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## Robbery under arms and power relations in Rolf Boldrewood's colonial Australia

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**"ROBBERY UNDER ARMS AND POWER RELATIONS  
IN ROLF BOLDREWOOD'S COLONIAL AUSTRALIA"**

by

Kevin James McLean

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the  
Requirements for the Award of

Bachelor of Arts (Honours)

at the Faculty of Arts, Edith Cowan University

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**INTRODUCTION**

This thesis examines power relations in colonial Australia as presented in the novel Robbery Under Arms<sup>1</sup> by Rolf Boldrewood (pseudonym of Thomas A. Browne). The primary argument to be developed in this study will be that the novel, which has been almost universally perceived as being thoroughly conservative in tenor, actually gives, in its historical context, a significant new literary voice, expression and representation to what would have been regarded, at least by the ruling classes, as hierarchically "inferior" and even subversive ideas, elements and forces within the social, political and economic milieu of colonial Australia. This, I must make clear at the outset, is largely in spite of, rather than as a direct consequence of, the author's "intentions." Whilst I am conscious of the credence given to the "intentional fallacy" argument and the notion of "the death of the author" I will deliberately devote considerable attention to the author, or at least the author's "apparent project" in this paper and indeed this practice will be seen to constitute an integral part of my critical methodology.

In terms of critical approach my project might best be described as political but rather than drawing on any one prescribed critical methodology, I will derive elements from a range of critical perspectives as suits my specific purposes. Accordingly I will apply insights from Marxist criticism - particularly that of Macherey, from Bakhtin's



dialogics, from deconstruction, from post-colonial theory, and from New Historicism.

Although I will be arguing that Robbery Under Arms does indeed present potentially destabilising voices and views previously absent, or at least muted in Australian colonial fiction, I will also examine ways in which the text (we might say Boldrewood) endeavours, often unconvincingly, to contain both these voices and some of the important social, political, and economic conflicts prevailing in colonial society, which, owing to the very nature of the subject matter, the novel can hardly avoid. The paper will look closely at both what is said and what is not said with respect to the tensions between the predominantly conservative apparent project and the oppositional voices and elements present in the narrative - that is, those which run counter to the ostensibly reactionary trajectory critics have traditionally identified and devoted their attention to.

My procedure will involve focussing on a number of strategic oppositions each of which is oriented hierarchically in accordance with the text's apparently unprogressive treatment of power relations in Australian colonial society - conceding at the outset that at face value the narrative does seem by and large to valorise the hierarchical formations it describes. I must stress that I am relating the selected hierarchies to colonial history to some extent because they are a reflection of those pertaining

in colonial society. Put simply, my thesis is that the text is more radical than has generally been acknowledged not simply because it undermines its own hierarchies but - more importantly - because it undermines those extant in colonial society. Consequently I will, of necessity, make some references to history at various stages in this paper.

Robbery Under Arms was first published in serial form between July 1, 1882 and 11 August, 1883, in the Sydney Mail.<sup>1</sup> It quickly achieved popularity but was not published in book form until 1888, when it was brought out by Remington and Co. in London. The novel occupies a fascinating place in the Australian literary tradition fitting into what Inglis Moore refers to as the transitional or "semi-colonial stage"<sup>2</sup> between the English-oriented works of novelists like Clarke and Kingsley and the literary nationalists' writing of the nineties. I wish to make it very clear at this point that the primary aim of this thesis is to show that Robbery Under Arms is in many ways no less radical than the work of the literary nationalists and that its radical implications have largely been overlooked by the critics who have always tended to put Robbery Under Arms in a different category - in a political sense - to the work of Lawson, Furphy et al. wherein the political content is more overt and also clearly connected with authorial intention. It is not my contention that Boldrewood intended to produce a politically radical or

progressive text but it is my argument that he did so nevertheless.

Robbery Under Arms, despite its great popularity with the reading public, has not received a great deal of critical attention - largely because it has not been regarded as a work of sufficient literary merit to warrant it. In Turner's words "despite the fact that it is now widely considered 'a classic', the novel is usually dismissed in critical accounts of Australian literature and is very rarely the subject of critical inquiry."<sup>4</sup> Although I will be referring to critical material quite frequently in this paper, Turner is perfectly correct here - most of the criticism available on Robbery Under Arms is to be found in relatively small passages in large volumes, brief references in articles, and various introductions to the novel. This thesis stands opposed to the view of the great majority of the critics who have actually written about Robbery Under Arms that it is far more conservative in its implications than the work of the radical writers of the nineties, and also puts the case that the novel should have received far greater critical recognition generally - for the very reason that it is, in so many ways, such a radical text.

Despite the fact that so few critics have noted any potentially subversive implications the narrative might reveal, and even fewer have examined such evidences in any detail, many have referred to Boldrewood's awkward dilemma in

presenting the exciting exploits of sympathetically drawn outlaws while trying to avoid being seen to glorify them. As R.S. Walker observes:

Not the least fascinating thing in Robbery Under Arms is a silent conflict in the mind of its author; romantic Rolf Boldrewood, story-teller, rejoices in daring deeds, hard riding, swift horses, but Thomas Browne, police magistrate, gravely rebukes all lawlessness.<sup>5</sup>

One result of this tension is that Dick Marston all too frequently expresses his regret regarding the life he has lead - but as McLaren correctly points out "the narrator's moralising reflections on the evil end of his actions are completely outweighed by the book's success in romanticising the whole way of life represented by the bushrangers."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as Hadgraft comments with respect to Dick's oft repeated utterances of remorse: "It is all very edifying; but we should feel more reassured if the repentant sinner were not in gaol at the time."<sup>7</sup>

But despite the recognition by critics such as Veronica Brady, that "the forcing of language and moral sentiments upon Dick, the narrator, almost as if the author was defending himself from his material, suggests a certain ambivalence"<sup>8</sup>, she still falls into line with the vast majority of reviewers in describing the novel as "conservative in its implications."<sup>9</sup> Where critics have been more divided is on the question of the novel's Australian-ness; the degree to which it accurately represents colonial

Australia from an "Australian" perspective. This is a particularly interesting issue because Australian-ness as a cultural construct has been shaped in no small measure by the legend of the nineties - which was radical in the sense of being nationalistic, democratic, anti-authoritarian and egalitarian, and which helped entrench some powerful myths concerning Australian identity - the noble bushman, mateship and so on. One of the tasks of this paper will be to examine ways in which Robbery Under Arms might have unwittingly prefigured - and indeed pre-empted - aspects of the nineties legend and how it may have contributed in a subtle way to the spirit of radicalism which came to characterise the nationalist movement. While one cannot necessarily link perceptions of the novel's Australian-ness directly with a sense of incipient nationalism and radicalism simmering beneath the narrative's surface, I believe this may be a connection which helps explain its popular success.

I will refer to history quite frequently in the second half of this paper in particular, because I wish to give some emphasis to the novel's treatment of the colonial period in which it is set and how it does present some significant distortions while remaining broadly authentic. Boldrewood claimed he had produced "a vivid pictorial record of the wild times long past."<sup>10</sup> In an account of how he went about writing the novel, Boldrewood asserts: "Of the dramatic incidents of Robbery Under Arms I may state with confidence

that they actually did take place, much after a fashion narrated in the tale."<sup>11</sup> R.B. Walker in his essay "The Historical Basis of Robbery Under Arms"<sup>12</sup> has shown this to be the case and his overall assessment of Boldrewood's faithfulness to the life and times he portrays in the novel is very favourable. On the reception of the early serialised version Walker writes: "It is worthy of note that the story was an instant success among a public well able to judge the verisimilitude of Boldrewood's depiction of the colonial scene."<sup>13</sup> Boldrewood interpreted and changed details in Robbery Under Arms but the claim in an article in the Sydney Morning Herald of December 21, 1892 that "the historian of posterity who has mislaid his police reports may turn up Rolf Boldrewood quite contentedly"<sup>14</sup> is not as exaggerated as it might seem. Robbery Under Arms is, in fact, in many ways an historical novel and this is why I will be examining its fidelity to history in some detail in the second half of the paper - particularly with respect to its depiction of the relationship between squatters and small farmers - the ruling and the lower classes - and the relationship between the forces of law and order and those disposed towards crime.

To move to a more detailed explanation of the critical methodology I will adopt and the way in which the paper will be structured, I set out here the major hierarchically oriented oppositions which will be selected from the text - remembering that my objective is to take these apparent

hierarchies and show how they are rendered unstable by the narrative itself. Each will be analysed thoroughly in the course of the paper, but not necessarily discreetly for the simple reason that the oppositions selected are inevitably, to a greater or lesser extent, implicated with each other. However my analysis will be divided into two sections to provide a primary structure appropriate to the development of the thesis.

The first section of the main body of the thesis will place a heavy but not exclusive emphasis on the opposition "English versus Australian." This analysis will be taken at both the level of the text itself and at the level of the novel's place in Australia's developing literary tradition. The two other major oppositions to be examined in this paper, "Government versus outlawry", and "Ruling classes versus working and lower middle classes", are also interwoven with the primary focus of this first section - the "English versus Australian" opposition - and consequently matters pertinent to these oppositions are also addressed in this first section.

The second section of the thesis has a less post-colonial emphasis and thus it concentrates less on the "English versus Australian" opposition and more on the other two major oppositions of concern in this paper: "Government versus outlawry" and "Ruling classes versus working and lower middle classes." The analysis will take the "Government

versus outlawry" opposition as the framing focus but because it is heavily implicated with the "Ruling classes versus working and lower middle classes" opposition, this latter hierarchy will necessarily constitute a closely corresponding concern of the examination. Put simply, the "Government versus outlawry" opposition refers to the text's treatment of law and order - as enforced by the Government and its officials and servants - in relation to the unlawful activities of the bushrangers, their associates, and their friends. The "Ruling classes versus working and lower middle classes" opposition focuses on class groupings and their interactions, with relations between squatters and small farmers being of particular concern. But although I have referred to the oppositions separately here, in the analysis they will, by and large, be treated as intertwining oppositional categories. I wish to stress here that I will be comparing the narrative's account of history with respect to these relationships with some more objective historical sources to reveal some of the distortions the text endeavours to purvey - and how these manifest themselves in some important internal inconsistencies in the novel.

A very important point I must make here is that some brief references will be made in the paper, where appropriate, to two other oppositions evident in the novel, which despite the much more limited attention I will devote to them, are certainly no less significant than the ones I



have chosen to concentrate on in the thesis. These are the depiction of the opposition I will refer to as "Anglo-Celtic characters versus the Aboriginal" - and the more general opposition: "Male versus Female." In the case of the Anglo-Celtics versus Aboriginal opposition I would concede that the novel's portrayal of the relationship between the Anglo-Celtic characters and the Aboriginal character - Warrigal - does hold the former category as privileged. But I will argue that the effective portrayal is not as sharply polarised as it at first seems. Again in the case of the male-female opposition it must be conceded that Robbery Under Arms' female characters tend to be stereotyped but I will argue that, particularly with respect to the Barnes sisters, there are some grounds for disputing the popular critical perception of the novel as an exclusively male-oriented text.

The conservatism often attributed to Robbery Under Arms and which I accept as being characteristic of the narrative's apparent project, produces a surface-level thematic trajectory which at least ostensibly holds the first term of each of the three major oppositions I have selected as privileged. In other words, I will concede that the three major hierarchies I have specified are at least at face value apparent in the narrative and that as such, they are consonant with the thesis that the novel's implications are conservative. But my thesis, as such, is that these hierarchies are undermined by the narrative itself so as to

make the novel far more radical in its implications than it appears to be. It could be argued that if a text appears to be conservative then for all intents and purposes it is. But I disagree. A message does not have to be explicit to be effective and it does not have to be received consciously to be potent.

I will, to a greater or lesser extent, deal with each of the three primary oppositions in both major sections of the paper, but at the beginning of each of these sections, the particular frame of reference determining the subjects for examination will be outlined. The critical methodology to be employed may vary somewhat according to the specific opposition under investigation but the critical objective in each case will conform to the larger project which is to show that the text, regardless of authorial intentions or apparent thematic trajectories, in many ways undermines its own conservative project - largely by means of the degree and kind of representation and expression it grants to subject persons and social groupings - and to potentially subversive ideas and attitudes seldom if ever heard in any major Australian novel published prior to Robbery Under Arms.

To provide a clearer indication of some of the key insights drawn from critical theory which will inform the paper's discussion, I refer briefly to some important concepts derived from the theories of Pierre Macherey, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Jacques Derrida et al. As I have already

pointed out, central to my thesis in this paper is the argument that Boldrewood presents in Robbery Under Arms, a far less conservative text than either he intended it to be or, indeed, than it superficially appears. But I will argue further, that the text's challenges to powerful and established hierarchies are not so deeply buried as to have failed to impact upon its readership-whether at the level of conscious recognition or in a more subtle and unacknowledged fashion. I strongly suspect this may have been one of the reasons for its extraordinary popularity. Boldrewood wrote Robbery Under Arms partly, perhaps even primarily, for commercial reasons and there is little doubt he was aiming for a popular audience.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, the novel - unlike any of his other works - was a huge success.<sup>16</sup> It is my view that although Boldrewood wanted to retain a strong measure of control over all the voices in his novel, and to explain away some of the fascinating historical conflicts he drew upon, he actually succeeded in producing a surprisingly polyphonic narrative. For the first time in a major Australian novel ordinary working and lower middle class Australians could, despite the author's often distorting and censorious presence, hear voices with which they could identify in dialogue with voices from the ruling classes. This many-voiced attribute of the novel provided opportunities for the conventional, established values of the ruling classes and their verbal-ideological ascendancy to be challenged.

To clarify my use of the term "polyphonic" in relation to Robbery Under Arms and also to identify, in theoretical language, the force which tends to resist the free expression and interaction of the voices in the novel, I refer to Brian McHale's elucidation of Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia:

"A novel is constructed," Bakhtin tells us, "not on abstract differences in meaning nor on merely narrative collisions, but on concrete social speech diversity." The "concreteness" of this diversity of discourse is secured by using different repertoires of stylistic features, correlating with different situations or uses of language - what M.A.K. Halliday would call registers. The interweaving of different registers in the text of the novel produces the effect of heteroglossia, plurality of discourse; and it is this concrete heteroglossia which serves as the vehicle for the confrontation and dialogue among world views and ideologies in the novel, its orchestrated polyphony of voices. It is important to distinguish between formal and stylistic heteroglossia of a text and its ideological polyphony, for heteroglossic texts are not inevitably polyphonic. Thus for example, "classic" modernist texts such as The Waste Land or Dos Passos's U.S.A. trilogy are genuinely heteroglossic, juxtaposing and interweaving a variety of languages, styles and registers, genres, and intertextual citations; yet their heteroglossic form is held in check by a unifying monological perspective."

Now crucial to my thesis is the idea that polyphony may be achieved regardless of authorial intention. The effect can, in other words, be more or less accidental. Writing about modernist texts, but in terms equally applicable to most postmodern literature (he claims postmodern literature is polyphonic by definition) McHale asserts: "Polyphony...is inadvertent in modernist writing, an unintended side-effect of heteroglossia."<sup>1</sup> In many ways Boldwood himself clearly endeavours to make sure his narrative's heteroglossic form is

kept under control by a unifying monological perspective - his own Establishment view. My argument is that his efforts are often blatant and clumsy and meet with very limited success when pitched against the commercial pressures he faced to produce a popular and reasonably credible narrative.

