In the Shadow of the Australian Legend:  

Re-reading Australian Literature

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Laurea in Lingue e Letterature Straniere (summa cum laude)

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This thesis is presented for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University

2011
Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

The Australian legend worked as a romantic myth of survival, a foundational grand narrative that legitimised white Australian belonging to the land. The construction of an identity based on the bush ethos and on those values and characteristics recognised as quintessentially Australian helped in the creation of an imagined community. This myth carried a racist underpinning which limited the typical Australian to the category ‘white’. Drawing on Foucault’s discourse analysis I argue that the legend is a discourse, grounded in an untheorised whiteness which defines Australianness. The national identity was modelled on the exclusion of the ‘other’ from any sense of belonging because Australianness was simply a substitute for whiteness. This exclusion worked on two levels; while it ensured cohesion among whites against a common enemy, it also provided a sense of belonging that could not be questioned because the ‘real’ Australians, the indigenous people as the common enemy, were left out of a definition of Australianness. Over time this discourse evolved slightly, altering its characteristics, but maintaining its power position and ensuring that its core whiteness remained unaltered. Despite the current claim of a multicultural nation, in fact, the legend is still central to Australian identity and still constitutes the defining characteristic of Australianness. Thus even in a multicultural context where ‘white’ Australians claim to be just one category among others, they are the ones who define the ‘rules’ that govern who belongs and who may be granted...
recognition. In this thesis the evolution of the Australian legend is analysed through readings of key literary texts. While before Federation literature was the major instrument for the construction of the legend and a sense of national identity through an uncritical celebration of the foundational myth, later writing engaged in a critique of the legend and the discourses constructed around it. Contemporary white authors have exposed the discourses of *terra nullius* and the violence at the foundation of the nation, thus deconstructing the legend. However, their critique is still influenced by their privileged white perspective so that even in their dismantling of the legend there is an implicit celebration of it. It is only when indigenous authors challenge the legend that we find a more radical challenge to the legend and the discourse of whiteness which underpin it. Even then, as argued in this thesis, the legend permeates Australian life and continues to play a role in one’s understanding of ‘Australianness’.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Vijay Mishra for his invaluable professional guidance and mentorship throughout the writing of this thesis. I thank him for the discussions and reading suggestions, and for his patience in reading, editing and providing detailed and constructive feedback and guidance on my countless drafts.

I would also like to thank Camilla Brokking, Julia Hobson and Andrew Fisher for their fabulous editing skills.

I am also grateful to Murdoch University academic and non-academic staff for their support and to Murdoch University and the Australian Government for awarding the scholarship that made this project possible.

And finally, my thanks to my family and friends for their constant encouragement, support and patience.
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Introduction

The Australian legend has been a very powerful discourse of whiteness in Australian history. Drawing on Foucault’s discourse analysis I re-examine this discourse with a view to deconstructing it and to show that it is grounded in a white colonial history of Australia.

Australia was settled as a white outpost of the British Empire. Its ‘Europeanness’ and ‘whiteness’ were constructed as forms grounded in ‘civilised’ values in opposition to the indigenous population and the alien land.¹ In the years before Federation the colonies became conscious of themselves as entities separate from the mother country and needed to differentiate themselves from the British. The defining moment for Australianness was, in fact, not the Federation of the colonies, since Australians did not have to fight a war of independence, but the creation of a foundational myth. This myth, which was really the myth of the ‘pioneers’—the ‘bushman’ who settled the hostile land—gave the nation a ‘heroic’ past and, in a sense, enabled them to differentiate themselves from the British. As a discursive construction, the myth had a double function: while it provided Australians with a grand narrative about the foundation of the Australian nation, it also contributed to the erasure of any trace of the ‘other’ and of previous ownership of the land, thus

¹ Australians originated from different parts of the British Empire, many of them from Scotland and Ireland, which had only recently been included in the category ‘white’. See Noel Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White (1995).
allowing Australians to claim uncontested belonging. The ‘battle’ fought by these brave ‘fathers’ of the nation was in fact not against the indigenous people, whose stories of resistance and whose very presence were erased from the grand narrative and from the land, which was presented as *terra nullius*, but against the land itself, the hostile wilderness that needed to be tamed, civilised and put to productive use by white settlers. Thus, the foundational myth is a celebration of whiteness and of white people’s achievements, presenting a nation that was ‘born’ into civilisation through the enterprises of the (white) pioneers, who challenged and confronted the unknown land.

The Federation of the colonies in 1901 and the promulgation of the ‘White Australia Policy’ emphasised the intent of maintaining the core white values of the nation. Whiteness was stressed as a distinctive characteristic that defined Australianness. The racial discourse of white superiority was used to justify the exclusion from Australianness of those immigrants—especially Asians—believed to threaten those values of civilisation that white people of European descent exemplified. This racial discourse was employed both for the exclusion of non-white immigration and for the exclusion from any role in the nation of its Aboriginal people who were labelled as uncivilised and ‘inferior’ in order to justify their dispossessition. Discourses of whiteness were used in Australia to guarantee white power through the production of knowledge about the land and the other. Non-white people were excluded from the legend because they did not belong to the whiteness implicit in it. Whiteness
became so central to the essence of Australianness that the two could be used interchangeably. In contrast to its later usage, in this early stage whiteness was a racial category.

In this thesis I examine how the Australian legend, as the foundation of Australian identity, is a discourse of whiteness employed to maintain white power in Australia. I argue that the Australian legend is an untheorised whiteness, as the whiteness of the national ‘type’ is implicit in the legend. The need for a myth of origin, a common shared idea of the nation with which Australians could identify, led to the all-encompassing power of the legend. The Australian legend incorporated in the myth those discourses used to claim the land. The diversity of the landscape, its fauna and the distance of Australia from the mother country contributed to the constant uneasiness felt by its settlers, who perceived the alienness of the place as threatening. Thus, Australians had to reimagine their surroundings and their place in them into a familiar pattern. In order to exert their power over the land, Australians had to define anything ‘native’ as inferior and beyond evolution. This categorisation was intended to include the indigenous inhabitants along with the flora and fauna. Once they had been categorised as ‘uncivilised’ the process of ‘taming’ could be extended from the land to its people through ‘education’ and ‘control’. Michel Foucault (1980) discusses the role knowledge has in the exercise of power. The white man\textsuperscript{2} presents himself as the rational subject who produces knowledge which is given

\textsuperscript{2} As explicitly male and not including the feminine which is also ‘other’ in this model of knowing.
the value of scientific truth. In Australia such knowledge guaranteed the perpetuation of the discourse of whiteness. Thus ‘disguised’ under the cover of reason, whiteness has gone unnoticed, easily shifting from a racial category to a modern category, an unmarked universal category, where the white man becomes the repository of reason. Whiteness became the most significant marker for inclusion in the category ‘Australian’. The constructed whiteness of the typical Australian therefore worked to exclude the other from an idea of Australianness. In this respect the legend is an ‘exclusive’ category.

In the 1890s the figure of the bushman was identified as the ‘typical’ Australian who Russel Ward in 1958 argued was representative of the ‘Australian legend’. All of the characteristics believed to be essentially Australian were emphasised in the figure exalted by the legend. In Ward’s theorisation of the legend, the national type is a ‘tough’ (white) man who can master the land and who has acquired some of the skills of the indigenous people. He has a strong anti-authoritarian streak but also a strong sense of solidarity with his mates and people of his class. Ward (2003) locates the origin of these characteristics in the figure of the bush workers, tracing some of them back to convict attitudes. The character traits of the bushman identified by Ward were incorporated into the character of the typical Australian and played a major role in constructing a distinctive identity that helped create Australia as a nation, an ‘imagined community’. The legend did not have a fixed historical basis but, in the moment that it was internalised by Australians, it became part of the
collective imaginary of the Australian consciousness; the legend acquired historical depth. Over time the discourse became modified and took on different forms, thus maintaining its power. The discursive nature of the legend is evident in its capacity to shift and thus to resist questioning. When discourses gain historical legitimacy they gain power—the power to define and to produce knowledge. Once it was part of tradition, the legend acquired the status of ‘myth’, which contributed to it being universally recognised by mainstream Australians. The legend, however, remained an exclusive form; grounded in a bush myth, it did not correspond to reality, but was a typified, crystallised image. The legend worked as a white settler ethos which justified the imposition of an alien identity on a land which was considered *terra nullius*, ignoring previous readings of the land. The legend has been analysed in both a celebratory and a critical manner by a number of writers. However, its power persists to this day as a political and cultural discourse.

In this thesis I analyse the development of the legend through Australian literature and examine the way in which the discourse of whiteness has affected both white and indigenous Australian writing. Early literature reinforced the legend, and the literature of the 1890s in particular celebrated it uncritically and contributed to the creation of the national ethos. The popular magazine *The Bulletin* and its contributors were instrumental in the promotion of a national character whose bush values

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3 Whereas ‘myth’ and ‘legend’ have different meanings, in this instance, the word legend applied to the Australian legend incorporates many elements which go into the definition of ‘myth’.

and whiteness were emphasised. Authors such as A.B. 'Banjo' Paterson and Henry Lawson reinforced those characteristics which were believed to be more distinctively Australian, promoting an image of the typical Australian based on the bushman. While Paterson celebrated successful mastery of the landscape, Lawson emphasised the difficulties these people encountered while ‘fighting against’ the adverse land. In spite of some differences in the representation of the bushman, both authors emphasised the endurance and strength of these people.

During the twentieth century, the exaltation of the bushman became less idealised, leading authors to a rethinking of the legend. A first interrogation of the discursive nature of the legend and its inconsistency is evident in the works of Xavier Herbert, who exposed some of the discourses which went into the making of the ‘Australian Legend’ but lacked the critical instruments to take them to their logical end. Although Herbert exposed the discourses that laid the foundations of the legend and acknowledged its racialised basis, his understanding of its limitations continued to be written in the shadow of race theories: the typical Australian was still a white man whose masculinity and whiteness were celebrated. Patrick White provided a further critique of the legend in his works, by queering the legend and questioning its valuing of mateship and masculinity. Voss, for instance, is the impersonation of the modernist idea of reason defeated by the Australian country. However, it is argued that the unavailability to these authors of multicultural discourses meant that their critique remained limited. What is evident is that even as
literature played a fundamental role in the creation of the legend and a sense of Australianness, it has also played an equally important part in the dismantling of such discourses.

With the advent of a multicultural theory and the Mabo decision, an uncritical celebration of the legend was no longer possible, and Australian authors have accordingly engaged in a critique of the legend and the foundational myth. They have exposed the discourses at the foundation of the settlement of the country—terra nullius and civilisation—and have presented history, likewise, as a constructed truth that helped maintain white power. The Mabo decision altered white Australians’ uncritical perceptions of their right to belong. White Australians had to redefine their position within Australia because their identity, the foundation of the legend and the colonisation of the country were based on the lie of terra nullius. The Mabo judgement in fact recognised the first nation people’s right to ownership. The construction of the Australian identity, based on the figure of the bushman who masters the wilderness, began to undergo a more severe critique. The white man had not written over an empty landscape, but over a landscape which was already humanised. The foundational myth was therefore exposed as a discourse constructed to legitimise white possession of the land. Contemporary authors have engaged in a critique of the foundational moment, exalted by the legend, and have exposed the violent dispossession of the Aboriginal people, a side of history that had been ‘overwritten’ by the legend. The land is presented as already inhabited, exposing the settlers’ erasure of the
previous inhabitants to claim belonging to the land. Contemporary authors such as Kate Grenville (2005) and Andrew McGahan (2004) address *terra nullius* and the violent dispossession of indigenous people, questioning the validity of historical accounts of early settlement. Both McGahan and Grenville deconstruct\(^5\) the discourses implicit in the Australian legend, exposing it as a means to justify possession of the land.

The availability to these authors of a multicultural theory has contributed to the undermining of discourses of whiteness. A foundational myth grounded in the grand narrative of the legend, the whiteness of which is overemphasised and which excludes any other narrative, does not fit with the claims of a multicultural nation in which every ethnicity should be equally represented. In a multicultural Australia, an Australian identity must now also include other races and their values, not only the values which were celebrated in the (white) Australian legend. In order to resist questioning, whiteness has reshaped itself into a different category from that of the legend, moving from a racialised category into an ethnic one, which positions itself as self-reflective and is based on cultural values instead of pre-given absolutist racial difference. White Australians can therefore claim cultural ethnicity by positioning themselves as merely another ethnic category among others. In reality, though, the category ‘white’ continues to have greater value because, while other ethnic groups are in need of recognition, the white group is not because it is the

\(^5\) I use the word ‘deconstruct’ not in the rigid sense in which Derrida uses it but in a slightly looser fashion which at times collapses with the word ‘dismantle’.
dominant group which lays down the ground rules for the recognition of the other minorities. This thesis argues that even in the work of contemporary novelists such as McGahan and Grenville, in the end, whiteness still retains a position of power.

It is only the work of contemporary indigenous authors such as Kim Scott (1999) that achieves a full critique of the legend and its racist underpinnings. Indigenous authors have brought this critique a step forward by exposing the legend as one discourse among other discourses. The discourses of whiteness are exposed in all their different forms, from the Social Darwinist theory used to justify assimilation and removal policies, to the construction of a historical narrative that excluded indigenous stories and the interpretation of the land as empty. All of these discourses have been used to justify the imposition of white power over indigenous people who were deprived of their cultural and linguistic background. However, indigenous authors use the legend to reverse the foundational myth, presenting white settlers not as heroes but as villains, using a myth recognised by mainstream (white) society to effectively critique the legend. By appropriating a narrative that had contributed to the exclusion of indigenous people from the concept of Australianness, indigenous authors thus expose Australian identity and its characteristics as discursively constructed.
In this thesis I offer a critique of the Australian legend through a reading of representative literary texts. I suggest that literature provides us with a valuable illustration of the manner in which the legend was created in the 1890s and subsequently challenged.

We need to acknowledge an important proviso. Even if over time the legend has been recognised as constructed, the ‘bushman’ is still Australia’s iconic figure and is fundamental to the Australian imaginary. The introduction of a multicultural policy in Australia has changed the characterisation of the typical Australian, but without changing the perception of what can be defined and identified as typical. The white Australian is still the criterion against which all other identities are measured and accepted. These characteristics have played a decisive role in the recent resurgence of nationalism, and have been exalted as truly Australian. The legend is still vital in Australian culture, and even though it is recognised as a stereotypical representation, it continues to play an important role in the definition of Australian identity with its stress on ‘mateship’.

Chapter One outlines the formation of the Australian legend through a discussion of the literary works which contributed to its construction. This

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6 In focusing solely on literature this thesis omits to consider more popular representations of the Australian legend such as films, sports and TV shows. The popularity of films such as Crocodile Dundee (1986) and TV figures such as the late Steve Irwin, “The Crocodile Hunter”, perfectly express the vitality of the legend in contemporary Australia. The legend is critiqued in films such as Wake in Fright (2009) while it is romanticised in films such as Baz Luhrmann’s Australia (2009).

7 For example, it is celebrated in the Anzac myth and in sports such as AFL/NRL football.
chapter traces the literary origin of the legend in the celebration of a bush ethos in the popular magazine *The Bulletin*. Characterised by a strong racist and anti-authoritarian tone, *The Bulletin* contributed to the formation of a national identity centred on the figure of the bush workers. This magazine played a major role in the birth of a distinctive Australian literature and, through its editor A.G. Stephens, promoted the publication of those writings which are recognised as important ‘nationalist’ Australian novels, Miles Franklin’s *My Brilliant Career* (1901) and Joseph Furphy’s *Such is Life* (1903). The literary debate started in *The Bulletin* by Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson in 1892 contributed to the elevation of the bushman to the status of myth. These authors, in fact, presented and popularised a reading of the bush and of bush life that would characterise its future representations. However, while Paterson exalted the bushman and his achievements, Lawson was more focused on class struggle and emphasised the hardship of the bushman’s life. Furphy’s *Such is Life* also exalted the figure of the bushman and his fight against the land. These texts represent the Australian bush as a wilderness that the bushman can master. This white man’s ethos has the function of claiming a belonging to a land perceived as threatening. Implicit in this construction of the myth is also the erasure of the original inhabitants, who only appear in these texts as secondary figures. The myth is conveniently placed at an indefinite moment in the past and the impossibility of identifying its origin is consistent with Foucault’s (2008) definition of a discourse as a set of rules and parameters that change and redefine the discourse but whose origins are vague. In its first appearance, the legend is the expression of
a racial, ‘white’ category, the typical Australian being a white man. Australianness is thus equated with whiteness in this representation.

Chapter Two analyses the work of Xavier Herbert as part of what seems to be the beginning of a systematic critique of the Australian legend. In Herbert’s work the figure of the typical Australian, the embodiment of a theory of whiteness, is no longer presented as the absolute expression of Australianness. Herbert exposes the racialised aspects of the legend and problematises it, even as he continues to work from within its discourses. In the end his work is strongly influenced by race theories and does not overcome whiteness. While his novels expose the discourses of whiteness used to impose white control on indigenous people, and while he identifies the role of institutions of control in the exercise of power, he still works from within these very discourses. The panoptic gaze through which the white man produces knowledge and defines the other is exposed. He critiques the legend through the exposition of the white man’s inadequacy in comparison to the indigenous knowledge of the country, but his critique is limited by his hope for an indigenisation of the white man through the acquisition of indigenous skills. Herbert does not overcome the racialised characteristics of the legend, and the typical Australian is still a white man who has acquired some of the skills of the indigenous people and who can ‘master’ the bush.

Chapter Three focuses on the work of Patrick White, a writer who engages in a broader critique of the legend. White moves away from a
racial representation of whiteness and instead interrogates the modern characteristics of the discourse. The white man’s rationality is presented as a discourse that is imposed on the land in the act of exploration, but fails to conquer the land. He deconstructs the foundational myth of the white man who tames the land and masters it, and presents the white man’s reason as inadequate to an understanding of the Australian landscape. In critiquing the whiteness implicit in the foundational myth, White presents different approaches to the land, approaches that are discordant with the white man’s rationality and which may be defined as ‘mystic’. These non-rational approaches can be seen as a further critique of discourses of whiteness. White questions the legitimacy of these discourses, based on the reading of whiteness as a ‘modern’ category and on the superiority of the law of reason. He deconstructs them through the use of different approaches that privilege a ‘non-rational’, almost mystical, interpretation of life-worlds. White’s critique of the foundational narrative is also evident in his choice of characters. His protagonists are figures who cannot be included in the stereotypical representation of the ‘national type’. They are in fact foreigners, women, or Aboriginal characters, all categories that are excluded from a definition of whiteness and therefore from Australianness (White 1964; 1994). White’s critique of the legend is strongly represented in the figure of the explorer, Voss, whose rational approach to the country is defeated, and in the figure of the ‘gay’ jackaroo, Eddie, who dismantles the masculinity and the ‘mateship’ of the legend (White 1981; 1994). White’s critique is, however, limited by the lack of a multicultural theory and therefore continues to be
influenced by those ‘western’ categories he wishes to deconstruct. He does not have the critical instruments with which to provide a complete alternative to discourses of whiteness.

Chapter Four outlines how events such as the Mabo decision and the introduction of a multicultural policy contributed towards modifying the perception of the legend and the foundational myth of Australia. The Mabo decision threw out the case for terra nullius, thus leading to a rethinking of the foundational narrative. Further, a sense of Australianness based on the legend does not reflect the claims of a multicultural nation. I analyse the work of two contemporary authors, Andrew McGahan and Kate Grenville, who in their works dismantle the legend and present a version of the history of settlement that has for too long been silenced by white Australia. They expose discourses of whiteness, deconstruct the white settler ethos, present land ownership as the reason behind those discourses, and question the white man’s rights to belong. In The White Earth (2004), McGahan focuses on the native title debate, the legitimacy of white ownership of the land and on the constructed history of settlement. Through the presentation of divergent versions of the history of settlement, he deconstructs those discourses voiced by landowners against native title and questions the foundational narrative. The land is seen to be ‘empty’ because of the violent dispossession of indigenous people. In Kate Grenville’s The Secret River (2005), the role of the legend in the foundational narrative is presented as a discourse whose scope has been that of guaranteeing white ownership
of the land, exposing the construction of Australia as *terra nullius* and the
violent dispossession of indigenous people. The settlers are aware of the
indigenous presence but they decide to ignore it, refusing to accept the
other as civilised even though there are visible signs of the land being
inhabited. The white settlers dismiss this evidence and refuse to admit
previous ownership, basing their refusal on other discourses such as
Social Darwinism and racial superiority. The authors dismantle the
discourses of whiteness based on the construction of whiteness as a
universal category, but they do not question the core values of
Australianness; in these authors’ critique of the national myth there is still
an implicit celebration of the settler evident in the construction of the land
as alien and hostile.

Chapter Five analyses the work of indigenous authors Kim Scott (1999),
Doris Pilkington (2000) and Larissa Behrendt (2004), with a view to
demonstrating how the legend is used in their novels to communicate its
constructedness to a white audience. In these works the legend—the
white settler’s myth that celebrates the settlement of Australia as *terra
nullius*—is juxtaposed with other stories, those of indigenous people, fully
exposing its role in the perpetuation of discourses of whiteness. The
indigenous authors focus on those discourses of racial superiority
employed to justify the adoption of assimilation policies in Australia. The
works analysed were all published after the landmark release of the
*Bringing Them Home* Report in 1997, which brought attention to the
removal and assimilation policies employed in Australia between 1910
and 1970. The Report exposed the assimilation agenda that aimed to create a white nation through the whitening of the indigenous people. The authors expose the purpose of whitening at the foundation of the assimilation and removal policies as a means of eliminating the otherness that denied and threatened white belonging to the country. They also highlight and discuss the genocidal intent behind these policies. These works, while focusing on the ‘stolen generations’, draw attention to a variety of other discourses employed by white Australia to maintain its privileged position. The discursive ‘nature’ of whiteness has allowed it to shift and camouflage itself over time, modifying its parameters to maintain its privileges and power. Whiteness has recently attached itself to the latest discourse, multicultural theory, claiming to be merely another ethnic category, thus denying its own origins in a racial categorisation of whiteness. In other words, through the adoption of a multicultural theory Australia has hidden the racial whiteness at the heart of the legend. Indigenous authors expose the racial discourse still at the foundation of Australian identity, directly critiquing it as the source of other discourses.

In Kim Scott’s *Benang* (1999) the author powerfully uses the white man’s archive to dismantle discourses such as eugenics theories, Social Darwinism and racial superiority. These discourses are juxtaposed with indigenous people’s stories and through different perspectives Scott lays bare their constructed nature. Scott retells the history of colonisation, appropriating the narrative of the ‘first white man’ and employing it as a point from which he recovers the indigenous history of the country. Doris
Pilkington’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2000) focuses on the removal policies and the ‘stolen generations’, and on the effects of indigenous dispossession. Finally, Larissa Behrendt (2004) focuses on the presentation of history and law as ‘absolute truths’ and shows these truths to be constructed by the white man to control the other. The legend of the brave explorers is exposed as a myth whose only scope is the celebration of white settlement by deleting any trace of indigenous presence. The critique of discourses of whiteness reaches its fullest articulation with indigenous authors who expose the exclusion of indigenous people from a constructed sense of Australianness. Their struggle for re-inclusion in the history and cultural diversity of the nation challenges the definition of an Australian identity where ‘Australianness’ and ‘whiteness’ are one. However, they continue to use the representative figure of the legend even as they offer a more effective critique. In the end, the ‘bushman figure’ is so embedded in Australian identity that its value as an iconic figure is also recognised by indigenous authors.
Chapter One

The Cultural and Literary Antecedents of the Australian Legend

There is a crucial passage in Michael Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2008), which may be used as the starting point for my examination of a theory of whiteness, and its links to what constitutes the ‘typical’ Australian.

We must also question those divisions or groupings with which we have become so familiar. [...] These divisions [...] are always themselves reflexive categories, principles of classification, normative rules, institutionalised types: they, in turn, are facts of discourse that deserve to be analysed beside others; of course, they also have complex relations with each other, but they are not intrinsic, autochthonous, and universally recognisable characteristics (Foucault 2008: 24-5).

In terms of the foregoing, whiteness may be seen as a discourse constructed as a universal category and defined as the parameter against which everything else has to be understood. Whiteness as an underlying discourse is never analysed; it is always in the background as a set of rules that limits what we can say. Although it seems that whiteness has always been present, it has gone under different names at different times, changing its name and shape in order to camouflage itself and to maintain its power. We have to recognise it for what it is, as that hidden and unspoken presence that is there, and that has been there from the
start and has influenced the formation of the Australian nation, and indeed Australian identity. Here again Foucault’s insight is invaluable: “We must renounce all those themes whose function is to ensure the infinite continuity of discourse and its secret presence to itself in the interplay of a constantly recurring absence” (Foucault 2008: 28). Foucault describes two themes which we have to renounce in order to break the continuity of this discourse. The first of these is the theme of origin, according to which we always imagine a ‘source’ that exists before the first written expressions of discourse. The second theme is the ‘conformation’ of discourse to unwritten rules (Foucault 2008: 27-8). If we follow this argument, ‘whiteness’ is intrinsic to a particular race, and cannot be defined in terms of an origin or as a universally recognisable characteristic.

We must be ready to receive every moment of discourse in its sudden irruption; in that punctuality in which it appears, and in that temporal dispersion that enables it to be repeated, known, forgotten, transformed, utterly erased, and hidden, far from all view, in the dust of books. Discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of the origin, but treated as and when it occurs (Foucault 2008: 28).

The “temporal dispersion” helps discourse to camouflage itself and therefore to perpetuate itself, which is how the discourse of whiteness may also be read.

Taking up Foucault’s reading of the construction and circulation of discourses, to analyse the discourse of whiteness I will attempt to identify a pattern, a set of relations which is repeated in order to create a discourse underlying the construction of the ‘typical Australian’. This
discourse is constituted by a specific pattern that must be identified, including how this pattern has been used to perpetuate the discourse analysed. It is necessary to identify “relations between statements […]; relations between groups of statements […]; relations between statements and groups of statements and events of a quite different kind” (Foucault 2008: 32). Whiteness is the pattern that lies at the foundation of Australian identity; it is the underlying ‘not-spoken’ presence of which Foucault speaks.

The production of a discourse of whiteness¹ allows a certain group that identifies as ‘white’ to maintain a power position through the circulation of this specific discourse. The discourse produces knowledge, ‘truths’, which are presented as matters of fact, as universal, and which have the function of guaranteeing power. As Foucault explains, every society, but specifically “ours”, is permeated by “relations of power”:

these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth (1980: 93).

The Australian legend to which I turn my attention functions as a sub-discourse of whiteness constructed to maintain white power. Truths are

¹ Whiteness is here intended as a constructed category which comes to be identified as the ‘norm’ by the dominant group. As Ruth Frankenberg argues “whiteness refers to a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination. Naming ‘whiteness’ displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance” (Frankenberg 1993: 6).
produced through this discourse and the very identity of Australianness is defined according to them. Thus, the Australian legend does not have a historical foundation, but is a discourse which has been constructed to give a sense of unity to the Australian nation and it has acquired legitimacy; this discourse redefines and adapts itself to guarantee its power position. The nationalist writers in the 1890s in particular played a decisive role in the perpetuation of the discourse of whiteness through the creation of a national myth of ‘Australianness’ whose characteristics are deeply rooted in a racial category of whiteness.

An understanding of the myth of origin as a discursive construction is fundamental to an understanding of how whiteness has operated in Australia. The myth creates a tradition, a shared past, a shared idea of origin that allows Australians to recognise themselves as part of this constructed Australianness. In Foucault’s argument, ‘myth’ itself is a discursive construction. Myth is constructed in order to create a common discourse of origin. The characteristics attributed to the myth are therefore not real, but are conveniently chosen in order to create a more powerful and adequate discourse. In Australia the national type is constructed, as is consistent with Foucault’s conception of the myth. The characteristics attributed to this type vary in time and space, but some of the features are constant. The national type is presented as noble, Australian-born and of British ancestry; in a word, this national subject is a ‘white’ subject. The construction of the typical Australian as white links the idea of Australianness to whiteness, making the first a synonym of the
latter. Built into the construction of the Australian character is a proto-
theory of whiteness as the discourses of the latter are pre-figured in the 
early construction of the ‘stereotypical Australian’. The construction of the 
type as a white male excludes from the idea of the nation any person who 
does not conform to this characteristic. Whiteness and Australianness are 
exclusive discursive formations: those who do not correspond to the 
characteristics that have been established by these discourses are 
excluded from belonging.

Before extending and refining a theory of whiteness, it is important to 
reflect on Australian history and how the Australian subject has been 
constructed. The importance of the formation of a national type and the 
characteristics this type embodies are fundamental to an understanding 
of a theory of whiteness. It is clear from the outset that this national type 
is a creation and that the characteristics attributed to it are those which 
were considered to be typical of a ‘civilised race’. As has already been 
stated, the construction of a national identity is part of a larger discourse. 
Typical of this larger discourse is its ability to hide itself behind other 
discourses such as ‘civilisation’, ‘evolution’ and ‘history’, which contain 
within themselves assumptions that justify power. Not surprisingly, in the 
years of the formation of a national identity at the end of the nineteenth 
century, ideas of Social Darwinism dominated the public sphere (Evans 
1997: 205).²

² Richard White discusses the influence Social Darwinism had on ideas of race 
superiority. The publication of Darwin’s The Origin of Species in 1859 is fundamental 
because it provided a ‘scientific’ basis to the ideas of race superiority which circulated
We can locate a ‘first’ moment of national identity (in itself an instance of a ‘proto-whiteness’) with reference to the mythologisation of the bushman, which began to emerge at the end of the nineteenth century.\(^3\)

The point is taken up by Evans:

A national type was emerging—egalitarian, anti-authoritarian males, the bushmen and the urban larrikins of the Australian Legend. But this image was a creation from urban writers from the 1880s and 1890s, not a natural product of the bush and the town (Evans 1997: 245).

As Evans suggests, the bushman, the typical Australian, is in fact a ‘creation’ or a ‘fiction’. He is presented as a natural character, but on closer analysis appears to be a construction, “the rules of which must be known, and the justification of which must be scrutinized” (Foucault 2008: 28). The native-born Australian is described as possessing superior physical and moral characteristics when compared to those born in the mother country. He is tough, self-sufficient and laconic (Palmer 1954: 31-2; Ward 2003: 57-8). The typical Australian is therefore able to survive in the country and can easily cope with the ‘unfamiliar’ landscape. These characteristics of the bushman would help create what would become ‘the Australian legend’. Considering that the majority of the Australian population lived in the city, and would not have considered the bush their home, the bushman could not possibly have been a fair representation of the typical Australian, and yet he continued to be. The idea of a national type is therefore a construction, a creation, something which is then

\(^3\) Until the 1880s literacy was not widespread, which meant that literature and journals that popularised the figure of the bushman were not widely read (Ward 2003: 211).
identified as typical, with a view to giving the ‘new’ nation a sense of unity. The characteristics defining the typical Australian and the constantly changing figures to which these are attributed over time are proof that this ‘type’ is a construction, and hence a discourse, which is given retrospective significance.\(^4\) The bushman is the idealised figure around whom the national type was constructed, elevated to a symbol that could be widely recognised as Australian. He was seen as someone to be proud of, who was strong and able to adapt to the environment and who linked the people and the land. The fact that the land was perceived as hostile explains why the bushman was chosen as the national type. Through the myth of the bushman, Australians reconciled themselves to the land, felt at home in it, because these people (the bushmen) had tamed the land.

The construction of a national type may be read as a process directly linked to the rise of Australian nationalism in the late nineteenth century. The need to stress a national type or image at different periods is linked to perceived threats to the foundational principles of Australian society. These perceived threats included the arrival of cheap labourers from Asia at the end of the nineteenth century and much later, immigrants from Europe after the two world wars. It could be said that the theorisation of

\(^4\) The characteristics that were considered typical of the national type are attributed in different times to different figures: the bushman, the bushranger, the digger, etc. The characteristics of the bushman and of figures constructed in the 1890s (see Palmer (1954), Serle (1973), Ward (2003)) are the same as those attributed to the soldiers who died during the two world wars (and especially at Gallipoli). ‘Blood sacrifice’ therefore becomes part of the ‘ideal’ Australian. Graham Seal analyses the sacralisation of the Anzac myth linking the figure of the digger to that of the bushman. The characteristics typical of the bushman are in fact transposed on to the figure of the digger. Seal points to the use of the term ‘digger’ for Australian infantry which is generally attributed to Gallipoli but is in fact not used until late 1916-early 1917 (Seal 2009: 221-2).
the ‘typical Australian’ often reflected some kind of real or perceived threat as well. The rise of nationalistic feelings and the need to emphasise and define national characteristics were reactions to the belief that the ‘outsider’ would dilute and compromise the characteristics of the nation and hence the national type, which would then threaten the implicit definition or idea of whiteness around which the national character was built in the first instance.

The national type has been incorporated into the Australian legend by two key writers: Vance Palmer (*The Legend of the Nineties*, 1954) and Russel Ward (*The Australian Legend*, 1958). I now want to turn my attention to the word ‘legend’, a word which occurs in both these works. The significance of its use and the romantic aura it creates around the figure of the national type also require an initial commentary. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word ‘legend’ as: “An unauthentic or non-historical story, esp. one handed down by tradition from early times and popularly regarded as historical”. A legend is therefore a projection on the past of something that is believed to be truth and which is traditionally understood as the truth.

The word ‘legend’ (used by both Palmer and Ward) may be understood with reference to Foucault’s use of the word ‘tradition’ which he defines as a typical form of continuity that allows a discourse to disguise itself and

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to create a continued and undisturbed substratum which permits the discourse to perpetuate itself unseen. In Foucault’s own words, tradition is intended to give a special temporal status to a group of phenomena that are both successive and identical (or at least similar); it makes it possible to rethink the dispersion of history in the form of the same; it allows a reduction of the difference proper to every beginning, in order to pursue without discontinuity the endless search for the origin; tradition enables us to isolate the new against a background of permanence, and to transfer its merit to originality, to genius, to the decisions proper to individuals (Foucault 2008: 23).

According to Foucault the concept of tradition is itself a discourse we need to renounce in order to free ourselves from the false continuity of discourse. In terms of this argument the theorisations of the Australian type create a tradition which links itself to an origin positioned in an indefinite past. Tradition or legend contributes to the perpetuation of the myth of origins and the constructed discourse that lies at its foundation. Palmer is conscious of the constructed nature of the national type as a discourse and refers to the vague origins of this myth which he describes as a dream: “Such was the dream that gives basis to the legend. It has never been described with precision, but isn’t it the essence of a dream to be vague in outline?” (Palmer 1954: 9). The impossibility of locating the “secret origin[s]” of the national type which lies beyond any “beginning” and the aura of romanticism and myth attributed to this figure allows the discourse to perpetuate itself (Foucault 2008: 27; Bailey 2000: 12-6).

As Greg Bailey points out, myth is characterised by an “aura of unquestionability” and it is “held to be occupied with those areas of culture deemed to be beyond question” (Bailey 2000: 12). Bailey discusses the relevance of myth in Australian culture. He refers to the Anzac myth as one which is not directly linked to the Gallipoli events, but which represents a “privileged narrative for a set of values considered to have been of central importance for the definition of (white) Australian society’s image of itself” (Bailey 2000: 15). Thus, the myth works as a way of conveying values recognised as characteristic of
It follows that the legend, with its roots in tradition, is a discursive construction created around the figure of the bushman. The creation of this ‘romance’ is addressed by Palmer, who describes as “myth-making” the steps undertaken by a new nation in order to achieve unity:

It has been said that men cannot feel really at home in any environment until they have transformed the natural shapes around them by infusing them with myth [...] the folk-impulse that makes men let their minds play around the world familiar to them, creating heroes and sacred places. It is the original urge towards art: it creates food without which the imagination would starve. [...] Myth-making is an important means of communication, of bringing people together, of giving isolated communities something to hold in common (Palmer 1954: 52).

The creation of a myth of origin is itself a discourse, and the influence the bushman had on the formation of a national type is linked to the emergence of a ‘national literature’. Fundamental sources in the analysis of how a national type has been constructed are literary works of the time and newspapers. Palmer points to ballads or songs as the “usual instrument for myth-making” (Palmer 1954: 53).

The importance of myth-making in the creation of a national unity is strongly connected to Benedict Anderson’s interpretation of the nation as an ‘imagined community’ (1991). Palmer points to the works of Furphy and Lawson as typical expressions of this national type. The Bulletin is also identified as being foundational to the spread of the idea of a national character and a national literature (Palmer 1954: 51-3). I will return to The Bulletin and the literature of the time later as their influence is pivotal.
Working from Palmer’s “myth-making”, Russel Ward too analyses the formation of an Australian “type”. Ward, however, is a lot more forthright as he works to trace this continuity back to its origins: “to trace and explain the development of this national mystique” (Ward 2003: 1). For Ward, the creation of an Australian ethos is fundamental to the formation of Australian nationalism and he speaks of it as a way of ‘appropriating’ or ‘mining’ the country. The construction of the national type is based on the principle of the stereotype and is connected to the idea of how someone should be (Ward 2003: 1). Australia’s lack of any strong public figure or the absence of war within its borders are believed by Ward to have caused the creation of the myth of the bushman, whose characteristics contributed to the construction of a national type that is recognised as a stereotype of the typical Australian (Ward 2003: 145-6). Ward describes these characteristics at length:

According to the myth the ‘typical Australian’ is a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others. […] He is usually taciturn rather than talkative, one who endures stoically rather than one who acts busily. […] He is a fiercely independent person who hates officiousness and authority, especially when these qualities are embodied in military officers and policemen. Yet he is very hospitable and, above all, will stick to his mates through thick and thin, even if he thinks they may be in the wrong (Ward 2003: 1-2).

According to Ward these characteristics originate from the figure of the bush workers. The isolation of this group in the past is believed to have

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9 Russel Ward’s The Australian Legend has been exposed to extensive criticism. The cause of much of this criticism has been the misunderstanding of Ward’s use of the ‘typical’ Australian, which does not correspond to any real subject, as opposed to the ‘average’ Australian (Ward 2003: vi-vii). Ward re-emphasises that the book does not have an historical basis, but tries to trace the development of a national ethos, a mystique. For a detailed analysis see “The Australian Legend Re-Visited” (Ward 1978-79).
contributed to the construction of the myth of the bushman (Ward 2003: 209). These men, in fact, were considered to be the typical Australian and the bush where they lived was considered to be the ‘real Australia’. Ward traces some of these traits to the convict period and to convict attitudes, thereby linking the ethos to the history of the settlement of Australia as a penal colony (Ward 2003: 2; 83-9). In particular, convicts had a great influence on those who came to be known as bushmen, as the first ones employed in the pastoral industry were generally ‘old hands’, or convicts who had gained their freedom (Ward 2003: 72-3). They and the ‘currency lads’ (native-born Australians) shared the same characteristics identified by Ward as mateship, group solidarity, aversion to any form of authority, knowledge of the bush and adaptability (Ward 2003: 81).

Ward’s central thesis—and its originality—lay in his location of the “Australian Legend” at the moment of convict settlement. He does not find the origins of a national character in the Gold Rush or in the nomenclature of the ‘diggers’. According to Ward the Gold Rush

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10 England’s need to find a solution for overcrowded gaols, a situation that had worsened after the American colonies’ proclamation of independence in 1776 and “their decision that their soil should no longer be polluted by British criminals” (Clark 1962: II. 60), is accepted by most Australians as the main reason for the colonisation of the country. However, Geoffrey Blainey, in The Tyranny of Distance (1966), presents a more complicated and realistic explanation and emphasises England’s need for flax, hemp and timber for its “seapower” (Blainey 1966: 27). Britain’s commerce and naval force depended on these materials. England imported them mainly from Russia and was aware that if this commerce were to stop for some reason, it would be impossible to maintain the same seapower. Blainey compares England’s dependence on these materials to today’s dependence on oil (1966: 28). Cook and Banks had collected specimens on the Australian coast, and on Norfolk Island had noticed a variety of flax that seemed of a better quality than the European one and grew much longer. The Norfolk Island pines were also seen as being excellent for ship masts and timber (Blainey 1966: 30-1). Blainey refers to K.M. Dallas’s lecture in 1952 in which he had argued that Australia could provide a possible ‘new’ route to China, avoiding routes controlled by the French (often at war with the British) and other nations. It is also suggested that the colony could be used as a “sea base” or “port of call” (Blainey 1966: 24).
strengthened characteristics that were already present, and which he then connects to the people who worked in the pastoral industry (Ward 2003:112-4). The importance given to the Gold Rush as a defining moment in the construction of the Australian character, and a tendency not to identify the Australian character with the earlier years of the colony, could be explained as a will to hide the convict past of the colony and the violent history of settlement. For Ward, the ‘convict moment’ needed to be spelled out and reconciled with the features of the Australian character. Ward identifies the presence of a high number of Irish convicts in the composition of Australia’s population and attributes to them characteristics such as an Australian aversion to institutions and to England:

We found reasons for thinking that convict and working-class attitudes had a disproportionately strong influence on the nascent Australian ethos. We have now seen that within the Australian working class, before the gold discoveries, Irishmen and native-born Australians exerted a disproportionately strong, and increasing, influence (Ward 2003: 68).

The upper classes used to send their children to England for education and often still considered England their true home, whereas the old hands could not, and were not interested in returning to the mother country. This in turn strengthened the already strong bond the old hands and currency lads had with the land: they considered themselves true Australians,

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11 These traits are also typical of the bushranger. Ward discusses at length the popularity of the figure of the bushranger, arguing that this figure embodied the characteristics of the typical Australian, being strongly anti-authoritarian, loyal to his ‘mates’ and possessing the skills to survive in the bush on which in fact his survival depended (Ward 2003: 146). Ward points to the sympathy the population had for these men and how they were often aided by the general populace, and were considered as ‘heroes’. Lacking any war heroes, Australians elected bushrangers as ‘heroes’ who, it seems, began to elicit the same sympathy and importance Robin Hood had in England, as the popularity of Ned Kelly clearly shows (Ward 2003: 145).
thinking of Australia as “the prisoners’ country”, thus emphasising the creation of Australia as a penal colony specifically for them (Ward 2003: 175). Again, in this argument it is clear that the characteristics of the old hands and the original convict system influenced the national type and contributed to the creation of a distinct Australian people.

The national type emerged as a discursive formation at the end of the nineteenth century. At the time, the colony was becoming conscious of itself as separate from the mother country and needed to construct a myth that enabled Australians to belong to the land. Thus, the construction of this myth had a double function: it differentiated Australians from their British or European counterparts (Ward 2003: vii), and at the same time created a link between Australians and the land they claimed (or needed) to belong to. This is indicative of the choice of the national type, a category with which they could claim an attachment to this new land where ways of living were as different as possible from the ones of the old country. Ward quotes contemporary observations from British people who upon arrival noticed that the cities were like English cities and that it was only in the country that the ‘real’ Australia was to be found. At the heart of the creation of a sense of Australian nationalism was the need to construct a distinctive Australian subject to identify with: “men often felt they were striving against English ‘tyranny’ when, in fact, they were striving, albeit unconsciously, to grow up nationally, to become a homogeneous Australian people” (Ward 2003: 176).

12 They looked at the immigrants and newcomers as strangers (Ward 2003: 54-9). Furthermore, the fact that land grants were often given to new immigrants with capital contributed towards embittering their relationship (Ward 2003: 59).
Australians had to construct their identity in relation to the only other major identity they knew, the British. In Hegelian terms, the figure of the bushman works as the ‘other’ in two ways. The bushman seems to have been constructed as the other, an alter ego through which Australians could become conscious of themselves through recognition (the city people and poets constructed the other as the bushman, to become conscious of themselves as a nation). At the same time, Australians seem to have constructed the figure of the bushman to distinguish themselves from the British and to become conscious of themselves as Australians. For this reason they idealised that part of the Australian population which was ‘universally’ recognised as typically Australian. The bushman figure was therefore incorporated because it gave Australians the sense of national identity that they otherwise lacked, and directly connected them to the ‘new’ land. Of course, there is an aura of romance that surrounds this figure and Australians do not literally identify themselves with the bushman, but there are some characteristics, enumerated by Ward, which originated among the bushmen and are still recognised as ‘typical’ of an Australian (Ward 2003: 2). Here it is a matter of myth triumphing over reality.

Another means of emphasising the qualities of the bushman is through his ‘heroic’ juxtaposition to the landscape. The construction of the landscape as hostile is a way of perpetuating the discourse of whiteness. The romanticisation of the bushman noted by Ward may have been
influenced by the perception of the Australian landscape as hostile, a perception that led to an idealisation of the figure of the bushman and an emphasis on his capacity to survive in harsh conditions. The bushman had found his way of living in the country without the urge to model or change it—a view not uncommon among people trying to cultivate the land. Here a dualist opposition can be located between the bushman, constructed as someone who knows and respects the land and does not need to modify it, and the settler who instead tries to model it in order to make it, as much as possible, similar to ‘home’. According to Geoffrey Serle’s argument, the majority of the early free settlers still thought of England as home and tried to compensate for feeling out of place by trying to model the new country on the old one through what Serle calls an “acclimatization movement”, such as the introduction of European animals and plants (Serle 1973: 26). Contrary to those people who dreamt of the homeland, the bushmen proved that it was possible to live in Australia and that, after all, it was possible to acclimatise here.

Ward argues that the bushman thought he had inherited indigenous people’s knowledge of the country (Ward 2003: 201). This could be interpreted as the Australians’ attempt to legitimise their presence in the land. Belonging to the land is considered a requisite for becoming self-conscious: the bushmen need to confront themselves with the harsh country in order to feel that they belong to it. The bushman’s heroic contraposition to the environment, exalted in the creation of the national myth, is consistent with Moreton-Robinson’s (2005) analysis of the
construction of the indigenous people as part of the landscape (it being impossible in Hegelian terms to construct them as autonomous subjects). The assimilation of the other to the landscape tends to hide violence, and if violence is perpetrated it is considered as a necessary reaction against the harsh environment (of which the indigenous people constitute a part) (Moreton Robinson 2005: 26). In order for the white settler to be ‘domesticated’ (or, in Moreton-Robinson’s terms, to ‘claim indigeneity’) the indigenous people have to be excluded as other. It is only through a negation of Aboriginality and of the indigenous people as subjects that a “domestication of settlers” can occur (Davis 2005: 8-13).

The bushman, according to Ward, was romanticised and took the place, in the collective imagination, of the ‘noble savage’, who in the 1820s was re-coded as the ‘noble frontiersman’. The “‘naturalness’ and freedom of frontier life” were emphasised, thus underlining the romantic aura that surrounded the frontiersman (Ward 2003: 248-52). Ward uses the term ‘frontiersman’ because he connects his analysis to that of F.J. Turner on the influence of the frontier on American character (Ward 2003: 239-49). The idealisation of the figure of the bushman (as in Banjo Paterson for instance) is associated with Kipling’s idealisation of the figure of the noble frontiersman and of soldiers of the Empire who were “bearing ‘the white man’s burden’ in far places” (Ward 2003: 252-3). It could therefore be argued that the myth of the bushman is merely another way of promoting the Empire.
Discussing Turner’s idealisation of the frontiersman, Ward emphasises the influence which the belief of the superiority of European civilisation had on the construction of the American and Australian frontiersmen at the end of the nineteenth century: “another romantic myth which, in Australia also, was intimately associated with the cult of the noble frontiersman: the myth of the innate superiority of European, and especially Northern European, peoples” (Ward 2003: 255). According to Ward the belief in the superiority of the white man was an expression of the times, and since in the construction of an Australian ethos the players were white, the typical Australian was identified as white. Whiteness, as a discourse evident in the years of the formation of a national identity, was therefore internalised and became invisible, making it more difficult to specify conditions that produced it as a discourse. In terms of my argument both Ward and Palmer present a theory of whiteness based on the construction of the myth of the bush. This myth is not created by these authors but was largely a product of the 1890s, and especially of *The Bulletin*, arguably the most influential literary production of the period. A theory of whiteness was present at the time of *The Bulletin* and in the 1950s Ward and Palmer simply reshaped it, making it less racist. In doing so, whiteness became the real discourse which hid behind other discourses and unities and thus went unnoticed and could be ‘innocently’ perpetrated. In short, in the 1890s the myth of the bush was constructed to create national unity and to maintain Australia as a white country.
The birth of a national ‘culture’ played a major role in the construction of this myth. The end of the century, in fact, saw the emergence of a number of periodicals\(^\text{13}\) aimed at establishing a national literature. A key moment in the construction and propagation of a national literature and a national character was the publication of the weekly journal *The Bulletin*. *The Bulletin* was first published on 31 January 1880 by J.F. Archibald and John Haynes. The political position of this radical paper, which was one of the most widely read national magazines in Australia, changed over time, depending on the editor, but its main focuses were federation, ‘one man one vote’, free trade, anti-immigration, and secularism (Ward 2003: 224).

The importance of *The Bulletin* in the formation of a national identity and a national literature has been pointed out by Ward (2003), Palmer (1954) and Serle (1973). The authors who contributed to this journal and who were of the 1890s generally all belonged to a restricted circle, a circle that orbited mostly around the main papers of the period. They shared similar experiences and were aware of the need to promote a sense of belonging to the nation. In some ways *The Bulletin* was instrumental in creating the Australian nation as an ‘imagined community’, and its influence can be seen as having extended far beyond the creation of a national ethos, as its readership brought together in one community a wide cross-section of Australian people. *The Bulletin* was in fact read both in the cities and in

\(^{13}\) Ken Levis lists a number of periodicals published at the end of the nineteenth century which influenced the literary production of the period, even if none, according to him, had the same influence as *The Bulletin*. Among the other periodicals were “the *Age*, the *Australasian*, the *Australian Journal*, the *Freeman’s Journal*, the *Boomerang*, the *Town and Country Journal*, the *Sydney Mail*” (Levis 1971: 45).
the bush and it was its variety of interests—it did not focus only on the bush—that made it a magazine appreciated and widely read all over the entire country. According to Benedict Anderson (1991), the collective act of reading a paper brings a nation together. Anderson refers to the daily modern newspaper, which creates a kind of mass consumption in the sense that at the same time every morning many people are united in the ‘ritual’ of reading the paper.

The significance of this mass ceremony—Hegel observed that newspapers serve modern man as a substitute for morning prayers—is paradoxical. It is performed in silent practice […] Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. […] The newspaper reader […] is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life (Anderson 1991: 35-6).

*The Bulletin*, being a weekly publication, succeeded more in this effect because it circulated to and was read in every part of the country each week, which would have been impossible for a daily publication. Both Ward and Palmer emphasise the importance of *The Bulletin*, known as the ‘Bushman’s Bible’, in the popularisation of the bush, the creation of a national character and the definition of its characteristics. In fact Palmer identified *The Bulletin* “as the chief instrument for expressing and defining the national being” (Palmer 1963: 92).

*The Bulletin* can be considered to be the reflection of the spirit of the time. It was concerned from the start with Australian nationalism and Australian ‘autonomy’ from England. The republican tendencies of *The Bulletin*...
probably influenced the strengthening of a sense of Australianness and the urge to distinguish Australia from Britain. Also influencing the writing of the period were the contemporary political movements, the unionist movement, the strikes and the economic difficulties due to the recession, the absentee landlords, and other factors (Ward 2003: 4-5). The role of *The Bulletin* as the mirror of a society in full movement is more important than its role as the ‘creator’ of that society. Its success lies in its ability to reflect its readers’ views, fears and assumptions. I believe that the reasons for its success are to be found in the competence of the editors, their interest in public submissions and their readiness to publish works from the public. *The Bulletin*, then, is not the originator of white Australian ideas, but rather a ‘compendium’ of ideas that already circulated in Australian society and that found an expression in this magazine in a radical way, thus contributing to their popularisation. *The Bulletin* contributed to the construction of a discourse of Australianness that merged into the discourse of whiteness. I am not arguing that these ideas were accepted by the entire Australian population, but certainly by the majority. This statement can be substantiated by the fact that policies limiting the immigration of “non-whites” in the attempt to maintain a white Australian society were adopted by the colonies and subsequently by the Commonwealth. The first acts passed by the Federal Parliament in 1901 were the *Pacific Island Labourers Act* and the *Immigration Restriction Act*, both of which formed the basis for what came to be known as the ‘White Australia Policy’ (Evans 1997: 205).
From 1887 onwards the masthead of *The Bulletin* read “Australia for the Australians”. The version of race relationship supported by *The Bulletin* is very effectively illustrated by the statement of the policies of the magazine, published in *The Bulletin* on 17 June 1893, which clearly support the idea that ‘Australians’ is understood as ‘white Australians’: “Australia for the Australians—The cheap Chinaman, the cheap nigger, and the cheap European pauper to be absolutely excluded” (quoted in Ward 2003: 224). In order to ensure national cohesion the other (often the Asian) is created as a threat to white Australia. It is clear that the foundations of a white Australia are already present here. From 7 May 1908 to 1960, 14 *The Bulletin* changed its masthead from “Australia for the Australians” to “Australia for the White Man” (*The Bulletin 1880-1980* 1980: 279), 15 making whiteness itself a lot more explicit. *The Bulletin* in later years functioned as the principal promoter and supporter of whiteness, in large part because it had previously not been necessary to distinguish between whites and non-whites since only white people were considered to be Australians. This suggests that the category ‘white’ became indistinguishable from that of the nation state.

Not surprisingly, the articles published in *The Bulletin* revealed a lot of concern regarding the preservation of Australia as a white country. The views on race, and the need to maintain a white majority in Australia as presented in the magazine, are clearly the expression of a racial category

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14 It was Donald Horne who on 7 December 1960 removed “Australia for the White Man” from the masthead (Lawson 1999: 302).

15 This change was the work of James Edmond who was editor from 1903 to 1915 (*The Bulletin 1880-1980* 1980: 279).
of whiteness. Of course the term whiteness was not used, but the idea was certainly there and since *The Bulletin* was so influential, this connection was readily embraced by its readers. The idea of whiteness and its exaltation is also stressed in the literary production of the time, and it is always the white male who is presented as Australian. An effective example is to be found in *The Bulletin*’s “Manifesto” which clearly expressed who is considered to be an Australian:

> By the term Australian we mean not those who have been merely born in Australia. All white men who come to these shores [...] are Australian (quoted in Lawson 1983: 130).

The connection between the national type (via the figure of the bushman) and whiteness is crucial to an understanding of how a white noble subject of British descent also became the celebratory figure of Australianness. Other races, particularly Asian and Pacific immigrants, were inconsequential. As for the indigenous race it was believed to be “dying out” anyway and “white Australians were their legitimate successors” (Evans 1997: 245). This theorisation of Australianness can be seen as an early theorisation of whiteness, where an explicit white Australian is the norm and everything else has to be kept out or ignored.\(^\text{16}\)

Some of the articles published in *The Bulletin* expressed a racial theory of whiteness in their attitudes towards immigrants from Asia and indigenous

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\(^\text{16}\) Not surprisingly, whiteness has been described as an invisible presence, invisible in the sense that it was not directly connected to race, but was considered by white people as identifying the human in general (Dyer 1997: 3). Theorisations of whiteness have exposed it, making it the subject of analysis. From being an uncontestated norm, the expression itself of humanity, whiteness has become the object of analysis. Authors like Toni Morrison have expressed the need for whiteness to become the object of study, inverting the position of white as the subject that studies the “racial object” to becoming itself the object of study (1992: 90).
Australians. While both were considered ‘inferior’, the first nation people were not seen as a threat and were presented as figures of the past. The invisibility of indigenous people in the magazine is emphasised by Sylvia Lawson who compares the reaction to them with that to the Chinese. In the case of indigenous Australians the reaction of the magazine was silence; they were “editorially invisible, out-of-print” (Lawson 1999: 87). Because they could not be sent ‘home’, being themselves the original inhabitants of the country, the reaction was to ignore their presence: they were often not described as a ‘problem’, as along Social Darwinist lines it was believed they would ‘disappear’, ‘die out’. As Lawson writes:

Ugly rhetoric constituted the line of defence against the Orientals; but against the first Australians […] the only defence was taboo. They were to be kept editorially invisible until, conveniently, they disappeared in the greater invisibility of collective death (Lawson 1983: 149).

This view, not uncommon in this period and very well expressed in the contemporary press, conveys the general attitude towards indigenous Australians. The position of indigenous people in the construction of an Australian national identity was marginal. They were not considered a threat in the 1890s and not even in the 1950s:¹⁷ they were simply omitted from any theorisation of Australianness.

*The Bulletin* seemed more concerned with the threat of a large Chinese, and in general, Asian immigration than it was with the presence of first nation people. An example of this situation can be found in an article

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¹⁷ In the 1950s the ‘half-caste’ were considered a threat to the ‘whiteness’ of the nation and assimilation policies were adopted in Australia to control them. A more in-depth discussion of the assimilation policies will be given in Chapter Five.
originally published in the United States and quoted at length in *The Bulletin*, which presents the views of a lawyer who was concerned about the growth of the Afro-American population. In this article, titled “White v. Black”, the writer was concerned about the possibility that the white population could in time be outnumbered, and he offered possible solutions to this situation. The comment of the editor of *The Bulletin* referred to Chinese immigration and to the possibility that the situation in Australia in twenty years would have been similar “had Australia not agreed to bar out the Chinaman” (*The Bulletin* 7 September 1889: 20). It seemed concerned only with Chinese immigration and not at all with the indigenous population. An explanation can be found in a passage from the article that perhaps resembles the Australian case more closely: “There are those who believe that the negro […] would share the fate of the Indian. Like the Indian, it was thought that he would gradually disappear from the face of the country as the whites multiplied” (*The Bulletin* 7 September 1889: 20). This same association could be made with indigenous Australians who, because of their number and because of the belief that the race would soon ‘die out’ and their colour would be ‘whitened’, were not considered a threat to white Australia. This reading reflects the belief of Australians about the Australian first nation people and their doomed status as a race, and explains their absence from any theorisation of the Australian stereotype.

The ideology of a unified nation state is created by constructing the other as a threat. The importance of ‘threat’ in the strengthening of nationalism
is clearly expressed in an article published in *The Bulletin* in which a Kanaka immigrant in Queensland is referred to as “a benefactor in disguise” because “he brought with him the germ of discontent, hence of nationalism”. It goes on to say that “if New South Wales were in like manner threatened by the usurpation of its larder by an inferior and foreign race, Nationalism would spread” (13 July 1889: 5). The construction of immigrants as the collective other, indeed as a threat, was a discourse used to strengthen the nationalist feeling of the nation and to create a national self-consciousness. The other was, therefore, presented as threatening the ‘civilised’ (white) nation and as inferior and vicious, so that those who belonged to the grand narrative of the nation (and of nationalism) could see themselves as superior. It was the Chinese (and more generally, Asians) who were constructed as the other rather than the indigenous people, because the latter were not made “palatable”, a point made by Bhabha who quotes from Fanon: “the Negro […] is needed, but only if he is made palatable in a certain way” (Bhabha 2004: 112). The first nation people could not be the other, whereas the Chinese could because they belonged to a civilization which was based on principles recognised by western cultures and because they had already been constructed as the ‘Oriental’.¹⁸

*The Bulletin*’s anti-immigration ‘campaign’ and the construction of other races as inferior is a clear example of an implicit theorisation of

¹⁸ Edward Said (1978) used the term ‘Orientalism’ to explain how the West’ has produced knowledge about the ‘Orient’ and has constructed the other as unable to speak for himself, in order to impose power over the Orient and to justify colonisation. Hodge and Mishra have analysed how ‘Aboriginalism’ is in a similar fashion constructed in order to produce knowledge and discourses about the indigenous other (Hodge and Mishra 1991: 27).
whiteness. The discourse of whiteness bases itself on other sub-discourses, other assumptions that are used at different times to control the other. One of these sub-discourses is the western concept of civilisation, where Social Darwinism is a major discourse constructed and used instrumentally to control and subjugate those who were read as uncivilised and therefore inferior. A significant example of this use, and of how in some instances it negated the value attributed to colour while at the same time reinstating it, can be found in an article published in *The Bulletin* entitled “The Jap on the Horizon” (1901). In this article it was stated that Asians should not be excluded from Australia on the grounds of colour or race but rather because they worked for very low wages, which was then seen as proof that they were located “far lower in the scale of civilisation than the white Australian” (quoted in Evans 1997: 211). The article went on to affirm that if there were a race in Africa or Asia “that has as high a standard of civilization and intelligence as the whites [...], and that can intermarry with the whites without the mixed progeny showing signs of deterioration, that race is welcome in Australia regardless of colour” (quoted in Evans 1997: 211). The other, in this case the Asian, is constructed as inferior, with vices and other negative connotations. A significant cartoon by Philip May published in *The Bulletin* is “The Mongolian Octopus—his grip on Australia” (21 August 1886), where the Asian is represented as a giant octopus with all sorts of vices attributed to him: “immorality”, “opium”, “bribery”, “customs robbery” and so on (reproduced in Kendall 2008: 15).19 Asians had to be described and

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19 According to Timothy Kendall the belief that the Chinese could corrupt Australian
considered as ‘negative’ in order to justify their exclusion and to perpetuate the idea of white superiority. In *The Bulletin*, whiteness is a racial category based on pre-given notions of a ‘master race’. It is not a critical category because if it were the white man himself would be created as part of an ethnographical narrative. In this non-critical and racial theory of whiteness, white Australians are opposed to Asians and Europeans (Ouyang 1995: 137). In fact, although to a lesser extent, Europe is also considered to be a place of ‘vice’, ‘corruption’, ‘poverty’ and ‘injustice’ when compared to the ‘egalitarian’ and ‘prosperous’ Australia, thus emphasising the egalitarian aspect of the legend. The role of these discourses is arguably to strengthen nationalism.

The importance of blood sacrifice in the creation of national unity is also stressed by *The Bulletin*’s discussion of the possibility of Australia fighting for England (if blood was needed for Australia, Australians would fight, but the magazine was against Australians fighting for England). The importance of blood sacrifice in the formation of a nation is underlined: “The ‘Baphometic’ fire-baptism of blood and tears may be needed to make of us a nation. [...] if men are the bricks out of which nations are builded [sic] blood is the cement which binds them together” (*The Bulletin*

society was common at the end of the nineteenth century and was supported by nationalist magazines: “It was widely believed that any colouring of Australia would inevitably result in moral and social degeneration. Since the 1870s, nationalist publications like the *Bulletin*, the *Boomerang*, *Punch*, the *Queensland Figaro* and the *Illustrated Australian News* consistently warned Europeans that Chinese immigration would result in moral degradation and spiritual corruption” (2008: 15).

The role war has in strengthening nationalism is discussed by White who argues that war was believed to be a fundamental test for the Australian type who had already proved their excellence in sports, winning the test cricket match against the English in 1874, but who needed to prove “national fitness” in war. Australia’s important contribution to British colonial wars, Sudan, China and the Boer War, proved the Australian colonies were worthy of the mother country (White 1981: 72-3).
28 December 1889: 5). Banjo Paterson makes this point clear in “Song of the Future” (1889).\textsuperscript{21} To illustrate, I quote a few stanzas from this poem below:

We have no tales of other days,
No bygone history to tell;
Our tales are told where camp-fires blaze
At midnight, when the solemn hush
Of that vast wonderland, the Bush,
Hath laid on every heart its spell.

Although we have no songs of strife,
Of bloodshed reddening the land,
We yet may find achievements grand
Within the bushman’s quiet life.
[...]
And lo a miracle! the land
But yesterday was all unknown,
The wild man’s boomerang was thrown
Where now great busy cities stand.
It was not much, you say, that these
Should win their way where none withstood;
In sooth there was not much of blood
No war was fought between the seas.

It was not much! but we who know
The strange capricious land they trod—
At times a stricken, parching sod,
At times with raging floods beset—
Through which they found their lonely way,
Are quite content that you should say
It was not much, while we can feel
That nothing in the ages old,

\textsuperscript{21} This poem was published in \textit{The Bulletin} with the title “The Bard that is to Be” and signed J.W. (21 December 1889: 30). It was later included in \textit{Río Grande’s Last Race and Other Verses} (1902) by A.B. Paterson. It is interesting to note the difference in the title of the poem and the pseudonym, which is not the usual Banjo used by Paterson for his contributions to \textit{The Bulletin}. This is even more peculiar if we consider that Paterson published “Clancy of the Overflow” with the pseudonym Banjo on page 7 of the same issue (21 December 1889: 7).
In song or story written yet
On Grecian urn or Roman arch,
Though it should ring with clash of steel,
Could braver histories unfold
Than this bush story, yet untold—
The story of their westward march
(Paterson 1902: 59-63).

In this poem the idea that the land was empty is clearly expressed and, even though “the wild man” is mentioned, the use of the adjective ‘wild’ helps to associate him with the land and the landscape. In this way the land is constructed as empty (“where none withstood”) because in Hegelian terms the first nation people cannot be recognised as the other, and their resistance is therefore denied, deleted and hidden. They are associated with the landscape, which is described as hostile. The repetition of the line “it was not much”, and the emphasis on the harshness of the land, is used to construct the land itself as the enemy in order to emphasise bushmen and pioneers as heroes. In the absence of a real enemy—and the indigenous populations and the battles they fought against the settlers were not accepted as battles, because they were not considered worthy to be enemies, being outside European/western understanding of societies and civilisation—the land was created as the enemy, and those who moved without problem across it, who ‘fought’ against it, were elected to the rank of national heroes. The absence of bloodshed is also clearly emphasised, and the construction of the character of the bushman is necessary in order to create a sense of national unity in Australia, even though there has been no war of
conquest, defence, or independence to conquer the land (Paterson 1902: 59-63).

The poet suggests that, even so, "achievements grand" can be found in the life of the bushmen. And here the bushman is constructed as the national myth; he is linked to the stories of Greece and Rome, and it is reiterated that even if those stories are full of accounts of battles, nonetheless, there are no "braver histories / Than this bush story, yet untold". The absence of wars within Australian borders certainly influenced the choice of the bushman as the representative of the ‘typical’ Australian. The bushmen, and the pioneers, are thus presented as the founders of Australia, re-confirming the role of these figures in the construction of a national unity. The location of these stories at some time in the past, and the fact that they need to be "sung", also contributes to the creation of an aura of myth around these figures and the bush (Paterson 1902: 59-63).

The importance of the bush in the history of *The Bulletin* is pointed out by Patricia Rolfe, who explains that the bush “was born out of a need to isolate something unique which had grown out of white settlement, something to act as a touchstone by which people could recognise themselves, something which set Australia apart from the old world” (Rolfe 1979: 187). Rolfe reiterates the importance attributed to the bush in the formation of an Australian nationalism. To support this argument she refers to Asa Briggs who somewhat enthusiastically writes in
**Victorian Cities** (1963) that *The Bulletin* was “the main instrument for transmitting bush ideals to all Australians” (quoted in Rolfe 1979: 189). This point is further stressed by Randolph Bedford who identifies the bush as the “real Australia”:

> Australia is not its cities; not its great cities whose preponderant population grows to a thing that begins to lose its Australianism and becomes an imitation of the tricks of older countries. The spirit of Australia, national as well as political, is of the bush. To learn inland Australia is to learn the real Australia (Rolfe 1979: 189).

The romanticisation of the figure of the bushman was emphasised in the 1890s, by which time he was more of a figure of the past, due to the introduction of railways and a change in the number of bush workers. At the beginning of the twentieth century the importance of the bush started to decline and cities became the focus of attention (*The Bulletin 1880-1980* 1980: 287). After the decline of the bush, the qualities of the bushman became incorporated into ideas of the ‘typical’ Australian.

*The Bulletin*’s influence in the creation of a national identity is best located in its role in the literary production of the period. Although it was not until the end of the century (in the late 1880s and 1890s) that *The Bulletin* started focusing mainly on literary works set in Australia, the role of the newspaper in the creation of an Australian literature is pivotal. The magazine’s interest in publishing literary works of Australian authors—largely due to Archibald, its editor—contributed to the creation of a national literature and to its circulation. Henry Lawson remarks on the

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22 Henry Lawson’s poem “The Roaring Days” refers to the coming of the railway as the end of the ‘digging’ days (*The Bulletin* 21 December 1889: 26).
editor’s request for work which had “the Australian atmosphere” (Lawson 1972: 128), and praises *The Bulletin* for its role in the creation of an Australian genre of literature and art: “The *Bulletin* proved to the people of Australia that they had artists and writers and the material for a distinct literature” (Lawson 1972: 128). Lawson’s praise of *The Bulletin* gives us an idea of the high prestige this magazine had among contemporaries. People who wrote for *The Bulletin* seem to have been aware of its role in the construction of an Australian identity. Authors who produced literary works in the 1890s and who largely contributed material to *The Bulletin* and other newspapers influenced the creation of a national type, and in some cases, contributed to its creation. The major function of *The Bulletin* was to provide writers with an audience interested in literary works set in the Australian bush. The readership in itself may have had a large influence on the subject matter. Certainly, it is clear that the role of the bush was pivotal in the discursive construction of the Australian nation.

A key moment in the creation of the myth of the bush was the publication, in *The Bulletin* on 26 March 1881, of the ballad “Sam Holt” written by G.H. Gibson (‘Ironbark’). This ballad is believed to constitute a starting point for the diffusion of similar celebratory verses of the bush (Serle 1973: 61; Ward 2003: 222). Key ‘nationalist’ writers such as Lawson and Paterson

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23 According to Henry Lawson, prior to *The Bulletin* an Australian author was taken into consideration only if he was recognised and praised by the English press, and generally their work had to be published by British publishing houses. Angus & Robertson was the first Australian publishing house to publish Australian literature (Lawson 1972: 128).

24 Sylvia Lawson has argued that the influence of *The Bulletin* in the creation of a bush ethos and “the notion of the *Bulletin* as the voice of the bush, articulating especially a ‘bush legend’ or ‘bush ethos’, was always a backward projection” (1999: 92). This clearly contradicts Henry Lawson’s conception of *The Bulletin* as pivotal in the development of a bush ethos and an Australian literature (Lawson 1972: 128).
published largely in *The Bulletin* as this magazine was seen to reflect the true spirit of Australia because it was “written by its readers”, and bushmen themselves often submitted material for publication (Serle 1973: 61). The magazine, in fact, went out of its way to address its readers (“To Readers, Wherever Located”) who were then asked to submit items for publication, “short stories, or ballads, especially on bush, mining, sporting, or dramatic themes” (21 December 1889: 28).

The connection between the bushman and the bush songs he sang and, in some cases composed, was made clear by A.G. Stephens in *The Bulletin* in 1901. Stephens defined the ‘typical bushman’, by which term he did not mean “the up-to-date shearer with his latest magazines, or the digger with his civilized interest in *The Bulletin*, but the Bush-grown, Bush-rooted product” which he identified with the ‘nomad’ workers who worked with cattle and sheep (quoted in Keesing 1957: viii). The emphasis on the ‘typical bushman’ in the year of Federation, and the link between this figure and the literature produced in the bush, is of pivotal importance. Ward and Palmer in the 1950s simply reinstated and theorised a legend that was already present and widely accepted at the time of Federation. It needs to be stressed that their analysis of the national type would not have been possible without the archival material produced by the ‘nationalist’ writers.

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25 A.G. Stephens (1865-1933) published Tom Collins' (Joseph Furphy's) *Such is Life* (1903). He was the editor of *The Bulletin*’s ‘Red Page’ (a section on literary criticism) from 1896 to 1906 (Serle 1973: 67; Lawson 1983: 170-6).

26 The positioning of the legend before Federation is significant. As Hodge and Mishra have pointed out, the choice to celebrate the “act of invasion, not the gesture of independence” in the year of the Bicentenary is symptomatic of a preoccupation with the legitimacy of that act which carries the “shadow” of indigenous people’s presence on the land and their dispossession (Hodge and Mishra 1991: ix-x).
As we have noted, Ward analyses a number of old ballads and emphasises the way in which features of the Australian legend are expressed in these ballads (Ward 2003: 166-8). Ward stresses the importance of ballads in the creation and the spread of the national character. Ballads were also popular forms among the convicts, and early ballads were transportation ballads. With the development of a pastoral industry, the ballads were adapted by the bushmen and folk singers and became the expression of bush life: they were sung around bushfires. These ballads contributed to the creation of the myth of the bushman. The importance of these songs as early Australian literary expressions, and the role they had in the creation of a community and therefore a nation, was realised by A.B. Paterson who collected them in order to preserve them (Old Bush Songs, 1905). According to Keesing, “these songs and stories are being recognised as one of the true and traditional constituents of a genuine Australian mythology” (Keesing 1957: xviii).

