intimate experience of travelling to the ocean's most obscure corners, as well as a wider geographic perspective that defies the insularity of island life.

The opening of 'Ninia,' for example, describes a cluster of islands almost as obscure as Attwater's remote sanctuary in Stevenson's *The Ebb-Tide*. In the same way that the pearl-fisher's island has to be traced in Findlay's nautical directory before it can quite be believed in, Becke's narrator directs the reader to navigational sources. 'Away out upon the wide Northern Pacific there is a group of three little islands,' the tale begins:

They are so very, very small that you need not seek to discover them on the map of the Pacific Ocean; but if any of you have a chart of the North or West Pacific, then you would easily be able to find them. Run your eye up north, away past the Equator, in the direction of China, and you will see, to the north of New Guinea, a large cluster of islands named the 'Caroline Islands,' some of which are named, but most are not—only tiny dots no bigger than a pin's head serve to mark their position. Perhaps, however—if you get a German chart—you may see one of the largest of the small dots marked 'Pingelap,' and Pingelap is the name of the largest of the three little islands of my story... (168).

This passage suggests the islands are easy to find, only to highlight their elusiveness (a map won't do, you need a chart—and not just any chart, a German one), opening them up as a space for fantasy. This is then played out in the fairy-tale quality of the story itself, which unleashes elements of violence and betrayal, banishment and salvation, nature's wrath and nature's bounty in tracing the fates of three young island women.

Greg Denning noted the importance of fantasy to beachcomber narratives, writing in *Islands and Beaches* that ‘the beach was a place of fantasy. When beachcombers tried to describe it they enlarged its beauty as well as its ugliness. They recreated ... [the island] according to others’ expectations of what paradise and cannibalism should be’ (146)³. True to this formula, the action in tales such as ‘Ninia,’ ‘Deschard of Oneaka,’ and ‘At a Kava-Drinking,’ inevitably sees idyllic white beaches reddened with blood. But there is another fantasy at work here as well, one that Terry Goldie has referred to as ‘the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous,’ for the colonial subject (13). Perhaps the beachcomber’s uncertain status as a settler who is also a fugitive from their originating culture intensifies the ambivalence of this position. Becke’s tales want to embrace the possibility of becoming indigenous, as clearly shown by a description of the beachcomber type in his short story, ‘Deschard of Oneaka.’ ‘Many were escaped convicts from Van Diemen’s Land and New South Wales,’ we are told, are ‘living, not in dread of their wild associates, but in secret terror of recapture by a man-of-war and a return to the horrors of that dreadful past. Casting away the garb of civilisation and tying around their loins the *airiri* or grass girdle ... they soon became in appearance, manners, language and thoughts pure natives’ (291). But they also liberate cultural tensions that render this fantasy of naturalisation impossible to realise. Whites grapple with local social customs, they become intoxicated by their locales or disenchanting by them, and they exploit natural resources for trade in the European economy—plundering the paradisiacal idyll for profit. Tales such as ‘Luliban of the Pool’ and ‘The Revenge of Macy O’Shea’ are concerned with lust and exploitation in interracial relationships, while dealings between local chiefs and resident beachcombers can further alienate these often already-estranged character types from their adoptive cultures.

In Becke’s fiction (as distinct from his more directly autobiographical tales), the experience of species is a marker of the disparity between island populations and the beachcombers that dwell among them. If the typical beachcomber views the landscape generically, unable to see beyond the broad brushstrokes of what paradise might look like, the Pacific Islander is represented as synonymous with it. Species of plant, sea and bird life are frequently called into service to define Islander perceptions as naïve and simplistic, while their experience of the landscape is cast as unmediated, primordial; the island’s unpredictable offerings of pleasure and disaster alike are enjoyed or accepted unquestioned. In ‘Ninia,’ species are inserted into a sort of free indirect discourse that gestures sentimentally to the inner-consciousness of three young island women. Every evening, the narrator tells us, the girls ‘would lie down together on a soft white mat embroidered with parrots’ feathers ... [and] fall asleep, undisturbed by the loud, hoarse notes of a flock of *katafa* (frigate birds) that every night settled on the boughs of a great *koa* tree’ (173).