Although my critical approach is in this sense influenced by the ideas of Bakhtin, I draw upon the insights of Macherey to show how the text tries to both conceal and contain the problems it inevitably encounters in striving to present a unified and consistent whole consonant with the illusions of its informing ideology. A key tenet of Macherey's "Production model" is that the text is seen as necessarily incomplete and contradictory. The author's apparent project "may be undermined by his own text."<sup>11</sup> According to Macherey, a literary work "produces" ideology extant in society but in a somewhat transformed state:

It gives it shape and contours it could not possess as ideology, since illusions are insubstantial. In doing so the text "hollows" ideology, separates its fictional version from the same ideology before it entered the text. In Macherey's words: "there is a conflict within the text between the text and its ideological content."<sup>12</sup>

The informed reader identifies "gaps" in the text and can "see what the text is hiding from itself."<sup>13</sup>

There are some similarities here with deconstruction in that points of contradiction, or what Derrida terms "aporias" are of particular significance. Terry Eagleton, in

fact, describes Macherey's A Theory of Literary Production<sup>22</sup> as "a fully fledged piece of deconstructionist theory" in which

the author spoke of the need to discern within them certain symptomatic absences and aporia, those points at which texts began to unravel themselves in ambiguous encounter with their deceptively homogenous power systems.<sup>23</sup>

Of course this paper's focus on certain hierarchically structured oppositions is also consistent with deconstruction theory.

The main reason for which I will invoke some of the ideas of Bakhtin in this paper is that the text represents such a revolutionary departure from the work of earlier novelists like Marcus Clarke and Henry Kingsley in its Australian colloquial narration and in its relatively generous representation of diverse and often conflicting voices in colonial society. Some of the novel's most significant gaps, silences and contradictions are actually to be found in the dialogue. But it must also be conceded that it is here we will also find, at a readily accessible level, some of its most subversive statements. Of course in a sense virtually all the dialogue in the novel is actually reported speech - given that it is a retrospective first-person narrative. That is, every character's speech may be said to be mediated through a narrator and the author's attempts to impose his own values on that narrator. Indeed this is an

inescapable attribute of the entire narrative. But while I will certainly be making references to passages where signs of this complex mediation might be said to intrude particularly blatantly or significantly in an ideological sense, I will, in a fair proportion of my analysis, deal with the speech acts of the characters more or less on their own terms because I believe they are more credible on this level than has generally been conceded.

Another Bakhtinian concept which I believe has relevance to Robbery Under Arms is that of "carnival".<sup>11</sup> A certain theatrical quality, which permits - among other things - fleeting inversions of power relationships, pervades the novel. There are numerous instances in the narrative wherein outlaws assume the guise of respectable gentlemen, often in daring and comic fashion, not only for specific criminal purposes, or simply to avoid capture, but also in several cases, as a gesture of defiant mockery aimed at the authorities. Furthermore, there are also several instances in which plebeian associates of the outlaws converse with figures of authority - desirous of the latter's capture - in a comically ironic fashion which temporarily subverts our perceptions of conventional hierarchies. To quote Webster:

For Bakhtin the novel is composed of multi-layers of discourse which align themselves in various ways, some harmonious and others oppositional. What the novel allows for is the challenging and subverting of monologic and authoritarian discourse by other kinds of language which parody or deflate the central, official language and values. This is linked to Bakhtin's concept of the "carnavalesque" whereby literature can draw on discourses outside the established language of authority to suspend the "hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety and etiquette connected with it." Carnival allows people who in life are "separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers [to] enter into free and familiar contact", thus suspending the established official order and allowing new relationships to emerge.<sup>15</sup>

Robbery Under Arms is by no means an exemplary polyphonic novel - authorial control is much too evident for that - but in terms of the evolution of the Australian novel it should in my view, be acknowledged not only for its popularity and its appeal as a "ripping yarn"<sup>16</sup> but also for the variety and interplay of its voices.

As one of the hierarchies I wish to investigate is that of "English versus Australian" I will, of necessity, draw upon some ideas from post-colonial theory. My project will be to glean from the novel what it has to say about the colony's relationship with the imperial centre and whether it reveals any signs of incipient nationalism. This will be a matter of dealing with implications for the most part, since it is not, at least of face value, a major concern of the narrative.



**PART 1**

**In this Savage Country...**

**- Robbery Under Arms (346)**

In this Savage Country...

In this first half of the paper, the central concern is the opposition "English versus Australian" which is also implicated to a greater or lesser extent with the other two major oppositions which are to be investigated in this thesis - "Government versus outlawry" and "Ruling classes versus working and lower middle classes" - and accordingly analysis pertaining to these oppositions will also figure prominently in the section. However, the primary focus is on the text's treatment of the relationship between the Australian colony and the imperial centre, England, as is implied in the language, characterisation, dialogue and a variety of other aspects of Robbery Under Arms. However, a large portion of my analysis will be devoted to Boldrewood's portrayal of English gentlemen in the novel because - paradoxically - this aspect of the novel tells us more about the attitudes and dispositions - and hence the "difference" of the Australian "native" than it does about English gentlemen. The prominent place of English gentlemen in the novel has probably been one of the main attributes of Robbery Under Arms which has made critics reluctant to describe it as a nationalistic text. Chris Tiffin, in a discussion of Robbery Under Arms refers to its strong "English gentlemanly"<sup>1</sup> flavour and to "Boldrewood's prejudices in favour of the English

gentleman..."<sup>2</sup> in putting the view that the novel tends to privilege the English over the Australian. But I am arguing the opposite case and although critics have often cited Boldwood's apparent partiality for the English gentleman in Robbery Under Arms as evidence of its "English-ness" I don't believe they have examined his portrayals closely enough to realise the full implications of the way in which they are drawn.

Language is one of the key indicators of the Australian-ness of Robbery Under Arms. Language is a major area in which a "Monoglossic"<sup>3</sup> settler colony may begin to reveal and emphasise its "difference" from the imperial power. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin assert:

The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonised place.

One cannot make such grandiose claims for Robbery Under Arms but I would argue that its colloquial narration and dialogue constitutes a very significant step towards making the idea of a "native" Australian language more broadly acceptable. I believe the colloquial language is celebrated as a cultural emblem in Robbery Under Arms and its vibrancy is one of the novel's strengths.

In Adrian Mitchell's words, Robbery Under Arms "begins sensationally both in language and situation":<sup>5</sup>

My name is Dick Marston, Sydney-side native. I'm twenty-nine years old, six feet in my stocking soles, and thirteen stone weight. Pretty strong and active with it so they say. I don't want to blow - not here any road - but it takes a good man to put me on my back, or stand up to me with the gloves, or the naked mauleys. I can ride anything, anything that was ever lapped in horsehide - swim like a musk duck, and track like a Myall blackfellow. Most things that a man can do I'm up to and that's about it.

As Mitchell declares: "Nobody else in Australian fiction announces himself quite like that."<sup>6</sup> The boldness, assertiveness and confidence of this "native" Australian voice provides an early indication of the narrator's sense of pride in his identity and prowess as a bushman - a trait which remains undiminished throughout the tale. Although Russel Ward claims Robbery Under Arms lacks verisimilitude he refers to these opening lines as follows:

Here if anywhere in imaginative literature is the actual birth-place of the "noble bushman", the romanticized figure at home on horseback anywhere in the interior, and standing as a symbol of emergent nationalism.<sup>7</sup>

Ward, however, does not elaborate and he qualifies his observation by quoting Vance Palmer's view, with which he concurs, that the novel, "[H]as an air of unreality in spite of the vivacity with which it is imagined."<sup>8</sup> Ward is referring here to what he regards as Boldrewood's habit of attributing inappropriately conservative and even "priggish" attitudes, values, thoughts and utterances to his characters.<sup>9</sup> I will take this issue up in more detail in the second half of the paper but I will refer to it briefly here

as it is one of the aspects of the novel which has made critics wary of classifying Robbery Under Arms along with the radical writing of the nineties.

The quote employed by Ward comes from Vance Palmer's book The Legend of the Nineties<sup>10</sup> and its context is as follows:

Boldrewood's Robbery Under Arms has an air of unreality, in spite of the vivacity with which it is imagined. Told in the first person, its hero, Dick Marston, is a typical currency lad, talking in the racy argot of his time. With what gusto he launches into descriptions of his early life... There you have the voice of a new people that had never found expression except in the oral lays and stories passed around. But Boldrewood, Dick Marston's creator, is always at his elbow, warning him that this won't do for law-abiding readers of the Town and Country Journal, that he must strike his breast and cry "Peccavi" after every paragraph. This pious gesture emasculates the character and destroys the integrity of the book..."<sup>11</sup>

Here we find an enthusiastic acknowledgment of the arrival of "the voice of a new people" juxtaposed with an expression of disappointment that the author felt constrained to "censor" his narrator. But for the particularly insightful and unusually generous praise of Robbery Under Arms' original Australian narrative voice, this is a fairly standard critical response. A crucial point I must make here is that very often in criticism of Robbery Under Arms one encounters references to Boldrewood's "interferences" with his narrator's voice, such as the one just cited, and to the marring effect it has on the novel - the way it turns a subversive, piquant and exciting yarn into a conservative and

sternly moral fable and so on. It is against this view that I am writing in this thesis. I believe Establishment values are undermined in the book and that the attitude of critics that the novel is conservative - valorising the hierarchies I am examining - is one which places far too much emphasis on apparent authorial intentions. Boldrewood does intervene, but awkwardly in my opinion, and to little real effect. It is my contention that all the hierarchies I cite are at least called into question by the narrative whether the author intended this to be the case or not.

Indeed many critics have referred to passages in the novel where Dick Marston's narrative rings suspiciously false - especially some devoted to articulations of social attitudes. But implicit in this criticism is the assertion that the critics are more than capable of reading "through" Boldrewood's distortions. Remembering that Boldrewood wrote the story for an Australian journal and that it concerned people, places, times and events a good many of his readers would have had some personal knowledge of, it is likely that such distortions would have been just as apparent to them - and indeed to most other Australian readers since - as to subsequent literary critics. I will put the case that a number of Boldrewood's unsubtle attempts to manipulate his characters' attitudes to suit his own, actually work against his conservative project - that of writing from a criminal's perspective while trying to be seen to be on the side of law

and order and the Establishment generally. His efforts to constrain subversive implications give rise to some glaring inconsistencies and I will draw attention to a number of these as the paper progresses. In other words, the novel's lack of what Palmer calls "integrity" has its own eloquence and one not necessarily lost on its general readership.

Whereas Palmer saw Boldrewood's readers as tending to constrain him I strongly suspect the commercial advantage of a racy tale's popular appeal worked against his conservative instincts in his having stooped to write from the point of view of a "native-born" bushranger in the first place and that this is why there is a fascinating tension between subversion and conservatism in the novel.

Some critics, but not many, have praised the Australian-ness of Robbery Under Arms very enthusiastically. A surprising assessment of Robbery Under Arms comes from A.G. Stephens who ran the "Red Page" of the irreverent, iconoclastic, and nationalistic Bulletin - a magazine for which Boldrewood has "no sympathy whatsoever and for which he declined to write"<sup>11</sup> - for ten years beginning in 1896.<sup>13</sup> Writing in Bookfellow in 1920 Stephens had this to say about Robbery Under Arms:

The Australian value of the book is that perhaps seven-tenths of it is Australian truth - the bush boys and bush girls, and particularly the old father Ben Marston - taken directly from Browne's observation of life - are as natural as trees...But it needed Browne's remarkable knowledge of bush life to harmonise his characters, incidents and scenes. He has had imitators since 1880, but none comes within cooey of his masterpiece.<sup>14</sup>

Notable here is Stephens' insistence that Boldrewood provides a faithful record of Australian life - that much of the novel is not simply fiction but "Australian truth." The historicity of the novel will be given some attention in the second half of this paper. More importantly though I would make the observation that if a prominent nationalist critic like Stephens could describe Robbery Under Arms as a "masterpiece" it is difficult to explain why the novel has received, in the larger scheme of things, so little critical attention for its pioneering and seminal depiction and celebration of Australian-ness.

It is arguable that the identifiably "native" language of the narrator of Robbery Under Arms and most of its characters was a powerful source of inspiration for the writers who come to dominate nineties nationalism. As G.A. Wilkes observes:

It is not until Rolf Boldrewood's Robbery Under Arms (1882-3) that the native-born Australian is given charge of the narrative; in less than a decade his vernacular idiom comes to pervade Australian fictional prose.<sup>15</sup>



Of course the proletarian idiom of the native bushman became an emphatic mark of cultural "difference" from the imperial centre in the radical literature of the nineties - its deviation from the formal imperial standard almost a gesture of defiance. Dick Marston's use of the vernacular is so forceful and impressive it is his character, I believe, who initiates the trend. Robbery Under Arms' use of Australian idiom helped make it a very accessible novel and in this respect it differs markedly from the supposedly more politically significant Such is Life<sup>16</sup>, by Joseph Furphy, in that the latter novel, for all its colloquial idiom, was written, for the most part, in such an awkward and pedantic style as to render it virtually inaccessible to the very people it purported to champion.

Before moving to the predominantly text-based analysis which will constitute the bulk of this paper, it is worth, for the sake of perspective, making a few points about the depiction of the English gentleman in relation to the Australian "native" in Henry Kingsley's Geoffrey Hamlyn<sup>17</sup> which apart from Marcus Clarke's For the Term of His Natural Life<sup>18</sup> - wherein the designation "native" is of little or no relevance - was the only major Australian novel published prior to Robbery Under Arms. The English gentleman has a towering ascendancy in Geoffrey Hamlyn and to put it bluntly the novel reeks of Empire, class-based elitism and racism and its few references to "native-born" Australians are at very

best condescending. John Barnes, who seems only to have noticed the conservative aspects of Robbery Under Arms, describes the novel as "the best 'Australian romance' in the Geoffry Hamlyn line."<sup>19</sup> But in my view the comparison is quite misleading. In Geoffry Hamlyn the Eton and Cambridge educated Frank Maberly is appalled by the colonial small farmers - of which the Marstons are representative in Robbery Under Arms - describing them as inferior to the English peasantry and having an existence marked by "independence, godlessness and rum."<sup>20</sup> He expresses his disappointment with the small holders and their native-born offspring thus:

He has turned to be a drunken, godless impudent fellow, and his wife little better than himself; his daughters dowdy hussies; his sons lanky lean, pasty-faced, blaspheming blackguards, drinking rum before breakfast, and living by cheating one and another out of horses.<sup>21</sup>

Nothing could be more apparent than the imperious English gentleman's anxiety and resentment at the "lower order" colonialists' opportunities for breaking free from the ruling class domination they would have been born into in jolly old England. This conversation is set in the year 1836<sup>22</sup> so with some intertextual licence we might say "lean, lanky, pasty-faced blaspheming blackguard" Dick Marston is as yet only about five years old (Dick is 29 in 1860)(29). The Australian "native" is not really given a voice in Geoffry Hamlyn, although on one occasion a "native" youth is given the opportunity to reveal that he is an illiterate simpleton in

Captain Brentwood's house by accepting Jim's description of a paperweight he is childishly attracted to as "[T]he button off a Chinese Mandarin's hat who was killed at the battle of Waterloo in the United States by Major Buckley."<sup>23</sup> And yet it is a curious fact that Rolf Boldrewood described Geoffry Hamlyn as "the first the finest Australian work worthy of the subject, of the great, the heroic subject of Australian colonisation"<sup>24</sup>; curious because Robbery Under Arms' portrayal of non-elite Australian colonials, and more particularly those that are "native-born", is in total contrast to the deprecatory and sneering account of the same in Geoffry Hamlyn.