The importance of songs in creating a sense of national unity cannot be overemphasised. According to Benedict Anderson, the role of language as a means for national unity is fundamental in the creation of a community. Language in Australia, however, is that of the mother country and by itself could not effect the creation of national unity. Anderson points to a second kind of community created by language, “above all in the form of poetry and songs” (1991: 145), and the national anthem as an

27 Ward quotes in full “Adieu to Old England” to which belongs the well-known line “I am bound for Botany Bay” (Ward 2003: 26-7).
example of these songs. As he explains: “No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity” (Anderson 1991: 145). Songs and ballads are therefore fundamental in the creation and consolidation of national identity and unity. Their importance in the development of an Australian literary tradition that had Australian people and landscape as a subject is well represented in the work of the poet A.B. (Banjo) Paterson (1864-1941), who celebrates the bushman, and of Henry Lawson (1867-1922).

An analysis of the works of selected authors of this period will confirm the importance the bush assumed in an emergent Australian literature. Paterson, Lawson and Furphy all contributed to the construction of the ‘typical’ Australian, idealising the representation of the bush and the bushman. The characteristics attributed to this national type have contributed to the creation of a shared national myth. Ward lists the foundational elements which will go into the making of the typical Australian:

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28 It is significant that Anderson includes “Waltzing Matilda” (1895) in the examples of national anthems (1991: 145). As we all know, this ballad by Banjo Paterson, is not the official Australian national anthem, but it could be argued that the feeling of national unity experienced by Australians singing it is not achieved by the official national anthem, “Advance Australia Fair” (1878).
A comradely independence based on group solidarity […] a light-hearted intolerance of respectable or conventional manners, a reckless improvidence and a conviction that the working bushman was the ‘true Australian’, whose privilege it was to despise ‘new chums’ and city folk. We have seen that this ethos sprang mainly from convict, working-class, Irish and native-born Australian sources, but that these streams coalesced ‘beyond the Great Divide’ where remoteness and the peculiar geographical, economic and social conditions transmuted them into something new which yet included them all (Ward 2003: 106).

Australia was identified with the bush and its true inhabitants were those who grew out of the bush. This construction of the national type, and the characteristics attributed to it by these nationalist authors, are consistent with Foucault’s concept of ‘discourse’. As I have already pointed out, whether the bush and its inhabitants were idealised or not, they were the subject of literature, and their stories became the stories of Australia, with which an entire nation identified. Whether the land was idealised or hostile, these people were still described as heroes, thus contributing to the creation of a national character, that of the bushman.

In the 1890s the bushman was identified as the Australian type. As Francis Adams had pointed out in an early study, The Australians: A Social Sketch (1893), it is in the inland that the national type was to be found:29

The one powerful and unique national type yet produced in Australia is, I have asserted, that of the Bushman.

The smaller resident or squatter or manager almost always shows signs of him: sometimes is merely a slightly refined or outwardly polished form of him.

29 Francis Adams (1862-1893) was a prolific writer (of British origins) who visited Australia in the 1880s (Ward 2003: 256).
The selector comes nearer to him still, so near as often to seem almost identic(al), yet a fine but unmistakable shade of difference severs him from the true Bushman, the Bushman pure and simple, the man of the nation. It is, then, in the ranks of the shearers, boundary riders, and general station hands, that the perfected sample must be sought, and it is the rapid thoroughness of the new social system…which has chiefly “differentiated” him already into this new species (Adams 1961: 139-40).

In this passage Adams gives us a clear idea of the conception of the bushman as the national type. Adams refers to the “true Bushman” as “the man of the nation”. This passage clearly points to the importance writers from the 1890s attributed to the figure of the bushman as the typical image of the Australian.

The bushman became the subject of an emergent Australian literature, a literature that was aimed at an Australian public and therefore tended to both represent and create a typical figure for the Australian readers to identify with. It was not unusual that the public from the city would identify with the adventures and miseries of the men who lived in the bush, who fought against the difficult landscape to secure a sense of belonging to the new land for all Australians. The bushman was the response to the difficulties of the settlers in adjusting to this land. Against a literature that focused mainly on the convict figure—a stain on the history of the nation—these authors wrote instead about the figure of the bushman. Even if they did not always idealise the bushmen they made them the focus of attention and the main characters of an emergent Australian literature. Authors like Marcus Clarke had constructed convict characters, and Price Warung (William Astley), contemporary of Lawson and
Paterson, still focused his attention on the convict period and told convict stories. It was with Lawson and Paterson that the focus of attention shifted to the bushman and the people living in the outback, a feature that would become an important feature of Australian literature for a long time. The life of the bushman was elevated to the level of a subject for literature which gained significant popularity, as the success of Paterson’s *The Man from Snowy River and Other Verses* (1895) and Lawson’s *While the Billy Boils* (1896) show. The literary works of these authors and of their contemporaries contributed to the construction of the myth of the bushman and of the bush. They played a fundamental role in the circulation, survival and perpetuation of this myth and the assumption of the bushman’s characteristics as those representing the national type. Through their work the nationalistic ideas concerning the Australian type and his racial characteristics were embodied in the constructed figure of the bushman.

It is important for me to turn to Banjo Paterson\(^3\) whose verses had a crucial function in the formation of the typical Australian and therefore of national unity. Paterson was probably the most prolific author of the 1890s, and his work included both poetical and non-poetical material. It is, however, for his verses that he is celebrated. His literary career started with the submission of ballads to *The Bulletin* in 1885.\(^4\) The exaltation of the bushman, which included all the bush workers, in Paterson’s work, reflects a tendency which was common at the end of the nineteenth

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\(^3\) A.B. Paterson was a solicitor in Sydney (Semmler 1966: 51).
\(^4\) As recalled by the poet himself, it was J.F. Archibald, *The Bulletin*’s editor, who suggested that he write about the bush (Semmler 1966: 19).
century. Paterson gave a vivid description of the people who lived in the bush and stressed their ‘heroic’ accomplishments. Paterson himself loved the land, and specifically the Australian landscape. However, this love did not obscure the harshness of the land and the difficulties of living in it. In this harsh context the bushmen were described and presented as fearless people who accepted the landscape they inhabited and who measured themselves against it. The places and figures in the ballads written by Paterson filled the Australian landscape with characters who were constructed imaginatively but who acquired a realistic aura. It was their realism which turned the Australian landscape into a familiar one for people who lived in the cities. However, these were idealised figures who did not correspond to the real bushmen, even if people working in the bush liked to identify themselves with these heroic men.

Paterson’s descriptions of bushmen provided material for the construction of the Australian character, a character which then shaped the identity of the nation. Paterson’s ballads circulated widely among the population, their success being due to his ability to link his ballads to those which had circulated in the colony from its foundation. Paterson used this old form and through it he gave a voice to the land. This voice, though, was a new one, and reflected the aspirations and feelings of an entire nation. According to Semmler, Paterson’s verses circulated among the bush workers before their printed version could reach them, thus reversing the usual process of the ballads, which were first circulated and later collected in printed version (Semmler 1966: 2). The success of Banjo
Paterson’s ballads and the fact that they are still read today is proof of how deep-rooted this construction of the Australian character is. The strength of these ballads is the feeling that their subjects are really Australian, that they do not talk of a far away mother land, but interpret and give voice to the Australian landscape and people. It is also their simplicity—not uncommon to the genre of the ballad which requires a simple language and a repetitive motif so that it can be easily remembered and told—which contributes to their popularity. The ballads were sung around campfires and, in some cases, they are said to have been used to calm the cattle at night. However, as Stewart has argued, their function was more to calm the men and to reassure them of their belonging to the country (Stewart 1955: xi).

Paterson constructs the bushmen as the founding fathers of Australia, thus creating a myth of origin for the country and contributing to their elevation as national characters. His ballads express and construct the characteristics of the typical Australian, characteristics associated with the will to create a distinct Australian type. The bushmen are praised for their qualities and are presented as heroic figures, and the harshness of the country is often stressed in order to exalt their achievements—as in “Song of the Future” (1889), where the bushmen are presented as heroic and their conquest of a “blank” land as a great enterprise (Paterson 1902: 59-63).
These themes are present in his poems. In “Pioneers” Paterson clearly associates the figure of the pioneer with the bushmen. They are exalted because they confront the wilderness: in this poem the landscape is rendered hostile in order to emphasise the courage of these men:

To you who fought the wilderness through rough unsettled years—
The founders of our nation's life, the brave old pioneers (Paterson 1967: 172).

The pioneers and the bushmen are not distinct for Paterson: they represent the same category and are believed to be the ones who really embody the ‘typical’ Australian, even if they are already described as figures of the past, a heroic time when compared to Paterson’s “dull” and “slow” present:

But now the times are dull and slow, the brave old days are dead
When hardy bushmen started out, and forced their way ahead (Paterson 1967: 171).

Here Paterson idealises a vision of the bush linked to the past, where the Australian essence is identified with the ‘old ways’ attitude.

Another typical feature of Paterson’s ballads is the idealisation of the bush and its inhabitants whose skill as horsemen and knowledge and love for the land are foregrounded. The bush is constructed in a dualistic way, it is at times contemplated as an idyllic place, where birds sing and where life is peaceful and full of beauty. Conversely, the harshness of the landscape is in some cases exaggerated in order to construct the

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32 This poem was first published in the Town and Country Journal, 19 December 1896.
33 J.B. Hirst highlights the importance of the pioneers in the creation of an Australian national identity. See J.B. Hirst, (1978-79), “The Pioneer Legend”.

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bushman as the hero. Life in the bush is often contrasted to the city. A fine example of this opposition is “Clancy of the Overflow”\textsuperscript{34} where Paterson compares life in the bush to life in the city, and praises the former. The life of the drover is idealised: “For the drover’s life has pleasures that the townsfolk never know” (Paterson 1967: 10), and the poet enumerates the pleasures of this life:

\begin{quote}
And the bush hath friends to meet him, and their kindly voices greet him
In the murmur of the breezes and the river on its bars,
And he sees the vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended,
And at night the wondrous glory of the everlasting stars (Paterson 1967: 10).
\end{quote}

The comparison to the city is vivid in its images, with a stress on the smells, colours and noises of the city very well conveyed through negative adjectives:

\begin{quote}
I am sitting in my dingy little office, where a stingy
Ray of sunlight struggles feebly down between the houses tall,
And the foetid air and gritty of the dusty, dirty city
Through the open window floating, spreads its foulness over all (Paterson 1967: 11).
\end{quote}

The city is described as a miserable place, while the adjectives used to describe the outback are magnificent: “wondrous”, “everlasting”. The sounds of the bush, the “lowing” of the cattle, are opposed to the “fiendish rattle” of trams and auto buses, as well as the “ceaseless tramp of feet”. People of the city have “pallid faces” and, in the term “haunt me”, are associated with ghosts. Their eyes are described as “eager” and “greedy”, and their “rush and nervous haste” are juxtaposed against

\textsuperscript{34} First published in \textit{The Bulletin}, 21 December 1889.
Clancy’s ride behind the cattle “slowly stringing”. This image creates a startling opposition to that of Clancy riding and singing behind his cattle, given at the beginning of the ballad. Paterson praises the life of the bullock driver, a life changing with the season as opposed to the monotonous life of the city symbolised by the “round eternal of the cash-book and the journal”, that the poet would happily change with that of the drover (Paterson 1967: 10-1).

Juxtaposed with this positive vision of the bush is one of a harsh and difficult landscape. Even in this case, though, this construction is not merely a more realistic representation of the bush; it has a discursive function: the exaltation of the figure of the bushman who confronts himself against these difficult surroundings. The figure of the bushman is therefore always constructed as positive, described either as enjoying the pleasure of his surroundings, or stoically dealing with them. These men are self-reliant and perfectly able to master the landscape. Another well-known poem, “The Man from Snowy River”, is a clear example of the exaltation of the bushman’s skills. The qualities attributed to the horsemen in this ballad are those typical of the Australian character: mateship, bravery, defiance, skill with horses, and so on. These characteristics are emphasised throughout the ballad. The idea of mateship and of the horsemen’s courage and readiness to challenge themselves is very well expressed in the ballad, in which they come from different stations to help find a horse that was lost: “For the bushmen love

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35 This poem was first published in *The Bulletin*, 26 April 1890.
hard riding where the wild bush horses are” (Paterson 1967: 1). Here, the stockmen and their horses are presented as fearless and in perfect control of the surrounding landscape. The unsurpassed skill of the man from Snowy River is anticipated through the presentation of an arduous challenge (Paterson 1967: 2), and his ride down the side of the mountain is compared to the fury of a torrent. His juxtaposition with Clancy, one of the best riders, whom the readers already know through “Clancy of the Overflow”, is preparing for the heroic enterprise of the man from Snowy River. This young man is presented as a true hero, being able to go where no one else can. It is meaningful that he does not have a name, and we only know where he is from, which contributes to the ‘legendary’ aura of the enterprise: “And the stockmen tell the story of his ride” (Paterson 1967: 4). According to Semmler, “Paterson in his ballads emerges as a myth-maker as well as poet” and, referring to “The Man From Snowy River”, Semmler continues: “it was as if a word had been uttered that was to awaken a dumb country, giving it a language of its own and spreading a sense of fellowship between one man and another” (Semmler 1972: 35).

The ‘ideal’ bushman, thus constructed, is opposed to other figures considered to be threatening to the national type. The Asian immigrant and the ‘new chums’ are presented as menacing the work and the peaceful life of the bushman (Palmer 1954: 111). These two categories are both considered outsiders because they are not part of the bush ethos. They are therefore an expression of the dualistic attitude of the
Australians towards the British and the immigrants, both considered as other, even if in a different way, and both necessary for the national type to become self-conscious of himself and his identity. In “A Bushman’s Song” the racist attitude towards the Chinese, which was a feature of the pages of *The Bulletin* in those years, is prominent and the Chinese workers are presented as responsible for low wages, and associated with “leprosy” (Paterson 1967: 58). Paterson seems to be aware of the white nationalist ideas of *The Bulletin* and adopts them in his work. The bushman’s reluctance to tolerate authority is also presented in the ballad: the character in fact decides to move “up country” because he does not want to submit to the authority of the station owner (Paterson 1967: 58). This is a characteristic typical of the bushman: his independence and belief in his ability to make a living without having to consider anyone ‘superior’.

Although both Paterson and Lawson wrote about the bush and the people who lived in it, their visions were not necessarily identical. While Paterson romanticised the bush, presenting the landscape as peaceful, abundant and familiar and the people as happy, Lawson presented the difficulties encountered by the bushmen in the outback. Their divergent representations of the bush and the bushman caused a literary debate, known as the ‘The Bulletin debate’, that saw the publication of both

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36 This poem was first published in *The Bulletin* in 1892.
37 In other poems (in “Saltbush Bill” (1894), for instance) a harsh description is given of the new chums and the jackaroos who are not familiar with the Australian ways.
writers’ contrasting visions of the bush in 1892. The positions assumed by the two authors crystallised a representation of the bush that would become a common binary opposition in subsequent literature.

According to Paterson, who recalls a conversation with Lawson, they agreed to start a debate in order to publish more (Semmler 1966: 81; Phillips 1970: 61). It was Lawson who suggested they present their differing versions based upon their different experiences. Paterson had done his “prospecting on horseback”, while Lawson had done his “on foot” (Paterson 1939: 21). Whether or not this debate was staged as Paterson claims, the two authors’ role in the creation of an Australian literature is pivotal. Their writings established a polarisation between the bush and the city. Paterson romanticised the landscape and presented it as the ‘real Australia’ as opposed to the city, whereas Lawson aimed at a realistic representation of the bush and its miseries, out of respect for those people, the bushmen, who lived on the land and who had to face the harsh environment. Lawson has been accused of preferring and exalting the city against the bush but, as is evident from his work—“Faces in the Street” (1888) and “Jones’s Alley” (1892) for instance—Lawson

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38 The debate involved other contributors to The Bulletin, notably Edward Dyson, John LeGay Brereton and Francis Kenna (Nesbitt 1971: 6-7).

39 Nesbitt argues that Lawson and Paterson did not start the fictitious debate, and he uses the verses to substantiate this statement. According to Nesbitt, the idea that they agreed to do so has been accepted by the biographers on the basis of what Paterson recalled years later, in 1939 (Nesbitt 1971: 4).

40 In the poem “Faces in The Street” (1888), Lawson’s description of the city is a negative one and the author laments that in a land so young there is misery. As well, he describes the endless tramp of feet on the streets, the faces as “sallow, sunken”, “wan and weary”, “sad”, “ghostly” and “rigid”. The verb used is “drifting”, a verb that conveys the idea of passivity and aimlessness, like something carried along on the current, an idea which is further emphasised by the association of the faces with a “pallid river”, a “human river” and a “human flood”. The faces are associated with the tide of a river and
himself criticised life in the city.\textsuperscript{41} Lawson’s intent was to condemn the idealisation of the bush carried out by other writers, an idealisation which did not correspond to reality. According to Lawson, if the country was ever to be understood, Australians had to accept and face its reality, and therefore poets had to stop idealising the outback and start describing the harshness of bush life. He poses himself as a direct interlocutor for other artists and is aware of the others’ construction of an idealised character (Serle 1973: 66).

Lawson started the so-called debate on the 9 July 1892 with the publication of the poem “Borderland” (“Up the Country”). This poem presents aspects of the bush conventionally accepted and described by other authors as typical, which the poem then subverts and ridicules. Lawson’s attack is not aimed at the bush or at Australian nationalism but at the writer’s literary representation of the bush. In its opening lines, “Borderland” addresses the “Southern poets’ land” located “up the country”. Lawson juxtaposes the romantic descriptions of the writers (the “sunny plains”) with his own, those of a hot and hellish place, where the “roasted bullock-drivers creep” and the “sun-dried shepherd” is surrounded by “clouds of dust” in a landscape which is an “infernal furnace”. The adjectives used are negative: burning, maddening, everlasting, barren, dismal, sinister, God-forgotten—contributing to the

\textsuperscript{41} The dates for Lawson’s works are based on Colin Roderick’s edited editions. See Lawson (1967); Lawson (1972); Lawson (1984).
presentation of a desolate place. Even the night is of no comfort after the heat of the day and the rain does not improve the land which is described as a “rain-swept wilderness”. Alongside the other typical inhabitants of the bush—bullock-driver, shepherd and sundowner—Lawson also presents “gaunt and haggard women” who “work like men”, waiting for their husbands “gone a-droving” to return. Lawson concludes the poem hoping for a future when “the plains are irrigated and the land is humanised” (Lawson 1967: I. 210-2).

Paterson responds to this poem with “In Defence of the Bush” on 23 July 1892, and contrasts the descriptions given by Lawson, arguing that they are a sign of his scant knowledge of the bush. Paterson exalts life in the bush in opposition to life in the city, as negative adjectives are used to describe the latter. The sounds of the bush—the songs of the birds, “the music of the bush”—are opposed to the noises of the city—“ceaseless tramp of feet” in the street and “the roar of trams and buses”. Paterson reinstates the adjectives used by Lawson to describe the bush in order to contrast them to his vision of the bush. Lawson’s ignorance of the bush is believed to be the cause of his dislike: Lawson—as a representative of the man from the city—is juxtaposed against the knowledge and love of the bushmen (Paterson 1967: 68). The droving days are recalled by Paterson in a nostalgic mood as something belonging to the past, and he refers to the shearers or the drovers singing in unison with birds in the bush. People from the city on the other hand are “sour and saddened”, and the streets themselves are presented as “squalid” (Paterson 1967:
67-9). Paterson misunderstands Lawson’s critique of the idealisation of the bush, assuming that the poet wants to idealise the city.

The debate continues with Lawson’s poem “In Answer to ‘Banjo’ and Otherwise” (“The City Bushman”) published on 6 August 1892. In this poem Lawson emphasises the fact that the bushman is a man, and “not a poet’s dummy” as he focuses on the difficulties encountered by these men. Here Lawson not only describes the hostility of the land, but presents the hard life of the bush workers, the difficult life of the farmers “ruined on selections” made harder by the “absentee”, and clearly points to the errors of idealising life in the bush: “Droving songs are very pretty, but they merit little thanks / From the people of a country in possession of the Banks” (Lawson 1967: I. 212). Lawson denounces the economic situation in Australia and seems very concerned with the current life and future of the bush workers. As has been pointed out by Christopher Lee, Lawson’s ideas on Australian workers could have been influenced by William Lane, editor of the Boomerang and the Worker, who was promoting a “new unionism” (Lee 2004: 24-5). Lawson’s interest in the worker’s situation is confirmed by the lines “Ah! we read about the drovers and the shearsers and the like / Till we wonder why such happy and romantic fellows strike” (Lawson 1967: I. 214). The bush described by the poets is a romanticised version of the real bush where life and work conditions are harsh.
The debate continues with Paterson’s “An Answer to Various Bards” (1 October 1892), in which he justifies his tendency to “‘over-write’ the bushmen” because he “always see[s] a hero in the ‘man from furthest out’”. The physical strength of the bushman is also emphasised: “there’s no denying that the bushman's life is rough, / But a man can easy stand it if he’s built of sterling stuff” (Paterson 1924: 28). Paterson suggests that they should all “herd into the cities [...] / Till we lose the love of roving and we learn to hate the bush” (Paterson 1924: 30). Lawson replies with “Poets of The Tomb” on 8 October 1892. The debate does not end for Lawson, and in the following years he will come back to the subject in his poems (“Australian Bards and Bush Reviewers”)42 and in his prose writing.

What emerged from the debate was a contrasting vision of the bush by Paterson and Lawson. However, a close analysis of the works of the two main participants shows that their positions are not all that different since in both there is still an exaltation of the bushman who remains the main protagonist of their work. In my argument, whether or not they were in agreement, the debate is fundamental because even in their sometimes contrasting representation of the Australian bush and bushman, they both contributed through their work to the creation of an Australian identity and to the establishment of a white, nationalist Australian literature. In spite of their differing positions both Lawson and Paterson present us with a nationalist vision of the Australian character as they both recognise the

42 Published in The Bulletin on 18 August 1894.
importance of the bush and of the bushman in the creation of nationhood.

What is at stake here is not the fact that the bush is better or worse than the city, but its role in the construction of a national type. The bushman, even when presented by Lawson as a sad figure cursed by the weather and the land, stands out because of his stoicism and his perseverance as someone who endures and is loyal to the bush and to his ‘mates’. The negative experiences and the harshness of the bush contribute to creating the landscape as an enemy, but an enemy that even in Lawson’s negative representation still preserves some of its idealised characteristics.

As I have already pointed out, this idealisation of the stoicism of the bushman is not a constant in Lawson’s work. It could be argued that his verses, especially in the early days of his career, tend towards an idealisation of the bush and its people. These idealised representations are generally attributed to the past as in “The Roaring Days” (1889) and “The Song of Old Joe Swallow” (1890), while later works, especially his prose writings and also the verses he wrote after his travels in the west of NSW in 1892, present a more realistic vision of the bush and its inhabitants, as seen in the short stories “Hungerford” (1893), “In a Dry Season” (1892) and “In a Wet Season” (1893).

43 Lawson’s poems and ballads have a more idealised vision of the bush when compared to his short stories. In “The Roaring Days” (1889) the poet remembers “the cheery camp-fire” and the “good old songs” (Lawson 1967: I. 55). In “The Song of Old Joe Swallow” (1890), Lawson idealises the bush and, in particular, the “days o’ long ago” mentions choruses and yarns they used to tell when “a lot of bullick-drivers was a-campin’” (Lawson 1967: I. 75).

44 _The Bulletin_ paid for the ticket for his journey to the west of NSW in 1892 (Nesbitt 1971: 7). On his arrival at Hungerford, Lawson, in a letter to his aunt Emma, describes the place as a “God-Forgotten town” and details the “horrors of the country out here.
In some poems bushmen are presented as the founding fathers of Australia. It is therefore clear that, even if Lawson sometimes seems to create a more realistic and less idealised vision of the bush, he also contributes to the creation of the bushman as the ‘national type’. The ‘realistic’ description of his subjects and their surroundings conveys an aura of realism upon the figure itself, thus contributing to the construction of the ‘ideal’ bushman. This is particularly salient, for example, in the poem “The Men Who Made Australia” (1901), where the bushmen are read as being pivotal to the creation of the nation.

Aye, the cities claim the triumphs of a land they do not know,
       But all empty is the day they celebrate!
For the men who made Australia federated long ago (Ward 1964:156).

Lawson identifies the bushmen as the men who ‘conquered’ the land: people from the city had no role in the foundation of the country. In this and other works the bushman is idealised and presented as a stoic person who fights against the harshness of nature for the creation of the nation. Lawson also places the origin of the bushman at an indefinite moment in the past, contributing in this way to the creation of a discourse with vague origins.

As far as the bush ethos is concerned, life in the bush is not always presented as positive and in some instances is portrayed as extremely

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Men tramp and beg and live like dogs” (Kiernan 1976: 119). In the short story “Hungerford”, written in 1893 after his travels, Lawson still emphasises the myth of the “men who first travelled through this country”, exalting their heroic achievements: “There were brave men in the land in those days” (Kiernan 1976: 122).

45 See for example “How the Land Was Won” (1899), where men fight against “wilderness, flood and drought” to win the land (Lawson 1967: I. 362).
miserable. Often it is an exaltation of the bushman’s sacrifice and sacrifice is something I have already considered as being important in the construction of the Australian nation and of the Australian character. Even so, in a large number of his works Lawson presents the bush as the ‘real’ Australia. This depiction, however, is not always unproblematic. In “The Ballad of the Drover” (1889), for instance, all the typical elements of the idealisation of the bush are at first presented only to be subverted afterwards: the peaceful and enjoyable landscape is then presented as a fury which kills the drover. The concluding verses, “But bleaching on the desert / Or in the river reeds / The bones lie of the bravest / That wide Australia breeds” (Lawson 1967: I. 29), refer to drovers as “the bravest”, once again an idealisation of this figure who fights against the drought and the harsh country even when this means death. Lawson’s descriptions of the negative aspects of the bush, always an extremely harsh environment, work to emphasise the stoicism and bravery of the bushmen whose work is presented as being carried out in the worst of conditions.

In his prose works, we discover that Lawson continued to support the debate he had started in verse in 1892 against the idealisation of the bush. In his short stories—the genre for which he is remembered—and in his essays there is a direct representation of the bush which is not idealised and in many cases reflects the ideas expressed in his verses at

46 This ballad was first published in the Town and Country Journal on 9 March 1889 (Lawson 1967: I. 26-9).
47 In “Out Back” (1893) as well, the bones of the dead swagman are described as “bleaching”: “Where the bleaching bones of a white man lie” (Lawson 1967: I. 244).
the beginning of the debate. Lawson’s tendency to consider the bushman as a poetic construction which does not reflect the reality of the bush is clearly expressed in his work. This point is made explicit in “Bush Terms” (1893), where Lawson explains the meaning of some of the terms used with reference to people living in the bush: “The old bush terms have died out with the old poetical bushman—who never existed; and the country has lost nothing, except poetry. The scenery out back isn’t like Illawarra. And so on without limit” (Lawson 1972: 23). In this passage the bushman described by the poet is exposed as being a literary construction. Lawson seems conscious of the discursive construction around the figure of the Australian “countryman” and in particular the bushman.48

According to Brian Kiernan, “Lawson did ‘idealize’ in another sense, in the sense of abstracting ‘ideal types’ from the society he encountered outback” (1976a: xviii). Through the characters he ‘sketched’, Lawson strongly contributed to the idealisation of the bushmen, and to the construction of the idea of a ‘typical’ Australian, based on those character traits common to the bushmen. In his short stories, in fact, we encounter all the versions of the representative of the ‘bushman’: the drover (“A Droving Yarn”), the shearer (“A Rough Shed”), the swagman (“Enter

48 “A Rough Shed” (1899) appears to be in line with the poems written for the “Bulletin debate” to contrast Paterson’s and other poets’ view of the bush. Lawson describes in some detail the life of the shearers and rouseabouts. [A ‘rouseabout’ is “an unskilled labourer in a shearing shed or on a station” (Wilkes 1985: 351)]. He seems to go through all the ‘clichés’ presented by Paterson and other poets in their poems and contrasts them with reality. The sentence “No, gentle bard!—we don’t sing at our work” (Lawson 1984: 460) seems to refer to the verses from Paterson: “Did you chance to hear a chorus in the shearers' huts at night?” (Paterson 1967: 68). There is another reference to a poet in the words: “No; we didn’t have sweet dreams of home and mother, gentle poet” (Lawson 1984: 459). These references seem to always start with a negation of the idealised description given by the poet, followed by what is presented as the reality.
Mitchell"), and the shepherd ("The Bush Undertaker"). His short stories, or 'sketches', are a presentation of life in the bush and his characters are described as realistic, but all of them share some characteristics of the 'typical' bushmen. Through the use of expressions typical of spoken Australian English, Lawson conveys what is seen as the peculiar idioms of the bushman, who is rough and his language reflects his manners. The bushman is presented as a solitary person who is at ease only with his mates and other bushmen, who dislikes people from the city and their sophisticated manners, and who is always willing to tell a good yarn.

We have a good description of the bushman type in one of Lawson's literary 'sketches', "Jack Cornstalk as a Drover" (1899). The description includes the characteristics considered to be typical of the bushman, in both his attitude and physical appearance. To these typical characteristics, however, Lawson adds some peculiarities which make this figure more realistic and at the same time ironic. For example Jack's eyes are "half-closed against the blinding heat; the red dust and the sand-sheeted sirocco from the North-West; the fierce and everlasting swarm of flies" (Lawson 1972: 46). The physical description Lawson gives refers to the typical bushman:

49 Lawson mentions the "early day name 'Currency Lad', applied to the native-born", thus directly connecting the bush type to this figure which now belonged to the past and was only used in literary works such as Rolf Boldrewood's Robbery Under Arms (Lawson 1972: 42).
Jack Cornstalk, as a general type, is slight “and wiry”, but often, because of his height and gauntness, he is described as being lanky. “New Australia”\textsuperscript{50} Lane’s description of the type as “the tall straight men in the west”, comes very near the mark—“straight” in a bush sense, too. His complexion runs to sandiness, his hair some shade of brown, and moustache reddish or “ginger”. His characteristics are early manliness and quiet independence; he swears and swaggers a bit when he feels, instinctively, that it is necessary to do so. When down in the city he seldom stays long enough for city life to get a ‘holt’ on him; he doesn’t see much in it, and wants to get “out back” again, and on a horse (Lawson 1972: 47).

The characteristics described here by Lawson are those which would be recognised as typical of the Australian, to which Ward also refers. The ironic tone used by Lawson shows his understanding of these characteristics as being a literary construction. The six months Lawson spent in the bush seem to have influenced his negative vision of it, but in fact gave his conception of the bush a more realistic frame.

Lawson’s landscape is negatively constructed as empty and monotonous, as the opening description of “The Drover’s Wife” (1892) exemplifies: “Bush all around—bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten native apple trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few she-oaks” (Lawson 1990: 47). This passage immediately conveys the desolation of bush life through a series of negations. The perception is further stressed in “The Bush and the Ideal” (1897) where Lawson refers to the “back country” and its “dreadful monotony” (Lawson 1972: 31). In the following passage Lawson refers to his ‘realistic’ description of the

\textsuperscript{50} Here Lawson refers to “New Australia” a utopian community founded by William Lane in Paraguay in 1893. It is interesting that this community had among its priorities an insistence on a white community. For a detailed analysis see Souter (1968).
bush as opposed to those of other writers, and emphasises the need for a truthful description which at least would do justice to the people who live in the bush and who suffer there:

I have been accused of painting the bush in the darkest colours from some equally dark personal motives. I might be biased—having been there; but it is time the general public knew the back country as it is, if only for the sake of the bush outcasts who have to tramp for ever through broiling mulga scrub and baking lignum, or across blazing plains by endless tracks of red and grey, through a land of living death (Lawson 1972: 31-2).

Lawson’s critique of the bush focuses on the harsh conditions of life in the bush as much as it aims at improving that condition. The description of the outback that emerges from Lawson’s words is a ‘hellish’ one. The adjectives used—“broiling”, “baking”, “blazing”—convey the idea of unbearable heat, associating the outback with hell, a feature of many of his stories.

The landscape of the interior, the ‘outback’, is presented as hostile and empty, both in the dry as well as the wet season, a point made clear in two stories: “In a Dry Season” (1892) and “In a Wet Season” (1893). Both stories emphasise the desolation and monotony of the country. The harshness of the landscape and the sadness of the people who live in the ‘outback’ are taken to extremes in the story “In a Wet Season”, where the bush is described as a miserable place, and its inhabitants as miserable people. The adjectives used in this story convey the sadness and

51 A similar point is made in “Some Popular Australian Mistakes”, published in The Bulletin, 8 November 1893. Here Lawson again stresses the non-realistic characteristics of the bushmen described in literary works, and the importance of presenting the real situation in the bush as a way of being ‘fair’ to those people who live and suffer there: “What’s the good of making a heaven of a hell when by describing it as it really is we might do some good for the lost souls there?” (Lawson 1972: 25).
negativity of the landscape. Quoting the first paragraph of the story gives us an idea of its tone:

The train left Bourke, and then there began the long, long agony of scrub and wire fence, with here and there a natural clearing, which seemed even more dismal than the funereal “timber” itself. [...] Sky like a wet, grey blanket; plains like dead seas, save for the tufts of coarse grass sticking up out of the water; scrub indescribably dismal—everything damp, dark, and unspeakably dreary (Lawson 1990: 191).

The adjectives he uses convey an idea of death. The repetition in the story of the adjective ‘dreary’ is underlined by the confirmation of the monotony of the landscape which is presented as a negative monotony. It is clear that Lawson’s description dismantles the ‘myth’ constructed by the poets around the ‘outback’ or ‘further west’: “It didn't look any drearier than the country further west—because it couldn't. There is scarcely a part of the country out west which looks less inviting or more horrible than any other part” (Lawson 1990: 196). A similar critique of the idealisation of the bush is carried out in the final sections of “The Union Buries its Dead” (1893), where Lawson again counterpoints those themes that have been used by other writers as typical of bushmen stories and poems. He provides a list of elements and characters he has voluntarily “left out” because they were not there (Lawson 1990: 85).

As I have already pointed out, while Lawson’s poems contain instances of idealising the Australian bushman, there is greater realism in the stories and references to the miseries of the lives of those who live in the bush. Examples of a more detached reading of the bush can be found in all of his short stories. “In a Dry Season” the typical characters of the bush are
the “sundowner [...] reading the Bulletin” (1990: 89), the bushman, the shearer and the swagman. Ironically enough the bushman is presented as having a “jolly red face” when someone he knows has died because “Death is the only cheerful thing in the bush”, an idea confirmed in the words “Better settle in” the land than on it (1990: 90). Lawson ridicules the swagman’s love for the “outback” and writes: “Somebody said to me, ‘Yer wanter go out back, young man, if yer wanter see the country. Yer wanter get away from the line.’ I don’t wanter; I’ve been there” (Lawson 1990: 91). Reality once again is emphasised because he has been there and knows that the outback is not the idealised place described by the poets—a point noted also in “Our Pipes” (Lawson 1990: 213). The oppression of the bush and the difficulties of the bushman’s life are also expressed “In a Wet Season” where we read: “We only thought of escaping from the bush” (1990: 194). Lawson often attributes the enthusiasm of people who want to ‘go outback’ to their scarce knowledge of the outback, saying bluntly, “He didn’t know what ‘outback’ meant” (1990: 194).

Nevertheless, the point remains that in spite of Lawson’s qualifications, he contributes to the construction of the myth of the bushman, creating these stoic and often desperate characters who are associated with the ideal of the bush. His characters are good and genuine people described as being miserable because of their life in the bush, but who respect life and each other. Lawson considers mateship to be necessary against the savage outback, and in “Mateship” (1907) he states: “The man who
hasn’t a male mate is a lonely man indeed, or a strange man‖ (Lawson 1984: 794). Mateship has a longer history, going back to the convict period through a reference to one of Marcus Clarke’s convict characters. The value and importance given by men to mateship is stressed and Lawson argues that “self-preservation” is not, as it is commonly believed, the “strongest instinct of mankind” (Lawson 1984: 795), but mateship is. To substantiate this argument he cites a series of instances in which a man would put his life at risk to save one of his mates, and refers to these men as the “simple heroes of common life” (Lawson 1984: 795).52

Mateship informs Lawson’s short story “The Bush Undertaker” (1892) where the theme of ‘madness’ is linked to the solitude of bush life. The protagonist of this story, a shepherd, lives in solitude in the bush with only his dog for company, to which he talks as if the animal could understand. He also talks to himself in what Lawson ironically calls a “soliloquy” and the man a “soliloquizer” (1990: 203). On Christmas Day he finds the body of another bushman he knew dead and mummified, and decides to bury him. The process of carrying this body home, and the manner in which the man takes care of it, are themselves the expression of the depth of his solitude. He talks to the body, and feels the need to say something after the burial has been completed, but cannot remember the exact words: “in hopes of a great an’ gerlorious rassaraction!” (1990: 212). The harshness of the bush and the solitude have affected the mind of this character. The land has turned him into a crazy man, as Lawson

52 The importance of mateship is a major theme in Norman Lindsay's children book The Magic Pudding (1918), where Bunyip Bluegum, Bill Barnacle and Sam Sawnoff protect the Puddin' from the puddin'-thieves.
underlines in the conclusion of the story: “And the sun sunk again on the grand Australian bush—the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird” (Lawson 1990: 212).

In spite of Lawson’s ambivalence towards the bushman, Lawson’s bushman is always a white male. The description of one of his characters is indicative of the racial underpinning intrinsic to the figure of the legend: “Bob was a good cove, a straight chap, a white man” (Lawson 1984: 797). The emphasis placed on the fact that he was a good person and the fact that to be good is to be white is fundamental to the idea of a “straight chap”. Being white, as has already been pointed out, seems to be an essential characteristic of the bushman and therefore of the Australian type. Lawson contributes to the creation, if not of the bush as the typical and idealised Australian landscape, at least of the typical bushman as a white male—male, of course, because mateship as Lawson has already pointed out, is a male characteristic (Lawson 1984: 794). However, while still emphasising mateship, Lawson also critiques the ‘masculinity’ implicit in the legend, writing as he does about the ‘bushwoman’, a figure who has been excluded from the legend along with indigenous people and (Asian) immigrants.

53 In “Settling on the Land” Lawson refers to a man who ends up in an asylum after his experience “up-country” (Lawson 1990: 13).
54 Lawson’s position on the Chinese ‘question’ and the indigenous people emerges from “Straight Talk” (1890) where, in line with The Bulletin’s view, he presents indigenous people as ‘dying out’, and the Chinese as a ‘problem’: “The aboriginals of Australia will soon in the course of civilisation become extinct [...] the Chinaman remains to be dealt with” (1972: 17).
In his iconic short story, “The Drover’s Wife” (1892), he presents the stoicism and sacrifice of a bushwoman, a figure who is not usually dealt with in ballads or stories, and who is generally a silent presence in the bush. The drover’s wife is described as a strong woman who is able to take care of any situation and any peril. The story revolves around the threat posed to her children by a black snake. While she watches all night for the snake she recalls all the difficult situations she had to face living alone with the children in the bush while her husband, the drover—the representative of the typical Australian—was away for work, and has been away for more than six months. As she remembers, the time is marked by the repetition of the absence of the husband and by the repetition of the words “she fought”. This woman is presented as brave as a man and capable of dealing with any situation: she had to fight bush fire and flood, deal with swagmen, dying cattle, and so on. One of her babies was born when she was alone, with the assistance of “Black Mary—the ‘whitest’ gin in all the land” (Lawson 1990: 159). One of her children died when she was alone, and a series of other misadventures that happened when she was by herself transformed her into a “determined-looking woman” (Lawson 1990: 162).

The drover’s wife possesses qualities typical of the bushman which Lawson attributes to the bushwoman as well, as he attempts to elevate the figure of the bushwoman to the level of the bushman: she has a

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55 Henry Lawson’s “The Drover’s Wife” has inspired a number of rewritings of this story: Barbara Bayton’s “The Tramp” (The Chosen Vessel) (1896); Murray Bail’s “The Drover’s Wife” (1975) and Barbara Jefferis’ “The Drover’s Wife” (1980). For an analysis of these stories in relation to Lawson’s version see Hodge and Mishra (1991: 168-172).
sense of the ridiculous and she is said to tell stories (Lawson 1990: 163). The woman is strong, and the life in the bush has changed her, has in fact made her hard: “Her surroundings are not favourable to the development of the ‘womanly’ or sentimental side of nature” (Lawson 1990: 163). However, sometimes her difficulties overcome her and she cries. In this story Lawson attributes feelings such as anxiety to the bushwoman; conventionally he could not attribute these feelings to the figure of the bushman and therefore confers them on his wife. “The Drover’s Wife” spells out the anxieties of the bushman as the bushwoman comes to represent the silent side of the legend of the bushman. The silenced bushwomen live under severe conditions in the bush. They are left to deal with everything alone and often with children to take care of as well, but their sacrifice is not exalted, they are left mostly in the margins of bush heroism and are excluded from the ‘legend’. It is the bushman who is elevated to the national type and becomes the sign of the national hero. Not surprisingly, there is no place in the Australian legend for the bushwoman. The exclusivity of the ‘typical Australian’ as white and male is again stressed and in spite of Lawson’s own seeming unease about this, his tenacious presence in the Australian imaginary is reinforced.56

56 In “No Place for a Woman” (1899) Lawson again deals with some themes he had treated in “The Drover’s Wife”: the difficulties encountered by women in the bush, and the protagonist who becomes crazy after the death of his wife. In this story, however, the life of a woman in the bush is presented as impossible if not in the company of other women. It is in fact the absence of women—in this case there is not even the presence of Aboriginal women who can help. The harshness of the place is emphasised by the continuous repetition of “it was no place for a woman” (the title of the story) and which anticipates the tragic ending, the death of the woman and the child she carries (1984: 397). In this case the woman is not presented as a strong bushwoman (1984: 393-8). In “Drought-Stricken” (1900), Lawson presents another bushwoman—a selector’s wife—who is a strong woman, and who works hard when the husband is away (Lawson 1972: 97).
The descriptions given by both Paterson and Lawson of the bushman highlight those characteristics that have been identified by Ward as belonging to the ‘typical’ Australian. Their construction of this figure and their attempt to present it as a real one needs to be emphasised. Both Lawson and Paterson, consciously or not, participated in the creation of a character who was then utilised towards nationalistic ends. Their role as nationalist writers in a moment when nationalism was so important needs to be stressed. They constituted the literary archive that enabled the construction of the Australian character and his perpetuation through literature. Their immortalisation of this character allowed it to become so rooted in the Australian tradition and consciousness that it has been difficult for it ever to be fully erased. The bushman became the ‘typical’ Australian: this character was consolidated and became part of tradition or discourse. In this way the origins of this character have been lost and are located at some time in the past, the “good old droving days” idealised by Paterson (1967: 68). The linking of the myth to an original moment is, of course, itself a myth and hence part of a constructed discourse. Tradition, as we have already pointed out, has been identified by Foucault as one of those notions that allow discourses to be perpetuated (Foucault 2003: 23). The point, however, is that the ‘typical’ Australian, thus constructed, had become the signifier of the ideal Australian denizen. Signs of a theory of whiteness are already becoming evident. The typical Australian is therefore a construction, created by these nationalist authors as a way of consolidating the idea of a nation state with a cohesive population. The bushman simply becomes the
figure—one could say a figure which is part of an Australian national imaginary—around whom the values of a nation are constructed.

The construction of the bush as the real Australia and of the bushman as the typical Australian was not limited to poems, short stories and ballads, as the 1890s also saw the publication of novels. Among the first Australian novels of the period were *On Our Selection* (1899) by Steele Rudd, *My Brilliant Career* (1901) by Miles Franklin and *Such is Life* (1903) by Joseph Furphy. These novels contribute to the strengthening of the legend, focusing on bush themes. An absolutely decisive novel, and among the most influential about the typical Australian, is *Such is Life* published by *The Bulletin* as the diary entries of Tom Collins, a pen-name for Joseph Furphy (1843-1912). In the review of *Such is Life*, signed by

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57 *The Bulletin* established a publishing company. The first book to be published was *The History of Botany Bay* (1888) by Arthur Gayll. *The Bulletin* published also collections of short stories: *A Golden Shanty* (1890) which included stories and verses by writers such as Edward Dyson, Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson, Henry Kendall and others. In 1892 it published *The Tales of the Convict System* by Price Warung. From 1897 A.G. Stephens became editor of the book publications of *The Bulletin*. The number of works published when Stephens was the editor increased and he ‘improved’ the manuscripts by working with the authors (Stewart 1977: 63). Out of twenty-two books published under Stephens’ editorship only three of them were novels, Steele Rudd’s *On Our Selection* (1899) and *Our New Selection* (1903) and in the same year Joseph Furphy’s *Such is Life* (Stewart 1977: 58-68). For a list of the books published by *The Bulletin* see *The Books of the Bulletin, 1880-1952: an Annotated Bibliography* (1955) by George Mackaness and Walter W. Stone. According to Stewart, *The Bulletin’s* contribution to Australian literature with the publication of ballads and short stories was fundamental (Stewart 1977: 18-20). Stewart quotes from H.M. Green who suggests that the tendency in the first half of the twentieth century of authors to ‘turn’ to the novel could have been influenced by the magazine’s interest in the novel and the institution of two novel competitions in 1928 and 1929, that saw the serialised publication of the winner’s novel in *The Bulletin*. Among the winners was *Coonardoo* (1929) by K.S. Prichard (Stewart 1977: 68).

58 Miles Franklin’s *My Brilliant Career* was praised by Lawson who first read the manuscript and suggested it for publication. In his preface to the novel Lawson wrote: “the work was Australian—born of the bush […] the descriptions of bush life and scenery came startlingly, painfully real to me […] the book is true to Australia—the truest I ever read” (Franklin 1994: xxv). Lawson identifies the novel with the ideal of the bush.

59 The use of a pseudonym was very common in the nineties. Paterson used the pen-name Banjo, William Astley was known as Price Warung, Joseph Furphy as Tom Collins and Rolf Boldrewood was the pseudonym of Thomas Alexander Browne.
the author with his real name, Furphy laments that large part of the literature read in Australia is British and praises this novel for its focus on “National life” (Furphy 1988: 406).60

The contemporary critical reception of Such is Life was positive but it never reached the same level of success as the work of Paterson and Lawson.61 This is probably due to the numerous literary references which abound in the text and require a more cultivated reading public.62 Nevertheless, this novel is pivotal to our understanding of the ideology of the period. The fact that it was published by The Bulletin proves the novel was in line with the ideas and policies of the paper. The themes and characters presented in the novel affirm values that characterised the period and confirm the emphasis the authors of the nineties placed on the bush. In this novel too the bush is the setting and the characters are bushmen. The novel once again provides us with themes, already analysed in this chapter, which went into the making of the ‘typical’ Australian who was so pivotal to the exaltation of the legend. The Australianness of the novel was emphasised by the very first person who read it, A.G. Stephens, who upon reading the manuscript argued that the novel was “fitted to become an Australian Classic, or semi-classic, since it embalms accurate representations of our character and customs, life and

60 “Such is life” are believed to be Ned Kelly’s last words before he was hanged (Wilkes 1985: 403).
61 Julian Croft analyses the critical response to Such is Life, quoting a passage from Robert Darby which summarises the contemporary response (from 1903 to 1917) as general appreciation of the novel by the reviewers for its Australian character and the “faithful picture of bush life and characters” (quoted in Croft 1991: 23). For a detailed analysis of the critical response to Such is Life, see Croft (1991: 22-45).
62 Such is Life abounds with literary references to Shakespeare and the Bible.
scenery” (Furphy and Stephens 1969: 119). What we need to do, as part of the argument of the constructed nature of the myth of the bushman, is examine how Such is Life contributes to this theme. Here too the bush is opposed to the city, and droving, stations, drought, and children lost in the bush are some of the key motifs. The novel is set in 1883 in the Riverina, where Furphy himself worked for years as a bullock driver acquiring experience of the bush (Serle 1973: 66).

To make my point clear, I read the novel selectively so as to exemplify the construction of the bush as the real Australia and bushman as the typical Australian. Before I do this, the structure of the novel and the changes it underwent require a brief commentary.

Such is Life was published in 1903 but the first manuscript was submitted to Stephens as early as 1897. Publication was delayed as changes were made to the novel mostly due to its length and the difficulties in financing the publication. In 1901 Furphy travelled to Sydney to meet the editor of

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63 When first writing to The Bulletin asking for suggestions on publication Furphy described his novel as “offensively Australian”: “I have just finished writing a full-sized novel: title, Such is Life; scene, Riverina and northern Vic; temper, democratic; bias offensively Australian” (Furphy and Stephens 1969: 117).

64 In reading the novel in this fashion I hope I will not incur what Kiernan has accused other critics of doing, which is quoting the novel out of context “as ‘representative of the spirit of the nineties’” and distorting the author’s intentions (Kiernan 1971: 134-5). I am aware that the narrator Tom Collins and the author Joseph Furphy have different visions and we cannot argue that the words of Collins are those of Furphy. However, I believe that Furphy’s own introduction to the novel in 1903 and Stephens’ comment on it are to be considered genuine. Thus, it can be argued that the representation of Australian bush life given in this novel is close to a ‘real’ one and can probably exemplify the reaction of contemporaries to the novel and to bush themes.

65 Furphy first wrote to The Bulletin asking for suggestions on the publishing of his novel on 4 April 1897. Furphy had initially excluded the possibility suggested by Stephens of shortening or dividing the manuscript into sections to be published separately, arguing that “the irregular entanglement of incident seems to fix the book, for better or worse, as
The Bulletin and agreed to shorten his novel (Croft 1991: 56). The omitted sections were reworked and published much later as two separate works, Buln-Buln and the Brolga (1948) and Rigby’s Romance (1946). Upon the publication of Such is Life, readers were struck by the overall structure of the novel which was unprecedented for the times. It presents events which are not directly related and even the narrator is at times unaware of their connections. The reader, however, is. Furphy described these structural features as “undercurrents of plot” (Furphy 1988: 407). The novel is supposed to be the entries of the diary of Tom Collins, the narrator, who worked previously as a bullock driver and at the time of writing is a Government official “UNEMPLOYED at last!” (Furphy 1987: 1). Tom Collins explains that what we are about to read are some of the entries of his diary that have been expanded to include the details of the conversations, the scope of this being a “fair picture of Life” (Furphy 1987: 2).

The importance the bush has in the perception of Australia and in the construction of what is distinctively Australian is also underlined in a unit” (Furphy and Stephens 1969: 120-1). For the correspondence between the author and A.G. Stephens on the publishing of the novel, see Furphy and Stephens (1969).

These two short novels were adapted, respectively, from Chapter II and Chapter V of the original manuscript. In the published version of the novel (1903) these chapters have been substituted with shorter ones in order to maintain the flow of the novel (Croft 1991: 56). As I will analyse in more detail, the stories of the three lost children included in Chapter V of the 1903 novel have been enlarged.

The choice of the pseudonym Tom Collins is significant for two reasons. According to R.G. Howarth the name “derives from a mythical bush character who was reputed to start all the idle rumours and taradiddles heard in the Riverina country” (quoted in Wilkes 1985: 107). The meaning of this name is “idle rumour” (Croft 1991: 85). As Croft has pointed out after his death the name Furphy also acquired the meaning of “rumour”. The origin of the term ‘furphy’ is in fact linked to the gossip told by World War I soldiers while drinking their water from water tanks produced by Furphy’s brother (Croft 1991: 85-6).

Initially the diary is intended to be the recollections of a week, but the narrator decides to extend it choosing the records of the 9th of every month, from October 1883 to February 1884. For March 1884 Collins chooses instead the entries of 28 and 29 March.
Furphy’s novel, which too celebrates the bush as the place that shapes national identity. In a long digression the narrator makes this point very clearly:

It is not in our cities or townships, it is not in our agricultural or mining areas, that the Australian attains full consciousness of his own nationality; it is in places like this, and as clearly here as at the centre of the continent. To me the monotonous variety of this interminable scrub has a charm of its own (Furphy 1987: 80-1).

Collins’ view of the Australian outback is a clear exaltation of the bush and the outback in general which is set against cities excluded from the experiences of the ‘real’ Australia. The bush is the ‘heart’ of Australia as it defines national consciousness even though it is described as a monotonous, empty and extremely hot landscape:

Overhead, the sun blazing wastefully and thanklessly through a rarefied atmosphere; underfoot the hot, black clay, thirsting for spring rain, and bare except for inedible roley-poleys, coarse tussocks, and the woody stubble of close-eaten salt-bush; between sky and earth, a solitary wayfarer, wisely lapt in philosophic torpor. […] And away beyond the horizon, southward still, the geodesic curve carries that monotony across the zone of salt-bush, myall, and swamp box; across the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee, and on to the Victorian border—say, two hundred and fifty miles (Furphy 1987: 2).

The focus is on the heat of the sun and on the emptiness of the landscape that remains unchanged for miles. In this realistic description of the outback the adjectives used are a continuous reminder of the loneliness and the heat of the place. The year the novel is set is a year characterised by drought and therefore conditions for the people living and working in the outback are especially harsh. The negative description of the bush and the difficult conditions in which people live is not
uncommon in the literature of the nineties.\(^6^9\) Although Furphy’s description of the bush is similar to Lawson’s and certainly not romanticised in the Banjo Paterson model, the bush is not negatively perceived. And in doing so the exaltation of the bush is affirmed.

In Furphy we can see Lawson’s criticism of an easy romanticisation of the bush in the works of novelists such as Henry Kingsley. He promotes a fair representation of the bush since Collins sees himself as a ‘chronicler’ who does not embellish the facts, describing them as they happened in contrast to “your novelist” who is instead inclined to romance and who would idealise the facts, or modify the descriptions (Furphy 1987: 4).\(^7^0\)

Such distortions receive Furphy’s critical ire:

> And yet your Australian novelist finds no inconsistency in placing the bookish student, or the city dandy, many degrees above the bushman, or the digger, or the pioneer, in vocations which have been the life-work of the latter. O, the wearisome nonsense of this kind which is remorselessly thrust upon a docile public! (Furphy 1987: 39).

The adverse, Furphy suggests, is more likely as the bushman would be more successful in acquiring the characteristics of a gentleman although the gentleman’s refinements are of no use in the “back-country life” and limit his ability to acquire bushman’s skills (Furphy 1987: 39).\(^7^1\) This

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\(^6^9\) See, for instance, the description of the drought in *My Brilliant Career* (Franklin 1994: 24-7).

\(^7^0\) Furphy’s attack is directed at a category of novels, in particular Henry Kingsley’s *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn* (1859), which popularised an idealised description of pastoral life that does not correspond to reality: “Those whose knowledge of the pastoral regions is drawn from a course of novels of the *Geoffrey Hamlyn* class, cannot fail to hold a most erroneous notion of the squatter” (Furphy 1987: 204-5).

\(^7^1\) Collins underlines the impossibility of people who do not know the country to excel in working as a bushman. An example of this is given in the case of Willoughby, the type of the ‘gentleman’ (Furphy 1987: 4).
hostility towards upper class refinement is one of the characteristics identified by Ward as distinctively Australian (Ward 2003: 2).

The importance the national type plays in the novel is underlined by the author who stresses the role “Outback topics” and “typical bullock-drivers” have in the novel (Furphy 1988: 407). Thus, these topics and characters are presented as types that embody all those characteristics considered to be distinctive of the typical bushman. A peculiarity of Tom Collins is his tendency to divide men into ‘types’: the bullock driver, the swagman, the gentleman, the squatter, the Englishman. Throughout the novel, each type emerges through his own “phraseology” and is constructed in a dialogic fashion through his words more than through the observations and comments of Tom Collins. Furphy defines the author as a “master of idiom” (Furphy 1988: 407) and praises his ability to construct the characters through language. As Furphy explains “these sketches present each individual—squatter or sundowner—as a document of special interest” (Furphy 1988: 406). The bushman had entered the myth, was part of the legend, and therefore was a fixed category. The author’s identification of the national type and his awareness of its ‘stereotypical’ qualities are significant, showing that the figure of the bushman was at this stage a literary creation whose scope was that of strengthening an idea of Australianness. The author points to the development of Australian literature, in “legendless Australia”, from “Anglo-Australian, through Colonial, to National” and how this “transition” has been influenced by the emergence of a “new type” (Furphy 1988: 405).
The creation of a type is significant from a literary point of view because it contributes to the creation of a character who can be readily recognised by the reader. It could be argued that by the time Furphy's novel was published the reader's familiarity with the characteristics attributed to this national type made him easy to identify. The bullock drivers described by Furphy are immediately recognisable as 'bushmen' through their characteristics: their supposed typical physical aspect, their language, their attitudes, and their ability for storytelling. Here we can already locate the existence of an ideal of the bushman with specific characteristics to which people could be compared in order to determine if they were real bushmen and how could they aspire, symbolically, to be one. Each character is therefore presented as more or less typical. The typical characteristics attributed to the bushman were well known to the public and the use of these clichés contributed to the creation of a type. The construction of this character as the national type is therefore linked to the construction of characteristics that were recognised as typical and these helped in the creation of a distinctive Australian subject. The existence of an 'idealised bushman' or better a 'typical bushman' in the nineties suggests that this figure is deeply rooted in Australian culture although it is consciously created as the typical Australian. This idealised figure is also important for an understanding of it as a constructed discourse which does not have an unproblematic corresponding figure in reality, but which is the sum of all those characteristics that are recognised as belonging to this type. It is fundamental to stress the
fictitious (not real) nature of this figure in order to understand the role it has played in the construction of a national identity and of a theory of whiteness.

If we return to *Such is Life* we find extensive representations of the typical characteristics of the bushman and of the life he lived. The novel opens with an action considered typical of the bushman—the campfire yarns and the telling of a good yarn. It is in fact through storytelling around campfires that some of the most significant events of the novel are told. A team of bullock drivers decides to camp in a paddock for the night and around the campfires they start their storytelling, which generally concerns past events and people they know. Furphy introduces the idea of the ‘typical bullock driver’ and describes in detail the appearance and language of this type who is portrayed as being typical of this category.

Not all characters, though, conform to the stereotype. The first bullock driver to be described is Steve Thompson who “was scarcely a typical bullock driver, since fifteen years of that occupation had not brutalised his temper, nor ensanguined his vocabulary, nor frayed the terminal ‘g’ from

72 The bullock drivers are presented as being in the difficult position of having to steal the grass for their bullocks to survive (Furphy 1987: 16). The bullock drivers are driven to breaking the law by the difficult conditions due to the drought, and because of this condition they do not consider stealing grass and water for the cattle a crime and instead demand the right to feed their bullocks. Collins comments on the fear of being caught trespassing: “the penal suggestiveness of trespass-penalty touches the sullen dignity of his nature; and the vague, but well-grounded fear of a law made and administered solely by his natural enemies makes him feel [...] apprehensive [...]. Of course, Willoughby, born and bred a member of the governing class, couldn’t easily conceive the dismay with which these outlaws regarded legal seizure for trespass—or possibly prosecution in courts dominated by squatters” (Furphy 1987: 37). Here is exposed another characteristic of the typical Australian identified by Ward: the hostility towards authorities and the law (Ward 2003: 2). Collins describes the bullock drivers as suspicious of the legal system and of authorities in general. The bullock driver is here opposed to the ‘squatter’. Furphy denounces the injustice of outback life and the situation between the bullock drivers and the squatters.
his participles” (Furphy 1987: 3). This character is first described by noticing what he lacks of the type: the typical bullock drivers possess a brutal temper, an ensanguined vocabulary and the lack of the “g” in the participles. This ‘ideal’ of the bullock driver is then not an idealised one: he is not described as possessing positive characteristics. Nonetheless the bullock driver is a type because the narrator can refer to a typical one. Thompson’s description continues and his physical appearance is instead presented as typical: “Physically, Thompson was tall and lazy, as bullock drivers ought to be” (Furphy 1987: 3). The importance attributed to the physical characteristics of the bullock driver is reinforced in the description of another character, Willoughby, a ‘gentleman’, a category that according to Collins “can never learn to take a man’s place among rough-and-ready-workers” (Furphy 1987: 4). When compared to the bullock driver Dixon, Willoughby comes off second best: “there was a suggestion of latent physical force and leathery durability in the bullock driver, altogether lacking in the whaler” (Furphy 1987: 4).\footnote{Willoughby is presented as a whaler. In A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms ‘whaler’ is defined as “a bush nomad, managing to subsist without work” (Wilkes 1985: 445).} Furphy seems to suggest that the characteristics of the bullock driver cannot be acquired in adult life with practice since a person needs to have grown up with them.

*Such is Life* gives us a fine example of idealised bushman life in the case of the swagman that Tom Collins sees on his way to a station. The man is described as sitting in the shade of a tree next to his billy. He is “tall” and “athletic”, two adjectives often used to describe a representative of the
typical Australian: “A tall, athletic man, apparently, with a billy and waterbag beside him, and nothing more to wish for” (Furphy 1987: 84). This description is a positive one and at first sight it would seem that it is the typical description of the ‘literary bushman’. However, we find out that the man is in fact dead. The positivity of the scene is somehow ruined and the bushman’s life, which from the initial image seems to be positive, is described in a more realistic way. The man had died of “physical exhaustion”. In his description of the dead body, Collins stresses again the characteristics of the bushman and the swagman is described as having the “face of a worker” and hands “heavily calloused by manual labour” (Furphy 1987: 99). Furphy, like Lawson, also presents the harsh aspects of bush life and emphasises the suffering that this man had endured. The author refers to the “unburied bones” of bushmen (Furphy 1987: 34) scattered everywhere in Australia: “the thousands o’ pore beggars that's died o' thirst an' hardship in the back country” (Furphy 1987: 33). These men and their deaths are read as sacrifices and their lives exalted above those of the explorers by the bullock drivers who complain about the lack of statues erected to commemorate their sacrifice (Furphy 1987: 33). The unburied bones the novel refers to are those of the bushmen who are all white men. There is no reference to the bones of the original inhabitants of the land.

The death of the man is an indirect cause of the death of Mary O’Halloran, the child who gets lost in the bush looking for her father and is worried her dad could die like the swagman. Tom Collins’ decision not to disturb the man because of “bush etiquette” (Furphy 1987: 85), had resulted in the death of the man and the child.

In contemporary novels the bones scattered around the country are instead those of the indigenous people killed. See for example Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth* (2005).
The ‘real bushman’ is also described as having acquired the skills of the indigenous people. It is one of the characters, a bullock driver in fact, who makes this connection explicit when describing the typical bushman: “As a general rule, the more uncivilised a man is, till you come right down to the level of the blackfellow, the better bushman he is” (Furphy 1987: 29). The bushman is described as being as good as indigenous people in the bush, having acquired their skills in successfully dealing with the Australian landscape. This, however, is never a two-way process because while these skills contribute to the creation of the bushman as the typical Australian, the indigenous people, who already possess these skills are never considered to be typical Australians, since the typical Australian is always a white man. And the “blackfellow” is referred to as an “inferior race” when compared to the “whitefellow” (Furphy 1987: 286). The Australian type is clearly white, as emphasised in the description of Mary O’Halloran, the “perfect Young-Australian […] a child of the wilderness”, who has “a skin of extreme whiteness” (Furphy 1987: 90-1). Collins is concerned with the discourse of race and the “coming Australian” as opposed to the Englishman: “you’re an Englishman, and you’re proud of your country; but I tell you we’re going to have a race of people in these provinces such as the world has never seen before” (Furphy 1987: 179). However, according to Collins we cannot predict what the future Australian will be like and speculations on “the Coming Australian” are fictitious (Furphy 1987: 180).
The Australian is definitively a white type: the ‘other’ is excluded from the
category of the typical Australian. This is evident in Furphy’s treatment of
indigenous characters and the Chinese. Both of them are considered
inferior and uncivilised. Collins’ opposition of the Australian character to
the European and the Chinese has been emphasised by Ouyang who
argues that Furphy constructs a binary opposition between Australia on
one side and Europe and Asia on the other (Ouyang 1995: 137).
Examples of this are identified in Furphy’s novel where the ‘Englishman’
and the ‘Chinese’ are always described in negative terms. The treatment
of the Chinese, in particular, has strong racial connotations and the
Chinese is addressed with “epithets such as ‘Chows’, ‘Yellow agony’,
‘Chinks’ and ‘Chinaman’” (Ouyang 1995: 137). An example is to be found
in a passage where Collins addresses the Chinese as ‘dishonest’ and
‘cunning’ as opposed to the ‘honest’ Caucasian: “‘Let us pit the honest
frankness of the played-out Caucasian against the cunning of the
successful Mongol’. Then, addressing the Turanian horde, and adapting
my speech to the understanding of our lowest types […]” (Furphy 1987:
249), the author embraces the racist views of The Bulletin in this matter.

This attitude towards Asia and Europe is also exemplified in a passage in
which Furphy praises Australia, which has preserved itself free from the
vice and corruption of the old continent:
For this recordless land [...] She is committed to no usages of petrified injustice; she is clogged by no fealty to shadowy idols, enshrined by Ignorance, and upheld by misplaced homage alone; she is cursed by no memories of fanaticism and persecution; she is innocent of hereditary national jealousy, and free from the envy of sister states (Furphy 1987: 81).

Australia is presented as a positive country whose history starts with the British colonisation, ignoring the indigenous presence completely: “Our virgin continent! [...] has waited in serene loneliness [...] waited, ageless, tireless, acquiescent, her history a blank” (Furphy 1987: 81). Indigenous people are excluded from the national imaginary based on a binary opposition between Australia and Europe/Asia. They are simply deemed “uncivilised” and are excluded from an historical perception through their uncritical identification with the land. Indigenous people’s knowledge of the land is only recognised when their tracking skills are needed to locate lost children.

The theme of the child lost in the bush is a familiar one in Australia.76 This narrative recurs in much Australian literature and is considered to be an expression of the settler’s fear of the landscape.77 The alienness and hostility of the land they have settled on and its unfamiliarity have

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76 Henry Kingsley’s *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn* (1859) and Marcus Clarke’s “Pretty Dick” (1869) both tell the story of a lost child, whose body is found only after he has died (Torney 2005: 58-60). The lost child is also the main theme in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967) even though in this case the girls who disappear are not children and a 'sexual' theme is added to the mystery of the disappearance, which is based on a real event. The landscape in this novel has an active role in the disappearance of the girls who seem to be under a 'spell'. See Pierce (1999: 159-164). In *One Night the Moon* (2002) the young girl who disappears is found dead too. Here the denial of indigenous skills and the father's refusal to employ an indigenous tracker is responsible for the fatal end of the child who could have been saved (Perkins 2002).

77 In nineteenth century Australia there are several narratives of children lost in the bush. These are at times fictional or based on real stories. As it will be analysed in the following pages the relevance given to this theme in Australian newspapers, through illustrations and stories, points to Australian settlers’ uneasiness about the land and its unfamiliarity which is perceived as threatening.
produced a sort of ‘archetypal’ fear of this landscape that finds its most
dramatic expression in the lost child. According to Peter Pierce, who has
devoted an entire study to the subject, this theme is the expression of the
settler’s anxiety towards the Australian landscape: “the lost child is the
symbol of essential if never fully resolved anxieties within the white settler
communities of this country” (Pierce 1999: xi). The child lost in the bush
becomes a popular theme in the literature of the late nineteenth century.
Both Lawson and Paterson deal with the bush myth of the lost children. In
his poem “Lost” (1887) Paterson describes the disappearance in the bush
of a young boy while he was riding. The desperation of his mother and
grandfather and their constant search for the boy kills his mother too. The
bush, however, while being responsible for the loss is even in this case
presented as not completely negative. The boy’s body is in fact protected
by the natural environment and it becomes part of it after death: “The
wattle blooms above him, and the blue bells blow close by, / And the

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78 Elspeth Tilley has analysed how the whiteness of the children is represented through
the description of their extremely white garments. Tilley finds examples in Furphy (1903)
and Perkins (2002) where the lost children are dressed in white (Tilley 2011: 5). In Picnic
at Hanging Rock the extreme whiteness of the girls’ clothing is also emphasised.
79 The lost child is also a major theme in children’s literature. In Ethel Pedley’s Dot and
the Kangaroo (1899), the little girl is lost in the bush. She has wandered away after a
hare while picking some flowers. The theme of the lost child is reinforced by the girl’s
memories of another lost child and the adults’ search for him. The boy was eventually
found, we understand dead because she has not seen him since. The negative
description of the landscape, “the cruel wild bush […] the bare, dry earth, and the
wilderness of scrub and trees that seemed to close her in as if she were in a prison”
(Pedley 1920: 2) is subverted by the arrival of a kangaroo. Her perception of the lonely
and alien bush changes when eating some berries offered by the kangaroo, which allow
her to understand the sounds of her surrounding and the ‘voices’ of the bush animals,
thus making the bush familiar. Dot finds her way home with the bush animals’ help. The
writer’s recommendation at the end of the story is significant: if a child gets lost in the
bush they should “sit still in one place, and not to try to find one’s way home at all […]
the best way to get found quickly, is to wait in one place until the search parties find one”
(Pedley 1920: 81). This idea is mentioned by Furphy: in the second story told in fact little
Henry stops to wait as he has been told by his parents to do if he gets lost. However, in
the boy’s case the calls of the adults looking for him scare him and he finds refuge in a
hollow tree. In this instance, the ‘legends’ told to the children to prevent them from
venturing in the bush have a negative effect (Furphy 1987: 244).
80 This poem was first published in the Sydney Mail, 26 February 1887.
brown bees buzz the secret, and the wild birds sing reply” (Paterson 1967: 47). The case presented here is that of the body which is never found, the one considered to be the most terrible, because there is no peace for the family. Nonetheless, Paterson suggests peace in death in the reunion between the mother and the child (Paterson 1967: 46-8).

Lawson deals with this subject in a poem (1900) and in a short story (1899-1900) both entitled “The Babies in the Bush”. The story follows the traditional pattern: the children’s disappearance in the scrub is followed by a desperate search which lasts several days and involves several search parties and indigenous trackers and eventually the children are found, usually dead, and not too far from home. Rather than focusing on the search, Lawson’s story focuses instead on the effects of the children’s disappearance: the sense of guilt of the father and the ‘insanity’ that affects the mother. This story emphasises the effects the bush has on the white settler’s mind and as in “The Bush Undertaker”, the bush is here again presented as the “nurse and tutor of eccentric minds” (Lawson 1990: 212). The mother who lost the children has in fact been affected by the loss and she is taken to believe in “Bush Fairies” because she cannot face the reality of her children being dead (Lawson 1970: 143). Pierce analyses this story alongside the poem by the same title. While in the poem the possibility that the children were taken by the bush fairies is offered as a consolation, in the story the belief in the fairies is the result of
the mother’s “mania” (Pierce 1999: 82).81 While the poem attributed the disappearance of children to the fairies that could guide them either to safety or “through the starry night” to a different world, “a land of light / Where the bush-lost babies go” (Lawson 1967, I: 384-5), in the short story the babies’ disappearance loses this ‘supernatural’ element, and acquires a dramatic tone, where there is no place for consolation. The ‘Bush Fairies’ are believed to be responsible for the children’s disappearance only by the desperate mother, whose belief in fairies is offered as a refuge for her troubled mind. In the story the ‘lost child’ is clearly the materialisation of an anxiety towards the bush. The hostile landscape is threatening the settler’s life by ‘taking’ and ‘hiding’ their children. The station is described by the woman as a “lonely place”, the bush has not been cleared and the “great awful scrubs” surround it (Lawson 1970: 140). The children disappear into the bush—either following one of the station men, or looking for flowers or butterflies (Lawson 1970: 141). And the narrator of the story, Jack, imagines the scene:

I could see it all. […] The hurried search in the nearer scrub. The mother calling all the time for Maggie and Wally, and growing wilder as the minutes flew past. […] Horsemen seeming to turn up in no time and from nowhere, as they do in a case like this, and no matter how lonely the district. Bushmen galloping through the scrub in all directions (Lawson 1970: 142).

The search continues for days and the bodies are found after two months not far from the station and, as it often happens, the search parties have

81 Pierce argues that Lawson’s works on the lost children are related to a real event. Walter Head, the father of the children in the story, is in fact the name of the editor of the New Britannia whose child had disappeared in the bush in 1894 and whom Lawson knew (Pierce 1999: 77-80).
inexplicably missed them. The importance of finding the bodies is stressed: “when the bodies aren’t found, the parents never quite lose the idea that the little ones are wandering about the bush tonight (it might be years after) and perishing from hunger, thirst, or cold. That mad idea haunts ‘em all their lives” (Lawson 1970: 144). Even though the bodies have been found, Lawson shows how the loss still haunts the parents. The bush is a “horror” for the parents and the inability of the search party to find them is attributed by the father to the fact that unlike him most of them were “new Chums” and therefore not real bushmen (Lawson 1970: 147). The story is darkened by the father’s sense of guilt. Jack’s expectation that the father would be “searching hopelessly, days after the rest had given up all hope of finding the children alive” (Lawson 1970: 142), is subverted: the father does not take part in the search because he is ‘absent’, supposedly away on “business” but actually on a “howling spree” in a “shanty in the bush” at the time of the disappearance (Lawson 1970: 147). The parents’ perception of the bush as negative is a projection of their anxieties: the bush is deemed responsible for the corruption of the ‘civilised’ white and it threatens the core of white society, the family.

