Journal of the Anthropological Society of South Australia

Volume 31
Numbers 1 & 2
December 1993

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ISSN 1034-4438
Aboriginalism in turn of the century South Australian literature

Ian Goodwin

Introduction

This paper is presented in four parts: the introduction serves to locate the study's relevance, a brief background to the sources used then follows prior to the discussion proper and the concluding remarks. The objective is to unearth something of the rhetoric of Aboriginalism and of Aboriginalist discourse in turn of the century South Australian literature. The paper follows the tradition of Edward Said and his pioneering work, Orientalism.¹ In terms of theory a debt must also be acknowledged to numerous post-Said writers (in the simplest and most literal sense of the term) who have examined similar discourses, and whose influence, whilst seldom referenced directly, must always be assumed to be present.

It should be clear that nothing particularly revolutionary is offered here. Accordingly, the paper may be seen as a redundant repetition of studies of Orientalist-type discourse, or as an unprofitable attempt to add something to the burgeoning encyclopedia of case studies in that field. By way of debunking such criticism, this introduction should be concluded by answering the question: Why undertake a study of Aboriginalism and Aboriginalist discourse?

To begin, a simple fact ought to be asserted: Australia and the Australian story are unique. Inevitably, then, there is something new here, and it is that newness which forms the crux of the issue. Despite considerable time and influence around the edges of mainstream scholarly thought in related areas, the approach adopted here has not previously been employed to any significant degree in Aboriginal studies nor to further an understanding of black/white relations in Australia. There is a gap which needs to be bridged to
imbue Aboriginal studies with that which is new, with an understanding of Aboriginalism and its history. Until that occurs, Aboriginality will never be understood vis-a-vis the historical investigative positionality. That is, in terms of its relationship to dominant Australian culture, and its existence per se, it will always be misunderstood in Eurocentric terms. The aforementioned objective of this paper may, therefore, be redefined as an exercise in gap bridging. Such an operation solves very few problems, whilst creating many on its way to theoretical chaos, yet that in no way defies one important point: the operation's relevance is self-evident in that it describes something that is a manifest reality.

A Background To The Sources Used

The study makes primary reference to eight discrete publications, about which some elaboration is required. To keep the study succinct, attention has been confined to that period of history in South Australia which spanned roughly a decade either side of the turn of the century, the most notable anomaly being an 1877 publication by Robert Bruce. The aim is to focus on the period of South Australian history which fell directly before the Aborigines Act of 1911 and which was sufficiently tempered by distance from the early pioneering era to avoid charges of drawing from an extreme and anomalous historical glitch.

All sources are written by South Australians about South Australia (including the Northern Territory), though an applicability to the broader Australian context must be assumed. Given that the time frame encompasses Australia's Federation, the writers discussed must be considered, in the main, to be as much Australian as they are South Australian, regardless of their personal affiliative proclivities.

Whilst succinct enough to hold coherent meaning, it is hoped that the sample of sources is elective enough to avoid being unrepresentative. Four
publications of South Australian poetry by two authors are cited, as are four works by two authors of purely descriptive and (supposedly) non-fictional prose, ranging from a quasi-academic pamphlet to a work of self-aggrandising autobiography.

Of the two poets, one is identified only as W. M. T., and his book is entitled *South Eastern Memories* (1891). Secondly, three books by R. Bruce are cited; *A Voice From the Australian Bush* (1877), *Echoes from Coondambo* (1893), and *Re-Echoes from Coondambo* (1903) - accounts of life as recorded by a squatter on the Eastern shores of Lake Torrens. Of the remainder, three works by Worsnop are cited; two articles entitled *The Pre-Historic Arts of the Aborigines of Australia* published in 1887 and 1895 respectively, and a book which bears a similar title published in 1897. At the time of his writing Worsnop was a Justice of the Peace and the Town Clerk of Adelaide. The final book referred to is William Willshire's *The Land of the Dawning* (1895). Of Willshire, it may be said that he wrote of a period in which he was a First Class Mounted Constable and Officer in Charge of the Native Police in Central Australia.

It is hoped that the sources are collectively illustrative of attitudes held in Australian society around the turn of the century. Moreover, being bound by the propriety conferred by their respective positions, it is hoped that the writings of Willshire and Worsnop provide a meaningful link between attitudes held in both popular and what one might call official culture.