But what Boldrewood successfully tapped into in Robbery Under Arms was a growing sense of pride in a specifically Australian identity. G.A. Wilkes quotes an illuminating observation made by Anthony Trollope in 1872:

The idea that Englishmen - that is new chums, or Englishmen just come from home - are made of paste, whereas the Australian native or thoroughly acclimatized, is steel all through, I found to be universal.<sup>25</sup>

At no point does Robbery Under Arms put such a view explicitly but the motif, intended or otherwise, is hardly less visible for that. Dick Marston's superbly brash opening announcement of himself is nothing more or less than a boast that he is "steel all through." It is significant that Trollope refers not only to the "Australian native" but also

to the "thoroughly acclimatised" because the latter category which is prominently represented in Robbery Under Arms - most notably in the persons of Ben Marston and Starlight himself - tends to carry with it similar mythic implications whereby the fresh, bracing, invigorating environment and the supposed rigours and challenges faced by all and sundry in the colony are deemed to give rise to an especially brave, robust and hardy Australian type. Ben Marston, for example, is an Englishman, but one who was transported to Australia "when he was not much more than a boy"(33). His son, Dick Marston, says of him at one point: "I always thought he was ironbark outside and in" (71). Not only is the metaphor Australian, but - by inference - the subject as well. Put simply, when examining the English versus Australian hierarchy in Robbery Under Arms one needs to consider just how "English" the more positively portrayed Englishmen really are.

Boldrewood wrote an article entitled "The Australian Native Born Type"<sup>26</sup> in 1885 in which he was intent on the argument that "native-born" Australians were not in the least inferior to the British, and that they might in fact prove superior to the English, the Irish and the Scottish because of a hybrid vigour resulting from the interbreeding of the three peoples in the colony. He praises the Australian bushman's physique, athleticism and stamina and suggests that as a physical specimen the bushman is superior to the British labourer - partly because of environmental factors and partly

because of the differing demands of his work.<sup>21</sup> His reference to the bush people as "stalwart men and wholesome, stirring lasses"<sup>22</sup> is worlds apart from the perspective of Geoffrey Hamlyn and it would be fair to say Robbery Under Arms' representation of the Australian people, whether "native" or "thoroughly acclimatised", is wholly pervaded by this unconsciously nationalistic sentiment. To cite a minor example, Boldrewood has Mr Howard, the Marston's school teacher, express this view with regard to the daughters of the colonials - Frank Maberley's "dowdy hussies"<sup>23</sup> in Geoffrey Hamlyn:

"Look at Mary Darcy and Jane Lammerby, and my little pet Aileen here. I defy any village in Britain to turn out such girls...the natural refinement and intelligence of these little damsels astonishes me."(38)

It is worth noting that Aileen is the daughter of a cattle-duffing ex-convict and Jane Lammerby's father, a publican, is described as "a sly greedy sort of fellow that bought things he knew were stolen..."(37). If blood and breeding do seem to uphold the gentleman in the novel it does not necessarily condemn the commoner and this latter motif runs counter to some fundamental assumptions underpinning the English class system. Nevertheless regardless of some of the critical material I have cited Robbery Under Arms is not generally hailed as a nationalistic text and in some respects it does retain an English gloss.

Ken Goodwin describes Robbery Under Arms as "an old fashioned English romance with an Australian setting and vernacular language."<sup>30</sup> Most of the "romance" of the novel is centred on Starlight, an English gentleman. Indeed the seeming English-ness of Robbery Under Arms derives in no small measure from what R.B. Walker refers to as Boldrewood's "great predilection for the English gentleman."<sup>31</sup> This species figures prominently in positions of authority in the novel but in terms of actual characters the most significant examples are Starlight, Mr Falkland and Ferdinand Morringer - remembering that the former two have been in Australia since they were young men and that the latter, an Inspector of Police, becomes something of a laughing-stock. John Barnes has claimed with respect to the novel that "all Boldrewood's sympathies are with the gentleman..."<sup>32</sup> I would dispute this claim but it has a certain superficial accuracy and when one considers that nearly all the gentlemen in the novel are - at least at face value - English one begins to understand why Robbery Under Arms has not gained wide critical recognition as a nationalistic text. Though acknowledging that Boldrewood presents a few mildly democratic nuances in Robbery Under Arms, A.A. Phillips, for example, still claims there is "a chasm between him and the Australian writers who were to supersede him"<sup>33</sup>, and Cyril Brown, in his book Writing for Australia: A Nationalist Tradition in Australian Literature? dismisses Robbery Under Arms as a work presenting

an essentially English view of colonial adventures."<sup>34</sup> But these are assessments I will contest and indeed most of this paper will be devoted to rebutting - at least as far as Robbery Under Arms is concerned - the common critical view, articulated here by John Barnes, that "Boldrewood...represents the colonial spirit against which the Bulletin struggled in politics and literature."<sup>35</sup>

Critics have tended to find the romantic figure of Captain Starlight an irresistible target and Miles Franklin's assessment here is fairly representative:

[W]e are introduced to the hero, Captain Starlight, a composite of romantic highwaymen from Robin Hood down. He is imperturbably urbane, invulnerably healthy, impeccably handsome, one of those glorious Englishmen a match for any ten of lesser breeds...<sup>36</sup>

I would take issue with two important but somewhat glibly-drawn assumptions here which have tended to colour most criticism of Robbery Under Arms. The first is that Starlight need necessarily be regarded as the hero of the novel. Starlight's air of mystery, together with his panache and chivalry, captures the imagination but Dick Marston's narration provides for greater insights into his own character which is, I would argue, much the more rounded, credible and impressive creation. But the other assumption I will challenge in more detail is that Starlight should be seen simply as an Englishman without acknowledgment of the radical distinction in the popular perception of the time -

which Trollope gauged perfectly - between English "new chums" and Englishmen "thoroughly acclimatised." Dick Marston refers to the fact that Starlight is English but the attendant qualifior is equally important in the context of the novel: "He was an Englishman - that was certain - but he must have come young to the colony..."(323) Starlight is an Englishman yes - but an Englishman "thoroughly acclimatised."

One of the ways in which this important distinction manifests itself is in Starlight's inversive - and I would argue subversive - theatrical impostures. Starlight's criminal adventures are apt to incorporate, or indeed revolve around, impersonations of "new chum" English gentlemen and some of these performances take on strong elements of parody. Senior police and Government officials, often "new chums" themselves, are generally the ultimate targets of Starlight's theatrical mockery but the figure of the "new chum" itself is subject to caricature as well. It is never stated explicitly in the novel why Starlight invariably assumes the identity of a gentlemanly "new chum" in his carnivalesque deceptions. While it does serve to obscure details about his background and to secure him a degree of immediate social respectability, there is also some advantage in the disarming vulnerability and slightly ludicrous naivety likely to have been attributed to the "new chum" in the Australian colonial milieu. This latter quality, which is undoubtedly exaggerated in Australian nationalist mythology - the "men of



paste" conception - is stressed in some of Starlight's impersonations to the point where the figure of the "new chum" itself is effectively lampooned - thereby adding to the overall spirit of irreverence and gentle ridicule which characterizes these performances, and, furthermore, conforming to, if not reinforcing, popular nationalist attitudes. In short Starlight is an English gentleman whose English-ness is called into question by the fact that he is so often making fun of English gentlemen in the novel.

One of Starlight's impersonations is associated with the auctioning of some ill-gotten horses on the goldfields (211). That Starlight presents a comically hyperbolised version of the "new chum" is clear: "Just before the sale began at twelve o'clock, and a goodish crowd had turned up, Starlight rides quietly up, the finest picture of a new chum you ever set eyes on. Jim and I could hardly keep from bursting out laughing"(215). References are made to his "moustache", "tweed clothing", "English hunting whip", "hogskin gloves", "leather gaiters" and "eyeglass"(215). But if his foppish grooming and attire are not enough to mark him out as being something akin to an "inbred upper class English twit" his precious manner of speech, replete with emasculating impediment, completes the portrait:

"Oh! - a - here is a letter from my friend, Mr Bernard Muldoon, of the Lower Macquarie-er- requesting you to sell these horses faw him; and-er-hand over the proceeds to-er-me Mr Augustus Gwanby-aw!"(215)

This coxcombical and incongruous laughing-stock - the archetypal English "new chum" - is the antithesis of Starlight the bushranger - the Englishman "thoroughly acclimatised." In the broader context of the strong and expressive Australian colloquial voice of Dick Marston's narrative, the "new chum's" voice seems more a symptom of effete-ness than a mark of imperial dominance. In this way the novel subtly undermines the English versus Australian hierarchy characteristic of colonial society.

But Starlight's aristocratic "new chum" impersonation allows him to sell a horse to a man acting for the Commissioner and another to the Inspector of Police personally - on his own recommendation (215). In other words, what has become comical and "foreign" to the populace remains potent within the Establishment - which is at this time still strongly English. "Augustus Gwanby", a figure that seems a risible oddity to the diggers, is yet able to evoke respectful responses from a senior policeman simply by projecting an image, however ridiculous, that the latter identifies with the upper echelons of imperial England. Starlight's mimicry - which is just as much mockery - subverts the English versus Australian hierarchy by making the former's ascendancy look ridiculous. Indeed in many ways Starlight's impersonations and stunts would seem more appropriate to anti-imperialist natives than an English gentleman and this has the effect of making him seem more

Australian. He actually re-enacts his "Augustus Gwanby" performance for the amusement of his decidedly non-aristocratic "native" Australian friends, the vivacious and completely unaffected Barnes sisters (216). It would be fair to say Starlight's caricature draws on much the same popular nationalist sentiment as the burlesque imitation of a British officer by an Australian soldier in the film Gallipoli.<sup>31</sup>

By and large English-ness is not valorised relative to Australian-ness in Robbery Under Arms nor Englishmen relative to "native Australians - especially if one takes into account how "Australian" the most favourably represented English gentlemen seem to be - but the depiction of "new chums" is in some ways unflattering. For the most part the "new chum" type tends to be represented in the novel as being decent and plucky but at the same time callow and faintly ridiculous. The most prominent policemen in the novel, Morringer and Goring, are Englishmen whose Australian experience is of unspecified duration but it is mentioned that there are many "new chums" in the police force (145) and one can only say the police are made to look very foolish and ineffectual throughout most of the novel. One of the policemen who ineptly divulges information about an operation to capture the bushrangers in the presence of some of their sympathisers is a "new chum" and Starlight's disposition towards the larrikin "bush telegraph", Billy the Boy, who outwits them and alerts the outlaws, reveals a decidedly un-"English

gentlemanly" regard for the impudent young "native's" bold self-assurance: "You're precious free and easy, my young friend...I rather like you" (182). In the context of the novel Billy has dominion over his land (184) - and no "new chum" policeman is likely to threaten it.

Horsemanship is one area in which Robbery Under Arms emphatically holds the Australian "native" superior to the Englishman, and given that many of the police are "new chums", it gives the bushrangers, as Dick explains at one point (145), a significant advantage. Although the observation that the "natives" are better horsemen than the "new chums" might seem to pertain only to a certain strategic advantage related to bushranging, it tends to take on, in the context of the wider novel, a much larger mythic significance because the amount of attention Robbery Under Arms devotes to horses and riding makes horsemanship the virtual yardstick of Australian-ness. Dick Marston puts it thus:

My word, Australia is a horsey country, and no mistake...I can't think as there's a country on the face of the earth where the peoples fonder of horses. From the time they're able to walk, boys and girls, they're able to ride, and ride well (352).

The radical nationalist Henry Lawson took up the theme and his beautifully condescending poem "New-Chum Jackeroos" opens:

He may not ride as you can ride,  
 Or do what you can do  
 But sometimes you'd seem small beside  
 The new-chum jackeroo.<sup>36</sup>

After an introduction like that the "new-chum jackeroo" had nowhere to go but up.

After the bushrangers' first coach robbery, an outraged "new chum's" account of the incident is a subject of considerable mirth to their friends the emphatically Australian Barnes sisters (208). Starlight's defensive response to the young man's reported attack on the Australian colonial character relative to the English character again shows him the more naturalised and experienced hand:

"Ingenuous youth! When he lives a little longer he'll find that people in England, and indeed, everywhere else, are very much like they are here. They'll wink at a little robbery or take a hand themselves if its made worth their while" (208).

One could imagine Geoffrey Hamlyn's Frank Maberly agreeing wholeheartedly with the "new chum's" deprecation of colonial moral standards.<sup>37</sup> But as one of many evidences of a major literary shift in Robbery Under Arms this passage again subverts the English versus Australian hierarchy by having Starlight, a "thoroughly acclimatised" English gentleman, dismiss a "new chum" Englishman's suggestion that English society is morally superior. Starlight may not be an Australian as such but he is very much like one in sympathy.

The depiction of the "new chums" in the novel does tend to vary according to their disposition towards Australia and the Australians. Clifford and Hastings, Starlight's aristocratic "new chum" work mates on the goldfields, are sympathetically portrayed although Dick Marston's account of the occasion of their first appearance still fosters in comical fashion, the notion of "new chums" being akin to babes in the woods in the Australian landscape. When they arrive at the Barnes place at night on their way to the goldfields one of them is wearing an eyeglass and he expresses relief that they'll have company and not get lost "in this beastly bush as they call it" (226). When he asks if they can have a bath, the down-to-earth Maddie replies: "Oh yes you can...there's a creek at the bottom of the garden, only there's snakes now and then at night. I'll get you towels" (226). But being as yet "made of paste", the "new chum" English gentlemen decline - preferring to wait for morning.

Although Clifford and Hastings are favourably represented in the novel, it is clear that Boldrewood drew these English gentlemen and their attitudes with a view to having them conform, probably quite unrealistically, to the egalitarian sympathies of his Australian readership. They are quite happy to mix with the bush people at the Barnes place:

We were afraid the strangers would have spoiled our fun for the evening, but they didn't; we made out afterwards that the tall one was a lord. They were just like anybody else, and...they made themselves pleasant enough...(227).