The myth of the lost child is well represented in Furphy’s Such is Life through the stories of three children lost in the bush, told around the campfire. The first story is that of five year old Mary O’Halloran who
disappears in the bush while looking for her father. Many expert bushmen—bullock drivers, shearsers, boundary riders—gather in search of her, but only one of them is able to follow her tracks. He is Bob, who is “hard to beat […] in the back country. You’d have to be more uncivilised than he is” (Furphy 1987: 232). Here again ‘uncivilised’ is a synonym for the good bushman. Even though indigenous people are considered by the bushmen as an ‘inferior race’, their skills and knowledge of the bush are recognised. This recognition is, however, diminished and their skills are attributed to their being ‘uncivilised’, close to nature. Bob is in fact surpassed in his tracking skills only by an indigenous woman. The bushmen, who are presented as knowledgeable about the bush, are however aware of their inadequacy and they look desperately for a “blackfellow” (Furphy 1987: 234-7). Bob is a good tracker, but he too recognises his limits: “God help us now, if we don’t get a blackfellow quick!” (Furphy 1987: 236). The tracks are in fact more difficult to find because of the surroundings, because the girl has removed her boots and there is an impending thunderstorm (Furphy 1987: 236). The importance of the ability to track in the bush is overemphasised:

82 Mary’s story was not included in the first draft of the novel (1897) and was only added later in the 1901 revision. The first draft contained two stories of lost children, the one found alive in the log and included with some minor changes in the final novel, and the one of a child who is found dead (Furphy 1988a: 313-6). This story has similarities with Mary’s one but it presents substantial differences. The child in the story does not have a name, he is a “youngster”. The search party is composed of bush workers and the white trackers Bat and Bob. There is no indigenous tracker; of the three indigenous people in the area, one is dead, another is in the final stages of consumption and the third is drunk and turned blind by smoke. The search presents similarities with the final version and great importance is also attributed to “fair trackin’[g]”: the horsemens pass the corpse of the child which is only found by the trackers (Furphy 1988a: 315). The inclusion of the indigenous tracker in the 1903 version and the fundamental role she played in finding the body underscores the difference between the knowledge of the land that can be acquired by a bushman and that possessed by indigenous people. Barnes published these stories which were omitted from the novel but are present in the typescript of the novel in the Mitchell Library (Barnes 1988: 312-6).
I compare tracking to reading a letter written in a good business hand. You must n't look at what's under your eye; you must see a lot at once, and keep a general grasp of what's on ahead, besides spotting each track you pass. Otherwise, you'll be always turning back for a fresh race at it. And you must no more confine yourself to actual tracks than you would expect to find each letter correctly formed. You must just lift the general meaning as you go. Of course, our everyday tracking is not tracking at all (Furphy 1987: 236).

The indigenous woman “picked-up the track at a glance” even though she was an “old, grey-haired lubra, blind of one eye” (Furphy 1987: 238). The blindness of the woman and her age highlight her unsurpassed skills in the bush. She alone is a better bushman than all the other white men who seem to be the ‘lost’ ones. Their search in the scrub for two days leads to nothing. The voice of the little girl is heard calling “Dad-de-e-e!” through the thick scrub, but the girl cannot be located by the men on horse (Furphy 1987: 239). Here again the importance of tracking as the only means of making one’s way in the dense bush is stressed: “but to show how little use anything was except fair tracking, the lubra herself never saw the child till she went right up to where she was lying” (Furphy 1987: 240). When Mary is finally found, she is dead. She had walked for more than twenty-two miles: “nothing is more astonishing than the distances lost children have been known to traverse” (Furphy 1987: 240). The dramatic story and the emphasis on the father’s distress makes the reader recall Collins’ thoughts at the beginning of the novel, when he first met Mary, and described her as the perfect Australian (Furphy 1987: 91). The Australian type is therefore presented as being threatened by the landscape. His is an alien position when compared to that of indigenous
people; there is an anxiety about the possibility of belonging to the country.

The bushmen are familiar with stories of lost children and two more stories are told. The second story tells of a child who was found alive; he had hidden himself in a hollow tree when he heard his name called at night fearing that ‘creatures’ such as “the boody-man, an’ the bunyip, an’ the banshee” (Furphy 1987: 244) were looking for him. These ‘legends’ used by parents to stop children from wandering in the bush in this case could have resulted in the death of the child. The third story, told by Stevenson, is considered to be the worst of all: “Bad enough to lose a youngster for a day or two, and find him alive and well; worse, beyond comparison, when he's found dead; but the most fearful thing of all is for a youngster to be lost in the bush, and never found, alive or dead” (Furphy 1987: 245). Stevenson’s own younger brother had disappeared in the bush and in this case the search was unsuccessful. As already seen in Lawson’s story the parents could not find peace:

The search was gradually dropped, till no one was left but my father. Month after month, he was out every day, wet or dry, and my mother waiting at home, with a look on her face that frightened us—waiting for the news he might bring. And, time after time, he took stray bones to the doctor; but they always turned out to belong to sheep, or kangaroos, or some other animal (Furphy 1987: 246).

The despair of the parents ends in their death and in the loss of their property.
The myth of the lost child can be read as a counter myth to the ideal of the bushman. In fact, while the bushman, the representative of the legend, is a celebration of the white male over the alien landscape and the wilderness that he has conquered and mastered, the myth of the lost child is the expression of white anxieties, of the impossibility for the white man to fully master the land that is still perceived as threatening. Thus, those anxieties that undermine Australian identity and that cannot be included in the myth of the bushman are transposed and attributed instead to children, those members of white society who are considered more fragile and in danger because they are unable to defend themselves. In a similar fashion, some of the bushman’s anxieties were attributed to the bushwoman, as seen in “The Drover’s Wife”. Thus, the threatening aspects of the bush are still present in the white settler’s mind; the white settler is aware of his alienness in the landscape and projects his anxieties on to the fear of losing his children. The fact that the possibility of rescuing these children is left to the skills and the knowledge of the land of the ‘black trackers’ is also an admission of the settler’s alienness and of their refusal to recognise that the real bushman, the only one who is able to master the bush is the indigenous person. Thus, the land does not really belong to the white man and his right to the land is uncertain (Pierce 1999: xii). The myth of the lost child is therefore a negation of the myth of the bushman because it expresses all the anxieties of the white man towards the land and the people he has dispossessed.
The success of these literary works published in the 1890s contributed to the creation of the typical Australian who was identified with the bushman. The need for a figure that unified the nation was clearly understood by the writers who were conscious of celebrating a nation. Australia was still a colony which needed the support of its literature and the press to emerge as a separate and ‘unique’ entity. The differences from the British were therefore emphasised and the bushman’s skills in the alien and harsh land elevated to the level of heroic enterprise. The drought, the wet seasons and the vastness of the land itself were personified and came to be an incarnation of the ‘enemy’ against which these men were fighting in order to create a nation. Therefore, the continuous reference to the poor bushman, whose bones lie bleaching in the sun,\(^{83}\) is the Australian blood sacrifice, a silent and often forgotten sacrifice which these authors brought to the surface and celebrated. A sacrifice, though, which denied indigenous resistance. The Australian land was being filled with familiar people and therefore rendered less hostile. The death and suffering of these people contributed to the creation of a myth of the land and created a sense of belonging which in these texts was never questioned, as it was a pre-given.

The construction of the land as a wilderness was also a means with which to construct a superior being who could control and tame and was not afraid of the wilderness. The more the land was described as inhospitable, the more heroic were the bushman’s accomplishments. *The

\(^{83}\) See for instance, “The Ballad of the Drover” (1889) and “Out Back” (1893) quoted earlier in this chapter (Lawson 1967: I. 29; 244).
Australian Legend and The Legend of the Nineties are uncritical celebrations of the legend which would not have been possible without the nationalist archive of the writers of the 1890s. The legend grew out of the feeling that the bush was the quintessential Australia. The construction of the bushman as the representative of the ‘typical’ Australian was influenced by the ideas that circulated in the period. The belief in the supremacy of the white race shaped and influenced the creation of this national type, and the creation of this myth was an expression of a proto-theory of whiteness based on the assumption of the superiority of a white race and rooted in the figures of the bushmen themselves. At this point, whiteness was still a racial category and Australians created the figure of the (white) bushman in order to belong to the land: they were sure of their right to belong, since the land—always constructed as a wilderness—was tamed by the white bushmen. Indigenous people were written out of the legend and thus from an idea of ‘Australianess’. Their ‘absence’ is also evident in the literature of this period where they were only represented as figures assimilated to the landscape, figures whose presence only contributed to further emphasise the alienness of this landscape. As I will show in the following chapters, this idea of belonging has been questioned in more recent years, the ‘legend’ gradually dismantled and the category of ‘whiteness’ rethought.
Chapter Two

Questioning the Legend: Xavier Herbert

In the previous chapter I presented an analysis of the formation of the Australian legend and pointed out how this very legend is a proto-theory of ‘whiteness’. I argued that the characteristics attributed to the typical Australian—Independence, self-reliance, physical strength, mateship—are part of the discourse of whiteness. The typical Australian is constructed as a white man whose relationship to the land is emphasised and his belonging to the land and his right to belong are never questioned. The legend was theorised by Ward in the fifties, based upon the archive of the writing of the nationalist authors of the 1890s, but it was already present in the Australian imaginary prior to Ward’s study. The construction of the legend was consistent with the representations given in the literature of the period (especially the 1890s) and influenced the formation of an Australian national identity. The non-correspondence of this national type to the real conditions of the Australian bush was pointed out by none other than Lawson, who nonetheless contributed to the exaltation of this figure through his struggle with the land. The discursive construction of the legend, a proto-theory of whiteness supported by the nationalist writers, emerges from an idea of ‘Australianness’ based on the belief in the racial superiority of the white race. In this discourse, the role of the indigenous population is marginal: they are presented as part of the
country they inhabit but are not recognised as belonging to it. The
Aboriginal people remain figures in the landscape: they are excluded from
any sense of Australianness.

The years after Federation saw a more rationalist and less idealised view
of the country, bringing authors to a rethinking of the legend in an attempt
to critique it. In the early twentieth century the ‘mythology’ of the typical
Australian was still very strong and can be identified as the embodiment
of a theory of whiteness. A critique of both the legend and the idealisation
of the bush assumed a stronger tone roughly between 1930-1970 with
the work of authors such as K.S. Prichard, Xavier Herbert and Patrick
White. These authors critique the legend constructed around the
bushman and the outback and begin to dismantle it. An analysis of the
works of Herbert will show how literature itself, previously coopted for the
perpetuation of the discourse, questions and critiques the proto-theory of
whiteness from the inside. With Herbert we begin to sense an
undermining of the racial category that had been so emphatic in the
1890s.

In this chapter I analyse Xavier Herbert’s novels, *Capricornia* (1938) and
*Poor Fellow My Country* (1975), to exemplify a different reading of the
role of the typical Australian, his relation to the land and its first nation
people. Herbert, I argue, engages in a critique of the legend. This choice
of characters is indicative of a change of perspective: they are no longer
the embodiment of the typical white, native-born Australian. The ‘typical
Australian’ loses some of his pre-eminence. While in the 1890s the bushman’s ability to master the Australian landscape was never questioned, Herbert exposes his inadequacy: the bushman lacks the ‘language’ with which to read the land. The landscape is now humanised, it is not an empty wilderness, waiting for the white man to fill it, but it is full and alive with its own life, and it influences the people who live in it. The outback still represents the ‘real Australia’ but the role of the bushman has changed: he is now a self-reflective subject who prizes ‘knowledge’ of the land above physical skills and practicality and who is aware of his role in the landscape. Herbert questions the previous authors’ presentation of Australia as an idealised or hellish land and their exaltation of the figure of the bushman. Herbert also spells out the discursive nature of the idea of white men bringing progress and civilisation. He dismantles the foundational myth, addressing the settlement as a ‘theft’, thus anticipating the critique of the fiction of *terra nullius* that would be a major theme for later authors. He explores the different understanding and relationship to the land that white and indigenous people have: the Australian land is untameable and white Australians need to know the land in order to control it.

Herbert exposes knowledge as a product of power. Power, according to Foucault (1980), is at the base of the production of knowledge and at the foundation of every discourse.¹ Herbert shows how the production of knowledge has been used to guarantee power over the Australian land

¹ For a more detailed analysis of Foucault’s view of power see p. 142 of this thesis.
and people. The land is controlled through mapping and naming, while indigenous people are controlled through discourses of Social Darwinism, language, religion and the judicial system. These ‘instruments’ are not made available to them, so that they cannot return the ‘gaze’. One recalls at this juncture Foucault’s analysis of Bentham’s ‘Panopticon’ as a way to analyse those institutions of control—the compound and reserves—used for the segregation and assimilation of indigenous people. Herbert exposes the racial discourse of whiteness constructed to justify the acquisition of the land and the subjugation of the indigenous population. He uses the legend to address the racial issues at the heart of Australian society, and questions for the first time in some detail the right of white Australians to belong to the country. Before I move on to a reading of Herbert’s novels and the way these themes are portrayed, I must first address the historical background and critical reception of the novels.

The years in which the novels are set are those of the White Australia Policy, which ratified at an institutional level a tendency that had been central in the formation of an Australian identity. The White Australia Policy excluded immigration to Australia of people who were not considered ‘white’, thereby reinforcing the nation’s racial phobia. This policy grew out of a belief in the superiority of the white race and the use of theories of Social Darwinism to justify such beliefs. The flourishing of anthropological studies, which focused on the indigenous inhabitants of the country and mapped, catalogued and analysed anything concerned with this population, was pivotal to the development of a racial ideology in
Australia. The whiteness of the country was presented as essential to the maintenance of those characteristics of the Australian nation that were exalted. Australia was in fact presented as the ‘lucky country’, ‘Australia Felix’, a land of opportunities, a place where any ‘white person’ could succeed through hard work. These beliefs had been influenced also by the Gold Rush of previous years and the development of a productive wool industry. Australia had to be preserved for the white man. The Chinese and the indigenous inhabitants were seen during this period as the ‘enemy’.

Australia was involved in the First World War, a war fought far from its shores for the Empire. Gallipoli came to represent the symbol of the nation’s sacrifice and finally gave Australia the ‘baptism of blood’ regarded as fundamental to nationalism. Indigenous people participated in the War but were not given any recognition of their sacrifice upon their return. Between the two wars, Australia was engaged in rethinking its relationship with England and there was a rise in nationalism as the country strove to forge a distinct identity on the back of the sacrifices of the Anzacs. During the 1930s, against the backdrop of the worldwide depression following the 1929 crash, and with global tensions rising ahead of the Second World War, Australia was concerned with Japanese imperialism and the potential for a Japanese invasion of northern Australia. After the Second World War, Australia had loosened its bond

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2 The year 1967 saw the referendum for indigenous people’s inclusion in the census.
3 This led to the controversial idea of the ‘Brisbane Line’, whereby northern Australian territory would be abandoned above an imaginary line drawn from Brisbane to Perth. Australian soil was bombed for the first time in 1942 by the Japanese.
with Britain and it was now under the United States’ influence. These events provide a broader context in which the events in Herbert’s novels play themselves out.

Xavier Herbert’s *Capricornia* (1938) is the reworking of an earlier unpublished novel, ‘Black Velvet’ (Herbert 1970: 208-9). The novel presents the quest for identity of the young ‘half-caste’, Norman. Norman, the son of Mark Shillingsworth, a government official and Marowallua, an Aboriginal woman, is brought up by his grazier uncle Oscar and educated as a white man. He is led to believe that he is the son of a Javanese Princess. Norman is called by the Aboriginal people Naw-nim: “The name No-name was one usually given by the natives to dogs for which they had no love but had not the heart to kill or lose” (Herbert 1981: 40). It is mostly in the company of dogs that the little child spends the first years of his life, having been neglected by his father and his mother being dead. He lives in Batman (Melbourne) with his uncle and cousin and moves back to Capricornia (the fictional name for the Northern Territory), a society characterised by racism. Here he meets Tocky, another young ‘half-caste’.

Before continuing with the discussion, I should say briefly that even in this novel Aboriginal characters continue to be presented in a rather simplistic way: they are not well developed (even though they are real characters and no longer just figures in the landscape that simply added local

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4 Further page references to *Capricornia* (Herbert 1981) are indicated with C.
colour). The ‘half-castes’ are better developed but, with the exception of Norman and Tocky who are both brought up in a white environment, they are presented in negative terms. The Chinese characters are also mostly stereotypes.

In *Capricornia*, Herbert is concerned with the ‘half-caste’ and the treatment of indigenous people. He exposes the faults of white society in general as well as those of the white institutions established to guarantee ‘protection’ for the original inhabitants. The government officers, the doctors, the protectors of the Aborigines and the religious orders are foremost in not respecting the ‘subjects’ they are supposed to ‘protect’. These institutions are presented as having a unique interest in controlling

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5 The positions expressed by Herbert in *Capricornia* are carried further in *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975) for which Herbert was awarded the Miles Franklin Literary Award. This novel, set mostly in the Northern Territory during the years 1936-1942, presents a harsher critique of Australian society—the thirty six years that separate the two novels had seen major historical changes. The novel develops around three main characters, all introduced in the first chapter: Prindy, a part-Aboriginal boy, Bobwirridirridi, an old Aboriginal *koornung* (witch-doctor) and Jeremy Delacy, the lessee of Lily Lagoons Station and veterinarian. The plot of the novel follows the travails of Prindy who is being introduced to Aboriginal culture by Bobwirridirridi and who encounters pressure from white society to assimilate and imitate white ways. In *Poor Fellow My Country*, Herbert emphasises the themes he had earlier used in *Capricornia*. Some of the issues that were only hinted at in the first novel, and stressed only through sarcasm or irony, are explicitly addressed in this later novel. The main themes of the novel are presented in the opening chapter of the book through Jeremy, who expresses his views on the history of colonisation and the problems of Australian society, pointing to the treatment of indigenous people. These themes are then developed throughout the novel, but their foundation is established from the start. “We’re aliens in this country…those of us not of Aboriginal blood. The more complex our origins, the more alien we are” (Herbert 1988: 95). [Further page references to *Poor Fellow My Country* (Herbert 1988) are indicated with PFC.] Herbert started working on the novel in 1965 and considered it his “life work, [his] whole reason for being” (Batman 1975: 45). *Poor Fellow My Country* is divided into three books: “Book One: Terra Australis—Blackman’s Idyll Despoiled by White Bullies, Thieves, and Hypocrites”, “Book Two: Australia Felix—Whileman’s Ideal Sold Out by Rogues and Fools” and “Book Three: Day of Shame—A Rabble Fleed the Test of Nationhood”. This structure is reminiscent of the one used by Henry Handel Richardson in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (1917-1929), which is also divided into three books: “Book I: Australia Felix”, “Book II: The Way Home”, and “Book III: Ultima Thule” (Richardson 1982).
and observing indigenous people. They are, in Foucault’s words, instruments of “disciplinary power” (1991).

The publication of *Capricornia* in 1938 was on the whole favourably received, and it was generally agreed that it would become a classic of Australian literature. On 31 March 1938 *Capricornia* was awarded the Commonwealth Literary Prize. The bulk of the reviews showed a deep interest in *Capricornia* and its themes, with general agreement among reviewers that the main theme was the treatment of the Northern Territory Aboriginal and ‘half-caste’ people and a critique of the government institutions. The reviewers pointed out Herbert’s familiarity with his subject matter, hence his entitlement to treat it. The favourable reception of the novel points to an awareness of the so-called ‘Aboriginal problem’ and an understanding of the need to address it. The reviewers emphasised the choice of a ‘half-caste’ as the main protagonist of the novel, seeing Norman as the representative of a new race. A key point for

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6 Negative comments on *Capricornia* refer primarily to the length of the novel or to its structure and the large number of characters, the latter considered unusual for a novel. Among the reviewers that critiqued the novel for its length were J.S. (1939: 17) and Stewart (1956: 2). Of the twenty-five reviews republished by *The Publicist*, only three or four are negative. Among the negative ones is “A novel of North Australia” by F.T. Macartney, who in his essay “Literature and the Aborigine” expressed negative opinions regarding the presence of Aboriginal people in literature (see Hodge and Mishra 1991: 29-30) and their representation in novels. Therefore, Macartney’s negative review of *Capricornia* is not surprising, since this novel focuses on the relationship between white settlers, ‘half-castes’ and indigenous people, denouncing the bad treatment the half-castes and indigenous people received (Macartney 1938: 11).

7 See Stephensen (1938: 7).

8 To mark the occasion, the novel’s publisher, *The Publicist*, printed reviews of the novel from before the winning of the Prize in its 1 May issue. These reviews show that the novel was very well received and praised. Angus and Robertson, which had previously rejected the novel on the basis that it was “too long and depressing”, took over the publication of future editions following the success of the first 2000 copies (Reid 1974: 270).

the reviewers was Herbert’s ‘indictment’ of the treatment of Aboriginal and ‘half-caste’ people.

Among the reviews focusing on racial relations, The Bulletin stressed the “color problem” represented in the novel by the “evolution of a new race” of ‘half-caste’ people (The Bulletin 30 March 1938: 2). On the occasion of the award of the Commonwealth Literary Prize to Herbert, The Times exalted the “openmindedness” of the inhabitants of the “Dominions” for awarding a work which was clearly a critique of the delicate if not damning ‘half-caste’ situation in the Northern Territory (S. J. 1939: 17). The reporter also mentioned “miscegenation” which had not been “prevented” by “a belief in the superiority of pallor” (S. J. 1939: 17).

The Times Literary Supplement gave a negative review of the novel stating that “miscegenation makes the plot”, and critiquing the use of “pidgin-English” in the dialogue between white men (West 1939: 549).

Miles Franklin too stressed the “author’s gift as a storyteller” and considered the work an indictment of the treatment of indigenous people (Franklin 1938: 13). The eminent Australian social historian T. Inglis Moore had earlier exalted the “Australianness” of the novel: “the most Australian of all our novels—[...] distinctive in subject, scene, handling and language” (Moore 1938: 11-12). Moore emphasised Capricornia’s denunciation of the treatment of indigenous people, the subject of ‘black velvet’, and described it as “a vital expression of the Spirit of the Land”

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10 The bibliography for the reviews mentioned here is based on the bibliography compiled by David Sansome (1988).
Hobart’s *Mercury* too praised Herbert’s accusation of the official institutions and their treatment of Aboriginal people and ‘half-castes’: “The Native Compound is revealed as a horror of incompetent administration, its officers careless of anything except their own comfort” (Scribe 1938: 14). The reviewer of the Melbourne *Sun* emphasised the novel’s critique of the missionary system and the treatment of indigenous people (The Bookman 1938: 15).¹¹

In an interview with Herbert, Batman praised Herbert’s novel, *Capricornia*, as “the first novel ever to penetrate under the skin of the Aboriginal, the first to reveal the appalling suffering we had inflicted on the black man” (Batman 1975: 44).¹² Camden Morrisby exalted the novel for its “fine masculine realism, blended with humour and an irony essentially Australian in spirit” (Morrisby 1938: 15).¹³ Vance Palmer also praised the work: “Xavier Herbert has opened up a new world. For a country can’t

¹¹ In “The Colour Question”, *The Sydney Morning Herald* argued that: “the major theme is the injustice of the treatment meted out by the conquering whites to the aboriginal and the half-caste inhabitants of the Northern Territory” (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 18 Feb. 1938: 16). *The Townsville Daily Bulletin*, however, wondered “why so many of our recent Australian writers seem to revel in revealing a seamy side of the Australian character” (Barrymore 1938: 16).

¹² In this interview, which preceded the publication of *Poor Fellow My Country*, Batman praises Herbert’s skills as a story-teller. Herbert tells the interviewer about the novel and explains the meaning of its title: “It covered the years from 1936 to 1942, North Queensland, the Brisbane line, the Japanese and the great dream of Australia Felix and how that dream died and was destroyed. It is also the cry of pain of the Aboriginal. The title, too, ‘Poor Fellow My Country’, comes from the Aborigines. He says it is the cry of exile: ‘I cry for my country which also cries for me’” (quoted in Batman 1975: 45). Batman asks Herbert about his "sympathy for the Aborigines" and Herbert refers to the first time he saw them as a boy of seven, explaining that their “ill-clad and starving” appearance was due to the fact that "the white man had taken their lands and their water" (Batman 1975: 45). In another interview with Keith Willey, Herbert expresses one of the themes that will be analysed in the novel: “I feel I am the only Australian apart from the aboriginals. I don’t believe anyone is as close to the land as I am. I belong to the country and the only way to do that is to feel the same way about it as the black man” (quoted in Grant 1976: 43).

¹³ The reviewer also associated the work with Dickens in the usage of characters’ names (Morrisby 1938: 15).
really be known until it is caught up in the vision of an artist, a creator, and presented to us in imaginative form” (Palmer 1938: 15). As we have seen, Palmer would later refer to the same point as “myth-making” in The Legend of the Nineties (1954). Palmer praised Herbert’s characterisation of the “coloured people” and referred to them as the “real heirs to the soil” (Palmer 1938: 15).

Hill Hanley criticised the manner in which the Government used the threat of the Japanese to avert attention from the treatment of indigenous people, and praised Herbert for spelling it out:

Xavier Herbert, in ‘Capricornia’, tells of the shocking exploitation and ill-treatment of the aborigines going on at the present time in Australia Felix. He does not look for alibis, there is no mention of the Japanese, as the offenders are all sprung from “good old Anglo-Saxon stock”. Once it was sacks of flour spiced with arsenic, mass executions and poisoned water holes that did the fell work, but the technique has improved with the passage of the years that will not bury their dead past and the remnants of the aboriginal race are being treated to the same civilising process to-day, but in a much more dreadful and subtle fashion (Hanley 1938: 13).

In this passage, Hanley emphasises the role of the novel as a social accusation of the treatment of the Aboriginal people and identifies the intention of the Government to hide this subject through the construction of threats. This passage is meaningful because it points to the use of different “techniques” in different times, with the same result for indigenous people. This subject is dealt with by Herbert in Capricornia and in Poor Fellow My Country,\(^{14}\) where the “old pioneers” are said to

\(^{14}\) Poor Fellow My Country had a mixed reception, being acclaimed as a masterpiece by some critics and dismissed as a failure by others. The majority, however, praised some of its characteristics, whilst generally condemning its length. Poor Fellow My Country
have colonised the land through the extermination of the original inhabitants using bags of flour spiced with arsenic (C 3; PFC 31). Here Hanley points to the “dreadful and subtle” (Hanley 1938: 13) nature of the more recent techniques used against indigenous people, apparently referring to assimilation policies and institutions. While reviewers of *Capricornia* underscored Herbert’s expression of his love and knowledge of the land and the treatment of indigenous people, they failed to read the novel as a critique of the typical Australian.\(^{15}\)

On the publication of the third edition some twenty years later, the novel was greeted as a “masterpiece” and was praised for its “irony” as well as for the author’s exposition of the ‘half-caste’ situation which “leaves the reader incapable of ever again seeing the halfcaste through the bleary eyes of prejudice” (Cookslander 1957: 37). Ken Levis praised *Capricornia* “as one of our best anthropological novels. Like Katharine Susannah...
Prichard’s *Coonardoo*, it presents a sound treatment of the problem of miscegenation” (Levis 1957: 116). *The Bulletin*’s review on the occasion of the third edition of the novel was a positive one, comparing *Capricornia*, “enormous and legendary”, to the “diprotodont”. The novel was praised for dealing with “the appalling conditions under which the Aborigines live at the Compound” and for its “artistry—in the way of good, vigorous storytelling, alive with humour, compassion and indignation” (Stewart 1956: 2).

In many ways *Capricornia* is a critique of the Australian legend and of the notion of the bushman as the ‘typical Australian’. Herbert’s deconstruction of the legend is carried out through the attribution of ‘typical’ characteristics to ‘non-typical’ characters. In other words, even as he presents the characters as an embodiment of the bushman, the critique of the legend is implicit in the choice of characters who are no longer representatives of the legend. The fact that Norman, a ‘half-caste’ despised by his white countrymen, possesses the characteristics of the typical Australian is a critique of the legend, an ironic way of presenting it. Norman is a skilled horseman, a drover, but he cannot belong to the type of the bushman, because he lacks one of its main characteristics: he is not ‘white’. Although having been brought up to think and act as a white man, Norman is not accepted by white society because, as we are constantly reminded, he is “honey-coloured”, brown as opposed to white. Thus, even as Norman’s presence exalts the figure of the bushman,
Herbert is questioning the very idea of whiteness, which is central to the legend.

A critical passage in the critique of the legend may be found in the chapter “Oh Don’t You Remember Black Alice?” where the constructed nature of the legend is exposed and the underlying irony of the entire novel is extended to encompass the legend. Herbert’s choice of title, the first line of the ballad “Black Alice”, is meaningful when juxtaposed with the other ballads and tunes quoted in the chapter.\(^{16}\) This ballad is in fact the one that is believed to have started the ‘tradition’ of the bush ballads in *The Bulletin*, and is therefore at the foundation of the legend. The succession of songs that appear in the chapter puts an ironic twist on their ability to express “the spirit of the land”.\(^ {17}\) When McRandy asks Mooch for “a good Australian tune, […] one’t expresses the Spirit of the Land”, Mooch sings one where the protagonist asks to be buried in alcohol, which according to McRandy, “only expresses the spirit that you live in the land in, Joe” (C 328).\(^ {18}\) The play on the word ‘spirit’ here is

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\(^{16}\) The ballad is generally known as “Sam Holt” by G.H. Gibson (Ironbark), and was published in *The Bulletin* in 1881. It is interesting to note that the name of the ballad quoted in the novel is “Ben Bolt”, which according to Russel Ward is the name of a Victorian ballad parodied by the Australian one (Ward 2003: 202). This ballad recurs many times in the novel: it opens Chapter Twenty-four and closes it, connecting this chapter to others in the novel. “Black Alice” is in fact mentioned very early in the novel in Chapter Two, where Mark is said to be sailing towards Flying Fox with Chook and Krater singing “Black Alice” and the first stanza of the ballad is quoted (C 15). A reference to the ballad can also be identified in the way Mark addresses Norman’s mother as “Mary Alice” (C 25). The recurrence of this ballad points to one of the underlying themes of the novel, ‘black velvet’ (the white man’s sexual exploitation of indigenous women), to which I will return later.

\(^{17}\) Chapter Twenty-four (“Oh Don’t you Remember Black Alice?”) contains a long digression by the character Andy McRandy, a grazier, on the “Spirit of the Land” and on the “Old People” (Aboriginal people)—and why Norman should not be ashamed of his heritage (C 311-332).

\(^{18}\) Joe Mooch is Albert Henn (‘Chook’), a friend of Mark Shillingsworth, who calls himself Mooch while hiding from the police. Mark changes his name to Jack Ramble.
deliberately ironic. Mooch, then looking at Norman’s attire—that of a stockman—starts singing a tune which can be recognised as the anonymously penned “The Dying Stockman”.¹⁹ But this one too, according to Andy, does not represent the land. The initial misunderstanding about which ballad best communicates the spirit of the land shows that the characters have divergent views on the matter. Significantly, “Waltzing Matilda” (1895) is believed to be the expression of the spirit of the land. This interpretation is attributed to an “English musical coot, sorter perfesser of music” (C 330), to give it credibility. This song is, according to this professor:

> a genuine folk song. That’s a song peculiar to a tribe of people […] one’t expresses their feelin’s. He says that this here Spirit of the Land that Andy mentioned is in it, both in the music and the words (C 330).

The connection between the swagman, the representative of the spirit of the land in “Waltzing Matilda” and the typical Australian is clearly given: “So the Jolly Swagman’s the typical Australian” (C 330). Herbert is aware of the importance of ballads in the construction of an Australian identity and a reference to the legend here is more than hinted at. The use of ballads in the novel is an attempt at critiquing a type that has been constructed through these ballads.

The attribution to the ‘swagman’ subject of qualities belonging to the indigenous people and the belief that he is their heir, allows him—and by extension Australians—to claim belonging. This is spelled out in the association between the way in which both the Aboriginal people and the

¹⁹ For the full version of the bush song see Stewart and Keesing (1957: 145-6).
swagman live. Both are said to consider animals as “public property, or rather property of the tribe, same’s the Binghi spearin’ a kangaroo or somebody’s bullock” (C 330), as opposed to the “troopers” and the “squatters”, who are presented as “outsiders” because of their “strong sense of property” (C 330) (the troopers are looked on with suspicion by the typical Australian, a characteristic pointed out by Ward in The Australian Legend and linked to the convict past). There is a clear attempt to create continuity between Aboriginal people and bushmen, as Herbert tries to explain the latter as having acquired some of the characteristics of the original inhabitants—even if it is still a one-way relationship. The spirit of the land is also associated with the bunyip:

the Great Bunyip, the Spirit of this Southern Land of ours, the Lord of your Aboriginal forefathers from the beginnin’ of time, and now the Lord of us who’s growin’ up in your forefathers’ place and goin’ the same old manly carefree way, wants to keep a bit of the place in its aboriginal glorious wild state, and has chosen this here Capricornia for it (C 321).

McRandy is trying to claim indigeneity by connecting the bushman to the Aboriginal people and the bunyip. This intent is clearly expressed when he elevates the “Old People” to the position of “Fathers of the Nation”, a position, we could argue, that was until then reserved only for the pioneers: “The day’ll come in your own time when your Old People’ll be recognized as our Old People too, as the Fathers of the Nation, and’ll be raised to a place of honour” (C 327). McRandy’s exaltation of the Old People is reversed and presented as ironic, as can be seen from the first line of the following chapter, “Norman remained proud of his Aboriginal heritage for several weeks” (C 332).
Sean Monahan has argued that Herbert attributes two meanings to the “Spirit of the Land” in Capricornia, one being the “spirit of the Jolly Swagman” and the other “the Australian ethos symbolised by the land and its Aboriginal inhabitants”, the latter being the only one found in Poor Fellow My Country (Monahan 1985: 22). Chapter Twenty-four has been interpreted by Monahan as an exaltation of the Jolly Swagman as the typical Australian, represented in the novel by Norman. However, I believe this presentation of the swagman only has the function of exposing its constructed characteristics; the swagman does not possess the spirit of the land, a spirit the white man cannot grasp. I believe Herbert is criticising the myth of the Jolly Swagman, presenting him as the false ideal of the spirit of the land—the bushman who thinks he understands the land is presented as ridiculous when juxtaposed against indigenous knowledge. The bushman, represented in the novel by Mark, Krater, Chook and Norman, is unable to survive in the land without the assistance of indigenous inhabitants, western instruments and food.

Norman himself, whom Monahan considers to be the incarnation of the idea of the “Jolly Swagman” (Monahan 2003: 60), does not belong to the legend because as we have already pointed out, one of the main characteristics of the typical Australian—perhaps the most important—is that he is white. Norman is a ‘half-caste’ who acquires a partial knowledge of the landscape but at the same time does not, indeed cannot, belong to the legend. The swagman, as Monahan also says, is a
white man; the same characteristics and privileges are denied both to the ‘half-caste’ and to the indigenous people: they are the ones who understand the spirit of the land, but this understanding does not allow them to be equal to the white men. They are still outside the myth, they are not part of the ethos. Herbert is aware of this exclusion and exposes it, thus deconstructing the myth.

Monahan makes a significant analysis of the characteristics of the typical Australian. He points to Herbert’s use of mateship (brotherhood), freedom and hospitality. The conclusions he draws from these characteristics are different from mine. He assumes that Herbert is exalting the myth of the swagman, not critiquing it: “When he wrote *Capricornia*, Herbert still believed in the stereotypes of Australian ‘mateship’ and freedom, and his hero exemplifies those stereotypes” (Monahan 2003: 59). I believe Herbert’s use of the characteristics typical of the legend is a first attempt at deconstructing them, his irony being stronger than his belief in them. Herbert locates these features and presents us with their limitations in the novel. For example, freedom is valid only for the white man; there is no freedom for the Aboriginal people and the ‘half-caste’. The indigenous people preferred to be “starving in the bush” and maintaining their freedom instead of living in the Compound (C 51). And here the criticism of the Australian nation is very explicit: “And all the while the Nation was boasting to the world of its Freedom and Manliness and Honesty. Australia Felix!” (C 51). In this passage, the tone used by the author is
obviously sarcastic and points to the different treatment indigenous people received through being denied their freedom.

For Herbert, the use of the spirit of the land in the Aboriginal sense is a way of exposing the limits of the bushman ethos rather than a means of exalting the myth. In the chapter “Song of the Golden Beetle”, Norman “sensed the Spirit of the Land to the full”, understanding that the song of the beetle is the “voice of the spirit of Terra Australis” (C 293). However, he can only feel that there is this other spirit, but is prevented from fully participating in it. Norman has been brought up as a white man, thus his access to his spiritual side had been compromised and he is excluded from an understanding of the spirit of the land. Norman’s inability to understand the importance of this song is a critique of white perception of indigenous culture. It is meaningful that the real spirit of the land is identified with a song, the song of the golden beetle, creating a direct counterpart to the ‘fake’ spirit of the land represented by the ballads and therefore the swagman. Monahan argues that Norman is the typical swagman and that it is his swagman’s characteristics which are exalted rather than his Aboriginal ones. I disagree. I believe that Norman is a clear expression of the fact that depriving a ‘half-caste’ of his cultural heritage, and making him grow up as a white man, destroys the possibility of him fully understanding Aboriginal culture and the real spirit of the land. Norman is a swagman, but he belongs to neither white nor Aboriginal society.
Chinese people are also excluded from the myth. An interesting critique of the legend can be identified in the ironic description of the Chinese character Cho.²⁰ Cho is presented as the anti-legend par excellence: riding his “old donkey” he is able to muster calves as well as any stockrider (C 367). The fact that he rides a donkey is emblematic of Herbert ridiculing the drover and by extension the typical Australian. In another passage, Herbert again refers to the tendency of Chinese people to ride donkeys and use horses as pack animals:

Their mode of travelling, the converse of that generally adopted by people of the land who owned both horses and donkeys, was the one invariably adopted by Chinamen, even by Cho, who of late affected in every detail of his dress the style of a white stockrider (C 408).

This is a clear inversion of the ideal of the typical Australian. Herbert here also ridicules the way Cho is dressed—as “a white stockrider”.²¹ Chinese people, even if they behave as bushmen are not “people of the land”; they do not belong to the myth.

Herbert’s critique of the legend is most evident in his exposition of the discursive construction of the landscape as ‘threatening’. The Australian bush is either presented as a terrifying wilderness where life is hard or as an ‘arcadian paradise’. The landscape seems to reflect the impressions and the feelings of the characters and the descriptions of it vary according to the subjects and their heritage. The indigenous characters

²⁰ Cho is employed as a cook at Red Ochre station, Oscar’s property. Cho is the brother of Cho See Kee, killed by Mark (Norman’s father).
²¹ The Chinese man’s choice to dress in the fashion of the drover could be seen as his attempt to identify with this category and therefore belong to the nation. Norman laughs at Cho, even though he himself does not belong to the category.
give a positive reading of the land linked to their knowledge of it. As Muttonhead tells Norman:

Proper good country dis one. Plenty kangaroo, plenty buffalo, plenty bandicoot, plenty yam, plenty goose, plenty duck, plenty lubra, plenty corroboree, plenty fun, plenty ebrytings. Number-one good country (C 307).

This perception of the land is contrasted with Norman’s vision: “he feared the chuckling assassin [river] before him” as much as “the wilderness behind” (C 305). White men do not possess the skills of indigenous people and therefore their vision is negative and they see the land as a powerful and frightening force.

A parallel is created between Norman and Tocky to stress their opposite approach to and knowledge of the bush. ‘Half-castes’ have different reactions to the landscape, depending on how they have been brought up. Herbert underscores this difference by mention of the food they eat while in the bush; Norman cannot survive off the land, while Tocky can. The repetition of the western food each time he eats, as a kind of ritual, is significant. Norman eats tinned meat, tinned peaches and biscuits, and he drinks tea (C 298; 303). This is clearly in contrast with what Tocky has been “livin’ on”: “yams an’ lily-roots—an’ fresh-water turtles an’ fish an’ stick-eggs—and poor lil frogs and birdses—an’ sometimes nussing” (C 380). Her ability to survive off the land on what she can collect is emphasised, as well as her ability to follow tracks and to disguise her own, skills which link her to her Aboriginal heritage. Tocky is resourceful and her knowledge of the bush is stressed. It is the kind of knowledge
Norman does not possess. The white man—and by extension the bushman—is unable to survive in the bush by living off the land, and his distance from an Aboriginal knowledge of the bush is again emphasised through Mark and Ket, who are hiding in the bush. They cannot live without a rifle or a shotgun because as Ket explains: “I gotter have a gun to get tucker. I’ve tried huntin’ like a nigger till I’ve nearly gone mad with hunger” (C 469). Like any white men, Norman and Ket cannot survive without food in the bush and feel threatened by it, while Tocky is more terrified by white men, who seem to be an evil presence in the land. Herbert’s repetition of these aspects is a means of drawing the reader’s attention to them.

The land is constructed as hostile. The four fugitives—Mark, Chook, Ket and Frank—have little chance of survival due to the distance they must travel and the harshness of the conditions they have to face:

They had choice of many roads, and several millions of square miles of wilderness to wander in safety. But what a safety! […] To reach civilization unmolested they must travel many thousand miles. […] But they would never make it. They would struggle on till the wilderness beat them. Then they would struggle back, praying to be caught and rescued from their plight, till they dropped in their tracks for the crows and dingoes. Or the myall niggers would get them (C 354-5).

The bush is seen by the white man as negative, frightening and opposed to civilisation; it is not positive and reassuring. The country is an

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22 The ability of the Aboriginal people to live off the country is also emphasised in Poor Fellow My Country. The difference between young Prindy, who can survive in the landscape on his own, and Norman who cannot, is significant. In fact Prindy has not been brought up as a white man—he has grown up in the country, while Norman has grown up in the south, being completely ignorant of his origins and far from his land.
“unknown wilderness” to them and the runaways are: “doomed to die by starvation, drowning, thirst, madness, spears of savages” (C 366). The indigenous people living in the bush are regarded by white men as “savages”, outside civilisation, a threatening part of the landscape.\(^\text{23}\)

Norman is influenced by these prejudices of his western education: “The savage was tall, broad, bearded, naked but for a belt of human hair, painted hideously, […] and armed with a handful of spears. Norman was terrified, open-mouthed, breathless, crouched” (C 306). The ‘fearfulness’ and ‘savageness’ of their look, however, loses its strength when Norman recognises them as people who worked on the station, thus exposing the idea of them being savage and treacherous. Herbert ridicules both Norman’s fear and the construction of the other as savage.

The land cannot be mapped, because it changes according to the season, a proof of which is the fact that the western side of the river is indicated on the map as “Not Surveyed” (C 298). The landscape cannot be tamed: floods, drought and storms (cockeye bob) are beyond control. During the floods in the wet season, men can only wait for the weather to change, as happens to Norman. He puts his life in danger because of his inability to ‘read’ the landscape; he should have paid attention to the signs around the river, but this entails an indigenous knowledge of the

\(^{23}\) Poor Fellow My Country emphasises the identification between indigenous people and the land. Bobwirridirridi is identified with the landscape from his first appearance; he is presented as one with nature: “so much a part of the background was that which had intruded into it—or materialized out of it, as seemed as likely. It was of human shape, greyish, or blackish made grey with dust and ashes and ancient body hair, so as to appear kindred to the crawling roots. It had stick legs, with shapeless lumpy feet and knobby knees, arms like a mantis, a tuft of grey hair sticking up like the crest of an angry bird out of a grubby ochred head-band” (PFC 10). This relation to the landscape is opposed to that of the white man. While the white man imposes his presence on the land, Bobwirridirridi emerges from the land as a full part of it.
land and Norman has been denied that kind of knowledge and sees through white eyes.

The inadequacy of the map as an instrument of knowledge of the land is underlined. The map is what Norman looks at, when instead he should have been looking at the signs typical of the floods and the nature around him. Observation of his surroundings—the type of vegetation, the soil on the banks of the river, the dark clouds, the absence of kangaroos, and so on—would have warned him against the peril. It is significant that he only notices the signs of “the debris in the trees” (C303) after he loses the map; he only becomes more aware of his surroundings and pays attention to them after losing the western instrument of knowledge.

Herbert is clearly critiquing Norman’s reliance on the map and his western attitude to the land: “A destination that to him was only an inscription on a map” (C298). Norman fails to understand that the Australian landscape cannot be reduced to a map because knowledge of the land cannot be obtained through western instruments. Even when, alone in the bush, “for the first time he realized his Aboriginal heritage”, Norman is still outside an understanding of—and belonging to—the land (C294).

24 Herbert uses a particular construction here to underline Norman’s alienness to this environment, exposing his scarce knowledge of the land and its climate (C296-7). Norman’s ignorance of the land is stressed through repetition: “he did not realize” (C297), it was “lost on him” (C297; 299), “not realizing” (C299), “not yet aware of danger” (C300), “he did not realise his danger” (C301), “he was not alarmed” (C301), “was not prepared” (C302).

25 There is a double sense of not belonging for Norman, because he identifies with people who treat him as ‘other’ and is unable to identify with those who would accept him. The indigenous people he meets in the bush accept him and he learns the skills of living in the bush “in native style”, considering it “a remarkable achievement” (C309). However, Norman is so much embedded in the white man’s point of view that he goes
Another symbol of the attempt to control and rationalise the land through the imposition of a western pattern is the construction of a railway. The plan to extend the railway line is seen with hostility by Andy McRandy, who believes it will “spoil this lovely country” and who attributes the desire to build a railway to “the whim of a few transplanted cockneys that hate to see places without tram-lines in ‘em” (C 318). According to McRandy then, the railway is an attempt by the transplanted British at reshaping the country, making it more similar to ‘home’. Herbert’s critique of the train and the railway is in itself a critique of the instruments of knowledge. As Brian Kiernan has argued, the railway is “the means of opening up the country to ‘civilization’” and it reflects the level of civilisation in Capricornia (Kiernan 1971a: 84-5). Kiernan identifies in the “inefficiency” of the railway a critique of the western ideas of “progress” and of instruments that are inadequate in the Australian landscape (1971: 86). Together with a critique of the legend and of the society of the period, Herbert extends his critique to the instruments of modernism. All of those scientific instruments that have been valued and considered indispensible are depicted as useless in the Australian landscape because they are unable back to his ‘civilised’ ways once back home and is ashamed of his heritage. Norman’s failure to truly understand the land and belong to it is fundamental. He has been deprived of the knowledge of those myths, the Aboriginal Dreaming, that connect the first nation people to their land.

26 There is little need for a railway in Capricornia “because it’s an utterly useless land. You can’t grow nuthen properly on account of the climate. Dry season it’s a desert. Wet season it’s a lake” (C 319). The railway is presented as a failure and many deaths are attributed to it. The train is described as an infernal instrument, at times even anthropomorphised by Herbert, when he shows it to us through the eyes of little Nawnim (Norman), who is scared by its noises and appearance: “Horror!—the Thing rushing down on him—black hair trailing and white billowing about its pounding flanks” (C 57).
to tame the land. These instruments are used to readdress the legend and the bushman’s relation to the land.\textsuperscript{27}

It should be clear that Herbert’s novel continues to challenge white attempts at controlling and disciplining a land that is foreign to a western understanding of landscape. The land does not correspond to the western ideal of it: the white man projects onto the landscape his idea of the land, based on the European landscape. The trauma derived from the land not corresponding to this projection is the one that causes the feeling of not-belonging to the Australian land. The ‘destruction’ (perhaps even ‘desecration’) of the land by Australians is considered a sign of their alienness. Herbert seems to suggest that Australians do not really love their land because they do not feel they belong to it, which is consistent with Germaine Greer’s perception of the ‘trauma’ of white Australia: “Ours is the trauma of never having belonged. Nothing else will explain the colonists’ contempt for and brutal treatment of the great southern land” (Greer 2007: x-xi).\textsuperscript{28}

Knowledge of the land is fundamental to one’s sense of belonging to it. The landscape is perceived as a monotonous wilderness by the white man, who is unable to read it or to give significance to every single aspect.

\textsuperscript{27} In \textit{Capricornia} Herbert refers also to the myth of country going to waste. The line: “The old tale of \textit{Wonderful Country Going to Waste—Go North, Young Man, Go North!” (C 213), reminds one of the myth of ‘going west’ or ‘going north’ that had been much emphasised by the authors of the 1890s (and criticised by Lawson). Capricornia is often referred to in the novel as “The Land of Opportunity” (C 62). The irony in it is exposed through Oscar: “Capricornia that the fools down South called the Land of Opportunity” (C 69).

\textsuperscript{28} In \textit{Poor Fellow My Country}, mining is seen as a means of destroying the country, which is a “murdered country” (PFC 220).
of it. Indigenous people, instead, possess a knowledge of the land that has grown out of it and has not been superimposed upon it. This opposite vision points to an understanding of the land that cannot be reconciled with that of the white man. In Xavier Herbert’s novels, belonging to the country is questioned: it is not a pre-given. As Greer has pointed out, the condition of the settler is that of ‘unbelonging’. The settler does not really belong to the land he colonises and at the same time he inflicts a sense of the unbelonging on the people he dispossesses (Greer 2007: x-xi). Implicit in this feeling of unbelonging is the knowledge that the country belonged to someone else. The hope of gaining a sense of belonging through knowledge ultimately leads to disappointment; the knowledge of the land necessary for a sense of belonging to it is denied to the white man. This is true of Norman, who has been deprived of his heritage, “bred like a whiteman”, far from his land and in a white environment (C 381). Prindy, instead, truly belongs, and his familiarity with the land is real. Indigenous people can read the landscape and locate everything in it through associated legends: “there was a tale attached to everything in the land, just as a tail was too—except to Man” (PFC 13). Aboriginal familiarity with the land is stressed by Laurie Hergenhan who refers to how “the Aborigines through the land and their ethos, reconciled the good

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29 The link to the land and the importance for Aboriginal people of living in the land to which they belong is emphasised in the novel when Bobwirridiridi is sentenced to imprisonment, but judge Bickering, who insists on having heard the old man crying “Poor Fellow My Country”, decides for him not to be removed from his country, so that he does not “lose his Dreaming” (PFC 293). Bickering is one of the names used by Herbert that clearly defines his character. The judge in fact says he is disappointed when the defence pleads “guilty” saying: “But I must admit a slight disappointment on my own behalf. With the array of talent that we have here today, not merely judicial, but sociological…and may I even say zoological?” The eye fell on Jeremy who reddened ‘...I had expected some fireworks’” (PFC 292). This aspect of the judge’s personality is consistent with the surname Herbert chooses for him.
and the evil spirits by accepting them in a balance of detachment (externalization) and involvement. Hence their belonging” (Hergenhan 1977: 69).

The importance of these myths is further stressed by Herbert in Poor Fellow My Country where the old Aboriginal character Bobwirridirridi sees the landscape through his Dreaming: the land becomes alive before his eyes through this ‘myth’ and a reading of the land that diverges from that of the white people emerges. Where white men see shores, rivers and the lines they have imposed on the land as clear signs of demarcation, of division, indigenous people see the features created by the Rainbow Serpent (Ttchamala) while moving across the land. Lydia Wevers points to the different perception white and indigenous people have of the landscape. She mentions a passage from Poor Fellow My Country where this different reading is clearly demonstrated. When flying over the land, the anthropologist Fergus Ferris sees the landscape through English names, the names attributed to it: “the colonial map, Queen Victoria’s family names spreading a net over the islands and rivers” (Wevers 1995: 44). By contrast with this western vision of the mapped and named landscape, Prindy sees the landscape through the Snake’s Dreaming, the patterns drawn by the Rainbow Snake: “a quite different text, written in ‘old python’s tracks, wriggling in from the sea” (Wevers 1995: 44).

30 Herbert explains this myth in detail through his character Jeremy Delacy (PFC 34-6).
In this passage the different approach to the land is clearly spelled out. The Aboriginal ‘text' has been overwritten by the white man to make the land into a familiar pattern, one that can be controlled, appropriated and ‘disciplined' through mapping and naming. The desire to define the ‘new' world, naming its places and people, is a way of claiming and belonging to the landscape, albeit ineffectively. On the whole, western civilisations tend to name and define everything they come in contact with by ignoring or refusing to acknowledge the previous names attributed to places, people, animals and objects. The importance attributed to naming is fundamental in Herbert's novels. In Poor Fellow My Country, Jeremy refers to the practice of changing place-names by telling how his station came to be named Lily Lagoons: “I asked that the name of the place be put on the map as Lulalla-goon, the native name, the Land Office made it Lily Lagoons, arguing, when I protested, that native names have no significance!” (PFC 124). It is as if something becomes alive or real in the moment when it is named by the white man. This is a means of denying legitimate ownership by the previous inhabitants, denying the very existence of places and people before they have come to be named. Naming is therefore exposed as a controlling mechanism, and together with the production of new myths, is another means employed by white people to claim power over the land and its people.

31 The same practice of renaming is also applied to indigenous people, ‘half-castes' in particular, who are given ‘Christian' names. As Protector McCusky says of Prindy: “we got to get him a proper name. That's our policy now. No blackfeller names” (PFC 248). Indigenous people adapted their names to a “semblance of those used by the masters”. For instance, Nelly is anglicised from Nelyerri (PFC 16).
Herbert critiques this approach to the land, arguing that a true belonging is possible only through an understanding of the myths of the land and a deep connection to the land itself. According to Jeremy, Australians do not belong to the country they stole, because they have destroyed the previous inhabitants and have tried to annihilate their traditions and myths. They have superimposed their western vision on a land that cannot be understood in those terms. The theft of the land has to be acknowledged, the ‘myth’ of *terra nullius* exposed,\(^{32}\) and Australia has to come to terms with it to redeem itself as a nation:

In terms of history, we stole this land we’ve been so quick to call our own, stole it with murder and mayhem and about the lowest forms of meanness a human being could stoop to…and we have to reconcile the matter someday, either by acknowledging the fact that we’re bloody-handed thieves and being proud of it, or giving it back what we stole, and not as an act of charity, but of downright humility (*PFC* 30).

It is this awareness of the theft of the land from which arises the deep sense of alienation in the Australian nation. The colonists do not have their own myths and are expected to live with those imported from a land that does not correspond to the one in which they now live:

unless you accept the beliefs as part of the land, you can’t live happily in it. […] You have your King Arthur and Merlin and the Druid and such things…the Germans their Siegfried…everybody’s got something mythical, semi-historical even, like your William the Conqueror, that makes them one with their environment…except us poor damned colonials, who’re supposed to get through on what’s handed down to us from our forebears, when our environment is utterly different (*PFC* 118).

The impossibility of Australians adapting the myths of their forefathers to a land different from the mother country, and the consequent impossibility

\(^{32}\) *Terra nullius* will be analysed in detail in Chapter Four.
of belonging, is clearly spelled out. The importance of myth in the shaping of a nation is underlined very early in the novel, when Jeremy refers to legends and history as ideas that give wonder to a place.\footnote{33} Herbert makes this explicit: “we live in a land the wonder of which, as damned and doomed Colonials, we’ve been unable to see” (PFC 24). The land is full of legends that belong to Aboriginal tradition which should not be considered less important for Australians than those of the Druids for the English (PFC 24). Jeremy seems to suggest that only by accepting Aboriginal legends can Australians truly belong to their “own native land” (PFC 25). Instead, the white men impose their own myths on the land.

The production of knowledge about the land and the people is fundamental to an understanding of the ways in which an Australian legend works as a means to impose a new and alien myth on the land. Thus, the legend of the foundation of the country and the bringing of civilisation can claim the land only by erasing previous myths—and perhaps even people.

The very idea of civilisation and white men as bringers of civilisation is questioned by Herbert who, in telling the history of settlement, refers to the civilisation of the land as the death of its original inhabitants. In Herbert’s rewriting of the foundational myth, the pioneers are not heroic figures but bringers of death. The reversal of the myth of the pioneers constitutes a first tentative deconstruction of the Australian legend.

\footnote{33} As I have pointed out in Chapter One, Vance Palmer stressed the importance of “myth-making” in the creation of a nation (Palmer 1954: 52-3).
It was an old trick of the grand old pioneers, the founders of our glorious young nation, to get rid of their pesky rivals for the land by leaving poisoned food about for them, as for the dingoes (PFC 31).

The arrival of the white man brings destruction: poison in the flour, massacres, venereal diseases, mining, and the ‘rape’ of the country associated with the ‘rape’ of indigenous women.\(^{34}\) Both the land and the people are constructed as primitive: civilisation is the ‘tool’ used by the white man to control and ‘tame’ them.

The first lines of *Capricornia* are a further critique of the settling of the country, and with it the ‘bringing of civilisation’:

> Although the northern part of the Continent of Australia which is called Capricornia was pioneered long after the southern parts, its unofficial early history was even more bloody than that of the others (C 1).

The reference to an unofficial “bloody” history exposes the official history in which the pioneers are “well equipped with lethal weapons and belief in the decency of their purpose as Anglo-Saxon builders of Empire” (C 1). The landscape, discursively constructed as the enemy against which the settlers have to fight to settle the country, is exposed by Herbert, who tells of the resistance of the original inhabitants. The difficulties encountered by the pioneers in settling the land, floods and dry seasons, make the land seem impossible to settle permanently. Hebert writes: “It was beginning to look as though the land itself was hostile to anyone but the carefree nomads to whom the Lord gave it” (C 2). However, they

\(^{34}\) This association of the land with the indigenous women is present also in Prichard’s *Coonardoo* (1929). In the case of Coonardoo, her link to the land is overemphasised and the banishment of the girl from the station brings suffering to the land, reflected in increasing drought (Prichard 1994).
finally succeed in settling the land: “The site of Port Zodiac was a Corroboree Ground of the Larrapuna Tribe, who left the bones of most of their number to manure it” (C 2).35

The association between civilisation and death is made even more explicit: “The civilizing was so complete that the survivors of the original inhabitants numbered seven”, of which five were dying from diseases brought by the white men (C 7). The description of the history of settlement is a retelling of the foundational myth: it is not presented as brave pioneers taming the wilderness and establishing a peaceful settlement, but rather the brutality of the settlement is clearly exposed, with an ironic hint. Due to the violence of settlement, the indigenous people “come to regard white men rather as creatures of legend, or perhaps more rightly as monsters of legend” (C 3). Here the legend is reversed, and the white men instead of ‘founding fathers’ become ‘monsters’. The indigenous tribes try to defend their lands, in a “desperate” war: “They continued to harass the pioneers for months, exercising cunning that increased with their desperation” (C 3).36 The

35 Several settlements were established, all of them at the expense of the tribes that occupied the places and all of them abandoned either during the wet season or the drought. A constant in these settlements is that they were established on the bones of the indigenous tribes: “the first white settlement […] was set up […] on the bones of half the Karrapillua Tribe” (C 1).

36 For Herbert, the connection of Aboriginal people to the land is different from that of other people. Herbert compares it to immigrants who can still have an understanding of themselves and of their culture even when in another land. Other people can ‘carry’ their culture to another place and feel a sense of belonging in a new place. A similar thing is not possible for the Aboriginal people, whose sense of belonging and identity is strictly connected to the land and the place they are from. To remove them from their land is to deny them their culture, their history and their identity. In Herbert’s own words it means to turn them into a “Nothing”. Herbert also points to what he calls a “show of surrender” (1992: 226) enacted by the Aboriginal people to remain close to their place of origin. According to Herbert, the submission of this population has been an apparent one. He believes that when they realised that they could not drive away the white men, they
struggle between the pioneers and the tribes is won by the white men, and here Herbert is clearly using the word “cunning” in an ironic way because it is only from the following lines that we understand who the cunning ones really are. In fact the white men “conceived the idea of making friends with them and giving them several bags of flour spiced with arsenic” (C 3). The lines that follow are a further reference to the “ferocity” of settlement:

Nature is cruel. When dingoes come to a waterhole, the ancient kangaroos, not having teeth or ferocity sharp enough to defend their heritage, must relinquish it or die (C 3).

The association of dingoes with white invaders and kangaroos with Aboriginal people was hinted at in the title of the chapter, “The Coming of the Dingoes” and is clearly spelled out by Herbert who constantly refers to the violence and bloodshed associated with the establishing of settlement. In this reading the white man is presented as violent and aggressive from the start.

The deadly effects of civilisation bring us to a rethinking of its characteristics and a questioning of its validity and rightness. Civilisation is therefore exposed as a discursive construction: the white man defines
decided to appear defeated and resigned in order to achieve what was most important to them: remaining on their land so as not to lose their identity (Herbert 1992: 226-7).

37 The word ‘cunning’ in the OED is defined as: “Now usually in bad sense: Skill employed in a secret or underhand manner, or for purposes of deceit; skilful deceit, craft, artifice”. See OED meaning 5.a. (1989: IV. 129). Herbert clearly uses the word with this meaning.

38 This association is stressed throughout the novel, as for example when Dr Aintee (and the Government that employs him) thinks of the ‘half-castes’ and the indigenous people as: “marsupials being routed by a pack of dingoes; and he understood that his duty was merely to protect them from undue violence during the rout. Most of the dingoes hated him for interfering with their rights as the stronger animals; the marsupials regarded him as a sort of devil-devil, and trembled at mention of his name” (C 238). Dr Aintee is the Protector of the Aborigines in Capricornia (C 232).
who and what is civilised and what is not. Other cultures are defined as uncivilised in order to be subjugated. The difference in the interpretation of acts according to race is spelled out by Herbert in explaining the name of “Treachery Bay”. This name was chosen by the white man who regarded the indigenous tribes as treacherous for defending their land and women, while the white man who killed to take possession of the land was considered to be bringing civilisation. The sarcasm inherent in this opposition is more than evident, and is repeated many times in the novel, where we are presented with the interpretation of an analogous situation from two opposing perspectives depending on the ‘race’ and ‘colour’ of the ‘subject’.

The need to civilise is therefore the need to control, to guarantee power. White Australians are aware that the land does not belong to them and need to construct a discourse—or reuse a discourse that has been used in other places—in order to justify their presence on the land. The bringers of civilisation, the white men, are described as “supermen” (C 4), “masters of mankind” (C 383), and through these epithets their greatness is ridiculed. Herbert’s ironic presentation of white men is already apparent in the early pages, where he addresses them as supermen: “Whitemen, who were, it seemed, not mere riders like the brownmen who used sometimes to come to them from the North, but supermen who had come to stay and rule” (C 4).
The white man appropriates the land through the production of knowledge. As I have already pointed out in my discussion of the landscape, the land is controlled through mapping, naming and the railway. Similarly, knowledge is used to control people, by naming and producing knowledge about the Aboriginal people who are defined as uncivilised and therefore need to be controlled and protected. Knowledge is, according to Foucault (1980), strictly linked to power, and is itself the product of power. In these terms, then, the knowledge produced about the Aboriginal people and the Australian land is a means to control both of them. Foucault (2007) puts forward the idea that a subject is itself ‘constructed’ or ‘produced’ by the body of ‘knowledge’ relating to it: for example the idea of the ‘Aborigine’ is produced by the discourses of anthropology and whiteness, just as for Foucault the idea of ‘madness’ is produced by discourses of psychiatry and medicine. The tendency to analyse the people and the land and to treat them as objects rather than subjects is a means employed by whites to control and possess. The white man is not under scrutiny in the same way, just as his western assumptions are not because he believes himself to be the repository of truth and distributes it through knowledge. The “discourses of truth” thus constructed allow the “exercise” of power “through the production of truth” (Foucault 1980: 93).

The production of knowledge about indigenous people has the function of controlling what can be said about them, thus controlling them. This use of knowledge is clearly expressed in passages of *Capricornia* where Mark
lets the things he had been taught guide his perception of the reality. He is surprised to find that indigenous artefacts are “fine pieces of work”, created by people he had been taught to consider as “extremely low creatures, the very rag-tag of humanity, scarcely more intelligent and handy than apes” (C 16). The validity of these ‘truths’ is questioned through the exposure of the discourses of truth constructed to control the other. Thus, “Mark was trying to excuse himself for seeing beauty in a creature of a type he had been taught to look upon as a travesty of normal humanity” (C 17).

Jeremy is also influenced by the western concept of knowledge and tries to find a scientific explanation for indigenous beliefs. He recognises the healing properties of pipe-clay, for example, but still feels the need to find a scientific explanation for its use: “There’s no doubt about the healing powers of pipe-clay…although the reason beats me. I’ve tried everything to find a scientific answer” (PFC 41). He still recognises its qualities and uses it anyway, but his first reaction to an indigenous belief is to find a logic. Knowledge is understood from a western point of view. This is also very evident when Jeremy decides to intervene in Prindy’s “trial by ordeal” because “They have their own way…but I have mine” (PFC 1441). His ‘education’ prevents him from trusting the magic and his attempt to save Prindy actually becomes the cause of his death. Bobwirridirridi explains that the boomerang Prindy was using to defend himself was a magic one that could not be defeated (PFC 1443): the old man believes in the magic of Tchamala (the Rainbow Snake) without
question, and Jeremy does not. For all his exalting his will to understand and believe in the Aboriginal tradition he is still a white man and his mind is shaped by and contained within a western structure and bound to western ideas. Herbert exposes this distance between the two cultures, a difference that in the death of both Jeremy and Prindy seems unbridgeable.

The construction of non-white races as negative—animal-like, full of vice and lacking morality—has the scope of justifying power. The other is judged by whites and on white standards and is excluded from this production of knowledge. The instruments of ‘observation’—anthropology, ethnology and language—are only available to the observer. The denial of access to education fosters a denial of access to the language which is used as a means of controlling indigenous people. They are not taught English properly—in Foucault’s terms, denying the observed the instruments to return the gaze—which therefore limits their ability to understand and participate in the ‘knowledge’ the white man is constructing about them. The importance of providing indigenous people with those western instruments that would allow them to survive in white society is pointed out several times in Herbert’s novels. In *Capricornia*, the character McRandy argues that indigenous people should be given “the citizenship [...] and education, rights as a human bein’, and the chance to learn this new system of society that’s been dumped down in his country and so far done nothing but wipe him out” (C 327).
A strong critique of the discourse constructed around indigenous people is expressed through the words of Differ who, together with Tim O’Cannon, is the only white character to raise his ‘half-caste’ children (and who is trying to convince Oscar to bring up Norman). Differ blames institutions such as the Compound whose only role is to teach them “humility, the chief subject on the curriculum of the Compound” (C 83). In such a place, the child is condemned to “life-long humiliation. Neither a whiteman nor a black. A drifting nothing” (C 83). Here the idea that the ‘half-caste’ is excluded from both the ‘white’ and the ‘black’ world is stressed. This conversation between Differ and Oscar, who represents the Social Darwinist vision, has as its scope the critique of white discourses. According to Differ, “whitemen won’t teach ‘em anything that might raise ‘em a bit” (C 79). They are kept ignorant of western ways, thus allowing the white man to maintain his superiority and control them. A major example of this is the fact that they are not taught English, a language they were “required to speak but never taught” (C 480), and they are not taught the value of money because they would demand proper pay (C 51).

In the divergent views of these characters Herbert is voicing the contradictions inherent in the white man’s treatment of ‘half-castes’ and indigenous people, exposing white attitudes as a construction, presenting us with the absurdity and shakiness of these assumptions. Herbert suggests that these discourses are used also against other ‘groups’:
All sorts of evil breeds—the sex-mad Hindoos, the voodooing Africans, the cannibals of Oceania, all dirty, diseased, slaving, and enslaving races—are being helped to decent civilized manhood by the thoughtful white people of the world, while we of this country, the richest in the world, just stand by and see our black compatriots wiped out. They’ll be like the Noble Redman someday—noble when gone! (C 80-1).

The irony in these words is explicit. These races are stereotyped and defined through the characteristics attributed to them by the white man. They “are being helped to decent civilized manhood” (C 81), underscoring the notion that anything outside the western idea of civilisation is not human.

Herbert critiques the ‘segregation’ of the ‘half-caste’ in institutions which leads to poor education and therefore no knowledge of the instruments with which to comprehend civilisation. The other is described as dying out, childlike, sub-human. All of these discourses are exposed by Herbert in his novel through the juxtaposition of similar behaviours of both whites and non-whites. Laurie Clancy points to a “double standard of morality exercised by Capricornians when they deal with blacks and whites” (Clancy 1975: 156). Clancy analyses a number of “parallels” in which Herbert critiques the opposite interpretations given to the same kind of behaviour, depending on colour and race. Clancy uses the example of the hospital nurses and the young ‘half-castes’ and the way in which amorous behaviours are considered to be immoral and negative in the case of the ‘half-caste’, but ‘normal’ and not a fault in the nurses (Clancy 1975: 156). Aboriginal people and ‘half-castes’ are believed not to
possess morality which needs to be taught to them: “It was generally believed that they had no moral-sense” (C 238).

The other is constructed as in need of being civilised, including being taught morality, which is then used to justify their segregation. Foucault writes about the use of the term “distribution” of people both spatially, through “enclosure” (Foucault 1991: 141)—institutions like the Compound being a powerful example—or through “partitioning” (Foucault 1991: 143); the separation of ‘categories’ of people—e.g. ‘half-caste’—from each other as a means of establishing control. This is pivotal to an understanding of race relations in Australia as represented in Capricornia and Poor Fellow My Country. The Aborigines, the ‘half-castes’, the Chinese and the Greeks are considered not civilised and they are segregated: the Aborigines and ‘half-castes’ in the Compound, the Greeks and Chinese more through social means, but also spatially because they use a different hospital from the whites. Herbert exposes these constructions and criticises them through his characters. It can be argued that civilisation is itself a construction whose function is to establish rules and behaviours that define who belongs within its parameters. Herbert’s ironic presentation of civilisation is evident in a passage that describes the first time little Nawnim (Norman) sails on the Spirit of the Land39 towards the town of Port Zodiac: “revealing to Nawnim one by one the wonders of Civilization” (C 53). Here Herbert lists and explains these wonders, the first of which is the “automobile”, then the

39 The name of the lugger Mark and Chook buy (C 21).
“buggy”, a “steamer” and so on. It is significant that among these “wonders of Civilization”, Herbert includes the instruments of control: “the Calaboose” (a prison), the hospital and “the Compound, the Nation’s Pride” (C 53-4). The ironic tone is here very explicit. The first two, the prison and the hospital, are identified by Foucault as instruments for the exercise of control and power, the last is, by extension, a place for the control of the ‘half-caste’ and the Aboriginal people—here the control is exercised in a stricter manner because they are not white men. These structures are material expressions of the desire to discipline, to control, and in the case of the Compound, to control the other.

The concept of the ‘panopticon’ is a useful tool for the analysis of these institutions since they functioned as control or surveillance mechanisms for the production of ‘truths’ regarding the Aboriginal people. I turn again to the concept of the ‘panoptic gaze’ and re-examine how Foucault’s use of Bentham’s ‘Panopticon’ gives us a better understanding of the power relationship between Aboriginal people and whites. The observer observes the ‘subject’ without he himself being observed. It is in fact a single-sided relationship and the observed does not have the tools (the instruments) to observe the observer. This resembles the structure of the panopticon, the central tower from which the ‘subject’ who is being ‘disciplined’ may be observed (Foucault 1980: 146-7). The creation of institutions expressly intended for this observation and the creation of specific rules that apply only to the subjects being observed is all part of the desire to exercise power, to discipline. The institutions whose primary
function is to wield power are also addressed in *Poor Fellow My Country*: the compound, the garrison, the hospital, the jail, and the madhouse (*PFC* 245-6; 254). It is significant that these institutions exert the control of power through coercion and the restriction of movement as well as the control of knowledge. People are thus confined, separated and categorised.\(^{40}\)

Religious institutions are also places where ‘half-caste’ and Aboriginal people are segregated. In *Capricornia*, Tocky moves from the Compound to the Hospital and then to the Mission on Flying Fox island run by the Gospelists. Her presence in all of these institutions points to the similarities in their intent. The Mission is ironically called the “Hallelujah Copra Co” because of the profit the missionaries derive from the work of their “converts” (*C* 244). The controlling purpose of the place is suggested by the fact that the indigenous people are kept on the island against their will:

> Converts came of their own accord at first, thinking the station just an ordinary whiteman’s business […]. But when the necessary discipline was brought to bear, most of the converts went bush, and warned their ignorant brethren against the Mission (*C* 245-6).