Elsewhere, the actions and expressions of native characters are tied to the non-human in ways that seem to drive narrative outcomes. In ‘At a Kava-Drinking,’ Felipe, a native Samoan, recounts a tale in which an illicit couple set out to catch a fat turtle to assuage an angry chief, almost becoming prey to ‘*tanifa* the thick, short shark that will leap out of the water,’ (220) and so on. Their only metaphors relate to the natural world—fellow tribesmen sleep like hogs, they crawl on their bellies like snakes, and the white man watching over his dead companion has hands ‘like the talons of the great fish eagle’ (222). Species also interact with human fortunes in ‘Kennedy the Boatsteerer;’ when a native wife develops ‘*mal-du-pays*’ or homesickness after being taken to an unfamiliar island, the local healer determines that a ‘little devil in the shape of an octopus’ is in her brain (239). He fastens a ‘*foto*, or barb of the stingray’ to her sleeping mat, which she rolls on and dies,

and so the story highlights the dangers of superstitions based in animistic belief-systems. Likewise, in ‘Lupton’s Guest: A Memory of the Eastern Pacific’ a native wizard foretells a white trader’s death after perceiving two rare butterflies. ‘See’st thou these? Lo, they are the spirits that await the soul of him who sitteth in thy house,’ he says, in a typical example of the biblical rhetoric used by Indigenous speakers in Becke’s tales (369-70). A combination of this ‘biblese’ and the peppering of dialogue with native names for species reinforces the distinction between the beachcomber and his island community (see Brantlinger, 132). No matter how ‘indigenised’ this figure is shown to be, he only ever employs this form of ecologically driven pidgin in dialogue with the locals—and never as a first-person narrative device.

The primal connection of the Pacific Islander to the coastal environment, meanwhile, is represented as something inviolable, almost mystical, no matter how acculturated to Western ways they might become. In ‘Baldwin’s Loisé—Miss Lambert,’ a half-caste island girl adopted by wealthy white parents in New Zealand abandons her comfortable existence when a chance meeting with a seafarer leads her to recall her island home. Lying in bed that evening, ‘the dead grey of the walls... changed to a bright shimmering white—the white of an island beach’ and she ‘heard the ceaseless throb of the beating surf upon the windward reef, and saw the flash of gold and scarlet of a flock of parakeets that with shrill, whistling note, vanished through the groves of cocoa-nuts as they sped mountain wards. Then her latent native soul awoke and made her desperate’ (192). But if the natural paradise is Loisé’s domain, her fate becomes the domain of the beachcomber, firstly in the disruption of her unmediated return to nature (she forms relationships with two beachcombers in succession and remains enmeshed in white society there), and secondly, within the framework of the beachcomber-narrator for whom the fantasy of a natural paradise is invariably offset by the more dramatic fantasies of lust and violence that the rest of the story plays out.

In the early days, according to Pacific historian I.C. Campbell, the beachcomber’s island hosts conceived of him in terms of the non-human. ‘A beachcomber was a kind of trophy or mascot,’ he writes, ‘kept by chiefs for their amusement or to distinguish themselves in much the same way as a millionaire might like to have a rare bird or dog. Indeed, the chiefs referred to “tame” white men in their retinue as “manu-manu” (a bird or pet)’ (110-111). Meanwhile, a beachcomber’s chief involvement with species involved trading such tropical products as turtle shell, copra, ivory nuts from the sago palm, *bêche-de-mer*, and pearl shell. There was also a more sinister corollary to the beachcomber’s designation of ‘*manu-manu*’—that of the ‘blackbird,’ a pejorative term used to refer to those Islanders taken by force or coercion to labour in the sugar cane fields of Queensland from the 1860s and 70s (not so long after the European blackbird [*Turdus merula*] had first been introduced to Australia).

The cutthroat enterprise of ‘blackbirding’ adds to the drama and adventure of Gilbert Bishop’s *The Beachcombers, or, Slave-Trading Under the Union Jack* (1900), a novel that sets out to critique the practice. It also forms a significant backdrop to Becke’s writing; apart from invoking it in his fiction, he sensationally describes having participated in ‘blackbirding’ expeditions in later, semi-autobiographical pieces such as ‘On the “Joys” of Recruiting “Blackbirds”’ and ‘My Friends the Anthropophagi,’ which were published in his 1908 collection, *The Call of the South*. This volume interestingly co-mingles the tropes of memoir and fiction, and is notable for the fascination with island species that underwrites its recollections and – in contrast to Becke’s early short stories – here the oppositions between the beachcomber and the Pacific Islander’s relationship to species