Dick's remark that these English gentlemen were "just like anybody else" (227) is symptomatic of the tension in the novel between Boldrewood's more or less unavoidable acknowledgment of the spirit of egalitarianism and independence pervading the broader Australian community and his desire to promote his own reactionary belief in the necessary ascendancy of a truly distinct and essentially hereditary elite. Dick Marston can find these elite English gentlemen agreeable because they are "just like anybody else." But this conditional acceptance subverts the hierarchy it is partly intended to excuse: the elite cannot - by definition - be "just like anybody else." But writing from a sympathetically-depicted "native" Australian bushman's perspective, Boldrewood could not afford to have his English gentlemen - for whom he was such a devoted apologist - treat his proud and independent narrator with any semblance of supercilious disdain. Consequently these gentlemen seem at times remarkably - if not overly - willing to fraternise warmly with the lower orders. The overall effect, unintended as it may be, tends towards the valorisation of egalitarianism - thereby subverting not only class hierarchies but imperial-colonial hierarchies as well.

Another aspect of Robbery Under Arms which subverts the English-Australian and the ruling class - working class hierarchies obtaining in colonial society is its wholly favourable depiction of the goldfields and its egalitarian society. The goldrushes are represented in the novel as a huge social and economic upheaval and the portrayal of the goldfields has a strong carnivalesque quality. In Dick Marston's words, "the whole country seemed turned upside down" (199). And further, on the goldfields: "It was a fairy-story place...the glitter and show and strangeness of it all. Nobody was poor, everybody was well dressed and had money to spend..."(228). The goldfields brings all races and classes together in one egalitarian community. Quoting partly from Bakhtin himself, Webster explains:

Carnival allows people who in life are "separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers [to] enter into free and familiar contact," thus suspending the established official order and allowing new relationships to emerge.<sup>40</sup>

One would expect a conservative like Boldrewood to find such a social environment - one without hierarchical stratification - threatening and undesirable. For there is no doubt that the historical experience of goldfields life - which Boldrewood was very familiar with and clearly drew upon for the novel - set many people formerly of the lower orders to wondering why society in general should not function the same way. As Manning Clarke writes:



By the middle of 1852 gold was subverting the old social order of rank and degree. At the diggings it was already being said, "Jack is as good as his master." All was confusion. Respect for worth, talent and education had also been subverted. Brawn and muscle, not birth, marked the aristocracy.<sup>11</sup>

Robbery Under Arms does not delve into the political implications of the egalitarianism of the goldfields as such but it does valorise, the fairness (237), self-regulation (228), and equality (237) of the fields very strongly - thereby effectively calling into question the necessary desirability of hierarchical stratification per se. For on the goldfields the exalted rub shoulders with the lowly. Accordingly the English "new chum" aristocrats Clifford and Hastings team up with Starlight, who is playing the "new-chum swell" (228) again and "gammoning to be as green about all Australian ways as if he'd never seen a gum tree before" (228), to work on a claim with a wages man and all four toil together like common labourers:

The crowd christened them "The Three Honourables," and used to have great fun watching them working away in their jerseys, and handling their picks and shovels like men (228).

These are very sympathetically depicted English gentlemen and their humility - their refusal to "pull rank" - is presented as their most positive attribute.

The way in which the "new chum" aristocrats Clifford and Hastings are tailored to appeal to an Australian bushman

narrator and indeed an Australian readership is quite instructive. Boldrewood imbues Clifford and Hasting, English gentlemen, with qualities and attributes of which a radical democrat would approve and surprisingly, he even introduces an obnoxious foil to his ideal types, the determinedly superior Mr Despard (233). Dick Marston describes him as: "[A] swell that didn't work, and wouldn't work, and thought it fine to treat the diggers like dogs" (233). Despard stands against the democratic, egalitarian spirit of the goldfields, complaining of "plenty of muscle" (233) but "devilish little society" (233). Remarkably, it is Boldrewood's English gentlemen who speak against Despard's position. Clifford and Hastings reproach Despard for his snobbish attitude claiming he is missing out on the opportunity to meet fascinating people living in a community characterised by "natural, unaffected good manners" (233). Furthermore, they tell Despard that once the diggers "see you don't want to patronise, and are content to be a simple man among men, there's nothing they won't do for you or tell you" (233). But he retains his contemptuous attitude: "Oh, d-n one's fellow creatures; present company accepted..." (233). And it is left to one of the "present company" - the disguised bushranger Starlight - to make a fool of him by acknowledging that as one of the Government administrators he is well placed to offer his opinion that the diggers could well be "Dashed bad characters" (234).

The curious message from Clifford and Hastings then, is that in order to be accepted among - and respected by - the diggers, the English gentleman must not "patronise" and must be "content to be a simple man among men." In other words, he must for the greater part, forego the very social privileges the hierarchical designation "gentleman" conventionally prefers. Although there are some glaring contradictions, Robbery Under Arms' portrayal of English gentlemen does tend to reveal a significantly modified conception of what constitutes gentlemanly conduct in the Australian context in the sense that a strong degree of erasure of class distinction in terms of interaction is more likely to be valorised than not. Of course in traditional English models, based wholly on an organicist vision, such conduct is more likely to be seen as a disruptive force giving rise to hopeless aspirations on the part of inferiors or the corruption of the standards of superiors. This aspect of Robbery Under Arms derives, no doubt, in large measure from Boldrewood's strong and proud narrative voice - that of a "native" Australian bushman who is so admirably independent in spirit as to make implausible any willing acceptance on his part of a position of inferiority or servitude.

An interesting sidelight in Robbery Under Arms is the presence of the Americans on the goldfields and the acknowledgment of their social influence: "There were so many Americans at first...that lots of the young native

fellows took a pride in copying them" (322). The Marston's claim is adjacent to one held by a team of Californians with whom they develop a strong bond: "[T]hey were such up and down good fellows, and such real friends to us..." (253). The Americans, coming from an independent nation with memories of British colonial rule, are naturally averse to any imperial - colonial hierarchy and they are irritated by some evidences of a continued deference to English social patterns in the Australian colonial mentality. When Sir Ferdinand Morringer, the new Inspector of Police, who also happens to be a baronet, makes his first appearance on the Turon goldfields, it is the Americans who are least impressed by his rank and title and their case is hardly demolished by Dick Marston in this exchange with his "Yankee" (245) friends:

"How de'ye fix it that a lord's better'n any other man?"  
 "He's a bit different, somehow," I says. "We're not goin' to kneel down or knuckle under to him, but he don't look like any one else in this room does he?"

"He's no slouch..." says Arizona Bill; "but durn my old buckskins if I can see why you Britishers sets up idols and such and worships 'em in a colony, just's if yer was in that old benighted England again."

We didn't say any more (246).

Perhaps Dick didn't have an answer. Or perhaps, more to the point, Boldrewood couldn't think of any credible way of having his Australian "native" bushman narrator argue any further in defence of the English class system. This is one of several notable instances in the novel wherein exchanges

which happen to relate to matters of ideological significance, close in a rather abrupt and unsatisfying manner. But I would argue that in leaving the radical view unanswered, or at best feebly opposed, in these exchanges Boldrewood unwittingly lends it the greater force and cogency. In an incredible attribution of sentiment early in the novel Boldrewood has Dick claim that the hierarchical privileging of the "gentleman" must be due to "some sort of a natural feeling" (64). And yet this "natural feeling" seems to be absent in the Americans who act like "such swells" (332) themselves. Arizona Bill - "the true grit old hunter" (260) - is a republican and democrat by nature, but his depiction, considering Boldrewood's own conservative views, is very positive. Observing Starlight disguised as "new chum" Frank Houghton, his anti-English and anti-elitist indignation is aroused instinctively - much to Dick's amusement:

"That's another durned fool of a Britisher; look at his eyeglass! I wonder the field has not shaken some of that cussed foolishness out of him by this time" (246).

In allowing such a voice, Boldrewood unwittingly acknowledges that the spirit of the Australian goldfields is really very much against such familiar images of Empire.

If some English gentlemen do seem very sympathetically depicted - almost privileged-in Robbery Under Arms I would argue that this is largely due to their investment with

"Australian" attributes - thereby undermining the traditional English archetype in any case. To people like Mr Despard, by implication a young English aristocrat, Australia would seem to be, in the words of one of Starlight's assumed "new chum" English gentleman identities - "Lieutenant Cascalles" - "a savage country" (346). The rawness and the physical challenge of Australia is certainly foregrounded in Robbery Under Arms and it is not surprising that one of its most favourably-depicted English gentlemen, Commissioner Knightley, is described as "a great sporting man" (363). Knightley, as his name would suggest, is a caricatured, "Boy's Own" English gentleman but Boldrewood is still concerned to have him treat not only Starlight but also his thoroughly disreputable Australian "native" bushranging companions, with an inordinate degree of respect and goodwill - even after it has ceased to be of strategic advantage. This is in keeping with the subtle but persistent motif in Robbery Under Arms that the measure of a gentleman is his disposition towards the working man - hardly the conventional yardstick but an appropriate one from a bushman narrator's singular perspective. It is particularly evident in the portrayal of "the big squatter" (78), Mr Falkland. Herbert Falkland - "a gentleman if ever there was one" (78) is an Englishman but a "thoroughly acclimatised" one. He is an especially good employer - one "that takes a good deal of notice of his working hands..." (78) - and, in an exchange

which would seem completely out of place in an English context, he allows Dick Marston to express his subversive and rather disparaging views - "Every one of you gentlemen wants to be a small God Almighty" (78) - without fear of recrimination. But if Boldrewood might be seen to be idealising the generosity of squatters in general here, Dick's remark that "if more gentlemen were like Mr Falkland I really do believe no one would rob them..." (91) tends to suggest both that he is something of an exception and, more subtly, that the others deserve what they get. In much the same way, Mr Knightley has to meet with the approval of his class opposites - if not enemies - to qualify as a gentleman of the right stamp. We can be sure Mr Knightley is a "good sort" (373) because Dick Marston tells us the bushrangers Hulbert and Hall said so. In the context of the novel there could be no more authoritative endorsement for a gentleman. But if the working man's imprimatur is not enough, he even sells Starlight a horse at a price he refused from their arch enemy Ferdinand Morringer.

Towards the close of Robbery Under Arms, Mr Falkland and his daughter visit Dick, who has been sentenced to death, in gaol. With them, as Dick recalls, is "a young gentleman...that they told me was an English lord, or baronet, or something of that sort, and was to be married to Miss Falkland" (416). In terms of characterisation Miss Falkland is primarily a creature of romantic convention; an

angelic damsel subject to sundry heroic rescues. But in a familiar pattern in the novel whereby the gentle folk are effectively rated by their generosity of spirit towards the working man, the confirmation of Miss Falkland's noble character occurs not so much in the drawing room as in the shearing shed and the gaol. Early in the novel she helps Jim when he is injured while shearing and advises him - without consulting her father - to take the rest of the day off (85). Later in the narrative Dick is amazed when - before onlooking dignitaries - she greets him and shakes his hand upon seeing him in Berrima gaol (163). When she visits Dick in gaol with her father and fiance many years later, she offers her hand to the prisoner once more. The imperious reaction of her aristocratic English fiance effectively diminishes him in the narrative's economy of evaluation and offers a moment hinting very strongly of a quite fundamental cultural separation:

Sir George, or whatever his name was, didn't seem to fancy it over much, for he said -  
 "You colonists are strange people. Our friend here may think himself highly favoured" (416).

Subverting "English-Australian", "ruling class-working class", and "male-female" hierarchies in one fell swoop Miss Falkland then puts Sir George in his place and we are left with the impression he is a foreigner with much to learn about a new country - most strikingly in this instance how



formalities associated with English class barriers no longer take precedence in interpersonal relations.

At the beginning of this paper I cited an assessment of Robbery Under Arms by Chris Tiffin in which he highlights the "English gentlemanly"<sup>41</sup> aspects of the novel. He characterises Robbery Under Arms as an "Anglo-Australian"<sup>42</sup> work with the "Anglo" taking precedence over the "Australian" precisely because of what he believes is the privileged treatment of English gentlemen in the narrative - the valorisation of their hierarchical ascendancy. But as I have argued, the novel - largely because of its unusual point of view - has a rather unconventional perspective on the English gentleman such that its ideal embodiments of that type, whether Boldrewood was conscious of it or not, are effectively defined and appraised not by the impressiveness of their titles, education or breeding, but, more subtly, by the standards of Australian working men - that is, their attitude towards, and treatment of, the so-called lower orders. That most of them more or less live up to these standards is unremarkable. What is remarkable is that they were applied at all. I would argue the glowing portrait of the English gentleman in Robbery Under Arms is in fact a glowing portrait of the English gentleman significantly redefined in the Australian context. Furthermore, I have also emphasised the novel's frequently implied distinction between the English "new chum" and the Englishman "thoroughly

acclimatized" and its somewhat disparate treatment thereof - the latter species being in many ways effectively "Australian."

**PART II**

**"A deal of the old life was dashed good fun..."**

**- Robbery Under Arms (418)**

"A deal of the old life was dashed good fun..."

In this second half of the paper, the two oppositions over which the opposition "English versus Australian" took precedence in the first half become the focus. Thus the "Government versus outlawry" opposition and the "Ruling classes versus working and lower middle classes" opposition will be the major subjects for investigation. However, I will also make some reference to the "Anglo-Celtics versus Aboriginal" opposition and the "Male versus Female" opposition in the latter part of the study. For the sake of convenience I will refer to the opposition "Ruling classes versus working and lower middle classes" as the "Ruling versus working class" opposition although I would admit that the term "working class" is not an entirely appropriate one for the small farmers I will include in this category, who are actually propertied - though not at all substantially. The two oppositions "Government versus outlawry" and "Ruling versus working class" are closely aligned in my reading of Robbery Under Arms and consequently they will be treated more or less concurrently in this analysis although because the novel focuses on bushranging, the "Government versus outlawry" opposition might be said to be the framing motif.

My objective, as in the case of the "English-Australian" opposition in the first half of the paper, is to examine Robbery Under Arms' treatment of the relationship

between the first and second components of each of the oppositions keeping in mind that the oppositions are to some extent assumed to conform, at least at face value, to a hierarchical orientation - the first category being held as privileged - one would expect obtained in the society the novel deals with - at least in terms of Establishment perceptions of appropriate order. In accordance with my thesis that Robbery Under Arms is a more radical text than it at first seems, I will be highlighting ways in which the novel subverts the hierarchies obtaining in colonial society and which might be seen to be endorsed by the text's apparent trajectory.

For the purposes of this paper, the opposition "Government versus outlawry" refers to Robbery Under Arms' treatment of Government authority and law and order, including its upholders and enforcers, as opposed to conduct and practices outside the letter and spirit of the law, and the perpetrators thereof. The emphasis, as one would expect, falls predominantly on the novel's portrayal of the police, and their professional endeavours relative to the bushrangers, their illegal activities, and their practical jokes. But it will also extend to the novel's depiction of the attitudes and actions of other individuals and of more general class groupings as well.

As I explained in the introduction to this paper, regardless of its romantic aspects which chiefly revolve

around the character of Captain Starlight, Robbery Under Arms has a fairly strong historical basis - Boldrewood himself claimed this was the case<sup>1</sup> and subsequent scholarly inquiry supports this view.<sup>2</sup> For this reason and because this paper has a political orientation, I will make some references to ways in which Australian colonial history is both reflected and distorted in the novel in areas pertinent to my analysis. Some of these distortions give rise to significant intra-textual contradictions because they are simply inconsistent with other more historically accurate information supplied by the text itself.

