

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS

IN

EARLY AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

1976

C O N T E N T S

RACE AGAINST TIME

by Christine Misko

CONVICT OFFENCES: SHAW/ROBSON?

by Gary Luxford

JAMES MUDIE, CIVILIAN MAGISTRATE, PROPERTY OWNER,
"CASTLE FORBES", PATRICK PLAINS

by Louis Greenwell

THE AUSTRALIAN AGRICULTURAL COMPANY

by Ken Kennedy

THE SQUATTING WOMEN OF AUSTRALIA

by Sally Kinsley

P R E F A C E

Each year students in the History IIB Class are asked in First Term to research a paper on some aspect of the History of Australia before Federation that interests them, basing their work, wherever possible, on primary sources. Some of these papers reach high standards, and not infrequently make original contributions to the understanding of our history, especially to the local history of this region.

This collection of five of the papers presented this year has been assembled to make the fruits of some of this research available to others, and at the same time to show students the standard of work that can be achieved. These essays are not necessarily the best essays, but they are good ones and are technically well presented. They have been chosen, however, more to demonstrate the variety of issues that interest students: local as well as national; female as well as male; black as well and white.

They display a solid background and provide an insight into several themes developed during the First Term. In this way they constitute a useful supplement to the course and should prove interesting reading.

It is hoped that this project will continue from year to year both to encourage research and originality and to slowly build up a body of material to which later students can refer.

Carol Bacchi
Peter Hempenstall
Noel Rutherford

THE SQUATTING WOMEN OF AUSTRALIA

by Sally Kinsley

SYNOPSIS

Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932) first emphasised the impact of a wilderness environment on a transplanted civilization. He saw that free land on the frontier, drawing men away from European influence, helped build a new Americanism. Frontier traits of self-reliance and individualism, and a "restless energy that comes with freedom" left their imprint on society. Russel Ward in The Australian Legend relates Turner's ideas on the significance of the frontier to the development of Australia. He states that in contrast to America the Australian frontier was inimical to the small farmer. The nature of the pastoral industry, the country's staple, and the great though decreasing scarcity of white women in the outback brought into being an itinerant rural proletariat, overwhelmingly masculine in composition and outlook. Thus he draws a picture of the typical bushman as a wandering individualist. McQueen, however, in A New Britannia suggests in fact that many may have had farms closer in and only have gone outback for a reason. Therefore they were not necessarily Ward's collectivists but were just as much small farmers as on the American frontier. To support his argument that many bushmen had a farm and family life McQueen presents evidence such as Henry Lawson's story "The Drover's Wife". This story and the new light which McQueen's theory sheds brings to attention the existence of a new class of people, that is, the bushman's wives or the squatting women. The position of part-time wife and part-time boss they had to fulfil and the qualities that their peculiar lifestyle exacted from them must have recognition.

In recent years the significance of the frontier in relation to the history and development of a country has received increasing attention. F.J. Turner (1861-1932) first recognised the tremendous influence of frontier conditions in America on molding the lifestyle, and the attitudes of its people. Since new countries like Australia and the United States were settled by Europeans, the natural tendency of historians was to explain development in terms of successive influences from Europe. The achievement of Turner's theory was to show that indigenous and particularly 'frontier' influences were of major importance in any just understanding of American history. Turner reasoned, in so far as the American was not just a transplanted European but a different kind of man, the change could only have been brought about by changes met within the new land. And thus he recognised a new Americanism based on frontier traits of self-reliance, restless energy, and 'that exuberance' that comes with freedom. American 'individualism', especially, was seen as traceable to the small independent farmers produced by a conjuncture on the frontier of favourable climatic conditions and the Homestead Acts.

As in America, these indigenous influences must be seen as most potent on the expanding frontier of Australia where they were met by colonists in their most undiluted form. However, there exists two opposing schools of opinion concerning the type of national ethos which developed as a result of these influences, those of Ward and McQueen. In his book The Australian Legend, Russel Ward reverses the American picture given by Turner, claiming that the failure of the Free Selection Acts and the hostility of the Australian frontier to the small farmers forced the typical Australian to accept collectivist notions:

"The plain fact is that the Australian frontiersman in the last century was a wage worker who did not usually expect to become anything else....his economic interests, unlike those of the American frontiersman reinforced this tendency towards a social, collectivist outlook". (1)

McQueen, in A New Britannia, disputes this theory and suggests, in fact, that many bushmen may have had farms and a family life closer in. That is, they were not necessarily Ward's collectivists but were just as much small farmers as the American frontiersman. If McQueen's argument is valid, recognition must be given not only to the bushmen of the frontier but also to the pioneer wives - not those that have their names carved out in the history books of Australia like the famous 'Mary of Maranoa', but those left in the background to work a farm and raise a family. The typical, yet the unobtrusive, such as the unknown drover's wife depicted by Henry Lawson deserves consideration.