begin to break down. Unexpectedly, at first glance, it is in narrating his experiences of *hunting* species that this shift seems to occur. But such correlations between histories of hunting, naturalism and conservation in the nineteenth century under the logics of Imperialism have been more broadly recognised in studies of nineteenth century ecology. Tom Griffiths, for example, notes in *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia* (1996) that ‘hunters were among the first conservationists’ because of their role in protecting particular species, establishing game reserves, and introducing game laws. He also emphasises that ‘the study of natural history and the culture of hunting were closely aligned in the nineteenth century, and both were part of the imperial impulse’ (16. See also McKenzie, 1998, 7). In the case of Becke, however, whose beachcomber status renders his position within categories such as naturalism and imperialism more uncertain, the tensions in these relationships unfold in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.

Becke’s knowledge and appreciation of bird life is striking as he recalls various island adventures, and this is filtered through the expertise of the communities with which he resides. ‘The South-Sea Corncrake’ opens in the countryside of County Louth, Ireland, when a farm labourer kills two corncrakes in a field of oats (mirroring the part played by the ‘native servant’ in Becke’s Pacific narratives). Examining the bodies, he ‘at once recognised a striking likeness in shape, markings and plumage to an old acquaintance—the shy and rather rare “banana-bird” of some of the Polynesian and Melanesian Islands...’ (359). So begins a reminiscence that leads the reader through the distinctive qualities of this bird, from its Pacific Islands name (*kili-vao*, or bush-snipe), to its feeding patterns, appearance, preferred habitats, sounds, and so on—touching all the hallmarks, in other words, of any naturalistic account. Becke’s own observations are initially presented at first hand (‘I have spent many a delightful half-hour watching them from my own hiding place’), and then interwoven with a set of local narratives. ‘The natives of the Banks and Santa Cruz Groups (north of the New Hebrides),’ he notes, ‘assert that the *kili* is a ventriloquist...’ (361). There follows a quoted passage—framed as reported speech—although no specific speaker is named: ‘If you hear it from the right, it is hiding to the left; and its mate is perhaps only two fathoms away from you, hiding under banana leaves, and pretending to be dead. And you will never find either, unless it is a dark night, and you suddenly light a big torch of dried coco-nut leaves; then they become dazed and stupid, and will let you catch them with your hand’ (361). In ‘quoting’ native perceptions here, Becke positions Pacific Islander knowledge in much the same way that he cites the British authority ‘Dr Stair’ in a subsequent piece, ‘The Tooth-billed Pigeon of Samoa (*Didunculus Strigirostris*).’ Although Becke finally ‘cannot accept the ventriloquial theory,’ native knowledge is allowed effectively to speak, and each of his further encounters with this species—by turns pleasurable, clumsy, ambivalent and even abject—are partly mediated by his island companions.

Much of the respect Becke maintains for native knowledge in this context relates to hunting expertise. ‘I was returning from pigeon-shooting on Ureparapara (Banks Group),’ he writes, ‘when in walking along the margin of a taro-swamp ... a big *kili* rose in front of me, and before I could bring my gun to my shoulder, my native boy hurled his shoulder stick at it and brought it down, dead. Then he called me to be ready for a shot at the mate, which, he said, was close by in hiding’ (362). Events take an unexpected turn, however, when the ‘fine full-grown female bird, beautifully marked’ is captured live and Becke places it in his game bag. His subsequent description of this now-doomed creature is significantly at odds with the enthusiasm he had earlier expressed for its

type: ‘During our two-mile walk to the village she behaved in a disgusting manner, and so befouled herself (after the manner of the young Australian curlew when captured) that she presented a repellent appearance, and had such a disgusting odour that I was at first inclined to throw her—game-bag and all—away’ (363). His ‘native boy’ cleans the bird, gaining it a stay of execution, but it refuses to eat or drink and dies in its cage a short time later. This is the first of a number of Becke’s ill-fated encounters with rare birds of the Pacific, where his seeming sympathy with nature contrasts strangely with awkward and unsuccessful attempts to keep various specimens in captivity, not to mention a tendency to shoot on sight.