That the novel appears to be more conservative than it is can be attributed in part to some of these historical distortions, as I will argue later, but perhaps the most obvious - and no doubt intentionally obvious - sign that the author is endeavouring to constrain the subversive implications of the novel, thus upholding conservative hierarchies, is the frequency of his narrator Dick Marston's expressions of regret for having taken to outlaw life. I am certain this aspect of Robbery Under Arms has been a very significant factor behind the traditional determination of critics to attribute a conservative character to the novel. Vance Palmer, as I observed in the previous section, lamented the fact that:

Boldrewood, Dick Marston's creator is always at his elbow, warning him that this won't do for law-abiding readers...that he must strike his breast and cry "Peccavi" after every paragraph. This pious gesture emasculates the character and destroys the integrity of the book...<sup>3</sup>(See p.23).

A more recent critic, Barry Argyle, emphasises the novel's conservative implications in a detailed analysis and observes: "Boldrewood is ever intent on pointing a moral..."<sup>4</sup> Chris Tiffin also favours a conservative reading, asserting:

Robbery Under Arms is a highly moral novel. It opens with Dick Marston reproaching himself in his condemned cell, and thus puts all the actions into a "what-a-fool I've been" framework.<sup>5</sup>

In my view a close reading of the text will show that Dick actually expresses little remorse. He frequently expresses regrets but given that almost the entirety of his tale is told from a prison cell it is little wonder. Indeed, if the gang had actually succeeded in escaping to America, it is difficult to imagine that Dick would have felt either remorse or regret. Furthermore, I would argue that by the end of Dick's tale - indeed throughout most of it - our sympathies are with the outlaws rather than the Government and that this is a constitutive feature of the narrative. I will pursue this matter further as this paper proceeds.

But to give my analysis some structure I will be examining several major aspects of the novel pertinent to my thesis sequentially and more or less separately in the

discussion to follow, bearing in mind that my focus is primarily but not exclusively on the text's treatment of the "Government - outlawry" and "Ruling class-working class" oppositions. The first aspect of the novel I will investigate is the information the text provides regarding the motives the various outlaws actually have for turning to crime. The second aspect I will examine will be the novel's treatment of the various criminal activities and practical jokes of the bushrangers. The third aspect of the novel I will deal with is the relationships between the bushrangers themselves and their relationship to the bush community, including references to that community's attitudes towards crime generally. Within this discussion I will devote some attention to the "Anglo-Celtics - Aboriginal" opposition and the "Male-Female opposition" - with emphasis on the relationship between the bushrangers and the Barnes sisters. I will then deal with the implications of the novel's concluding chapters.

Most critics would have it that no significant elements of social protest are implicated in the motives of Robbery Under Arms' outlaws for taking to crime. Accordingly, on the subject of the reasons the Marstons have for taking to outlaw life, Barry Argyle makes the following observation:



Small farmers though the Marstons are, there is no suggestion...of economic hardship driving them to crime. "The ground like iron and the sky like brass"...are not starving but boring them!

But Argyle later contradicts himself by claiming - correctly I think - that this boredom is essentially "boredom with the unrewarding grind which was existence for the small farmer in Australia."<sup>7</sup> The Marstons, as small farmers, may not be starving but they are certainly poor relative to the squatters. In fact the lot of the squatters, the ruling class, relative to that of the small farmers, the working class, is a focus of very significant but barely overtly acknowledged conflict in Robbery Under Arms and it is effectively implicated quite strongly in the Marstons' resorting to crime. Furthermore, it also offers them an appreciable degree of justification.

Although I would argue that there is an effective acknowledgment of the social and economic causes of crime in the Australian countryside in Robbery Under Arms one rarely encounters any critical references to this fact. An exception is seen in one very early reviewer's praise of the novel's historical accuracy in showing "how scores of bushrangers and cattle thieves would have remained honest men had honesty offered to them only a fair reward."<sup>8</sup> R.B. Walker sheds some light on Boldrewood's own thoughts on the matter and they are quite surprising:

Some years after he had written his book Browne...spoke of bushranging...as "a world-old protest against the dullness of respectability...the selfishness of property."<sup>9</sup>

Walker, however, then conforms to a pattern I have referred to previously in this paper whereby critics seem not to be able to resist attributing a conservative character to the novel with his subsequent comment: "This assertion was considerably more radical than the tenor of Robbery Under Arms..."<sup>10</sup> I would agree that Boldrewood's assertion is not entirely consistent with the surface level trajectory of Robbery Under Arms which tends to attribute criminal behaviour to the moral shortcomings of its perpetrators. But I believe protest against "the selfishness of property" and "the dullness of respectability" relate very closely to the undercurrent of conflict effectively acknowledged in the novel between the ruling class squatters and the working class small farmers and labourers. And it is this conflict which serves as a more credible explanation for the Marstons - and others - turning to crime than some of the more superficial and less radical reasons Boldrewood offers at a more visible level. Furthermore, the novel's treatment of the conflictive relationship between the squatters and the small farmers - the ruling class versus the working class - the text's sympathies despite evidences to the contrary, are, by and large with the small farmers.

And yet this was probably not Boldrewood's intention. He had a thorough knowledge of the historical experience of Australian rural life<sup>11</sup> and although he no doubt understood some of the social and economic reasons for crime in the countryside he wasn't about to foreground them in his novel. Accordingly we find quite a deal of evidence in Robbery Under Arms of Boldrewood endeavouring to distort the historical experience he drew upon so as not to present the ruling classes and the Government in too unfavourable a light. For this reason we find Dick frequently attributing the bushrangers' turning to crime to causes such as these: "fate" (101), "devils" (61), "folly" (61), "vanity" (61), "idleness" (224), "a good horse" (62), "a woman" (69), "passion" (61), "a toss up" (96) or "the devil in the shape of a mopoke" (96). But these explanations seem hopelessly superficial even in the context of the narrative. Boldrewood also occasionally attributes some absurdly conservative sentiments to his narrator - as in this example: "I don't think there's any place in the world where men feel more out-and-out respect for a gentleman than in Australia" (64). One can only say that in the broader context of the narrative with friends like the Marstons the gentlemen certainly didn't need enemies. Another dimension of this attempted containment of subversive implications I will address later in more detail is the successful rise of the apparently exemplary George Storefield.

But if these aspects of the novel seem not to question the status quo, the tension between the ruling and working classes is acknowledged nevertheless - often less overtly and in disjointed and incidental references. The impression created is of a very wealthy and none-too-concerned squatter class opposed to a small farming class which more or less operates on a subsistence level and which feels a quite justifiable resentment at the indifferent affluence of the larger landowners. I will refer to some of the passages which develop this awareness of the social context from whence cattle-duffing and bushranging arose.

Ben Marston the ex-convict small farmer is arguably one of the most consistent and credible of Boldrewood's characterisations in Robbery Under Arms and he probably has the most ingrained - and the most valid - grievance against the Government and the ruling classes. Accordingly his recourse to crime could be said to have political overtones though admittedly he has no radical political views as he would understand them. He conceives of himself simply as a rogue but one with a fierce and legitimate grudge against those he identifies with his erstwhile oppressors - "the swells and the Government, and everybody almost that was straight-going and honest" (363). But it is important to realize that Ben Marston's intense resentment of these categories does not derive exclusively from the distant past.

Accordingly, he answers his wife's pleas that he give up cattle-duffing thus:

"You mind your own business; we must live as well as other people. There's squatters here that does as bad. They're just like the squires at home; think a poor man hasn't a right to live." (40)

This expression of the view that the squatters - the ruling class- are oppressors is indicative of the risk that the conservative Boldrewood took in writing a polyphonic novel. Once this subversive voice has been raised by a quite credible and sympathetic character a genie is released that must be either put back in its bottle or left as a potential threat to his conservative project.

In fact Ben's views are corroborated by other passages in the novel. One, when Dick is reflecting on the contrast between life on the goldfields and the small farming experience, tends to indicate that stealing from the squatters whose wealth was protected by the Government, was almost a matter of necessity for small farmers like Ben Marston:

How different it seemed from the hard, grinding, poverty-stricken life we had been brought up to, and all the settlers we knew when we were young! People had to work hard for every pound then, and, if they hadn't the ready cash, obliged to do without, even if it was bread to eat. Many a time we had no tea and sugar when we were little, because father hadn't the money to pay for it. That was when he stayed at home and worked for what he got. Well it was honest money, at any rate....(229)

It would seem very clear that Ben's choice was to raise his family in dire poverty or help himself to the squatters' surplus. And the text also tells us that if the small farmers had trouble making ends meet they could not rely on a generous wage from the squatters when it came to earning supplementary income. Dick Marston sheds some more light here on some of the reasons for stock being stolen from the squatters:

"It is their fault almost as much as it is ours. But they are too lazy to look after their own work and too miserable to pay a good man to do it for them. They just take a half and half sort of fellow that'll take low wages and make it up with duffing...(101)

And this is not Dick's perception alone. At the trial of Dick and Starlight over the Momberah cattle-duffing affair their lawyer provides an insight into the more general perception of the tension between the ruling and the working classes in the rural areas and one consistent with the tenor of the previous passages I have cited:

He blew up all the squatters in a general way for taking all the country, and not giving the poor man a chance - for neglecting their immense herds of cattle and suffering them to roam all over the country, putting temptation in the way of poor people and causing confusion and recklessness of all kinds(154).

To my mind these are not evidences of the novel's conservative valorisation of the hierarchical ascendancy of the ruling classes - the squatters - over the working classes

- the small farmers - at all. In fact they are quite the opposite. When R.B. Walker claims Boldrewood's citing of protest against the "selfishness of property" as contributing to the emergence of bushranging is "considerably more radical than the tenor of Robbery Under Arms..."<sup>12</sup> I believe he is mistaken. The "selfishness of property" is acknowledged as a cause of bushranging in the novel and the blame falls quite clearly with the ruling class squatters and the Government which protects them.

There is a conversation early in the novel between Dick Marston and "the big squatter" Mr Falkland which brings the conflict between the ruling class and the working class to the surface:

"Every one of you gentlemen wants to be a small God Almighty" I said impudently. "You'd like to break us all in and put us in yokes and bows, like a lot of working bullocks."

"You mistake me, my boy, and all the rest of us who are worth calling men, let alone gentlemen. We are your best friends, and would help you in every way if you'd only let us."

"I don't see too much of that."

"Because you often fight against your own good. We should like to see you all have farms of your own - to be well taught and able to make the best of your lives..."

"And suppose you had all this power...don't you think you'd know the way to keep all the good things for yourselves? Hasn't it always been so?"

"I see your argument," he said, quite quiet and reasonable, just as if I had been a swell like himself - that was why he was unlike any other man I ever knew - "and it is a perfectly fair way of putting it. But your class I think, always rely upon there being enough kindness and wisdom in ours to prevent that state of things. Unfortunately neither side trusts the other enough. And now the bell is going to ring I think."(79)

This exchange ends conveniently for Mr Falkland because he hasn't answered Dick's argument, which he concedes is a valid one, at all convincingly. Indeed it looks as though Falkland has to be "saved by the bell" when the exchange reaches an awkward juncture. Boldrewood would probably prefer the reader to take the squatter's view, but he allows the working man a voice and it is the voice of a class that fears and resents domination and exploitation by the ruling class squatters. Falkland admits the ruling classes have the power to abuse their ascendancy but relies solely on an idealistic vision of their capacity for enlightened thinking and compassion to counter Dick's argument. I cannot see that Falkland wins any decisive moral or intellectual victory here and furthermore I would argue that there is something radical about the very fact that a bushman's radical voice is heard - and heard so respectfully - by a member of the ruling class who is willing to speak to a bushman on more or less equal terms. But more significant perhaps, is the discrepancy between the text's ample acknowledgment of the relatively impoverished lot of the small farmers and Mr Falkland's advice to Dick that his class must rely on the ruling class' "kindness and wisdom" to prevent the development of an extreme economic imbalance. Like the claim he makes that "the poor man...was the real rich man in Australia..."(78), it undermines the credibility of his position and further subverts the ruling class - working class hierarchy. The



critic A.A. Phillips makes a quite revealing comment with respect to Dick's conversation with Mr Falkland:

Boldrewood almost seems to be suggesting that the rebellious democratic demands voiced by Dick, and his distrust of gentry, are the natural preludes to a life of crime. The writers of the nineties must have read this chapter with scoffing disapproval.<sup>13</sup>

This assessment has a paradoxically conservative bias. I believe the text does connect democratic attitudes with bushranging but given that the bushrangers are so sympathetically depicted, and as such essentially decent men in the novel, I cannot see why the writers of the nineties would not have identified with characters who were, to some extent, simply wielding the sword rather than the pen.

But there's another conversation early in the novel which provides an even clearer picture of Dick Marston's resentment of the injustice he perceives in the Australian rural socio-economic milieu. On this occasion he is in dialogue with the much more politically conservative, acquiescent, and conformist small farmer George Storefield. Boldrewood may have intended to represent George Storefield as a small farming paragon - indeed he undoubtedly did - but he succeeded more impressively nevertheless in cloaking him with a less sympathetic quality, one Boldrewood himself later actually cited as a partial cause of bushranging - "the dullness of respectability."<sup>14</sup> Their exchange centres largely on the huge comparative advantage enjoyed by the heavily

capitalised squatters, particularly under adverse conditions - in this instance the onset of a drought. Dick protests that when trouble - such as a drought - strikes the squatters, they are able to ride out the difficulties because they have financial reserves and are able to obtain credit - while the small farmer is virtually ruined (76). George more or less concedes this point but explains that he is willing to start from the bottom again when such calamities occur (76). But Dick is not so docile and has some revolutionary views:

"Oh! if you like to bow and scrape to rich people, well and good," I said; "but that's not my way. We have as good a right to our share of the land and some other good things as they have, and why should we be done out of it?"

Dick goes on to express his belief that people should all share equally to an unimpressed George Storefield:

"[I]f a dry season comes and knocks all our work over, I shall help myself to someone's stuff that has more than he knows what to do with" (76).

Dick does go on to engage in some illegal redistribution, while honest George, toils away in the background throughout the novel, going on to bigger and better things all the while - thereby proving that if small farmers remain honest they can one day expect to be exceedingly wealthy members of Parliament. Or at least this is what Boldrewood would apparently have us believe.

But the text itself is not entirely kind to George Storefield. Veronica Brady, who emphasises Robbery Under Arms' conservatism, claims that Boldrewood's "ideal man is George Storefield, slow and plodding, dedicated to the pieties of property and a proper submission to the status quo."<sup>15</sup> With apologies to Brady, I think this is a classical misreading of the novel. I have no doubt Boldrewood wanted Storefield to reinforce the hierarchical ascendancy of the ruling class by making it seem possible for the honest small farmer, given the experience of the exemplary George, to actually move up into its ranks - a radical concept itself in a sense - but there are serious problems with his portrayal, both in terms of his credibility as a small farming hero and in his capacity to evoke admiration or sympathy.