Thus the need for “the native quarter” to be “enclosed by a high barbed-wire fence” and the absence of canoes on the island (*C* 245). The place resembles a prison and limits their freedom of movement, even though, as Herbert ironically states, it was not the Gospelists’ “wish to keep a

\(^{40}\) The white man’s prerogative to control is extended also to madness, and someone’s insanity depends upon the standards with which you judge them. An example is the case of Bobwirridirridi who is judged insane by western standards but who is not insane by any other standard (*PFC* 253).
prison” but they “hope[d] to get control of all the Aboriginal people in the land” (C 245-6). The missionaries impose knowledge by teaching them “to read and write and think like whitemen” (C 244). Religion is exposed as an instrument of control and they have to learn white ways of life in order to be accepted among “mankind”:

Mr Hollower [… ] was convinced that someday he […] would establish order and win the Aborigines to Him who had created and neglected them so long. […] They must be found an honourable place among mankind and taught salvation (C 248).

Here the role of teaching is again underlined: religion as well as civilisation must be taught.

The imposition of the Christian religion on indigenous people is presented as a way to wield power through the diffusion of religious knowledge. Religion in Capricornia is associated with power and knowledge and is linked to the idea of punishment. Herbert explores the white man’s power to selectively teach what is considered to be right and wrong, together with the threat of punishment by a God who is not a God of love but a God of revenge. Tocky imagines God as “whiter than any whiteman” (C 397). In this instance the attribution of the colour white to God is a clear link of whiteness with reason. Thus, as in Kant’s conception, God is a God of reason. The white man is the repository of reason and the white God is seen as a frightening one by Tocky, more frightening than Mr Hollower and Dr Aintee.41

41 Mr Hollower is the reverend leader of the Gospelist Mission (C 246).
Herbert also associates religion with government and police thus suggesting its institutionalised function:

God, Old God, Mr Holver's Boss, who, Mr Holver let it be known was more terrible than himself, more powerful and vindictive than Government, more savage than police, whiter than any whiteman (C 397).

This quote shows the ‘half-caste’ s fear of all the official institutions and representatives of power, which is influenced further by the treatment received in such institutions and from such authorities. This vision of God is shaped by the teaching received while at the Mission, where the idea of a threatening God who is willing to punish has been instilled in the ‘half-castes’ by the missionaries.

Through Tocky, Herbert reflects on the function of punishment. Tocky believes that capital punishment is only destined for “coloured people”; her “knowledge” coming from images she had seen in the Bible where, only with the exception of the “Cain and Abel Case”, the murderer was always a “coloured-man” (C 383). She is horrified at the prospect that “these Masters of Mankind” are willing to kill a white man for the murder of “humble Chinamen and Greeks” (C 383). The perception that justice is administered in different ways depending on race is stressed again by Tocky after she kills Frank and she considers her situation: “If Government would act like that in respect of a Dago and a Chow, what would it not do in respect of one of the Anointed?” (C 398). Justice, a discourse of whiteness, is interpreted as something which favours the white man. Indeed both religion and justice are used as instruments of control.
Since different parameters of justice are applied according to race, indigenous people cannot even plead guilty or not guilty; the protector or a representative of government institutions has to do that for them. The partiality of justice is very evident in *Poor Fellow My Country* when Mrs Alfie Candlemas, the new teacher at the Compound, is asked to go to court and plead guilty for the accused and when she protests, “what if they’re not guilty”, the Superintendent of the Aboriginal Compound replies: “they wouldn’t be there if they weren’t” (*PFC* 311). In court, after listening to the charges and the way justice is administered, Alfie expresses her resentment: “it’s a travesty of justice” (*PFC* 315). Jeremy makes a similar point, emphasising the doubtful validity of a statement made by a witness with such a “poor grasp of English, the language of the Court” that without an interpreter, the testimony is “a travesty” (*PFC* 261). This underscores the partiality of white justice. The attitude of indigenous people is that of not recognising the authority of a law that does not belong to them and that has not been explained to them. This attitude towards white law is exemplified in the figure of Bobwirridirridi who is said to be “surely showing himself to be the wise one by sleeping through what he experienced several times and still had not the slightest understanding of or respect for” (*PFC* 258).

Justice, and by extension the prison, is a tool used to control Aboriginal people. The treatment of indigenous people is a major theme in both *Capricornia* and *Poor Fellow My Country*, with a harsh critique of all the
institutions for their lack of understanding. Western ways are constructed as the truth and other ways are simply dismissed as inadequate. Indigenous people are portrayed as inferior and their laws and rules as primitive. The need to civilise is expressed through restriction of freedom; most of the Aboriginal characters presented in the novels spend time in institutions. Herbert’s exposition of the discourses constructed around race relations is a central theme in the novels, and institutions such as the Compound play a central role in the perpetuation of such discourses. The Compound is in fact a place for the confinement and observation of ‘half-castes’. Its function is to control them.

Herbert denounces the situation of indigenous people in the Northern Territory through the character Mrs Alfie Candlemas. As she explains, “they had married with the intention of going to some land of poverty, ignorance and disease”, not realising that such a situation existed in their own country; they decided that they did not need to go to Asia: “Our job’s here…right here” (PFC 278). The words “land of poverty, ignorance and disease” seem to refer to Asia but are instead clearly addressing Australia where, according to Alfie, there is still an ‘Aboriginal problem’, even though Aboriginal people were believed to have ‘died out’:

‘I hadn’t any idea of all this.’ She waved a hand in a way to indicate the squalor of the Compound as a whole. ‘Down South we didn’t realize an Aboriginal Problem existed. We thought they’d just about died out, except for a few pockets living happily in reserves in remote places untouched by whites. My Daddy often used to speak of the great wrong we’d done them. I hadn’t any idea we were still doing it…and how!’ (PFC 278).
The Compound is first presented through the eyes of Prindy and his mum, whose first impression is of “a ghostly looking city of whitewashed hovels [...], the place that eventually would swallow them and obliterate them” (PFC 225). The Compound reminds them of a prison, with wire and padlocks on every gate—a connection that is explicitly spelled out by the author: “A prison, it might be thought. But as it was a place of protection, not correction, such a thing could not be said” (PFC 226). The function of the Compound is one of segregation over education. This is consistent with Foucault’s analysis of institutions created to exert power and to observe the inmates.

The Protectors of the Aborigines do not respect the people they are supposed to protect, regarding them in a paternalistic way. This is evident in the attitude of the Chief Protector, Dr Cobbity who is also the Director of Public Health. According to Jeremy, “The Aboriginal Problem’s a Health Problem to him. The Aborigines are a disease, like malaria and leprosy. He was appointed to the job without the slightest knowledge of Aborigines” (PFC 74). Protectors are believed to have too much power over indigenous people, and like other representatives of institutions, have been corrupted by power: “May be all doctors are to some degree like policemen...like priests. Power, eh? They have special power. And as they say: All power corrupts” (PFC 77). The Aboriginal Act\(^{42}\) places all aspects of indigenous people’s life under the control of protectors. For

\(^{42}\) The Aboriginal Act will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.
instance it gives protectors the right to decide whether or not ‘half-castes’
are included in the Act, who they can marry and where they can live:

They were not allowed out of the Aboriginal Compound, or any places
where they were permitted to reside as servants of a household, on any
nights but Saturdays between sunset and sunrise, except in possession of
a pass issued in the name of the Protector (PFC 223).

The protector can also remove children from their country and from their
families.

In Capricornia, institutions such as the Compound are condemned and
the fear of miscegenation is exposed as the reason for the segregation of
‘half-castes’. Officer Furphey, working at the Compound, voices these
concerns and exposes “the mad pride in colour” of the nation as being
responsible for the poor life conditions of indigenous people (C 186).
According to Furphey “the prudes who ruled the Nation […] would rather
wipe out the Aborigines—wipe out a race” than risk miscegenation (C
186). The introduction of assimilation policies is due to the concern about
the increasing ‘part-Aboriginal’ population, believed to constitute a threat
to white society. Dr Cecil Cook, Chief Protector of the Aborigines (1927-
1939) introduced assimilation policies in the Northern Territory which
were aimed at the complete assimilation or ‘whitening’ of the ‘Aboriginal

43 It is interesting to notice that the name of this officer is Furphey, which reminds us of
the name of the writer Joseph Furphy whose surname means “rumour” (Wilkes 1985: 184). It is significant that he brings up the subject of miscegenation.
44 Dr Cecil Cook, (Chief Medical Officer and Chief Protector of Aborigines), seems to
have been the real person behind two fictional characters in Herbert’s work: Dr Aintee in
Capricornia and Dr Cobbity in Poor Fellow My Country (Probyn-Rapsey 2007: 157-160).
The ‘racial cleansing’ intent behind these policies needs to be highlighted. Implicit in the whitening of the Aboriginal race, and the creation of a uniform white race, is the legitimisation of the right of white Australians to the country by effectively removing the previous inhabitants. Thus, Herbert exposes the attempt by white Australians to claim belonging to the land through the assimilation of indigenous people, and the role played in this by the institutions of control.

Andy McRandy gives a clear reference to eugenics theories in *Capricornia*. While his speech works as a way of deconstructing the discourses built by the white man around indigenous people (*C* 324-7), Andy praises their ‘colour’ because of its ability to be ‘diluted’ into white: “The blackfeller aint a Negroid type. His colour's only skin-deep. Three cross-breedin’s and you'll get the colour right out, with never the risk of a throw-back” (*C* 327-8). McRandy addresses the absurd idea of ‘whitening’ the Aborigine by suggesting that Aboriginal people are genetically weak. Herbert seems to share this notion but emphasises that even as the Aborigine is ‘bred out’ his ‘Aboriginality’ remains, and this is the crucial feature of what is seen as the ‘future’ Australian. Herbert’s reference to eugenics theories and to the dilution of Aboriginal blood, whose only valid “diluent” was considered to be white blood, points to the fact that the author was still embedded in the race theories of the period (*C* 55).

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45 The effects of these policies on the indigenous population will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five where I describe the policies adopted in Western Australia by A.O. Neville.
Herbert seems to believe that a sense of belonging to Australia can only be obtained through the acquisition of some of the characteristics of the ‘half-caste’. According to Probyn-Rapsey, Herbert aspires to a ‘breeding in’ of the Aboriginal race—an absorption by white Australians of the characteristics considered good in the Aboriginal people—that would bring them a real belonging to Australia. Herbert’s idea is opposed to that of Dr Cook, who instead aspires to a ‘breeding out’ of the Aboriginal race, through a series of unions between ‘half-caste’ girls and white men in an attempt to ‘breed out the colour’ (Probyn-Rapsey 2007: 168). Probyn-Rapsey quotes Sara Ahmed, who identifies a common basis to both processes: “there are different forms of expulsion, all of which also involve prior acts of incorporation” (quoted in Probyn-Rapsey 2007: 165). They are both an attempt to create a sense of belonging: “both sought to make Aboriginality work for whiteness” (Probyn-Rapsey 2007: 168). In further explaining, Probyn-Rapsey associates the two processes with an attempt at “incorporating Aboriginality (while excluding Aboriginal people)” (Probyn-Rapsey 2007: 169). Herbert seems to be interested in acquiring indigeneity through an appropriation of the characteristics of indigenous people.

The stress on colour presented in the novel is strictly connected to the idea of belonging and the trauma the white man feels from not belonging. As it emerges from Herbert’s work, the person who can really belong is in fact the ‘white Aborigine’, a ‘half-caste’ in whom all the (residual) colour has been ‘bred out’. In the words of McRandy, a policy of assimilation will
produce a ‘new race’ which will have inherited the characteristics considered essential to belonging to Australia, those of the indigenous people—knowledge and understanding of the land—and the white colour believed to be essential to being Australian. This new race would belong to this country and could claim Aboriginality. This idea is further stressed in Poor Fellow My Country where Jeremy believes that Australia could have been a “Creole nation” and “a beautiful breed of people could have been created […] one that would have loved the land because they truly belonged to it” (PFC 110). According to Jeremy, a Creole nation would have been possible if the pioneers had not neglected their offspring: “We’d have been a Creole Nation…of a different type again…unique […] we’d’ve had that uniqueness to contribute to the world, in music, literature, politics…instead of being just lousy copies of the stock we came from” (PFC 53). The failure of the pioneers to do this is considered the starting point, the cause of all contemporary troubles.

Assimilation policies are presented by Herbert as a response to the fear of miscegenation, which is a direct consequence of ‘black velvet’ (the white man’s sexual exploitation of indigenous women). Capricornia deals with this “distasteful subject” (C 82), addressing its suppression through the character Differ who complains about the impossibility of writing about it because, “if you dare write a word on the subject to a paper or a magazine you get your work almost chucked back at you” (C 82). Differ explains that he is not writing about this subject in his book: “I’ve learnt long ago that I’m expected to write about the brave pioneers” (C 82).
Here there is an undeniable parallel with Herbert’s experience. Capricornia is a rewriting of the book Herbert first wrote as ‘Black Velvet,’ which no-one wanted to publish (Herbert 1970: 208-9; Monahan 2003: 24-5). The sexual exploitation of indigenous women was a well known subject, but one that everyone refused to address, especially in a public fashion. Again, the fact that Australia and Australian identity are constructed on the pioneering myth is emphasised, silencing the shameful aspects such as sexual exploitation or violent subjugation. Herbert subverts the presentation of the brave pioneers of the legend in his exposition of ‘black velvet’, through the presentation of it as the main reason for the exploration and settling of the country: “It was actually the black lubras who had pioneered the land, since pursuit of them had drawn explorers into the wilderness and love of them had encouraged settlers to stay” (C 13). The myth of the noble pioneer is therefore subverted. The subject is further explored by McRandy, who considers ‘black velvet’ indispensable: “they say a feller aint been in this country unless he’s tried the Black Velvet. And that’s a fact” (C 314).

The attribution of forbidden sexual characteristics to the ‘indigene’ is analysed by Terry Goldie (1989). The indigene is constructed as being more lascivious and more sexually active, lacking the repressive morality of whites. According to Terry Goldie, the “commodity” of sexuality is a fundamental part of representation of the indigene (Goldie 1989: 64). The white man attributes sexual characteristics to the indigene who is often constructed as sexually attractive and as possessing those ‘qualities’
considered to be ‘forbidden’—but at the same time desired. This attitude is evident in the figure of Norman, who at one point is expected to “come disguised as a Sheik or some such erotic character” (C 283). Norman, on board the ship to Capricornia, is seen by the other (white) passengers as a non-white and is attributed certain characteristics in their discussions about him; he is seen as “Eurasian” and his ‘otherness’ as “something exciting too, suggesting lust—lust in the sun, or before the moon’s hot face, amid the scent of the frangipani and the throb of heathen drums. Oh East is East and West is West” (C 210).  

A reference to different races and how they are perceived by white people is given in the following pages where the people working on the steamer are defined in a decreasing tonality of colour, a presentation culminating with the description of Norman behaving like a white man. The firemen were Indians, “stringy-limbed wildlooking creatures” whose movements while working are compared to “brown ferrets” and “black rats” depending on the task. Then Herbert moves on to another nationality: “The sailors were Malays” who are compared to “brown monkeys” (C 208). This is followed by: “Yellow-brown Norman loved to watch these humble ones and glory in his superiority over them no less than did his pale-faced fellows” (C 208-9). The bitter irony intended by

46 Norman’s boat trip to Capricornia is an interesting exposition of race relations: coming from the south where he spent his youth, Norman, grown up unaware of his colour, is exposed to the implications of the White Australia Policy. In order to purchase a ticket he is asked his nationality, to which he candidly replies: “Why—Australian” (C 206). The clerks let him board, hearing he is the nephew of a beef-baron, and justify themselves mentioning the “White Australia business” (C 207) for which reason he will have to fill in a form before landing. The concern of the ship company is for the other passengers who could be “colour-proud” (C 207).
Herbert is to be found in the words “A whiteman must keep up his dignity” (C 209). This decrease in the tonality of colour from brown to the whiteness of the pale faces and the association of non-white people with animals is significant. Here Herbert is presenting the racial aspect of the discourses of whiteness, emphasising the precariousness of its foundation. Norman believes that he belongs to the ‘superior’ race, having been educated as such. The education he has received and the attitudes of other people compel him to behave in the same way. However, Norman is in the eyes of one of the passengers “a Eurasian. He spoke of the condition as of a disease” (C 210). This remark stresses the constructed nature of the characteristics attributed to the other.

Herbert points to the tropic of Capricorn as the spatial demarcation of racism and notes that once “north of the Capricorn”, Norman is treated badly by white people on shore: “One man addressed him as Nigger” (C 211). The importance attributed to race in Capricornia is stressed by Herbert in the ironic choice of name for the character Saxon Whitely, who is the first to categorise Norman as a “Yeller-feller” (C 211).47 Here the choice of the character’s name clearly points to his race, Saxon, and the race’s main characteristic, whiteness. It is significant that a white person is one the more ‘qualified’ to identify Norman’s race. The point we have made though, and which needs repeating, is that Herbert’s critique of discourses of whiteness is still influenced by the discourse itself: whiteness is still understood as a racial category. Herbert is exposing the

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discourses built to justify whiteness, but he is not yet fully subverting them.

Herbert’s disappointment with Australia is evident in the final chapter of *Poor Fellow My Country* where Aboriginal society is further destroyed. It is a sort of epilogue that shows those locations that have been described as the centre of the cult of the Rainbow Snake, as the centre of the indigenous characters’ link to the land—specifically the painted caves and the snake pool—as having been compromised by mining and by tourism (*PFC* 1453-4). The chance for white Australia to grasp an Aboriginal understanding of the land and to be able to truly belong is then presented by the author as having been lost. Parts of the painted caves have been cut out and put in a museum by Fabian Cootes, the anthropologist, and the traditional value of the caves has been completely ignored by white people.

Herbert critiques the nation’s emphasis on a national identity that does not connect with the land—through indigenous beliefs—but that promotes nationalist means of cohesion such as the threat of an invasion and war. In *Capricornia* Herbert refers to the threat of an Asian invasion, dismantling the fear propaganda of the National Government whereby “a certain Asiatic Power was about to make war on the land” (*C* 213). This is another myth which Herbert exposes through his character McRandy, who recognises it as a construction of politics and magazines aimed at
creating an Australian nation (C 320). In McRandy’s words, Herbert clearly refers to the threat of a Japanese invasion as “the unconscious desire to have this scrap that’ll form our national character” (C 321). Herbert’s references to these constructions and the way they are used prove his awareness of their nature. In Poor Fellow My Country Herbert further dismantles this myth as Jeremy’s hope that a Japanese invasion would strengthen Australia’s resolve remains unrealised when Port Palmeston—Darwin—is abandoned after the bombing (in what Herbert names the ‘Day of Shame’ in the last book) (PFC 1354-5).

In Poor Fellow My Country the critique of the legend acquires a deeper meaning and becomes a harsh critique of the nation itself. Symbols of national identity such as Australia Day and Anzac Day are presented in ridiculous terms—“the Day of the Great Drink Up”; “Holy Boozy Day” (PFC 300). He also critiques the emphasis placed on Anzac Day—“On That Day the Australian Nation was Blooded” (PFC 298)—by Australians as a proof of national identity. Herbert spells out the elevation to the

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48 As pointed out in Chapter One, the idea that a war/invasion would unify Australians as a nation was used also in The Bulletin at the end of the nineteenth century.

49 In the novel Herbert engages in a critique of the typical Australian. A critique of the legend can be located in the choice of characters. The main characters, Jeremy Delacy, Prindy, Bobwirridirridi and Rifkah (a Jewish woman), are not typical Australians. Only Jeremy is Australian and he is considered by other Australians as being different due to his attempt to understand Aboriginal people. Jeremy seems instead to be the ideal Australian that Herbert is trying to promote, someone who is aware of his role in Australia and who tries to change the position and the awareness of other Australians. Herbert also deconstructs two characteristics considered typically Australian: hospitality and the lack of class distinction. The importance of class distinction is spelled out in the behaviour of people towards Lord Vaisey, the owner of most of the local meat industry. Herbert refers to the belief of absence of class distinction in Australia as a “foreign fiction like our hospitality” (PFC 81).

50 The author condemns the denial of citizenship to indigenous people, and the fact that those who fought in the war are recognised as citizens only on Anzac Day: “The day conferred on him not only the status of a hero but also of a full citizen of the land he had fought for” (PFC 300). It is significant that Poor Fellow My Country was published post-
stature of myth of an event that is not strictly connected to Australia but to the Empire, a war started by foreign powers. The sarcasm is implicit in the author’s comment on the term ‘blooded’:

in the huntin’, fishin’, shootin’ tradition, referring to the actual bespattering with a victim creature’s blood of a novice huntsman to mark his first bit of slaughter. But how can it be appropriate to the so-called Tradition of Anzac when it was the victims who were bespattered and the blood their own? (PFC 298).

He ridicules the Australian nation’s belief in the need for a ‘baptism of blood’ in order for it to become a nation. The soldiers died in a war fought for the mother country, not for Australia. The disillusionment with the wars and the failure of the dream of Australia Felix is a major subject in Poor Fellow My Country. Herbert sees the war as a missed opportunity for Australia to finally become independent and criticises the substitution of the American influence for the British. The disappointment of the author is evident in his critique.

Herbert’s novels begin the process of dismantling the legend: the figure of the typical Australian is no longer presented as the absolute expression of Australianness. In this regard, it is the sense of Australianness itself, and by extension, whiteness, that is critiqued. He questions both the myth and the power of reason over the Australian land, a land presented as

referendum and after citizenship had been granted to the indigenous people. This same subject is dealt with several times in the novel and points to the importance of the 1967 referendum. Jeremy criticises the “preoccupation with evils on the other side of the world, when we have enough under our noses…the treatment of the Aborigines, for a start” (PFC 46). Here a denunciation of the treatment of the indigenous people is clearly spelled out: the Aborigine does not need a death certificate nor a birth certificate “because [there is] no real citizenship…actually [he is] not subject to the Law of the Land…unless he breaks it!” (PFC 22).
incomprehensible to a western mind, undermining the stability and foundations of this discourse. Herbert uses the tradition, the myth of the typical Australian—the bushman—to deconstruct the myth itself. This figure as depicted by Herbert seems to be in line with the writings of earlier nationalist authors, but on a closer analysis does not conform to the myth. His characteristics seem to be those of the typical Australian, but each of these characteristics is then subverted and we are presented with characters who are too human or too weak to belong to the myth. It is thus from this critique of the subject within the same framework used to construct it that a deconstruction of the legend, and of the discourse of whiteness implicit in it, is operated.

Herbert is aware of the boundaries of Australian society and understands Australia’s problems but he is still working from within white Australia, from within white racial assumptions. Nevertheless, he presents a more realistic view of Australian society, addressing the relations between Australians and indigenous Australians. It is, however, a patronising presentation from a white perspective, lacking the indigenous people’s point of view, and their characterisation is influenced by the beliefs of the period. Herbert recognises the importance of indigenous people, their culture and knowledge of the land, but he hopes for the white man to become the repository of that kind of knowledge. Herbert does not accept the Aborigine as the true Australian: the typical Australian is still a white male who possesses or tries to acquire a knowledge of the land similar to the one possessed by indigenous Australians.
While critiquing the racial attitudes of the institutions and the policies for the assimilation of indigenous people, Herbert is still influenced by racial theories and his solution to white Australians belonging to the country is through the ‘indigenisation’ of the white man, the acceptance of the indigenous myths about the land and through the creation of a ‘Creole’ nation, the colour of which is significantly white. Thus, the ‘perfect’ Australian for Herbert would be ‘whitened’ indigenous people who can belong because of their knowledge of the landscape and the myths of the land, but who still preserve that fundamental characteristic of the legend, that is, whiteness. Herbert’s understanding of Australian race relations remains influenced by racist thinking and by a belief in the superiority of the white race. He continues to present white knowledge as fundamental but he aspires to a race that possesses both this knowledge and that of the indigenous people. This attitude is paternalistic and this is probably the limit of Herbert’s position. He persists in considering the other as having to learn civilisation, even if he exposes the constructed nature of it. Therefore, Herbert does not really overcome the main discourse of whiteness and his critique of the legend is still informed and trapped within those same discourses that have guaranteed the maintenance of white power in Australia. It is only with Patrick White that the Australian legend and its implicit discourses of whiteness lose the racial characteristics and become a modern category.

51 “Indigenization”, according to Goldie, “suggests the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous” (Goldie 1989: 13).
Chapter Three

Critiquing the Legend: Patrick White and the Metaphysical Encounter with the Legend

The previous chapter examined two of Xavier Herbert’s books as source texts for a critique of the legend of the ‘typical Australian’. I argued that Herbert’s novels exposed some of the discourses which went into the making of the ‘Australian Legend’, a legend constructed to maintain white power, white civilisation and the institutions that confer upon the white man the capacity to analyse others without he himself being subject to any analysis. While Herbert highlights the panoptic role of these institutions, in the end he lacks the critical instruments with which to analyse them to their logical end. Although Herbert exposes theories of eugenics, for instance, he is still influenced by a racial category of whiteness. Even when he reveals the main discourses underlying Australian identity, he still believes in a white subject whose belonging to the country is based on a pragmatic and even distanced utilisation of ‘Aboriginal knowledge’. In other words, Herbert works from within white Australia and even as he critiques racial theories he continues to be influenced by them. In the end he does not subvert the theory of whiteness in which Australian identity is grounded. It should be clear that even as Herbert exposes the discourses that laid the foundations of the
legend and acknowledges the racialised basis of the theory of whiteness, his understanding of the limits of the legend continues to be written in the shadow of race theories: the typical Australian, after all, is still a white man whose manliness and whiteness are celebrated.

In this chapter I will analyse the works of pre-eminent Australian writer, Patrick White, whose role in Australian literature is pivotal. White’s novels present us with a rather different picture, moving the critique a step forward as he confronts the masculinity and whiteness implicit in the legend. I will argue that White’s intention is to interrogate the Australian legend and its implicit support for the discourses of whiteness. I argue further that Patrick White constitutes a transitional figure between a white racist reading of the Australian character and a post-multicultural one. Although White still works from within white Australia, in the absence of a readily available multicultural theory he is rethinking the Australian legend through rather different categories. Central to this rethinking is Patrick White’s critique of post-enlightenment attitudes towards progress, reason and modernity, which were part of the nationalist ethos that enshrined and celebrated whiteness. In other words, since whiteness is symptomatic of the law of reason, it requires an approach which is non-rational, even mystical. In line with Patrick White’s own thinking, I want to use ‘mysticism’¹ rather loosely to suggest alternative, but equally valid,

¹ Patrick White’s use of mysticism is not directly connected to any specific religious mysticism. While as Morley has pointed out specific influences from Judaeo-Christian tradition can be identified (Morley 1972: 2), White’s mysticism overcomes these distinctions and becomes a means used to express aspects of the existence which cannot be explained solely through reason. My use of ‘rationality’ as diametrically
rationalities. Since reason is presumed to be central to whiteness, and manliness part of it, non-rational experiences allow Patrick White to explore dimensions of lived experience silenced by the Australian legend. White’s mysticism is therefore an attempt at deconstructing the Eurocentric values at the core of Australian identity. He exposes the way in which the discourse of whiteness is naturalised into a narrative of the Australian nation and presented in itself as the sign of Australianness, as well as the constructed nature of its ideological groundings. White’s use of mysticism readdresses the value attributed by western society to reason and the superiority of reason. A more spiritual reading of the land is in itself a critique of reason and by implication a critique of whiteness, as the white man is considered to be the repository of reason, the one who ‘brings reason to the darkest parts of the world’.

Patrick White reads Australia and the Australian landscape as external to the law of reason: he is aware of a land that has been inhabited for thousands of years, a land and a people upon which the western idea of reason cannot be superimposed. White’s critique of reason and the defeat of reason by the Australian desert is central to our understanding of how the crucial category of the legend—whiteness—is thought through. The typical Australian who fights against and tames the land is replaced by a rational being whose rationality is defeated by the land. The rational being is inadequate in a land that is recognised and perceived as spiritual. The construction of a nation based on a narrative of progress,

opposed to ‘mysticism’ is adopted to analyse White’s novels and not intended to deny the ‘rational’ aspects of mysticism or of indigenous people’s use of the land.
justice, and bush values undergoes serious exposure. Patrick White’s critique of the legend often operates through a critique of its inherent masculinity and mateship, as many of his characters are women, and some are gay. His choice of these characters is noteworthy, as is his inclusion of characters that are foreign; not Australian. In readdressing the legend and questioning its masculine tenor, Patrick White takes us to a reading of the Australian character and the influence this character had in defining the nation.

Before moving forward with my analysis of White’s work it is necessary to examine the critical reception of his work so as to establish my own departure points. Although his novels are now part of the Australian (and indeed world) literary canon, their historical reception has been controversial, generating both favourable and less favourable reviews. Contrary to the generally held view that Patrick White’s work was initially appreciated only abroad and was given serious critical attention in Australia only after he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1973, the reception of his novels was mixed from the start (Lawson 1973). Australian reviewers initially read White critically for not working in a realist tradition that was in line with Australian literature. The Bulletin’s review of Voss is exemplary here, comparing his writing to a surrealist

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2 Patrick White was also the first author to be awarded the Miles Franklin Award for Voss in 1957. He won it again in 1961 for Riders in the Chariot.

3 For a full discussion of the reviews of White’s novels see Lawson (1973).

4 A perception shared by the author himself who in “The Prodigal Son” (1958) says: “I was determined to prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism. On the whole, the world has been convinced, only here, at the present moment, the dingoes are howling unmercifully” (White 1989: 16).
painting and criticising the characters for not being “convincing”: “they are symbols; pictures; the enlarged shadows of explorers” (Stewart 1958: 2). The Overland reviewer also criticised Voss for its mysticism and ‘religious’ content, arguing that “Australians recognise themselves more readily in the natural drama, the morality play, than in the religious mystery, the parable. […] a rational realism is more characteristic of our way of thinking than is the contemplation of infinite mysteries” (Turner 1958: 37). Katherine Susannah Prichard had a similar view of the novel: “‘Voss’ seems to me anaemic and completely out of tune with an Australian atmosphere and environment” (1958: 14).

Key approaches in the critical bibliography on Patrick White include: focus on the religious/metaphysical, emphasis on style/symbolism, and analysis of his work in an Australian social context. Regarding the religious and metaphysical readings of his work, critics have identified an underlying pattern in White’s novels—the recurrence of specific symbols—based on ‘religious’ and symbolic traditions. Patricia Morley identifies both “Judaeo-Christian” (1972: 2) and Jungian archetypal influences in White’s work, seeing a foundational unity in his novels which encompasses a transcendental vision (Morley 1972: 10). Peter Beatson also sees a “religious pattern” at the foundation of White’s work (Beatson 1977: 2), while Wilkes’ analysis of both The Tree of Man and Voss focuses on the transcendental aspects of the novels (Wilkes 1965; 1967). He sees Stan as “the mute visionary” (1965: 28), who cannot communicate to others what he experiences and who through a number
of “illuminations” achieves “a state of oneness with the created world” reaching “fulfilment […] through transcendence” (1967: 173). Wilkes also observes that the explorer in Voss achieves transcendence not by exercising his will, but when “his spirit is dispersed in the country” (1967: 173). James McAuley reads White’s Voss as a novel which uses the contrast between the bush and the city to expose the “raw visionary heart of man” (1965: 36). The vision is limited, though; according to McAuley, while White uses the structure of Christian myth to achieve his artistic vision, he does not follow it to the end (1965: 44). William Walsh contests this perceived limitation, arguing that White’s novels suggest “a vision of life […] based on a paradox, the coexistence of human malice and human goodness” (1977: 129). Walsh praises White’s achievement in both the use of language and metaphors, saying that the latter “with their mysterious connection with the profounder part of human nature, enrich and complicate the fiction” (1977: 128).

Cynthia Vanden Driesen considers White a “religious novelist”, with the qualification that White’s concern is “with the personal rather than the institutional aspect of religion” (1978: 77). Vanden Driesen also analyses White’s representation of the indigene in Voss, Riders in the Chariot and A Fringe of Leaves. She argues that White subverts the colonial orientalist discourse which presents the indigene as dehumanised (2009: xviii). Similarly, Veronica Brady locates a religious subtext in White’s work (1980), citing White’s awareness of the Aboriginal heritage of the country and the way in which his representation of Aborigines in Voss and A
Fringe of Leaves confronts colonialist stereotypes of the ‘savage’ (Brady 1996). J.J. Healy, in his Literature and the Aborigine in Australia (1978), identifies the ‘Aborigine’ in Patrick White’s work as being “central to an understanding of white Australia” (1978: 204). Healy also sees White as reconstituting moments of first contact between white and Aborigines with a “metaphysical and moral aspect”, an aspect that he identifies as having been lacking in previous descriptions of such meetings (1978: 193).

Michael Cotter argues that White juxtaposes Aboriginal spirituality with western spirituality in order to create “a world in which the dilemmas of both coloniser and colonised may be resolved” (1978: 173). Kay Schaffer has analysed A Fringe of Leaves in the context of writings on lost settler Eliza Fraser, arguing that White is more concerned with issues surrounding “the relationship between England and colonial Australia, the convicts and their masters and the gap between white and Aboriginal Australia”, than with the historical shipwreck (1995: 159).

Other critics have focused on White’s role as a foundational Australian writer. John Docker places White’s work in the Australian literary context, identifying his dualistic thinking as characteristic of a specifically Australian literary tradition (1974: 59). Brian Kiernan examines what he calls White’s “entire oeuvre” with the aim of identifying common characteristics, making a case that the author presents similar issues from different perspectives. Kiernan argues that White creates in his novels “correspondences between the personal and the universal” through “social disasters” and other “traumatic experiences”, bringing the
characters to an understanding of the “nature of life” (1980: 137). His analysis of The Tree of Man points to the development of themes that are presented at the beginning of the novel: “the conflict between the search for permanence and the need to grow and change through experience” (Kiernan 1980: 36). Kiernan also denies a reading of the novel as religious, suggesting rather that the author’s preoccupation with transcendental issues should be considered “poetic” (1980: 37). Kiernan places White’s achievement in a specifically Australian context because his novels “engage in a problematical way with Australian society” (1980: 9). Ross Gibson, in his analysis of the changes in the perceptions of Australia through English literature and subsequently Australian literature in The Diminishing Paradise (1984), includes an analysis of White’s novels Voss and A Fringe of Leaves as a contemporary reflection of previous English literary interest in explorers and Aborigines. He argues that the choice of this historical period (1830-1850) by White is emblematic of his belief in the importance of these years in the formation of an Australian “ethos” (1984: 199).

The relevance of Australian literature’s engagement with the Australian legend is emphasised by one of the reviews of Voss. Ian Turner suggests that Australians do not recognise themselves in the figure of Voss, because he does not possess the qualities of the ‘typical Australian’. Turner argues that the negative reception of the novel in Australia was due to the fact that Voss does not correspond to “how Australians see themselves […]. For Australians, the qualities which conquered the
continent were human skills, hard grafting, and a fair measure of luck. Courage, fellowship and understanding counted far more than the exercise of will” (Turner 1958: 37). Here, White is being criticised for not exalting the Australian legend.

Later criticism, however, has recognised White’s role as an Australian writer. Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra analyse White’s work in some detail in relation to the figure of the explorer and the Australian legend. They argue that Voss is portrayed as an inauthentic explorer: his exploration is not an exploration of the landscape but an internal exploration (1991: 159-60), as it lacks any concrete spatial movement. They conclude that Voss is not “an exception to the generalisation that Australian literature has no major works based on the explorer figure” (1991: 161). In their discussion of the influence of the Australian legend on Australian literature, they hint at the treatment of the legend by White in the construction of some of his characters. While Stan and Voss are considered a “monument to the legend, heroically inadequate”, Norbert Hare and Don Prowse are instead a critique of the legend (Hodge and Mishra 1991: 177). Simon During places the reception of White’s novels and the author’s elevation to the ‘canon’ in a historical context. According to During, his work emerged concurrent with the change in Australian society from a colonial to a postcolonial one. During argues that White criticises not only the Australian legend but also aspects of Australian life in the 50s and 60s, specifically suburbia, and finds it interesting that White could be considered “the great Australian writer as an anti-
Australian” (1996: 11). He sees White as continuing a European movement away from humanism and modernist narratives, rejecting realism and replacing it with the mythic (During 1996: 18). According to During, White “structure[s] his texts through mythical themes” (1996: 27), and he points to White’s use of transcendentalism as a way of connecting Australian literature with Australian history and culture (1996: 19). He identifies in Voss and A Fringe of Leaves examples of the failure of the modernist narrative in Australia (During 1996: 28). Jennifer Rutherford addresses White’s critique of what she calls ‘the Australian Good’, an underlying “fantasy of a good and neighbourly nation” which hides the tendency to aggression towards the other that characterises Australian society, an “aggression to alterity both in the self and other” (2000: 11). While these critics have analysed White’s work in relation to the Australian legend, their analysis of the extent of his critique is limited. My analysis of White’s work, as I have pointed out, identifies a critique of the legend as he silently dismantles other discourses supported by the legend.

While the legend and the role of the white man as the one who possesses reason was unquestioned by the authors of the 1890s, Patrick White exposes the discourses behind the legend and the notion of whiteness. These discourses construct the white man as the one who can produce knowledge. The knowledge he produces is given the value of scientific truth, contributing to the construction of a set of parallel discourses which has guaranteed the perpetration of the discourse of
whiteness. Thus ‘disguised’, whiteness has gone unnoticed, shifting from a racial category to a modern category, the white man becoming the rational subject as he analyses, studies and describes anything he sees as different. Thus, ‘reason’ and ‘civilisation’ become substitute discourses for the discourse of whiteness, which does not disappear, but is submerged and informs the creation and perpetration of these other discourses while its central assumptions and characteristics remain unchallenged.

Warren Montag has referred to a “universalisation” of the white race, a moment in which whiteness becomes a universal category and white is identified with human, thus erasing the distinction between black and white and creating instead a distinction between ‘human’ and ‘animal’ (Montag 1997: 285). If white becomes the norm, then anything different from white is defined as inferior and therefore considered non-human. As Montag explains, “whiteness is deprived of its purely racial character at the moment of its universalisation” (Montag 1997: 285), leading to a consideration of white as the norm and therefore the universal. In the works of Patrick White, whiteness becomes a condition of modernity. Reason above all is posed and presented as the prerogative of the white man. However, the author is aware of the whiteness of his white characters but undercuts their universalist pretensions to reason.

The legend contains all of those discourses—reason, civilisation, historical truth—used to attribute superiority to the white man. White
exposes the constructed nature of such discourses, presenting them as just one side of truth and juxtaposing them with other realities. Thus, White’s critique of reason and of the legend is operated through a dismantling of all those discourses constructed to maintain power. In his works, the rational man is substituted for the typical white Australian and it is his modernity that is emphasised. However, it is evident in White’s novels—in *Voss*, for example—that the law of reason is itself critiqued: the German explorer who wishes to explore, know and map the land is instead overpowered by it. It is a clear defeat of the rational subject by spiritual, ‘irrational’, natural elements.

White’s choice of an explorer as the protagonist in *Voss* makes it explicit that he is critiquing the legacy of the enlightenment. Voss is the incarnation of the rational man of the enlightenment: the modern man who praises reason above all. He represents the Nietzschean will to power, the idea that will can create and modify the surrounding world, and he believes he can conquer the land through his will. As Laura remarks, the expedition “is pure will” and in this instance, Voss clearly explains his belief in the superiority of reason, and the uselessness of the preparations and the material things they carry. He considers the other members of the party a “restraint”: “It would be better […] that I should go barefoot, and alone. I know. But it is useless to try to convey to others the extent of that knowledge” (White 1994: 69). As William Walsh has pointed out in an early study, it is “the pure shape of the will” that guides

5 Further page references to *Voss* (White 1994) are indicated by *V*. 
Voss in his expedition while other characters support the exploration “for reasons of economics or geography or knowledge” (Walsh 1976: 13). Voss believes in the capacity of reason to gain knowledge of the country—in his vision the country is shaped by reason, and does not exist before the rational man starts thinking it. His belief in his ability to imagine the country is equated to the creation of the country itself. The landscape he is about to cross seems to materialise from his own mind: “I do meet scarcely a man here […] who does not suspect he will be unmade by his country. Instead of knowing that he will make it into what he wishes” (V40). Here Voss clearly expresses his attitude as a man of will. Voss represents, according to Kiernan, the “modern man, rootless, no longer believing in God, yet uncertain of his nature and his relationship to the universe” (Kiernan 1980: 51). The exploration of the continent is therefore a “structural metaphor”, and it is this quest for understanding the “modern man’s search for transcendence” that is emphasised (Kiernan 1980: 51).

The expedition is given scientific value or status by the presence of an ornithologist, Palfreyman, among the participants. Explorers were often accompanied by botanists or other scientists. The ornithologist carries boxes containing his specimens, and he continues to collect and classify even when the expedition is lost. Palfreyman was sent by “an English peer” whom he refers to as “His Grace”. His Grace, though, seldom “looked at his possessions […] But to collect, to possess, this was his passion. Until he was tired of all those lifeless objects. Then they were

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6 Leichardt was accompanied by an ornithologist, Gilbert (Vanden Driesen 2009: 32).
quickly swathed and handed to the nation” (V 46). The ‘scientific’ scope of the expedition is here reduced to a mere obsession for rare ‘objects’. Thus, White critiques the scientific importance attributed to the expedition and ridicules the need for collecting ‘exotic’ specimens. This is made explicit when we are presented with those scientific instruments—“sextant, prismatic compasses, barometers, thermometers” (V 44)—which are fundamental to the exploration. The importance of these scientific instruments is underlined by the reverential attitude Judd has towards them, as if they were sacred: “As for the instruments of navigation, the mysticism of figures from which they were inseparable made him yet more worshipful” (V 181). The scientific instruments and what they stand for are presented as powerless in the context of the vast land: “Those flashing instruments with which Voss and Judd professed to be plotting, in opposition to Providence” (V 194), meticulously recording their position even when they appear to be lost. The instruments are useless when confronted with the Australian land, a desert landscape.

Voss is also a critique of the kind of modernism contained in the myth of Australia Felix expressed by Mr Bonner, who is a materialist and who clearly imagines the country as “the country of the future” (V 28), ready for progress and development. “Consider the progress we have made”, says Mr Bonner, “Look at our homes and public edifices. Look at the devotion of our administrators, and the solid achievement of those men who are settling the land” (V 29). Voss, however, dramatically portrays
the defeat of the modern man and all that he stands for—modernity, progress and ‘science’—by the Australian desert.7

Voss’s attitude is such that he positions himself even above scientific instruments. When asked if he has “studied the map”, Voss replies incredulous: “The map? […] I will first make it” (V 23). The idea itself of the map is ridiculed, and the document is hardly recognisable as a map: “Here, indeed, was a map of a kind, presumptuous where it was not a blank” (V 23). Mr Bonner “began to read off his document, to chant almost, to invoke the first recorded names, the fly-spots of human settlement, the legend of rivers. Mr Bonner read the words, but Voss saw the rivers” (V 23). In the eyes and attitude of Mr Bonner, the map is a sacred object even though the ironic reference to human settlements as “fly-spots” points to their insignificance when compared to the vastness of Australia. For Voss though, the land cannot be mapped or named in the western sense of the term, and humans cannot leave a lasting name behind. If Voss were to leave his “name on the land, irrevocably, his mineral body swallowed by what it had named, it would be rather on some desert place, a perfect abstraction” (V 41). Naming, crucial to map-making, is not durable as the land swallows up names. Voss too dies without naming the country—a statue in his honour being the only trace the expedition leaves in the country: “in the immediate landscape, nothing

7 Reviewers of the novel recognised that White was critiquing the narratives of progress that had been promoted in Australia, and rejected his criticism. See for example Turner: “we are still optimists, believing in the perfectability (given a better society and an improved land) of man” (Turner 1958: 37). Turner perpetuates the myth of the harsh country arguing that “we have been too busy battling with a tough country to battle with ourselves” (Turner 1958: 37).
remained of the expedition except a small cairn of stones that marked the grave of Palfreyman" (V 348). Instead of imposing his name on the land, the rational man is absorbed by it. The only one to survive is Judd who, “had been tempered in hell” (V 137). Judd himself seems to have lost his reason; he believes he was there when Voss was killed, even though he was not. Reason is lost in the Australian landscape; reason cannot control and define it. The white man is defeated and dissolves into the irrational landscape. Names do survive on maps, but the people named disappear in the landscape which swallows up names and reduces people to mere ‘abstractions’.

The remains of the expedition are never found: “Even Colonel Hebden had been made to look ridiculous by that most irrational country” (V 421-2). The “irrational country” is a pointed reference to a country which cannot be reduced to western categorisations. The white man’s confrontation with the Australian land exposes a different reality, a reality that cannot be penetrated through reason and, therefore, requires a different mode of understanding. White completely dismantles the rational attitude to the land; for him, the only possible understanding is a ‘mystical’ one. In Voss, mysticism, represented by the possibility of telepathy, is a clear attack on the overly rational nature of western society. The dismantling of the idea of the superiority of reason as the foundation of western philosophy points to reason itself as an ideological construction which justifies white reason and superiority.
Along with a critique of reason and the rational world view, Patrick White exposes the discursive nature of civilisation through a juxtaposition of ‘civilised’ and ‘uncivilised’, as is evident in his attitude towards the Aborigines. White deals with Aboriginal characters in only three novels: *Voss* (1957) and *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), both set in the nineteenth century and based on historical figures, and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), set not long after the Second World War. Patrick White’s choice of a tribe of indigenous people (located on Frazer Island in *A Fringe of Leaves* and completely anonymous in *Voss*), points to his intention not to describe Aboriginal society as it is but as it is perceived through the eyes of white people. White is more interested in exposing the faults inherent in white civilisation than in presenting us with an accurate description of indigenous life. His interest is in writing about white society through the way in which it defines and identifies the ‘other’. Lynette Russell clearly makes this point when, drawing on Foucault, she writes: “As the European invaders wrote of the Aborigines in Australia, they wrote also of

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8 *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves* are considered historical novels because they are based on historical characters and facts. *Voss* is based on the German explorer Leichhardt who attempted to cross the Australian continent in 1848 and who died during this expedition. The character Ellen Roxburgh in *A Fringe of Leaves* is based on Eliza Frazer, who was shipwrecked off the coast of Queensland in 1836 and was taken back into civilisation by an escaped convict. Much has been written on the similarities and differences between the historical events and their portrayal in White’s novels. For further discussions on this subject, see Aurousseau (1958) for *Voss* and Leichhardt, and Davidson (1990) and Shaffer (1998 and 1995) for Eliza Fraser. However, as Patrick White states, he has “taken a historical character or moment, as starting point” (1990: 40). Had he written a novel on the real historical characters, this would have lacked “the psychological complexities, the sensibility, and the passion I was able to explore” (White 1990: 40). For this reason the similarities of the novels with historical facts are not analysed here.


10 In *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves*, Aboriginal characters are described from a white perspective. This positioning of the narrator as an outsider is explicit and the narrator does not speak for them. The only exceptions seem to be the two guides in *Voss*, when they are separated from the white men. We are given an insight into their characters through Dugald, when he explains the meaning of the letters, and Jackie after he kills Voss. White is aware of the limitations of a description of indigenous life from a white point of view.
themselves” (Russell 1998: 52). This idea has its origins in Hegel who argued that the ‘other’ has the function of helping to define the subject: the subject acquires meaning only by juxtaposing himself with what he is not (Hegel 1977: 113).

The discourse of civilisation has been naturalised and needs to be dismantled to show its ideological groundings. The creation of a body of knowledge regarding the ‘savage’ contributes to the creation of a discourse: the other is deprived of his humanity in order to be analysed as a scientific ‘object’. As Foucault argues, it is power that defines the rules of truth and links to it the “specific effects of power” (1980: 132). The ‘other’ defined as ‘savage’ is then analysed by the subject who defines them as such. In A Fringe of Leaves, Ellen Roxburgh’s impression of indigenous society is presented as the stereotypical European one; indigenous people are described as ‘primitive’ and their only concerns seem to be satisfying the most basic instincts (White 1997: 246-268).11 This first impression is influenced by her belief in the inferiority of the ‘savages’, a belief dictated by her western knowledge, which defines the ‘other’ either as ‘innocent’ or ‘unenlightened’. It is not uncommon to read statements in the novel such as: they are “starving and ignorant savages” (F 272), “innocent savages” (F 271) and even Roxburgh reduced “to the level of bestiality” (F 267). There remains the white man’s fear of losing civilisation through contact with people believed to belong to the uncivilised world. The question A Fringe of Leaves seems to address is:

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11 Further page references to A Fringe of Leaves (White 1997) are indicated by F.
“Was civilization something innate, a whiteness that would not wash away; or could a European, in a savage environment, revert to a primitive state?” (Gray 2003: 35). The possibility of losing civilisation, of being corrupted by the uncivilised ways of the country, points to an unease about the constructed nature of civilisation which, it is agreed, does not exist as a separate entity. White is presenting the limits of civilisation, exposing it as a discourse, something which comes into existence because it is defined as such. As Veronica Brady argues, “for White there is little difference between ‘civilisation’ and ‘savagery’” (1983: 62).

White’s attempt at deconstructing civilisation is evident throughout Ellen’s presence among the Aborigines. She is often reminded of similarities between their ‘primitive’ life and her past ‘civilised’ one. A critique of her civilised ways is explicit in her recollection of how these had been imposed on her by her mother-in-law and her husband in an attempt to make a lady of her. Significantly, during her time in the bush she seems to return to the language and the name she used before her marriage and her acceptance into high society—“it was the spirit of Ellen Gluyas coming to Mrs Roxburgh’s rescue” (F 263). Patrick White disrupts the binary opposition between ‘civilised’ and ‘savage’, showing the points of intersection between the two. This is spelled out in a passage where

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12 Patrick White also critiques civilisation in the reversal of the role of the ‘slave’. In Voss the usual presentation of the white man as the master and the other as the slave is maintained, with Jackie being the slave, while in A Fringe of Leaves this relationship is reversed and Ellen is reduced to a slave by the Aborigines, being referred to as the “laden donkey” (F 261).

13 Ellen Gluyas is from Cornwall and has grown up on a farm. On marrying Austin Roxburgh she is taught by her husband and mother-in-law to dress, behave and talk like a ‘lady’. As Vanden Driesen points out, Ellen is considered a “British ‘savage’” (2009: 102) by the society in Sydney because she is from Cornwall, “a remote country […] of dark people” (quoted in Vanden Driesen 2009: 102).
Ellen compares the women sitting before the corroboree to a drawing-room: “to have started screaming in a drawing-room would not have been worse than to return by the way she had come, between the rows of correctly seated black women” (F 282). In the passing description of black women being “correctly seated” we get precisely the collapsing of the civilised/savage categories since the juxtaposition of civilised and savage ways of life exposes the limits of this distinction. Patrick White subverts this categorisation through the changed perception of Ellen Roxburgh who acquires an understanding of Aboriginal life, and an appreciation of what she still perceives as primitive because she is unable to completely free herself of her preconceived ideas.

Nothing is more extreme in the civilisation-savage divide than cannibalism. It is Patrick White’s use of cannibalism that pushes the validity of the distinction between savagery and civilisation. A crucial point in Mrs Roxburgh’s experience among the Aborigines involves her witnessing and taking part in an act of cannibalism. White describes it as a ritual and uses a language which reminds us of the Eucharistic rite: “something akin to the atmosphere surrounding communicants coming out of Church” (F 271). The ritual nature of cannibalism in the case of the Aborigines—only the family of the girl was allowed to participate—is juxtaposed with Ellen’s participation and collapses all other non-ritualistic references to cannibalism in the novel which involve white people.
Sacrament and hunger come together as Ellen participates in the ceremony:\(^\text{14}\)

She had raised the bone, and was tearing at it with her teeth, spasmodically chewing, swallowing by great gulps which her throat threatened to return. But did not. […] The exquisite innocence of this forest morning […] tempted her to believe that she had partaken of a sacrament (F 272).

Cannibalism symbolises aspects of the self which have been repressed but which come back as dark symptoms of a civilised society. These dark parts are traditionally attributed to the other, but in this case White shows that they are present in everyone, even in people considered to be civilised. While cannibalism is seen through Ellen’s eyes as innocent when perpetrated by the Aborigines, it is invested with negative meanings when the perpetrators are white and for whom the motivation is hunger alone. There are various references in the novel to cannibalism associated with whites. In fact the other shipwreck survivor, Mr Pilcher, admits about his companions: “Some of them was eaten” (F 377).

Cannibalism can be read on a different level, as a rite that brings the initiate into connection with the land (a sort of belonging to the country). It could nourish “not only her [Ellen’s] animal body but some darker need of the hungry spirit” (F 274). A similar episode occurs in Voss when, not long before his execution, Voss is offered a witchetty grab, a gesture which reminds him of his first communion, suggested also by the solemnity of the manner in which it was offered:

\(^{14}\) Kay Schaffer discusses Terry Goldie’s analysis of cannibalism as an attempt at an “assimilation of Aboriginal culture into the West” through Ellen’s participation (1995: 170).
Once, in the presence of a congregation, the old blackfellow, the guardian, or familiar, put into the white man’s mouth a whole witchetty grub. The solemnity of his act was immense. The white man was conscious of that pinch of soft, white flesh [...]. He mumbled it on his tongue for a while before attempting to swallow it, and at once the soft thing became the struggling wafer of his boyhood, that absorbed the unworthiness of his hot mouth, and would not go down [...] He did, however, swallow the grub in time (V 388).

Voss and Mrs Roxburgh show similar reactions: they both are on the point of not swallowing, but they eventually do. The use of the same religious analogy in both cases suggests that, in *A Fringe of Leaves*, the stress is not on cannibalism itself but on the meaning of this ‘ritual’ which connects the white participants to a part of themselves which has been repressed by the impositions of civilisation. As Goldie underlines, through this act “Ellen not only participates in Aboriginal life, she partakes of the Aborigine” and acquires some of the skills of the dead indigenous woman (Goldie 1989: 205). After participating in the act of cannibalism, Mrs Roxburgh gains a deeper understanding and can connect with her inner instinctive self, thus becoming aware of a different truth.

Ellen’s return from the “savage domain [...] with a new definition of good and evil” (Brady 1983: 67) reminds us that “the production of truth” is influenced by power and it is variable (Foucault 1980: 93). Indigenous society is represented rather differently by White as he does not perpetuate “the racist stereotype” regarding Aboriginal life, which needs to be analysed in conjunction with “the description of the cruelties of white society” (Brady 1983: 63). This is made explicit when Ellen returns to civilisation and is faced with a kind of society that now seems to her eyes
more brutal than that of the Aborigines. Just before re-entering civilisation, Ellen realises that she has “escaped from one hell into what might prove a worse” (F 332). Mrs Roxburgh’s life amongst the indigenous tribe has changed her perceptions of civilised life and she can finally understand the barbarity, violence and savagery present in the society she has learned to consider civilised. This understanding comes to her through the suffering recollected by the convict Jack Chance (F 309),\textsuperscript{15} a ‘proof’ of the brutality of the convict system and by extension of the white society which supports it. The association of civilisation with a prison—“the prison to which she had been sentenced, a lifer from birth” (F 359)—suggests a critique of the restrictions of civilised life: “Had the walls but opened at a certain moment, she might have turned and run back into the bush, choosing the known perils, and nakedness rather than an alternative of shame disguised” (F 392).

Patrick White returns to the myth of the ‘wild white man’, a myth that had previously found expression in much European literature (Gray 2003: 35). This myth represents the desire of the white man to claim indigeneity, to truly belong to the land. The concept of ‘going native’, was one aspect of this claim. According to Stephen Gray the idea “reflect[s] European fears, not that we may easily revert to the ‘savage’, but that in the process of becoming civilised we have lost something noble, some essential connectedness with the land” (2003: 35). This fear is voiced by White in the whole episode of Ellen’s life among the Aborigines. It is most evident

\textsuperscript{15} Patrick White’s critique of the convict system and the atrocities of Moreton Bay, already hinted at in Voss, are here made explicit. He clearly exposes the brutality of the treatment of the convicts and their punishment (F 387).
when on being asked to climb a tree, she feels she has lost the skills she possessed as a young girl in Cornwall, attributing this loss to her introduction into society and her having to acquire the “habits and advantages of refinement” (F 253): “Her spirit had taken refuge in stays, petticoats […] all the impediments of refinement […]. Her actual blackened skin, her nakedness beyond the fringe of leaves, were of no help to her; she was again white and useless, a civilized lady” (F 263). Here her civilised ways are pointed out, not as advantages but as impediments to her life amongst the tribe.

Patrick White’s suggestion of the possibility of white indigeneity is, however, different from the way in which the subject was treated in Australian literature before him (one recalls Herbert here). Indigenisation, argues Goldie, leads to a character gaining:

a new awareness of self and of nationality through an excursion into the wilderness. […] The character plunges into the natural and in some association with the indigenes partly removes the civilization which is seen to be inimical to his or her indigenization (1989: 46-7).

The white indigenised can be identified in the figures of the escaped convict Jack Chance,¹⁶ who rescues Ellen, and even Ellen Roxburgh herself. They become ‘indigenous’ in the sense of gaining an understanding and belonging to the land, but they lose a sense of belonging to white society without completely gaining a sense of belonging to the Aboriginal one. Ellen has gained an understanding of the possibility of another reality which is excluded by civilisation, but she

¹⁶ Judd, the convict character in Voss, can also be seen as an example of the white man ‘going native’.
chooses civilisation over savage life, because she is not completely indigenised. Jack, on the other hand, chooses the bush and life with the Aborigines. Jack has experienced the worst aspects of white civilisation and would rather face life in the bush, but in ways that are very different from the bushman of the Australian legend.

Emblematic in White’s critique of civilisation is the importance attributed to clothing as a marker of civilisation. A significant scene in this regard is the first encounter of Mrs Roxburgh with the Aboriginal women on the beach after the shipwreck. Her clothes and jewellery are removed by the women, every item causing expressions of surprise: “they run from her trailing the ultimate shreds of her modesty” (F 244). Mrs Roxburgh is detached from civilisation and the undressing seems to be a ritual performed by the Aboriginal women that allows her to enter their world, to live among them (F 244-5).17 After the women’s removal of her corset, which represents the ‘constrictions’ of civilised life, “she was finally unhooked […] entirely liberated” (F 244). This ritual of undressing is followed by one of dressing to make her similar to the other women: she is “smeared” with fat, an action referred to as “her anointing” and charcoal is “rubbed with evident disgust, if not spite, into the shamefully white skin” (F 251). In this instance it is the white skin that equals nakedness. The act of dressing assumes a different meaning and in order to enter indigenous society, Ellen’s dressing ritual necessitates an undressing. The point is that even though the rules which regulate different societies

17 The clumsiness of the clothes she wears in her ‘new’ environment is made explicit: “her heavy skirt dragged behind her, ploughing a track through the sand such as the tail of some giant lizard might leave” (F 219).
are sometimes opposed, they are nevertheless governed by the same principle, which is the need to conform to codes of behaviour. The importance of clothing is stressed again upon her return to white civilisation and it is significant that at that moment she is not even wearing her fringe of leaves.\(^{18}\) She is about to “re-enter what is commonly referred to as civilisation almost as naked as a newborn child [and] she had lost the vine she had been wearing as a gesture to propriety; worse by far was the loss of the wedding-ring” (F 330). The first word Ellen hears on her return to civilisation is “Naked?” (F 334). Her nakedness, like a new-born child, however, is not a rebirth. The house and the sound of shoes symbolise the passage from nature to ‘constriction’, underlined by feeling of a “weight” under which Ellen “bowed her head” (F 335). The removal of clothes is associated with the loss of moral sense, of ‘modesty’.\(^{19}\) The use of clothing as a metaphor for moral sense underlines the fact that moral sense is something artificial, constructed, and worn by people. Clothes tend to be related to civilisation and they seem to symbolise belonging to civilisation. Their role as mere symbols is the key point here.

This same symbolism between clothes and moral sense is made explicit in Voss where Dugald’s removal of his coat leads to a connection made between clothes and conscience: “If the coat was no longer essential, 

\(^{18}\) After the women strip her of her clothes, Mrs Roxburgh’s first impulse “less from reason than by instinct” is to cover herself with some vines behind which she hides her wedding ring: the “fringe hanging from the vine allowed her to feel to some extent clothed” (F 245).

\(^{19}\) The removal of clothing as a loss of innocence is present also in the novel Picnic at Hanging Rock, where the girls’ removal of their gloves, stockings and shoes signify a gradual loss of innocence as they enter the mysterious bush (Lindsay 1975: 37).
then how much less was the conscience he had worn in the days of the whites?” (V 219). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘conscience’ as: “Consciousness of right and wrong; moral sense”.20 The ability to distinguish right from wrong is attributed to the white man and it is compared to the white man’s clothes—something you can either wear or strip off.21 The fact that Dugald can remove his morality just as he can the white man’s clothes points to the constructed characteristics of the moral sense. Morality is considered a universal category by the white man but is meaningless to the Aborigines who have their own moral sense/code, one that is different from the white man’s, but just as valuable. The Aborigine thus enters the discourses of the white Australian legend and his presence begins to offer alternative readings of it.

The imposition of discourses of whiteness on the Aborigines is also evident in the role language plays as an instrument of domination. Patrick White’s preoccupation with the limits of communication and the effects they have on understanding therefore requires critical commentary. Communication is a means through which power is exercised and “techniques of communication” are considered by Foucault to be a way of conveying “forms of power relation” (Foucault 1993: 106). This point is spelled out in *Voss* through the explorer’s intention to communicate in order to rule. When the party meets a group of Aborigines, Voss

21 Thoughts as well are considered to be a prerogative of the white man and a point made after Jackie had regained his innocence with the Aborigines: “Subtle thoughts that he had learnt to think, thoughts that were other men’s, had made it [his head] too heavy” (V 364).
approaches them determined to know what the man who he identifies as a poet is singing.

Voss rode across, sustained by a belief that he must communicate intuitively with these black subjects, and finally rule them with a sympathy that was above words. In his limpid state of mind, he had no doubt that the meaning of the song would be revealed, and provide the key to all further negotiations. [...] When the rejected sovereign returned, still smiling generously, and said: 'It is curious that primitive man cannot sense the sympathy emanating from relaxed muscles and a loving heart', his followers did not laugh (V 334-5).

The reference to Aborigines as “subjects” and Voss as the “rejected sovereign” emphasises the paternalistic attitude of the explorer. Communication therefore, on western terms, is a privileged discourse and a discourse of power, but not necessarily the only mode of communicating. There are other languages which are equally valid and these rely not on writing, but on sign language, storytelling and paintings.22 In the first encounter of the explorer with his two Aboriginal guides, Voss is described as a “victim” of his western heritage:

In other circumstances, Voss would have liked to talk to these creatures. Alone, he and the blacks would have communicated with one another by skin and silence, just as dust is not impenetrable and the message of sticks can be interpreted after hours of intimacy (V 170).

22 Writing, a symbol of civilisation, is also dismantled by the author: the letters Voss sends to Laura are destroyed by Dugald, who interprets them as a means by which the white man frees himself from his worries (V 220). The official journal of the expedition, where Voss meticulously records everything, acquires a mythical status: “He himself would sit with the large notebook upon his knees, recording in exquisite characters and figures, in black ink, the legend” (V 194). The official diary is lost. It is believed to contain the truth, a truth that cannot therefore be grasped. The journal is considered to be an objective proof, while the information that can be obtained by men is unreliable—Dugald, Boyle, Jackie, and even Judd seem to lack the rationality and objectiveness expected to be found in the journal. Writing, the symbol itself of western civilisation, loses its importance in the novel and Voss and Laura communicate on a spiritual level.
A communication based on words—specifically English words—is here exposed as ineffectual. Another important scene which illustrates the role of language is that of the cave paintings in Voss, described by Ross Gibson as the “climax of the ‘language theme’ of the novel” (1984: 223). Voss is here “doubly locked in language” (V 274), as is Jackie who first has to translate from the figurative language of the paintings into his own language and then into English, a language he has never been taught. A similar impossibility of communication is expressed several times in Riders in the Chariot where Alf, the Aboriginal character, cannot communicate what he feels through words. He associates words with the white man, implying in a way the fact that words themselves have a hegemonic role in culture: “In the great library […] all the readers had found what they had been looking for, the black man noticed with envy. But he was not altogether surprised; words had always been the natural weapons of whites. Only he was defenceless” (White 1964: 342). 23 This impossibility of communicating through words is confirmed by the European outsider, Himmelfarb: “For words are the tools of reason” (R 149).

White advances the possibility of a communication which goes beyond language, a communication which has the same ‘non-rational’ characteristic of the ‘telepathic’ communication between Voss and Laura. In fact this kind of communication is not comparable to the ‘standard’ exchange of words between human beings, but to the understanding that

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23 Further page references to Riders in the Chariot (White 1964) are indicated as R.
is established between humans and nature, a kind of communication that implies a deeper, non-rational relationship with the land. According to During, Voss’s desire to communicate with the Aborigines “as if he were communing with nature” is the expression of his desire to “engage in a ‘deeper’ mode of communication than it is possible in conversation with other whites. Like the landscape, the Aborigines represent a glimpse of that primordial, non-human order for which Voss is searching” (During 1996: 31). However, White’s intention is not to represent the Aborigines as ‘primitive’ but as ‘outsiders’, free from the law of reason, which is a white man’s construction anyway. White reads Aborigines as being closer to a ‘mystical’ knowledge. This communication between humans and nature is also described in Riders in the Chariot when Miss Hare ‘immerses’ herself in the scrub and her own thoughts become one with the surrounding elements of the bush:

kneeling in a tunnel of twigs [...] speckled and dappled, like any wild thing native to the place, she was examining her surroundings for detail of interest. Almost all were, because alive, changing, growing, personal, like her own thoughts, which intermingled, flapping and flashing, with the leaves, or lay straight and stiff as sticks, or emerged with the painful stench of any crushed ant” (R 15).

This ‘osmotic’ exchange between nature and humans is juxtaposed with the western mode of communication which cannot dispense with its inherent power relations.

In Voss the discourses used by white civilisation against the Aborigines are addressed through the white characters of the novel. The white man’s belief in the ‘goodness’ of his actions is voiced by Boyle: “Mr Voss go far
places [...] find new country, do good all of us, black and white feller” (V 170). These words express the presumption of the white man who thinks he knows what is good and who decides what is right or wrong. Voss feels the importance of the undertaking vested in him and expects the Aborigines to be aware of the magnitude of the undertaking. His institutional function as explorer and his desire to be kind to these subjects are not uncommon functions of the white explorer. Rephrasing Foucault, we can say that the Aborigines are part of those “myriad of bodies which are constituted as peripheral subjects as a result of the effects of power” (Foucault 1980: 98). The inclusion of indigenous people in the English law as subjects of the crown is a pre-given for all explorers, because the law has been imposed on them with the claiming of Australia as English soil. Part of Voss’s understanding as he enters the vast empty land is the awareness that the indigenous people have not accepted becoming subjects and they continue to see the white man as an intruder.

These issues are spelled out by the behaviour of the two guides, those the explorer considers his “subjects”, who “jogged along, a little to one side of Voss, as if the subjects of his new kingdom preferred to keep their distance. They could even have been rejecting him” (V 191). Here the narrator’s intention is clearly ironic and the explorer’s role is ridiculed: these subjects do not recognise his authority. In the first encounter with Aborigines the explorer is ignored, thus diminishing the aura of importance that surrounds him:
The strange natives looked at the white man [...]. The explorer would have liked to talk to these individuals, to have shown them suitable kindness, and to have received their homage. But they disappeared. Once or twice he called to his escorts, who had decided, apparently, not to hear (V 191).

White refers to the Aborigines as subjects several times in the novel: “the subjects of his new kingdom” (V 191), “these subjects of his kingdom” (V 273). This attempt by the ‘great explorer’ to institutionalise them clearly contrasts with the description of their attitude towards the expedition, which they tolerate, but watch closely as it makes its way through the country.

The great divide between the indigenous man and the white man is illustrated by the ‘flour’ incident, where the party meets a group of Aborigines who still live outside white society. Voss approaches one of them, offering his hand “in friendship” (V 205). The fact that after having examined the hand it is dropped is interpreted by Voss as a sign that “they are at that stage when they can only appreciate material things” (V 205), a clear reference to the ideas of Social Darwinism which placed indigenous people on a lower rung of the evolutionary ladder. However, the assumption made by the man of reason is disproved straight away by a similar reaction to the present of a bag of flour, whose “virtues” are “unwillingly” explained by Dugald. The material gift of flour is treated in exactly the same way as the hand of friendship, being discarded: “they

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24 The importance of flour in the relationship between Aborigines and explorers is fundamental. As I pointed out earlier while analysing Herbert’s *Capricornia*, flour was often given as a present to the Aborigines, and in some cases it contained arsenic. Here it is presented at an earlier stage when the Aborigines’ way of life has not yet been compromised and they do not depend on flour as the white man does: they are still safe from any possibility of poisoning.
were all laughing then, and running through a rain of flour, after which they trailed the empty bag” (V 206). The narrator’s reference to Voss as “the benefactor” (V 206) is clearly ironic and this first encounter establishes the impossibility of understanding the other based upon the preconceived ideas held by the rational man.

A further reference to the gesture of ‘giving presents’ to ‘savages’, one typical of the explorers’ tradition, can be identified at the moment that Voss meets his two guides, Jackie and Dugald. On this occasion Voss gives a button to Dugald, a present that is received without interest. The act of giving as useless an object as a button is ridiculed by Boyle, who seems to be the more down to earth character: “Plenty valuable button. You take good care” (V 171). This observation forces the reader to consider the symbolic meaning of the whole scene. The reaction of the young Jackie is described according to the stereotype of the ‘savage’: “The youth […] had been brought to animal life. Lights shone in his skin, and his throat was rippling with language. He was giggling and gulping. He could have eaten the brass button” (V 170-1). Jackie is given a knife—the same he will use to ‘sacrifice’ the explorer (V 394). In this scene the institutional role of the explorer is emphasised and Voss is already described as a statue: “Voss, too, was translated. The numerous creases in his black trousers appeared to have been sculptured for

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25 During his first voyage to Australia, Captain Cook commented on the happiness of the inhabitants of this land who gave no value to material objects: “they seem’d to set no Value upon any thing we gave them, nor would they ever part with any thing of their own for any one article we could offer them” (Cook 1968: 399).

26 In a Fringe of Leaves a similar circumstance is presented when “the monkey-women snatched” (F 243) the rings from Ellen’s hand. Here both the adjective and the verb used point to an identification of the women with the animal.
eternity” (V 171). The description of the other as animal-like and innocent is a means to delimit the idea of ‘humanity’, a category constructed by the white man who defines the parameters of inclusion or exclusion. As Sara Ahmed argues: “If to be human is to be white, then to be not white is to inhabit the negative: it is to be ‘not’” (2007: 161). The other is defined negatively through what he is not. At the same time the subject understands himself through a differentiation with the other who is given animal characteristics. If the other is not human, then the white man can recognise himself as human. This is one version of the politics of recognition which White briefly exposes.

White exposes and subverts the concept of humanity as a constructed category in Voss by attributing animal characteristics to the two indigenous guides and human characteristics to animals: “They listened with that same politeness with which they received intelligence in any shape or form” (V 170). The goats, part of the livestock that accompanies the expedition, are described along similar lines: they “were staring up, their lips smiling, looking right into the faces of the men, even into their souls beyond, but with expressions of politeness” (V 173). Here the goats are anthropomorphised, “their lips smiling” and are attributed human characteristics: “the goatmind” (V 173). In a further delimitation of the category ‘human’, the association between western civilisation and human is spelled out by the use of ‘European’ as a synonym of ‘human’: “In the presence of Brendan Boyle, the German was the victim of his

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27 For a detailed analysis of the role of ‘humanism’ in western discourses about the other see Anderson (2007).
European, or even his human inheritance (V 170). White questions the legitimacy of the discourses constructed around Aborigines—and specifically the presumed inferiority of their race—by subverting the Manichean opposition between ‘human’ and ‘animal’, ‘civilised’ and ‘savage’. He offers a third possibility: a ‘mystical’ understanding which is placed outside the constraints of western categories and which constitutes an implicit critique of rationalism and civilisation.  

White clearly expresses the significance of an alternative mystical ‘truth’ in Voss by presenting a reading of the entire novel in its closing chapters and explaining the mystical temper that has characterised the core of the novel. It is given a deeper meaning and is clearly presented as a superior alternative to rational knowledge:

I am uncomfortably aware of the very little I have seen and experienced of things in general, and of our country in particular [...] but the little I have seen is less, I like to feel, than what I know. Knowledge was never a matter of geography. Quite the reverse, it overflows all maps that exist. Perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind (V 446).

This statement from Laura exemplifies the conception of a knowledge unrelated to rationalism: it is not a knowledge in the sense of the modern, which brings a scientific description and physical qualities to the country (geography). Rather it is suggested that a knowledge of the Australian land is only possible through mysticism. The defeat of the men who go in search of Voss’s lost expedition confirms the impossibility of an

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28 This is evident also in Riders in the Chariot where the four illuminati are excluded from both ‘civilisation’ and ‘savagery’; they in fact constitute a third, separate group.
exploration which presumes a rationalisation of the land. It is only through a more spiritual understanding of it that possession of the land can be achieved. White renegotiates the sense of belonging to the land through non-rational qualities and in doing so poses a challenge to the masculine-nationalist bias of the Australian legend and its heroic presuppositions.