This ambivalence plays out across different narratives in the collection. In at least three different pieces, Becke refers to the high value placed on the tooth-billed pigeon by island cultures where it is known as ‘*manu mea*’ or ‘red bird.’ A chapter called ‘Te-Bari, the Outlaw’ sees his narrator hunting again in Samoa. He has just shot a ‘wild mountain cock’ when his ‘native boy’ encounters the dreaded murderer and outlaw Te-Bari. Becke sends the terrified boy home and befriends the fugitive. The rest of the narrative tells his story, including the ways his lover, a local woman, assists his livelihood: ‘whenever he trapped a *manu-mea* (the rare *Didunculus*, or tooth-billed pigeon),’ he notes, ‘she would take it to Apia and sell it for five dollars—sometimes ten,’ thus establishing the scarcity of these birds, the existence of a live trade, and their local market value (312).

A later piece, ‘The Man Who Knew Everything,’ also points to the monetary value of this species as well as highlighting its cultural value. Here, recognising local respect for the creature becomes a marker of Becke’s authentic status as a beachcomber—an old hand and insider—while Marchmont, the ‘know it all’ of the title, exposes himself as a vulgar newcomer, disrespectful of custom and unversed in island ways. ‘Presently, as we were all smoking and exchanging compliments in the high-flown, stilted Samoan style,’ Becke writes,

there entered the house a strapping young warrior, carrying a wickerwork cage, in which were two of the rare and famous *Manu Mea* (red-bird) or Samoa—the *Didunculus* or tooth-billed pigeon. These were the property of the young chief commanding the rebel troops, and had simply been brought into the house as a mark of respect and attention to Marchmont and me. Money cannot always buy these birds, and the rebel chief looked upon them as mascottes. (466)

When Marchmont gauchely insists on trying to purchase the birds, he receives a sharp blow to the head from his island hosts, and Becke warns him to apologise or to run the risk of a violent end. Later in the same story, Becke defends native Pacific Islanders’ knowledge of species when Marchmont dismisses local fishing advice. ‘But I imagine they do know a little about such things,’ he observes with a dryness that comes easily to the masculine hero of adventure.

In a chapter wholly devoted to the ‘*manu mea*,’ however, Becke’s claims to expertise and cultural sensitivity seem less certain. As in the opening of ‘The South Sea Corncrake,’ ‘The Tooth-Billed Pigeon of Samoa’ begins when Becke is remote from his Pacific days. Perusing a newspaper in California, he discovers that ‘the recent volcanic outburst on the island of Savaii’ has resulted in numerous sightings of the bird, previously thought to be all but extinct. He describes his own unfortunate encounters with this species and quotes extensively from *Old Samoa: Or, Flotsam and Jetsam from the Pacific Ocean* (1897) by John Bettridge Stair. Stair had first travelled to Samoa

as a missionary, but he was also a keen naturalist—connected to members of the British Museum, the Zoological Gardens of London, and the Royal Society and the author of at least one work of natural history, *Palolo, A Sea Worm Eaten by the Samoans* (1897). His account of the ‘*manu mea*’ traces its genealogy in Western biological sciences, and notes the ‘interest and curiosity’ it had excited among members of the ‘scientific world’—from Sir William Jardine, who in 1845 had first described it, to a Mr Titian Peale of the United States Exploration Party and several others; not least John Gould, who had figured it in his seven-volume *Birds of Australia* (1840-1847). Stair describes the global circulation of specimens (living and dead), its characteristics and kinship to the famously extinct dodo, and his own ill-fated efforts to obtain specimens.

Like Stair, Becke draws on his first-hand encounters with the ‘*manu mea*,’ but he also relates information about the bird’s cry told to him by a ‘native teacher on Tutuila’ and so on; he acknowledges Samoan sources as well as Western authorities such as Stair himself. But Becke also begins to distance himself from local respect for the creature, and renounces the confident naturalist’s air he had earlier brought to his observations of the ‘*kili-vao*’:

Less than twenty years ago I was residing on the eastern end of Upolo (Samoa), and during my shooting excursions on the range of the mountains that traverses the island from east to west, saw several several Didunculi, and, I regret to say, shot two. For I had no ornithological knowledge whatever, and although I knew that the Samoans regarded the *Manu Mea* as a rare bird, I had no idea that European savants and museums would be glad to obtain even a stuffed specimen (376).