**Discussion**

The logical place to begin this discussion - and useful by way of a brief revision of theory - is to trace its lineage back to its progenitor Edward Said and his work, *Orientalism*. To reduce Said’s argument, the suggestion therein is that Western culture was instrumental in creating the Other as an entity which existed across a gulf of diametric opposition from everything Western.
A Eurocentric conception of the Other as inferior, uncivilised and backward was built upon generations of accumulated ‘superior’ Western knowledge, creating a juxtaposition of ‘us’ to ‘them’ in Western thought, where ‘they’ were the conceptual and textual constructions of ‘our’ accumulated knowledge and self-citational characterisations, representations and descriptions of ‘them’.

Said suggests that this Orientalist body of knowledge gained a Gramsci-style consential hegemony within Western civil society. Its relevance to the colonial project lies in the fact that Orientalism has a political dimension: constructed Western knowledge underlies Western political thought, policy and action regarding relations with the Other, in which the West has held the balance of power.

Whilst Said has studied the representation of the Orient, the essential tenets of his work can be used to gain some insight wherever the Other exists, is represented or created; wherever a discourse of colonialism gave that project its impetus and justification. How, then, was colonial discourse manifested in the case of Australia?

The idea that the West can know the Other and, indeed, know the Other better than their inferiority allows them to know themselves, the notion of conquest through knowledge, is captured here by Worsnop when he suggests that Europeans ought to examine native Australian rock carvings:

For a halo of romance and mystery lies over them, which the traditions of the native race utterly fail to interpret.\(^3\)

Again, such perceived superiority and consequent ability to know things Aboriginal is illustrated in the following:

To-night it will be my task to create in you an interest in the pre-historic arts of the aborigines; a task which will not call upon you for very deep thought, or for the exercise of very abstract attention.\(^4\)
The tendency of colonial discourse has been to represent the Other as a savage and primitive being of barbarous and uncivilised race, inhabiting a chaotic social environment and an untamed often pre-historic physical environment. The Other, their race and environment are represented as being in a natural and chaotic, as opposed to improved and orderly, state. What is critical here is that the juxtaposition of us to them, of primitive to civilised, of natural to improved, when linked to nascent evolutionary theory, came to contain an element of universal dynamism. There was the suggestion that we have moved beyond the position which they now inhabit, that we have undergone a history of evolution or civilisation through numerous stages along a unilinear continuum, and that they, as yet, have not evolved or changed from that past state. Similarly, it is asserted that they have devolved to a degraded state whilst the West has evolved from an original common stock. This linear, universalist perception of things is clearly illustrated in the subtitle of Willshire’s book, which reads:

Being facts gleaned from cannibals in the Australian stone age.  

The term ‘stone age’ depicts an unequivocal unilinear juxtaposition to a European present age. In the following, similar rhetoric by Worsnop casts the Aborigine as a child and the European as an accomplished adult:

We are apt to forget, in our consideration of the works of aboriginal art, that the world’s grey fathers were children themselves, and that the beautiful works of art which adorn our homes and cities are the product of hundreds of years of patient teaching and toil ...  

When Worsnop further suggests that Aboriginal art:

will bear very favorable comparison with those of prehistoric man in any other part of the world ...  

we see that the Aborigine is suggested to be classically prehistoric in Eurocentric terms. At this point it should be noted that if history is considered to be a documentation of the process of change, the Aborigine is defined as culturally ahistorical or, more bluntly, acultural. One might suggest that a
process of devolution casts the Aborigine as negatively cultural or negatively historical, but the end point is still the same, being a negation of the Other.

To provide some archetypal examples of Aboriginalist representations in the spirit of broader colonial discourses, the following passage shows how Aboriginal culture is confirmed as inferior and dismissed through trivialisation:

(they) found large stones - much larger than they had seen before - placed side by side, marking out squares, circles, and different kinds of figures, as far as the eye could reach. What they were for the party could not make out; but it was supposed that the natives held merry-making, or something of that sort, here.\(^8\)

Australia and the Aborigine are empirically shown to be ahistorical, when Worsnop comments on:

the almost total absence of historical notices, relative to the aborigines of Australia, during the long ages which have passed since this continent was first peopled to a period within little more than 100 years from the present time \(\ldots\)\(^9\)

In the following, the same author ponders the origin of Aboriginal paintings. He implies that Aborigines are ahistorical and inferior primitives, having produced nothing of historical relevance. The reasoning hinged on the hypothesis that anything of relevance associated with Aborigines must be, at least indirectly, the product of the influence of an outsider. He says:

Whatever may be the age of these paintings, it is scarcely probable that they could have been executed by a self-taught savage. Their origin \(\ldots\) must still be open to conjecture.\(^{10}\)

Paradoxically, Worsnop uses evidence which should logically question Aboriginal ahistorical and acultural inferiority to form a thesis which, by its implications, confirms that status.
Evidently, these representations cast the Other as inferior according to Western standards. When linked to Western paradigms of progress and development, or improvement, these types of representations coupled with Darwinian theories of evolution established themselves as a ‘legitimating ideology’ for colonialism in the form of the so-called ‘civilising mission’.