Beyond all this, White also questions the concept of absolute truth, believed to be a crux of modernism. As an explorer, Voss is supposed to produce modernist truth through his scientific measurements, maps and naming, but as his expedition proceeds he finds himself drawn more towards a mystical truth, even losing his scientific equipment along the way. Through the figure of Voss we see the decline and failure of the grand modernist project of defining and thus possessing the world. However, in death Voss becomes a figure of acclaim: “Johann Ulrich Voss was by now quite safe, it appeared. He was hung with garlands of rarest newspaper prose. They would write about him in the history books” (V 440). Through a conversation between the opposing figures of Colonel Hebden and Laura, White demonstrates that he does not buy this version of empirical history because the mere presence of men means that lies will always shadow history.

‘Mr Voss is already History’
‘But history is not acceptable until it is sifted for the truth. Sometimes this can never be reached’ […]
‘It is all lies. While there are men, there will always be lies. I do not know the truth about myself, unless I sometimes dream it’ (V 413).
Truth is constructed according to need and perspectives. As Laura points out, “all truths are particoloured” (V 444). White’s preoccupation with the relativity of truth is reinforced in a similar observation in A Fringe of Leaves: “the truth is often many-sided, and difficult to see from every angle” (F 378). Captain Lovell is aware of these different truths: “it’s by hearing different versions of the same incident that we arrive at the truth, Mrs Roxburgh, in any court” (F 362). Captain Lovell is, like Colonel Hebden, troubled by the impossibility of arriving at a definite truth: “It is difficult to arrive at the truth either in the account offered by Mrs Roxburgh, or that of Pilcher” (F 396). This reminds us of the same questions about truth posed by Colonel Hebden in Voss and the fact that truth cannot be grasped, because he cannot rely on the accounts of Judd and Laura. It is significant that the ones ‘obsessed’ by truth are institutional figures, which underscores the institutionalised function attributed to truth by power. As Foucault argues: “Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements” (Foucault 1980: 131). This concept of the relativity of truth is emphasised in Voss through the juxtaposition of scientific rational truth with mystic truth and similarly white men’s truth with indigenous truth: “standards of truth of course vary” (V 169).

In the aftermath of Voss’s death we are presented with these different truths: for the Aborigines, Voss is still in the land, as he is for Laura:
“Voss did not die […] He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be. His legend will be written down, eventually, by those who have been troubled by it” (V 448). The incredulity of the rational man is played in this case by the Englishman Mr Ludlow who argues: “If we are not certain of the facts, how is it possible to give the answers?” to which again Laura’s reply is enigmatic “the air will tell us” (V 449). Voss has accomplished the white man’s desire for knowledge even through failure: he has been raised to the level of myth, his death has become an historical occasion. The obscure circumstances of his death, however, leave a sense of uneasiness, especially for the Colonel who has failed to understand the meaning of the expedition and who is puzzled by Laura’s satisfaction with it. White continually emphasises the difference between Laura, who has an understanding of the fate of the expedition because she knows through ways not recognised by rationalism, and the Colonel, who is described as “still hungry for the truth” (V 447). The battle between rationalism and mysticism is played out through the characters of Laura and the Colonel and their different conceptions of truth. It is in a sense the triumph of mysticism over reason, but it is also a metaphysical retelling of the Australian legend itself. To reprise Laura’s decisive statement: “his legend will be written down, eventually, by those who have been troubled by it” (V 448).

Patrick White’s critique of the legend (and also of modernism) is seen in his use of landscape. By rejecting order, progress and rationalism, he refuses the possibility of a landscape which can be understood in terms
of the legend. This critique is most evident in White’s presentation of the divergent perception of the landscape held by whites and indigenous people. As can be evinced from his descriptions, the land is not a wilderness, but a ‘humanised’ landscape for eyes that are able to see, and it belongs to the Aborigines. Peter Coates explains European attitudes to the land using the metaphor of writing on a landscape that was already humanised:

the physical environment is often compared to a palimpsest—a manuscript from which the original writing has been effaced to make way for a second inscription. Instead of being written on a page rubbed blank, the colonial imprint copied over the existing letters in bold print (1998: 95).

In Voss, what appears as empty to western eyes is instead inhabited and shaped by humans. When crossing the interior of the country the exploring party encounters obvious signs of the landscape being inhabited—the fact that someone lives in the land that is still to be ‘discovered’ by the white man is in itself a sign of a presence on the land and therefore ownership of it. The path the party follows towards the Aborigines’ encampment is clearly recognised as a path, and is therefore a sign of previous use of the land: “a path must have been cleared in former times by blacks pushing the stones aside” (V 366). The paintings in the caves are also evidence of the presence of indigenous people on the land. As Jackie says: “Blackfeller belong these caves” (V 273). The land the explorer is about to take possession of is already inhabited (V 190). Voss’s first encounter with the two guides who will accompany him on the expedition points to their relationship with the land. The sound of their feet on the ground is interpreted as “ownership” and it is therefore
established from the beginning that the white man is about to embark on an exploration of a land owned by someone else: “their bare feet made upon the earth only a slight, but very particular sound, which, to the German’s ears, at once established their ownership” (V 169). It is significant that the one who seems to perceive the different sound made by the two guides on the ground is the explorer whose act of exploring is a negation of previous ownership.

The Aborigines know the land they move through, their knowledge being in itself a proof of ownership. They do not struggle to survive: they know how to live off the land even in the most arid places. When the party is lost in the desert and sustenance is scarce, the two guides are able to find water from the roots of trees (V 211), while the white man is powerless and cannot survive without his provisions.29 The different attitudes towards the land are explicitly presented: while the white men see it as a desert and the advance of the exploration party is described as “riding eternally over the humped and hateful earth” (V 210), a group of Aborigines is “trooping gaily over the grey earth” (V 210). The use of two opposite adjectives, “hateful” in connection with the white man and “gaily” in connection with the Aborigines, points to their diverging attitudes. The latter know their land and do not perceive it as a desert:

29 In A Fringe of Leaves White also presents the Aborigines as the people who possess the skills to live in the country, while the white man does not. The white man who has knowledge and understanding of the country is Jack Chance, who by living with the Aborigines has learnt their ways of living and thus their understanding of the land. Jack has acquired the skills of the Aborigines as well as their language; he is able to find food and shelter and move freely in the bush. Ellen has acquired some of the skills and can live off the land—she dives for lily roots, digs yams, lights the fire and climbs trees for honey and possums. Jack Chance possesses the characteristics of the bushman, but as in the case of Judd, he is a convict and cannot therefore be the ‘typical Australian’.
“the party was on its way to eat the fruit of the bunya bunya” (V 210).

White’s presentation of the Aborigines and their successful relation to the landscape juxtaposed with the white men’s failure, is itself a critique of the myth of the bushman and the assumptions of white superiority. Patrick White therefore exposes civilisation as relative: the Aboriginal way of life is more adequate to this country than a superimposed white civilisation.

The connection of the Aborigines with their land is emphasised through their association with nature. They are described in terms of natural elements— their bodies are given the characteristics of forms of nature— and they seem to materialise from the landscape and at the same time to disappear in it, being elements of the land itself. This is different, however, from being figures in the landscape: the Aborigines do not simply have the function of adding colour to the landscape, they are part of it. Dugald is described as being a “thinking stick” (V 170) and “a man of ash and charred wood” (V 213).30 The singing of the Aborigines is also associated with natural elements: “The singing, as monotonous as grey earth, as grey wood, rose in sudden spasms of passion, to die down, down, as the charcoal lying. The voices of dust would die right away” (V 377). This same technique of identification between nature and the Aborigines is used throughout the novel: “a party of blacks appeared, first as shreds of shy bark glimpsed between the trunks of the trees, but always drifting until, finally, they halted in human form (V 204). However,

30 Alf Dubbo in Riders in the Chariot is also “a thinking stick” (R 409). Xavier Herbert used this same kind of assimilation with the land in his description of Bobwirridirridi in Poor Fellow My Country.
this is not intended to identify them with the landscape so as to avoid recognition of their land ownership, but instead is focused more on their ‘mystical’ relation to the land. The Aborigines are part of the landscape in the sense that they have a ‘spiritual’, ‘mystical’, understanding of the landscape. They are described as a society, with rules and structures, as is evident in the description of their social life in *A Fringe of Leaves* and *Voss*. White is not identifying the Aborigines with the landscape in order for whites to claim belonging to the land. Belonging is only obtained through the acquisition of a spiritual understanding of the land, an understanding that often is only reached by the white man at the moment of death.

White is aware of indigenous peoples’ ownership of the land as is clear in his autobiographical work *Flaws in the Glass*, where he writes “I persuaded myself that […] an avatar of those from whom the land had been taken had invested one of the unwanted whites” (White 1983: 16). It is meaningful here that whites are unwanted, a concept White reiterates elsewhere: “the country we invaded” (White 1989a: 183). The use of the words “taken” and “invaded” positions White as one of the writers who opposes the discourse of *terra nullius* when, it is suggested, an ancient way of life was destroyed. His novels make clear the fact that *terra nullius* is a ‘myth’ by the portrayal of the whites’ attitude to the land. The need to impose a scientific knowledge on the land and to reduce it to elements that can be analysed, categorised, named and classified proves that the land is perceived as indomitable and needs therefore to be translated into
elements and patterns that the white man can control through scientific
discourse. And yet—and this point is pre-figured in White's work—as Bill
Gammage has persuasively argued in his recent book (Gammage 2011),
the Aborigines had carefully ‘crafted’ the land; the whole continent was
carefully regulated and managed. Far from being “shiftless wanderers”,
the Aborigines had managed the entire ecosystem so well that the
country was a ‘designed estate’ and not ‘uncharted wilderness’.

Patrick White also critiques these western ways of controlling the land. As
Shirley Walker argues:

most perceptions of Australian nature were defensive attempts to assert
some sort of order and control over the vastness and sameness of the
landscape, the very fearfulness of which suggested chaos to the European
mind. There is an iconography of order and control, one which asserts that
the Englishman is able to impose his own civilised values upon this nihilistic
chaos (1988: 158).\(^{31}\)

A major instrument of control is identified in the “botanical categorization”
through which the country is “classified and absorbed into the European
consciousness as an act of possession” (Walker 1988: 158), as well as
the exploration and naming of the country. Another means of imposing
control over nature is the ‘creation’ of “gardens and parks” (Coates 1998:
115). Patrick White exposes examples of the attempts to reduce to
regular patterns the irregular shape of the Australian landscape through

\(^{31}\) Among these images that are supposed to impose control, Walker includes the picnic
which “assert[s] the ordering role of civilised manners and social ritual” (1988: 158) on
the landscape. Patrick White himself makes use of the picnic in Voss. The setting is in
the bush close to the beach and the whole scene seems to be ridiculed by the author by
comparing it to a rite: “the most solemn rites of the picnic were in the course of being
celebrated” (V 69). The interaction of the gentry with the bush is limited to a picnic and
their inappropriateness in this context is underlined by the image of the ladies sitting on
“unreliable stools” (V 70).
the creation of gardens. The outcome of this attempt at controlling the bush is the bush ‘intruding’ into the ordered space created by the white man. The vastness of the Australian landscape is often juxtaposed with descriptions of European gardens. Peter Beatson identifies this binary presentation of the natural setting with two archetypes: the “Garden” and the “Desert, Wasteland or Labyrinth” (1977: 138).32 This binary opposition is evident in the garden of the Parkers in The Tree of Man, initially presented as an “Eden archetype” and later becoming a “wilderness” with the drought: “The garden becomes overgrown and tangled, a wasteland, wilderness, labyrinth or desert that threatens the embattled house” (Beatson 1977: 138-9). As Beatson points out, Patrick White refers ironically in his novels to the presence of the native landscape that threatens to invade the garden.

While Beatson analyses this in terms of archetypes, it is possible to make a closer reading of the text. As highlighted by the observations of some of the characters and the narrator in Riders in the Chariot and Voss, the native landscape no longer under Aboriginal environmental management seems to be constantly threatening the borders of the imposed European garden, and in time claims back that land which was cleared with difficulty from the scrub or bush. In Voss, the garden is that of the Bonners, surrounded by “hideous native trees”, “dreadful trees” that are always considered an ominous presence (V 222). The native bush is irregular and mysterious, its forms perceived as irrational and negative. The

32 According to Peter Beatson, Patrick White’s landscapes can be read as reflections of different states in the “life cycle” of his characters, although the perception of the same natural setting varies according to the situation of the character (1977: 138).
impossibility of imposing order on the landscape is clearly addressed in another passage: “the science of horticulture had failed to exorcise the spirit of the place. The wands and fronds of native things intruded still, paperbarks and various gums, of mysterious hot scents” (V: 156). Australian nature escapes science, whose instruments are not adequate to shape the country. Another example is presented in Riders in the Chariot, where the beautiful park that surrounds Xanadu has been slowly swallowed by the bush: “The scrub, which had been pushed back, immediately began to tangle with Norbert Hare’s wilfully created park, until years later, there was his daughter, kneeling in a tunnel of twigs which led to Xanadu” (R 15). The bush cannot be controlled, it keeps coming back. This habit of trying to eradicate native plants is also mentioned by Patrick White in Flaws in the Glass when, talking about his mother, he writes of “the tree ferns she rooted out methodically in establishing her English garden” (White 1983: 17). “English” and “garden” are two words, both sounding foreign, that do not fit in the Australian context.

The ‘rational’ garden is juxtaposed with the ‘wilderness’ of the Australian landscape but it is an uncharted wilderness only from the white point of view.\textsuperscript{33} White disrupts the dichotomous representation of the landscape

\textsuperscript{33} For Patrick White, the relation to the landscape is fundamental to his sense of Australianness. As he explains in Flaws in the Glass it has always been the landscape that made him come back to Australia (White 1983: 16). There is an attraction for the landscape that he describes in great detail. White refers also to the Australian landscape as an imagined and idealised one in his memory when he was ‘confined’ in England. It is significant that the image he has of Australia is of him “riding a pony bareback” and swimming in a “muddy creek” (White 1983: 14). White seems to be aware of the importance of the Australian bush and also aware of its construction as an imagined country which he refers to as the “country of the mind” (White 1983: 14). This idealised
as either hostile or romanticised, as established by the nationalist writers, and presents us with a more composite vision of the Australian land. The landscape is at times portrayed as a paradise and at times as hell, but in both cases there is already present an anticipation of the other. The landscape is neither a negative place nor an extremely idealised one, and even the “gentle, healing landscape” the exploration party travels through on the first stage of the expedition has within itself the presence of the “mysterious, blue bush” (V 124). The prevalence of the uneasiness about the land is a critique of western approaches to the landscape itself, which White does by emphasising western perceptions of the land. In Voss the landscape is for the most part harsh, and even if sometimes it is green and abundant, the negative vision prevails. The adjectives used to describe it are: arid, hellish, desert: “devilish country” (V 336), the “desert of the moon” (V 338), “the bare crust of the earth” (V 210), “the landscape appeared to be dead” (V 207), and so on.

The white men see the landscape as hellish, “monotonous” (V 11), “miserable” (V 27), because they are influenced by what may be called an ‘instrumentalist’ reading of it.

So the party entered the approaches to hell, with no sound but that of horses passing through a desert, and saltbush grating in a wind.

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vision he has of the Australian landscape is continuously stressed: “I found consolation in the landscape. The ideal Australia I visualised during any exile and which drew me back, was always, I realise, a landscape without figures” (White 1983: 49).
This devilish country, flat at first soon broke up into winding gullies, not particularly deep, but steep enough to wrench the backs of the animals […]. There was no avoiding chaos by detour. […] It was as if the whole landscape had been thrown up into great earthworks defending the distance (V 336).

The landscape here is perceived as hostile to the white man, as something which opposes the advance of the explorers and in turn needs to be defeated. The idea of men fighting against the land is emphasised in the following line where their advance is referred to as an “assault” (V 336). This could be read as the ‘traditional’ description of the landscape as harsh and hostile. However, the positivity of the land as described through the actions of the Aborigines clearly stresses that the landscape is imagined as hostile by the white man. In fact, the landscape seems to be a creation of the white man, and the association with the “country of the mind” clearly points to this. The hostility of the land is a construction traditionally used to emphasise the courage and accomplishment of the white man who battles against it and who succeeds in taming it. However, Patrick White’s explorers do not succeed; they are defeated and perish in the landscape, highlighting the superior strength of the land and of the Aborigines who live in it successfully.

Patrick White tries to convey a sense of the complex nature of the land to which Australians still struggle to belong. This sense of belonging needs to be continuously renegotiated because of the awareness of indigenous people’s belonging—as Laura states, the land does not belong to us (V 239). Laura clearly points out the settlers’ fear of the landscape as a lack of understanding of the country, a lack of a sense of belonging,
something that was not emphasised by the authors of the 1890s: “Everyone is still afraid, or most of us, of this country, and will not say it. We are not yet possessed of understanding” (V 28). Again it is Laura who notes the difficulty in “grasping anything so foreign and incomprehensible. It is not my country” (V 29). Belle voices the fears that the men would not admit: “blacks, and deserts, and rocks, and skeletons” (V 28). The country is feared because of its difference from the mother country. The foreignness of the country is attributed by Mr Pringle to a lack of knowledge: “It seems that this country will prove most hostile to anything in the nature of planned development. It has been shown that deserts prefer to resist history and develop along their own lines. […] we do not know” (V 62).

Voss’ attitude instead is the one of the super rational man who can know by projecting his will onto the land. A country becomes one’s own only “by right of vision” (V 29), as Laura says of Voss. Although a foreigner, little by little he feels he can grasp the country: “I will venture to call it my country, although I am a foreigner […] and although so little of my country is known to me as yet” (V 40-1). When Voss enters the desert, the further from civilisation he goes, the more strange and different the land becomes. The narrative can be read as the gradual loss of reason and a slow but sure gaining of mystic insight. Voss sees himself at the beginning as a rational subject guided by will, by a God who resembles the God of reason, very much an enlightenment reading of God. White’s God on the other hand is not a God of reason. As Voss enters the
Australian land, he is invaded by the mystical aura of the land, a land whose understanding is beyond reason. Soon after leaving Jildra the explorer is still described as “taking possession” of the country (V 190). However, this concept is reversed a few pages later when, now that they are away from any sign of western civilisation, it is the country that possesses the expedition: “So they advanced into that country which now possessed them” (V 194). The journey is seen as eternal, and the concept is repeated: “an eternity of days was opening for the men” (V 194). This idea of eternity and of a journey through the desert without destination or end is also associated with the descriptions of a hellish landscape: “So they rode on through hell” (V 363). The interior of the country thus assumes an unreal dimension. White deconstructs the myth of the exploration of an empty land where the explorer sets off with his scientific equipment and often a scientist in his party to map, categorise and name it, exposing the impossibility of knowing the land through rational categories. These ways of knowing are presented as inconsistent with the Australian land which requires a mystical knowledge. Voss needs to free himself from western concepts of reason, from western post-enlightenment categories in order to understand it. Belonging is only possible through thinking outside of the rigid limitations of reason.

The Australian land cannot be reduced to a modernist landscape on which the white man can impose his modelling plan. And this is the point where the sublime comes into play. The land described by Patrick White is overpowering: it cannot be grasped, it is powerful, immense,
indomitable. Descriptions of the desert in *Voss* and the thunderstorm and lightning in *The Tree of Man* are examples of a rendering of the ‘sublime’ implicit in the land. In the *Tree of Man* the feelings of fear and terror felt by Stan and Amy due to the approaching storm are typical of the sublime:

> He felt a kind of pleasure in the mounting storm [...] When suddenly he was altogether insignificant. A thing of gristle. [...] God blew from the clouds, and men would scatter like leaves. It was no longer possible to tell who was on which side. Or is it ever possible to tell? [...] he was not sure. In this state he was possessed by an unhappiness, rather physical, that was not yet fear [...] he began to be afraid (White 1961: 47). \(^{34}\)

The failing of reason against this spectacle reflects the “feeling of the sublime” which, according to Lyotard, possesses the characteristic of having “no immediate communicability” (2000: 62). The incommunicability of the sublime differentiates it from the category of beauty which reason can explain: the ‘beautiful’ is attributed to a landscape that is linear and ordered. Patrick White’s use of the sublime points to his interest in the impossibility of explaining an experience through reason alone.

The descriptions of the Australian land as presented by White—especially those of the hellish desert landscape—suggest a sublime perception of the land itself. Ian McLean links the idea of the sublime to exploration:

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\(^{34}\) Further page references to *The Tree of Man* (White 1961) are indicated as *T*.  

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The sublime is the principal aesthetic trope of exploration, the grotesque of invasion and the picturesque of settlement. The sublime pacifies the unknown or newly discovered by making it an empty, silent ahistorical space, a virgin stage ready to be occupied. However, the sublime cannot be improved; it is outside of history and so immune to progress. Its purpose is the suspension of terror and strangeness. When this spell is broken by colonisation, the silent, still bush and its inhabitants enter history, ready for picturesque improvement and progress (McLean 1998: 23).

The sublime landscape, the Australian wilderness, is outside reason: it is incomprehensible. In White’s novels the land cannot be ‘appropriated’ through colonisation but requires different ways of knowing. It needs non-rational categories to come to terms with it—an understanding separated from the category of reason. White proposes a different approach to it, a mystical approach that resembles that of the Aborigines. Patrick White suggests a way of understanding the country, of claiming belonging to the country, which moves beyond rationalism and modernism and comes to terms with the Australian landscape. He is also suggesting that the original inhabitants posses that understanding of the land, and that this understanding can be grasped by the white man too, if he is willing to transcend the limitations of his rational knowledge and accept alternative ‘reasons’.35

Gibson links Jackie’s explanation of one of the paintings in the caves, according to which “the spirits of the dead are everywhere in the land”, to the understanding that Laura—and Le Mesurier—gain of the land through their fusion with the natural elements (1984: 224). At the moment of death, a sort of understanding seems to descend upon Voss, an understanding that, however, is not communicated to the reader but is

35 It is a sort of religious understanding, but a religion that cannot be specifically identified. As White says in his essay “In the Making”, he does not belong to any religion, but he believes “everyone has a religious faith of a kind” (White 1969: 218).
symbolically implied—as is the case with the death of Stan in *The Tree of Man* (*T* 476-7). His final annihilation and his entering the country—we could say his absorption into it—through his death (the land drinks his blood) is the only moment when Voss does truly belong, when he does truly know. He has been penetrated by the mystique of the country. Space and time cease to exist and his will and super-rationalism are destroyed. It is the defeat of the rational man by the country.

The meaning of the suffering Voss has gone through is explained by Laura. It is now clear to her that suffering was necessary for an understanding of the land: “Finally I believe I have begun to understand this great country, which we have been presumptuous enough to call *ours* [...] a country doesn’t develop through the prosperity of a few landowners and merchants, but out of the suffering of the humble” (*V* 239). It is through sacrifice that this is possible. But the importance of sacrifice is not linked to Voss as explorer and institutional figure, it is a deeper, spiritual connection to the land. The importance of blood sacrifice is again stressed, but it is not the sacrifice of blood that is intended for nationalist purposes, the sacrifice necessary to unify a country as a nation. The blood sacrifice, in this case, is a homage of belonging given to the land in order to know it and to become part of it: “his blood ran out upon the dry earth, which drank it up immediately” (*V* 394). The blood of Voss allows his reconciliation with the land. The fact that Voss is killed by having his throat cut and is later beheaded recalls ancient sacrifices intended to
bring the favour of the gods so that the land becomes fertile again after winter. His killing is more a blood ritual than a blood sacrifice.\(^\text{36}\)

The figure of the explorer, and specifically his death or martyrdom, has been interpreted by Graham Huggan as a celebration of whiteness: “white death is a sure sign of the desire for white regeneration; and disembodied whiteness—the transmutation of the body after death into pure spirit—a sure sign of the desire for continuing white control” (Huggan 2007: 89). Although, as Huggan suggests, White still works within the tradition of whiteness, what Huggan misses is the fact that whiteness is not exalted, but critiqued through the opposition of reason and mysticism. And it is the latter that prevails. The spirit of the white man which inhabits the country after his death cannot be understood simply through reason. Voss’ initial claim of belonging through reason is shown to be totally inadequate, and it is only through a non-rational, mystical cognition that he can belong.\(^\text{37}\) To put it starkly, the point I make is that white belonging is a lot more problematic than the ‘Australian legend’ suggests.

Voss is not the typical explorer as his ability to successfully complete the exploration is questioned from the start by Mr Bonner, himself the organiser of the expedition. The idealised vision of the explorer is clearly

\(^{36}\) In the novel the idea of blood sacrifice is constantly repeated as when Judd kills the sheep for Christmas lunch and Voss describes it as “pagan survivals” (V 198).

\(^{37}\) Voss also contains the theme of the white man going native. Judd, returning to civilisation twenty years after his disappearance on Voss’s expedition, is addressed as “the wild white man” after having spent years among the Aborigines (V 436). Here the possibility of belonging to the land through the acquisition of the knowledge of the Aborigines is a clear subtext.
exposed and its constructed nature addressed. Such a man does not exist in reality and we are presented with a leader who is after all human. The explorer is presented as an idealised figure, an icon that does not correspond to reality, a point underlined by Mrs Saunders who wonders if “Mr Voss will be able to endure all the sufferings of an explorer” (V 139). Her husband’s reply, “But a great explorer is above human suffering, for his men’s eyes, at least” (V 139), clearly equates Voss with the myth.

The idealisation of the figure of the explorer and White’s attempt at ridiculing it is evident in the passage where, before leaving, Voss is surrounded by people from Sydney who are there to witness the event: “If he was already more of a statue than a man, they really did not care, for he would satisfy their longing to perch something on a column, in a square or gardens, as a memorial to their own achievement” (V 109). The exploration is therefore a means for settlers to belong, to prove they have achieved knowledge of the ‘unfamiliar’ land. The expedition is elevated to “an event of national significance”, “an historical occasion” (V 78). The exploration and the knowledge of the land that will come from it are fundamental to legitimising the settlers’ presence on Australian soil. However, White ridicules the myth of the explorers, the brave men who discover the country. The members of the expedition are in fact a ‘weird mob’—counting among them an alcoholic and an ex-convict—and certainly not the ideal party for an explorer. That these men cannot succeed is clear from the start. The one figure who confers respectability and an aura of scientific scope to the expedition seems to be Palfreyman,
the ornithologist (V 47). It should be clear that White is explicitly critiquing western methods of discovering and possessing the country through reason. The choice of an explorer as his protagonist—Voss, a German—links this critique of reason to the foundational myth of the nation encapsulated in the Australian legend.

Two years before the publication of Voss, White offered a reading of the pioneer myth in The Tree of Man. In this novel Stan Parker is a small version of a pioneer, a man who travels to an isolated stretch of land, clears it and settles on the land. He is the first one in the area and is followed by others. These ‘pioneers’ are confronted with floods, fires and droughts, and they go through their lives resigned to their fate. There is nothing in Stan Parker that reminds us of the myth of the pioneer, of the exaltation of this figure in the 1890s. While Banjo Paterson exalted the fearless pioneers:

To you who fought the wilderness through rough unsettled years—
The founders of our nation's life, the brave old pioneers (1967: 172),

White does not romanticise the figure, and nor does he attempt to gain sympathy from the reader for Stan. White is more realistic about the pioneer and plays down his achievements—settling on the land is not exalted; the act of clearing land is not presented as a heroic activity, there is nothing grand about it: Stan “began to tear the bush apart. [...] Many days passed in this way, the man clearing his land” (T 16).

The pioneer’s efforts are insignificant in the face of the Australian bush, as White’s bush in this novel is not threatening; he anthropomorphises the bush—the bush has a face and bleeds—creating a sympathetic figure against which the pioneer’s efforts are less significant:

There in the scarred bush, that had not yet accepted its changed face, the man soon begun to build a house, or a shack. He brought the slabs he had shaped for logs. Slowly. He piled his matchsticks [...] amongst the stumps, that in time had ceased to bleed. It was more the symbol of a house. Its prim, slab walls fulfilled necessity (T 16-7).

By anthropomorphising the bush White denies the ‘civilising’ achievement of the pioneer; rather than facing and defeating a dark, threatening enemy, the pioneer is defacing and scarring a living being.

Some critics have read The Tree of Man as an exaltation of the pioneer, arguing that White aims at creating a “mythic status for his story of pioneer life” (Beston 2003: 153). Upon its publication The Bulletin review (1956) acclaimed the novel as an exaltation of the pioneering spirit of the land, reminding Australians that “we are still pioneers” and showing “how settlement is done in Australia, today or in the past, wherever there are still gumtrees to be chopped down. His pioneer Stan Parker goes into the bush with an axe; and gradually, over the years the settlement of Durilgai grows up” (Stewart 1956a: 2). These readings of the novel fail to understand the ways in which White critiques the pioneer myth through the figure of Stan Parker. As the above quotes from the novel itself show, there is no attempt at mythologising this figure; on the contrary, White is exposing the constructed nature of the discourses about the foundation of
the Australian nation. In other words, he is dismantling the foundational myth in both *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* through a critique of its representative figures, the pioneer and the explorer—Stan and Voss respectively. These two figures are not presented as heroes because the first is too ordinary to be elevated to the level of myth, and the second is defeated—in White’s own words “Voss was a monomaniac, rather than a hero, and like almost all human beings flawed and fallible” (Wilkes and Herring 1973: 138).

In a number of instances, White’s critique of the legend is more explicit as he exposes those characteristics considered to be typical of the ideal Australian, especially that of the bushman as constructed by the legend. These characteristics are questioned and attributed to characters who, upon a closer look, are unfit to represent the legend. The choice of characters is indicative of the writer’s intention to critique the legend. The protagonists of his novels are in fact non-typical Australians, and even when they appear to be typical they are too unremarkable to be identified with the myth. For example, Stan Parker in *The Tree of Man* is quite unconvincing as a representative of the legend. A silent, practical man, he is always ready to help his mates, but there is nothing heroic or outstanding about him because even heroic acts—rescues in flood and fire—are quite ordinary.\(^{39}\) White’s critique of the artificial ‘Australianness’ of the legend is evident also in the choice of foreign characters—the

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\(^{39}\) As Patrick White explains in “The Prodigal Son” (1958): “I wanted to try to suggest in this book every possible aspect of life, through the lives of an ordinary man and woman. But at the same time I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary” (White 1989: 15).
English Palfreyman, the German explorer, and the Jewish émigré Himmelfarb—and women, two groups excluded from the legend. White uses Amy Parker to destabilise some of the key assumptions of the legend: like Lawson’s “The Drover’s Wife”, her body affirms a different kind of strength. White undermines the legend by presenting different aspects of it and the ordinariness of the people who are generally considered part of this legend. They are first of all flawed humans, and any attempt at idealising them is undercut. Even the explorer is just a man, and finds humility before his death. White seems to want to present different aspects of Australian identity, fragmenting this identity in a series of ordinary or less than ordinary characters who together constitute the Australian identity, but who lack completeness.

The main aspects highlighted by White are mateship and the heavily suggestive masculinity of the legend. Specifically, Voss deconstructs the characteristics of the legend by addressing mateship, self-reliance and practicality and presenting these characteristics as unreal and even inadequate. The Australian landscape is such that not even mateship can save men and it is only true knowledge of the landscape that can guarantee life. These characteristics are attributed to different characters but no individual seems to embody all of them at once apart from Judd the convict, who possesses most of them and who is the only one to survive the expedition. As he himself points out: “All my gifts are for practical things. Then, too, I have a ‘bush sense’, it has been proved. […] Oh, I forgot to mention endurance (V 136). It is obviously a controversial
choice to have given those characteristics to a convict, but the point being made here is that it is the convict who can best carry the attributes of the typical Australian.\(^{40}\) Among the peculiarities of the bushman, it is mateship which is probably the most criticised as it is reduced to being the act of desperate and weak people depending on someone stronger. The components of the party are described as being hostile to each other, clinging to one another only out of necessity and a fear of being alone in the country. Their lack of self-reliance is criticised as well, their dependence on the leader, Voss, and later Judd, who in turn relies on others who attach themselves to different people: “Angus hated Turner now. […] He hated Judd also, but expressed that hatred differently. Since he had been forced by circumstances to put himself in the convict’s hands” (V 423). They are never sincere and express ambiguous feelings towards each other. The man who sticks with his mates through good or bad times does not really exist. Contrasting the characteristics of the ex-convict are those of the scientist Palfreyman, who lacks any sense of practicality and physical strength: “There was Palfreyman, in a cabbage-tree\(^{41}\) hat that made him look smaller, with a clean, white handkerchief to protect his neck and throat, but which exposed, rather, his own innocence and delicacy. There he was, riding out, an old woman of a man” (V 174). The figure of the typical Australian is further ridiculed: manliness and strength are completely absent from this description.

\(^{40}\) As already mentioned, Jack Chance, the escaped convict in *A Fringe of Leaves*, also embodies the characteristics of the ‘typical’ Australian.

\(^{41}\) The ‘cabbage-tree hat’ is described by Russel Ward as ‘standard wear among bushmen’ (Ward 2003: 12).
White’s critique of masculinity is exposed in the equivocal presentation of relationships based on mateship. During identifies the formation of male couples in *Voss*—Turner and Angus, Judd and Harry, Voss and Le Mesurier—and reads the expedition as a “highly sexualised community without women” (During 1996: 76). The relationships between the members of the party seem to strengthen the more they travel into the continent. While some of the relationships could be seen as a mild queering of the legend, a deeper critique exists in the form of Eddie, the protagonist of *The Twyborn Affair* (1979), whose ambivalent sexuality clearly challenges the heterosexual masculinity of the legend. Eddie appears in the novel as three distinct characters but he is in fact the same person, first disguised as a woman, Eudoxia Vatatzes, then as Eddie, and later again as a woman, Eadith Trist, in a brothel in London. While his transvestism represents in itself a critique of the masculinity of the typical Australian, the second section constitutes the strongest critique of the legend. The protagonist is in fact a war ‘hero’; Eddie Twyborn is an army Lieutenant returning from the First World War, and “had been decorated, officially for value” (White 1981: 193). This is a clear incorporation of the link between blood sacrifice and the Australian legend.

Eddie moves to a pastoral station where he works as a jackaroo in a replay of masculinity and its links with the legend. White addresses here one of the standard stereotypical acts of the legend of the ‘typical

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42 Further page references to *The Twyborn Affair* (White 1981) are indicated as TA.
Australian’. Eddie Twyborn is not a bushman and compared to the experienced stockmen, he is a clumsy horse rider: “two stockmen leaping at their saddles, the jackeroo almost rupturing himself as he landed on a pommel” (TA 192-3). Eddie seems to be preoccupied with a desire to express his masculinity and attempts to affect a manly behaviour: “Eddie did not know what to do beyond grunt back in manly fashion” (TA 195). In the strongly masculine environment of the station, Eddie is an outsider. The height of the deconstruction of the myth of the Australian legend is reached when Eddie has a relationship with the station manager, Don Prowse. He too is an ambivalent figure: “Drained of his masculine strength and native brutality, Prowse was reduced to a harmless, rather pathetic ape” (TA 259). According to Goldie, in becoming the “homosexual ‘mate’ of the complete bushman, Prowse”, Eddie assumes a role which belongs to the underside of mateship which “has often been seen as covertly or overtly homosexual. The absence of women in the outback was met by an almost symbiotic one-to-one relationship between a man and his mate” (Goldie 1993). Goldie continues, “The end result is not the reductive Australia of Australian legend but a new Australia of legendary, multigendered possibilities” (Goldie 1993).

The fundamental characteristics of the legend are also critiqued in a key passage in Riders in the Chariot where, after Ernie Theobalds has saved Himmelfarb from crucifixion, Patrick White sees dark irony in the idea of mateship itself: “So Himmelfarb was raised too soon from the dead by the

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43 White worked as a jackaroo in the early 1930s at Bolaro station not far from the Snowy Mountains (Marr 1991: 93-9).
kindness and consideration of those who had never ceased to be his mates” (*R* 416). The sentences following this remark stress even further this critique, addressing another aspect of the legend: the anti-authoritarian spirit of the typical Australian. When Himmelfarb thanks his rescuer, addressing him as “Mr Theobalds”, the latter lectures him on the egalitarian character of the Australian:

‘Something you will never learn, Mick, is that I am Ernie to every cove present. That is you included. No man is better than another. It was still early days when Australians found that out. You may say we talk about it a lot, but you can’t expect us not to be proud of what we have invented, so to speak. Remember that’, advised Ernie Theobalds, laying the palm of his hand flat against his mate’s back (*R* 416-7).

Saying that he will never learn this, Theobalds excludes Himmelfarb from the possibility of being Australian, thus reversing the meaning of the word “included”. The narrator repeats the word “mate”, underlining the absurdity of talking of mateship in such circumstances.

In this episode White also critiques the sense of humour typical of the Australian, who likes a good joke. Here, set against the seriousness of the attempted crucifixion of Himmelfarb, the declaration of an Australian sense of humour seems a little forced:

Remember [...] we have a sense of humour, and when the boys start to horse around, it is that that is getting’ the better of ‘em. They can’t resist a joke. Even when a man is full of beer, you will find the old sense of humour hard at work underneath. It has to play a joke. See? No offence can be taken where a joke is intended (*R* 417).

The emphasis placed on the joke aspect of the crucifixion underscores the incongruity inherent in the will to consider it as a joke. The fact that
the act conforms itself to a code of unwritten rules that are accepted among mates, is clearly a critique of mateship which accepts cruelty as long as it conforms to “the convention which demanded that cruelty, at least amongst mates, must be kept at the level of a joke” (R 410). This concept is reiterated several times: “Blue the vindicator was also Blue the mate. It was possible to practise all manner of cruelties provided the majority might laugh them off as practical jokes” (R 408). The act itself is not seen as a crucifixion by the participants because: “nobody would have said crucified, because from the beginning it had been a joke” (R 411).

Brisssenden has argued that the crucifixion scene is an exaggeration because horrible things like those that happened in Germany could not happen in Australia. It is a criticism which White has rejected, arguing that it does happen in Australia “as I, a foreigner in my own country, learned from personal experience” (quoted in Rutherford 2000: 195). As Rutherford points out, in “refusing this fantasy of the good Australian, White […] is not engaging with an Australian racism of the past, but with his present” (Rutherford 2000: 196). According to Rutherford it is the fact that White’s representation of racism deals with the present that makes it significant: “The fantasy of a Good Australia relies on denying the continuities of past and present; aggression, racism and misogyny are always located in a past the good present has overcome” (Rutherford 2000: 196). White exposes the racism embedded in Australian society, a racism against the ‘other’, who is identified not just as the ‘Aborigine’ and
the foreigner—the Jew as in the case of Himmelfarb—but as anyone who does not fit into the idea of ‘Australian’.

The setting of the crucifixion scene in a fictional Australian suburb, Sarsaparilla, is clearly a critique of Australian society: this behaviour towards a Jew in a society that considers itself egalitarian is obviously an attack on it. Crucially, White disrupts another characteristic considered to be typically Australian—the myth of egalitarianism. Only whites are equal but not all of them, since most women are excluded. In *Riders in the Chariot*, the critique of the legend implicit in the choice of characters is pushed to the extreme. The main protagonists, the four *illuminati*, belong to categories excluded from the legend and therefore from a sense of Austrialianness. At the heart of this exclusion is racial prejudice. White’s awareness of discourses of race superiority is particularly evident in the lives of both Himmelfarb and Alf who are victims of racist behaviour. White is exposing the racist attitude of white people towards not only indigenous people, but anyone who does not fit into the definition of ‘Australian’, that is, into the white Australian category. White is questioning the legend by exposing the discourses of whiteness implicit in the distinction between what can and cannot be considered white: Himmelfarb is addressed as ‘black’: “You bloody buggers [...] you black bastards!” (*R* 408). Anyone other than a white Australian is regrouped into a different category. The description of Himmelfarb given through Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack’s eyes is significant, where his features are exaggerated and he is attributed monstrous characteristics:
they had never seen anything so yellow or so strange. Strange? Why, dreadful, dreadful! [...] Had failed to observe such disgraceful dilapidation of appearance, such irregularities of stubble, such a top-heavy, bulbous head, such a truly fearful nose (R 214-5).

The description displays all the stereotypes attributed to a Jew, as the two women long to see “a foetus, or a mutilated corpse” (R 214).

Himmelfarb and Alf are also both identified as ‘other’ in the eyes of the factory workers; in fact, they both represent “the antithesis of themselves” (R 402). Alf, like Himmelfarb, does not belong to the category of Australianness, which becomes the category itself of humanity, a category from which they are both excluded: “If nobody commented on his appearance, not even those who were most disgusted by the presence of sickness, or blacks—antithesis in its extremest forms—it is because he had become by now the abstraction of a man” (R 402). White’s distinction between ‘human’ and ‘black’—“Officially, of course, he was not a man, but a blackfellow” (R 408)—seems here very ironically dark. Alf is juxtaposed with the factory workers who consider themselves “human beings”, the ones whose lives are characterised by “brick homes and washing machines” (R 402).

As During points out, “the racism of which Alf is a victim strengthens his capacity to see whiteness not as norm but as hegemony (even the war is the ‘white man’s war’), and to look at white, heterosexual masculinity, in particular, with a disenchanted eye” (1996: 34-5). Alf Dubbo is in fact aware of whiteness discourses, as is evident from his perception of white
people’s reaction to the war: “the white peoples who had always known the answers, until they discovered those were wrong” (R 350). Alf’s reading of racial relations is very straightforward: he is aware of the “duplicity of the white men” (R 371) whose attitude changes. After the end of “the white men’s war” when peace is restored, Alf is for a short time ‘equal’: their stomachs were, “for the occasion, of the same colour” (R 371). However, after the initial euphoria of peace, he becomes “the abo” again (R 371): “the White men had never appeared […] so confidently superior as they became at the excuse of peace” (R 371).

Even as White works from within whiteness, his awareness of whiteness issues is obvious. In a process similar to ‘reverse hysteria’ (after Freud), what we get in characters such as Dubbo is the portrayal of an indigene who appropriates the features of ‘whiteness’ which is the converse of white attempts at indigeneity. Something else happens because the Aboriginal is located not in the bush but, as in Riders in the Chariot, in the city, specifically suburbia. The latter, however, remains at the outskirts

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44 This is most evident in a piece of writing where White comments on his parents’ attitude towards southern Europe, perceived as the black south: “My parents encouraged travel only in these decent, ‘white’ countries, never in the ‘black’, passionate South” (White 1989b: 130). Discussing the neighbours at Castle Hill, White writes: “Manoly was thought to be ‘some kind of black prince’. […] The blacks were moving in. Down the road a Sicilian family had bought a farm” (White 1983: 138). White is clearly aware of the discourses of whiteness and of the inclusion or exclusion of people in the white category according to convenience. White’s preoccupation with whiteness is evident in the recurrence of the colour white, especially when associated with death. Alf paints the deposition of Christ. The features are those of Himmelfarb but the Christ is “darker than convention would have approved” (R 456). This scene reminds us of another one in Voss, the death of Palfreyman, who is speared by the indigenous tribe. While this death, too, can be associated with the death of Christ, it is in contrast to the one in Riders in the Chariot because here the prevailing colour is white: “death had turned him into wax” (V 343). Harry’s death is also characterised by the same colour through the repetition of “white maggots” (V 389). The connection of white and death is significant because Alf dies of tuberculosis which was referred to as the “white death” (Dyer 1997: 209).
and is perceived as threatening to invade the ‘civilised’ space of the city. White writes: “Alf Dubbo now went bush, figuratively at least, and as far as other human beings were concerned. Never communicative, he retired into the scrub of half-thoughts, amongst the cruel rocks of obsession. Later he learned to prefer the city, that most savage and impenetrable terrain” (R 340). The city is here attributed characteristics typical of the bush and becomes the place of ‘savagery’, and not a civilised space.

If Norman, the other ‘half-caste’ analysed in the previous chapter, constitutes the hope of Xavier Herbert for a new race that can truly belong to Australia, Alf Dubbo, is a critique of white Australia. White does not see the solution of ‘white belonging’ in the assimilation of indigenous people, but in the acquisition of ‘mystic’ knowledge which is closer to indigenous ways of knowing the land and which does not superimpose western categories on it. Alf Dubbo’s deep understanding, his visionary power, encompasses both white and black culture. Alf, like Norman, was brought up by whites which meant that the knowledge of his people and his land were denied to him.45 Caught between two worlds—European and Aboriginal societies—Alf belongs to neither of them. His inclusion among the four illuminati, who are all ‘outcasts’, is significant in that he possesses a different kind of knowledge that finds its expression in painting, a technique acquired through his association with the whites, but a technique that plays a fundamental role in Aboriginal culture too. His

45 Alf avoids other indigenous people because of the education he has received (R 341). He has been raised by reverend Timothy Calderon and introduced to both religious education and painting. The abuses suffered by Alf while staying with the reverend are an exposition of a problem suffered by many children in missions and elsewhere. This subject would be taken up by Kim Scott in Benang.
ability to adapt his religious knowledge to his needs and to reinterpret it through his imagination is the triumph of the artist as the one who can reach an understanding of the world.\textsuperscript{46} Alf Dubbo is the only one of these characters who at the end achieves a complete vision of the chariot and can paint it. J.J. Healey has seen in the choice of a ‘half-caste’ character for this role an attempt by White to reconcile the two cultures: Alf represents “Patrick White’s peace with Australia” (1978: 204). However, even as Alf’s paintings and the image of the chariot show his deep knowledge, they also represent his exclusion from white society because even in death he is still an outcast (\textit{R 460-1}).\textsuperscript{47} With its strong mystical bent, the ending of the novel represents White’s critique of Australian society, its materialism, its superficiality and its inherent ‘emptiness’.

White directly addresses the Australian exaltation of the legend in a famous passage:

> In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes, […] muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves. It was the exaltation of the ‘average’ that made me panic most. (White 1989: 15)

This passage makes explicit the critique of the Australian legend with its exaltation of the ‘average’ and its valuing of muscles above brain. White’s

\textsuperscript{46} This theme would be further developed by White in \textit{The Vivisector} (1970) where the protagonist, Hurtle Duffield, is also an artist.

\textsuperscript{47} The paintings are referred to as a “source of embarrassment to Mrs Noonan” (\textit{R 461}).
intent through writing is that of “helping to people a barely inhabited country with a race possessed of understanding” (White 1989: 17).

White critiques the assumptions of western superiority of reason through his use of mysticism (as we have defined it) as an alternative source of knowledge, presenting reason itself as constructed and subjective, and thus exposing it as a discourse of power. For White, mysticism is a superior means of knowing the Australian country, triumphing where reason fails. While White still works from within discourses of whiteness, he is nevertheless critiquing aspects of these discourses, exposing them as constructed forms and denying their status as absolute truths. He dismantles the idea of an absolute truth that belongs to the white rational man and presents the possibility of infinite truths. He also suggests the constructed nature of historical truth. As I have pointed out in this chapter, White’s deconstruction works at different levels since his exposition of reason as a contested principle presents us with another outlook on whiteness. Thus, White’s deconstruction of whiteness operates through a critique of the Australian legend as well as through a critique of Enlightenment reason. In this way, mystical knowledge acquires a legitimacy denied by an absolute insistence on reason. Mysticism as used by White is therefore the strongest critique of whiteness: it contains within itself a critique of all that discourses of whiteness stand for and suggests different possible ways of explaining the world and man’s experiences. White’s writing, “as part of a transitional moment in the emergence of postcolonial Australia” (During 1996: 15), takes place at a time when whiteness had not yet been systematically theorised. It could
be said, however, that in his works the exposure of racist and nationalistic myths leads to an understanding of Australia in ways very different from the nation’s reading through the mythic categories of an undertheorised whiteness which forms the basis of the Australian legend.

White’s critique of the legend emerges from his deployment of characters who are marked by a lack of those characteristics considered to be typically Australian. His explorer Voss and his pioneer Stan Parker are not the heroic figures generally depicted in earlier literature and exalted as national heroes by the nationalist works of the late nineteenth century. In this way White undermines the myth and the underlying discourse behind the legend and the exploration of the country. The Australian legend is an uncritical celebration of whiteness. A critique of the legend is therefore a critique of whiteness. White lacks the critical instruments to move his critique beyond the limits of white Australia, however. His work is still influenced by European categories of knowledge which explains why there is not a total overcoming of whiteness. It is only with post-Mabo authors and the influence of a multicultural policy that a full deconstruction of the legend is accomplished and whiteness shifts from being a modern to a critical category.
In the previous chapters I traced the development of the Australian legend from its first appearance as a theoretical formation or principle at the end of the 1890s to the first half of the twentieth century. I argued that the formation of and importance attributed to this legend was informed by discourses of whiteness that shaped the legend. The representatives of the legend are in fact white males. The perpetuation of this stereotype and its elevation to myth is significant to the structure of Australian society. The questioning of Australian identity and the continuous stress on this identity has contributed to the perpetuation of the myth, a myth that, albeit slightly altered, still exists today. I analysed the way in which authors such as Herbert and White started a process of critiquing the legend, questioning its validity and exposing its ‘constructedness’. Herbert, while critiquing the legend, still works from within the tradition that has contributed to its formation, while Patrick White’s work shows a broader critique, questioning white assumptions to a greater extent and dismantling not only the whiteness of the legend but its masculinity as well. As we can see, whiteness has undergone a considerable change,
shifting from a racial category—as exemplified in the work of Herbert—to a modern one, with the work of Patrick White.

The authors examined so far engaged in a criticism of whiteness that was directly proportional to the critical instruments available to them. It is clear that the absence of multicultural discourses limited the depth of these authors’ critiques, restricted as they were to working from within the discourse itself. As a consequence their subversion of the legend’s fundamental elements was, in the end, partial. The critique of elements of the legend which, as we have postulated is the Australian expression of a discourse of whiteness, has led to a rethinking of the whole legend. In the examination of the contemporary texts I analyse in this chapter, a reading of both the legend and whiteness along the lines of the nationalist authors of the 1890s and the later ‘modernist’ authors is no longer possible. Crucial events have modified Australians’ perception of themselves and have influenced the way the nation is ‘imagined’. In the wake of multiculturalism and post-

*Mabo* recognition of land rights, a dramatic shift has taken place in Australian literature, leading to a reconsideration of the foundational elements of the Australian legend and the discourses of whiteness implicit in it. The acceptance of Australia as a multicultural society which gives equal consideration to all different ethnicities itself destabilises the validity of the legend where a white male figure was the representative of the typical Australian. In a multicultural Australia which privileges difference, the racial nature implicit in the defining characteristics of the legend is problematic: whiteness is not ‘the’
category, but becomes one of many categories. The celebration of the
legend—its whiteness and its Australianness—no longer represents the
cultural diversity of the nation as it is based on a very narrow reading of
the Australian. Previously the white man belonged and was the ‘true
Australian’; now the white man’s identity needs to be renegotiated in
order to fit into the ‘new’ multicultural society. Thus the myth needs to be
deconstructed and rewritten into the new perception of national identity.

Through case studies of two contemporary novelists, Andrew McGahan
and Kate Grenville, I will demonstrate a further reinterpretation of the
Australian legend in relation to the category of whiteness through the
recognition of the violent dispossession behind the ‘fiction’ of terra nullius.
McGahan and Grenville readdress the validity of such discourses,
questioning the foundational narrative of the country itself. They redraw
the events that led to the creation of the Australian nation and the
consequences of those events. They are aware of the discourses of
whiteness and openly address them, questioning the causes and effects
as well as mainstream assumptions. These authors also focus on the
fiction of terra nullius and deconstruct it. The legend contributed to the
construction of the landscape as empty, emphasising the battle of the
bushman against it; McGahan and Grenville present the myth as
constructed and deprive it of any romantic aura. The land has always
been inhabited and has been expropriated through violence: the
bushman is no hero. The exposition of the violent settlement is a critique
of the legend which contributed to hiding such violence. The authors also
engage in a critique of historical truth, showing that it was used to guarantee power over the land and to justify its acquisition. Although united in their questioning of white legitimacy to the land, they approach the subject from different perspectives: while McGahan examines *terra nullius* in terms of the *Mabo* decision debate in the 1990s, and looks backward to the settlement of the land, Grenville deconstructs *terra nullius* from the moment of settlement, showing the ‘origin’ of this discourse. Both authors dismantle the foundational myth and expose and condemn the atrocities committed by settlers against indigenous people. The constant reference to the first moment of settlement is, in itself, symptomatic of the need to draw attention to the moment of dispossession, a recognition of the dispossession being fundamental for both the dispossessed and those who have dispossessed them to come to terms with it. The attention paid by contemporary authors to early settlement is an expression of a profound malaise in Australian society, an unresolved ‘business’, a deep sense of guilt. Previous authors never completely acknowledged the ‘dark’ history of Australia. McGahan and Grenville participate in the moment of ‘truth’ even though the engagement is traumatic.

The change of direction in Australian literature has been influenced by a series of events that altered the perceptions of Australian society and Australian consciousness as a whole. The aftermath of the Second World War brought international attention to human rights with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Further alterations in perception
came as a result of other events, mainly concentrated in the 1990s, but these were often the consequences and outcomes of movements that had started much earlier. Going back a decade or two, the 60s can be seen as constituting a turning point in Australian social attitudes, which saw the emergence of movements for indigenous rights, leading to the Referendum of 1967.\(^1\) Momentous as the referendum was, it did not change attitudes towards indigenous people who were still considered in a patronising way. An expression of concern for the situation of the Aboriginal people was raised by W.E.H. Stanner, who in 1968 described the deliberate erasure of indigenous people from Australian history as the ‘Great Australian Silence’ and who advocated their inclusion in white Australian history.\(^2\) The changing attitudes of historians, especially figures such as Reynolds in the 1970s, with their greater concern about the interactions between settlers and indigenous people, brought about a revisiting of history. Other salient moments such as the abolition of the White Australia Policy in 1972 and the launch of a multicultural policy in 1973 have deeply changed Australian consciousness as whiteness discourses shifted in response to shifting power positions.

According to Ghassan Hage, the changes in migration, extended to other European nationalities, modified the racial underpinnings of the white

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1. The 1967 Referendum included indigenous people in the census and allowed the Commonwealth to legislate for them.
2. In the Boyer lecture of 1968 W.E.H. Stanner condemned the exclusion of indigenous people from history: “what may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale” (1969: 25). Stanner also criticised the fact that indigenous people had been given “no place in our past except that of ‘a melancholy footnote’” (1969: 25).
‘paranoia’. Racial discourses in Australia were gradually exchanged for cultural ones as Australia moved from being a British society to a European society, and the threat came to be identified with the non-European ‘other’, Asians, who could not be culturally assimilated (Hage 2003: 55-6). Hage discusses in some detail the rise of a multicultural policy in Australia, identifying different phases—assimilation, integration, and later multiculturalism (Hage 2003: 55-8). Multiculturalism shifted from being “descriptive”, which allowed white Australians control over migrant minorities and did not compromise the whiteness of the nation, to being “prescriptive”, with the Hawke Government’s promotion of “multiculturalism as national identity” (Hage 2003 60-1). According to Hage, this second approach to multiculturalism, together with the economic downturn of the 1980s-1990s and the Labor government’s support for an Australian republic that threatened to cut ties with Britain, created the conditions for a renewal of the old white paranoia. Hage suggests that anxiety was at a level similar to the time of Federation, due especially to the fear of the Asian ‘threat’ suggested by the republican campaign which emphasised Australia’s role in Asia (Hage 2003: 61-2).³

With the ‘death’ of the White Australia Policy in favour of a multicultural policy, Australia went from being a nation that exalted whiteness and Australianness as the fundamental requisite of belonging, to one claiming to be a multicultural society with a new, but untheorised idea of the Australian citizen. The possibility that different groups would also make a

³ Hage identifies a further threat to white Australia in the “government’s drive towards settling the ‘colonial question’ by granting the Indigenous people some form of ‘land rights’ which later culminated in the Mabo judgement” (Hage 2003: 62).
claim of equal belonging to the nation problematised the hitherto unquestionable right of belonging on the part of white people who considered themselves as the ‘definitive’ Australians. This is valid only in theory, however, as we are left with a culture which continues to exalt white Anglo Australians as the ‘real’ Australians. The other still needs to find his space in the myth in order to be recognised, to be accepted and therefore declare that he or she belongs. The whiteness of the myth has undergone a change in the sense that although it is still present and is its defining characteristic, it is a characteristic that is not spoken about as it is submerged and is momentarily replaced by a cultural discourse. The nation therefore proclaims its pride in values considered to be peculiarly Australian, the same sort of values that identified the bushman, but that are not, at least in theory, strictly connected to the category ‘white’. Nevertheless, the core culture, the core values of the nation, are those that come from its British heritage. The language is English and migrants need to accept both values and language in order to become citizens. It follows that multicultural theory, the recognition of more than one culture, is in essence a different form of assimilation, with different ethnicities maintaining their cultural ‘autonomy’ but having to conform to the Australian identity without ever truly ‘belonging’. According to Elizabeth Povinelli, multiculturalism in Australia becomes “a new form of national monoculturalism” (Povinelli 1998: 580). A truly multicultural society would require every culture to be recognised by the others. In Australia, though, it is still the Anglo-based culture that recognises and decides what can be included and excluded. The system of the Australian state is based upon
European standards and is shaped and influenced by the legacy of an instrumental version of the enlightenment.

The 1990s constituted a decisive turning point in the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. In 1992, the High Court handed down the *Mabo* decision, a decision that would have a profound impact on issues surrounding land rights in Australia, specifically Aboriginal rights to land. The *Mabo* judgement threw out the argument of *terra nullius*, asserting that indigenous peoples’ use of land was such that a legal claim to the land existed. The decisive role that *Mabo v. Queensland (No 2)* played in Australian and indigenous relations requires a deeper analysis of the case and the decision.

The 1992 decision, described as a “legal revolution” (Reynolds 1992: 185) was the outcome of a ten-year legal battle that Eddie Mabo, David Passi and James Rice, members of the Meriam people, fought against the state of Queensland. In 1982 they presented an instance in the High Court against the state of Queensland arguing that the Meriam people never lost ownership of the Murray Islands (Bartlett 1993: vi). The justices of the High Court took into account previous deliberations over native title, referring also to similar cases discussed elsewhere, for example, in

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4 The 1990s saw also the publication of the *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997), an inquiry into the assimilationist policy of removing indigenous children from their families to be raised in institutions. An official apology for the ‘stolen generations’ and the general dispossession of indigenous people was belatedly made by the Rudd Government in 2008.

5 In the text of the decision, Justice Brennan defines native title as follows: “The term ‘native title’ conveniently describes the interests and rights of indigenous inhabitants in land, whether communal, group or individual, possessed under the traditional laws
the USA and Canada. The decision made on 3 June 1992 with a six to one majority affirmed that the Meriam people maintained their native title over the Murray Islands and that they had the right to enjoy this land. In the justifications to the decision the justices established that English common law was transferred to Australia with the settlement of the land. According to common law, property rights are not affected by a change of sovereignty: "a mere change in sovereignty does not extinguish native title to land. [...] interests in land possessed by the indigenous inhabitants of the territory survived the change in sovereignty" (Bartlett 1993: 41). Since indigenous people became British subjects at the moment of settlement, English common law was applicable to them and they were

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6 The justices that delivered the decision were: Brennan, Deane, Gaudron, Toohey, Dawson, Mason and McHugh; all concurred except for Dawson (Bartlett 1993: viii).

7 The full text of the order reads:

In lieu of answering the questions reserved for the consideration of the Full Court,

(1) declare that the land in the Murray Islands is not Crown land within the meaning of that term in s. 5 of the Land Act 1962 (Q.);

(2) putting to one side the Islands of Dauer and Waier and the parcel of land leased to the Trustees of the Australian Board of Missions and those parcels of land (if any) which have validly been appropriated for use for administrative purposes the use of which is inconsistent with the continued enjoyment of the rights and privileges of the Meriam people under native title, declare that the Meriam people are entitled as against the whole world to possession, occupation, use and enjoyment of the lands of the Murray Islands;

(3) declare that the title of the Meriam people is subject to the power of the Parliament of Queensland and the power of the Governor in Council of Queensland to extinguish that title by valid exercise of their respective powers, provided any exercise of those powers is not inconsistent with the laws of the Commonwealth” (Bartlett 1993: 169-170).

The judgements leave the Government the right to extinguish native title.

8 As M.A. Stephenson explains, the way a colony was acquired influenced the law that could be applied to the colony. In case of conquered or ceded colonies the law that existed before colonisation continued to exist until it was modified by the conqueror. In the specific case of Australia, however, the colony was settled and the land considered “in the language of Blackstone ‘desert and uncultivated’”, and therefore without a pre-existing law. In this case English laws were transferred to the colony (1993: 99).
entitled to the rights and privileges connected to this status including their property rights (Bartlett 1993: 25-6; Stephenson 1993: 100).

Fundamental as the *Mabo* decision is, it is however still limited and framed within western legal concepts. While legitimising indigenous rights to land, the decision in fact also establishes that the Government can extinguish native title without the consent\(^9\) of the indigenous people who hold the title, if this extinguishment does not breach the laws of the Commonwealth—specifically the 1975 *Racial Discrimination Act* (Bartlett 1993: vii; xx). Therefore the decision recognises native title, but also that this can be ruled out by the State, thus affirming the superiority of white law over traditional indigenous law. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2001) argues that the possibility of extinguishment is inconsistent with common law and that it was introduced by the High Court with the sole intention of maintaining white interests. According to Moreton-Robinson, the *Mabo* decision maintained the privileges of “patriarchal whiteness” (2001: 164-6).

Furthermore, native title is not automatically granted to indigenous people, but claimants have to prove that they have maintained a connection with the land and have continued those practices associated with the land that their ancestors used to perform before English settlement. In order to claim native title it is necessary to provide evidence of continuous habitation of the land through means recognised

\(^9\) According to Bartlett’s commentary on the decision, three judges dissented on this ruling (Deane, Gaudron and Toohey), arguing that either consent from the indigenous holders of the title or compensation was needed (Bartlett 1993: xx).
under western law. In other words, it needs to be established historically that the land was inhabited in order for native title to be recognised. This is valid also in the case of “forcible removal or expulsion from the land”, in which case native title cannot be proved (Bartlett 1993: xix). This favours white possession, and because of the emphasis on oral communication in indigenous society there are often no written records of indigenous presence on the land. The written records favoured by white society may therefore be recognised as being of more value than oral evidence, thus once again favouring white property rights.¹⁰ Property ownership is interpreted from a white point of view where the ownership of the land needs to be proven by “physical presence” as it is understood by white law: “The idea that you have to have a physical presence on the land to enjoy one’s entitlements is based on conceptions of white property ownership, which requires evidence of human occupation in the form of fences, title deeds or residences” (Moreton-Robinson 2004). Indigenous land possession is determined on the basis of a set of white rules and needs to be legitimised by white law: “patriarchal whiteness sets the criteria for proof and the standards for credibility” (Moreton-Robinson 2001: 167). According to Larissa Behrendt, the *Mabo* case had a limited effect on land issues because “It is the judges who determine what ‘Aboriginal culture’ is” (Behrendt 2007: 103). Aboriginal culture is still defined by the white man’s law which dictates the rules that decide and define a person’s Aboriginality. The necessity of recognition contrasts

¹⁰ This point has been made by Moreton-Robinson in her analysis of the *Yorta Yorta* case where indigenous claims were dismissed and white evidence was privileged over indigenous oral evidence and the evidence of anthropologists. The evidence of the indigenous people and anthropologists was dismissed by the judge as emotional and exaggerated. For a more detailed discussion of the case, see Moreton-Robinson (2004).
with the claims of a multicultural state: it is always the white core culture that establishes the parameters according to which the ‘other’ is defined and given legitimacy.

The historical relevance of the *Mabo* case lies in its overthrowing of the concept of *terra nullius* and its abrogation of the construction of indigenous people as ‘barbarous’ and ‘uncivilised’, thus indirectly revealing the constructed nature of the other as ‘savage’. Justice Brennan directly criticises the concept of *terra nullius* and also rejects Social Darwinism:

> The common law of this country would perpetuate injustice if it were to continue to embrace the enlarged notion of *terra nullius* and to persist in characterizing the indigenous inhabitants of the Australian colonies as people too low in the scale of social organization to be acknowledged as possessing rights and interests in land (Bartlett 1993: 41).

The doctrine of *terra nullius* is clearly addressed as a European construct which had the sole scope of acquiring sovereignty over settled areas even when these were inhabited: this notion in fact allowed the acquisition of a territory without “conquest or cession” because this was considered to be “‘desert uninhabited’ country. The hypothesis being that there was no local law already in existence in the territory” (Bartlett 1993: 24). The acquisition of Australian sovereignty by the Crown was therefore based on the assumption that there was no previous sovereignty. What the *Mabo* decision established, however, is that the acquisition of sovereignty over Australian territory did not extinguish the property rights of the indigenous people.
The justices were aware of the importance of the decision for the Australian nation to come to terms with its ‘shameful past’. As Povinelli has argued, the decision was driven by the will to reintegrate Australia among first world nations, and indigenous land rights were used to this end:

Native title condenses and stands in for Australian aspirations for first-worldness (symbolically white, Euro-American) on the margins of Euro-American and Asia-Pacific domination, with the Aboriginal subject (indigenous blackness) standing as the material to be worked over for the nation to maintain its place in (Western) modernity, an organic barometer of national redemption. The court’s use of the shamed Anglo-Celtic Australian fixed the ideal image of the nation as a white, first-world, global player in the national imaginary (Povinelli 2002: 182-3).

This view was confirmed by the words of Prime Minister Paul Keating who commented that Australia had “finally entered the mainstream of world opinion” (quoted in Russell 2005: 283). According to Bain Atwood, Keating’s stress on the importance of Aboriginal heritage in the process of constructing a stronger national identity was a way of claiming, through Aboriginality,11 a sense of belonging (1996: xxxiii-xxxiv). The Keating Government’s focus on Australia’s past and the need to overcome the history of dispossession can be seen as a way of reshaping Australia’s identity and in the words of Keating himself this was a “test” to see if Australia “truly” is “the land of the fair go” (quoted in Atwood 1996: xxxiii). However, even as the overthrow of terra nullius stands in stark contrast to

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11 The Keating Government’s stress on the importance of recognising and acknowledging the past wrongs and discrimination against indigenous people has been interpreted by Atwood as an attempt at “indigenising ourselves through Aboriginality” (Atwood 1996: xxiv).
the idea of the legend, some of the characteristics of the legend continued to be given an extraordinary importance and they are still the ones that characterise the ‘real’ Australia. Although the Mabo decision is unquestionably a pivotal moment in Australian history, the decision itself has been made into an instrument with which to keep the privileges of white Australia unchanged or unchallenged. The decision and its outcome are still oriented towards celebrating Australia and Australianness. It is defined on the basis of white canons, in white courts and on the determination by white Australians of what is meant by Aboriginal tradition. The recognition of native title does not give full power to indigenous people and their claim to title is still determined by white Australian law: as even Keating conceded “native title land […] is…kept fully within the reach of Australian law” (quoted in Attwood 1996: xxxv).

Notwithstanding the Government’s reassurance, in 1993 the Mabo decision started a public and political debate over the consequences of native title on land tenure.\footnote{The larger debate on the Mabo decision was delayed, and started a year after the original decision, that is, in June 1993 (see Markus 1996: 88-9; Russel 2005: 282-3).} The main concerns were addressed by the mining industry in the person of Hugh Morgan, and the pastoralists who perceived the decision as menacing “the prosperity of the nation” (Gale 2005: 37). An examination of the public reaction to the Mabo decision is fundamental to an understanding of subsequent legislation over native title. The significance of the Mabo decision lies not only in the decision itself, but in its consequences and in the public debate that followed it: the
decision was given enormous publicity in the media,\textsuperscript{13} which bought into
the ‘propaganda’ against native title. This debate was aimed at limiting
the consequences of the \textit{Mabo} decision (which was perceived as a threat
to economic interests) by winning the favour of the “moral community”
(Markus 1996: 89). Among the kind of propaganda used were references
to the risk that people’s backyards were under threat from native claims
(Russell 2005: 285; Markus 1996: 89; Gale 2005: 39) and the possibility
of the creation of a separate state system (Markus 1996: 89). Andrew
Markus analyses in some detail the reaction to the \textit{Mabo} judgement,
arguing that it was mainly influenced by the will to maintain capitalist
economic interests.\textsuperscript{14} The decision was presented as threatening those
interests and in some cases as threatening the unity of the nation, as in
the case of Geoffrey Blainey who argued that “to extend land rights is
also to weaken…the real sovereignty and unity of the Australian people”
(quoted in Markus 1996: 89) where ‘Australian people’ is clearly read as
‘white Australian people’. Markus also analyses the racist content of the
debate, arguing that it was mainly directed towards the conservative
electorate in an attempt to win public support against the \textit{Mabo} decision
(1996: 98-9). These debates led the Keating Labor Government to
introduce the \textit{Native Title Act} in 1993 to formalise the recognition of

\textsuperscript{13} The relevance given by the media to the \textit{Mabo} case is mirrored in McGahan’s novel \textit{The White Earth} (2005).

\textsuperscript{14} Markus discusses the use of five different themes in the negative response to \textit{Mabo}. The first was the exaggeration of the consequences—possible claims over backyards and national division (Markus 1996: 89). The second concerned the use of history and past dispossession to justify Aboriginal dispossession (Markus 1996: 90). The third exalted the position of Australian Aborigines as a privileged minority (Markus 1996: 90-1). The fourth criticised the High Court’s decision, arguing that the Court acted beyond its power: legislation is a power entitled only to the elected Parliament (Markus 1996: 91). The fifth theme was the one that commented on the nature of Aboriginal civilisation, describing it as primitive (Markus 1996: 92).
This Act recognises native title and defines the rules by which to determine the existence of native title, how to apply for it and the possibility for compensation. The Act establishes the National Native Title Tribunal which focuses on native title claims, and the Indigenous Land Fund for compensation (Butt et al. 2001: 95-7). The Act, however, still maintains white Australian rights and validates Commonwealth legislation—extended to include state and territory legislation—that would otherwise be cancelled by the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Russell 2005: 305-6).

A further turning point in land issues in Australia was a second High Court decision, the Wik judgement (1996) which ruled that native title was not extinguished by pastoral leases but coexisted with them (Butt et al. 2001: 100). This second decision of the High Court roused even more debate because white Australians saw it as a further threat to their property rights. The reaction to this decision was immediate and both mining companies and the National Farmers’ Federation condemned it, demanding amendments to the Native Title Act (Moreton-Robinson 2001: 169). On 4 September 1997, the Prime Minister John Howard showed a map of Australia according to which a large part of the country was potentially subject to native title claim (Moreton-Robinson 2001: 169; Gale 2005: 1). The Howard Liberal Government passed the Native Title Amendment Act in 1998. This Act, known as the ‘Ten Point Plan’, re-

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16 The Act establishes which grants extinguish native title (freehold grants) and which others suspend it, for example, “grants of mining leases” (Butt et al. 2001: 97).
established white land rights, significantly limiting the possibility of native claim (Gale 2005: 1). The Howard Government’s reaction to the Native Title Act by establishing the Amendment Act, and the prominence given in the media to native title, could be seen as attempts to neutralise the threats that native title posed to white power and to the discourses of whiteness. Peter Gale clearly spells out the role played by fear and the media in land issues in Australia when he argues that the public attention to land rights recalled past conflicts over land at the time of settlement. The presence of fear in contemporary discussions about land is fundamental because it connects to the old fears associated with the settlement of the land and emphasises the feeling of a threat to the nation (Gale 2005: 42).

The Mabo judgement brought to the fore a colonial reading of the doctrine of terra nullius. This reading had been used by white settlers to claim their right to settle in Australia and to define it as a land recognised in law as ‘no one’s land’. Implicit in the settling of Australia was the principle that, legally, it was an unoccupied land, a wilderness. According to European law, in order to settle a land without any agreement with the previous inhabitants, it had to be empty or without any trace of sovereignty. Captain Cook’s instructions compelled him to sign agreements with the inhabitants of the land, if any. Cook and Banks both reported that the population inhabiting Australia was scattered and lived mainly on the

17 According to Gale, a similar attitude towards indigenous land rights had been displayed by Pauline Hanson who in 1996 “appealed to the fears of farmers and the sentiments of what was fair for ‘white Australians’ […] at the launch of the One Nation Party” (Gale 2005: 40).