Here, European knowledge systems are valued over local ones, at the same time that Becke distinguishes himself from both. There follows an account of his subsequent attempts to acquire specimens to send to Europe, a repetition in detail of the shooting incident, and an account of a live sighting while in the company of local guides. The piece concludes with a reiteration of his regret for having killed two fine examples of this rare species, although lingering questions of its worth on the open market strongly flavour his remorse. ‘I have always regretted in connection with the two birds I shot,’ he writes, ‘that not only was I unaware of their value, even when dead, but that there was then living in Apia a Dr. Forbes, medical officer to the staff of the German factory. Had I sent them to him, he could have cured the skins at least, for he was, I believe, an ardent naturalist’ (378).

Finally, Becke’s regret for this dwindling species is a beachcomber’s regret—the province of a figure that straddles two cultures (belonging fully to neither) and trades between them for profit. His passion for the natural world cannot supplant the economic drives and gritty adventurism of his type—any more than the ‘ornithological knowledge’ and naturalistic pursuits of the ‘European savants and museums’ can replace his literary heritage as a writer of adventure whose primary citations apart from Dr Stair (who as a long time resident of Samoa had, at least, a common experience island living) are always Stevenson and Kipling. Even when looking beyond the broad brushstrokes of the natural paradise, his tale remains one of an adventurer’s first-hand knowledge and experience of an exotic place and an exotic culture over the story of the melancholy lives (and deaths) of those tropical species, which—many years after the fact—he nonetheless affectionately records.

In 1896—the same year that Becke had published *The Ebbing of the Tide*—the Australian writer Edmund James Banfield retired with his wife Bertha to Dunk Island, off the coast of Northern Queensland. Banfield was born in Liverpool, England, and came to Australia with his family in 1854. He grew up in the inland Victorian mining township of Ararat where his father established the local newspaper, and Banfield contributed articles from an early age. According to biographer Michael Noonan, much of his spare time as a youth was spent in roaming local native wildernesses and reading extensively, with American nature writers such as Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau becoming formative influences (1983, 35). Lawrence Buell in fact positions Banfield's island retreat directly within a global 'proliferation of homesteading experiments during the past century that claim Thoreau as inspiration' (325). 'As Thoreau's fame grew,' he writes in *The Environmental Imagination*, 'it became increasingly common to see each new experiment in pristine solitary living framed in terms of the Walden experiment as a prototype' although few had the longevity of Banfield's 'twenty-five year Walden experiment' (326).

Banfield worked as a journalist in Melbourne, Sydney and Townsville and continued contributing to newspapers such as the *North Queensland Register* and the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* after his move to Dunk Island, which was undertaken partly in an attempt to recover his ailing health. *The Confessions of a Beachcomber* is a collection of newspaper articles about his life there—signed off rakishly with the name of 'Beachcomber' in recognition of a departure from mainstream culture as much as a plunge into island living. Just like Becke's *The Call of the South*, Banfield's book was published by T Fisher Unwin in 1908—and it draws knowingly on the sensationalism of beachcomber fiction to produce its distinctive, non-fictional rendering of a tropical paradise. As a journalist with a special interest in the natural world, Banfield belongs to a tradition of environmental writing in Australia that Melissa Harper describes in *The Ways of the Bushwalker*, to do with a late-nineteenth-century popularisation of nature study that was 'evident in the field naturalist clubs and ornithological societies that began to form in the 1880s, in the proliferation of newspaper nature writing by the likes of Louisa Atkinson, Donald Macdonald and Charles Barrett, and in the introduction of nature study in schools in the first decade of the twentieth century' (42).

Banfield was well acquainted with Barrett—a prolific nature writer and prominent member of various field naturalist and ornithological groups—and corresponded with him on matters of natural history while living on Dunk Island, which Barrett visited a number of times (Noonan, 1994, viii). Another close, much younger acquaintance of Banfield's was Alec Chisholm. Later a noted journalist and author of a number of significant works of Australian natural history—including the recently reissued *Mateship with Birds* (1920)—Chisholm was still a teenager in 1908 when *The Confessions of a Beachcomber* first appeared (though he was already prolific, publishing eight articles in *Emu*, the journal of the Ornithological Union of Australasia, that year). Ten years after Banfield's death Chisholm wrote an introduction to the 1933 edition of his book, celebrating the fact it makes the beachcomber romance more tangible and local. 'How well I remember the glow imparted by those pages!' he writes,

Robinson Crusoe's isle was veiled in the mists of romance. Melville's Marquesas were scarcely less vague. But Dunk Island, albeit never heard of before, had been proclaimed in such a forthright fashion, and was relatively so close to home, that it

became at once definitely tangible—a *real* tropical island. E J Banfield had given to airy nothing a local habitation and a name (v).