In the Australian Legend Ward argues that the typical bushman was a wandering individualist, a nomad with no ties but those of mateship. He states that this had to be the case because, in contrast to America, frontier conditions were inimical to the small settler. In the United States favourable geographical conditions of soil, rainfall and relatively accessible markets combined with nineteenth century land legislation, which culminated in the Homestead Act of 1862, made it possible for a poor man, backed by his wife and family, to obtain a living from the soil. However, in Australia Ward argues that conditions were such that a bushman might by

"loyal combination with his fellows win better conditions from his employer but the possibility of his becoming his own master by individual enterprise was usually but a remote dream". (2)

The harsh facts of Australian geography, that is, scanty rainfall and great distances, ensured that most of the habitable land could be occupied only sparsely and by pastoralists. The effect of these limitations, Ward goes on to point out, was further accentuated by government land policies and legislation. British manufacturers wanting increasingly more wool for the Yorkshire textile mills meant that, from at least 1828 onwards, the effect, if not always the intention, of legislation was to favour the big pastoralists. The failure of the Free Selection Acts aimed at 'unlocking the land' bears testimony to this fact. Thus geographical factors, combined with nineteenth century economic conditions, ensured that the typical station should be a very large unit, employing many casual hands, but owned by a single man or a company of substantial capital.

Because of this, Ward argues most bushworkers seem to have felt that there was little point in saving money, as they believed it almost impossibly difficult for a poor man to become a landowner, even in a small way. He gives the example that from 1831 when land normally sold for five shillings an acre a shepherd who saved every penny of his wages could only purchase his own 'block' after seven years and that period of time again would be required in order to obtain sufficient working capital. (3) Supporting Ward's argument Alexander Harris, author of Settlers and Convicts, cites bad land legislation as the principal cause of the proverbial thriftlessness of the pastoral proletariat. And Niel Black, landowner, commenting on this aspect of his workers' lives, wrote

"Yet if they did not go regularly to the Grog shop we should have no labour at all, they would save and have properties of their own". (4)

To Ward then

"the typical Australian frontiersman was not a small, individualist farmer, tilling his own soil with the help of his family...Indeed he usually had no family

and scorned agricultural pursuits". (5)

In fact he goes on to say,

"So far from being 'precipitated by the wilderness into a primitive organisation based on the family', he was precipitated into an equally primitive organisation of 'nomad tribesmen', if one may conceive a tribe without women and children". (6)

In support of his vision of the bushman as a lone figure without a wife or family Ward draws attention to what he calls the 'famine of females' in the interior. In 1851, for instance, in the remote district of Maranoa there were sixty-five single males over thirteen years and no single women of the same age group. (7) Taken from census returns a table illustrating the proportion of males to females in the white population for the years 1841 and 1851 is located in the appendix. From these figures, assuming women to be distributed evenly through the different groups of outback population, Ward calculated that four out of every seven men of that period would be doomed to bachelorhood. In reality, Ward states the proportion of single men among the pastoral labourers would be very much higher since the few marriageable girls would be attracted to those with land or steady work. (8)

In summary, Ward sees frontier conditions as fostering and intensifying the growth of a distinctively Australian outlook, an outlook strongly egalitarian in nature and characterised by sentiments of group solidarity and loyalty. He points to environmental pressures as the cause of such behaviour, stating that the 'difficulties' of outback life made the practice of a collectivist 'mateship' essential just as abundance of basic foodstuffs made it possible. The bush hospitality, so characteristic of the Australian outback, represented a kind of primitive communism. Thus he pictured the typical Australian bushman as a wage-earner rather than a landowner, an individual wandering where work took him with no ties of wife or family; but, bound by his economic interests and the loneliness and hardships of outback life towards a social collectivist outlook.