18 McGahan (2005) clearly refers to the association between the land issues of the 1990s and the early conflict between settlers and indigenous people.
coast (Frost 1990: 70-1), hence the British government decided to settle Australia and take possession of the land. To reinforce the right of settlement through *terra nullius*, it was necessary to construct the non-European other as ‘savages’ who were unable to farm the land as they were only hunters and gatherers. Indigenous people were thus described as primitive people who roamed the land, living on any food they could find. They did not build houses, did not farm and to the colonial eye, they seemed not to have an organised society but lived in small groups. The view of Australia as a wilderness was thus another colonial construct. The colonisers’ first reaction to the land was to map it. Mapping is a means of appropriating the land by knowing it, defining its boundaries and describing its shape and dimensions. The dispossession of indigenous people’s land was followed by the settlers’ attempts to model the landscape and try to eliminate wilderness, making it as similar as possible to the landscape they knew. In this way, the dominant culture refused to see the Australian landscape as having been modelled for thousands of years by its inhabitants (Gammage 2011). Herein lies the significance of the *Mabo* judgement; it overturned this position and called into question all of the earlier assumptions used to justify *terra nullius*.

In the context of my reading of the legend generally and of McGahan and Grenville in particular, the *Mabo* decision is pivotal. *Mabo* in fact questions many of the foundational myths of the settler nation, overthrowing the foundational narrative of the settling of an empty land and of the bushman/settler writing on an empty landscape. Whether
native title is legally recognised or denied, the landscape can no longer be considered empty. Therefore the heroic enterprise of fighting against a wilderness loses much of its relevance: it was the settling of a land that was already inhabited, of a wilderness that was not authentic because the landscape had already been written on by indigenous people. Australia was not an empty page at the time of settlement, it was not simply the ‘negative text’ of Lawson’s ‘emptiness’ with which begins “The Drover’s Wife” (1892).

The recognition of previous ownership of the land threatens the invader’s claim to indigeneity, questioning the legitimacy of settlement itself. Australians have had to rethink and renegotiate their Australianness. The obliteration of *terra nullius* implies a different perception of the role of white Australians in settlement and their position, or even the legitimacy of their position, in the land. The notion of white Australian ownership is questioned as is the exaltation of the role of the bushman in settling the country. The foundational moment of the nation is therefore exposed as constructed, as indeed a discourse. The legend as a foundational myth becomes increasingly invalid and needs to be rethought. The ‘indigene’ is reimagined, redefined: he is no longer the other who needs to be defined as alien and inferior, as the recognition of native title restores to him pre-existing rights to law and land that need to be recognised. The legend is submerged even more; it shifts and changes, becoming an ever-defining element without being directly addressed. Behrendt raises a very interesting point on the discussion over *terra nullius*, pointing out that it “is
another attempt to use a semantic debate to hide an historical travesty” (2007: 105). It is just a means of diverting attention away from the real issue, indigenous land rights. These debates draw attention to aspects of the hidden discourse that surfaces at these points and then disappears again, taking us back to Foucault’s words: “We must be ready to receive every moment of discourse in its sudden irruption” (Foucault 2008: 28).

These political and historical debates have seen a flow-on effect in subsequent literature. As noted earlier, contemporary authors are readdressing the role of the legend and the role of history in the construction of the legend. They often present history from an unofficial angle, giving fictional characters historical depth so as to challenge the validity of historical truth, pointing to the presence of multiple truths. The exalted history of settlement is exposed as a discursive construction which served the purpose of colonisation and helped in the imposition of power, thereby exposing the influence power has on the production of knowledge. Authors contest historical claims to absolute ‘truth’, exposing and presenting a variety of different stories that collectively constitute the multifaceted nature of truth. The relativity of truth and the relativity of history as a discourse of power are exposed. This is evident in the fictional works that will be analysed. In *The Secret River* (2005), Kate Grenville rethinks the history of first contact, ridiculing the assumption of an empty land. In *The White Earth* (2004), set during the years of the

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19 In *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002), Alex Miller, winner of the Miles Franklin award in 2003, deconstructs *terra nullius* and exposes the violent settlement of the land.

20 In *Joan Makes History* (1988), Kate Grenville presents major Australian events from the perspective of a woman, one of the minorities silenced by official history (Grenville 2002).
Mabo decision, McGahan addresses terra nullius as well as the wrongdoings of settlement and questions the validity of historical accounts of early settlement. McGahan and Grenville are reclaiming the side of history that was excluded from the ‘official’ history.\(^{21}\)

In these contemporary novels, the mythology of the bushman is no longer strong: the characters employed by the authors have some of the characteristics of the bushman but they are different figures, as many of them openly critique white attitudes. It is not the historical truth of the legend that is at stake in these narratives. The fact is that by now the legend is recognised as a construct. The qualities considered to be typical of the average Australian are shown to be the same ones which are attributed to the representative of the legend. When deployed, the ‘bushman’ figure of the legend finds a different function as his characteristics are simply used either to make someone more ‘Australian’ or at other times to ridicule the ‘typical Australian’. The fact is that by now the legend has been so internalised that it is recognised as a discourse, and as such is not part of an historical truth. The legend functions differently in that its discursivity is recognised but its metaphorical significations continue to be utilised.

White settlement no longer becomes a moment of exaltation, of brave men settling an unknown land, but of men taking a land that was already

\(^{21}\) Indigenous authors will take a stronger position on this subject, as we will see in Chapter Five.
inhabited.\textsuperscript{22} The iconic figure of the bushman, the explorer, the brave white man fighting against the wilderness, loses its power and the validity of this stereotype as the representative of national identity is questioned. After the \textit{Mabo} judgment, there is evidence regarding the inadequacy of this figure. Australian identity needs to be rethought and indeed redrawn in order to reflect both the new reality of a multicultural Australia and the ‘work’ which has to be done in arriving at this new identity. As well as redefining Australian identity, the discursive nature of history needs also to be addressed because, as Attwood argues, “historical discourses have long played a fundamental role in constructing the categories of ‘Aborigines’ and ‘Australia(n)’” (Atwood 1996: vii). The revisiting and attempts to address past deficiencies in the official accounts of Australia’s history have not been without their discontents. With the rise of the conservative Howard Government came a backlash against what is now known as the ‘black armband’ view of Australian history, a term coined by Geoffrey Blainey (1993). The importance attributed to debates on Australian history, known in recent times as the ‘history wars’, is fundamentally connected to questions of white identity. As outlined by Behrendt, the real nature of debates such as ‘the history wars’ was that:

\textsuperscript{22}David Malouf’s \textit{Remembering Babylon} (1993) deals with the theme of \textit{terra nullius} and the settler’s perception of the landscape as threatening. The settlers try to make it as similar as possible to the landscape they know: “Out here, the very ground under their feet was strange. It had never been ploughed […] good reason, that, for stripping it, as soon as you could manage, of every vestige of the native; for ringbarking and clearing and reducing it to what would make it, at last, just a bit like home” (Malouf 1994: 9). Set in Queensland in the 1830s, the novel presents Gemmy, who after having spent years with the Aborigines, returns to ‘civilisation’. Gemmy represents the white ‘savage’, the returned white man gone ‘native’. This character expresses the fears of the settlers of losing their ‘whiteness’ through prolonged contact with the land and in this case through life with the indigenous people. At the same time Gemmy represents the possibility of white belonging to the land as he is truly “assimilated” (Pierce 1999: 150). Pierce analyses this novel in connection to the myth of the child lost in the bush (Pierce 1999: 146-50).
Those debates are not about Aboriginal history. They are about white identity. These debates are about the story that non-Aboriginal Australians want to tell themselves about their country, and, more specifically, they are about the story that white people want to tell themselves about this country (Behrendt 2007: 106).

This point clearly addresses the use that has been made of history and in general the production of knowledge which has been constructed to create a convenient ‘past’ by the coloniser. The attachment of meanings of ‘truth’ defined by white Australians to this knowledge has guaranteed the continuation of this discourse which allowed them to maintain power.

The influence these historical events have on subsequent literature is particularly evident in my first case study, McGahan's *The White Earth* (2004).23 Set in the year of the *Mabo* decision, this novel questions the

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23 Before I proceed with my analysis, a summary will be useful for understanding the key events related in the novel. The novel is set in 1992 and is structured on a parallel narration of present and past. The third person narrator assumes alternately the point of view of William, a nine-year-old boy, when relating present events, and that of his great-uncle John McIvor, when narrating the past. William loses his father after a fire accident while driving a harvester on his small and unproductive wheat farm. William and his mother Veronica are left without a place and William's great-uncle John welcomes them into his house. The man lives in Kuran Station, an old mansion with an old housekeeper, Mrs Griffith. The station is in decay because the property has been neglected for years. As the story evolves we find out that John's intentions are not simply charitable, as he hopes to find in his nephew a worthy inheritor for the station. The old man has his own ideas about the place, its history, the land and the concept of belonging to the land. We also find out that he is involved in the creation of a land movement that hopes to oppose the passage of the *Native Title Act* in Parliament, perceived by John and the farmers he stands for as a threat to their property. John's ‘The Australian Independence League’ is a clear reference to Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party. In a parallel series of chapters we are told John's life story and the process that brought him back to possess Kuran Station after he and his father had to leave it. We are also told the history of the Darling Downs as perceived from McIvor's white nationalist perspective. Later on in the story a third main character comes into play: Ruth, John's daughter, who voices more radical ideas. Although speaking from a privileged white position she is arguing in favour of native title and against her father’s position. However, when at the end she becomes the owner, we see that she is no longer enthusiastic about giving the land back to the legitimate owners, being more interested in taking the land away from her father than in acknowledging indigenous land rights. Even in her limited perspective, however, she presents a different aspect of the story, one that had been silenced, exposing the violence of first contact and the attempt at hiding it. To prove his loyalty to his uncle and his worthiness of the station, William is asked to walk to the water hole, a place considered be the heart of Kuran station. The boy walks on his own in the heat and gets
foundational narrative of the nation—the settlement of an empty land, a few brave men against a wilderness—revisiting the history of the colonisation of the Darling Downs and its consequences for the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. The central concerns of McGahan’s novel are the playing out of the death of old white assumptions such as terra nullius, justifications for land ownership and the dispossession and brutalising of the indigenous population. These historical events and the fictional reconstruction of their effects on the understanding of the Australian past constitute the background to the story. The story unfolds through the eyes of a nine-year-old boy, William, who is instructed by his great-uncle John on the history of the place and on the effects that the Native Title Act, then being discussed in parliament, will have on property. The foundational European narrative of the land is undermined when John’s daughter Ruth presents the boy with the other side of the story.

The relevance of the native title debate to the novel was pointed out by the majority of reviewers upon its publication and on the occasions on which it won awards. The White Earth won several awards, including some of the most prestigious in Australia, such as the Miles Franklin

lost (a clear reference to the child lost in the bush). During his trip, in a hallucinatory state caused by the lack of water and the worsening of his ear infection, he encounters three apparitions. He eventually finds the water hole to be dry, and in the cave at its bottom, where the spring was supposed to be, there are white bones. Through Ruth we find out that those are the bones that testify to the massacre that took place when John was only a child and that his father perpetrated. John, in an attempt to first collect and later burn these proofs, catches fire and together with Veronica dies in the house. William, Ruth and the old housekeeper survive.

24 For reviews that emphasise the relevance of the native title debate in the novel see Stolz (2004), Ley (2004), Tuffield (2004), Metherell (2005), Cloran (2004),

25 Further page references to The White Earth (McGahan 2005) are indicated with WE.
Literary Award in 2005.\textsuperscript{26} The judges' comment on the choice of the novel for the Miles Franklin award praises the “imaginative force and contemporary relevance with which it tells its tale of dynasties and dispossession in South-east Queensland” (quoted in Metherell 2005: 3). McGahan intelligently introduces the native title debates and presents contrasting views on them. The majority of the reviewers praised the way he presents this subject without trying to give answers, but instead posing questions. The relevance given to native title in the novel is among the reasons contributing to its success.

McGahan engages in a rethinking of whiteness, disrupting the usual idea of whites as bringers of progress and productivity to the land by presenting them as bringers of death and sterility. He also engages in a deconstruction of two other major discourses, the legal assumption of \textit{terra nullius} and the validity and authority of history, both of which are presented as fictitious or ambiguous when viewed from an alternative perspective. McGahan employs two main characters to symbolise white Australian society: John and Ruth who represent, respectively, the old colonialist \textit{terra nullius} attitude to white land ownership and the newly-negotiated, post-\textit{Mabo} recognition of the rights of indigenous Australians to land ownership. John McIvor is the character who most of all embodies the contradictions inherent in the native title debate.\textsuperscript{27} Owner of Kuran

\textsuperscript{26} The novel won the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2005 and the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize South East Asia and Pacific Region, in 2005. It also won the Age Book of the Year Award and the Courier-Mail Book of the Year Award in 2004.

\textsuperscript{27} It is significant that there are no indigenous characters in McGahan’s novel, and when mentioned, they belong to the past or are connected to native title claims. While this could be considered a negative aspect, the point is that McGahan is consciously
Station, a large property in the Darling Downs (the station is itself a symbol of the power of the squattocracy), McUvor is a key figure in the novel for both his political views and for his constant attempts to appropriate history and claim indigeneity. His political views are clearly identifiable with those of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party. His views on land ownership and the rights to the land reinforce an erstwhile discourse of whiteness. According to Moreton-Robinson, “the nation is a white possession” (2005: 27). John represents the white nation and white attitudes to land ownership. He embodies the conservative landowner class and is the representative of all the discourses used to justify land dispossession through the myth of the foundation of this country: a few heroic men, counting only on their own strength, stand against a harsh environment over which they alone can triumph.

A painting in John’s office of the early settlement of Kuran Station represents a visual rendering of the Australian landscape as hostile. This painting, dating back to the 1860s, is described as “brown and muted” (WE 46) and shows sheep and people on horseback. There are also black figures in the corner of the painting. The inclusion of the indigenous

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28 The station represents the squattocracy: “the sheep barons of the Darling Downs (the Pure Merinos, as they were known)” (WE 23). The station was purchased in the 1860s by the White family—the choice of name is significant—who completed the building of the mansion which became the largest one in the region. The mansion, symbol itself of white colonial power and its imposition upon the land, is described in terms of both its magnificence at the time it was built and its state of decay in the present. The House is steeped with juxtapositions, being itself a place characterised by darkness and by terms linked to decay: William first notes its sagging roof, shuttered windows, overgrown garden and cracked and sunken steps, signifying the decline of the old landed gentry—“hints that it had once been something grander” (WE 17). The garden, once a “formal English garden” (WE 24), is overgrown and has been reclaimed by the bush (WE 17).
people in the representation of a land that had been considered empty is significant—they are a presence too obvious and perhaps too disturbing to be completely ignored. This painting is juxtaposed with another painting showing a fox hunt in an English landscape characterised by green hills and a castle. England and its reassuring green hills are thus compared to the Australian landscape and its dangerous surroundings—which includes the inhabitants, who constitute yet another threat along with the landscape. It is significant that the one who contrasts this view of land ownership is a woman, Ruth. It is an expression of the white patriarchal view of land, a point made explicit in the novel: John in fact believes ownership to be “a male concern” (WE 341). The whole novel may be read as a critique of white conservative attitudes to land ownership.

The diverging perceptions of the settlement of the region are exposed through the interpretation of this painting by different viewers. John sees the white riders as bringers of progress and describes the land as a wilderness in need of taming. He stresses the foundation of Australia and the importance of pioneers confronting the harsh country, to the point of justifying violence against the indigenous population, seeing it as a necessity. This telling of the story from McIvor’s point of view is clearly a celebration of whiteness, a celebration of the white side of history, the legend, and the myth of settlement of an empty land. Ruth’s perception, by contrast, is seen in her explanation to William: “You know, no one really found Kuran. And it wasn’t empty. Other people were already here”
(WE 276). *Terra nullius* is clearly being questioned here. McGahan uses these visual images, the paintings that seem to change shape and meaning according to who is looking, to modify the meaning of what is seen and also the history of the settlement. William’s understanding of these opposite perspectives reveals the uncertainty of colonialist discourses, opening up the possibility of different interpretations. Significantly there is no Aboriginal character. The story is told from a white perspective, and even though some of the characters support Aboriginal rights, they are still speaking from a privileged position. McGahan does not speak for indigenous people, but carries out a critique of Australian history and attitudes towards indigenous people.

In narrating the history of Kuran Station, the novel immediately plays with the myth of the lonely white man against the wilderness.29 It is the 1840s and there is a “land rush”: “A few lone men staking out boundaries in what was then an unknown wilderness” (WE 23). This representation of Australia as a place founded on the hard work of settlers in a difficult environment is consistent with Moreton-Robinson’s analysis of the construction of an antagonistic landscape which excludes indigenous people as a means of ignoring the dispossession of their lands and the violence involved in this dispossession: “by creating the landscape as oppressor, the values and virtues of achieving white possession can be valorised and Indigenous dispossession can be erased” (Moreton-Robinson 2005: 26).

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29 The novel is set at Kuran Station. The text is preceded by two maps: one of the fictional Powell Region on the Kuran Plains and the other of Kuran Station itself.
Through his main character, John McIvor, McGahan engages with the myth created by the legend. John himself is a representative of the legend, both in the ideas he expresses and in his attempt to impersonate the myth of the bushman. As a young man he is “hardy and able”, “tall and handsome and sure of himself, quick, capable and strong” (WE 27).

When the station is sold and they are left without work he decides to go “westwards” (WE 73) in search of fortune. He looks for employment on cattle and sheep stations, among drovers, railway gangs, and shearsers—all occupations typical of the Australian bushman—but because of the depression he ends up as a swagman, ‘tramping’.30 His impression of the country west of Kuran Station is negative, it is arid and desolate: “the great emptiness of the west, naked and red oppressed him” (WE 74).31

30 Another important point McGahan addresses is the role of Banjo Paterson’s “Waltzing Matilda” in the creation of a shared idea of Australia. According to John McIvor the official national anthem does not say anything about Australia, while this ballad does: it is believed to carry the essence of Australianess. We have already discussed in Chapter Two the relevance given to this ballad by Xavier Herbert. McGahan also stresses its importance in the construction of an Australian identity. However, the context in which McGahan places it—a rally aimed at contesting native title and above all one that ends in racist attitudes—is significant. McGahan could be said to be willingly criticising the racist attitudes that went together with the legend at the foundation of the Australian nation.

31 In his novel 1988 (1995) set in the year of the Bicentenary of the nation, McGahan had already stressed the emptiness of the country outside Brisbane: “The country was all reds and dull greens, scrub and ant-mounds [...] farm houses baked under the sky” (McGahan 1995: 37). This description of the landscape reminds one of Lawson’s “The Drover’s Wife” with its emptiness. In this novel McGahan plays with Australian myths and stereotypes through the experience of two young protagonists, Gordon and Wayne, who travel towards a weather station in the Northern Territory. Their expectations of the country and their comments are a clear attempt by the author at ridiculing Australian myths. The idea of the outback as a ‘mythical place’ is ridiculed when they arrive at Longreach: “Gateway (so community road signs said) to the Outback” (McGahan 1995: 41). They do not fit in the outback and clearly stand out as city people looked upon with concern by the locals. The myth of the bushranger as “a hero, a pioneer” (McGahan 1995: 42) is also presented through a guide book that tells the story of Captain Starlight. The fact that they are out of place in the Australian outback is further emphasised when they climb a hill to see the landscape and their disappointment is strong: “what was I expecting? To master the outback? I wasn’t Captain Starlight” (McGahan 1995: 48). And the final critique of the legend comes with the character Barry, a ranger who represents the typical Australian and who makes them feel inadequate because they cannot relate
His impression of Brisbane is no better: “he hated the cities with their crowds and squalor” (*WE 74*). McIvor eventually succeeds in identifying himself with the myth when he works as a logger, another job which suggestively requires a man to possess the characteristics of the typical Australian, above all mateship.

McIvor’s ideas about Australia and the settling of the country echo and exalt the legend. McIvor’s account of the history of the Darling Downs completely ignores the presence of the Aboriginal people and starts with the arrival of the first white people. He emphasises the settling of the land, the foundational moment in mythical terms, describing the achievements of the first men who settled on the land, their loneliness and the hardship of fighting against the landscape: “Go back to the 1840s, when white men first came here. This was a wilderness, far beyond the colonial frontier. There was no civilisation, no law and order—that was all a thousand miles behind, back in Sydney. So those first men

themselves to the legend: he is capable, is able to survive in the most difficult conditions, and he has truly mastered the landscape. After their failure at fishing and crab hunting and their obvious inappropriateness in the bush—ironically they cannot even keep up with Barry’s drinking (McGahan 1995: 219)—the ranger believes that if “alone in the bush” they “wouldn’t last three days” (McGahan 1995: 220). The feeling that they are “useless” because of their displacement is a critique of the legend, a legend that does not represent the majority of Australians but that is still alive. Gordon’s belief that Barry would not survive in Brisbane is readily dismissed by Wayne who states: “they’d worship him. They’d make a TV show out of him. He’s good looking. He can do everything. He’s the great Australian dream” (McGahan 1995: 221). This final remark clearly shows that the myth of the bushman is still alive in the national identity, even as the novel continues to critique it.

32 Here there is a clear reference to the legend as romanticised by Paterson and Lawson, but McGahan seems to lean more towards Lawson’s version of the story: in fact, out west John only meets “wandering souls” (*WE 73*) in search of work. This passage is reminiscent of Lawson’s description of the country out west and the miserable lives of those who lived there. The negative descriptions of the west are juxtaposed with the description of the Kuran Plains where the “rolling hills” (*WE 74*) are a clear reference to Paterson and his descriptions of the bush. There is also a reference in this passage to Paterson and Lawson’s representation of the squalor of the city in their poetry (“Clancy of the Overflow” and “Faces in the Street” for instance).
were completely alone, a law unto themselves” (WE 128). As well as the “wilderness” against which these men had to fight, John also mentions the “blacks” who “were spearing sheep, or just as likely the shepherds. Nothing you could do if they did—no police, no hospitals, no one to help. A man had to look after himself. [...] That’s independence for you. It means hard work and self-reliance. And that’s how Australia began” (WE 129). In this passage McIvor emphasises the achievement of those men by positioning them against “wilderness” and “blacks” and silently justifying violence with the excuse that there was no law and no institutions such as police and hospitals through which power and control are wielded. The myth at the foundation of Australianness is here clearly emphasised.

What is suggested is that the explorer has to fight to discover the land. Two explorers are mentioned by John McIvor: the first one is Allan Cunningham, a “famous explorer” who in 1827 “battled his way north from Sydney through forests and mountain ranges” (WE 81) and ‘discovered’ the Darling Downs. The second one is Alfred Kirchmeyer who ‘discovered’ the place where Kuran Station stands. His name is not to be

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33 The authority of the institutions and in particular of the police is represented by what William finds in the chest in the red room: an “army officer’s cap”, “a uniform”, “a badge” and “a pistol” (WE 155). They are symbols of authority. The hat, which belongs to a Queensland Mounted Police uniform, is linked to power: wearing the hat and holding the pistol in his hand William feels “power working in him” (WE 155). The idea that the hat is linked to authority is emphasised by the repetition of it: “The badge seemed to cast a glow of authority before it” (WE 165), “the authority of the metal badge” (WE 250). And its meaning is significant when William meets the apparitions who recognise the hat and the authority of it; the shepherd had withdrawn, “the explorer had saluted its authority. And the bunyip had regarded it with ancient hostility” (WE 336). Also significant is the room where William finds the uniform: the walls are “painted a blood red” (WE 153), an anticipation of the bloody history linked to Daniel McIvor, John’s father, the owner of the uniform.
found in “history books. Alfred was no bushman, he was just a smalltime Sydney surveyor […] Maybe he dreamt of finding the infamous inland sea” (WE 161). The station was named after the indigenous people who killed the explorer: “It’s hard to say who really won in the end. The Kuran people are long gone—shot, or killed by disease, or carted away. And Alfred—no one around here even remembers his name” (WE 163). The importance of being remembered, of having named some part of the country or having a statue to commemorate the expedition is emphasised by John, who refers to the explorer’s illegible journal as “an awful thing” (WE 163). Because “discovery isn’t enough. Doing something great isn’t enough” (WE 163) unless people know about it.

The explorer’s belongings and his journal are found years after his death and they are kept by McIvor in a cabinet in the ‘red room’ where William finds them:

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34 The similarities between the story of this explorer and the one told in Voss are significant. Neither of them are expert bushmen, their journals are lost, they are killed by indigenous people, their food supplies and their horses are stolen, and their expeditions are a failure. Both McGahan and Patrick White celebrate the defeat of the rational man by the Australian country. These similarities are even more evident when William ‘meets’ the apparition of this explorer during his trip towards the water hole. This part of the novel when William wanders towards the water hole reminds us of Patrick White’s Voss. The idea of the explorer in search of the inland sea is repeated by the apparition loaded with instruments and a compass (WE: 309). The explorer and the hellish landscape in which he appears reminds us as well of Voss's expedition when the party advances through a landscape that is more than once referred to as “hell” (see White 1994: 362-4). Similarly, in Voss, "the water holes are dry in hell" (White 1994: 362), and the water hole William finds is also dry. The idea that the journey is endless is present in both novels: “endless track” (WE 308). Some of the reviewers noticed the similarity between this novel and Patrick White’s Voss: Aviva Tuffield and James Lay (2004) mentioning it in a positive way, and Michelle Griffin (2004) viewing it negatively.

35 The novel also presents clear gothic references. The old mansion is in a state of complete decay, the upper level of the house is closed and it is strictly forbidden to William to enter those doors (WE 62). Of course, the boy disobeys and when he ventures upstairs the novel reminds us of a gothic novel: “the floor creaked […] faint rustling in the ceiling. The great hall […] a cavern of shadows”; but this is contradicted by “there was no such thing as ghosts” (WE 152). William discovers a padlocked room: “he advanced into a darkness that was weirdly crimson […] the walls were painted a blood
There was an old pair of spectacle frames, without any lenses. There was a tarnished metal compass with a broken needle. There was what looked like a fob watch, all blackened, the face missing and the inside caked with dirt. There was a red leather-bound notebook, faded and stiff, its cover scuffed and scratched* (WE 154).

The compass and the watch, scientific instruments to measure space and time were useless. His attempt at mapping and knowing the land was defeated—his documents are illegible, his writing deleted by the elements. His enterprise has no value because there are no written documents to testify his findings. His commemorative statue that used to adorn one of the Station fountains is long gone. The importance of written evidence* is exemplified by the two maps of the Station in John’s office which are meant to celebrate white power over the land—one represents

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*Written sources are juxtaposed against oral ones in the novel. Written sources are attributed more value than oral ones in legal terms (see Moreton-Robinson 2004). However, the importance of oral sources is reasserted by one of the characters, a PhD student who is writing a thesis on the Aboriginal history of the Hoop Mountains, and who is taking into account both written and oral sources: “People’s letters and journals—early settlers, the loggers, the odd explorer. And old maps [...] But oral sources [...] like Aboriginal legends” (WE 91). The history of settlement and colonisation has relied almost exclusively on written documents and archives, placing indigenous culture, often an oral tradition, at a severe disadvantage. The tendency to rely mostly on white-generated archives as the main source still persists, as may be seen in the ‘history wars’ involving Windshuttle and Reynolds (Ravenscroft 2004: 3). In recent years the value of relying on such written archives has been reconsidered through the application of postcolonial theory and oral history projects. The necessity of including other histories, from oral sources, diaries and unofficial records, is paramount if the other side of the story, the Australian history of indigenous people, is to be written.
Kuran Station before subdivision, the other is more recent, the boundaries marked as a “spiderweb” (WE 45).

The legend is a romantic myth of survival and has been used to claim the land, to claim belonging, to legitimise white presence on the land. In terms of the legend, for the white man the settlement is a constructive act, an act that models, defines, and encloses the wilderness often through the introduction of physical demarcations and by naming. This is radically different from the Aboriginal idea of a country that does not need physically constructed demarcations, but that is there before it is defined: the country is a pre-given. Richard Dyer notes that the frontier, as the bringer of order and civilisation to a wilderness, marks the “border between established and unestablished order”, and points to the effect of the introduction of the idea of “border” in a society that had “no concept of boundaries and of the order and civilisation that this bespeaks in the white imagination” (1997: 33).37 In the novel the lack of fences is pointed out as a sign of the wilderness of the place, and the imposition of order on the land through these physical demarcations represents the imposition of western concepts of property on the Australian landscape. Fencing and mapping constitute a way of defining and appropriating the land. This excludes the possibility of other ways of possessing the land since the absence of fencing and housing is seen as the absence of human presence. The emptiness of the land is emphasised throughout

37 In his discussion of the frontier, Richard Dyer refers to North America where a similar doctrine of terra nullius was used to justify colonisation. For more detail see Dyer (1997: 33-4) and Footnote 29 p. 226 which discusses the philosophical foundations of this doctrine.
the novel, even though John himself recognises the contradiction implicit in it. When John works in the mountains as a logger he notices evidence “of a long human presence” (WE 100). In fact, on the trunks of the bunya pines the loggers see “a ladder of footholds, seemingly cut out by a stone axe, perhaps as much as two centuries earlier. All across the mountains there was no other clear sign that people had been there before white men—no dwellings or middens or cave drawings” (WE 99). When it is mentioned, the presence of the indigenous people on the land is located in a distant past, thus positioning the original inhabitants ‘outside’ history. This is spelled out when John first mentions the Aborigines to William as those who could claim his land: William “thought of deserts, and dark-skinned figures with spears, but he had never met a black person” (WE 136). Here there is a clear reference to the construction of the other as a figure belonging to the past, to a time before modernity. In this way indigenous people are denied any rights in the present because of their representation outside time, and in the western sense, their existence in prehistory. As John repeatedly says, the Aborigines “were gone and wouldn’t be coming back” (WE 100). According to Homi Bhabha the culture that is colonised is perceived as fixed, a concept which has been applied to Australian Aboriginal culture in order to write the indigenous people out of a western sense of history, and therefore outside of any possible claim to and inclusion in western society (Bhabha 2004: 111).

We return to the central theme of the novel which is the debate around native title and the perceived threat to white Australian land ownership.
McGahan plays with the media propaganda that surrounded the native title debate in 1993, exposing and ridiculing the discourses used against native title. John McIvor’s “THE AUSTRALIAN INDEPENDENCE LEAGUE” (WE 126) organises a rally to discuss native title, which John believes to be a “disaster” (WE 135), since it could deprive people of their rights to their own land and “will alienate land to the black minority” (WE 132). The possible outcomes of native title legislation are all voiced by the members of the committee of the League, including the not uncommon rhetoric that “half the country is open to claim. The pastoral industry, the mining industry, they’d both be paralysed” (WE 185). The unreality of those threats is made clear by the suggestion of one of the members to choose a property that could be open to claim and call the TV and the newspapers: “They’d love it—a struggling farmer and his family, terrified of being kicked off their land, land they’ve worked for generations. And in the meantime we’re screaming at the cameras—You could be next! [...] Your back yards aren’t safe!” (WE 188).  

The League members’ aim is “to preserve some true Australian values” (WE 186), and these values are believed to be in the bush “out west” (WE 187).

The “Charter” of the League reinstates the principles at the foundation of the White Australia Policy: “we reject special and preferential treatment of elite minorities/We reject the alienation of Australian soil to elite

38 Griffin argues that Andrew McGahan’s interest in native title seems to be more in the “paranoia about land grabs than in the legislation itself” (2004: 3). As quoted in the interview, the author says: “They were literally out there saying you’ll lose your backyard, your football stadiums, your beaches: the hysteria was so high that it did lead a few years later to the whole One Nation thing” (Griffin 2004: 3).

minorities” (WE 133)—this ‘reverse’ discrimination is one of the arguments used to contest native title. Hage identifies this construction of minorities as a threat to the privileges of “ordinary” white Australians as typical of the discourse of “white decline” a manifestation of “White paranoia” (Hage 2003: 64-5). This ‘white paranoia’ is conveyed through John, who claims to be a ‘normal’ Australian, perfectly epitomising the white assumption of whiteness as the ‘norm’ (Dyer 1997: 3): “You had to be a migrant, or black, or homosexual. But God help you if you were a normal Australian, let alone a farmer like me” (WE 138). The line in the Charter “all Australians are equal” (WE 133) clearly refers to white Australians, and its racist undertones are further stressed in the line: “We reject excessive immigration and the dilution of traditional Australian culture” (WE 133). The use of the word “dilution” brings with it the idea of ‘blood dilution’, used in the years when eugenic theories were largely accepted in Australia.40 During the nationalist rally organised by the League, the racist undertones are brought to a climax when the members of the committee try to imitate the Ku Klux Klan (WE 216). The imagery of white-robed people bearing a flaming cross is an explicit association of whiteness with death, echoing Dyer’s interpretation of the Ku Klux Klan as “an image of the bringing of death”, perfectly marrying white death and fire (1997: 209).

According to McIvor, the problem is with the legislation which “says that we stole this country, when in fact we earned it” (WE 212). John’s

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40 For a discussion of these theories and their influence see Chapter Five.
argument that he had to fight his entire life to “earn” his property (137-8) reinstates a concept that is peculiar to discourses of whiteness: that the property has to be earned and ownership is the result of hard work. The assumption, of course simply reaffirms the principle of the land as *terra nullius*: “part of the theory is that the Aborigines didn’t work the land, they just left it as they found it, and so therefore they had no rights of ownership” (*WE* 174). The novel corrects this misunderstanding and makes a defence of the *Mabo* judgement by using the media:

The *Mabo* judgement […] recognised finally that *terra nullius* was always a lie, and now the government is responding to historical reality with the Native Title legislation. This country was Aboriginal land and it was stolen from them without compensation. […] but Native Title is at least the first step in righting the wrong. […] but if your land is freehold, Native Title won’t touch it. It shouldn’t even touch pastoral leases. […] It’s hardly stealing farms away (*WE* 174-5).

Behind the fear of losing property lies the knowledge, though suppressed, that the land belongs to someone else. John’s attitude towards the land seems to suggest an ability to sense a different understanding of it, one that is closer to the indigenous people, but he cannot grasp it: “He seemed to perceive the land around him as something powerful in its own right—to hear a voice in it, meant specifically for human ears” (*WE* 100). As a young logger John is supposed to know the country, and to have the capacity to master it, but he is aware he does not quite belong: “he was still a stranger to the mountains. He had not grown up there, nor had anyone in his family. Maybe it took a lifetime to get a piece of country into your bones; and maybe other lifetimes as well, your father’s and grandfather’s” (*WE* 100). This sense of unbelonging grows into a need to
claim belonging when he becomes a land owner: buying land is “about knowing where you belong [...] this is where I belong” (WE 109). John’s ‘fantasy’ of belonging to the land, of being able to listen to the land is a way of claiming his right to own the place. John is trying to appropriate indigenous ways of knowing the land: “This country will speak to you too, if you listen. The blacks say it flows into you through your feet, and they are right. But it's not an Aboriginal thing. It's not a white thing either. It’s a human thing. Not everyone has it” (WE 295). This can be understood as John’s way of claiming indigeneity to the place through his connection with the land. However, John’s idea of belonging is strictly connected to ownership and it is an imposition of a concept of ownership on the land which contrasts with the indigenous one: white land ownership needs to be proved through documents that certify it and it needs to be absolute (WE 192).

William ponders the importance of “knowing the land [...] Knowledge was the essence of ownership. The black men, it seemed, had held the knowledge when they had owned the land” (WE 181). Knowledge is the key to ownership. Seen through William’s eyes, ownership is also linked to power and knowledge:

Ownership was something that enlarged the veins and enriched the blood. [...] if it was his he would be able to walk the hills just as his uncle did, knowing them, having learnt all the stories and secrets that there were to learn, a master of wisdom inaccessible to anyone else. The power of that! The certainty of that! (WE 117).
The objectivity of knowledge is questioned and what John presents as ‘truth’ is in reality his own production, and it is imposed over the land to gain power over it. John’s claim to an understanding of the land and its history can be seen as an attempt to affirm his right to own the land, resulting in a further negation of indigenous land rights. Moreton-Robinson (2003: 30) refers to the appropriation of the sacred as a means used by white Australia to claim indigeneity: John’s claim to all Australian soil as a sacred place for white Australia—“Australia—every square inch of it—is our sacred site” (WE 209)—and his native title claim to Kuran Station—“So I claim Native Title” (WE 294)—are expressions of this process of acquisition of ‘Aboriginality’.

John wrongly believes he can recognise the places that were significant for indigenous people—e.g. the water hole believed to be a ‘sacred place’ and the stone circle, a meeting place (WE 178). He has interpreted the land and read it through his cultural heritage—a white reading of the land requires boundaries—hence an important old meeting place had to be marked. Instead the Aboriginal sacred place William enters is an ‘unmarked’ place, there are no visible boundaries: “it was a patch of scrub as unremarkable as any other on the station […] And still there was no visible sign, no marker to show the boundary he had crossed” (WE 315). William has found the sacred place, a hidden place which only people with “the right eyes” (WE 326) can see and which his uncle had missed. William starts questioning the knowledge his uncle has passed on to him about the station: “then what did the old man really know about the
property at all? […] All those tales about the people who had discovered the plains, about the men who had built the House, about shepherds and stockmen and explorers—those stories were what made the station so precious” (WE 326-7). Here William is directly questioning the legend: the story told about the settling of the country is not true, those figures do not really exist the way they have been described and exalted in the legend.

John, the figure who represents the legend, does not know the land as he claims. John’s version of the history of settlement and of the native title legislation is disputed by his daughter Ruth. Ruth presents William with an opposite version of the settlement of the region—and of the whole country in general—by pointing out that the land was not settled by brave men, and above all the land was not empty (WE 276). Ruth is the character who criticises John’s idea of the land, of the country as ‘created’ by the settlers, as tamed by those men and made into something that can be used and appreciated. Ruth acknowledges the way in which the first nation people had creatively responded to and used the land through firestick farming to attract game:41

Every summer, apparently, they burned the plains clean through. That way they had fresh green grass every year, and so more animals would come down from the hills for them to hunt. […] The problem was, they did too good a job. A hundred and fifty years ago, the squatters came along and saw all that beautiful grass. And they thought, wow, won’t this be perfect for cattle and sheep. And aren’t we lucky that all this pasture is just sitting here, with no one using it. So they marched on in (WE 277).

41 According to Gammage, indigenous people used fire as a “management tool”, controlling the lighting of fires and following strict rules and ceremonies (Gammage 2011: 160-1).
The two opposite versions of the story are powerfully presented by the author who, through the eyes of the young boy, questions the settlement of the nation and all the discourses that have helped in perpetuating the legend. History is presented as unstable and changing: “Nothing was solid, not the land, and even less so its history. He had been told so many stories—but which ones was he to believe?” (WE 285-6). Through Ruth and William the author poses questions about the foundational moments and leaves the answers up to the reader. McGahan first sets the scene with the old man and his version of history as the absolute truth and later Ruth intervenes to present us with a different view of the story. This reminds us of what has happened in the historical context, where history, told previously only from a white point of view and exalting the legend and the foundational moment, has now been revised to include indigenous people and their dispossession.

Ruth’s views on the native title debate and on the concept of terra nullius take into account different perspectives but she is still talking from a privileged (white) position. Ruth dismisses the possibility of native title claims on people’s farms: “it’s only about sharing access. And only if the tribe can prove that they’ve had continuous connection with the land in question, which is going to be a big problem. But no matter what, absolutely no one is going to get kicked off their farm” (WE 284). Ruth explains that there are no indigenous people on the station because most of the Kuran people are dead: “No one knows for sure how many Aborigines lived here on the Darling Downs. Maybe three thousand,
maybe six thousand. No one bothered to count” (WE 282-3).\(^{42}\) This is a clear reference to the history wars over the number of indigenous people killed in the settling of the land. This point is further stressed when William finds what looks like an army hat (in reality a Queensland Mounted Police (QMP) hat): “Not that there had ever been anything like an army on the Kuran Plains, or any great battles” (WE 165). Implicit in this observation is the fact that ‘battles’ against the indigenous people had not been recorded by official history and as Ruth points out there are no memorials to commemorate them while there are statues for the explorers: “there are probably a lot of bones around here—but mostly they’d be black, not white. And you don’t see any memorials to them” (WE 282).

McGahan’s deconstruction of the discursive nature of the foundational narrative reaches its peak with William’s journey to the water hole. This episode has been linked by James Ley to another Australian myth, that of the child lost in the bush. Drawing on Pierce, he connects it to anxieties about the land: “the lost child represents the anxieties of European settlers […] in a place where they might never be at peace” (quoted in Ley 2006: 37). This constitutes the symbolic centre of the novel since it is at this point that all the stories told in the novel come together under a single momentous theme: the violent dispossession of the indigenous people. William’s journey to the water hole is a pilgrimage, but a pilgrimage not of life and renewal but one of death. William sets out on

\(^{42}\) The indigenous people who survived were sent to Cherbourg mission in 1911 and for that reason they could not claim native title on the station land (WE 283).
his journey during the drought and everything around him is dead. His journey is marked by the onset of a hallucinatory state, due to the heat, the lack of water and his ear infection. He travels through a ‘hellish’ landscape, characterised by the constant heat and by the encounter with two ghostly visions that belong to the white world—a shepherd and an explorer—and a bunyip, a creature connected to indigenous beliefs.\(^{43}\) It is meaningful that the boy encounters the ghosts of figures who have been glorified by the myth of the bushman and the history of Australian colonisation and described by his great-uncle as heroes who had to confront the hostile country alone. These two apparitions, however, are negative figures which carry nothing glorious within themselves: the shepherd is a murderous creature, and the explorer is obsessed with the ‘inland sea’ (WE 304-9). The journey is associated with the expiation of some sort of sin: William’s “punishment” was to walk the hills “from end to end” (WE 307). The ghosts, in fact, point to a place the boy is supposed to find. The bunyip tells him that “The rivers have run dry. Caves have opened to the sun [...] The dead are waiting for you now” (WE 317). William feels through the bunyip a “rush of violence that he could not grasp, [...] his fingers touched the badge of his captain’s hat [...] he had been called here for a purpose” (WE 317). William’s expectation that “the water hole [...] would wash him clean” (WE 318) of his disease is disappointing: the water hole is dry, as if water itself has lost its power to purify. It only contains branches of trees “some starkly white” (WE 319). After the journey William starts questioning his uncle’s stories about the

\(^{43}\) There is a juxtaposition of the ‘white’ ghosts with the bunyip: the “white men dreamt those spirits. The black men dreamt me, long ago” (WE 315).
station: the visions he had encountered “were not the figures of which his uncle had spoken […] they were from a different history altogether, a history Ruth might have told, harsh and ugly” (*WE* 327).

The role of violence in the settlement of the land is exposed and through the words of Ruth we are given the other history of the settlement of Queensland and the role of the “Queensland *Native Mounted Police*” in it, a version diverging from the official history. This passage questions the foundational narrative of the land as constructed by the white man and which informs the Australian legend.

There were more Aborigines in Queensland […] so when white people tried to move out and settle the bush, there was more trouble. The tribes were warlike, and they weren’t going to stand aside and lose their land. They killed quite a few whites in the more remote areas. At times it got so bad, especially up north and out west, that whole white communities went into panic and evacuated. The government […] set up a special troop. The Native Police. There were over one hundred of them […] their job was to make sure that Aborigines didn’t bother the white settlers. Their orders were to “dispersing” any troublesome blacks. And the thing was, no one ever really defined what “dispersing” might mean (*WE* 334-5).

The meaning of the word ‘dispersing’ was ‘vague’ and often instead of scattering the tribes, the Police killed them. There are no official records and no one knows the numbers: “they went on ‘dispersing’ for over thirty years […] There were complaints and inquiries. But that didn’t stop the killing” (*WE* 335). It is at this moment that William’s attention is drawn to the paintings, and he sees the white figures as “ghostly riders”.

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44 It all revolves around the hat William has found and whose authority the visions had recognised: the letters on the badge, QMP “stand for Queensland Mounted Police” (*WE* 334). Ruth’s grandfather, Daniel, had joined in 1888 for seven years: “He was part of a special detachment […] They were called the Queensland *Native Mounted Police*” (*WE* 334).
connecting the depicted whites with death (*WE* 335). The identification of the ghostly riders as bringers of death becomes explicit when William, influenced by his cousin Ruth’s stories of the Queensland Mounted Police, imagines he sees rifles in the riders’ hands (*WE* 335). Although Ruth says that this “officially” has not happened on Kuran Station (*WE* 336), John holds on to his belief that the Native Police “had performed a necessary duty”, which confirmed, for him, that the occupation of Australia “was a brutal business”: claiming the land always requires fighting, and history, after all, “was there to be read” (*WE* 339).

The revelation of what William is supposed to discover, what the visions have pointed to, is that the water hole is the place where the bones of a massacre are hidden: John’s father had killed a number of indigenous people in 1917 and had hidden their bones in the creek.45 John’s furious denial and refusal to accept this as ‘truth’ is overcome and “an abyss of memory” opens up (*WE* 350). All the memories he had suppressed re-emerge and John connects the massacre to his first memory: he in his mother’s arms crying and the “smell of smoke” (*WE* 350; 22). John has repressed the memory of the massacre, and the nightmares of the

45 Ruth tells about a picnic in December 1917 when John was three years old. Malcolm White, previous owner of Kuran Station, had recorded the event in his diary, although Malcom was not an eyewitness. The picnic was at the water hole (*WE* 346). She tells the story of the indigenous people from the station who were sent to Cherbourg in 1911, but after two years all the men and the boys went back to the station and Daniel reported them to the police. Two years later they returned again, and they were beaten first by Daniel and then handed over to the police (*WE* 347-8). But they came back after two years, in 1917. And then Ruth tells about what happened next: the indigenous men were back on the land, not far from the water hole where the station workers were having a picnic. John was scared of them. Daniel killed all of them, helped by some of the other men. “Afterwards, they burned the bodies. Because times had changed a little—you couldn’t just leave black corpses lying around like in the old days. So they burned them. […] And then they just dumped the remains in the creek” (*WE* 348).
‘burning man’ are the expression of this trauma and have the function of “repeatedly” recalling the traumatic event (Mishra 2007: 111). The trauma is repressed by the mind but it does not disappear and it is later triggered by something which brings it back. John tries to repress it again, denying the very existence of the traumatic event and trying to destroy any proof of it. As noted by Vijay Mishra, the trauma of the indigenous genocide is “triggered” by other traumatic recollection as in the case of the ‘stolen generations’ narratives which recall past repressed traumas (Mishra 2007: 115). Implicit in Australian history is the original traumatic event of the violent dispossession of its first nation people. The nature of the event has contributed to it being repressed by the victims because it is too painful to bear and denied by its perpetrators. Trauma is intergenerational and according to Caruth it “can be transmitted to those who may not have experienced it” (quoted in Mishra 2007: 115).

However, this does not put the traumas of the victims and the perpetrators on the same level. John’s trauma is an example of intergenerational trauma that is passed on to the future generation. In this case the trauma is that of the perpetrator—the trauma of the victims is not represented in the novel. What returns is McIvor’s history of settlement and his omission—deliberate or not—of the indigenous people from his stories, in an attempt to suppress guilt. However, McGahan’s point seems to be that no matter how hard one tries to suppress the past, it

46 Vijay Mishra analyses trauma theory, moving from its linguistic occurrences in the OED to the essays of Freud, Cathy Caruth and Ruth Leys, and finally analysing V.S. Naipaul’s work. For a detailed analysis of ‘trauma theory’ see Mishra (2007: 108-120).

47 A similar point is made by Ley who, when considering John’s behaviour about his father’s isolation in the small town of Powell argues that John McIvor is trying to “protect himself from the pain of acknowledgement” (2006: 39).
returns as trauma when another event or scene triggers it. And the image used by McGahan for this traumatic recall is a powerful one, one that affects all of the senses: the smell of burning and the image of fire that links all the episodes in the novel is revealed at the end to be linked to the ‘original sin’, the burning of the bodies of the massacre.

The land carries within it the memory of those who have lived on it, those who have contributed to its history. John describes possession of the land as a ‘burden’, as something that cannot be shared: “ownership could not be shared. Not the power of it, and not the weight of it […] encompassing all the history that the land had ever witnessed” (WE 340). The burden, being in this case the indigenous dispossession and massacre, is carried and passed on through the property, symbolised by the smell of smoke and the figure of the burning man;48 ‘ghosts’ that are inherited together with the station by the future owners: “the burning man […] his reminder of things lost, and his accuser of things done […] it had moved on to William. […] the boy had assumed the burden” (WE 341). The image of a burning figure,49 a reminder of the massacre, is a constant throughout the novel together with the smell of burning—both visual potent of the traumatic event. The recurrence of fire invites reflection by the reader and

48 Fire associated with death and the bringer of death is juxtaposed with the regenerating characteristics it had for indigenous people.

49 From the first pages of the novel, when William’s dad dies in a fire, to the end when John himself dies in the fire of the house, fire constitutes a constant in the novel. William’s mum and Oliver Fisher, John’s wife’s father, die as well in a fire. Oliver dies in a bush fire, a scene which powerfully conveys the strength of the land: “John saw a monster step out of the smoke. It was a tornado of flames, a giant eddy in the firestorm, crowned with the white-hot sparks of detonating leaves. The whirlwind howled, swayed this way and that in search of prey, and then curled gleefully to engulf Oliver” (WE 170). While these are characters who die by fire, the other burning figures—seen in a dream by John and while awake by William—are instead ‘ghostly’ images connected to the massacre and to the ownership of the station (WE 341).
is a very productive device used by the author. The appearance of the burning figure is always accompanied by questions about its provenance and its meaning: “the same burning figure, standing watchful and silent. What was it? Who was it?” (WE 247), as if to urge the reader to ask the same questions. There are multiple interpretations and connections, but we can connect it to the sense of guilt, to the burden of past generations, to the intergenerational guilt and responsibility. And this idea that the property of the station was in fact a burden is clearly expressed by William who realises that: “the inheritance was no gift. It was a burden” (WE 327).

The apparition is motionless: “It was a man on fire. And yet the figure didn’t scream or struggle, but stood perfectly still. […] a head, tilted calmly to one side, as if to ask a question while it burned […] it looked as if it could wait forever” (WE 214-5). The fact that this figure is “an accuser of things done” and that “it could wait forever” suggests that it could represent the indigenous people killed in the massacre who could wait forever for justice to be done. John’s repressed memory of the massacre comes back to ‘haunt’ him through the smell of smoke: “JOHN MCIVOR’S EARLIEST MEMORY WAS OF SMOKE” (WE 22) and the feelings of guilt associated with it. But John’s response to this memory is again denial: “It was eighty years ago. It doesn’t matter to anyone now” (WE 351). Ruth

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50 This is in contrast to the Howard Government’s argument that Australians cannot be held responsible for the actions of their ancestors. Since this burden is passed down through generations, the need for an apology even for actions that were committed in the past becomes critical.

51 The figure in John’s dream is motionless as well: “a human shape, all ablaze, and yet standing motionless as it burned” (WE 217); “the burning figure […] wrapped in smoke and flames, but patient also, waiting” (WE 218).
threatens him with a possible native title claim to the station arguing that those men were probably coming back to perform rites on a sacred site, and that they could prove their presence on the land because in a “Native Title tribunal […] old letters, old journals, old stories— that’s exactly the sort of evidence they’re going to have to accept. If we are talking about Aboriginal history, what else is there?” (WE 355). John holds on to his belief that a ‘real’ proof is necessary in a tribunal and that there is no proof without the “bodies” (WE 355). As Baker and Worby point out, Ruth:

seeks something beyond the comfortable and convenient narratives of a white nation, but is aware of their presence and provenance. […] Her name and profession are at once symptomatic and symbolic. Nor is it a coincidence that Ruth discovers the inheritance of “white earth” […] is stained with the blood of its original, Aboriginal, owners (Baker and Worby 2007: 29).

Then it all unfolds and William remembers what he saw in the hills: “not a vision or an hallucination, but something real. Something he’d seen and touched […] proof” (WE 356). And it is here that white and whiteness is connected to the bones: “a gleam of white” (WE 357). And William starts recollecting: “I thought they were sticks […] dead branches […] but they were white […] bones […] They were the bones of those people” (WE 358-9).

Significantly, the last chapter has a specific time reference; it is 21 December 1993 before midnight, just when the native title legislation was being voted on in Parliament (WE 361). William is now the inheritor of the station, but “for him the inheritance had been darkened by the shadow of a malevolent history. A history with one chapter left to write” (WE 361).
The old man’s obsession about property urges him to a “final indignity” (WE 362): to destroy any proof that could alienate that property from him (WE 364). William feels all the weight and guilt of it, imagining that: “his own ghost would eternally haunt this place, bearing its burden back and forth amidst the shadows” (WE 365), like the visions he had seen.

William descended into the hole [...] he was deep into the earth [...] picked at the bones [...] he did not allow himself to recognise them as human, not even the white domes with holes [...] he refused to count, to ever know or remember how many bone there were, or how many people they represented. He acknowledged nothing at all. [...] He was filthy. Dirt was in his hair and caked under his fingernails, as if he had clawed his way from the grave [...] the rain had come too late. Too late to refill the pool and hide its secret, too late to wash him clean. He would never be clean” (WE 364-5).

This image of death and eternal damnation, of a cave in the earth, made white by its contents, reminds us of the title of the novel *The White Earth*: the usual association of white with purity is reversed and the white earth comes to embody the image of death itself. The author’s use of the term white—McGahan draws the reader’s attention to this term more than 130 times—contributes towards exposing the underlying discourses of whiteness. McGahan reverses the usual association of white with purity and positive images and makes use of an association identified by Dyer, that of ‘white death’ connected to the inherent contradiction of whites being “overseeing subject[s] without properties [that may]…lead one to wonder if [they are subjects] at all” (1997: 207). McGahan makes the association repeatedly in order to unsettle the reader, to forcefully draw attention to the fact of whiteness so often taken for granted. The recurrence of the image of death associated with whites is strong
throughout the novel and these images are used by the author to deconstruct, question and rethink white discourses.

During his final attempt to destroy the proof that could take the property from him, John himself catches alight and becomes the final burning figure that links the entire novel:

A burning shape walked through the door. It was wrapped in smoke and flame [...] And it was silent. [...] The figure didn’t reel or stumble, it seemed possessed of a calm and terrible deliberation. [...] its head turned slowly, searching, just as it had been searching the first time William had seen it [...] The mouth opened [...] William was sure that it would speak, that it would utter the question it had carried with it for so long. But instead the head tilted upwards slowly, beseeching, its question unasked and unanswered (WE 367).

The fire destroys John, the representative of the landowner class, his last will, the document that proves ownership over the land, and the mansion itself, the symbol of white power on the land.

The epilogue\textsuperscript{52} of the novel contains the headline from The Australian article about the passing of the Bill, and quotes Prime Minister Keating’s words: “the end of the great lie of terra nullius and the beginning of a new deal…a turning point for all Australians” (WE 372). These words are juxtaposed with those of the opposition leader: “A day of shame for the Australian people” (WE 372). Ruth also reasons over property, inheritance and land ownership, suggesting that all is open to dispute

\textsuperscript{52} Ruth and William, the two survivors of the fire—together with Mrs. Griffiths—are in hospital. William has been diagnosed and has had surgery for a “cholesteatoma” a benign tumour that grows in the ear which caused the boy the dizziness and the smell of rotting (WE 373). This part of the story is autobiographical since the author himself suffered from it (Elliott 2004: 40).
without the will document: “the only copy of the will had burned along with the House. Kuran Station belonged to no one [...] with nothing in writing the property lay open to any number of claims” (WE 374). Ruth has acted throughout the novel as the open-minded white Australian who recognises indigenous rights. However, when she becomes the owner of the station, the burden, the past guilt, is now hers: “the burden couldn’t fall on her” (WE 376). And with it, white ownership which is ‘absolute’.

Ruth changes her position and starts thinking like her father:

> if anyone from Cherbourg really wanted the place, they would have to lodge their claim, along with everybody else. It was fifteen thousand acres of prime grazing country. In this world, something like that wasn’t just given back. It had to be fought for (WE 375).

McGahan spells out his awareness of white politics here. As Baker and Worby have pointed out, Mabo has been “constructed as a signifier of justice” and it therefore contributes to reinforcing “a white sense of rightness” (Baker and Worby 2007: 30). However, it does not change white possession over the land.

The history of the Station is a symbol of the history of the whole country: the imposition of white ownership, the dispossession and the violence all happened throughout the country on a larger scale. This novel clearly addresses the presence of discourses used to impose and maintain power. McGahan uses the parallels between the contemporary life of William and the youth of his great-uncle to expose those discourses

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53 This comment refers to the child, William, who has lost his mum in the fire, and now depends on Ruth. However, considering the use McGahan made of the word ‘burden’ in the novel—as the responsibility for past actions that is passed on through property—I believe here the word carries a double meaning, since Ruth, just like John before her, cannot get rid of “the smell of smoke” (WE 372).
through the point of view of different characters. Having exposed the discourses of *terra nullius*, civilisation, dying race, history and whiteness and having uncovered massacres, we are still left with the feeling that we are a long way from the ‘truth’, that an absolute truth does not exist and that truth is always linked to the subject who creates it. And this is probably the strongest statement made by the novel as McGahan dismantles the foundational myth and deconstructs the history of settlement: it was not a heroic enterprise, it was a bloody one, and the land was settled through the shedding of blood. What had earlier been described by white Australia as the peaceful settling of an empty land, the taming of a wilderness—a justification for the colonisation of the land and the erasure of violence against indigenous people—is undermined, and the violent history that laid the foundation of this country is addressed.

In the wake of native title legislation, the novel addresses white uncertainty about land ownership. The inadequacy of the major discourses becomes evident when the ideas upon which they are founded are exposed and are presented as partial and untrue, leading to a different understanding of the white presence in Australia. The legend is questioned: if the national identity is based on the figure of the bushman, what happens now to the national identity? The validity of white writing on the history of colonisation is also addressed, together with the necessity for a rewriting of history that takes into account sources other than the white colony’s archives. McGahan has dismantled those white discourses that have been constructed to justify indigenous dispossession, reversing
the idea of whites as bringers of civilisation, to one of bringers of death instead. As has been pointed out, through the use of the word ‘white’ and its association with images of death, McGahan undermines the solidity of white Australia’s assumptions and history, paving the way for different histories and interpretations to emerge.

McGahan does not speak for the indigenous people, as this rethinking takes place only within the white community. It is within this community that the justifications for these discourses are questioned and the legitimacy of the dispossession of the land is explored. Perceptions of indigenous people and of those institutions of power that control Australian society have changed from previous readings. However, these discourses are not completely overcome because even though the observer is aware of the role of discourses and institutions, they are part of his culture, and even while critiquing them he is still part of a western philosophical frame of mind. There is no full reversal of the panoptic view. The observer is not looking in from the outside, but is inside looking in or ‘around’. The panoptic gaze is a gaze from the inside in the sense that the white characters are no longer looking at the other from the outside, but are looking at white subjects and white institutions from the inside, that is, from the perspective of white subjects. Institutions, government, laws, assumptions and white people are analysed and critiqued by white subjects themselves. However, the white subjects are still in a privileged position because they are analysing themselves and are influenced by their own culture (race) and philosophical background (western thought).
The critique, although advanced, is not complete: a reversal of the panoptic view is obtained only when it is the other who looks at whiteness and white institutions from the outside (even though he himself is still influenced by those dominant institutions and culture to which he had to adapt and that have shaped his identity and the way he perceives himself). In other words, even in the deconstruction of the legend, the subject is still a white subject: he is still the one who constructs the nation.

My second case study is Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* (2005). This novel is a key work for its questioning of the foundational myth, of *terra nullius*, and for its exposition of violence against indigenous people. Grenville deconstructs the foundational myth exalted by the legend by acknowledging the violence implicit in the history of settlement that has previously been silenced. She employs a traditional Australian character, a convict who becomes an emancipist, thus linking the novel to the

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54 In 2006 *The Secret River* won the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize as best book and the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Awards. It was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award. The novel tells the story of William Thornhill, a lighterman on the London Thames who is transported to New South Wales after having committed a minor crime—stealing timber. He is transported together with his wife Sal and his first son Will. After a few years in the new settlement at Sydney Cove he obtains his pardon and settles with his family on the ‘wild’ Hawkesbury River. The land is already inhabited by indigenous people whose presence is constantly felt even when they are not seen. The differences in language and culture create a barrier between them that will lead to an escalation of violence ending with the massacre of the tribe in retaliation for the death of one of the settlers and as an attempt to secure absolute ownership of the land.

55 The dedication of the novel reads: “This novel is dedicated to the Aboriginal people of Australia: past, present and future” (Grenville 2005). Odette Kelada reads this dedication in connection with the politics of reconciliation arguing that it is in line with the attitude to expose past violence as a way to “help the process of reconciliation” (Kelada 2010: 5). However, she considers this dedication to be at odds with the title *The Secret River*, reading in the word ‘secret’ a “subtle reiteration of the notion of *terra nullius* as there appears to be no one there to know yet of the river’s existence” (Kelada 2010: 5). Sue Kossew reads the title in connection with the novel’s dedication to indigenous people, as an “apology” offered by the author (Kossew 2007: 9). Grenville acknowledges the title was inspired by the 1968 Boyer’s lecture where Stanner refers to the “secret river of blood in Australian history” (quoted in Kossew 2007: 8).
Australian literary tradition of the convict novel, notably Marcus Clarke’s *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874). However, the novel goes a step forward and not only critiques the English penal system but questions the legitimacy of settlement, overthrowing the doctrine of *terra nullius* and arguing that the land was visibly owned, and that settlers ignored this in order to become owners themselves, justifying their actions on the back of discourses such as Social Darwinism and progress. The novel itself has its origins in Kate Grenville’s research on her family ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, who had been transported to New South Wales in 1806 and who had “taken up land” on the Hawkesbury River (2006a: 149). As Grenville explains: “My first idea was to write a book of non-fiction about the story of Wiseman—as a representative settler—and the Darug. What happened on the frontier—not in the abstract or the generality, but in the particular, to one man, in one place?” (2005a: 75).

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56 The structure of the novel and the convict theme remind us of Marcus Clarke’s *For the Term of his Natural Life*, first published as a serial in *Australian Journal* (1870-2) as *His Natural Life* (Elliott 1977: xi). This novel tells the story of Richard Devine, unjustly accused of murder and transported to Van Diemen’s Land under the name of Rufus Dawes. Clarke’s novel is a critique of the English penal system and of the brutality with which convicts were treated in Van Diemen’s Land (Clarke 1977).

57 The novel *Moondyne* published by O’Reilly in 1879 also critiques the brutality of the British penal system in Australia and hopes for a reform. Based on the story of the famous Western Australian bushranger Moondyne Joe, and on the experiences of the author who had lived as a convict in Western Australia and had escaped to the US, O’Reilly both critiques the cruelty of the system and throws light on the indigenous population. Moondyne, who lived among the indigenous people as an escapee, learning their language and their customs, later returns to civilisation as Mr. Wyville, a reformer of the penal system. He and other Englishmen discuss the possibility of ‘civilising’ the indigenous people and Mr. Wyville clearly addresses the relativity of the notion of civilisation as a construct imposed on other people: “they have kept all their natural customs, which people in England call savage ways. They eat and sleep in their own fashion—I do not see any reason for imposing my way upon them, if they prefer theirs. Mine is in itself no better, except as it pleases me” (O’Reilly 1879: 47). Interestingly, the author addresses the indigenous people as “bushmen” and “Australian” (O’Reilly 1879: 8). The characters recognise the language of the indigenous people as a language with a proper structure and acknowledge the similarities between the one spoken in Western Australia and those spoken in other parts of Australia.

58 Kate Grenville explains how during a conversation with writer Melissa Lucashenko about her family history she came to reflect upon the words “took up” land on the Hawkesbury River. Lucashenko pointed out that in fact Grenville ancestor “took” land. This subtle difference, Grenville reflects, carries “more responsibilities” (2006: 28).
The absence of records about the interaction between Wiseman and the Darug people is what made the author choose to write a historical novel rather than a straightforward documentary history (2005a: 77). The thematic centre of the novel is Grenville’s identification of the cause of problems between settlers and indigenous people in “ignorance and misunderstanding on both sides” (2005a: 78).

*The Secret River* engages in a critique of the first years of settlement by rewriting the interactions between settlers and indigenous people. Grenville uses the legend and the myth to set the scene but constantly undermines it, exposing the discourses of Social Darwinism and racial superiority employed to justify white settlers’ power over the land and the people, and the sense of Australianness growing from these discourses. As we have argued, the creation of the legend and the foundational myth guaranteed the survival of these discourses, none of which were based on history, but which were given historical relevance and acquired legitimacy. Grenville adopts the white settlers’ point of view but the settler himself is aware of the presence of the ‘other’ even while denying it. She dismantles the discursive construction of Australia as *terra nullius*, as the land is ‘visibly’ inhabited, and portrays the manner in which

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59 The author wrote a separate text, *Searching for the Secret River* (2006), where she explains in detail the process behind the writing of the novel and the research she undertook for it. See Grenville (2006).

60 According to Inga Clendinnen this is the same conclusion she arrived at in *Dancing with Strangers* with the difference that her work was an historical one and she used historical records to arrive at her conclusions (2006: 18). The publication of the novel and especially the author’s claims that it is “solidly based on history” (Grenville 2007: 67) caused a reaction among historians.

61 Grenville adopts a “third person subjective” point of view for her novel which allows her to convey the settler’s point of view, but also to communicate to the reader elements which are not evident to the protagonist (Grenville 2006: 164).
indigenous people’s ways are constructed as primitive although they are very much like the European ones. The narrator's continuous references to these similarities unsettle the reader and expose the discourses constructed around the 'other'.

The novel opens with a section called “Strangers” which establishes the setting of the novel: it is 1806 and William Thornhill has just arrived at Port Jackson “transported for the term of his natural life” to “His Majesty’s penal colony of New South Wales [...] a prison whose bars were ten thousand miles of water” (Grenville 2005: 3).62 This first section immediately establishes the context: the alienness of the land, the fact that the land is inhabited and the impossibility of comprehending the ‘other’ because of the different culture and the lack of a common language with which to communicate. These three main aspects will be developed throughout the novel.63 According to Eleanor Collins, The Secret River dismantles three Australian myths: “the almost-innocent convict”, “the pioneer”, and “the story of first contact”—this last one is not considered to be an efficient national myth, lacking the fundamental characteristic to “unify” because it does not tell a “shared history” (2006: 39-40). The myth of the pioneer is diminished by the fact that other people already lived on the land and their presence “challenge[s] the legitimacy of the pioneer story, and its feeling of triumph” (Collins 2006: 62, 63)

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62 Further page references to The Secret River (Grenville 2005) are indicated by SR.
63 Before the novel moves on to tell the story of Thornhill and his family in the penal colony, there is a flashback where we are told the story of the poverty-stricken man and his wife in London and the vicissitudes of life that brought him to be sentenced to death for having stolen timber, a sentence later commuted to transportation (SR 7-71).
The pioneer myth is based on the construction of the landscape as empty and unconquerable.

The author conveys very well the distress caused by being in a place that is completely different from the mother country due to its climate, vegetation and fauna. Sal, Thornhill’s wife, notices the strength of the rain, the different “creatures” and the seasons, but especially the trees: their colour is not green “the way a tree should be” (SR 88), but they are grey; their shape does not correspond to that of a ‘proper’ tree and the strange characteristic is that they do not drop their leaves, but their bark. The landscape does not have a “pattern”: “it was exhausting to look at” (SR 88). In these lines the author expresses the alienness felt by the first settlers who look for something familiar and cannot find anything, not even the simplest things. William Thornhill’s “pain of loss” is rendered through his perception of the “alien stars” (SR 4). The stars, dear to him in his work as a lighterman finding his way on the Thames, are “meaningless” in this unfamiliar place: he has lost his reference points, accentuating his feeling of not belonging to this unknown place (SR 4).

The author conveys the perception of the bush and its inhabitants as threatening and overpowering, presenting the ‘brave’ settlers as nothing legendary and sharing a common feeling: fear. They are “helpless

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64 Collins reads *The Secret River* as a ‘tragedy’ instead of an historical novel (2006: 45-7).
65 Sal identifies herself with England, a place she always longs to return to, and even when she renounces the idea of going back ‘home’, she lives in her garden, planted with European trees and surrounded by high walls, from which you cannot see the outside world (SR 330-1).
creatures” (*SR* 138) and the “blackness beyond the reach of the flames was as absolute as blindness” (*SR* 138).

Out of the “foreign darkness” (*SR* 3) on his first night William meets the first Aborigine, who appears to be a part of the darkness out of which he has come. The role of communication in establishing a gulf between the two cultures is emphasised from this first meeting:

*Be off!* […]

The mouth of the black man began to move itself around sounds. As he spoke he gestured with the spear so it came and went in the darkness […]

In the fluid rush of speech. Thornhill suddenly heard words. *Be off*, the man was shouting. *Be off!* It was his own tone exactly.

This was a kind of madness, as if a dog were to bark in English (*SR* 5-6).

The language of the ‘other’ is given the status of words only when he speaks English words, recognisable to the listener.

Grenville introduces two ‘types’ of Aborigines, those living on the fringes of settlement, “the visible ones” (*SR* 90) and the “invisible” ones (*SR* 92). Among the first ‘type’ is the one the Thornhills have named Scabby Bill, who lives around their hut.⁶⁶ The ritual scars on his body are given

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⁶⁶ The narrator explains this name: “Scabby Bill because his face had been mauled by the smallpox” (*SR* 90). This is a reference to the epidemic of smallpox that spread in 1789. There has been some debate regarding the causes of the spread of the disease, one year after the arrival of the First Fleet. Different possibilities—whether it was introduced by the English and the French or the Macassans on the north coast—have been considered. For a detailed discussion of the possible origin of the infection see Butlin (1983) and Campbell (2002). It has been argued that smallpox was introduced by the English. This possibility was dismissed by Watkin Tench, a marine captain of the First Fleet, who wrote in his account that no one had been sick since they left Cape Town and that: “It is true that our surgeons had brought out variolous matter in bottles; but to infer that it was produced from this cause were a supposition so wild as to be unworthy of consideration” (1961: 146). The mention of this possibility suggests that doubts relating to an accidental or voluntary spread of the disease from the variolous
particular relevance and they are contrasted to the scars inflicted on the convicts: “This was a town of scars” (SR 90). The ones resulting from the floggings inflicted on the convicts were meant to cause pain and leave marks on their bodies while the ones on the Aborigine were of a different nature: “they were carefully drawn each scar lined up neat next to its neighbour, a language of skin. It was like the letters Sal had shown him, bold on the white face of the paper” (SR 91). Here the patterns of scars on the body of the indigenous man are elevated to the level of a language through the direct comparison to letters. In spite of the complex signs on his body the Aborigine Bill is associated with nature, and is seen as part of the hostile land. His humanity is denied by the settlers as he is compared to the “ants or the flies, a hazard of the place that had to be dealt with” (SR 91). This idea is further emphasised and connected with discourses of Social Darwinism, which clearly constructs the other as inferior so that the settler can perceive himself as superior: “men came
[...] to watch this black insect of a man capering before them, a person lower in the order of things even than they were" (SR 92).

In juxtaposition, the other indigenous people were “invisible” to those who lived in the settlement because they “retreated with each new patch of cleared land” (SR 92). The discourse of the other as ‘savage’, and the nomadic aspect of their life as hunters and gatherers are here presented:

They wandered about, naked as worms, sheltering under an overhang of rock or a sheet of bark. Their dwellings were no more substantial than those of a butterfly resting on a leaf. They caught their feeds of fish, gathered a few oysters, killed a possum or two, then moved on (SR 92).

Their ability to ‘camouflage’ themselves in the landscape and become part of it is emphasised through references such as: “a silhouette”, “the splinter of a canoe, fragile as a dead leaf”, “a twister of blue smoke”, but everything disappears before William can get any closer.67 The landscape is in fact anthropomorphised—“as if the landscape itself was a dark-skinned creature with golden flesh beneath” (SR 101)—and it seems to be constantly watching the newcomers. This humanisation of the landscape, voluntarily used by Grenville to “convey something of the closeness of the identification between the land and its original people” (2005a: 80), has been critiqued by Adam Gall who argues that this attitude contributes to the perpetuation of the frontier (Gall 2008: 97).

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67 As the author explains, the bush could look empty to a person unable to read it. She compares it to a text whose signs had to be shown for the ‘reader’ to fully understand it. Grenville refers in particular to those evidences of Aboriginal inhabitation of the landscape e. g. the “scars” on the “trees from which canoes and shields had been cut” (2005a: 79). The author has “humanised” the landscape and in this way “a sense was emerging of the Aboriginal presence as part of the landscape—people and country as one” (2005a: 80).
Seen from the settlement and from a white perspective the place is perceived as empty: “During the day, if a person kept to the settlement [...] he might even imagine that there was no one there at all” (SR 93). This perception is, however, a daylight illusion, because at night there are singing and “campfires everywhere” (SR 93). The apparent emptiness of the place is used to deny Aboriginal ownership:

There were no signs that the blacks felt the place belonged to them. They had no fences that said this is mine. No house that said this is our home. There were no fields or flocks that said, we have put the labour of our hands into this place. But sometimes men were speared (SR 93).