Banfield certainly goes about describing and classifying the individual species of the island he inhabits with a scientific and geographical precision that is far removed from the impressionistic snapshots found in Becke's fiction—or even those autobiographical pieces directly addressing species, in which the Pacific birds he pays tribute to nevertheless remain situated within larger human dramas of hunting, exploration, and social exchange.

In Banfield, by contrast, the natural world takes centre stage. Plants are given their common, Latin and often Indigenous names, and put into a relationship with each other, with the surrounding landscape, and with the many forms of avian and insect life they might support or typically fall prey to. This associative view of the natural environment—and Banfield's own relationship to it—almost seems to anticipate Rachel Carson's holistic understanding of life on the shore⁴ or research by environmental theorists drawing on work by Estonian biosemiotician Jakob Von Uexkull. 'For Von Uexkull,' Alfred Kentigern Siewers explains in his recent introduction to *Re-Imagining Nature*, 'each organism lives in a meaningful environment or Umwelt... that he compared to a soap bubble. For a flower and a bird, or a spider and a fly, their overlapping Umwelts form duets, establishing identities in a relationship' (5). The ecological spheres Banfield's writings describe, for the most part, include few human agents beyond a small number of local Aborigines and the author himself, whose passionate investment in island living flows through his prose like a kind of intoxication. 'Physic was never so eagerly swallowed,' he writes, literally drinking in his environment, 'nor wrought was a speedier or surer cure' (7).

Far from dispelling the typical beachcomber's fantasies of lust and violence in paradise, *The Confessions of a Beachcomber* transposes them onto the ecology of the island itself. Here the 'stealthy murderers' are not wronged chiefs or jealous native wives, but the Upas tree or the fig tree—'a greedy intractable, implacable foe ... [that] flourishes upon its dead or dying friend' (143). The cannibals are falcons caught swooping upon woodlarks, or 'a fierce cannibalistic fly ... of the family Asilidae' (146). This kind of anthropomorphism is emphasised more broadly in Banfield's account of the island's ecology, along with an elaboration of his own affective responses to particular species. 'I do not pretend to catalogue botanically all the plants that contribute to the specific odour of the island,' he writes at one point, 'I cannot address them individually in scientific phraseology, though with all I am on terms of easy familiarity, the outcome of seasoned admiration' (14).

The courtly tenderness with which Banfield addresses his affections to particular varieties of plant, sea and birdlife, may seem to belie the beachcomber's status as a mercenary figure on the margins of two cultures, yet his approach to the island paradise retains some of this duality. For example a section on '*bêche-de-mer*' — the sought-after sea cucumber that was a popular commodity for trade in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—encompasses its collection and preparation, culinary uses, and global trade destinations as well as a information about its scientific classification, the number of different species, its habits, and finally, an account of its more personal qualities. 'If this dolefully helpless creature be lifted by the middle on a stick,' he writes,

its liquid contents are instantly separated, forming distended, high-pressure blobs at each end of the empty, flabby, shrunken skin. Though it suffers this experiment placidly, being incapable of the feeblest resistance, it has the primordial gift of care of itself. Twists purposely made to test its degree of intelligence are artfully straightened out, and the eagerness and hurry with which water is forced through the empty parts show that life is both sweet and precious. And what is the value of life to an animal of such homely organism and so few wants? (112)

The daily realities of harvesting this creature for international trade here lie comfortably alongside a meditation on its consciousness and self-understanding that moves toward effacing taken-for-granted hierarchies and re-centring the non-human in a way that resonates with Val Plumwood's call for a non-reductive understanding of nature 'as an active, collaborative presence capable of agency and other mind-like qualities' (60).