Any ideological or ethical opposition to the civilising mission as regards, for example, indigenous land ownership or defined indigenous social systems was typically annulled by those representations which cast the cultural and environmental Other in ahistorical and negatory terms, portraying a blank slate inviting the unimposed and unrestricted cultural and physical imprint of civilisation. It was in this spirit that Worsnop said:

I trust . . . that in this effort to rescue from oblivion the primeval antiquities of Australia some interest may be awakened in the public mind . . .

The implication is that these primeval antiquities await the shape and existence, as opposed to a state of oblivion, which only discovery by, and contact with, white society can confer upon them. We see the landscape portrayed as a blank slate by references to it as being ‘unknown regions’, and ‘isolated parts of which no-one has been’. Again, it awaits significance through discovery by white culture. It awaits evolution, development and history.

Consider further this passage by Worsnop. He comments on:

a considerable variety of mammals indigenous to the country but amongst them all not one useful for labour . . . so also was there a lack of cereals suitable for cultivation for human food.

Equally as peculiar and isolated as its flora and fauna are the aborigines . . . They had no implements . . . they were equally ignorant of the art of making pottery.
The country is described as being without cereal, without animals of any use. The human part of the country is described as without tools, without pottery. This is illustrative of the tradition of describing the Other in the negative and as awaiting existence or form. In the following passage, negatory language is used to establish the Aborigines and the broader environment as being without law, which sets the scene to further establish how white contact can fill that void with substance and imbue the scene with improved characteristics, with an ordered form and recognisable existence, via the provision of law:

the author . . . received intimation of all depredations committed by the lawless aborigines . . . he had to . . . deal with each case respectively as the law provided.\textsuperscript{16}

In the same vein, we see the rhetoric of the civilisation via white contact applied to improving the savage being in Bruce’s poem, ‘That Blackfellow’:

And now, as copper coloured black
Improv’d will soon be from creation,
Of photos please pile up a stack
To keep in mind your queer relation.
Of course, descendants he will have
With British skins and Roman noses,
Who’ll favour Teuton, Celt or Slav
While some may pass as seed of Moses.

In half a century I’ve seen
The blacks improving much in places,
Not only in their dress and mien
But other Austral airs and graces.\textsuperscript{17}

That is the essence of the civilising mission in colonial discourse: contact with the West is portrayed as inherently good, having the potential to facilitate evolution from one extreme to its juxtaposed other, which is ascribed a higher value and righteousness, a greater desirability, within a Western paradigmatic framework. The civilising mission can thus be understood as bringing
civilisation where there is none, good where there is bad, order where there is chaos; subjugating and improving nature; subjugating nature personified (the primitive) to effect an ordered civilisation.

The mission, which required a juxtaposition of self to Other to be represented, needed a concrete identity of each party, an identity which was born from the very act of representation. This type of construction is well illustrated in Bruce’s poem, ‘The Thunderstorm’. Here nature, the inhospitable outside and dirty world of the blacks, the Other writ in the environment, is juxtaposed to the improved, clean and ordered sanctuary of the inside of the squatter’s home. Outside is portrayed as a thing of which to be ‘frightened’. The Aborigines as a part of the outside and personification of nature are instrumental as integral components of its representation. They are literally demonised as ‘crew of dark demon elves’ and portrayed as being a chaotic ‘motley crew’ and ‘friends so dirty’ of an unpleasant and malodorous type. Conversely, the final two lines are presented as follows:

And the old woman comes with a sour face
And inwardly growls as she cleans up the place

From that we understand that a temporary influx of Aborigines or chaos into the sanctuary of Bruce’s home having warranted its reordering or cleaning, the latter is created, by implication, as a centre of cleanliness and order. Seen on a unilinear continuum, this Aboriginalist dichotomy, when combined with Western paradigms of progress, creates a self-affirmation of what is desirable by portraying its negative image, and a consequent mandate to civilise the Other.

A sense of Darwinian superiority within a Western model of what was desirable and right, bolstered by a providential knowledge to that effect, gave the civilising mission its sense of mission, often designated ‘the white man’s burden’, and being a sense of self-sacrifice and benevolent labour. What occurs in the last two lines of ‘The Thunderstorm’ is that the notion of the white man’s burden (or old woman’s burden, as the case may be) as regards
civilising the primitive, is transferred and applied to improving the untamed and chaotic environmental Other. The cleansing of Bruce’s representation of disorder is a chore which must be borne to facilitate improvement.