At the beginning of the novel George is represented as a patient and industrious fellow who will keep assiduously to honest toil regardless of its meagre rewards and tedium. But the Marstons are not particularly impressed, as Dick reflects:

I always had a great belief in George, though we didn't get on over well, and often had fallings out. He was too steady and hard working altogether for Jim and me. He worked all day and every day and saved every penny he made (44).

Jim complains to him:

"Oh but you never see any life...you're just like an old working bullock that walks up to the yoke in the morning and never stops hauling till he's let go at night. This is a free country, and I don't think a fellow was born for that kind of thing and nothing else"(44).

The word "free" recurs throughout Robbery Under Arms and in many ways bushranging is effectively represented as a heroic quest for freedom in the novel. The Marstons, as heroes of freedom and adventure, are rendered a good deal more attractive than George Storefield, the hero of drudgery and conformity. In other words, by making the Marstons' taking to outlaw life seem like an heroic escape from a soul-destroying life as small farmers, the text leaves George Storefield looking relatively dull and uninteresting indeed. As a consequence he is ineffectual - indeed counterproductive - as a device for valorising the status quo. And there is no doubt that small farming is generally presented as a life of drudgery and a kind of entrapment. When Dick is contemplating the opportunities for new experiences which will be opened up by his participation in the great Momberah cattle-duffing feat he reflects: "What a paltry thing working for a pound a week seemed when a rise like this was to be made!" (102). Dick also remarks on the dull, limiting and confining nature of their impoverished bush existence when he sees the city for the first time: "Don't it seem as if one was shut up in the bush, or tied to a gum tree, so one

can never have a chance to see anything?," and later: "I was never tired of watching, and wondering and thinking what a little bit of a shabby world chaps like us lived in that never seen anything but a slab hut..." (115). Dick and his friends are not so much criminals as champions of excitement, freedom and the joy of living and he characterises their type thus:

They must have life and liberty and free range. There's some birds...that either pine in a cage or kill themselves, and I suppose it's the same with some men. They can't stand the cage of what's called honest labour, which means working for someone else for twenty or thirty years, never having a day to yourself, or doing anything you like, and saving up a trifle for your old age when you can't enjoy it (83).

If this is the small farming experience, it is difficult to blame men like Dick and Jim for wanting to escape from it, and thus, in a subtle way, our sympathy is built up for the small farmers and labourers over the squatters, and the bushrangers over the Government.

Boldrewood claimed to have produced a reasonably accurate picture of Australian colonial life in Robbery Under Arms<sup>1</sup> and in respect of his acknowledgment of the hardships and deprivation that many small farmers endured in colonial times, his text is historically sound.<sup>11</sup> But if there is one distortion of history in Robbery Under Arms which Boldrewood does attempt to propagate through the example of the Marstons and George Storefield, it is that poor selectors ended up poor because they were dishonest, whereas in fact - as the

broader sweep of the text much more effectively convinces us - a great many of them ended up dishonest because they were poor.<sup>18</sup> This is a good example of a textual contradiction showing up a flaw in Boldrewood's Establishment ideology. At face value it appears as though George Storefield's experience proves that honest industry will allow the small farmer to gradually become prosperous - in other words it appears that George is a model small farmer. But in trying to defend the status quo in this fashion Boldrewood overplays his hand. George's rise is much too meteoric. The blossoming of his fortunes is primarily due to his shrewd exploitation of new markets opened up by the goldrushes and not decades of painstaking toil at all. Success for "the great contractor" (240) George Storefield, is a very early escape from small farming.

Ben Marston and Dan Moran are the only bushrangers who could be described as brutal, and the former is sympathetically depicted in any case. Both also attribute their criminal life, or at least its serious beginnings, to abuse at the hands of the Government while prisoners (362,306) so there is a sense in which the Government is simply reaping what it sowed with respect to these two very violent outlaws at least. But the other bushrangers are represented, in most respects, as decent men. Indeed witness Dick's statement: [M]en like us are only half-and-half bad, like a good many more in this world..." (248) - which more or

less dispels any suggestion that they might be considered "naturally vicious." Starlight's motives for leading an outlaw life seem to revolve chiefly around a quest for adventure but his actions - as opposed to his attitudes - have, as I will argue, a rather subversive quality which the novel effectively celebrates. Not the least subversive aspect of Robbery Under Arms is its reluctance to treat its outlaws as incorrigible scoundrels.

An unintentionally radical aspect of Robbery Under Arms is its unequivocal valorisation of the egalitarianism of the goldfields. The Marstons' goldfields' experience also effectively sets into relief those aspects of small farming life they find intolerable because the opportunities and conditions which prevail on the goldfields erase any temptation for them to engage in criminal activities (237). It is their first opportunity to derive a satisfying return from honest work, they are not under the defacto rule of the squatters, society is more or less egalitarian, poverty is rare, the social environment is stimulating, and law and order is maintained largely by the diggers themselves. But what must be stressed is that this is the Marstons' ideal society - a fully functioning Utopia in which social and economic hierarchies have been all but eliminated:

They were all alike for a bit, all pretty rich; none poor, or likely to be; all workers and comrades; nobody wearing much better clothes or trying to make out he was higher than anybody else...It was a grand time - better than ever was in our country before or since. Jim and I always said we felt better men while the flash time lasted, and hadn't a thought of harm or evil about us (237).

In this place of "hard work, high pay" (225), and mateship - "good friends that would stick to a man back and edge" (255), the police presence seems barely necessary - "the miners were their own police mostly" (228). But although the Government's servants may not be required to protect the privilege of a ruling class in goldfields society, the Government - or at least one of its policies and its enforcement - is the subject of one of the very few aspects of the diggings that Dick Marston finds disquieting: "Wha. I didn't like so much was the hunting about of the poor devils that had not got what they called a licence..." (213), claiming: "We could see it would make bad blood one day..." (213) - an obvious reference to Eureka. All this is perfectly consistent with democratic nineties radicalism and one can only say that if a community is represented as ideal in large measure because it has no hierarchical stratification then that representation effectively calls into question the hierarchical structures of society as a whole.

In many ways Robbery Under Arms is a picaresque novel and like most picaresque novels it effectively plays on the



reader's relish of the violation of established norms of conduct prescribed and enforced by the Government and the ruling classes. Daniel Defoe was fully aware of the subversive implications of Moll Flanders<sup>19</sup> and this explains his quite implausible attempt in the novel's preface to characterise his text as "a work from every part of which...some just and religious inference is drawn, by which the reader will have something of instruction..."<sup>20</sup> Boldrewood was criticized while writing Robbery Under Arms<sup>21</sup> and afterwards<sup>22</sup> for making bushrangers seem like heroes and he defended himself with an explanation somewhat reminiscent of Defoe's.<sup>23</sup> But Boldrewood was writing for a populist audience, for commercial reasons<sup>24</sup> and whether he was conscious of it or not, the anti-authoritarian aspects of the novel, and the vicarious sense of individual freedom, independence and mischievous amusement it is capable of inspiring, have, in my view, ensured its "continuing success."<sup>25</sup>

The most enthralling aspect of Robbery Under Arms - indeed it is integral to the dramatic tension of the entire novel - is the way in which Boldrewood allows his likeable bushrangers and their helpers to get the better of the ruling classes - the squatters mainly - and the Government - as represented by the police - on so many occasions and in such amusingly impudent fashion. Desmond Byrne overstates his

case somewhat here but he is correct in emphasising the place of impudent humour in Robbery Under Arms:

Cattle stealing and highway robbery as supervised by Starlight are allowable, and even meritorious, in so far as they afford him opportunities to practice some facetious deception on the police. Such raids are not crimes, but comedies.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, the bushrangers humiliate the police and other Government officials at every opportunity, and although the impetus for their doing so is never really articulated, it conforms to a strong motif in the novel centring on the heroic appeal of their independent, freedom-loving defiance of constraining Government and ruling class authority.

But there is an inconsistency in Robbery Under Arms between the bushrangers' subversive actions in making a mockery of the authority and efficiency of the police, and their at times strangely polite, respectful, and almost amicable disposition towards the Government's servants. Dick at one point reflects: "I've no call to have any bad feeling against the police, and I don't think most men of my sort have" (145). Once again this is an inconsistency deriving from a historical distortion on Boldrewood's part. In short, Boldrewood embellishes the historical truth about the popular image of the police during a period when they were not generally held in high esteem.<sup>27</sup> I have already pointed out that Boldrewood drew very heavily upon history for Robbery Under Arms<sup>28</sup> and R.B. Walker, among others, relates many of

the attributes and exploits of the Marston gang to those of Frank Gardiner, Ben Hall and their accomplices, who operated at a time roughly contemporaneous with the novel's setting.<sup>29</sup> Walker writes thus of Boldrewood's portrayal of the police in Robbery Under Arms: "[H]e is really loathe to represent them in a bad light and largely conceals the public contempt in which the troopers fell in Ben Hall's days."<sup>30</sup> But the problem Boldrewood faced in borrowing heavily from newspaper reports<sup>31</sup> and the like for his novel was that he was drawing in large measure upon the exploits of men who hated the police and thought them fools.<sup>32</sup> If we take Ben Hall, Frank Gardiner, and John Gilbert as an example, the image they wanted to project through their escapades is instructive:

All three encouraged the picture of themselves as heroes of the people, as avengers of the poor and robbers of the rich, as men who were going to take the mighty down from their seat, send the rich empty away and hold the police up to public ridicule.<sup>33</sup>

This latter intention to "hold the police up to public ridicule" driven as it is by a purported radical agenda is very pertinent to Robbery Under Arms because the novel omits explicit reference to the agenda and only records the bushrangers' actions and their consequences. The police are rendered "a laughing stock"<sup>34</sup> and publicly ridiculed both by the bushrangers' stunts themselves, and by the newspapers "quoted" (359,362) in the novel. The fact that Boldrewood did not want to connect these outcomes with radical motives

does not prevent the Government-outlawry hierarchy from being subverted in the narrative and the reader whose sympathies are with the Government is definitely reading against the grain. One might add that the bushrangers' occasional evidences of an amicable disposition towards the police sit rather oddly with the outlaws' remarkably casual attitude towards firing upon them.

But there is another aspect of Robbery Under Arms which shifts our sympathies more towards the outlaws than the Government - and it is a very important one. At several points in the novel, the "wanted" Marston brothers have both the desire and the opportunity to keep to honest work, but on each occasion the Government's relentless desire to discipline and punish those who dare to defy its authority prevents them from doing so. It sets the Government in the role of a obdurate and vengeful oppressor, unconcerned about generating even more violence in order to crush its enemies. Sitting in prison at the end of his bushranging career, Dick Marston is still bitter about being denied the opportunity to work honestly on the goldfields as he recalls their plans to rob the gold escort:

A desperate chance; but we were desperate men. We had tried to work hard and honest. We had done so for the best part of a year...And yet we were not let stay right when we asked for nothing but to be let alone and live out the rest of our lives like men.

They wouldn't have us that way, and now they must take us across the grain and see what they would gain by that. (278).

And even Starlight effectively blames the Government for the violence which is still to come: "Society should make a truce occasionally, or proclaim an amnesty with offenders of our stamp. It would pay better than driving us to desperation" (273).

This more sombre and serious reflection is complemented by much comically subversive narrative wherein the outlaws temporarily assume the role of upright citizens and the police are made to appear ludicrous. There is a strong carnivalesque quality about these role inversions and there are effective power inversions also when the hunted men are able to defy and manipulate the police so easily. The whole effect is to enhance our sympathies for the outlaws. Displaying a theatrical, almost joking style the bushrangers often assume the guise of "respectable citizens" hierarchically "superior" to themselves - frustrating the police with their audacity, impertinent humour and creative flair. Starlight, as we have seen, plays a number of different roles. Dick and Jim pose as "up-country squatters" (116) in Melbourne. Ben is "dressed up as a back-country squatter" (217) for the Ballibri bank robbery. Jim

impersonates Joe Morton and escapes to Melbourne as "the Rev. Mr Watson's coachman" (332). Dick becomes "a speculator in mining shares from Melbourne" (337) for the Grand Turon Handicap.

We also see carnivalesque inversion when the outlaws lock the policeman in "the logs" (219) at Ballibri and wear partial police uniform (219). We see the Australian-English, Government-outlawry, and Ruling class-working class hierarchies subverted when Billy the Boy and Warrigal lure Sir Ferdinand Morringer, Inspector of Police, away from the goldfields during the Grand Turon Handicap (339) with a false alarm. Billy the semi-literate Australian "native" youth, mortifies Sir Ferdinand Morringer, a baronet, mocking his authority and sophistication with an orthographically unorthodox but nonetheless biting sarcasm message:

If Sir Ferdinand makes haist heel be in time to see Starlite's Ranboe win the handycap. Billy the Boy (356).

As the Government's senior police representative, Sir Ferdinand is the main butt of the outlaws' humour. Even the lowly Warrigal is said to do an excellent imitation of him (271). Starlight is introduced to Sir Ferdinand while he is in disguise on the goldfields, and much later he places an advertisement in several newspapers requesting that all accounts against the Marston gang be "addressed to the care of Sir Ferdinand Morringer, whose receipt will be a

sufficient discharge" (400). When Dick Marston arrives on the goldfields for the Grand Turon Handicap, Morringer has - unknown to Dick - been drawn away by his companion's trickery and he recalls: "I was wondering why Sir Ferdinand wasn't swelling about bowing to all the ladies, and making that thoroughbred of his arch his neck..." (339). The overall impression created is that Sir Ferdinand is something of an ineffectual fop and after he has easily eluded the Inspector at the race, Starlight admits his own recklessness and remarks: "What a muff Sir Ferdinand must be, he's missed me twice already" (357). Deprecatory comments about the police are rare in Robbery Under Arms so it is worth noting this archaism's application to its senior representative in the novel refers to "one who is awkward at games or sports, or who is effeminate, dull or stupid."<sup>35</sup>

Critics who see no comparison between the tenor of Robbery Under Arms and the radicalism of the nineties might be surprised to learn that the Bulletin granted very favourable reviews to Dampier and Walch's play Robbery Under Arms<sup>36</sup> which was adapted from the novel - largely because of the bushrangers' frequent victories over the police! This passage comes from the theatre pages of the Bulletin of March 8, 1890:

Robbery Under Arms...is likely to fill the Melbourne Alexandra with a stupendous shout until further notice. The plot of the novel has been followed in most respects which entail the triumph of virtuous bushranging over a despicable police system, and the curtain mostly descends upon an exhilarating spectacle of heroic cattle-lifters giving their natural enemies fits.<sup>37</sup>

... .

Although I would admit the play is slightly more radical than the novel, I would argue this is due mainly to the fact that the play simply highlights and mildly accentuates those aspects of the novel most likely to appeal to a populist audience. Richard Fotheringham describes the Melbourne audience for whom the play held the greatest appeal thus: "young, working-class, predominantly male, with a significant proportion of Celtic descendants and strong larrikin and nationalistic tendencies."<sup>38</sup> I would submit that Robbery Under Arms<sup>39</sup> impressed such an audience not just because of its lively action, but because of its entertaining subversion of hierarchies they, as Australian working class larrikins, were thoroughly familiar with: English-Australian, Ruling class-working class, and Government-outlawry.