This desire to situate the non-human ethically is also evident more broadly in Banfield's book, most conspicuously in a chapter titled 'Birds and their Rights' which pays homage to local island species and affectionately traces individual voices in the 'universal paean' of morning birdsong (56). Banfield successfully fought to have Dunk Island declared a bird sanctuary during his stay there, but his investment in its maintenance as a pristine wilderness is also offset by the vision he lays out for economic development in the region—in terms of greater settlement, agricultural ventures and tourism as elaborated, for example, in a chapter called 'Tropical Industries' (41). This seeming contradiction is best understood in the context of the early conservation movement in Australia, which, according to Drew Hutton and Libby Connors in *A History of the Australian Environment Movement* sometimes incorporated progressivism and the priorities of nation building into schemes for environmental preservation (see 21).

Banfield's attitude to his status as (self-appointed) beachcomber is also double-sided. Invested in the romance of this title on one level, he is ironic on another—distancing himself from the traditional beachcomber type of popular fiction who, he writes, 'parades his coral islet barefooted, bullying guileless natives out of their copra, coco-nut oil and pearl-shell; his chief diet, turtle and turtle eggs and fish; his drink rum and cocoa-nut milk... A whack on his hardened head from the club of a jealous native is [his] time honoured fate' (35). In contrast to the fugitive from convictism or the ship's deserter, the beachcomber is now a fugitive from modern metropolitan life, with 'naught to remind of the foetidness, the blare and glare of the streets' (12). Banfield's 'return to Nature' is to 'partake freely of the novel, and yearned for pleasure of the absolute freedom of isles uninhabited, shores untrodden; eager to know how nature, not under the microscope, behaved; what were her maiden fancies, what the art with which she allures' (34).

In Becke's stories and memoirs, islands are always populous, the sources of allure female and, at least, human. For the journalist Banfield, however, the object of desire for the 'social vertebrate' is pristine—and most importantly—*uninhabited* nature. Rather than supplanting the beachcomber—who crosses the beach to become integrated into another culture—Banfield's fantasy is to supplant local indigenous culture and to somehow join the kingdom of species. This fantasy of is, of course, in keeping with much more pervasive and long-lasting aspirations in Australian settler culture to achieve spiritually meaningful connections to environment that emulate (or rival) those assigned to Aboriginal experience—as elaborated, for example, by Ian

McLean in *White Aborigines*. Banfield's relationship to the few remaining Aboriginal residents of the island is complex—sympathetic and affectionate on an individual basis, certainly, but also limited by his freely expressed prejudices and a proprietorial (imperialistic) connection to the place itself.

In a recent chapter about Banfield in *The Reef: A Passionate History*, Iain McCalman views his relationship to the island's Indigenous population positively, as something that increasingly flourished with familiarity and a shared knowledge of ecology over time. 'Ted began this education [with local men Tom, Mickie and others] with many of the typical frontier prejudices of the day,' he writes. 'He thought that Aborigines were a doomed Stone Age race, a childlike people incapable of rational thought, discipline or morality, who treated the island like a larder for mindless consumption' (207). Eventually, in this version, Banfield's growing respect for his Aboriginal companions and their ecological insights led him to

evolve one of the foundational beliefs of his distinctive beachcomber philosophy: that individuals must develop "a sense of fellowship with animated and inanimate things" within their country. Such knowledge must draw on the complete spiritual, material, emotional, sensual and intellectual composition of one's being. Dunk Island was not just a habitat or environment, it was a fusion of nature and culture: a heartland, a Dreaming (210).

In other words—for McCalman, at least—by absorbing local Aboriginal lore and benefiting from local Aboriginal knowledge systems, Banfield's environmentalism came close to achieving something like the state of 'white indigeneity' mentioned above.

But instead of following an increasingly positive trajectory, Banfield's relationship to local Aboriginal culture seems to be characterised by a radical dissonance, where empathy and insight one moment give way to reflex prejudices—as well as deeper, subtler ones—the next. The former are expressed in the familiar terms of nineteenth-century extinction discourses—as analysed by Patrick Brantlinger, for example, in his 2003 book, *Dark Vanishings*. 'Why invoke these long-silent spectres, white as well as black, when all active boorishness is in the past?' writes Banfield, 'Civilisation has almost fulfilled its inexorable law; but four out of a considerable population remain, and they remember naught of the bad old times when the humanising processes, or rather the results of them, began to be felt' (4). Such views persist throughout the book as shown, for example, in a late chapter titled 'Passing Away.' Elsewhere, affectionate portraits of his Aboriginal companions nonetheless strive to amuse white readers with comic stereotypes and examples of 'pidgin' English, which simultaneously distance Aboriginal subjects from their own heritage and set them apart from white European culture (see Brantlinger, 2011, 129).