That the primitive and the natural environment are entirely analogous has been established, as has the fact that the mission of civilising each are inextricably linked. In other words, the appropriation and development - in Western terms - of natural resources can be understood in terms of the civilising mission.

Let us now take that further and move beyond analogy to consider evidence, further to any presented in ‘The Thunderstorm’, which shows the absolute link between Aborigines and nature. Such a link is characteristic of Aboriginalist discourse and shows how Aborigines were considered to be an integral and dehumanised part of the natural environment, as a chaotic component of a whole in need of ordering and improvement. In the following passage by Willshire, the Aborigine is clearly portrayed as a component of the whole of the broader landscape:

What a sense of freedom one experiences standing on high ground, with nothing above but the pure, glorious sky, and a far-spreading view of the country below, with here and there a gleam of water where the river winds, till the whole melts away in the distance against the far western sky; but nearer still, among the pandanus palms, the light blue smoke from the aborigines’ camp curls up through the deep foliage.²¹

In a similar vein, this depiction of an Aboriginal woman in Bruce’s poem, ‘To a dead black gin’, requires no elaboration. He says, ‘A cheery daughter of the soil were you . . . ’²² In a further piece by Willshire, a synthesis of the language used in the previous two passages is provided:

The Wickham, the queen of beautiful rivers, whose banks sparkle with flowers, presents its soothing breast to the untutored children of the forest, who, in their . . . ignorance are not qualified to appreciate the land of wealth and beauty in which their lot is cast. It
is obvious to any one with practical knowledge who wanders through this bright and wonderful terra incognita that her resources will in the future be practically limitless.\textsuperscript{23}

The passage is also illustrative of a tradition in colonial discourse which alludes to the desirability of a superior and qualified people who can appreciate the wonderful wealth and beauty of natural resources, putting such resources to the purposes which they are seen to be intended by those with ‘practical knowledge’.

It was such perceptions of the uses which the earth is supposed to serve, and ‘man’s’ duty to serve such ends, which had led to the Eurocentric or Christian-centric designation of Australia as Terra Nullius, arising from European perceptions of Aborigines like the following:

The native has no fixed or permanent abode; he roams from place to place where ever food... is plentiful. His wanderings are bound by no law... He never cultivates the soil, and... his shelter by night is of the most primitive character... constructed one day and forsaken the next.\textsuperscript{24}

Images of that type were clearly at odds with the European notion of the correct scheme of things, as laid down in Genesis:

And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful... replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over... every living thing that moveth upon the earth’.\textsuperscript{25}

By failing to follow consequent perceptions of divine law as regards property rights, the Aborigine is therefore cast, not as an owner of the land, but rather, by implication, merely as an element of it, as an obstacle in the way of European improvement which is portrayed as the making, not taking, of the land.
It was in this light, following the logic which legitimated European usurpation of the land by casting the Aborigine as too primitive to have gained dominion over it, that Bruce referred to Aborigines as ‘Nature’s errors’. Such representations doubtlessly served to justify, effect and affirm in the Australian public conscience the otherwise dubious designation of Australia as Terra Nullius.

It has been established that the perceived unilinear scheme of things may be understood not only in terms of European evolution, but also in terms of a devolution of the Aborigine to a point of degradation, but from an original common stock. Accordingly, Bruce suggests in his poem, ‘Tulip’, that the Aborigines:

to old Adam and Eve trace back a lineage, perhaps not always black.²⁷

That Aborigines had undergone and were undergoing a process of devolution is unequivocally represented in the following two passages by Worsnop:

The customs of the natives . . . point . . . to some long-forgotten source. . . (and) resemble more what we should expect from survivals of a former civilization than the efforts of savages to rise to a higher sphere.²⁸

The paintings . . . give evidence of great intelligence. At the same time it must be remembered that there is no data whatever to connect these works with the present generation.²⁹

It is interesting to consider that the logical extrapolation or end point of a process of devolution is the dying race scenario, pronounced as the Aborigines’ fate by Worsnop when he comments upon the importance of collecting and studying native artefacts:

so that the weight of personal knowledge may accompany them, or, like the tribes themselves, these relics will soon disappear and be no more known.³⁰
Bruce illustrates his belief in the scenario too, by depicting an image of near and inevitable death in what may be understood as a portrait of the Aboriginal condition in his poem, ‘The Hunt of the Manawirta Coodla’. He writes of:

-toothless hags whose skins, like bags, hang o’er their frames too loosely -
For time, you know, long, long ago, has wrinkled them profusely
And so the lot like huge toads squat, their poolkas near them sprawling,
While crows hop round, on plunder bound, by pickaninnies crawling.\textsuperscript{31}

Though the implications arising from Worsnop’s explanations for the degradation of rock art, we see that the Aborigines have only themselves to blame for their fate:

-The renovating artist . . . to whom their original signification was unknown, was not always careful or particular in keeping to the exact design or lines of the original painting, and in this manner distortions and alterations from the primary design insensibly crept in.\textsuperscript{32}

We understand that the displacement of the old by the new, the removal of chaos, obstacles, and therefore Aborigines from the landscape to effect order, is seen as a providential good. This is well illustrated in a passage from W. M. T.’s poem, ‘Twilight near the Sea’:

-God rules the years. Long course of far-off time
Saw here the lava from its craters run
To heave and burst the plains of sea-land lime, -
With help of yeasty surge and sand-filled wind
To form this long-stretched range, these knots of hills.
Changes of weather, births and deaths, a rind
Of dark mould laid; now man raw nature drills.
His clay, fine-kneaded and inspired by God,
Conjointly with its progress leading on
To higher grades of use the lifeless clod,
The senseless grass, dull fauna. Years have gone:
The white race has supplanted low-caste blacks,
Culture has changed the wild, and better stock
Been brought upon the field ... 33

If one adds to this notion of providentia evidence or representations of a dying race, one has a quasi-Darwinian affirmation of the inevitability of the perceived divine progression of things. The demise and disappearance of the Aborigine is seen not only as right and good in accordance with the tenets of civilising nature, but also as natural and inevitable and, furthermore, as a result of their own folly. This essentially affirms the moral rightness of the notion of Terra Nullius and annuls any moral impediment to Aboriginal disenfranchisement. After all, the blacks disenfranchised themselves through the devolution of their culture, for which only they are to blame.

We have seen how subduing nature, and the appropriation of resources, was justified by a rhetoric otherwise used to legitimate the cultural destruction of the Other. We have also seen how Aborigines were portrayed not as owners of the land, but as a part of it, as natural or chaotic errors or obstacles in the way of improvement, progress and order. It has been suggested that such representation reaffirmed Australia as Terra Nullius in white public consciousness. What is important is that these constructions, when linked to representations of devolution, degradation and the dying race, created a self-reinforcing affirmation of what was the inevitable and correct progression of things. Moreover, there is a further aspect to this self-reinforcing affirmation. Representations of a race dying through devolution confirmed the correctness of Eurocentric ideas about unilinearism, and therefore of the universalistic superior knowledge, representations and constructions of the Other, and the consequent correctness of the tenets which allowed the land to be usurped.
Conclusion

Of the manifold ad hoc forms which Aboriginalist discourse may have taken to serve varied purposes of the dominant culture, a representative historical part has been examined. It shows how the Aborigine and therefore Aboriginality have been historically constructed by the European to serve the interests of a European audience, in a manner which can be understood in terms of Said’s Orientalism. The study’s relevance to Aboriginal studies is to show that a European investigating Aborigines or Aboriginality inevitably does so from a position built atop a historical construction of accumulated Aboriginalist knowledge. The point is that unless the investigator to able to identify and deconstruct that positionality, the limits of culture dictate that he/she will inadvertently continue to erroneously manufacture the Aborigine.

Endnotes

2 ibid.
6 Worsnop, 1895, p. 2.
7 ibid., 1887, p. vi.
8 ibid., p. 18.
9 ibid., 1895, p. 1.
10 ibid., 1887, p. 25.
12 Worsnop, 1897, p. v.
Willshire, 1895, p. 1.

ibid, p. 8.

Worsnop, 1895, p. 2.

Willshire, 1896, p. 4.

R. Bruce, Re-Echoes from Coondambo, Adelaide, 1903, p. 66.


ibid., pp. 79-81.

ibid., p. 82.

Willshire, 1895, p. 13.

Bruce, 1903, p. 62.

Willshire, 1895, p. 37.

Worsnop, 1897, p. 2.

King James Bible, Genesis, 1:28.

Bruce, 1903, p. 64

R. Bruce, Echoes from Coondambo, Adelaide, 1893, p. 209.

Worsnop, 1897, p. 9.

ibid., p. 4.


Bruce, 1903, p. 4.

Worsnop, 1897, p. 5.

W. M. T., South Eastern Memories, Adelaide, 1891, p. 22.