I turn now to the relationships between the bushrangers themselves and their implications for the ruling class-working class hierarchy and to some extent also, the English-Australian hierarchy. At face value Starlight, as an English gentleman, would seem to hold an automatic ascendancy, but his relationship with the Marstons changes as the narrative progresses. Early in the novel Boldrewood



endeavours to establish Starlight's "natural" ascendancy in the gang's hierarchy with lines such as the following - in which the English gentleman responds to criticism from Ben Marston:

I'm the superior officer in this ship's company - you know that well - your business is to obey me, and take second place." Father growled out something, but did not offer to deny it. We could see plainly that the stranger was or had been above our rank...(68).

But Ben's attitude changes about half way through the novel when he informs Starlight and his sons: "I'm not going to be a wood-and water Joey, I can tell ye, not for you nor no other men" (223) and furthermore tells Starlight: "I look to have my turn at steering this here ship, or else the crew better go ashore for good" (224). In any case, Dick has already subverted the class hierarchy and characterised the relationship more appropriately before the "superior officer" (68) metaphor appears by referring to Starlight as his father's "wonderful mate" (64). In fact this egalitarian term is quite applicable to the relationship between Starlight and all the Marston men for the rest of the novel. Although the newspaper reports give him top billing, Starlight does not by and large put himself ahead of the Marstons. He habitually refers to Ben Marston as "governor" and late in the novel when Starlight places advertisements in the newspaper to taunt and mislead the police, he refers to the gang as "The Messrs. Marston Brothers and Co." (400) and

concludes his message: "For the Firm, Starlight" (400). When the Marston gang join up with the other bushrangers, Starlight does become the "captain" (280) but only through being democratically elected (281). But perhaps the best evidence of Starlight's non-hierarchical relationship with the Marstons is presented when Starlight, English gentleman and "superior officer" (68), goes to ex-convict Ben Marston to ask his permission to marry his daughter Aileen - a "poor ignorant" (328) Australian "native" peasant.

Probably the most marring and consistently reactionary aspect of Robbery Under Arms is the portrayal of Warrigal the "half caste" (52). One of the more extreme examples of the kind of racism which Boldrewood purveys in the novel is seen in this exchange between Ben Marston and Starlight:

"It's been lonesome work - nobody but me and Jim and Warrigal, thats like a bear with a sore head half his time. I'd a mind to roll into him once or twice, and I should too, only for his being your property like."

"Thank you, Ben, I'll knock his head off myself as soon as we get settled a bit. Warrigal's not a bad boy, but a good deal like a Rocky Mountain mule: he's no good unless he's knocked down about once a month or so, only he doesn't like anyone but me to do it"(177).

In essence, such a passage bears the hallmark of the classical imperialist vision of the black man's place relative to the English gentleman. Certainly Warrigal seems excessively devoted to Starlight - indeed the relationship is reminiscent of that between a dog and its master. But there are some qualifications which ought to be considered before

interpreting this as an attempt to represent a "natural" racial disposition. Given that I am arguing that Robbery Under Arms is, in many ways, as radical in tenor as much of the literature of the nineties it is worth observing that the novel's racism is, in fact, no more virulent than that which also pervaded the much-vaunted "democratic", nationalistic writing of that decade. Lawson's heroes were not above "stoushin a bleedin' Chow"<sup>40</sup> and the Bulletin's racism was nothing short of fanatical.

I would not attempt to argue that the Anglo-Celtic versus Aboriginal opposition in Robbery Under Arms shows a radical subversion of the white ascendancy but I would argue that the hierarchy is not as extreme as it at first seems. For one thing although I have characterised the opposition as Anglo-Celtic versus Aboriginal, it is actually a mistake to assume the unsympathetically depicted Warrigal is presented in the text as being a "typical" Aborigine - or "half-caste" for that matter. Dick Marston comments with respect to Warrigal: "He knew all the black's ways as well as a good many of ours. The worst of him was that, except in hunting, fishing and riding, he'd picked up the wrong end of the habits of both sides" (197). The clear implication is that there is a much better side to Aborigines in general - which Warrigal lacks - and that some of his worst "habits" derive from Anglo-Celtic culture in any case. Starlight does not attribute Warrigal's dog-like devotion to any appropriate

recognition of his own innate superiority but more to a form of idiosyncratic neurosis: "It's his peculiar form of mania, I suppose. We all suffer from some madness or other" (270). In the serial version of the novel Warrigal's devotion is explained by the fact that Starlight had once saved his life<sup>41</sup> but this omission, along with a good deal of other material, from the book leaves Warrigal's servitude looking racially determined and very undignified.

There is one broad statement regarding Aborigines in general in the novel and it is made by Dick Marston as he recalls the huge quantities of easily accessible gold that were available at the beginning of the goldrushes:

It licked me to think it had been hid away all the time, and not even the blacks found out. I believe our blacks are the stupidist, laziest beggars in the whole world" (213).

It is hardly a serious assessment and I suspect Boldrewood was engaging in some rare light mockery of his narrator's naivety. Starlight does once refer to Warrigal's "semi-barbaric head" (270) but by and large he is not represented as being stupid or lazy - "He was one of those chaps that always does what they're told and never comes back and says they can't do it, or they've lost their horse, or can't find the way, or they'd changed their mind, or something" (313). He is more or less acknowledged, also, as the most skilled bushman of the gang - no small accolade in the context of the novel. But what Boldrewood does apparently endeavour to

represent him as being, however, is "fly" (94), treacherous, and "revengeful" (396). However what appears to be his effort to attribute a treacherous nature - and hence a hierarchically "inferior" nature - to Warrigal is seriously flawed. For one thing his absolute loyalty to Starlight is never questioned and never abandoned. Although I have highlighted the most hierarchically extreme aspects of Starlight's relationship with Warrigal this is not the whole story. When the proceeds of the Momberah cattle-duffing adventure are divided up Warrigal receives the same share as the others, including Starlight (109). Indeed throughout the narrative there is no suggestion that Warrigal receives any less a share than the "superior" Anglo-Celtic Marstons in terms of "wages." In other words Warrigal fares quite well under Starlight's patronage in material terms and one can also say Starlight is the only character in the novel to exhibit the slightest positive regard for him. The salient point to be made here is that the Marstons regard him as an enemy from the time of their very first acquaintance (94). Ben Marston doesn't want him included in the gang (62) while Dick and Jim develop an instant and irrational aversion to him: "We couldn't say what grounds we had for hating the sight of Warrigal neither..." (94). Consequently, Warrigal cannot really be said to "betray" the aggressively antagonistic Marstons - they are never disposed to allow a bond of trust to develop in the first place. If a

"treacherous" nature is intended to demonstrate Warrigal's inferiority to his Anglo-Celtic "friends-cum-enemies," it is an inherently faulty - and false - demonstration.

One of the subtly subversive aspects of Robbery Under Arms is the bushrangers' relationship with the ordinary bush community. It is implicitly conveyed throughout the novel that the working class bush people are by and large neutral if not broadly sympathetic towards the bushrangers in their targeting of the country gentlemen and in their struggles to avoid the Government. And while this reluctance to assist the police on the part of a great many ordinary country people is effectively acknowledged in the fabric of the entire novel, it is not subject to any substantial degree of condemnation. Dick's disposition towards the poorer country people who assist the bushrangers in various ways and who do not co-operate with the police is, as one would expect, entirely sympathetic:

No one wonders at the Barnes's, or little farmers or the very small sort of settlers, people with one flock of sheep or a few cows, doing this sort of thing; they have a lot to lose and nothing to get if they gain ill-will (292).

When Dick claims they have "a lot to lose" the inference is that they may be subject to retaliation and while this is theoretically true, the other side of the equation "nothing to get", is just as significant. It conveys the impression that bushranging is fundamentally a ruling class and

Government problem and the working class are the outlaws' natural allies. Not only do the bushrangers come from among their families and friends, and - with the exception of Starlight - from their class, but it is also made clear in the narrative that for helping the outlaws they are generally materially rewarded for their efforts (291). On the other hand, they would appear to derive no particular benefit from the bushrangers' apprehension for the simple reason that, by and large, the outlaws are predisposed to leave them unmolested. There is not the slightest suggestion in the entire narrative that any of the bushrangers would set out to rob a small farmer or a labourer. In fact the outlaws are imbued with a "Robin Hood" quality - robbing from the rich to give to the poor - both in their payment of bush telegraphs and harbourers and in their focus on the wealthy. On the occasion of the gang's first coach robbery, Starlight, in true Robin Hood fashion, takes a very expensive gold watch from the pompous "Mrs Buxter of Bobbrowobbra" (204), but actually makes a donation to the timid young Miss Elmsdale who is on her way to "take up a position" (204) and has only an old watch and a few pounds to her name (204). Dick Marston retains a peculiar admiration for "gentlemen" but it is rendered somewhat problematic by the gang's preference for wealthy victims. At one point Dick claims bushrangers generally like the country gentlemen who offer some resistance more than those who co-operate out of cowardice

(293). But it is a dubious honour. The outlaws might "like" Mr Knightley, for example, but to punish him for "going out of his line" (364) - assuming the role of a policeman - they shoot up his house, hold him to ransom, and take £500 from him. Building our perception of - and sympathy with - the bushrangers as being allied with the poorer working class bush community is this implicit expectation that resistance will only - and should only - come from the ruling classes and the Government.

In fact the novel conveys the impression that petty crime at least is quite endemic among the poorer classes in the bush. If Robbery Under Arms was a conservative novel, like Geoffry Hamlyn, this would be a subject of pious condemnation. But in Robbery Under Arms what little disapproval is expressed is thoroughly undermined by the novel's overall preference for a humorous approach to these matters. After the judge's solemnly threatening and then congratulatory addresses to the jury at Nomah, there is a deliberately comic aspect to Dick's offhand remark: "(We heard later that they were six to six and then agreed to toss up how the verdict was to go)" (158). And the novel, if anything, tends to make a joke of "righteous outrage" - as does the young bush larrikin Billy the Boy on this occasion:

"You fellers don't think you're going on forever and ever, keepin' the country in a state of terrorism, as the papers say. No Dick, it's wrong and wicked and sinful. You'll have to knock under and give us young uns a chance" (264).



This effective devaluing of law and order - what amounts to the privileging of its humorous subversion-is seen in the subversion of another hierarchy in the novel: male versus female.

Robbery Under Arms is in many ways a male-oriented and male-dominated novel. But it is not wholly so and there are a number of comic episodes in the narrative whereby women have the advantage over male Government officers and make them seem rather foolish. Billy the Boy's account of his mother's handling of the plain-clothed police looking for Dick and Starlight after they've escaped from Berrima jail is one example: "Mother got 'em to stay, and began to talk quite innocent-like of the bad characters in the country. Ha! Ha! It was as good as a play" (183). When Sergeant Goring visits the Barnes' place hoping to get information about the bushrangers, the women are too clever for him:

"We told him a lot of things," says the girl; "but I'm a feared none of 'em true. He didn't get much out of us, nor wouldn't if he was to come for a week."

"I expect not," says Jim; "you girls are smart enough. There's no man in the police or out that'll take much change out of you" (209).

On another occasion the women tell the bushrangers of a recent conversation about the Ballabri bank robbery:

"The police Magistrate was here tonight. You should have heard Bella talking so nice and proper to him about it."

"Yes, and you said they'd all be caught and hanged," said Bella; "that it was settin' such a bad example to the young men of the colony. My word it was as good as a play" (225).

Bella and Maddie also tell the bushrangers of a meeting with Sir Ferdinand Morringer who has come asking questions about the wanted men (226). Bella explains ironically: "Maddie says she'll send him word if ever she knows of their being about" (226). Even Aileen Marston and Gracie Storefield, two of the more conventionally submissive female figures in the novel, engage in a battle of wits with Sir Ferdinand when he visits them - and he is unable to win (388). But Bella and Maddie Barnes are the most adventurous women and the most credible as characters. There is no sense of male-female hierarchy at all in Boldrewood's portrayal of the Barnes sisters and whereas nineties radicalism presented "mateship" as an exclusively male preserve, in this respect Robbery Under Arms is remarkably progressive in that the relationship between the bushrangers and the Barnes women has every semblance to -indeed effectively is - characterised by a male-female "mateship." They share risks equally, are completely mutually loyal, and relate to each other on perfectly even terms. As very favourably depicted representatives of the less than law-abiding working class bush community, the Barnes sisters help draw our sympathies towards that class and its culture of illegal practices, such

that their defiance of ruling class privilege and Government authority takes on a legitimacy which subverts the apparent valorisation of conservative hierarchies evident in other aspects of the novel.

The closing chapters of Robbery Under Arms see Dick Marston being punished for his deeds - the other members of the gang all being dead - and then being released early, largely through the efforts of Mr Falkland and George Storefield. It is a curious fact that although George Storefield is represented in the narrative as an exemplary and unimpeachably honest man, he also has some dealings with the bushrangers which are not in keeping with either the letter or the spirit of the law. Late in the novel, Dick Marston and Starlight accidentally "stick up" (379) George Storefield, who by then owns "half-a-dozen stations" (379), thinking he is just another wealthy squatter (379). He considers this an excellent "joke" (379) and remarks: "It isn't often that a man gets stuck up by his friends like this" (379). And if this remarkably sanguine attitude is not enough to call into question the extent of George's public spirited desire to see the criminals brought to justice, he then - quite illegally - offers Starlight and Dick the opportunity to run one of his more remote stations, remarking "[T]here's a fortune in it" (380), and - furthermore - telling them: "I'll send you some cattle to start you on a run after a bit" (380). As it turns out Dick works his way

towards Queensland in George Storefield's employ and it is quite clear George is fully aware that Dick will be meeting up with his bushranger companions in an attempt to leave the country - indeed the scheme is partly his idea (380). With a paragon like George Storefield being involved in such obviously illegal actions and not being subject to any note of censure in the narrative, we see yet another way in which notions of the rule of law - and thus Government authority - are subtly undermined in the novel. If Boldrewood intended to use George Storefield as proof of the rewards of the straight and narrow path, the effect is somewhat diminished by this curious deviation - though of course in the context of the novel, it actually helps make him a more sympathetic figure.

The word "free" - "free-free-free! What a blessed word it is!" (427) - recurs throughout Robbery Under Arms and prison is very nearly the ultimate penalty for a bushman like Dick Marston who loves "life and liberty and free range" (83), "the free bush breeze" (170) and the "free bush life" (350). In fact his love of freedom makes Dick Marston a rather heroic figure. The prison, standing against Dick's defiant energy, is represented as a place designed to crush the spirit of men like him who dare to challenge a constraining status quo. When he recalls that late in his sentence the Minister had taken the view that "the steel had been pretty well taken out of me..." (426) and that "I wasn't

likely to trouble the Government again" (426), the former "man of steel" simply adds: "And he was right" (426). But not entirely so, for soon after Dick claims that if he'd not got his three year remission - which "some of the Parliament men and them sort of chaps in the country that never forgives anybody..." (426) oppose vehemently - "I r'aly do believe something of dad's old savage blood would have come uppermost in me, and I'd have turned reckless and revengeful like to my life's end" (426).