McQueen, on the other hand, sets out an argument in A New Britannia which suggests that many bushmen may have had a farm and family life close in. He claims that the downfall in Ward's theory is his failure to realise that it was not necessary for bushmen to have their farms beyond Bourke. They could far more easily have one closer to the settled areas and only go outback for the shearing season. (9) Evidence for this is not lacking. Such seems to be the case in Louis Esson's "The Shearer's Wife:

"Before the glare o' dawn I rise
To milk the sleepy cows, an' shake
The droving dust from tired eyes.
I set the rabbit traps, then bake
The Children's bread
There's hay to stook, an' beans to hoe,
.....
Women must work, when men must go
Shearing from shed to shed". (10)

The same situation is present in Henry Lawson's story 'The Drover's Wife' where the husband apparently spends six months of the year being a bushman and the other half trying to run a farm. He was a squatter but "the drought of 18- ruined him", (11) and so to earn money to keep a family he goes droving. For, as Ward himself states, the labour scarcity far 'up the country' meant that wages were usually higher in the bush. The outback, in fact, offered something nearly approaching absolute economic security. Huge quantities of mutton, damper and tea and sufficient rough slop clothing were always available to competent workmen unencumbered by wife or children. (12) Thus it seems likely that because of the higher wages and self-sufficient life that the outback offered many men may have used it as a means to earn and

save money with the aim of supporting a farm and family elsewhere. Francis Adams explains that the bushman's

"visits to the township are with a view of entering his cheque to his account, or of forwarding it by post office order to his 'old woman' at the homestead hundreds of miles away". (13)

Anthony Trollope who travelled extensively in the outback and spent some months in 1871, and again in 1875 on sheep stations wrote:

"The bulk of the labour is performed by a nomad tribe, who wander in quest of their work, and are hired only for a time. This is of course the case in regard to washing sheep and shearing them... For all these operations temporary work is required and the squatter seldom knows whether the man he employs be married or single. They come and go, and are known by queer nicknames or are known by no names at all. They probably have their wives elsewhere and return to them for a season". (14)

In an interview recorded at Singleton on the seventeenth of April 1976 Mrs. Eric Robinson presented further evidence in support of McQueen's argument. She stated that her grandfather Robert Sinderberry, owner of an orchard at Camberwell, supplemented his income by droving in the off-season leaving his wife, Ellen, alone to cope with the farm in his absence. The census returns recorded in the appendix could tally with such an explanation showing a higher percentage of females in those counties within the boundaries, that is in the more closely settled districts proportionately equal to males.

Thus in McQueen's opinion the bushman was not as landless as Ward makes out. For instance in the Riverina in 1891 there was general relief amongst the striking dray drivers on learning that fines imposed could be taken only from wages and not from property, suggesting that in this area, at least, the bushman was receiving an income from the land. In the far north gold miners opposed the use of kanaka labour on sugar plantations on the grounds that it made possible the establishment of large estates and thus limited their prospects of becoming cane farmers. And McQueen states that this ambition for land was not peculiar to a particular group but extended to the townsfolk. There existed a general feeling among the society of the time that the soil was the source of a 'Blokes' redemption from larrickinhood. (15) McQueen states that although Australia was, in places, a big man's country these were not where the bulk of the non-urban population lived and worked. For example South Australia below the line was deliberately a small holders' frontier. And important pockets in the south west of Western Australia, Tasmania, Gippsland, the Darling Downs and the Riverina all confirm the possibility of landed proprietorship in Australia.

S.H. Roberts, author of The Squatting Age in Australia, agrees with Ward that the small men in the Australia of this time had a hard lot but goes on to say that the bush offered opportunity. He draws a picture of the average squatting establishment as two slab huts, a tumble down wool shed and a couple of rougher out stations. The absence of security over land preventing any sane man from constructing a permanent home or improvements. In an environment such as this Roberts states that theoretically, a squatter would boast of his garden and his intention to plough some ten acres and would dream of a small barn and dairy but these very rarely came to pass. (16) However, one begins to wonder whether these were merely the 'dreams' of the squatter as Roberts suggests, or whether there was indeed some reality in them. Especially in the light of Roberts next statement that living conditions for long remained unbelievably hard "even more so" than the uncertainty of tenure warranted. (17) Possibly the squatter didn't worry about improvements because for him this was only a temporary existence, his stable home being located elsewhere,

a home which more than likely consist of the ten acres and the dairy described. Thus Roberts draws a very important point for McQueen's argument. That is, that the life of a squatter was usually a sordid, filthy existence:

"It was a penal servitude of the worst type
...there is no romance in monotony and mutton fat"; (18)

with the sole return of such an existence being monetary. Money to perhaps fulfil or keep going the dream.