Language is important here, not least in terms of the naming of place and species in the 'unnamed' home Banfield had christened 'Brammo Bay' (5). Aboriginal words for species are found everywhere in the text, positioned at a remove from local knowledge systems. 'Within a few yards of the high-water,' Banfield notes at one point, 'stands a flame-tree (*Erythrina indica*) the "bingum" of the blacks. Devoid of leaves in this leafy month, the bingum arrays itself in a robe of royal red' (11). In many such instances, the Indigenous term for a particular species is attributed in quotation marks and then adopted when that species is mentioned again—thus becoming indexed to a body

of botanical information that is enhanced, although not necessarily transformed, by their addition. They become testimony to Banfield's (cross-cultural) expertise in—as well as his passion for—the island's ecology.

Elsewhere Aboriginal legends about the island's geology are regarded as being 'of the simplest and most prosaic nature' (24), while Aboriginal hunting practices are noted as 'fast passing away' with the suggestion that white technologies interpose too easily between Aboriginal subjects and their cultural interactions with the world—severing age-old connections and emptying them of meaning. 'New acquirements are generally saddening proofs of the unfitness of the aboriginal [*sic*] for the battle of life when once his primitive condition is disturbed by the wonder working whites,' he concludes (159). For Banfield, in this instance, the Aboriginals of Dunk Island ('the Coonanglebah of the blacks,' 3) are caught between a failure to progress toward a civilized future on the one hand, and an inability to retain a grip on their own 'primitive' traditions for inhabiting the landscape on the other.

By contrast, Banfield strives towards some sort of eternal 'spiritual' kinship with the island ecology, at the same time that he understands (and helps open the way to) the place of progress and development in the future of that landscape. Ultimately, perhaps, he resembles the frontier settler more closely than he does a beachcomber and a writer and protagonist of adventure-romance like Louis Becke. In *Gone Native in Polynesia*, I C Campbell pits these two figures against each other. 'Unlike frontiersmen of Australia or North America,' he writes, '[beachcombers] were not the hardy pioneer role-definers that set the mould for later colonial or even national culture. Later colonists saw them more as a national embarrassment because, instead of pioneering new ways, they merged into old native ways, reinforcing barbarism rather than trailblazing civilisation' (154).

In a post-federation Australia where 'civilisation' in Banfield's terms has supposedly already 'fulfilled its inexorable law,' one important aspect of the project of nation building and development also encompasses the paradoxical priority of preserving sanctuaries for wilderness. By popularising this idea in *The Confessions of a Beachcomber*—a detailed and passionate elegy to the island's ecology—E J Banfield made a profound, early contribution to the conservation and appreciation of native habitats and species. But his book also refashions the role of the beachcomber to produce the new fantasy of an adamantly white kinship with a now (nearly) deserted ecological paradise.

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¹ See Rod Edmonds, *Representing the Pacific* (1997) for another lively evocation of the beachcomber as 'the type of the white savage' (63) and Vanessa Smith, *Literary Culture and the Pacific* (1998) for a discussion of this figure as 'Western bricoleur, producing objects and narratives that are makeshift rather than crafted, from materials to hand at the periphery of empire...' (23).

² Elsewhere critics have noted the importance of adventure fiction in adding ideological impetus to the project of Empire itself: see, for example, Dixon (1995) and Phillips (1997). Adventure tales were, in Martin Green's often-quoted phrase, 'the energising myth of English imperialism...they charged England's will with the energy to go out into the world and explore, conquer and rule' (cited in Dixon, 1).

³ Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey has articulated the way such contradictory impulses were routinely entwined in 'imagined island topographies' of the Pacific, writing: 'within their own time period they represented a system of ante-islands; heterotopias that were alternately idyllic or inhabited by ruthless cannibals' (12).

⁴ 'To understand the life of the shore,' Carson writes, for example, in *The Edge of the Sea*, 'it is not enough to pick up an empty shell and say "This is a murex," or "That is an angel wing". True understanding demands intuitive comprehension of the whole life of the creature that once inhabited this empty shell: how it survived amid surf and storms, what were its enemies, how it found food and reproduced its kind, what were its relations to the particular sea world in which it lived' (xiii-xiv).