In Robbery Under Arms as a whole, any attempt to evoke sympathy for the Government is greatly undermined by the fact that Government's authority is ultimately so closely identified with the prison - an institution opposed entirely to the exuberance and adventure of the tale. It would be misleading to deem the prison the central location in Robbery Under Arms but it should be remembered that almost the entirety of Dick's tale is told as he sits in a prison cell awaiting execution (415). Indeed throughout the narrative, the prison always looms large as the Government's principal deterrent - short of death - standing against the unlawful freedoms the outlaws boldly wrest for themselves. Dick Marston, the Australian "native" bushman who at first is endeavouring to free himself from the soul-destroying "cage of what's called honest labour" (83) becomes, like his companions, a fugitive trying to remain free of the "cage" called Her Majesty's prison.

As Boldrewood probably intended, there is an air of pathos about a man like Dick Marston being proud of mats he has made in prison (426) and the fact that his crowning achievement is one presenting an image of Rainbow, Starlight's horse, serves as an indication of his enduring emotional attachment to his former life. As Dick is finally about to leave prison he suddenly becomes aware of the extent to which he has aged and deteriorated physically since the beginning of his sentence when he looks into a mirror:

I regular started back. I didn't know myself. I came in a big, stout, brown-haired chap, full of life, and able to jump over a dray and bullocks almost...

And how was I going out? A man with a set kind of face, neither one thing nor the other, as if he couldn't be glad or sorry, with a fixed staring look about the eyes, a half-yellowish skin, with a lot of wrinkles in it, particularly about the eyes and grey hair. Big streaks of grey in the hair of the head and as for my beard it was white - white. I looked like an old man and walked like one. What was the use of my going out at all? (429).

It is probable that Boldrewood partly intended this image to be cautionary - a frightening portrait of a broken man justly dealt with by the invincible might of responsible Government. But it is at least possible that Boldrewood - who if nothing else admired his bushman narrator - did to some extent, intend the quite opposite anti-authoritarian effect which is actually created. Early in the novel Dick remarks with respect to free spirits such as his own: "There's some birds, and animals too, that either pine or else kill themselves in a cage and I suppose it's the same way with

some men" (83). (See p. 71) Put simply, we derive from Dick Marston's pathetic state, not so much a satisfying feeling of justice having been done as a very strong impression of there having been something disturbingly incongruous and unfitting about Dick's treatment at the hands of the Government - at least in the sense of its having been the presiding authority over a society which could see such a fundamentally decent, brave, intelligent and freedom-loving man frustrated and denied, hunted and trapped, and then ground into a state of submission in a penal institution. If the Government wins a victory over Dick Marston, it savours faintly of the kind of victory nurse Ratched wins over R.P. McMurphy in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest wherein another stirring, bold and rebellious spirit finishes his institutionalisation with a "blank, dead-end look."<sup>42</sup> The victory is decisive - but nobody applauds.

But for all Dick Marston's punishment, while he feels some understandable regret there is no real remorse. Dick's thoughts on his past deeds and experiences as he anticipates his execution soon after his trial do not seem to alter substantially in the ensuing years:

How was I to repent? Just to say I was sorry for them? I wasn't that particular sorry either - that was the worst of it. A deal of the old life was dashed good fun, and I'd not say, if I had the chance, that I wouldn't do just the same over again...It come natural to me to do some things and I did them (419).



**CONCLUSION**

## CONCLUSION

Although Robbery Under Arms has probably been one of the most read of all Australian novels, it has never really attracted a commensurate level of attention from literary critics,<sup>1</sup> who have tended to overlook the text in favour of more "sophisticated" and "artistically meritorious" works or ones more overtly political in tenor. An indication of the novel's popularity with the Australian reading public - as opposed to its indifferent status with the "serious" critics - is exemplified in the fact that Brisbane's Courier Mail<sup>2</sup> of Saturday April 19, 1938, actually devoted its entire editorial to acknowledging the fiftieth anniversary of Robbery Under Arms' publication in 1888. The editorial begins: "If one were to ask what is the best known Australian novel, the answer would probably be Rolf Boldrewood's Robbery Under Arms."<sup>3</sup> As further evidence of the novel's popularity, Brenda Niall notes that a survey of forty-five prominent Australian authors, carried out in the nineteen-eighties, regarding their early Australian literary influences, reveals that Boldrewood - whose only really successful novel was Robbery Under Arms - is among the top three authors cited, along with Henry Lawson and Marcus Clarke.<sup>4</sup> Because of its popularity the novel has undoubtedly printed itself on the nation's consciousness and I strongly suspect that many readers have accorded Robbery Under Arms a historical "authenticity" it may not entirely deserve but

which has nevertheless contributed quite significantly to the novel's cultural influence. The Courier Mail editorial mentioned above, for example, claims Robbery Under Arms has "the inestimable advantage of a firm historical background."<sup>5</sup>

It is with these considerations in mind that I have inquired into the political implications of Robbery Under Arms and have reached my conclusions to the effect that it is in many ways an unexpectedly and indeed more or less unintentionally radical text - even though this side of the novel remains largely unacknowledged by literary critics. Robbery Under Arms has been greatly overshadowed in critical terms by the radical nationalist writing of the eighteen-nineties and yet I see it as yielding - albeit more or less unconsciously - many very similar political implications in its treatment of power relations in the Australian colonial milieu it depicts. To provide an investigative framework I have broken the examination down to specific oppositional hierarchies but one can discern within my analysis various attributes of the novel which relate closely to broader national myths - myths the narrative probably contributed to significantly in terms of crystallisation and dissemination. It is a measure of Boldrewood's capacity to gauge and represent the prevailing mood of his time that he could produce a text probably more nationalistic in tenor than an assessment of his own personal attitudes might have suggested was likely.

In the first main section of the paper - "In this Savage Country..." I have given greatest emphasis to the "English versus Australian" opposition with a view to showing how Robbery Under Arms subverts its apparent imperial-colonial hierarchy. It does so in a variety of ways, some of them rather subtle, but in an overall sense I would describe the novel as quite strongly nationalistic in effect - whether that effect was intended or not. The "nationalistic" character of Robbery Under Arms incorporates some of those myths which came to be associated with the radical nationalist movement of the eighteen-nineties. We see the myths of egalitarianism - as highlighted particularly in the descriptions of the goldfields, mateship - as highlighted again on the goldfields and between the bushrangers and their friends, the noble bushman - Dick Marston himself is the archetype, "men of paste" new chums - as parodied in Starlight's impersonations, anti-authoritarianism - as in the bushrangers' practical jokes against the police, and so on. I believe this is due to the fact that both Robbery Under Arms and the nineties' writing drew heavily on proletarian bush culture and also - though not necessarily always overtly - the experience of the goldrushes. To some extent, then, both Boldrewood and writers of the nineties were tapping into - that is reflecting - broader community myths, attitudes and feelings, but I strongly suspect the nineties writers took what Boldrewood presented to some degree unintentionally and

implicitly in Robbery Under Arms and gave it a more conscious and explicit emphasis in their more recognisably political narratives and tracts. The use of a "native" bushman narrator - an entirely new literary voice - with his superbly expressive Australian colloquial idiom, should in itself be recognised as a huge advance in the development of a national consciousness.

Although it has led to a good deal less critical recognition as a politically significant text, in my view Robbery Under Arms' political implications have not necessarily been any the less influential for being largely unintended and implicit rather than deliberate and openly declared. Lawson and Furphy may have had politically radical attitudes, but it made their work in many ways very biased and predictable - and thus most appealing to the "converted." Robbery Under Arms' radicalism is a good deal more "insidious" - working as it is against a conservative and unremarkable apparent project broadly concerned with demonstrating the folly of crime.

Boldrewood included sympathetic ruling class figures in Robbery Under Arms - something most nineties writers were loathe to do - but he nevertheless in some ways effectively subverted the "ruling class-working class" hierarchy by providing a decidedly un-English model of interaction between the classes whereby his ideal types like Mr Falkland, Miss Falkland, Clifford, Hastings and even Starlight exhibit a

valorised willingness to relate to ordinary Australian bush people on a remarkably even interpersonal basis. In this way I think it is quite misleading to emphasise the "English-gentlemanly"<sup>6</sup> flavour of Robbery Under Arms - as Chris Tiffin does - in arguing that the novel is "colonial" and conservative.

Robbery Under Arms' ideal English gentlemen are ideal English gentlemen from the point of view of an Australian native-born bushman and that makes a very significant difference between the English gentlemen lionised in a colonial novel like Geoffrey Hamlyn<sup>7</sup> and the representatives of that species in Robbery Under Arms like Mr Falkland, a "thoroughly acclimatised" Englishman whom Dick Marston says speaks to him "just as if I'd been a swell like himself" (79), or Clifford and Hastings whom Dick says are "just like anybody else" (227), or Captain Starlight who is affianced to a small farmer's native-born daughter (329) - one of the admirable Frank Maberley's "dowdy hussies"<sup>8</sup> in Geoffrey Hamlyn.

The Government-outlawry opposition is a particularly fascinating aspect of Robbery Under Arms and again I would say the second, ostensibly hierarchically "inferior" term, actually comes to hold the ascendancy in the novel - not because there is any claim in the text that there is something inherently admirable about crime, but because of

the way in which defiance of the law - and its enforcers - is contextualised in the narrative.

The Government-outlawry opposition is closely aligned with the ruling class - working class opposition in the novel such that through various textual utterances, patterns and intimations we build an impression of the Marstons as being part of a wider economically and socially disadvantaged rural working class which is very much resentful of the ascendancy of the wealthy ruling class squatters - who are in turn protected by the Government. By providing a range of evidences of the social and economic background to the Marstons' cattle-duffing, which almost inevitably leads on to more serious crimes, Boldrewood largely undoes his efforts to attribute their crimes to causes less relevant to social and economic inequalities and resultant class conflicts. And of course these social and economic factors tend to cast the Marstons' slide into outlawry in a much more sympathetic light - in other words, it offers them a significant degree of justification. Boldrewood does employ an apparent small farming exemplar, George Storefield, whose name is intended to be suggestive of his determinedly thrifty ways, to prove that patient and honest industry will lead to certain prosperity. But Storefield and his single-minded focus on hoarding are rendered unattractively dull relative to the less conformist Marstons and their exciting adventures. As well, Storefield's actual small farming career is so brief

before he rockets to the status of a major capitalist - thanks to the totally fortuitous advent of the goldrushes - that the credibility of his depiction as a model small farmer is destroyed in any case. Furthermore, his whole image as a "respectable" law-abiding citizen is subverted towards the novel's close by the highly illegal assistance he renders the bushrangers in their efforts to flee the country.

Some of Robbery Under Arms' inconsistencies show up flaws in Boldrewood's Establishment ideology and these inconsistencies can be shown to have been produced by certain distortions of the historical experience the author drew upon so heavily for the novel. I have highlighted some of these distortions and the inconsistencies they create in the narrative. The crucial point here is that the efforts Boldrewood makes to smooth over conflicts which point to elements of social protest and a subversive agenda as being implicated in the bushrangers' motivations - efforts which produce the inconsistencies - are unsuccessful in distracting our attention from the subversive and protest-driven dimension of their activities, even if they are not made explicit.

The Marstons are heroic figures in a sense, refusing to conform to "respectable" standards which would entail a life of abject drudgery and paltry returns when adjacent ruling class squatters have more stock than they can be bothered attending to. But having become embroiled in crime,



the Government allows them no path back other than through a lengthy prison sentence - even when they are determined to return to honest ways. In this light the Government is effectively represented as irrationally harsh and as an actual cause of their progression towards more serious crime. In the democratic Utopia of the goldfields the Marstons are in their ideal social and economic environment. Some critics have referred to the Hollow as an illusory Utopia<sup>1</sup> but the Hollow is never much more than a refuge. The goldfields' carnivalesque levelling of society where all classes mix equally is the novel's real Utopia and here the Marstons, being under no domination and earning fair rewards from honest work have no motive for crime. The egalitarianism of the goldfields is strongly valorised in the novel - thereby effectively undermining the ruling class-working class hierarchy. But once discovered, the Marstons are driven to more shocking crimes and it is little wonder that our sympathies gravitate towards the outlaws rather than the Government.

The bushrangers are identified strongly with the working class bush community and the Barnes sisters are representative of that culture. They are effectively portrayed as the bushrangers' "mates" and there is no suggestion of a hierarchical inferiority in their relationship to the male characters. And although the fierce Kate is represented unsympathetically, she is nevertheless a

potent force. But it is definitely the Barnes sisters who completely subvert the male-female hierarchy in the novel. A number of women are also involved in the almost theatrical style of mockery of Government authority which comes to characterise the adventures of the bushrangers. The daring and comic aspects of these episodes build our sympathies for the outlaws and their bush friends - as opposed to the inefficient and frustrated Government forces. In a fashion again reminiscent of carnival, the outlaws frequently impersonate their "betters" rendering unstable - at least temporarily - their hierarchical inferiority in conventional social affairs but also offering in these performances bold gestures of defiance against the ascendancy of their persecutors. Subversive humour is a keynote of Robbery Under Arms and hence the emphasis I have given to it throughout the paper.

The Anglo-Celtic-Aboriginal hierarchy is not radically subverted in Robbery Under Arms but one can say Boldrewood unintentionally reduces its extremity greatly by making Warrigal's "treacherous nature" the effective mark of his inferiority. At face value the text would have it that Warrigal "betrays" the Marstons. But there is no "betrayal" for the text itself reveals clearly that the Marstons despise Warrigal - quite irrationally - from the moment they meet him and never alter their disposition towards him. In this sense the Marstons simply reap what they sow. At the same time one

can say Warrigal is completely loyal to Starlight and is also represented as the best bushman in the novel - and if one considers Dick Marston's opening boasts in Chapter One, regarding his riding and tracking abilities, this is no small measure of a man's actual worth in the context of the narrative. Robbery Under Arms is a racist text but in this respect it differs little from the radical nationalist writing of the nineties which could in fact in many instances, be said to be a good deal worse.

Robbery Under Arms is a novel of many voices. Some would say chief among these is that of Rolf Boldrewood compulsively talking over - if not taking over - his characters, when not resorting to the language of the stereotype. But these are harsh judgements and I believe one of the outstanding achievements of the novel is its representation of diverse and sometimes opposing voices. But the crowning accomplishment of the novel is the proud and independent voice of the "native" Australian bushman Dick Marston, a sympathetic criminal whose crimes are really more in the nature of heroic adventures in pursuit of "life and liberty and free range" (83) - wants denied him in a life of "respectable" small farming conformity. The Government gets its revenge on Dick Marston in "a close-feeling, close-smelling, dirty-clean graveyard they call a gaol" (61) but throughout the novel while one cannot condone their violence there is nevertheless in the case of the Marstons at least,

a very strong impression, generated by the narrative itself, of their being victims of society - and more particularly its rulers - rather than simply vicious predators thereupon. In being very humane in this regard, Boldrewood also inadvertently managed to be very radical.

**END NOTES**

END NOTES

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