This passage clearly exposes the concepts which were at the heart of the discourse of terra nullius; the land was not fenced and was not farmed, it lacked those signs accepted in western law as signs of ownership. The use of the preposition “but” following this statement, however, clearly addresses the existence of a ‘sense’ of ownership amongst the Aborigines who sometimes speared white people who ventured beyond the settlement. The spears of the Aborigines are also compared to the natural world: “The spears of the blacks [...] were like the snakes or the spiders, not something that could be guarded against” (SR 93). The Aborigines are therefore assimilated into the hostility of the land in order to further deny their ownership and their presence, since like the land, they too are threatening. The Hawkesbury river itself is presented as a dangerous place:

68 In Searching for the Secret River, Grenville seems to be justifying the white man’s reaction and attitude: “the land looked empty and unclaimed to the newcomers because it had none of the familiar marks of ownership: fences, roads, houses. It was perhaps understandable that they thought they were entitled to take it up” (Grenville 2006: 130).
On its unmapped reaches [...] the blacks were most numerous and most warlike. They gathered by the hundred, it was said, and descended on the lonely huts of the farmers [...] The Gazette had a handy expression that covered all the things the blacks did, and suggested others: outrages and depredations (SR 95).

The farmers are “lonely” and defenceless against the aggressive Aborigines. Here the bravery of those men who settled the wild Hawkesbury in defiance of the adverse conditions and of the threats posed by the indigenous people is clearly exalted by constructing the ‘other’ as outside civilisation, part of the wilderness. At this point Kate Grenville is constructing the background for her story to unfold; she is ‘drafting’ the legend, using all the discourses implied by the legend in order to later subvert them. The discourse of ‘civilisation’ is thus clearly addressed as a means of justifying land dispossession and white settlement:

King George owned this whole place of New South Wales, the extent of which nobody yet knew, but what was the point of King George owning it, if it was still wild, trodden only by black men? The more civilised folk set themselves up on their pieces of land, the more those other ones could be squeezed out. In exchange for the risk such men were willing to take, and the labour they were prepared to expend, a hundred acres of land seemed a fair thing.

All a person need do was find a place no one had already taken. Plant a crop, build a hut, call the place Smith’s or Flanagan’s, and out-stare anyone who said otherwise (SR 121).

This passage explains well the whole idea justifying terra nullius: a place to be owned needs to be named, it should show signs of dwelling and of farming. One of the common grounds on which the assumption is made that Aborigines were not using the land is the lack of signs of agriculture: “It seemed the emptiest place in the world, too wild for any man to have
made it his home” (SR 101). Thornhill, however, is aware of the presence of the Aborigines on land that he wishes to see as empty. Although he recognises that people inhabit his land—“this might look an empty place, but [...] this place was no more empty than a parlour in London” (SR 155)—he does not acknowledge the indigenous inhabitants as the land’s owners. The settlers do not accept the land as a humanised landscape, perceiving it instead as virgin, an empty slate where they can write, a “blank page on which a man might write a new life” (SR 130). The emphasis posed on ownership is remarked upon through the constant repetition of possessive pronouns: “His own. His own, by virtue of his foot standing on it” (SR 133); “Mine”; “His own air! That tree [...] his! That tussock of grass [...] his own! Even the mosquitoes [...] belonged to him” (SR 133). William is compared to Adam in “his own new-coined world” (SR 135), and the land is perceived as unmarked by man as if no one had ever walked on it before. The concept is repeated and the Hawkesbury, in a conscious echo of the opening lines of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, is compared to the Thames before the arrival of the Romans (SR 137)—a significant reference to another empire invading and claiming a land.

The settler’s fight against the wilderness is exalted through the effort he puts into clearing the land to make the place into a familiar pattern, one that can be recognised, named, controlled. The exaltation of the legend is evident in the building of the hut: “Chopping, clearing, building, he was discovering a new William Thornhill, though: a man who could labour
against wilderness until it yielded up a dwelling […]. The place was full of the sound of themselves” (SR 160). Once the hut is built the place does not seem empty anymore. The imposition of civilisation on a wild place is symbolised by the hut: “Once there was a hut to go into, a person became again a thing separate from the place, moving through an air of their own making” (SR 160). This imposition is emphasised through a change in the perception of the landscape itself: “outside the eye was confused by so many details, every leaf and grass-stalk different but each one the same. Framed by doorway or window-hole, the forest became something that could be looked at part by part and named. Branch. Leaves. Grass” (SR 160-1).

Ownership needs to be ‘marked’ through recognisable signs:

In the centre of the clearing he dragged his heel across the dirt four times, line to line. The straight lines and the square they made were like nothing else there and changed everything. Now there was a place where a man had laid his mark over the face of the land. It was astonishing how little it took to own a piece of the earth (SR 134).

William’s ownership of the land is not complete by simply settling on it: “what marked a man’s claim was a rectangle of cleared and dug-over dirt and something growing that had not been there before” (SR 139). The concept at the foundation of terra nullius—that the land needs to be farmed to be owned—is repeated over and over again. When William and his two sons go to plant the seeds of corn in the land to claim ownership, they discover that the soil they had chosen had already been dug up (SR 140), which on its own should prove that it is ‘owned’, according to
western standards. But upon a closer look it is not in the shape of a square as when a pick is used, and the daisies are on the ground where they could “grow again”.\(^{69}\) This suggests to William that it has not been worked by “a man with a corn patch on his mind” (SR 140)—not by a white man because he cannot see the ‘order/regular pattern’ given by the drawing of a rectangle. It is the younger boy who voices the fear: “It’s them savages. Planting them things like you would taters” (SR 141). Thornhill refuses this possibility on the grounds that they are “savages” and ‘childlike’ because they do not farm the land, thus voicing the preconceived ideas about the ‘other’:

Dick would be right, he thought, except that everyone knew the blacks did not plant things. They wandered about, taking food as it came under their hand […] But, like children, they did not plant today so that they could eat tomorrow.

It was why they were called savages (SR 141).

He does not plant his corn crop to provide food: “it was not so much a crop he was aiming for, as a message. Like hoisting a flag on a pole” (SR 142). This message is that the land is owned by him: the actions undertaken by Thornhill—naming, clearing, building a hut, farming—are the ones believed necessary by the settler to claim the land for himself. As Suzanne Falkiner stresses, naming is fundamental to the process of “humanising the landscape”: “possession is signified by naming: for

\(^{69}\) Gammage describes in detail how the land was managed by indigenous people. He identifies different “crop groups” such as “tubers, bulbs, roots, rhizomes and shoots” and explains how “in season women spent hours a day tilling, replanting, transplanting and weeding” (Gammage 2011: 289). This process is described by Grenville in the novel where the yams are replanted after harvesting to ensure a new crop (2005: 140-1).
Europeans something that cannot be named cannot be owned” (1992: 135).

The white man’s act of settling shapes the landscape. The settling of the land is perceived by the white man as a constructive process—civilising, rationalising, and taming:

He had made something of this place. He had cut down trees, got rid of bushes, chopped out the tussocks [...] With each day that passed, a little more progress could be measured: one more tree cut down, one more yard of bushes cleared, another length of fence (SR 249-50).

The verbs used to describe this constructive process, however, are verbs that connote destruction: “cut down”, “got rid of”, “chopped out”, “cut down”, “cleared”. This illusion of achievement through destruction is further stressed through the use of the fence:

He loved the thing a fence did to a place. The tidy square of ground inside a fence had a different look from the ground outside it. A fence told a man how far he had travelled, and beyond the last length of fence he could see where he might go next (SR 250).

The exaltation of the clearing of the land and the imposition of order on it through the physical demarcation of the fence is subverted straight away: “no matter how much a man did in this place, the everlasting forest could not be got rid of, only pushed back” (SR 250). The presence of the other further diminishes the exaltation of the taming of the land, since the land

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70 Falkiner discusses the importance attributed to naming in the possession of the country. As well as naming Australian landmarks and properties, the settlers develop a “language and a myth” in order to acquire a “sense of belonging” (Falkiner 1992: 135). She argues that words used in England do not correspond to the Australian landscape and therefore a “stronger terminology” had to be used. She explains that the use of terms such as “station” to replace farm, “paddock” to replace field convey a better sense of the largeness of the land. She describes a similar process for the use of terms such as “squatter”, “selector”, “swagman” and so on (Falkiner 1992: 135).
is not a wilderness, it is already inhabited, and it has already been ‘tamed’; the achievements of the settlers are overturned. Grenville’s strongest critique of the legend lies in her exposition of the lie of *terra nullius*. William’s idea that in this place there is “nothing a man could recognise as human, other than the small square of dirt they had dug” (SR 142) is subverted by the apparitions of two “black men” who “had chosen to become visible” (SR 142). The encounters with the indigenous people show the dominant attitude of the settlers who, once they had claimed a piece of land, assumed that it was theirs and that their boundaries should be respected by the other whose presence was often ignored—as in Sal’s attitude towards living in the square they have cleared and refusing to see anything outside it: “what was beyond was invisible to her […] she kept her face turned away” (SR 150). They believe that the Aborigines do not exist if they are not mentioned: “Neither of them ever mentioned the blacks. […] He felt sometimes that they might not exist if no one said the words: the blacks” (SR 152). This clearly points to the constructed nature of the ‘emptiness’ of the land. Thornhill gives names to the Aborigines he sees, as if naming them helps him not to fear them but to know them: “He begun to give them names: humble sort of names that made their difference less potent. It made something domestic—just another kind of neighbourhood—out of this unpromising material” (SR 198). Naming is seen here as an attempt to domesticate the other, and is associated with the naming of the landscape: it confers

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71 The feeling of constantly being watched and the knowledge that “the blacks did not have to be seen to be present” (SR 128) is common with explorers who knew that they were being followed and that the news of their presence travelled ahead of them (Reynolds 1995: 21-2).
order on something perceived as threatening, thereby making it more familiar.

Attempts at communication between the settler and the indigenous people are presented as a failure from the first encounter: neither of them can understand the words of the other: “It was as if a word that had no meaning could not be heard” (SR 214). Grenville emphasises the importance of a shared language in achieving understanding between different cultures. A clear example of misunderstanding is given in the ‘conversation’ between the old Aborigine and Thornhill. The old man is trying to explain the importance of the daisy yams, pointing out the tubers as edible, but Thornhill does not understand the reference to food:

A conversation had taken place. There had been an inquiry and an answer. But what inquiry, which answer? They stared at each other, their words between them like a wall (SR 197).

Words lose their power to facilitate communication, to transmit knowledge, if they are not understood by both sides. The settler, not understanding the different use of the land, strips it of every native plant. He replaces the “daisy yams” with corn (SR 168), failing to acknowledge the role this food had in the indigenous diet, even though Blackwood had warned them. Thornhill and the other settlers refuse to recognise a way of farming different from their own (SR 167-8), and as a consequence the

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72 Grenville explains her choice not to render the dialogue of indigenous people in English, arguing that they would have looked like caricatures and that she was not confident with interpreting the thoughts of indigenous people of 200 years ago (2005a: 81-5).

73 While observing a corroboree, William Thornhill becomes aware of a “language of this dance” (SR 244) through which a story is being told and the old Aborigine is compared to a book whose content they were reading because they had the instruments to read it: as with a book, you need to be able to read to access its knowledge.
Aborigines harvest the settler’s corn as a substitute for the yams, an act which results in retaliation.

Grenville identifies the cause of violence as the lack of knowledge and understanding of the other’s culture due to the impossibility of communication. In most cases, however, settlers and the government willingly refused understanding and produced a discursive knowledge of the land and the people which justified dispossession and even violence. Dispossession and violence—for too long excluded from history—are now rewritten into the foundation of the nation. The ‘traumatic’ experience of claiming the land and dispossessing its original inhabitants, which Grenville describes in all its gruesome detail, offers a scathing critique of the legend and constructs settlers not as brave men but as fearful and violent (SR 240-1).

The author introduces a number of settlers each of whom react to Aboriginal presence in a different way. Blackwood⁷⁴ has chosen to co-exist with the Aborigines, his way of dealing with them being “give a little, take a little” (SR 104). However, Blackwood too subscribes to the notion of *terra nullius*, arguing that someone does not need permission in order to get land. Thus while underlining the importance of sharing the land with

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⁷⁴ Blackwood is the only real representative of an ‘indigenised’ version of the legend (the ideal of writers like Xavier Herbert), as he has acquired all the skills of the indigenous people and lives on the land without having imposed his mark on it. He lives with an indigenous woman and is for this reason considered an outcast by other settlers. Blackwood tries to act as mediator between the settlers and the indigenous people. He has learned their ways with the land, and explains them to the other settlers. However, the latter’s sense of property is too strong and they are unwilling to share the land with the legitimate owners. As a typical Australian, he remains taciturn.
the indigenous people, Blackwood himself does not seem to recognise them as owners (SR 105). The settlers’ attitudes towards the indigenous people are reflected in their relationship to the bush. Blackwood has left the place almost as it was: “There was no bald patch defined by dead wood that marked where civilization began and ended. This was a place where clearing and forest lived together on the same ground” (SR 206). And in fact, Blackwood lives with an Aboriginal woman, has learnt the language and respects the land and its inhabitants. This contrasts with other settlers who use violence to keep Aborigines outside the land they have claimed. The first act of violence in the novel is perpetrated by the settler Smasher Sullivan who is inclined to do “a lot of mischief” (SR 102). The physical description of this man is revolting, emphasising the redness of his skin due to exposure to a climate to which he is not suited. Smasher Sullivan, in a gratuitous and deliberate act of cruelty, cuts off the hands of an Aboriginal man and kills him for ‘stealing’ (SR 103).

The author describes different settler types: the ‘good’ settler and the violent settler. Thornhill’s reaction to the presence of the indigenous people falls between these two extremes. He moves from a refusal of Aboriginal ownership due to the lack of fences and other ‘visible’ signs, to an understanding of the indigenous ways of using the land that makes them farmers (2005a: 81): “The blacks were farmers no less than the white men were. But they did not bother to build a fence to keep animals from getting out. Instead they created a tasty patch to lure them in” (SR 229). Through her protagonist, Grenville questions the validity of the
assumption of Australia as *terra nullius*, acknowledging Aboriginal fire-stick farming. However, when his sense of ownership and his property are threatened William, along with the other settlers, reacts with violence. Thornhill claims that he belongs to the place he has “carved out of the wilderness” (*SR* 288). Here once again the emphasis on the idea that ownership is linked to hard work, to a ‘Protestant’ work ethic. His belonging is strengthened by reference to the first night when he had perceived the “fearsome strangeness of the place” (*SR* 289), for which white knowledge, the knowledge of the stars, the Southern Cross and the Pointers are his “old friends” (*SR* 289). But the claim can only be based on a denial of indigenous ownership. Despite all of the evidence, despite all he has come to understand about the indigenous people, Thornhill repeats the discourse of *terra nullius*: “they aint never done a hand’s turn [...] They got no right to any of this place. No more than a sparrow” (*SR* 290). In order to secure his sense of ownership, the settler denies the other’s ownership. Grenville’s description of the land simultaneously articulates both the colonialist discourse and the placing of Aborigines outside that discourse. And this remains, to some extent, an unresolved contradiction in the text.

The escalation of violence starts when the corn is ripe and indigenous people harvest the crop, burning fields and huts. It is March 1814 and the Governor decides to retaliate against them officially, first by sending out the army to punish them (*SR* 260), an act which turns out to be a failure as the army is defeated by both the hostile landscape and its
inhabitants.\footnote{This episode of the army expedition to sever and capture six heads is similar to the expedition led by Watkin Tench in 1791. This expedition was ordered by Governor Phillip in order to capture the indigenous people believed to be responsible for the death of his gamekeeper John McIntyre. This episode is well described in the historical novel \textit{Pemulwuy, the Rainbow Warrior} (1988) which takes its name from the Aboriginal warrior who fought against the British army until his death in 1802.} Since the indigenous people did not have a regular army, there was no one to fire at; they simply appeared out of and disappeared into the bush (\textit{SR} 261-5).\footnote{This technique of guerrilla warfare is well described by historian Henry Reynolds (1984: 14-7).} The failure of the expedition results in a proclamation by the Governor, printed in the \textit{Gazette}, which legitimises violence against indigenous people: if they approach a farm armed they can be \textit{“driven away by force of arms by the settler themselves”} (\textit{SR} 266).\footnote{This is based on the 1816 Proclamation by Governor Macquarie (Grenville 2007a).} The violence that follows is climactic. Thornhill finds an indigenous camp where all of its inhabitants have been killed by ‘poison in the flour’ (\textit{SR} 276-7); his neighbour Sagitty, responsible for the poisoning, is speared (\textit{SR} 293-6). These events culminate in a final act of massacre in which Thornhill himself takes part. The author’s presentation of violence as a logical consequence of events, what Gall calls “the logic of escalation” (2008: 99), justifies Thornhill’s act as ‘responsible’ violence under the circumstances. The punitive expedition is, however, carefully planned and seventeen men take part in it. Thornhill is “choosing it of his own free will” (\textit{SR} 301), even though a few lines earlier Thornhill is presented as having “so little choice” (\textit{SR} 300). This “double perspective”, according to Kossew, reflects the “moral ambiguity inherent in settler identity” (2007: 9), something of which Grenville certainly is conscious. The outcome is the massacre of the entire Aboriginal community living
nearby, including women and children (SR 303-9). Grenville chooses to describe the massacre in detail. According to Kelada the writer wanted to “perform a literary catharsis or exorcism, a process of purification in order to release the toxicity of a violent history where issues of culpability and guilt persist” (2010: 5). However, Grenville does not deliver a full critique of the settler, even in this act of violence. Kelada has identified in this description of the massacre and in Thornhill’s reaction an attempt to present the settler as a man who becomes violent because of events, but who is not a “brutal murderer” (2010: 11-2), and therefore has redeeming qualities. Kelada reads his role as that of the man who protects his family, an image that “evokes pioneer imagery integral to Australian nation-making such as the battler and the anti-hero” (Kelada 2010: 7). In this way, the bushman figure of the legend constantly resurfaces.

There is no mention of the massacre in the Gazette—the white man’s archive—“The natives had been guilty of depredations and outrages. There had been an affray and the settlers had dispersed them” (SR 322-3). What really happened is never spoken of; it exists only as an underlying presence. The bonfire destroys the proof, but it leaves marks on the dirt, a patch of land where grass does not grow anymore: “bare yellow earth […] marking where the bonfire had burned […] Nothing was written on the ground. Nor was it written on any page. But the blankness itself might tell the story to anyone who had eyes to see” (SR 325).

Although absent from the official archive, violence is exposed in its

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78 The description of this massacre is based on the 1838 Waterloo Creek massacre (Grenville 2007a).
brutality and condemned as an unnecessary act. In this way Grenville’s fiction articulates some of the more common forms of frontier violence that in the past have been left out of the official history.

Ten years after the massacre, the Hawkesbury River has not changed, only the names have (SR 313). The memory of the violence is repressed by Thornhill who now spends his days searching the horizon with his telescope, imagining that some of them still live in the most remote parts: “They could still be up there, in that intricate landscape that defeated any white man—still there, prepared to wait”, but there is no man standing in the landscape: “each time, it was a new emptiness” (SR 333). The emptiness of the landscape is now real and this is a burden that haunts the settler who is responsible for it. He has prospered and lives a wealthy life in his stone house surrounded by a high stone wall (SR 318) with only one entrance: the house resembles a fortress, with something similar to a drawbridge (SR 315), a sign that the fear of the landscape and of the other remains. Inside the garden walls Sal has planted all European plants, a proper English garden and “real trees” (SR 318); “a person was entitled to draw any picture they fancied on the blank slate of this new place” (SR 319). They have imposed on the landscape a “version of England” (SR 330) but the other world, the one that was there before the white settlers arrived, is still there: “but beyond the wall […]

79 This continuous searching of the landscape with his telescope and looking for ‘survivors’ seems to be a punishment for his deeds. It reminds us also of John McIvor in The White Earth watching the hills for any sign of the ‘burning man’. Both of them carry their sense of guilt.
80 Thornhill also briefly introduces the ‘dying race theory’, and ‘eugenics theories’ dismissing them as “wrong”: "in spite of everything, it seemed that the blacks were not going to disappear” (SR 327).
was another world, where the cliffs waited and watched. Above the roses
and the rest of it was the forest […] unchanged by the speck of New
South Wales enclosed by William Thornhill’s wall” (SR 330-1). The
legitimate owners are still there, fused in the very landscape that is again
anthropomorphised: the hills are watching. And Thornhill behind his high
walls does not feel the place to be his own, he does not feel he is part of
the place, he does not belong.81

Thornhill’s claim of belonging to the land—through naming his own patch
of land ‘Thornhill’s Point’—is clearly qualified not only by the looming
bush and the unchanged landscape outside his ‘world’ but by the
presence of the only Aborigine who survived the massacre, the one he
named Long Jack: “This me, he said. My place. He smoothed the dirt with
his palm so it left a patch like the scar on his head” (SR 329). This
gesture and the words that accompany it are the first successful
communication between the two of them.82 Thornhill suddenly faces what
he has tried to repress:

Thornhill felt a pang. No man had worked harder than he had done […] he
would have said he had everything a man could want.
But there was an emptiness as he watched Jack’s hand caressing the dirt.
This was something he did not have: a place that was part of his flesh and
spirit. There was no part of the world he would keep coming back to, the
way Jack did, just to feel it under him.
It was as if the very dirt was a consolation (SR 329).

81 Grenville’s latest novel Sarah Thornhill (2011) is part of the ‘colonial trilogy’ with The
Secret River and The Lieutenant (2008). This novel tells the story of Sarah, William’s
youngest daughter, who discovers the dark secret in her family history.
82 A similar contrast in the white/indigenous understanding of ownership is clearly
expressed in One Night the Moon (2001) where the landowner sings “This land is mine”
while the Aboriginal character, Albert sings “this land is me” (Perkins 2002).
Thornhill does not belong to that place nor to any other place and the feeling of belonging is something he cannot take away from Jack. The settler is defeated in his claim on the land: he owns the land but does not belong to it because he knows it was taken by force from its legitimate owners. This final statement expresses the ‘trauma’ of not belonging.

As Gall argues, this sense of “loss” in Thornhill suggests that Grenville has succeeded in unsettling the settler reader, in producing an account that does rearticulate the frontier in the present. But it could also be read as a moral negotiation between good and bad forms of colonisation, in which the bad prevails through misunderstanding, and the logic of escalation (2008: 100-1).

Thus Grenville’s representation of the dispossession as an ‘escalation’ of violence due to misunderstanding perpetuates “the settler-colonial articulation directly on the land at the expense of indigenous dispossession” (Gall 2008: 101). Grenville dismantles the lie of *terra nullius* but the settler’s position as owner is not questioned. What is questioned is his taking part in the violence, which is attributed to a series of causes, but not to anything intrinsically bad in the settler whose ‘good’ nature emerges from his juxtaposition with Smasher. Ultimately such representation allows the “good” settler to identify responsibilities on both sides (Gall 2008: 101). In Grenville’s representation of the massacre, according to Kelada, “the white nation, while presented with shame, is not […] ultimately threatened” as “the writing of such a text with its genuine goodwill and willingness to relive the nation’s past atrocities, could be read as a signifier of even more virtue” (Kelada 2010: 12).
Grenville acknowledges the existence of another story by creating “a hollow in the book” but, as Gall suggests, “recognition” is a “judicial position, apparently above the action of the frontier that it evaluates and describes” and the creation of a “space of recognition” for indigenous dispossession does not undermine the settler’s “possessive logic” (2008: 101-2). This point is stressed by Kelada who identifies the author’s choice to reinsert indigenous people in the narrative “in the form of a hollow” as a “privilege of the narrative” which is still informed by the knowledge produced about the other (2010: 4). Kelada suggests that in the final pages of the novel “terra nullius appears to be reasserted with the reference to emptiness and any suggestion of continuing Indigenous sovereignty is effectively whitewashed and reduced to a haunting ‘hollow’” (2010: 13). In the absence of an appropriate indigenous point of view an alternative narrative is never fully countenanced.

Grenville consciously positions herself as a white Australian writer who is aware of her privileged position and for this reason she does not appropriate the indigenous point of view and her indigenous characters are not given a ‘voice’ in the novel. She has said that this was because “their inside story—their responses, their thoughts, their feelings—all that was for someone else to tell, someone who had the right to enter that world and the knowledge to do it properly” (Grenville 2006: 198-9). Thus Grenville’s choice not to insert indigenous stories or offer the point of view of the native informant is a conscious recognition of her limitations due to
her speaking from a privileged position of ‘whiteness’. However, even as she positions herself as a white writer who does not have the tools and the legitimacy to speak for the other, it is an acknowledgement by the author of her power position as a white writer in Australia. Although critically self-aware, she is reaffirming her power to give recognition: thus the other’s story exists because the white settler/writer recognises that existence. It is the white man who gives recognition and who at the same time does not need the recognition of the other. While Grenville’s intentions are probably genuine, she remains trapped in the white settler’s frame of reference.

In *Searching for The Secret River* (2006), Grenville explains that the novel was influenced by the reconciliation walk across the bridge in Sydney on 20 May 2000:

> The imagery of our walk across a bridge, suddenly seemed all too easy. We were strolling towards reconciliation—what I had to do was cross the hard way, through the deep water of our history. This is the story of what happened when I took the plunge and went looking for my sliver of that history (2006: 13).

Grenville explains that she realised she needed to find out about her ancestor’s relationship with the indigenous people and recognises the importance of coming to terms with that difficult part of Australian history which has too often been avoided and denied. Kelada reads this episode in the context of the “politics of recognition” arguing that these marches do not change race relations but are a means to reaffirm “the ‘goodness’ of white Australia” (2010: 5-6). In this way the novel participates in the
politics of ‘saying sorry’ through an acknowledgement of past violence without really taking responsibility because these acts are positioned far in the past.

The importance of acknowledging dispossession is fundamental for both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Grenville clearly addresses the need to attend to every aspect of the past, of colonisation, so as to come to terms with it:

My writing of the book was driven by a feeling that there’s unfinished business in our history—it’s probably why the “history wars” go on making headlines [...]. There’s no going back and replaying the hand that history dealt us, but we can go back and tease the story out so we can feel what it was like to live through it. Doing that helps to understand the past, and understanding the past is essential to any attempt to disentangle the puzzles of the present (2006a: 152).

In turning to the past in order to “disentangle” the present, Grenville must unravel those traumatic moments in history which had been silenced or repressed. Any healing or reconciliation would depend upon the perpetrators acknowledging their complicity in the treatment of Aborigines. The dispossession of indigenous people and the policies of assimilation need to be spelled out, to be represented in order to be exorcised. The whole argument around the apology and its importance for the healing process is linked to the fact that guilt and suffering are intergenerational. The victim needs to have their grief recognised in order to heal and the perpetrators need to acknowledge their wrongdoing in order not to feel guilt any longer. Presenting and re-presenting the violence of dispossession is therefore part of the healing process from
both sides. However, the ‘politics of reconciliation’ and the idea that an acknowledgment of the violent history of settlement is enough to ‘move on’ is a limited vision. As McKenna argues, “‘Moving on’ may only be a journey to a new kind of forgetting” (2006: 106). An exposition of the violent dispossession can only start a healing from the white perspective, a coming to terms with the past from a white point of view. Once the perpetrators’ side of the story and the suppressed intergenerational trauma (guilt) has been acknowledged, white Australians can ‘move on’. However, this is not the case for the victims, whose trauma is much deeper and whose healing requires more than just acknowledging the violence and ‘saying sorry’. Thus, the white Australian approach to ‘reconciliation’ is another way of imposing white power. As Kelada points out, the term itself can be controversial, since it implies that the two parties both have responsibilities in the choices they made (2010: 10).

Reconciliation in Australia has been employed to allow the nation to ‘move forward’ by coming to terms with its past. However, as Kelada explains, drawing on Ahmed: “national shame can be a mechanism for reconciliation as self-reconciliation, in which the ‘wrong’ that is committed provides the very grounds for claiming national identity. It is the declaration of shame that allows us to ‘assert our identity as a nation’” (Kelada 2010: 6). Following on from this argument, the politics of reconciliation and with them the politics of recognition of past wrongs

83 Grenville has argued that “Australian history does have a series of secrets in it. [...] My feeling is that until we are prepared to look at all those slightly hidden, slightly secret places in our history, we can’t actually make much progress into the future” (Koval 2005).
work as a way of re-establishing the legend while critiquing it. Even as the foundational myth, which excluded the violence perpetrated against indigenous people, is rewritten to include that violence, the rewriting continues to operate from a white point of view and the ‘goodness’ of the white man who rewrites to acknowledge the wrongs of the past is a self-congratulatory act that re-emphasises the ‘goodness’ at the core of the nation. Thus the legend is not diminished by the acknowledgement of the past but emerges stronger, having rectified the ‘bad’ aspects connected with the creation of an Australian identity and thus contributing to solidifying that identity. The implicit attitude of white Australians—evident also in the words of the Apology—that ‘saying sorry’ is fundamental to moving on, contributes to re-enacting those same acts of imposing white power on indigenous people in the moment when they are declaring otherwise. The white power behind the discourses of whiteness remains unchallenged by these acts.

What remains of value and sets the scene for the ‘end’ of the legend is the novel’s role in questioning the foundational myth. Grenville’s claim that a novel could tell more about an historical event than history itself, however, has been critiqued by historians such as Inga Clendinnen and Mark McKenna.\textsuperscript{84} In “The History Question: Who Owns the Past?” (2006), Clendinnen analyses Grenville’s novel and points out, openly against Grenville’s assertion about the imaginative powers of fiction, that it is not

\textsuperscript{84} The debate about \textit{The Secret River} was largely due to an interview of the author by Ramona Koval for Radio National. The author’s position in this interview with regard to the ‘history wars’—“up on a ladder, looking down” (Koval 2005)—has also generated a number of critiques from historians (See McKenna 2006; Clendinnen 2006).
possible to empathise with people who lived more than 200 years ago (2006: 16-28). In her defence, Grenville suggests that her work does not declare the superiority of fiction over history but the capacity of fiction to offer a different point of view (Grenville 2007: 69-71), explaining that many of the events narrated in the novel were actually adapted from historical records with names, places and dates modified.

This book isn't history, but it's solidly based on history. Most of the events in the book "really happened" and much of the dialogue is what people really said or wrote. Whenever possible I based events in the book on recorded historical events, adapting and changing them as necessary (quoted in Grenville 2007: 67-8).

Grenville emphasises the importance of literature in addressing the past. Literature communicates to the reader, brings him/her closer to the writer on an emotional level and arrives at a 're-created' life world in a way which history does not. As James Bradley has argued in response to Clendinnen's critique of the novel, Australian novels "have been concerned less with the historical events on which they are based than with a deeper project, something which looks rather more like the mapping out of an imaginative foundation in which a new idea of the nation might be rooted" (Bradley 2006: 73). This novel is no exception as it too is more concerned with readdressing the moment of settlement in order to deconstruct its mythic aspects than focusing on matters relating to the exact accuracy of the events. The importance of the novel in rewriting the history of settlement so as to expose its violent side is
crucial in any deconstruction of the foundational narrative.\textsuperscript{85} The construction of history as a discourse from which events may be silenced to justify land dispossession is clearly addressed by the author. Camilla Nelson analyses the debate on Grenville’s novel and the positions of McKenna and Clendinnen. She suggests that this novel “steps into a politically loaded area of history and poses a question that has been taken as an affront” (Nelson 2007). She argues that the historical novel “might present us with a way of intervening in the discourses of reality—of questioning the discourses (like history) through which reality constructs itself. I think this is ultimately what Grenville’s novel does” (Nelson 2007).

I disagree with the attacks on the novel in which historians try to reaffirm the ‘superiority’ of history. I believe novels have a fundamental role to play in the process of narrating the violence of the frontier. The dramatic opposition between history and the novel is not particularly helpful.

McKenna also criticises Grenville’s position.\textsuperscript{86} He acknowledges the importance of frontier histories and the importance given by Australian authors and historians to an acknowledgement of dispossession (2006: 106). He addresses in general the reception of historical fiction, arguing that historical fiction is popular since

\textsuperscript{85} McKenna has pointed out that a process of rewriting the history of the frontier had already started before the publication of Grenville’s novel (McKenna 2006: 106).

\textsuperscript{86} Peter Carey’s \textit{True History of the Kelly Gang} (2000) was also attacked by historians upon its publication for its historical content. Carey replied, arguing that his version of the story is fiction. This response was praised by McKenna and contrasted with Grenville’s (McKenna 2006: 105).
it suits the prevailing conservative commentariat (to use their language) for novelists to be anointed as historians, as the national bards of a more balanced past. For such a history can never escape the realm of myth. Its truth can never be tested. In the world of fiction, history is made to order, made to fit. And its political potency is muted when compared to the real thing (McKenna 2006: 107).

This is true to a certain extent. In the context of the Australian legend and the foundational myth supported by the legend, a complete deconstruction relies on means other than the historical record. The legend has acquired ‘historical’ legitimacy but it does not have a solid historical grounding, hence its categorisation as ‘legend’. Fiction can be more effective in deconstructing these myths since the Australian legend is not history and its deconstruction is more powerfully obtained through fiction. Fiction can in fact work on the same level of myth, undermining the constructed myths on similar grounds.

Kate Grenville has exposed the discourses at the foundation of Australia’s settlement and has presented them as constructions willingly used by settlers and institutions to justify the legitimacy of their presence on the land. The denial of previous indigenous ownership and the violence used to maintain settler ownership are all well analysed and critiqued. Grenville exposes the construction of the landscape as empty. Settlers, according to the novel, were aware of the presence of indigenous people and of a way of farming the land that was different but evident. The novel therefore critiques the legend through an examination of the white characters’ attitude towards the land and its original inhabitants. She exposes the denial of indigenous land rights based on
the doctrine of _terra nullius_ and clearly addresses the Aboriginal right to land. The _Mabo_ judgement proved that indigenous people never renounced their rights to land, a point which is clearly expressed in the novel. The whole legend loses its power when its constructed nature is exposed and all the discourses of Australianness, of white superiority, are dismantled and reduced merely to a way to justify dispossession. This white myth is only a legend with no historical foundations; it has been used to legitimise ownership by excluding indigenous people who are perceived as a threat to belonging. Once the legend is identified as a discursive construction, other stories can emerge allowing for the re-inscription in history of indigenous people and their dispossession.

The novel presents a version of settlement that has often been silenced by official history and the violence linked to the settlement of the land is here exposed in all its atrocity. The settling of the land itself is presented as a violent act—exemplified by the massacre—thus deconstructing the foundational myth. The figure of the bushman, represented in the novel by the settler, is demythicised as he is not a brave man. The outcome of the novel clearly shows that the denial of dispossession and the creation of a mythical past to replace it have not deleted the trauma as the sense of guilt connected to this act still needs to be addressed. Even though the narration of the trauma does not constitute a cure, in the act of narration there is an understanding (Mishra 2007: 114). As a white Australian author, Grenville is still speaking from a privileged position. While she avoids assuming the point of view of the dispossessed indigenous
people, the external narrator is still influenced by the same discourses she wishes to criticise. Thus while condemning violence the author still reduces it to an outcome of misunderstanding. While critiquing the legend and its whiteness and condemning the violent nature of the acquisition of land, Grenville, nevertheless, celebrates the settlement, since Australian society is exalted as more egalitarian when compared to the mother country—an egalitarianism that is valid only for white settlers. The self-celebratory aspect of the legend still lingers in the novel. The author adopts the settlers’ point of view and even while critiquing the legend and the foundation of Australia the settlement is still the central subject and the achievements of the white settlers, if not exalted, are still celebrated.

In this chapter, through the case study of *The White Earth* and *The Secret River*, I have analysed the way in which McGahan and Grenville have imaginatively rewritten the absent Aborigine back into history, exposing the exclusion as a discursive construction employed by the dominant power to legitimise the Australian nation. The exclusion of the indigenous people from both official history and a sense of Australianness defined and celebrated by the legend has been fundamental to the legitimisation of whiteness in Australia. These novels critique the foundational myth of the nation presented by the legend—the settlement of Australia in the context of *terra nullius*—exposing it as a construction not based on historical evidence but on the will to unify and legitimise a nation. Foucault’s insights on the nature of discourses and their ability to acquire historical depth is fundamental to an understanding of how a myth could establish itself as the defining characteristic of Australianness,
and is so well incorporated into Australian identity to be accepted almost without question. This kind of exaltation is anachronistic after events such as the *Mabo* decision and the adoption of a multicultural policy. Grenville and McGahan address these discourses and expose that side of history so often silenced or ignored. Their critique of the legend and its foundational myth based on *terra nullius* is unequivocal. However, while being critiqued, the legend is still employed to represent and define the ‘typical Australian’ and even in their expression of the constructed characteristics of this figure there is still a lingering sense of celebration in their descriptions of the settlers. The subject of their novels is still a white subject analysed and critiqued from a white point of view. While this aspect limits their ability to completely overcome discourses of whiteness, it also shows that they are conscious of their role as white Australian authors and of their white privileges as a limitation. Grenville and McGahan do not talk from an indigenous point of view: they are aware of their power position and do not appropriate indigenous stories.

While presenting the wilderness and hostility of the landscape as a discursive construction to celebrate settler achievements, the landscape still comes through as a hostile entity: the white Australian subject has not accepted the landscape as his own and the green European hills are still something to long for. The feeling about this landscape is still of an overpowering and alien entity that needs to be tamed and controlled, not a welcoming and nurturing place. This perception shows that a sense of belonging to the ‘bush’ has not been achieved. The legend therefore still
emerges as a way to exorcise this fear of the landscape by creating imaginative subjects who have achieved that belonging to the land. These authors have also addressed the traumatic and violent aspects at the foundation of the nation and have voiced them, willingly acknowledging the dark history of Australia and participating in these traumatic events. However, they have only addressed the trauma at the foundation of the nation that is positioned well in the past, leaving mostly unspoken more recent policies, the ‘stolen generations’ and assimilation. It is only with indigenous authors, analysed in the final chapter, that these issues are fully addressed. Indigenous authors have a clear and complete sense of the landscape which for them is welcoming and familiar. These authors voice past violence, including ‘stolen generations’ narratives and contemporary issues. Their critique of the legend as a constructed and superimposed discourse to legitimise white colonisation is fully addressed and in the process a fully articulated and multicultural sense of Australianness is achieved.
Chapter Five

The Legend Dismantled: Aboriginal Counter Narratives

In the previous chapter I analysed the work of two contemporary authors, Andrew McGahan and Kate Grenville and their deconstruction of the legend with its claim to be the Australian foundational narrative. These authors addressed a hegemonic white discourse of the colonisation of an empty land and worked towards dismantling it. The legend, the construction of brave white men pitted against the wilderness, is so embedded in Australian identity that it has become internalised, even though it is not based on any historical evidence. The novels of McGahan and Grenville expose the discourses present at the foundation of the country and acknowledge that settlement was a violent enterprise. The foundational myth contributed to the erasing of this violence in order to maintain the colonists’ power and allow them to defend their ownership of the land. The recognition of the atrocities that took place in the history of contact is fundamental to an understanding of Australia’s past and contributes to the dismantling of the discourses of whiteness.

McGahan and Grenville addressed the truth of history, pointing out that history was used as a discourse to perpetuate dispossession and to hide
the violence against indigenous people. That said, we need to acknowledge that even as these writers expose the violent treatment of indigenous people they maintain a white perspective: the subject of their novels is still a ‘white’ subject. Their critique of the legend is limited by a corresponding celebration of the settlement implicit in the settler’s relationship to the landscape that, even when recognised as inhabited, is still perceived as threatening, as alien, thus emphasising the achievements of the act of settlement. While McGahan and Grenville exposed the discourses of *terra nullius* and condemned the violent settling of the land, they only hinted at the discourses of eugenics and race superiority and ‘dying race’, rather than analysing them in depth. I will argue in this chapter that it is only with indigenous authors that these discourses and their effects are fully examined and critiqued.

In this chapter I will focus on the work of indigenous authors Kim Scott, Doris Pilkington and Larissa Behrendt who bring a different insight into the effects of colonisation, violence and dispossession. Indigenous authors address in detail the results of the application of eugenics theories and the effects of removal policies, writing not as outsiders but as insiders. The subject is no longer the white settler. It is no longer the white man who—even from an ‘enlightened’ perspective—analyses the other, but it is whiteness that is exposed to scrutiny and all its discourses are dismantled. The ‘panoptic gaze’ is reversed and it is the Aborigine who is looking at the white man and his institutions, who is analysing and scrutinising whiteness, deconstructing it and reducing it to the discourses
that contributed to form it and that constitute it. These discourses persisted because they were hidden behind discourses of racial superiority, of ‘doing good’, of bringing light, culture and civilisation. As I have pointed out, these discourses of whiteness could exist because of the absence of a multicultural theory. The ‘arrival’ of a multicultural theory exposed their constructed nature, and they could no longer be seen as self-evidently true. In the previous chapter I showed that the first nation people have been written back into history, albeit by white writers. In this chapter the indigenous people themselves “write back”, dismantling whiteness and its discourses, and addressing the constructions behind them. While in previous works indigenous people were given a voice through white eyes, now they speak with their own voices. Earlier, Aboriginal people in ‘white’ Australian literature played the role of characters who helped define the place of white settlers, in the classic repetition of the other used to define oneself; now indigenous people are defining themselves using the same novelistic techniques used by white writers.

Indigenous authors engage in a critique of whiteness, and through the questioning of white claims to belonging to the land, they also question Australianness. Examining the national identity as constructed on the basis of white man’s ideas and supported by the legend and the foundational myth, they radically question it, if not dismantle it outright, and reveal the existence of an erstwhile unproblematic link between identity and culture. The fact is that indigenous authors can look at the
The legend which constructed an identity that excluded indigenous people from belonging to the idea of the Australian nation needs to be rethought by indigenous authors. While the legend, in the figure of the bushman, had appropriated some of the skills and characteristics proper to indigenous people—the bushman is a nomadic figure who possesses the skills to survive in the bush—the ideology of whiteness implicit in this representative of the legend excludes indigenous people from belonging to a general ‘Australianness’. Indigenous authors thus deconstruct the idea of the nation, based on a ‘white Australianness’ to show that indigenous people already possessed the characteristics that exalt the bushman and the foundational moment, and in many cases taught these
to white ‘pioneers’ to guarantee their survival. The image of the ‘starving’ pioneers, dying for lack of either food or water and that of “indigenous people being rejected and even feared, yet needed” is a powerful one (Scott 2005a: 18). This image is juxtaposed with that of the indigenous people who can easily survive without effort because they have a deep knowledge of their environment, a knowledge that springs from it, and is not superimposed upon it. An indigenous sense of belonging does not need to be proved; it is pre-given.

Australia’s preoccupation with the exaltation of the legend and of the figure of the bushman is based on a racial understanding of ‘whiteness’ and its role in creating the imagined nation. The essence of Australianness is to be found in this principle of whiteness, the two terms being interchangeable. The excessive preoccupation with maintaining whiteness and with it the civilisation implicit in it has been addressed in a somewhat combative manner by Ghassan Hage (2003) who argues that Australia is affected by a form of “paranoia” which “denotes a pathological form of fear based on a conception of the self as excessively fragile and constantly threatened” (2003: 49). This paranoia is attributed to the fear of losing Europeanness and with it whiteness: “the core element of Australia’s colonial paranoia is a fear of loss of Europeanness or Whiteness and of the lifestyle and privileges that are seen to emanate directly from that” (Hage 2003: 49). This paranoia is accentuated also by the ‘foreignness’ of the place which is seen to be a constant threat. The observation is true of Australian attitudes towards identity and of
Australia’s obsession with keeping the ‘whiteness’ and Europeanness of the nation more or less intact.

Hage (2003) argues that the attempt to keep a white Australia reached its peak between the two wars with the adoption of an internal policy that controlled the assimilation of the indigenous population, and an external policy that limited immigration to white Europeans (2003: 53). The White Australia Policy prevented non-white immigration and was an expression of the paranoia against Asian immigrants that had been strong since Federation (Hage 2003: 52).¹ The policies aimed at controlling whiteness from the inside—limiting the so-called ‘native problem’ and the even more threatening ‘half-caste problem’—were an expression of the fear that the ‘half-caste’ population, if not limited through controlled breeding, could outnumber the white population. All of these theories and policies were symptoms of the fear of losing one’s whiteness, believed to carry implicit within itself the qualities and characteristics of Europeanness. In other words, the fear was about losing what Europeanness exemplified, i.e. civilisation, through contact with and the influence of races considered inferior and whose ‘inferiority’ was represented and proven by their non-whiteness. Therefore whiteness exemplified not just a ‘colour’ but the social values attributed to it. Using Enlightenment theories to elevate it as the repository of the ultimate truth, European civilisation was exported as

¹ Ghassan Hage analyses the ‘paranoia’ connected to an Asian invasion, a “fear of being ‘swamped’ by what is perceived as a surrounding hostile and uncivilised otherness” (2003: 52). This fear is also linked to the possible threats posed by “the uncivilised others” that can “penetrate” Australian culture from the inside with the result of “polluting” its identity and in the loss of their “social and economic privileges” (Hage 2003: 52). The White Australia Policy was the result of this fear.
the only ‘civilisation’. This contributed to the ‘enslaving’, dispossession and control of indigenous people through power and the consequent related production of knowledge that ensured an absolute and undisputed leading role for the white societies of European descent. Australia’s fear, or paranoia as Ghassan Hage calls it, is linked to an unease connected to the acquisition of a land through the dispossession of its inhabitants. This meant that belonging to the land was always questioned, and always needed to be proved. The sense of unease was also aggravated by the sense that the landscape was always unfamiliar, that it did not belong to them and that it was “undomesticable” (Hage 2003: 51).

A series of events contributed to a rethinking of indigenous/white relations and to the exposure of the inhumane policies perpetrated by the Australian Government against the Aborigines. Before moving on to a reading of novels by indigenous writers, a deeper analysis of the effects of these events is required for a better understanding of the novels’ content. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the publication in 1997 of Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families exposed the policies of assimilation and the forcible removal of children from their indigenous families from 1910 to 1970. These children are now referred to as the ‘stolen generations’. The Inquiry was conducted by Sir Ronald Wilson, President of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity

2 “Stolen generations” is a term coined by Peter Read who published an essay with this title in 1981. According to Robert Manne “the term ‘stolen generations’ had become for Aboriginal Australians what the term the Holocaust was for the Jews—a way of referring, in a kind of moral shorthand, to a common and collective tragedy” (Manne 2001: 82).
Commission and Mick Dodson, Social Justice Commissioner. The Inquiry found that “between one in three and one in ten Aboriginal children” were separated from their families and grew up in institutions or foster homes (Manne 2001: 4-5).³

Policies for the ‘protection’ of the Aborigines were promulgated in the different states from as early as the end of the nineteenth century. These policies instituted reserves and settlements where Aborigines were separated from white societies with the ‘humanitarian’ justification of ‘protecting’ them. With the increase in the part-Aboriginal population—believed to constitute a threat to white Australia—policies for the removal of part-Aboriginal children were also promulgated. These policies gave institutions and authorities complete control over every aspect of indigenous life. The analysis of writings by public figures concerned with child removal clearly shows that the intent behind these policies was the assimilation of indigenous people into mainstream settler culture. One of the most important figures in the promotion and application of such legislation was A.O. Neville, Chief Protector of the Aborigines in Western Australia from 1915 to 1940.⁴ In Western Australia, the 1905 Aborigines

³ The Report does not quantify the number, and Robert Manne, analysing previous studies and statistics, concludes that the figure of one in ten seems more accurate and that the number of children removed between the years 1910 and 1970 is probably between 20,000 and 25,000 (2001: 27). For a detailed discussion see Manne (2001: 24-28).

⁴ Dr Cecil Cook, Chief Protector of the Aborigines (1927-1939) in the Northern Territory is another key figure in the exposition of eugenics theories in Australia. Dr Cook, preoccupied with the possibility of white Australians being outnumbered by ‘half-castes’ in the Northern Territory, promoted a policy for the removal of ‘half-caste’ children and the marriage between ‘half-caste’ women and white men with the scope of “breeding out the colour” to absorb them into white community (Manne 2001: 16-7). Robert Manne also analyses the institutional relevance of these policies that were not merely promoted by some isolated institutional figures—a common argument among those who criticised
Act established the figure of the Chief Protector of the Aborigines as “the legal guardian of ‘every aboriginal and half-caste child’ to the age of 16 years” (Bringing Them Home 1997).5 The Aborigines Amendment Act 1936 extended the power of the Chief Protector—now called Commissioner of Native Affairs—to any native child to the age of 21. It should be noted that the definition of ‘native’ is more inclusive than the previous ‘half-caste’ definition:

native – ‘any person of the ‘full blood’ descended from the original inhabitants of Australia’; ‘any person of less than full blood’ excepting a ‘quadroon’ under 21 who does not associate with ‘full bloods’; a ‘quadroon’ over 21 and a person of less than ‘quadroon’ blood who was born prior to 31 December 1936.
quadroon – ‘a person who is descended from the full blood original inhabitants of Australia or their full blood descendants but who is only one-fourth of the original ‘full blood’ (Bringing Them Home 1997).

These Acts gave the Protector power over indigenous employment, marriage exemption from the Act and child removal: “Regulations may be made for ‘the care, custody and education of the children of aborigines and half-castes’ and ‘enabling any aboriginal or half-caste child to be sent to and detained in an aboriginal institution, industrial school or orphanage’” (Bringing Them Home 1997). While in some cases the removals were justified on the basis of humanitarian intent, in the majority of the cases analysed by the Inquiry “the predominant aim of Indigenous

the 1997 Report—but that were supported by the Government (2001: 64-65). Dr Cook and his policies have been discussed in Chapter Two in regard to Xavier Herbert’s critique of the eugenic practices employed by the Chief Protector.
5 The Appendices to the Bringing Them Home Report document the legislations regarding indigenous child removal and subdivide them by States and Territories. Those discussed here are the legislations of Western Australia, Appendix 5, as they are the ones addressed in the novels analysed in this chapter. For a complete list of the legislations and regulations see the Appendices section in the Report (Bringing Them Home 1997).
child removals was the absorption or assimilation of the children into the wider, non-Indigenous community so that their unique cultural values and ethnic identities would disappear, giving way to models of Western culture (Bringing Them Home 1997). The Bringing Them Home Report concluded that the policies of child removal, adopted with the “objectives” of destroying their cultural, linguistic and social identity, were genocidal according to the deliberations of the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Bringing Them Home 1997).⁶

Genocide includes “a coordinated plan of different actions aimed at the destruction of the essential foundations of the life of national groups with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves”. As such, genocide “can be committed by means other than actual physical extermination” and this includes the forcible transfer of children” (quoted in Behrendt 2001: 135).

Thus the attempted eradication of indigenous culture through the forcible removal and the assimilation of part-Aboriginal children was genocidal—the “intention of their destruction” being sufficient—even though the destruction was not achieved (Behrendt 2001: 134).⁷

The conclusion advanced by the Inquiry—that the child removal policies were genocidal—has been criticised by many commentators, and Robert Manne argues that the attacks on the conclusion have been made possible by the lack of recognition by the Inquiry of two distinct attitudes

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⁶ Australia ratified the Genocide Convention in 1949 but the legislation has not been incorporated into “domestic law” (Curthoys et al. 2008: 114).

⁷ Larissa Behrendt also makes a strong case for genocide in her novel Home (2004) where the protagonist, a young Aboriginal lawyer, links the local history of the place that tells of a massacre, to a court case where the definition of ‘genocide’ is discussed. Behrendt notes that “the word was coined in 1944, a new word for an old concept” (2004: 10). Further page references to Home (Behrendt 2004) are indicated by B.
in the removal policies.\(^8\) In Manne’s argument there were two phases in the application of the removal policies: a first phase that was concerned with “biological absorption” and a later phase directed towards “cultural assimilation”.

Through the failure to distinguish clearly between removals in the age of eugenics, biological absorption and racial engineering, and removals in the age of social and cultural assimilation, the plausibility of the discussion of the relationship between child removal and genocide in *Bringing them home* was […] weakened (Manne 2001: 30).

The ‘objectives’ of the removal policy changed after the Second World War, largely, it seems, because of the meaning that eugenics theories took on under the Nazis. As Manne notes, “The policy of the biological absorption of the ‘half-caste’ was replaced by the policy of the cultural assimilation of the Aboriginal people as a whole” (2001: 40). While the aims of the policies promoted before the War were clearly genocidal in their intent, aiming at the disappearance of a race, the attribution of genocidal intent to the assimilation policies after the War is more controversial (Manne 2001: 38-40).

The reactions of the public and of some members of Parliament to the Report were sympathetic. ‘Sorry Books’ were signed around Australia. The Howard Government’s position on the debate, however, was made clear with the 2000 submission to the Senate on the Report. In this

\(^8\) The publication of the Report led to a large debate on the ‘stolen generations’ and on the Report itself. I refer here to Robert Manne’s detailed analysis of the debate. He acknowledges some of the limitations of the Report highlighted by the critics—the lack of evidence by people involved in the application of the policy, such as policemen, public servants, and missionaries, for example (Manne 2001: 30). One of the first attacks on the Report was from Ron Brunton (Manne 2001: 31-2).
submission the term ‘stolen generations’ was questioned and it was argued that the children were not ‘stolen’ but “in many cases the separated children were removed because they were neglected or that they had been relinquished voluntarily” (Manne 2001: 83). The submission also contested the use of the word ‘generation’ on the grounds that it was not an entire generation which was affected by the policy but ‘only’ ten per cent of indigenous children. This submission used a semantic debate to avoid discussing the nature of the policies themselves. The submission did not “discuss that evidence which revealed the racially engineered, eugenic basis of Aboriginal child removal policy and practice in both the Northern Territory and Western Australia. This evidence is, of course, at the heart of the discussion about genocide and the stolen generations” (Manne 2001: 84). The submission concluded that there was no need for an apology because no “‘violations of human rights’ had been involved. Naturally if there had been no such violations no national apology needed to be offered, no compensation needed to be paid” (Manne 2001: 82-5).

In the Report Sir Ronald Wilson acknowledged the violation of human rights and that “it is not too late for the nation to gain release from the burden of this shameful part of its history” (Bird 1998: xv). Among the recommendations made by the Inquiry were acknowledgement of past policies and an official apology to the Aboriginal people and reparation
The Howard Government refused to apologise to the ‘stolen generations’, arguing that “Australians of this generation should not be required to accept guilt and blame for past actions and policies over which they had no control” (quoted in Curthoys et al. 2008: x). The attitude of the Howard administration has been one of denial, a denial that culminated in the ‘history wars’. The Howard Government’s refusal to acknowledge past guilt is therefore a refusal to come to terms with an Australian history which is ‘traumatic’ both for the victims and in a lesser way for the perpetrators. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, trauma is intergenerational, as is guilt. This trauma needs to be acknowledged with both narration from the victims and listening from the perpetrators to help the healing process. In the Apology, these two traumas are linked, emphasising the need for healing on both sides. Kevin Rudd’s Apology on 13 February 2008 constitutes a turning point, as a “new page in the history of our great continent can now

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9 The *Bringing Them Home* Report was presented to Federal Parliament on 26 May 1997. On 26 May 1998 the first National Sorry Day was held to commemorate the ‘stolen generations’. In 2005 it was renamed National Day of Healing for all Australians.  
10 Gail Jones in her novel *Sorry* (2007), published before the official apology, takes a political stand on the Howard Government’s refusal to apologise. The novel refers to Perdita’s inability to say ‘sorry’ to her Aboriginal friend Mary—separated from her mum as a child—for the suffering she has inflicted upon her. Mary has been imprisoned for life for the murder of Perdita’s father, a crime she did not commit. Perdita had killed her father—while he was abusing her friend—but has repressed this traumatic event and is unable to remember it for years. Her mother, a witness, refuses to tell the truth to save Mary from prison. Mary refers to the different parameters of the law: “no one will believe the word of a bush blackfella. Unless [...] they’re confessing a crime” (Jones 2007: 203). The novel is a clear reference to the Australian Government’s refusal to say sorry, denying the past because it was too traumatic. Even when she recalls the traumatic event, Perdita fails to apologise to Mary: the importance of saying sorry for past events is here clearly addressed. At the end of the novel a snow dream covers everything with whiteness—as in Australian history where discourses of whiteness have covered every negative aspect, deleting them from the historical past. “A note on ‘sorry’” at the end of the book expresses the author’s position on the *Bringing Them Home* Report and the refusal by the Prime Minister to apologise (Jones 2007: 215-6). Perdita’s words in the novel “I should have said sorry” (Jones 2007: 211) are a clear statement of Gail Jones’ position on the apology. In the Acknowledgments the author recognises Aboriginal Australians as the custodians of the land and hopes for more native title grants to be recognised (Jones 2007: 217).
be written […] this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians" (Rudd 2008).\(^{11}\)

In response to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s Apology, Tom Calma said to the members of the ‘stolen generations’ and to the nation: “Let your healing, and the healing of the nation, begin” (Calma 2008).\(^{12}\)

Unfortunately the Apology was not followed by acts of reparation. As Makarand Paranjape points out when discussing Kevin Rudd’s Apology, a “promise of compensation and restitution has been ruled out by Rudd. An apology empty of action will produce only a false reconciliation, even adding to white self-congratulation without producing a genuine recognition of the felt experience of aboriginal alienation” (Paranjape 2009: 18). The nation’s belief that the acknowledgement and the apology are sufficient for the healing of the trauma and for Australians to move forward is a white appropriation of the victim’s trauma. In order for the healing process to take place there needs to be a full acknowledgement of past events. White Australia’s refusal to acknowledge a violent settlement demonstrates yet again the importance of the settlement myth

\(^{11}\) According to Tony Barta the exhortation to move forward and to close a chapter in the history of the country, looking instead towards the future, is also an exhortation to bring the discussion over the past history to a close (Barta 2008: 211).

\(^{12}\) Tom Calma is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. In his speech he also expresses the hope that all the recommendations of the 1997 Report will be implemented (Calma 2008). The words of the Commissioner expressed hope for a different future, condemning the attitude of those who opposed the Report: “By acknowledging and paying respect, Parliament has now laid the foundations for healing to take place and for a reconciled Australia in which everyone belongs. For today is not just about the Stolen Generations—it is about every Australian. Today’s actions enable every single one of us to move forward together—with joint aspirations and a national story that contains a shared past and future. It is a matter of great sadness that the experiences of the Stolen Generations have been used as a source of division among the Australian community since the release of the Bringing Them Home Report. There are many individuals who have made their name as ‘Stolen Generations deniers and rebuffers” (Calma 2008).
in constructing a sense of belonging and the ‘fear’ that in acknowledging the real history of settlement this sense of belonging ceases to exist and with it the settlers’ rights to belong.

As had happened with the *Mabo* decision, whenever attention is focused on what in Behrendt’s words is a “‘semantic’ debate” (Behrendt 2007: 105), real issues are ignored. According to Barta the “genocide was buried in the national apology” and “the apology was framed within what has come to be called ‘reconciliation’ […] the official ideology within which Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians can now ‘move on’” (2008: 210). The Apology does not “recognize the depth of their historical trauma or give them a national memorial. It is meant to validate enough of their suffering to enable the celebratory memory of the Australian past to progress with less dissent into the future” (Barta 2008: 210). The acknowledgement by Australians of more recent traumas inflicted on indigenous people—the ‘deaths in custody’ and the ‘stolen generations’—are therefore a means to avoid an acknowledgement of the original trauma—the dispossession and violence that characterised the ‘settlement’—because, in Barta’s argument, this is an “historical truth” the nation is not ready to acknowledge (Barta 2008: 210). The acknowledgement of this trauma, in fact, would have a powerful effect on Australia as a nation. While the ‘stolen generations’ and the ‘deaths in custody’ can be attributed to past unjust legislations and attributed to the ‘times’, the recognition of a settlement that was not a pacific one but was in fact an ‘invasion’ involves a questioning of the legitimacy of white
occupation of Australia, if not the foundations of Australian identity. According to Ghassan Hage the “genocidal practices” linked to colonisation and the presence of indigenous Australians constitute a constant threatening reminder that haunts Australian identity with a “continuous sense of unfinished business” (Hage 2003: 51).

The genocidal intent attributed to the removal policies (implicit in the dispossession of indigenous people and in their removal from their traditional lands) requires a rethinking of the word ‘genocide’ itself. In Raphael Lemkin’s discussion of the concept, the word ‘genocide’ is attributed to a larger variety of acts than those recognised by the 1948 Convention.13 Lemkin’s idea of genocide includes “the destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group” and “the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor” (quoted in Curthoys et al. 2008: 112). In this argument the dispossession of indigenous people was done with genocidal intent. The focus of indigenous authors on these aspects of Australian history, which have already been addressed by contemporary white Australian authors, is a central feature of their writing. In their works there is no exaltation of settlement. Settlement is a completely negative act with no positive aspects. Where the clearing of the land and the stripping of the land’s ‘wilderness’, even when critiqued, was still exalted by white authors, in the indigenous works the critique is more

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13 The concept of genocide was introduced in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin who coined the term ‘genocide’ from “the Greek word genos (tribe, race) and Latin cide (death)” (Curthoys et al. 2008: 111). The OED defines ‘genocide’ as “The deliberate and systematic extermination of an ethnic or national group” and quotes the first occurrence of the term in Lemkin: “1944 R. Lemkin Axis Rule in Occupied Europe ix. 79 By ‘genocide’ we mean the destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group” (1989: VI. 445).
comprehensive and more uncompromising. We need to acknowledge, as we have indeed done, that the legend has been used in literature to either exalt the figure of the bushman or to critique it. In many instances it has been critiqued, analysed and exposed as merely a construction with no historical foundations, its scope being that of unifying a nation, creating an ‘imagined community’ and with it a sense of belonging since the legend is rooted in Australian identity and consciousness and is readily recognised by Australians. Indigenous authors too understand that the legend is a construct but where they differ is in their strongly negative reading of it: it is a means of using an image recognised by white readers—the majority of the readers—and then turning it on its head.

The white male who masters the wilderness and around whom an Australian identity is created does not easily fit into a nation that declares itself multicultural. In a post-multicultural context the legend can only be used as a stereotype of the ‘typical’ Australian. In this context, indigenous authors show that the legend is both inadequate and a construction. As we have noted, the bushman acquired some of the characteristics of the indigenous people in an attempt at claiming a sense of belonging. Thus the bushman is read as a nomad who has knowledge of the bush and can survive in the most difficult conditions. His attitude though is one of having to fight the bush to master it; he does not have a ‘harmonious’ attitude towards it. This paradox or ambiguity is exposed by indigenous authors who present these bushmen for what they are and contrast them with indigenous people’s attitudes. Even while critiquing it, indigenous
authors use the myth of the bushman because of its pervasiveness and its general level of accessibility as a symbol. The bushman is not celebrated but continuously critiqued because he does not master the land in any real sense, but simply affirms his misguided sense of superiority through violence against indigenous people. The very foundations of the idea of the Australian nation are destabilised: the myth used to create a cohesive nation is dismantled, leaving a sense of uncertainty. The history of settlement and the figure of the ‘typical Australian’ need to be rethought, reimagined in order to truly reflect the nation, and the multicultural nature of the nation needs to be reflected in its myth. At the same time, indigenous writers are afraid of the fact that multiculturalism makes their identity one among many other identities, forgetting that their role in Australian history and their rights to the country are very different.¹⁴

While multiculturalism now makes the idea of an Australian identity based on the legend untenable, the focus of indigenous writers is on the exposition of those discourses used to perpetrate violence and to justify policies such as the removal of children from their indigenous families. Stories have become a way of dealing with the trauma of the victims who need to retell their stories in order to heal through narration. In this way narrative informs mainstream Australians about a part of history too often ignored. Kim Scott argues that many indigenous works adopt a “victim

¹⁴ According to Scott, indigenous people have been grouped under the multicultural policy with immigrants while, from an indigenous point of view, white Australians and immigrants should be together under the category ‘immigrants’ as opposed to ‘indigenous’ (2005a: 19-20).
mode” not only because of the importance narration has in healing, but in part because it is a “way of talking and storying that Non-Aboriginal Australia still allows of Aboriginal Australia” (Buck 2001). In Scott’s argument, non-Aboriginal Australia controls the kind of narratives which it wants to be told about the past. This point is made by Ghassan Hage as well, who recognises the importance of moving forward from the “recognition of the past as shameful” which “remains a coloniser’s take on history” (2003: 5). Although white contemporary authors have exposed some aspects of the shameful past such as massacres and dispossession, Hage argues that there are a number of different stories of indigenous resistance which need to be told as well but that these “cannot be integrated into the histories of ‘recognition of the colonial past’” (Hage 2003: 5).

I turn now to my primary texts. The novels I analyse, Kim Scott’s *Benang* (1999), Doris Pilkington’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996) and Larissa Behrendt’s *Home* (2004), deal with the effects of removal policies on Aborigines.15 However, while focusing on the removal policies, these

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15 Kim Scott’s *Benang* won the Miles Franklin Award in 2000 (the first book by an Aboriginal writer to win this award). The novel has a large time span covering three generations and dealing with history, land dispossession, violence, massacres, ‘stolen generations’ issues, eugenics theories and the like. Harley, who has been brought up by his grandfather Ernest Scat, emphasising his white heritage, is introduced to his Aboriginal heritage by his father Tommy, just before his death in a car accident. While recovering from his injuries from the same accident, Harley discovers his grandfather’s eugenics notes. With the help of his uncles Jack and Willie from his father’s side, Harley reconnects to his indigenous heritage and to the stories of his ancestors Fanny and Sandy One. The stories of his uncles, his grandmother and other members of his family are also told. All of these stories add a new and different perspective to the story that is being told, questioning western linear storytelling. *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, published in 1996, tells the story of Molly, Daisy and Gracie, respectively 14, 11 and 8 years old, who are removed from their families in Jigalong in the northern desert region of Western Australia and transported to the Moore River Settlement in the south. The three girls escape from this institution and walk
novels employ a larger time frame connecting those ‘local’ histories to the whole history of indigenous/non-indigenous relations. Moving from the central subject, the exposition of removal policies and genetic theories, these novels in fact engage in a wider critique. They all expose and address aspects such as the telling of history, the construction of an identity based on the legend, the denial of violence and previous evidence of ownership. They also engage with the original dispossession, the effects of the violent settlement of the land, and the imposition of civilisation and of a law alien to both the land and its people. Indigenous novels are a celebration of indigenous stories of resistance. This resistance does not take the form of battles and victories in war, which are white measures of resistance. It is instead the daily resistance of people who have had to oppose laws and policies imposed on them without any recognition of them or their rights within the system. In the end these novels tell a story of quite extraordinary survival.

1,600km back to their families, evading the authorities determined to find them. It is based on the true story of Doris Pilkington’s mother Molly in the 1930s. Pilkington, while introducing the effects of colonisation, is however more focused on the experiences of the ‘stolen generations’. The author gives us an overview of the first years of settlement, the destruction of the indigenous way of life and society, and an alternative history of the foundation of Western Australia from an indigenous perspective, and then presents the separation of three girls from their family and their long trip to join them again. Larissa Behrendt’s Home presents the story of a Eualeyai/Kamilaroi family (NSW) whose lives are disrupted by the sudden removal in the 1920s of their daughter Garibooli (Elizabeth), who is later employed as a servant and whose first child is removed at birth. The lives of her seven children are told as separate stories. The novel opens with Candice, a lawyer, who in the 1990s travels with her father Bob to Dungalear Station, her grandmother’s country. Elizabeth’s story is told, detailing her life with her Aboriginal family, her removal, her feeling of loss, her mistreatment and abuse. The stories of her children follow, among them Bob, whose search for his indigenous heritage brings him back to his mother’s place and reconnects him with Granny, the last one to remember Garibooli. Behrendt’s novel criticises the removal policy, the legal system and the way in which a European version of history is told.
All of the voices telling the stories are Aboriginal. Their stories are pitted against white men’s narratives which come straight from documents out of the archives. The language of these archives has been a major tool for the imposition of power. The Aboriginal writers twist the archival information and use it in a manner contrary to the original aims of the archives in order to show the limitedness and partiality of a white perspective. Using a contrastive technique, indigenous authors contest the dominant perspective by juxtaposing it with indigenous stories. This manner of presenting history and policies has the effect of revealing the other histories which diverge from the one presented by white Australia. The introduction of several perspectives dismantles the dominant view, and truth becomes no longer absolute but relative. In addressing these discourses of whiteness the legend is shown to be a self-celebratory myth with no real historical foundation; it has been produced by white men to diminish Aboriginal achievements while emphasising their own.

Aboriginal writers rethink not only the legend, but Australian literature itself. Often the stories are told within a structure that does not conform to western ideas of time and space. As Doris Pilkington explains in the introduction to her novel, indigenous culture perceives time and space differently, and attributes different significance to them. The author refers to them as “different forms of knowledge” (2000: xiv), and contrasts them to time as understood in western culture: “consistent with Aboriginal storytelling style, seasonal time and the features of the natural

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16 Further page references to Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence (Pilkington 2000) are indicated by RPF.
environment are more important to recounting this journey than are western notions of time and distance” (*RPF* xiii). The different conception of time is also present in Scott’s novel. The author enriches a narrative form taken from the western tradition by introducing different perspectives and different points of view from which the same story is told. In doing so he achieves a novel which is more dynamic and communicative than the traditional European one. Pablo Armellino describes the structure of Scott’s novel as a “type of healing process”, because of the way Harley reconstructs his heritage through the stories of different characters (Armellino 2007: 18). Scott uses a number of techniques borrowed from the oral storytelling tradition (such as non-spatial linearity and non-chronological temporality), but his aim is mainly one of “working against the dominant ways of storytelling”, and principally against the “language of the archives” whose intent is that of “making a beginning” (Buck 2001).

Kim Scott’s novel contributes towards dismantling both the traditional structure of western stories, through the form he uses, and the historical content of those stories by presenting an alternative version of history. Thus Scott's novel is the result of a fusion of western and Aboriginal cultures because he has used a typical western form and given it a new vitality, while giving a new voice to Aboriginal stories.

Scott’s use of non-linear Aboriginal time and space disrupts the linearity of the coloniser’s way of telling stories from the beginning. Scott identifies this white obsession with a beginning in the emphasis placed on the birth of the first white man: “It seemed to me that in doing that they were trying
to impose a story on a landscape and jettison the pre-existing stories. So I was trying to work against a beginning that involved time” (Buck 2001). The foundational narrative that exalts the first white men to explore, map and tame the bush is an expression of this desire to create a shared ‘heroic’ beginning. As Armellino points out:

This combination of distinctive approaches produces a meta-historiographic narrative that openly challenges white Australian history: “first inhabitants”, “first explorations” and “first dwellings” are all pinned down as counterfeit “locations of culture” whose agenda is to invalidate Aboriginal antecedents (Armellino 2007: 19).

As Scott explains: “Our colonial history consists of representations of Aboriginal people in the interest of non-Aboriginal Australia, of dispossession and damage in that cause. There’s a pattern to it, and a similar texture in the archival history: […] ‘last full blood Aboriginal’ and ‘first white man born’” (Scott and Brown 2005: 256). White Australian history has been imposed on an Aboriginal history, creating an identity, an ‘imagined nation’, which exalted the first-born white man at the expense of the Aboriginal other who was read as ‘dying out’. The Aborigine had to be ‘deleted’ from the history that white Australia wanted to tell so that the presence of non-Aboriginal Australians—their belonging—could be legitimised.17

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17 Larissa Behrendt also highlights the tendency to tell history from a white beginning. The local history of Garribooli’s country is told from the white point of view in a book written by a descendant of one of the ‘pioneering’ families. The first chapter, entitled “Humble But Strong Beginnings”, stresses the “battle of white men against the harsh terrain and unyielding, unsympathetic climate”. Indigenous people are excluded from this telling of history and only mentioned when killed in a massacre (H 9-10).
The underlying objective of the absorption policies was the creation of a ‘homogeneous’ white Australia where everyone could belong to a core ‘whiteness’. A.O. Neville aimed at the incorporation of Aborigines into white Australia through ‘whitening’. Whitening is a way of constructing indigenous people in the legend, incorporating them into the ‘imagined’ nation. The whitening process is deemed fundamental for this incorporation. Scott exposes these theories and western ways of telling stories and history through his narrator Harley, who introduces himself as “the first white man born”, thus bringing attention to the recurrence of this expression in white histories. Harley’s story is at odds with the celebratory white history. This opposition is manifest from the beginning of the novel where the narrator states that the history he is writing is not that of an explorer, but “a simple family history, the most local of histories” (Scott 2005: 10). The fact that this family history seems to conform to white histories, starting from the first white man born, is soon subverted, and what he recovers is the ‘black’ side of this history. Harley’s whiteness is, in fact, the result of his grandfather Ernest Scat’s interest in eugenic theories, “a whiteness which was surface only, with no depth, and very little variation” (B 11). Scat had devoted his life to the deletion, through careful breeding, of any trace of Aboriginal heritage in his nephew. To establish his Aboriginality Harley searches for his family history, starting with his grandfather’s papers: “I began with where the paper starts, where the white man comes. I thought, trapped as I was, that this was the place to begin” (B 32). The ‘archive’ tells the settlers’ history. To recover his

18 Further page references to Benang (Scott 2005) are indicated by B.
heritage, Harley journeys with his uncles through the land of his ancestors. Through this journey, Aboriginal culture is juxtaposed with that of the settlers; Aboriginal stories are connected to ‘place’ and there is no beginning, no ending (B 168). The oral narration of this story to Harley is itself very different from the western way of writing stories. As Harley camps by the fire with his relatives, the old stories unfold. His uncle Jack tells him about Fanny and Sandy One Mason, who had travelled through the country trying to avoid the influence and violence of settlers. The spirits of the ancestors connect with those of the story tellers, allowing them to cross temporal and spatial boundaries and live through the past. Through the story of their people, of their country, a new journey begins to take shape, from the western culture that surrounds Harley to the one represented by his ancestors. As in a magic realist text, the stories change the various narrators around the fire, making them look older, as if in this telling entire generations of Aborigines had joined them (B 171).