In weighing the two opinions of Ward and McQueen evidence suggests the validity of the argument set out by McQueen, especially in the light of inconsistencies within Ward's work. For instance in defending the code of bush morals in his book The Australian Legend Ward quotes a squatter, Thomas Major, to the effect that the bushman

"with all his faults he not infrequently marries
and settles down to farming and raising children...". (19)

Yet, some fifty pages later, Ward states in contradiction, that the typical Australian frontiersman was a wage-worker with the possibility of his becoming his own master by individual enterprise usually only a remote dream. (20)

If we accept McQueen's theory, that the pioneer bushman was not the wandering individualist that Ward pictures but, in fact, the owner of a small farm and family, one must look at the role played by women on the frontier of Australia. The history books tell of pioneer women fighting side by side with their husbands to carve a path in the wilderness; McQueen's theory suggests that the frontier created a second type of woman, those that the men left behind to work a farm and rear a family. These women had to take on a dual role - that of manager and worker, and wife and mother - and play both with dedication and determination. The 'shearer's wife' simply accepts the fact that

"Women must work, when men must go
Shearing from shed to shed". (21)

Her day started before the 'glare o' dawn'. She must do the work of two, milking, trapping and cultivating on the one hand and baking and darning on the other. 'By the time evening comes she is tired with "labour sore". However, the poem suggests a tiredness beyond the fatigue of labour;

"Tired of the bush, the cows, the gums,

.....

The moon is lonely in the sky,

The bush is lonely, an' lonely I

Stare down the track no horse draws nigh

An' start.....at the cattle bells". (22)

In these few lines the loneliness and the monotony of the life of these wives is felt. 'Wives' in the sense that they have the responsibilities of such a position. They had a home and children to tend and look after, but, derived few of the traditional benefits of married life such as companionship, dependency or security. It is hard to imagine in today's society the sense of total isolation they must have experienced. Henry Lawson's 'drover's wife', for instance, is alone with her children in a two roomed house built of rough timber, slabs and stringy bark. She is surrounded by bush:

"...the everlasting, maddening sameness of the
stunted trees - that monotony which makes a man
long to break away and travel as far as trains
can go, and sail as far as ships can sail - and
further". (23)

The nearest sign of civilization, a shanty on the main road, is nineteen miles away. Living in such a manner, she has not heard from her husband in six months, and is anxious about him.

Russel Ward in The Australian Legend talks of the hardships and loneliness the typical bushman experienced and the strong bonds of mateship which developed between such men because of these hardships. He talks especially of the tradition that a man should have his own special 'mate' with whom he shared money, goods, and secret aspirations, and for whom, even when in the wrong he was prepared to make almost any sacrifice. However, Ward fails to recognise the existence of women such as the 'drover's wife' for whom even the compensation of friendship with other females was denied. Their only pipeline to the world was their husbands who could be absent for as long as eighteen months. (24) Henry Lawson in his story depicts the condition of such women with a simplicity and clarity that leaves a vivid impression. 'The Drover's Wife' contains no hint of an over-sentimentalised treatment but rather embodies a plain statement of life as it was. In the absence of her husband the 'gaunt sun-browned bushwoman' must deal with childbirth, death, fire, flood and, as the story relates, everyday threats such as appearance of a deadly snake. Throughout the whole work there pervades a sense of resignation. The wife accepts her lot. 'No use fretting', she says. Her husband may forget sometimes that he is married, but if he has a good cheque when he comes back he will give most of it to her. (25) However, underneath, there is a decided dissatisfaction, a longing for all those things most women possess. For the drover's wife all her excitement and recreation must be found in the 'Young Ladies Journal'. On Sundays it is ritual that she dresses herself and the children for a walk, taking as much care to make them look as smart as if they were to do the block in the city. However, Lawson takes care to point out how pathetically wistful the exercise was because there was nothing to see and not a soul to meet:

'You might walk twenty miles along this track without being able to fix a point in your mind'. (26)

Mrs. E. Robinson of Singleton illustrates the life of these women more fully with a first-hand account of the life of her grandmother, Mrs. Ellen Sinderberry of Camberwell. She states that her grandmother was a bushnurse and in her husband's absence would ride as far as twenty miles alone to someone in need of her services. She had no professional training, all her knowledge being passed to her from the former nurse, 'Granny Baldock'. This, Mrs. Robinson states, occurred in most cases. Services were usually voluntary and not only did the bushnurse tend the sick but in a majority of cases she also ran the home of those that were ill. Sickness, and especially childbirth, Mrs. Robinson states, was one of the major fears. She relates how many times a woman weak, and with child, would arrive at her grandmother's, having had the baby, often without shelter, on the way to find help and assistance from the bushnurse. In 'The Drover's Wife' Lawson relates how the mother once rode nineteen miles for assistance carrying her dead child and how her last two children were born in the bush, one while her husband was bringing a drunken doctor, by force, to attend her. (27)

This was the life of many of Australia's pioneer women. Not one of glory or fame but unobtrusive, and beset with the hardships of everyday existence in a hostile environment. Women playing a part time role as wives, but for the majority of time, alone.

'An' start ... at the cattle bells'. (28)

The quality of their life is perhaps best expressed by Lawson's 'dirty-legged boy' who, throwing his arms around his mother, exclaims

'Mother, I won't never go drovin; blast me if I do!' (29)

In conclusion, Russel Ward's The Australian Legend presents a picture of the bushman as a wandering individualist forming part of a 'nomad tribe' which was overwhelmingly masculine in composition and outlook. He sees this singular social group as possessing an ethos, uniquely Australian, derived from the struggle to come to terms with their frontier environment. However, the ethos which Ward presents in his book and which has become such a valuable

expression and symbol of Australian nationalism, is inadequate in that it precludes the possibility that women might also have played an important role on the frontier other than as mere appendages of their husbands. It is in McQueen's argument which states that many bushmen may have had a farm and family life that one sees the squatting women, lone pioneers on the frontier like the 'famours' bushmen, left alone, while their husbands were occupied droving or shearing, often for months at a time, to cope with the same hostile environment.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) R. Ward, The Australian Legend, Melbourne, 1966, p.244.
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Ibid., p.101.
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) Ibid., p.243.
- (6) Ibid., p.244.
- (7) Ibid., p.97.
- (8) Ibid., p.95.
- (9) H. McQueen, A New Britannia, Penguin, Australia, p.170.
- (10) E. Pownhall, Australian Pioneer Women, Rigby, p.173.
- (11) H. Lawson, The Bush Undertaker And Other Stories, Colin Roderick, Sydney, 1975, p.20.
- (12) R. Ward, Australian Legend, p.76.
- (13) Ibid., p.191.
- (14) A. Harris, Settlers & Convicts, ed. C.M.H. Clark, Melbourne, 1953 (1st published 1847) p.202.
- (15) H. McQueen, A New Britannia, p.170.
- (16) S.H. Roberts, The Squatting Age In Australia 1835-1847, Melbourne University Press, 1964, p.284.
- (17) Ibid.
- (18) Roberts, Squatting Age In Aust., p.284.
- (19) Ward, Aust. Legend, p.190.
- (20) Ibid.
- (21) E. Pownhall, Aust. Pioneer Women, p.173.
- (22) Ibid.
- (23) Lawson, Bush Undertaker & Other Stories, p.23.
- (24) Ibid., p.20.
- (25) Ibid.
- (26) Ibid., p.23.
- (27) Lawson, Bush Undertaker & Other Stories, p.21.
- (28) Pownhall, Aust. Pioneer Women, p.173.
- (29) Lawson, Bush Undertaker & Other Stories, p.24.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Clark, M., Sources of Australian History, Melbourne, 1971.
- Feely, F. & Prout, D., Petticoat Parade, Rigby Ltd., Adelaide, 1965.
- Harris, A., Settlers & Convicts, ed. C.M.H. Clark, Melbourne, 1953 (1st published 1847).
- Lawson, H., The Bush Undertaker And Other Stories, Colin Roderick, Sydney, 1975.
- McQueen, H., A New Britannia, Penguin Bks, Australia, 1970.
- Pownhall, E., Australian Pioneer Women, Rigby.
- Roberts, S., The Squatting Age In Australia, 1835-1847, Melbourne Univ. Press, 1964.
- Shaw, A.G.L., The Story of Australia, London, 1972.
- Ward, R., The Australian Legend, Melbourne, 1966.

APPENDIX

Proportion of Males to Females In White Population

in 1841 and 1851

(N.S.W. excluding Port Phillip)

	Males	Females	Total	Per Cent of Males
County of Cumberland -				
1841	33,736	24,345	58,108	58.0
1851	42,035	39,079	81,114	51.8
Other Counties within the Boundaries -				
1841	33,322	14,126	47,448	70.2
1851	44,975	33,457	78,432	57.3
Squatting Districts -				
1841	7,551	1,494	9,045	83.5
	19,219	8,478	27,697	69.4