The telling of this journey through time, connecting present and past, also has the effect of blurring concepts of space. Thus it is through the connection with the Nyoongar traditional country that Harley can produce a kind of writing that re-energises Aboriginal culture.

Larissa Behrendt makes a similar point about history, critiquing the production of historical records that privilege a white foundational narrative and delete previous indigenous narratives. The historical texts quoted in her novel Home are examples of a version of history that emphasises a legend which presents the Aboriginal people as negative,
passive figures who are disappearing, “as the victor’s version of history would have it” (B 299). The white version of history emphasises the settling of an ‘empty’ land, thereby legitimising white power in Australia. The discourses hidden behind the foundational narrative are clearly exposed by Behrendt: the story of explorers presented as heroic figures pitted against the wilderness contributed towards hiding another side of the story. The only way in which the “truths” presented by this version of history “could be challenged [was] by looking from a different perspective” (B 234). Of note is the rewriting of this version of history by historians such as Henry Reynolds, who expose massacres and frontier violence as part of that history (B 234). This rewriting acknowledges the active role of Aboriginal people in the history of settlement and the presence of stories of resistance—those “stories beneath the stories we were being told” (B 299). The figure of the explorer is diminished in this reading of history, as indigenous people had travelled the land long before the arrival of the first

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19 In F.L.W Wood’s textbook [Wood, an Australian, held the chair of history at Victoria University of Wellington from the mid thirties to the early seventies] A Concise History of Australia, Bob notices that the Aborigines are mentioned but twice—when the First Fleet lands and in the context of the Tasmanian Black War—and in both cases “their propensity to disappear” is stressed (H 172). Through Bob’s contemplation of the subject, Behrendt exposes the discourse implicit in this telling of history: “If the Aborigines all disappeared, why were his brothers and sisters here?” (H 172). Bob ponders the influences of power and colonisation on the telling of history and how that history is written by the winners. The other history text he has to read for his course is Shaw’s The Story of Australia, where Aboriginal culture is represented as primitive and the Aborigines as ‘vanishing’, thus emphasising “the superiority of the whites” (H 233). In this historical text the figure of the explorer is celebrated and elevated to represent progress: “explorers like Wentworth seemed to embody all that was noble, good and civilised”; these qualities are in opposition to those possessed by the ‘other’ who held back progress (H 233). This telling of history, which describes the Aborigines as passive and unable to oppose white settlement, is perceived by Bob as “the inevitable assertion of his inferiority and the continual accusations that he was the descendant of savages, primitive tribes. He realised that he was not seen as equal to white people” (H 233).

20 Larissa Behrendt exposes the constructed nature of the notion of ‘history’ through the etymology of the word, showing that there was no distinction in the past between ‘story’ and ‘history’: “In English, the words ‘story’ and ‘history’ mean different things, but they were originally both used to describe an account of events either imaginary or true. It was only in the fifteenth century that the term ‘history’ was used to describe the telling of real past events and ‘story’ used for imagined ones” (H 316).
settlers (B 235). Behrendt openly critiques the exaltation of the legend, the emphasis placed on the acts of exploration and the taming of the land, the ‘erasure’ of previous inhabitants, and the manner in which indigenous people were presented as troublesome and an obstacle to the advancement of white settlement.\(^{21}\)

According to Simon Ryan, the exploration of Australia constructed a text that responded to rules dictated by white canons. Australia was assumed to be a blank slate on which the colonisers could inscribe their own narrative. “The Aborigines and the signs of their existence are excluded from the construction of the land as text; thus when this text is read, they are absent” (Ryan 1996: 126). Continuing to use the metaphor of a text, the ‘writing’ of Australia’s grand narrative, the legend, required the erasure of any previous ‘reading’ of the land. Indigenous authors rediscover and bring to light the pre-existing text. Although the language of this ancient text has been at times deleted by the attitudes of the colonisers, and some meanings are lost, the authors stress the importance of acknowledging its existence. The production of knowledge about the land and the mapping of it is a role exclusively reserved to the white European, while previous indigenous ‘mapping’ is ignored.

\(^{21}\) The characteristics of the legend implicit in the Anzac myth are other aspects discussed by Larissa Behrendt and Kim Scott. Both authors expose the theory of whiteness implicit in this myth. Soldiers of Aboriginal descent who fought in the War with white soldiers were denied the privileges granted to white soldiers and were refused grants and access to associations: “the returning black soldiers were shunned by the Australian society they had protected and were excluded from the returned servicemen’s clubs. Even the Soldier Settler scheme, which gave farm land to men who had served their country, turned out to be only for white soldiers, and it became clear that the Anzac legend was not going to include the contributions made by Aboriginal soldiers” (H 126).
The attitude of white settler cultures towards indigenous people and their land is destructive, because it is grounded in a superior and mindless exploitation. Although explorers and settlers made use of the Aborigines’ knowledge of the country through the agency of Aboriginal trackers and guides, for their own survival in a completely unfamiliar landscape, the fundamental role of the Aborigines is not acknowledged (B 456). Scott clearly makes this point when discussing the journals of John Septimus Roe, who presents knowledge he has acquired from his indigenous guide as his own without acknowledging him (Scott 2005a: 19). An ironic commentary on precisely this idea of misappropriation is evident in Doris Pilkington’s novel, where the author compares the walk of the three girls to the journey made by men on horses—explorers, pioneers—thus diminishing their achievements. The girls, writes Pilkington, have endured:

one of the longest walks in the history of the Australian outback. While other parts of this vast country of ours have been crossed on horses or camels, these three girls did their exploring on their bare feet. An incredible achievement in anyone’s language. The vastness and diversity of the Western Australian landscape would always be respected and appreciated by them—they had trekked across it and conquered (RPF 129-30).

The ‘momentous’ achievements of the explorers exalted by the legend are similarly critiqued by Larissa Behrendt in Home. The author lessens the accomplishments of Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth in succeeding where many before them had failed, stating that the mountains had been crossed for centuries by indigenous people: “all the fuss about their crossing the Blue Mountains as though it was some kind of superhuman

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22 This same point is made by Larissa Behrendt (H 299).
feat seemed absurd, unless it was their propensity to suffer sunburn that set them apart from the thousands who had crossed in the centuries beforehand” (B 299). The author clearly points to the whiteness of the explorers as the reason why their enterprise is celebrated. As Ryan elaborates, ‘discovery’ is a European concept and it is through the European gaze that the land is ‘known’ as if seen for the first time by human eyes, ignoring the Aboriginal knowledge of the land, the ‘eye’ of the explorer being the sole one that can ‘know’ the land through his gaze. Thus, the landscape is known and possessed by the European through sight. In Ryan’s words, “The land is ‘new’ because it has never been seen by the organ of knowledge-generation, the European eye, and this gaze is constructed as an imposition of power. […] The myth of ‘discovery’, then, is based upon vision” (Ryan 1996: 24).

The role of sight in the exploration of the country and in the ‘possession’ of the land is recognised by Armellino in the attitude of the character Scat in Benang: “Ern’s gaze is that of a pioneer” (2007: 28). Ernest’s belief that he can ‘explore’ the land by looking at it from a roof is compared to the ‘gaze’ of the explorer who possesses the land through his sight and anticipates its progress (Armellino 2007: 28). Significantly Ernest’s ‘gaze’ is extended from the land to its people and he considers them in the light of the eugenics theories to which he was introduced upon his arrival in Australia. The progress that is expected from the land is likewise expected from indigenous people, who are believed to need civilisation, just as the land needs taming, categorisation and mapping. The white
man thus acquires the role of the bringer of civilisation, imposing his preconceived knowledge on both the land and indigenous people. The foundational narrative acquires validity through the exclusion of the other, who may be included only through a process of ‘whitening’ since ‘whiteness’ is central to the legend itself. That is, inclusion of the other in a white, monocultural society is contingent upon erasure of diversity. When introducing the character Ernest Scat, Kim Scott explicitly connects the legend to discourses of whiteness. Ernest is associated with the figure of the legend—even if he is a Scotsman. This association is directly addressed by Harley, who identifies him as a different kind of pioneer: “It was as if he—a little too late to be a pioneer, and not really cut out to tame the land—could still play a role in taming a people into submission” (B 32). Ernest decides to ‘tame’ the indigenous people by applying the theories put forward by A.O. Neville: the idea of racial superiority which proposed “upbringing” or “uplifting” indigenous people on the grounds that they were inferior. These prejudices were clearly used to maintain white privilege and whiteness itself, which was understood as a racial category. Connected to this idea of taming the people and the land is the desire of the settler to claim unqualified belonging to the land, even when in the novel white men are presented as not belonging: they only aim at possessing without ever truly belonging to the country since their guilt over dispossessing indigenous people makes it impossible for them to belong. Curiously enough, the settlers’ progress was measured against the Aborigines’ decline (B 207): “They measured themselves against these original inhabitants, and consequently wanted them pushed further
down. Controlled” (B 117-8). In order for the settler to be elevated his achievement praised, the other has to be degraded and presented as being in need of civilisation.

Civilisation too is exposed by Scott as a discursive construction. According to the settlers, Aboriginal people had to be civilised and made to adapt to western language and way of life: “These people of the land [...] they are like the land, they are treacherous. Something to be tamed, subdued, harnessed, made to work. Something to be improved in order to fit our ways” (B 117). In order to justify this attitude, the other has to be constructed as inferior: “They were not of this country but, looking outward, believed they understood its potentials. It was necessary to believe that the land’s people and ways were inferior, and to ensure that there was proof of that” (B 312). Here Scott is addressing Social Darwinism as a discourse used to claim the land and dispossess the Aborigines: “Taming, controlling, elevating, elevating the whole bloody country so that it might achieve its potential and become part of the civilized world” (B 194). The exaltation of the pioneers, and therefore the legend of the foundational moment, is described by Harley’s uncle Will, who addresses it as a construct and a distortion of the facts by white people who try to describe their parents as the first to arrive “for the sake of being known as descendants of the first pioneers” (B 166). The history of Gebalup is therefore presented as a history overlaid with an imaginatively constructed narrative: “the descendants have given their forebears images which they wish to see and present to the public in their
most favourable light” (B 166-7). Scott takes up this narrative only to present the pioneers or the first settlers as mean and brutal; there is nothing heroic about their achievement as they exploit, destroy and grab. Scott’s deconstruction of the legend operates through the exposition of the ineffectiveness of the legend as a constructive act. While the legend is, from a white perspective, an act that helps build the nation through fencing, naming, knowing and defining a wilderness, for indigenous authors the legend is a destructive act where the clearing and fencing are all presented as destroying an interconnectedness and harmony: “the land which, neglected, was opened to the sun; was grazed, razed, shaved, plucked” (B 272).

The ‘Australian’ legend constructed the landscape as negative, threatening, as something which needed to be tamed, stripped of native plants and adapted so as to resemble a familiar English one. The origins of the construction of this kind of landscape lay in the literary debate about the bush started by Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson in 1892.23 Even when the land was seen as positive, as in Paterson’s description, it was a positivity that still implied a certain degree of alienness: the landscape was positive, but was perceived as something which needed taming, which needed to be kept under control. It was through the exaltation of the dangerous nature of this landscape that the accomplishments of the bushmen were emphasised. The approach taken by later authors to the landscape varied to some degree but still

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23 For a more detailed analysis of the debate see Chapter One.
conformed to the binary perceptions contained within the debate. The
legend is the result of imposing upon the landscape a fixed idea that
corresponded to the one of ‘home’; a framework that interpreted the new
land according to a pre-existing knowledge considered to be superior,
and which was to be seen as the ‘norm’. The ‘raw’ land and its people
were considered ‘uncivilised’ without those landmarks and patterns
recognisable to a western eye. The landscape was alien to the European
mind which still considered the green hills of England to be ‘home’, the
natural habitat of the settler. This lack of correspondence between the
actual Australian landscape and how a ‘proper’ imagined landscape
‘should’ be is not an uncommon theme in Australian literature. As I
pointed out in the previous chapter, this is true also of writers like
McGahan for whom the landscape is negative. The descriptions of a dry
land are often overpowering; they are the descriptions of a land that has
something the human mind and body cannot control: it is a landscape of
the impossibly negative sublime. In Grenville, too, the bush is threatening.
In those instances when it is beautiful, such as the description of the
banks of the Hawkesbury River, the beauty is always accompanied by a
feeling of transience and imminent disruption because of the presence of
the original inhabitants, which lingers even when they are long gone.

What is dramatically different from this perspective is the indigenous
perspective of the land. The landscape is friendly and welcoming when
seen through indigenous eyes and it does not need any literary
superimposition. This alternative and indeed ‘indigenous’ perception and
presentation of the landscape constitutes a first critique of the legend, based as the legend is on a negative reading of the landscape as empty. Instead, according to the indigenous perspective, the landscape is populated, it is full. This divergent perception is already evident in the work of Gail Jones who, as a white Australian author, addresses this alternative perception of the land. In a passage from *Sorry*, young Perdita is introduced by Aboriginal Mary to a ‘nativist’ knowledge of the landscape, a clear statement that what the white man sees as empty is instead full:

all that had been inscribed there before them, in a hidden language never noticed, became suddenly visible.

‘Whitefellas can’t see nothin’ around them […] Under her intelligent guidance the scrub, which had seemed so empty, took on fullness and detail. Every bird had a true name, every mark in the wind-scalloped dirt betokened liveliness and activity. Even the glass-clear sky was a fabric of signs. There were seasons that a whitefella never noticed, marked by tiny efflorescences and the swelling and fading of bush fruit (Jones 2007: 54-5).

Mary teaches them how to read the landscape. It is full; and it is the white man who lacks the ‘language’ to read it. Language\textsuperscript{24} is here understood in both a figurative and non-figurative way because the English language does not have a direct semantic connection with the ‘new’ environment. English words and concepts need to be adapted to this reality which is different from the ‘settler’ usage in which the words are imposed on the

\textsuperscript{24} It is significant that the only two white characters who seem to acquire the language to read the landscape through Mary’s teaching are children, and one of them, Billy, is deaf and cannot speak, while Perdita herself will start stuttering after her father’s death. The novel emphasises the relevance given to language and the possibility of communicating in forms different from a ‘normative’ English. These children develop a different perception of reality and, with it, of the landscape around them.
landscape to make it more familiar.\textsuperscript{25} Jones’ critique of the legend is interesting in that she is less concerned with the momentous *terra nullius* than Grenville and McGahan and more focused on presenting an Aboriginal perspective even though the point of view remains white.

The perception of the land as nourishing, familiar and friendly is implicit in Doris Pilkington’s account of the journey home undertaken by the three girls in *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. When compared to non-indigenous accounts of children lost in the bush, this journey stands out for its positive descriptions of the landscape. Even when the land is flooded, with grass scratching the girls’ legs, it is never described as a threat. The girls fear the white men and the authorities who are searching for them, as well as, understandably, the evil spirits believed to inhabit some areas and to be harmful; however, the land itself is not something to be feared. During their 1,600 km walk home, the three girls travel through a variety of landscapes including flooded areas, green fields, flowers and desert landscapes. Their perception is never negative and even when they seem unable to find food this is because they are far from their traditional lands where they would easily have been able to find ‘bush tucker’. The land, like a mother, protects them because they seek refuge in it. The three girls find their way through the bush without a compass, emphasising their ability to survive:

Molly, this fourteen-year-old girl, had no fear because the wilderness was her kin. It always provided shelter, food and sustenance. She had learned and developed bushcraft skills and survival techniques from an expert, her step-father, a former nomad from the desert (RPF 82).

The crucial point is that these three young girls do not perceive the land as threatening.

A further divergent perception of the land is presented in Benang, where the accounts of the explorer John Forrest, who had travelled across the land about thirty years earlier, are compared with the same experience as lived by the Coolman brothers—Sandy One’s sons-in-law. While the explorer described the fear of being attacked by ‘blacks’ in Darkest Western Australia, the twin brothers travelled safely with their indigenous wives who knew the land and the people. They lived off the land and gathered kangaroo skin. The narrator stresses the difference between those two accounts: “Do you wish to hear how they suffered; of their endurance, hardship, deprivation? In fact it was almost too easy a life” (B 170).26 Here the narrator reveals hardship and endurance to be constructed characteristics attributed to pioneers and explorers; these men travelling with indigenous women encounter none of that hardship.

26 This different perception of the land is remarked on by Kim Scott in other passages of his novel. The land, as seen and described by white settlers, explorers and shepherds, is negative, arid: “The diaries and journals tell me that there was nothing but plains of sand and sharp rolling stones. Impenetrable mallee. Salt lakes, and brackish streams” (B 179). This negative perception of the land conveyed by the white man is juxtaposed with what Sandy One sees while journeying with Fanny: a land in flower, with kangaroos, a friendly landscape. Sandy reads the grassy plains as his own version of a European parkland: “Sandy thought of all the books he’d read, yet understood that it was people and fire had made this parkland” (B 179). The landscape as seen through Sandy’s eyes is a paradise, with creeks, shade, flowers, food and trees sweet as sugar which smell like jam (B 179).
As we have already noted, the foundational narrative has been used to conceal violence and dispossession. Doris Pilkington addresses the dispossession of the Nyoongar people and the destruction of their world, narrating the ‘first’ encounter between Nyoongars and the British in the opening chapters of *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. The novel opens with the description of Aboriginal bush life, characterised by the silence and the familiar sounds of the bush. The arrival of white people immediately disrupts the harmony the indigenous people have with their environment—the “annual scrub firing”, the hunting, the game used both for food and for making cloaks and carrying bags—and this destruction is effectively communicated through the “ominous sound” that interrupts “the sounds of normal, everyday camp life” (*RPF* 2-3). The sound is of a cannon being fired to salute the raising of the British flag when, in 1826, Major Lockyer established a garrison in King George Sound (*RPF* 3-5). The negative outcome of the British arrival is anticipated by the narrator’s words: “Soon devastation and desolation would shatter this tranquil environment; [...] this pristine forest would echo the anguished cries and the ceaseless weeping of thousands of people—his [Kundilla’s] people—as they were tormented by foreigners and driven off their land” (*RPF* 2). The initial reception of the “invaders” is positive because they are believed to be “gengas”, spirits of deceased relatives, and because the soldiers clearly have no intention of using violence against the indigenous people (*RPF* 4-6).²⁷ This initial “friendly frontier” (Green 1983), described by a number of historians and referred to by Kim Scott in his recent novel

²⁷ The behaviour of this first garrison is juxtaposed with that of the violent American sealers and whalers who instead kidnap and kill indigenous women (*RPF* 4-6). The violence perpetrated by whalers and sealers is also discussed in *Benang*. 

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That Deadman Dance (2010),\(^{28}\) is the first phase when white men were not interfering with indigenous ways and were not claiming indigenous lands. This is before the arrival of the settlers.\(^{29}\) The establishment of the “Swan River Colony” in 1829 changes this peaceful relationship because the settlers claim land and fence it, thus denying indigenous people ready access to food and water.\(^{30}\)

\(^{28}\) Kim Scott was awarded the Miles Franklin Award for this novel in 2011.

\(^{29}\) Kim Scott’s That Deadman Dance (2010) rethinks the foundational narrative and presents a different story. Instead of presenting an account of the violence of settlement, Scott focuses on the moment before, the moment when indigenous and white settlers lived in harmony. This moment, referred to in history as the “friendly frontier”, was a period when the number of whites was still small, and their main interest was whaling instead of farming, which made it possible for the two peoples to live in peace. There were no claims on the land and no fences that limited indigenous hunting grounds (Green 1983: 72). This situation degenerated when more settlers moved into the area and started claiming land, provoking the reaction of the indigenous people who ‘lived on’ the land. Henry Reynolds has argued that “maritime industries” did not interfere with the Aboriginal way of life and their food sources in the same way that farming and pastoralism did (Reynolds 1995: 175). According to Scott there is a deep difference between white Australia and Nyoongar people in their “inclusiveness” and acceptance of the other. In the lack of acceptance from both sides, Scott identifies the foundation of the negative outcome of the “shared history” that becomes “genocidal” (Buck 2001).

Aboriginal culture is inclusive and, as presented in That Deadman Dance, tends to include the other without assimilating him. White Australia and the legend, on the other hand, are exclusive: in order to be included, the other first needs to be assimilated into mainstream culture, and indigenous people therefore had to conform to the ‘place’ decided for them by white Australia.

\(^{30}\) Doris Pilkington describes the moment at which the land was claimed by the British from the Nyoongar point of view. Captain Fremantle had been instructed by the government to “seek” indigenous approval before naming their country (RPF 9). The request was made in English and the failure of the communication was not acknowledged by Captain Fremantle, who named the land “Western Australia” (RPF 10). Robert Hughes also mentions the government’s request to seek the Aborigines’ consent for the naming of the land, writing that Fremantle could not speak their language and “one could hardly convey so heroic a territorial concept to savages by pointing and weaving”. Hughes notes that this was the first official use of the name ‘Australia’ (Hughes 1996: 575). This event was followed by the arrival of Captain James Stirling and the settlers. Pilkington describes the arrival of the first settlers from the indigenous perspective, presenting the inadequacy of these ‘alien’ people on the beach. The settlers’ landing on the beach with their belongings and their dresses getting wet is a “disappointing introduction to their new home […] in a land which was a wilderness to these downhearted ladies and gentlemen” who had been promised an Arcadian paradise (RPF 11). This image reminds us of Ellen Roxburgh in A Fringe of Leaves, and the description of her dress which is totally inappropriate for the Australian climate (White 1997). Captain Stirling “takes[s] possession of a land grant of half a million acres of Nyungar land, which the Colonial Office neither bought nor owned but merely claimed for Britain” (RPF 12), ignoring previous ownership. The settlers are encouraged to “keep up their Englishness” through “picnics, fox hunts and balls” (RPF 13), activities which were performed by the gentry in the Home country and transplanted to Australia. Hughes also described the distressed “Swan River pioneers” and their belongings, “the emblems of civilization they were to plant in the wild” (1996: 575-6). Western Australia
The introduction of fences limits indigenous hunting grounds, and their belief that the newcomers will share their food turns out to be no more than a dream that is shattered when the white settlers react to the spearing of a sheep: “they were the first of many Nyungar men to be bought in to be sentenced under the English law” (RPF 14). The white law is imposed on the land and on the Aborigines while their own laws are “not recognised by these strangers” (RPF 15). The law is applied in two different measures: “The white settlers were a protected species; they were safe with their own laws and had police and soldiers to enforce these rules […] The whites had created two sets of laws” (RPF 15). The friendly frontier which marks the initial contact is soon transformed into “unending conflicts between the traditional owners and the white invaders, with reports of merciless killings on both sides” (RPF 15). The weapons used by the white invaders are superior and the Aboriginal people “were forced to accept the white system of justice and punishment” (RPF 15). Doris Pilkington considers the consequences of the invasion and dispossession: white settlers impose their laws and their rules and, most importantly, prevent indigenous people from performing

was not founded as a penal colony but because of the precarious economic situation, the colony needed free labour and by 1850 the first convicts had arrived (Hughes 1996: 578).

31 Aboriginal laws were ignored and British law was imposed on them instead. Larissa Behrendt compares law to history, arguing that both are shaped by the dominant narrative, but there are other, “subversive narratives” under the surface (H 304). Aboriginal laws were ignored at the time of colonisation but the colonisers tried to adapt Aboriginal practices by giving king plates to Aboriginal men who were recognised as leaders by them, an authority that had no value in Aboriginal society. “So, the naming of ‘kings’ was a way in which colonists tried to alter Aboriginal practice to suit their own concepts of hierarchy” (H 23). It was the colonisers who gave recognition, who chose the leaders in order to accommodate the other into a pattern they could recognise and control.
rituals such as corroborees and visiting the sacred sites which are part of their traditional culture. These restrictions contribute to the loss of those traditions, laws and language which define their society. The imposition is devastating for indigenous society and turns them into a “dispossessed and devastated race” (RPF 16).32

The act of settlement begins to destroy the Australian environment as well with the introduction of foreign plants and animals such as rabbits, foxes and cats, and with the clearing of the land. The dispossession of Aboriginal land is followed by the settlers’ attempt to remodel the landscape and try to eliminate the wilderness, making it ‘familiar’. “These were the ones who took the land, cut and cleared it, sowed foreign seeds. [They were] The winners” (B 389). The introduction of boundaries and fences in a country that previously did not use any, the clearing of the land to delimit what was civilised and what was not, is well described in Benang. Through indigenous eyes the ‘tamed’ land is presented as ‘dying’:

A world gone? Changed. The telegraph line, railway line, wheel tracks everywhere. Rubbish, and bad smells. Trees gone, grass grazed to the ground, the earth cut, shifting, not healed and not yet sealed; vegetation left too long without flames and regeneration. Dust coated the leaves. So many places seemed empty or had new inhabitants (B 478-9).

The dominant culture refuses to see the Australian landscape as one modelled for thousands years by its inhabitants. Scott refers to the importance of fire-stick farming, a form of controlled burning used to

32 The negative effects of settlement and the dispossession of indigenous people are also addressed by Larissa Behrendt in the opening chapters of her novel Home (H).
maintain the productivity of plants and animal habitats, in modelling the Australian landscape (B 254).

The perception of the landscape as threatening and unfamiliar is, according to Hage, another “factor” which has contributed to “colonial uncertainty”: the “awareness of the impossibility of fully colonising the natural environment” (2003: 51). The bush, in fact, is always menacing as it always wishes to reclaim those areas that have been cleared through the settlers’ hard work. There is in the landscape a constant “undomesticable reminder’ even within domesticated spaces” (Hage 2003: 51). This has been pointed out by Australian writers who have ‘captured’ the feelings of uneasiness represented by the bush that surrounds cleared spaces and gardens, always threatening to reclaim those spaces. The bush is pushed behind the boundaries imposed by the white men, but it is always there, always present, a constant source of anxiety for the white man, a reminder of an alienness that cannot be tamed and a reminder that the real intruder, the real alien, is not the bush, but the white man himself. Boundaries, patterns and plants are

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33 Aboriginal knowledge of the land and its resources and their connection to it is once again shown to be different. Harley compares going through his grandfather’s papers, looking for “traces” of “what happened” to his ancestors going back home: “It was never random, it was never just wandering, it was never wilderness. […] Fanny led her family through a terrain in which she recognised the trace of her own ancestors” (B 471). Aborigines know their way through the land, they feel a deep connection with it and suffer for the way it is spoilt by settlers. Settlers find it difficult to adapt to Australian climate and vegetation, trying to change and model it to their European tastes: “These new people, they were growing a community like they grew their crops. They focused on money and time, on cause and effect and knew they would have to modify what was around them if they were to grow as they wished” (B 311).

34 As we have seen, examples of these ‘anxieties’ are evident in Patrick White’s Riders in the Chariot, where the bush has reclaimed the park of Xanadu, and in Kate Grenville’s The Secret River, where the bush surrounds the cleared spaces and the Thornhills’ walled garden as if it could absorb it again. In McGahan’s The White Earth and in 1988 the European-style gardens have been reclaimed by the bush, leaving old pathways and flower beds as reminders of a failed attempt at imposing an order on the landscape.
superimposed on the Australian landscape but they are unable to permanently modify it.

A land rapidly becoming desert. Cleared of trees, its skin blew away in searing wind [...] The farms and farmers; receding. The railway line; shrivelling back to some centre. He was surrounded by cleared land, by sand; but there was always, somewhere, some tight and curling bush, and still-secret waterholes (B 116).

Nevertheless, in spite of all the clearing, the white man’s imposition over the landscape is being defeated by the bush which is always there at the edge of civilisation threatening to reclaim its place. The town of Gebalup, for instance, seems to be “dying”; it is about to disappear into the land as the communication lines imposed to control the landscape are fragile. “With no new people arriving and hungry to impose themselves upon this country; with no railway, no telegraph, and with only shifting, sandy roads to connect it to the rest of the new nation, the town seemed about to dissolve, to sink back into the sand” (B 117). Indigenous authors expose this perception as further proof of the ‘unbelonging’ of the white man and his ‘civilisation’, but they do not share it, because to the Aboriginal people the bush is friendly, it is their environment.

The colonisers’ first attitude towards the land is to map it. Mapping is a means of appropriating the land by knowing it, defining its boundaries and describing its shape and dimensions. The settlers build roads, and railway and telegraph lines. They overlay the old paths used for generations by the Aboriginal tribes who traversed all of the country. Over these paths you could read the imprints of man and animals. Scott
juxtaposes these original pathways with the paths laid by settlers which represent the imposition of white culture on Aboriginal culture. As Scott points out, the new bitumen roads are ‘superimposed’ on the old ones, ignoring them, only exploiting them (B 165; 284). The telegraph and the railway, symbols of the spread of settlement, are negative elements that impose straight lines or a grid on a land that already had ‘lines’ of communication that were adapted to nature. The rabbit-proof fence, the fencing of the country, the construction of a railway line, a telegraph line, are a means to mark, control, and divide the country. However, these constructions are by and large shown to be ineffectual. The rabbit-proof fence built to stop the spread of rabbits is a failure and the railway line is never connected to the other lines. Ernest’s hope of bringing ‘progress’ and ‘prosperity’ through the expansion of this line is in fact a dead end. The only effective use of the railway line is that of allowing the Chief Protector of the Aborigines to move about easily during his inspections: “the railway shunted a new generation of pioneers to the smoky frontier, and allowed the Chief Protector to make his inspection in much greater comfort than the first Travelling Inspector who had the assistance of camel, cart, and native boy” (B 322).

The settlers impose their control over the Aborigines as well. In allowing the Protector to travel easily, the railway becomes an effective tool for spreading those policies used to impose control and to bring, if not physical, then figurative death, because implicit in the policies of separation and assimilation was the intent to erase indigenous culture
and language through separation of Aboriginal children from their families and traditional practices.

Chief Protector Neville made notes. He spoke to various authorities, to all those white men with knowledge and experience of the Native Problem. He had ideas, this man. Ambition. He wanted to establish settlements for the natives […] children that are growing can be turned into useful workers instead of becoming a nuisance (B 324).

The railway, this instrument of ‘civilisation’, is in fact a bringer of death. But the railway “remained as ineffectual as the rabbit-proof fences” (Scott B 324), and so the ‘civilisation’ it represents did not reach every part of the country. Both the land and its people resist the spread of what is presented as ‘progress’ because the spread of railways means the capacity to wield power: “How crucial this railway was in facilitating the development of the wheatbelt, this lucky land’s prosperity, and the alienation of so many of us” (B 324). The link between the progress brought by the railway and death is further stressed by Scott who relates the arrival of the railway to the law that declares that half-caste girls have to marry white, not Nyoongar men. The local police, in this case Sergeant Hall, have to approve any wedding. “It’s another sort of murdering. What the law was doing. And helping people do. Killing Nyoongars really, making ‘em white, making ‘em hate ‘emselves and pretend they’re something else, keeping ‘em apart” (B 338-9). The assimilation policies are another way of killing the Aborigines by making them white, by denying them access to their culture and by making them feel ashamed of their origins.
While white Australian authors focus on the deconstruction of whiteness as a discursive category, indigenous authors often directly address whiteness in its original form, that is, whiteness as a racial category. They also show how other discourses have been modified to disguise the racist underpinning of whiteness. The fact is that at the time of eugenics theories and the policies of child removal, the discourses were those of a racial category of whiteness. In *Benang* the reference to discourses of whiteness is very well articulated. The author presents the evolution and adaptation of these discourses; as times change, whiteness shifts and so does the attitude towards the indigenous people. This is well conveyed through Sergeant Hall’s consideration of the “native problem” and the need to “raise the level of debate […] from the level of troublesome indigenous fauna, of vermin control, of eradication and slaughter […] to the level of animal husbandry” (*B* 73-4). The assimilation practices employed by the Western Australian Government were aimed at the “absorption” of people of Aboriginal descent into mainstream (white) society. The justifications for these policies were governed by discourses of civilisation, evolution, humanitarianism and the acceptance by (white) Australian society of the part-Aboriginal. However, at the foundation of these policies lay the desire to maintain a white Australia and to deny the other’s belonging.
Regarding the scope of breeding out colour, Russell McGregor advances the argument that “whiteness was a potent signifier: of virtue, of racial superiority […] of national membership. Breeding the colour out of persons of Aboriginal descent was equally a process of breeding them into the community of the nation” (McGregor 2002: 286).35 The assimilation policy was aimed at creating a ‘white Australia’: “The ethnic identifier (whiteness) defined national membership, with civic benefits available only to those meeting the ethnic criteria” (McGregor 2002: 295). Whiteness was still understood at this stage as a fundamental prerequisite for belonging to the nation, thus identifying it with a normative Australianness. McGregor emphasises the “power of blood kinship as a unifying myth of nationhood” which is essential for the creation of a shared idea of identity (2002: 295). The construction of nationhood myths depend upon the degree to which the myths are plausible before they can be shared by the nation.

35 The assimilation policies are often referred to as eugenics. However, according to McGregor, the use of the term ‘eugenics’ is controversial. He has argued that eugenics were more concerned with genetic ‘improvement’ while in Australia the assimilation policies were focused on “whitening”, not on genetic outcomes: “absorption took whitening as its primary—indeed virtually sole—goal. Herein lies absorption's major dissonance with eugenics. Absorption promised little by way of genetic enhancement of the Australian population. 'Breeding out the colour' sought to improve the nation's complexion, not its gene pool” (McGregor 2002: 298). In some cases genetic positive outcomes of ‘crossbreeding’ were pointed out—e.g. Cecil Cook and Norman Tindale (McGregor 2002: 298-9)—but the improvements are more often believed to interest the Aborigines than white Australians and in some cases interbreeding was opposed because it was believed to corrupt the white race (McGregor 2002: 297). According to McGregor the theory of the “Aboriginal-Caucasian race-relatedness” advanced by some Australians does not have a eugenic scope but merely aims at proving that ‘Australians of mixed descent would not ‘throw back’ to the Aboriginal side of their ancestry, as was alleged to occur in Negro-White crosses. […] The crucial point was that Aboriginal ancestry could be hidden. With no risk of embarrassing atavisms” (McGregor 2002: 299).
If all Australians were white, they could be attributed a shared origin, history and descent. Conversely, if a minority were black, this would mark their origins, history and descent as different, discordant. To be brought within the fold of the mythic community of descent, their colour had to be ‘bred out’. Indeed, if nationhood be conceived in potently ethnic terms, the incorporation of new members must depend on their shedding all attributes, biological as well as cultural, that could set them apart as an alternative ethnic community. [...] Complete exclusion was the means for dealing with external threats to the national-ethnic character; radical inclusion provided the solution to internal threats (McGregor 2002: 296).

In this passage McGregor clearly explains the reasons behind the assimilation policies which were based on the desire to maintain a white nation with which all Australians could identify. The White Australia Policy excluded all those who were considered to be a threat to the whiteness of the nation, especially Asians and blacks. With the advent of a multicultural policy, racial characteristics are no longer considered fundamental to belonging to the nation, as they have been substituted by cultural ones. Immigrants can belong to different ethnic groups, but they are still required to conform to the values of the mainstream society, in other words, to Australian values which are, after all, linked to Australia’s British heritage. Although whiteness has lost its racial characteristics it has maintained its power to define and to dictate the rules of belonging. While the desire to maintain a core white Australian culture is a plausible reason for assimilation, the policy of assimilation could also have been driven by an attempt to ‘eliminate’ the original inhabitants whose presence was a constant reminder, not only of the fictitious nature of the legend and the foundational myth, but also of the violence and dispossession linked to settlement. In other words, Aborigines are a constant reminder that white people do not belong here, that the land was
someone else’s. Thus the assimilation of the indigenous people is also a means of claiming belonging to the country by deleting any trace of previous belonging—as Neville says “merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there ever were any aborigines in Australia” (Aboriginal Welfare 1937: 11). It was commonly believed by authorities that the Aborigines were dying out: “It is settled. The natives are dying out” (B 327). The physical elimination or assimilation of the Aboriginal people would make the settlers feel they truly belonged. A.O. Neville’s views, and the means used to study and categorise the ‘scientific’ results of his ‘interbreeding’ policies as seen in his writings and conference presentations, constitute the strongest assertions of assimilation policies. These may be taken together with Dr Cecil Cook’s policies in the Northern Territory. These policies are discussed in detail by Scott in Benang and in a less detailed way by Doris Pilkington in Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence. Neville appears as a fictionalised character in both novels, and there are quotes in these works from historical documents written by the Protector himself. Kim Scott attributes a ‘scientific’ attitude to the character Ernest that is similar to the one employed by the Protector. On a smaller scale, Ernest applies Neville’s theories to “absorb and dilute [them] like a small dirty stream into a large and clear one” (B 74).

Scott dismantles all discourses of whiteness used to justify indigenous dispossession, assimilation and the removal of children. The brutality of assimilation policies and the separation of children from their families are
exposed through the stories of people who experienced these separations. Harley, for instance, presents the difficulties encountered by his ancestors in trying to oppose policies and institutions. He is aware that discourses of evolutionism and ‘uplifting’ are presented as ‘humanitarian’ but that their intent is clearly the assimilation of Aboriginal people and the creation of a ‘white’ Australia. In Benang, Ernest Scat—who seems to be driven to these theories out of humanitarian feelings towards the ‘half-castes’ and without self-interest—is clearly shown by Scott to have a very different intent, as Ernest is interested in the personal advantages he can gain from these theories: “Could Ern possibly have believed that his was a selfless task? That he did not think of himself, or if he did it was only insofar as he was helping these other people become more like himself? He wanted to make us in his own image, uplifting us to that” (B 158). Ernest’s “uplifting” project aims at the birth of the first white man, and his obsession with colour is evident in his looking for the “fairest” of the many children he has fathered. He has “discarded all the others” but Tommy, whose whiteness and hazel eyes elevate him above them, and whom you could not tell “from white children” (B 154). Tommy and Harley are left as witnesses “to see, with appropriate rigour, his experiment through to the end” (B 158).

One of the most significant passages describing the ‘whitening’ process applied by Ernest is the literal ‘bleaching’ of Tommy’s mum, Topsy, who is immersed in a hot tub full of bleach. She and the child were forbidden to go out into the sun (B 154). The scientific attitudes adopted by those
who were applying absorption theories were simply a means of hiding a policy which was genocidal in its intent behind the ‘rigour’ of science, numbers and classification. Ernest is quite happy to put into practice the theories advanced by Neville. The scientific discourses at the base of the absorption project continue to be exposed by Scott. We note that Topsy is ‘observed’ by Ernest (“my grandfather-as-scientist”) who sees in her “almost a new *species*” (*B* 133). Ernest’s scientific attitude is emphasised further and he is compared to “the scientist” mentioned by Neville who: “*with his trained mind and keen desire to exert his efforts in the field investigating native culture and in studying the life history of the species, supplies an aid to administration*” (quoted in *B* 132). The language used here—“species”, “investigating”, “studying”—confers a ‘scientific’ veneer to the policies.

Ernest records the ‘results’ of his ‘interbreeding experiments’ through detailed annotations and photographs that he then compares to previous ones (*B* 25-6). Harley finds his photograph “at the end of the line” and his name at the end of family trees (*B* 27): “I may be the successful end of a long line of failures. Or is it the other way round? […] The first white man born” (*B* 10).
Photographs. [...] Various people all classifiable as Aboriginal [...] There were families grouped according to skin colour [...] Captions to the photographs; full-blood, half-caste (first cross), quadroon, octoroon. [...] There was a page of various fractions [...] Of course, in the language of such mathematics it is simple [...] I was a fraction of what I might have been (B 25-6).

Scott discusses this use of photographs to confer an aura of scientific validity and objectivity to ‘crossbreeding’, playing with the language, with the meaning of these ‘experiments’, and using the same language employed to justify assimilation in order to subvert and question it. The need to classify and categorise is linked to the will to control the other:

“Sets of documents, things filed in plastic envelopes in rumbling drawers and snapping files. Certificates of birth, death, marriage; newspaper clippings, police reports; letters [...]; parish records; cemetery listings; bookmarks, photographs” (B 25). The classificatory eye of the white man is also evident when Sergeant Hall finds a group of Aborigines at Daniel Coolman’s funeral and he stops to “survey them with a professional eye”, cataloguing them according to their appearance: “full-blood”, “half-caste”, “quadroon” (B 83-4). However, there are so many children that “his calculations faltered. He had to call them all half-caste, and ignore the range of hues” (B 84). ‘Scientific’ language is used to classify, analyse and thereby dehumanise people, turning them into numbers and thus further denying their humanity. Turning indigenous people into a set of data allows the production of knowledge about them, and makes it possible to control their lives and institutionalise their marriages and

36 In Australia’s Coloured Minority, A.O. Neville published photographs of part-Aboriginal children to support his discussions and his findings. See, for example, the photograph “three generations” representing: “half-blood”, “quadroon daughter”, “octoroon grandson” (Neville 1947: 72). This ‘method’ is employed by Ernest in Benang (B 25-6).
births. It is significant that Aboriginal people were not included in the census because they had to be classified separately; they needed protection so that they could become civilised.

These discourses and justifications are at the foundation of the promulgation of the *Aborigines Act 1905*. The rules that defined who came under the Act were modified in time and the *Native Administration Act 1936* included more people of Aboriginal descent than the 1905 Act. Scott exposes the power this legislation provided to institutions: “You could be moved anywhere, told who to marry, where to live, had to get a permit to work, not allowed to drink or vote […] it separated us all” (*B* 216). The *Aborigines Act* gave institutions and protectors the power to control every aspect of Aboriginal life.

‘Colour’ played a decisive role in choosing which children were to be educated and could be integrated into white society, and which were to be relegated to the ‘dying race’ category and placed in various institutions. Scott discusses the importance of colour in the interest taken by institutions in young Aborigines. Tommy’s fairness is remarked upon at the institution to which he is sent. The white people working at Sister Kate’s appreciate the results of his father’s experiments: “firm hands pulled at his clothes. Those hands spoke of excitement, as did the voices […] Look, oh look where the sun has not reached. He is quite white. Quite white” (*B* 383). There are many of Ernest’s ‘discarded’ children in this institution and many of the children did not know if they had family: “Aunty
Kate told many, sadly, that their mothers and fathers had died or did not want them" (B 384). The practice of the institutions of denying Aboriginal children even the possibility of seeing parents is documented in the *Bringing Them Home* Report (1997).

Scott exposes the discourses used to justify assimilation and child removal. Part-Aboriginal children are sent away to Mogumber and transported there in a carriage, “like animals, really, but of course it was not for slaughtering. For training? Yes, perhaps. Certainly it was for breeding, according to the strict principles of animal husbandry" (B 91). The possibly good intentions behind this removal are negated by the description of the place with its overcrowded rooms, poor food and bars on the windows, and in the treatment children receive. Children are examined for their colour and if they are judged to be white they are sent to a different institution where the “lighter ones” are kept (B 90-1). Institutions where indigenous people are kept are praised by white visitors: "segregation is the only thing for the Aborigines. But let their segregation be Christian, and the natives taught to be useful" (B 94). The education children receive in the institutions is generally a basic one and can be seen as another way of patronising and controlling them by depriving them of the possibility of having the same chances as other

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37 In *Benang* there are many references to the children who were removed and all the women in the novel—Kathleen, Fanny, Dinah, Harriette—have ‘lost’ some of their children to institutions (B 139).
children, thus ensuring that they will remain under control by white people and institutions. \(^{38}\)

In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the ‘half-caste’ children are removed from their families to be trained as servants in institutions. \(^{39}\) Children are located using information given by station owners, and police officers are responsible for removing them from their families who are “powerless to stop the abductors” (*RPF* 40). Families often try to disguise their ‘half-caste’ children, covering their bodies with charcoal powder to make them look darker (*RPF* 42). The three girls are initially removed because, according to Mr Keeling, they “were not getting a fair chance as the blacks consider the H/Cs [half-castes] inferior to them” (*RPF* 39). \(^{40}\) The removal is described in detail as is the devastating trauma inflicted on both the girls and their families (*RPF* 44-5). \(^{41}\) The three girls are sent to the Moore River Native Settlement, where they are going to be “educated in the European ways”, and are supposed to “accept the inevitable and fall in with the usage of the place” (*RPF* 61). The first impression the girls

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\(^{38}\) In some cases things were different and some children received a proper education. One of the Aboriginal women Harley speaks to, Ellen, has been raised by a foster family and treated like one of their children; she praises the education she has received (*B* 395).

\(^{39}\) In Behrendt’s *Home*, Garibooli is also removed from her family. The welfare official who takes her to the house where she will work as a servant insists on the good intentions of the removal, and on the documents it is written: “Removed at child’s own request” (*H* 46). Garibooli will never see her family again.

\(^{40}\) The Superintendent of the depot, Mr Keeling, records in his files the birth of Molly, “the first half-caste child to be born amongst the Jigalong people” (*RPF* 38). Then two more “muda-mudas” were born, Daisy and Gracie (*RPF* 39). Here again the emphasis is on the obsession with registering the first (in this case) ‘half-caste’ to be born (*RPF* 38-9).

\(^{41}\) The moment of the separation is described in detail. Constable Riggs, the local Protector of Aborigines, “full of authority and purpose” informs the family that he will take the girls to the Moore River Native Settlement (*RPF* 44). The heartbreaking moment, the “silent tears”, the “high pitched wail”, “the cries of agonised mothers and the women, and the deep sobs of grandfathers, uncles and cousins filled the air”; family members left behind inflict wounds upon their own heads with sharp objects as a sign of mourning (*RPF* 44-5).
have of the settlement is a negative one and the institution is repeatedly compared to a prison: the dormitory is locked from the outside with “chains and padlocks [...] had bars on windows as well. Just like a gaol” \((RPF\ 63)\). The association of the place with a prison is repeated constantly and the treatment children receive also resembles that of a prison. The conditions are degrading and inhumane: they are severely punished by being locked up in isolation and by being flogged if they try to escape. The children are woken up early by having the blanket pulled from their beds, and the food served to them is very poor \((RPF\ 62-74)\). The treatment they receive in the institution and the other girls’ belief that after schooling they will be sent home to their families (when in fact they are destined to become servants) expose the real, inhumane intent behind the removal policies.

White people believe it is their duty to report fugitive girls when they see them, claiming that it is “for their own good before they get lost and die in the bush” \((RPF\ 100)\). This same concern about the three girls is expressed by the Chief Protector A.O. Neville: “we are very anxious that no harm may come to them in the bush” \((RPF\ 102)\). While the three girls walk home marvelling at the beauty of the landscape they travel across, authorities are busy looking for them and, through newspaper articles, telegrams, phone calls and reports from farmers, try to locate them, ironically enough, to save them from the bush. The three girls “evaded capture by practicing survival skills inherited from their nomadic ancestors” \((RPF\ 106)\). The reference to words such as “capture”,
“captors”, “evading”, and “absconders” are constant reminders of the similarities between the Moore River Native Settlement and a prison.

Institutions such as hospitals, schools, missions, settlements and the police are all used to control indigenous people, and the Protector has the power to impose Aboriginal identity: these same authorities define who is to be considered Aboriginal and therefore subject to the *Aboriginal Act*, and who could be exempted from it. The arbitrariness of this categorisation is clearly exemplified by Kathleen’s inclusion or exclusion from the *Act* according to convenience. Kathleen is defined as “unequivocally a white girl” (*B* 95; 87) by Sergeant Hall who, as local protector, gives his permission for her marriage to Ernest: “legally she was a white woman. Parents married; a white father. Living like a white person” (*B* 98). Kathleen, who is deemed ‘white’ because of her education, manners and lightness, is however later sent to a reserve. She is no longer defined by the white man as ‘white’, while the other inmates mock her because she behaves like a white woman: “And it was true that Kathleen wanted to be like a white woman; to have rights and respect” (*B* 137).⁴²

The enforcement of identity and the categorisation of the Aborigines according to the judgement and decisions of the protectors (that is, of

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⁴² Behrendt explains the power to confer or deny recognition that is enjoyed by white Australians. Drawing on Foucault, the narrator reflects on the “power to name and then dispossess” (*H* 299). Behrendt discusses white people’s propensity to impose an identity on others that is only valid when they give recognition. The attribution of otherness on someone is given or taken: it is the category ‘white’ which gives recognition, and decides to which category the other belongs (*H* 299).
white men in general), is a powerful tool used to control the other. The justification of these practices through the discourse of science is well conveyed by Scott who ironically describes the “rigorous and scientific mind” (B 326) of the Protector and of other white characters concerned with the application of eugenic theories. Harley’s grandfather and the inspector see Aborigines in terms of their genetic blood relations as they analyse, categorise and name them in order to control them: ‘full-blood’, ‘half-caste’, ‘quadroon’: “Once you shared this tongue, you could taste it. Evolution. Light out of darkness. [...] With such a language, it is hard not to accept such concepts” (B 312). Here the author is openly critiquing the discourses used to wield power and to subjugate indigenous people. Language is an instrument of power, as is writing. The representatives of institutions, and especially of the instruments of governmental control, are empowered by writing. They take scrupulous notes of everything in order to control, classify and rationalise. The consequences of this control are deeply felt by the indigenous people: “It was the Travelling Inspector for Aborigines who first caught them, first sentenced them to a page” (B 484).

Once indigenous people have been “put down on paper” there are files about them, and these files are used to define who they are and to which ‘category’ they belong, a category that is always imposed on them. In Benang we see clerks behind pens and documents which have the power to prove their existence, to define them and to decide their identity. Sandy Two meets Chief Protector Neville, who is described as holding a pen
and being surrounded by drawers, files, labels and the like (B 121). The power of the pen as an instrument of control is made clear:

The Chief Protector’s pen hovered above the page, [...] a hawk watching, waiting to fall, to grasp, to take away [...] Our Chief Protector wished to study the man before him [...]. Half-caste [...] but unusually fair. His very fine mind recalled the relevant diagram. First-cross, he believed. Remarkably fine features. Very well-spoken (B 121-2).

Sandy claims he is not an Aboriginal because his father was a white man. However, the white man imposes his power through language and writing, defining, controlling, labelling and finally deciding who is and who is not Aboriginal; “the proof is to the contrary, Sandy. And it is I, or my representatives, who decide who is or is not Aboriginal” (B 123). Documents and other kinds of written material could be used by authorities against indigenous people, for purposes such as locating them.

The indigenous people understand the principles of exclusion involved in documentation, but at the same time documentation is seen as a slim means of protection for the Aborigines in that they can obtain a certificate proving their existence so that their deaths would then become a crime (B 178). Sandy Mason, Harley’s ancestor, tries to appropriate language, writing and education in the hope of acquiring rights. He recognises that paper, certificates and documents are important, thus he has registered the births of his children and he has married his Aboriginal wife hoping that these certificates can protect them (B 343). Sandy uses white means

43 Sandy One Mason, who is referred to in the novel as a white man, in fact also has Aboriginal ancestry.
to evade white policies. He sends his children to a mission school and wants them to learn to write, hoping that this will help them to survive assimilation: “He chose to put us on paper. A strange gift” (B 457). The fact remains that existence for Aborigines in the eyes of the colonial world is dependent on pen and paper and Aboriginal people do not exist until they are institutionalised. In institutions children are prohibited from speaking their own language and English language and culture are imposed upon them: “You girls can’t talk blackfulla language here […] You gotta forget it and talk English all the time” (RPF 72). They were also denied proper access to schooling, thus maintaining them in a subaltern position and denying them the chance to master the new language. Language is power; elevating one language over another is an imposition of power. Aware of the power of the master’s language and in some sense always imprisoned by it, Scott uses the same language to disrupt and contrast the effects of those policies imposed on indigenous people. He must, therefore, use the English language and give it a new vitality.

Kim Scott declares in an article that he is concerned with how to write from an Aboriginal point of view while using the English language and its discursive as well as generic forms (Scott 2000). He employs colonial records to access historical information, using the ‘instruments’ of the West to deconstruct an imperialist, colonial discourse. As Scott argues, “In writing and rewriting the language of the archives, it seems possible

44 In Benang, one of the ‘half-caste’ characters, Harriette, voices the different treatment received by part-Aboriginal children when she asks for equal educational opportunities for her children who have been refused a place in the local school: “why you trying to keep us back? Is it to make yourselves feel big? Give all children the same chance as your own, and they will do just the same” (B 290).
not only to defuse, but also to hint at what language can’t say; as if something existed behind and between the lines” (Scott 2000: 170). The author’s use of colonial documents and narratives against themselves is reflected in Harley’s obsession with writing, paper and ink, an obsession which constantly recurs throughout the novel. As Scott explains, he wants to use the language of the archive against itself, to deconstruct the way “our shared history” has been told: “I want to work with the dominant non-Aboriginal audience, and use its own language and tools and turn them back on themselves to promote self-reflection […] That’s why I wanted to use the language of the archives” (Buck 2001). The starting point of reflection is those written documents that have been used to define and institutionalise Aboriginal people. Through archival research Scott reconstructs a history that has been deleted, starting from those written documents, influenced by a “wadjela way of thinking” (B 111), that contributed to indigenous dispossession and assimilation (B 32).45

As Scott himself points out, sometimes the indigenous person deprived of his cultural and linguistic background is trapped in the very discourses he is trying to critique. He describes the English language as a prison that limits the possibilities of his understanding of indigenous traditions and of the land. In order to recover his ancestry, Harley has to “work right through this white way of thinking, it is the only way to be sure” (B 112).46

45 In Larissa Behrendt’s Home, Bob too uses the archive to find his family history. It is another example of how the archive can be used counter to its original purpose.
46 In Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence, Doris Pilkington uses archival material such as letters, newspaper columns and telegrams. The archival material exposes the discourses used by authorities, juxtaposing them with a different reality. For example,
Harley does not speak the Nyoongar language and he is reminded by his grandfather that no one of his people is left to tell him. Language, as we read in the novel, is a “fence that keeps you out” (B 36). Harley is in fact defined by his grandfather’s ‘eugenic’ words that have contributed to shaping him: “It was still his story, his language, his notes and rough drafts, his clear diagrams and slippery fractions which had uplifted and diminished me” (B 37). In other words, Aboriginal identity is defined by the white man.

Language shapes our understanding of the surrounding world. Scott describes how not having grown up speaking the Nyoongar language has limited his sense of place. He draws on Jay Arthur’s argument that Australians are “trapped in the language of the ‘Default Country’” (quoted in Scott 2007: 9), and that their understanding of place is filtered through a language modelled upon the ‘default country’, that is, England. The use of the English language creates a perception of Australia that is necessarily negative, because the language does not correspond to the landscape. English words and their ‘signifieds’ are shaped by English rather than Australian ‘signifiers’; therefore there is no direct correspondence between the signifier and the signified. The word ‘drought’, for instance, conveys a negative understanding of the land. By contrast, indigenous language is in synchrony with this landscape because it originated here. Scott provides the example of the word for ‘river’ which is the same as the word for ‘navel’: “rivers as connections to

Neville’s preoccupation with the welfare of the girls is in contrast to their desperate attempt to escape those institutions where the Protector would like to ‘imprison’ them.
a nurturing life source” (Scott 2007: 10). The importance of language in the connection to the country and its history further stresses the negative effects of government policies on indigenous people. The Aborigines are colonised not only spatially, by having their lands claimed for farming and white settlement, but also by the colonial systems, in this case writing. In order for decolonisation to take place, these systems must be questioned. Harley, we note, grows distrustful of writing while studying his grandfather’s documents, declaring that “I thought of all those the papers named, and of how little the ink could tell” (B 347).

However, even as he is distrustful, Harley acknowledges the importance of the education that has given him the instruments through which he tells the stories of the people of his country: “I have written this story wanting to embrace all of you, and it is the best I can do in this language we share. Of course there is an older tongue which also tells it” (B 495). Harley is unable to speak his ancestral language and therefore acknowledges the impossibility of understanding the voices of his country, a failure which he shares with the English colonists in a different way (because for him it is a loss) (B 182). To illustrate this failure, the names of the Aborigines are misspelled or changed by the settlers, as happened to Fanny. “It was really a no-name, a mean-nothing name. Not a name used to distinguish between people. We cannot depend on such names put down on paper” (B 103). Fanny’s name was spelt in different ways, and one of them happened to be Benang. As Scott explains, “The novel’s title ‘Benang’ is a Nyoongar word meaning ‘tomorrow’. It was also
one of the spellings given to the name of an ancestor of mine. With one lonely word I hoped to join a past to a possible future” (2007: 5).

Scott’s novel is a strong statement on the dispossession and violence perpetrated against indigenous people, juxtaposed with the white version of the same story, thus creating an alternative or divergent narrative. In the white version, history has been used to deny the violence perpetrated against Aborigines. Referring to his grandfather, Harley affirms, “I had inherited his language, the voices of others, his stories. That history whose descendants write, ‘There was never any trouble. Never blood spilled, or a gun raised in anger’ (B 183). Against this dominant white narrative the narrator refuses to “destroy memory of a culture, destroy evidence of a distinctive people, bury memory deep in shame” (B 446).

There was blood, there were massacres; the land herself keeps a memory of it, and preserves her people’s memories. Official history has denied the violence and has described settlement as peaceful. After the Mabo decision and the Bringing Them Home Report, such denial is now seen to be anachronistic.

Scott deals with one of the themes at the centre of the novels of the previous chapter, that of the massacres and violence perpetrated by white settlers against indigenous people. While McGahan and Grenville

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47 The white habit of naming is also emphasised by Behrendt, who sees it as a further means of dispossessing indigenous people who are deprived of their land and “in return, they were given the terror of God, schooling […], clothing […] and a new language which gave them new names”. These new names are written by the Reverend’s wife in a book “making them official in dark blue ink letters” (H 30). Hence the imposition of English names is a means of denying indigenous identity and another way of ‘dispossessing’ them.
attribute violence to isolated settlers and incidents and show how this violence then taints the people who perpetrated it, making them outsiders in their own communities, Scott presents it as a more widely shared act, and the pastoralists in his novel, the Dones, the Mustles and the Starrs, had done “all they could to tame and pacify the place”, killing the indigenous people of the area, and segregating those remaining in designated areas, out of sight, which is ostensibly why in Gebalup there is no “native problem” (B 72). The massacres described in Benang are justified by white settlers through Social Darwinism, but these justifications are exposed by the author as self-legitimating discourses written along ideological lines:

Perhaps it is most exciting to gallop and shoot and blast holes in people as they turn and fumble with whatever slight weapon they might carry; to keep the horses stomping and rearing, to turn around and around, to reload and shoot; to think these which the dogs seize and fling about are not humans, these are not men women children.

But it is afterwards that the words come. Oh, they are not really human. Not like us. We are superior (and here is our proof) (B 175).

The massacre, which according to Uncle Jack has been authorised by the police on the grounds of “revenge killing” (B 175), is presented through the point of view of Harley’s ancestors, Fanny and Sandy One Mason.49

48 As mentioned in Chapter Four, there is a recurrent image in McGahan’s novel of a burning man that is a reminder of the massacre. Curiously, the dream of a burning man is also present in Behrendt’s Home. This dream brings Bob to search for his Aboriginal heritage. (Both novels were published in 2004).

49 Philip McLaren’s Sweet Water Stolen Land (2001) deals with the indigenous-white relationship and gives an account of the Myall Creek massacre. This massacre is the only one for which the white people who took part in it were trialled and sentenced to death.
While in Grenville (2005) and McGahan (2005) the exposition of the massacres is the central and most dramatic point in their novels, in Scott (2005) the massacres are presented as just one of the many means employed by white settlers to annihilate Aboriginal people; they are presented alongside other pernicious methods such as eugenics theories, the destruction of culture, language and family links, and the attempt to make the Aboriginal people ashamed of their heritage. In a telling passage, Jack preserves the bones of those killed in the massacre, and the bones are described as ‘getting paler’ like the survivors: “bones white like the skin of the young ones will be, […] the survivors growing paler and paler and maybe dying” (B 176). Xavier Pons reads this passage as Scott’s attempt to reverse white “ethnocentric symbolism by equating whiteness with death”, through both a literal bleaching of the bones and through the absorption policies which contributed to the destruction of indigenous identity, symbolised by the loss of ‘colour’ (Pons 2007: 45).

The forcible removal and separation of Aborigines from their families, culture and language in order to ‘eradicate’ them is effectively illustrated by the metaphor of a tree, which recurs throughout the novel. The Aborigines are compared to a tree that Ernest wants Harley to cut down: “Cut down the tree. Burn it, dig out its roots. He might also have written: Displace, disperse, dismiss…My friends, you recognise the language” (B 107-8). In this passage the grandfather’s desire to see the tree

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50 Pons refers to the use of the tree as an “allegory” that he defines as a “narrative device” whose intent is “to make deeper truths intelligible through the decoding of the symbolical though superficial elements of a narrative. A hidden meaning emerges through this decoding” (Pons 2007: 41).
eradicated is, as Pons has argued, “a symbol of the whites’ genocidal intentions” (Pons 2007: 43). The attempt to destroy the ‘roots’ of Aboriginal culture is also manifest in Harley’s tendency to drift through the air, a metaphor of his inability to ‘root’ himself in the ground because he lacks the cultural links, the cultural heritage, that will allow him to be firmly connected to the land. Through writing and through listening to the stories of his people, he slowly recovers his heritage, his sense of belonging:

Nyoongar language. Culture ... I thought of all the things I did not have. Unsettled, not belonging—The first white man born—I let myself drift. I gave up, and drifted [...] I thought I was a solitary full stop. Or a seed, I know now there are many of us, rising (B 109).

The lack of culture and of heritage that leaves him disconnected, is reversed through the stories told by his uncles, and he reconnects to his people, his land and his culture. Through this reconnection Harley reverses his grandfather’s eugenic project and deconstructs it; the creation of the first white man is a failure: the superficial ‘whiteness’ has not succeeded in deleting his indigenous inheritance.

According to Scott, in order to reconcile the past Australia has to come to terms with its “relationship to Aboriginal Australia”, a relationship that he sees as a sort of psychosis (Buck 2001), reminiscent of Ghassan Hage’s (2003) reference to ‘paranoia’. Scott hopes for a recognition of the past which involves a reflection by white Australia on the nation’s history and on its relationship to Aboriginal Australia. This for him is fundamental for a reconciliation to take place. White Australia needs to come to terms with
the “insecurity, uncertainty, and doubt about the foundations of modern Australia”, and with “their rights to belong” (Buck 2001).

Despite the sad subjects they deal with, the stories told by these authors nevertheless have a positive ending. The journey of the three girls is a sort of triumph over the authorities who failed in their attempt to separate and dispossess Aborigines. Molly and her sister return home and though Molly and her daughter were later to be removed by authorities, Molly would escape again, repeating the long walk home: a proof that Aboriginal resistance is stronger than any laws or policy imposed upon them (RPF 131-2). This is the meaning of the closing sentence of Scott’s novel: “We are still here, Benang” (B 495). It is a statement about white defeat. Aboriginal people and their heritage are still there, obviously changed and weakened but still alive and vital. The conclusion of the novel points to the failure of all those policies used by white men to destroy and assimilate Aborigines. Even in the figure of Harley himself—“the first white man born” (B 10)—there is the will to continue to recover that part of his indigenous culture that has been denied to him. He does that with the means he has, the same means given to him by his education and used to control Aboriginal people: the English language. He uses his grandfather’s notes, the white man’s archive, to effectively turn it upside down and use it against itself. He uses all the notes taken on his family in the attempt to breed out their colour to recover his family history and to reconnect with the culture that was denied to him. Words assume a different meaning and can be used against the white man—not
just in the violent acts he tries at the beginning, when he cuts words onto his grandfather’s skin and tries to tattoo them with ink, but by telling a different story, by telling the story of those people silenced by history, silenced by the discourses of whiteness. Indigenous authors have exposed those discourses used to justify indigenous dispossession and impose power upon indigenous people and their land. The use of discourses of ‘racial superiority’ and their application through assimilation policies had to be dismantled because their only scope was the maintenance of white power. The exposition of the legend as a constructed whiteness, and of an idea of Australianness as being strictly linked to whiteness, is presented by Aboriginal authors in its basic, ‘naked’ terms. The subversion of these discourses is achieved by juxtaposing them with other perspectives which make their constructedness explicit, thus revealing their discursive foundations.

Indigenous authors fully deconstruct the Australian legend as held together by the figure of a white male who represents the essence of the Australian nation. This figure does not represent the entire Australian nation and it certainly does not correspond to a real representation of the typical Australian, but it is a construction used to justify white belonging. Indigenous authors have thoroughly exposed this construction, along with the other discourses that have been used to justify the deployment of whiteness. As has been pointed out, the legend is only used by these authors to more strongly convey the idea of its constructed nature. Indigenous authors are aware of how rooted this identity is in the
Australian psyche, and use this myth to better convey their critique. The figure of the legend does not represent indigenous Australians who do not need a foundational myth to justify their belonging to the country; a fact which, ironically enough, makes the legend and whiteness a useless commodity to them. The legend does not represent all the different cultures that are supposed to be accepted in a multicultural Australia. Implicit in the perpetuation of the legend is the will by white Australia to maintain its privileges and dictate the rules for recognition and belonging. Before multicultural theory the category of whiteness was the one that defined and legitimised the ‘other’. In a post-multicultural Australia, however, ‘white’ is only one category among others. In this context, recognition should be a dialectical process, although it must be acknowledged that whiteness is still the dominant category which grants recognition to the other minorities. In a very real sense, the Australian core culture is one based on a British heritage and linked to a presumption of its continuing relevance and dominance. In this context, and as this chapter has shown, it is only when Aboriginal writers (who have no need for a white foundational myth) take literary representation on their own terms that the legend finally confronts the voice of the other which lays bare the ideologically empty and, in the end, false foundations of the Australian legend.
Conclusion

Hierarchical Pluralism

To reprise my argument, in this thesis I analysed the role of the Australian legend and the importance attributed to the typical Australian in the legend, and how these have changed over the years as the legend has been modified and even camouflaged. At its ‘inception’ the role of the legend was obviously to create an awareness in Australians of their status as a separate people, and as a nation. This was accomplished by highlighting those characteristics that distinguished them from their British counterparts and their ability to move freely through the land and control the ‘new’ environment. The legend worked as a white settler ethos which justified the imposition of an alien identity on a land considered as *terra nullius*, ignoring previous readings of the land. Once this national ideology had been established, the legend persisted, slightly changing its characteristics and its function over time. Blood sacrifice came to the fore during times of war, and the legend came to include the diggers, whose heroic enterprises were emphasised and who, it was suggested, shared many of the characteristics of the bushman. The iconic figure of the bushman behind the legend became so embedded in Australian national identity that it was assimilated into the Australian psyche and went, in some cases, unnoticed and was taken for granted. It is this characteristic of the legend which is the focus of my analysis. The fact that the legend
became an underlying presence, a discourse with no definite origin, contributed to its ability to resist questioning. The elevation of the legend to the status of myth is a sign of its incorporation into the essence of Australian identity. The internalisation of this discourse has allowed it to become one with the construction of the Australian identity, thus contributing to the perpetuation of the discourse. I have argued that this is an Australian version of a discourse of whiteness: implicit in the legend is the ‘whiteness’ of the subject, thus further emphasising the importance attributed to race.

I have argued that the Australian legend, the grand narrative at the foundation of a sense of Australianness, is deeply influenced by a racial interpretation of Australianness. The typical Australian, a white male, is the uncontested representative of the nation. The power of this narrative which includes the foundational myth of the country—of brave, stoic men against an unconquerable wilderness—has been employed to confer an aura of heroic origin to the nation. I have argued that the Australian legend is a discourse constructed to legitimate white power and to foreground the legitimacy of white belonging to the land.

The role of literature in regard to the legend of which it was once the ‘source’ text has changed over time. At the end of the 1890s, it was the major instrument used to promote the legend, but over the ensuing decades has assumed a different role, becoming one of the instruments used to criticise the legend. This is due to the development of a different
kind of sensitivity towards the legend, as authors have gradually become more and more concerned with the racist underpinnings of the legend. This qualification notwithstanding, it has to be recognised that the legend was an uncritical theory of whiteness. Over time, the subject of the legend has become transformed from the bushman of the early literature to more complex figures. However, some of the characteristics of the early representations have remained constant. The figures have modified their relationship with the land as Australians have become increasingly more confident about their role in the land.

Changes in social attitudes and an increasing awareness of the racialised characteristics of the legend have led to a rethinking of Australian identity. The analysed texts have shown that Australian literature has moved away from an uncritical celebration of the bushman as the typical Australian to a critical reception and representation of this figure. While early writers were unaware of the historical and cultural significance of the legend, more recent works have shown a change in this perception, first through an exposition of the strongly racial attitudes implicit in the legend—in Xavier Herbert for instance—and later through a critique of the ‘rational’ discourses of the white man as the modern man, as in the work of Patrick White. Works published after the Mabo decision saw a shift in focus—the throwing out of the case for terra nullius contributed to a rethinking of the foundational narrative. Authors such as McGahan and Grenville exposed the violence of settlement and the lie of terra nullius. However, even while critiquing the legend, they implicitly celebrate the settlement.
It is only with indigenous works that we see a dismantling of the legend as indigenous writers move away from it, exposing the violent disposssession and assimilation of their people. Behind the assimilation policies lay the aim of incorporating indigenous people into the ‘whiteness’ of the legend through ‘whitening’, thus creating a white monocultural nation that would legitimate white belonging and would unify the nation into a homogenous whole under the legend. But even as they overcome the legend (or attempt to do so), indigenous authors still adopt the legend as a sub-narrative and in doing so accept its implicit power. Even in dismantling it, the legend is reinforced because the very act of dismantling it means that the legend continues to haunt the literary imagination. While their critique is uncompromising and ‘full’, their works nevertheless still move within a white Australia since they have to accommodate a white readership shadowed by the legend. At another level, though, the idea of the bushman is employed by Aboriginal authors to reclaim the place of indigenous people as the real bushmen in the legend. Contrary to an argument that the legend is a relic of a racist white Australia and has no relevance to multicultural Australia, I argue that the literary evidence shows how persistent it is.

Notwithstanding Australia declaring itself a multicultural society, it is clearly still strongly influenced by the legend, as white Anglo-Celts are the ones who give recognition to other minorities. While a multicultural theory should imply a complete overcoming of the legend because this
foundational narrative does not represent the non-white part of the nation, the legend and its whiteness, hidden behind discourses of cultural ethnicity, continue to define Australianness. The legend persists; it is very powerful, and even though multiculturalism is opposed to this myth, the national values are strictly connected to the legend. In order to fully overcome the legend Australia needs a different nationalism. The national type with his mateship and 'combativeness'—the bushman battling the hostile land, the digger battling enemies, sportsmen competing to win—seems tied in with the wish for a war of independence, for blood to be spilt to help define the nation. The emphasis placed on blood sacrifice, Gallipoli and the Anzac tradition, is an exaltation of the legend and the very survival of these myths is indicative of how strongly rooted the legend is in Australian identity.

Whiteness has shifted in order to maintain its power position and now declares itself to be just another ethnic category among the others. However, it persists because instead of having a historical pluralism, Australia is informed by a hierarchical pluralism: the legend is at the top of the narrative followed by Aboriginal stories and multicultural stories. Thus, while the legend is considered a construction and its validity has been questioned, it still constitutes, together with its implicit whiteness, the heart of Australianness, the underlying narrative of the nation. In spite of multiculturalism, the *Mabo* decision, critical self-consciousness on the political level and an awareness of discourses of whiteness, and in spite of a growing body of Aboriginal writing presenting an alternative reading
of the Australian country, the legend has acquired a degree of ‘historical
depth’ and it is still what defines Australianness. In the end the legend
persists, albeit in an undeclared form, because it is linked to questions of
power.


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