Desire, mateship and the 'national type': Vance Palmer's Legend for Sanderson

Antonio Simoes da Silva

University of Wollongong, tony.simoesdasilva@utas.edu.au

Publication Details

Desire, mateship and the 'national type': Vance Palmer's Legend for Sanderson

Abstract
If we are to believe his critics Vance Palmer's Legend for Sanderson was not his most successful novel. Indeed Vivian Smith, one of Palmer's most perceptive, persistent and patient critics, has gone so far as to suggest that it 'is a tired book'. It is also generally left out of discussions of Palmer's work in literary histories of Australian writing. Thus it is, for example, the only one of Palmer's major works not discussed by Ken Goodwin in his A History of Australian Literature. And, although they mention it, neither Peter Pierce in 'Literary Forms in Australian Literature' nor Geoffrey Dutton in The Literature of Australia devote any real time to it. There are of course exceptions; Harry Heseltine, for example, regards Legend for Sanderson as the novel where 'Palmer achieved some of his most memorable characterisations', but even Heseltine's discussion of the novel is brief. This article seeks to read the novel in ways that make it a less tired, and tiring, book.

Keywords
legend, mateship, type, sanderson, desire, national, vance, palmer

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details
Desire, Mateship, and the ‘National Type’:
Vance Palmer’s Legend for Sanderson

TONY SIMOES DA SILVA

The time was coming when I should see him loved, admired,
with a strength and prowess forming around his name as though
he had been the stuff of a hero.1

If we are to believe his critics Vance Palmer’s Legend for Sanderson2 was
not his most successful novel. Indeed Vivian Smith, one of Palmer’s most
perceptive, persistent and patient critics, has gone so far as to suggest that it
‘is a tired book’.3 It is also generally left out of discussions of Palmer’s work
in literary histories of Australian writing. Thus it is, for example, the only
one of Palmer’s major works not discussed by Ken Goodwin in his A
History of Australian Literature.4 And, although they mention it, neither
Peter Pierce in Literary Forms in Australian Literature5 nor Geoffrey
Dutton in The Literature of Australia devote any real time to it.6 There are
of course exceptions; Harry Heseltine, for example, regards Legend for
Sanderson as the novel where ‘Palmer achieved some of his most
memorable characterisations’,7 but even Heseltine’s discussion of the novel
is brief.

This article seeks to read the novel in ways that make it a less tired, and
tiring, book. It will attempt to do so by proposing a rereading of Palmer’s
novel which focuses on the novel’s treatment of the (gendered, racialised)
body, and which relates it to the larger context of Australian national
identity, both at the time of the novel’s production and more recently. I am
therefore concerned to provide a reading which concentrates particularly
upon the ways in which Legend for Sanderson deals with, and indeed
articulates, notions of desire and sexual politics, and to explore the ways in
which these then impacted upon Palmer’s notion of a ‘national type’. With
this in mind the article will seek to examine the ways in which Palmer’s
concern with the threat of the expanding cities to an ethos of national
identity based on natural attributes of male ‘beauty’ and strength are
ultimately responsible for the manner in which the Other, both a gendered
and racialised one, is conceived of in terms of a body – raw and inscrutable

which thus allows for a displacement of the main male characters’
homoerotic desires. To put it another way, given the poor quality of the
‘Other’ alternatives – the females and the ‘natives’ – the Australian male is
forced to play with same. The Other is represented in Legend for Sanderson
either in the form of the Malay fishermen in the quarters placed at the edge
of the White town or as the half-witted, insatiable, all-consuming female
self embodied by Freda and Laura. Consequently, in the context of the
novel’s explicit portrayal of male to male desire, the Other becomes a place
of alterity that ultimately seeks to familiarise the attraction to same, what
Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms the ‘homosocial’.8

Legend for Sanderson is a retelling of Chris Sanderson’s story, a man
who is at once powerful, kind, ambitious, ruthless, careless of his own well
being and contemptuous of society’s views. A typical self-made man,
Sanderson is the archetypal ‘last frontier’ hero, that essential colonial whose
ability and indomitable desire to succeed are posited in an inverse
relationship with the ambiguous nature of his moral fabric. As he himself
puts it, speaking, perhaps significantly, in a drunken stupor: ‘Chris
Sanderson. Scrub-worker, contractor, Cabinet Minister, undischarged
bankrupt – a hell of other things as well’, in sum, a good ‘old shyster’.9 And
as another character in the novel later comments; ‘the last place I’d have
looked for any one belonging to Sanderson is on a job that means bending
your back and earning money honest’.10 Sanderson’s story, then, or at the
very least the one which is about to be distributed for wider consumption
through his obituary, is a myth, a ‘legend … that’ll grow wings and cover
the whole continent’.

Reading the novel in the 1990s, one gets an uncanny, almost eerie
feeling, that Sanderson’s legend has just been rereleased in the form of the
(hi)stories of a number of the entrepreneurs of the late 1980s. These ‘good
old shysters’ are of a sort which another Australian writer, Peter Carey,
would probably not approve of, although few could paint their portraits as
richly and as accurately as he does in novels like Bliss, Illywhacker and The
Tax Inspector.11 Carey also comes to mind here because, like Palmer, his
work is concerned with national types, legends of nationhood and notions
of masculinity. Thus both Palmer and Carey seem to offer in their work
interesting examples of the way in which certain writers become
emblematic of the moods and preoccupations of their age. Unlike Palmer,
however, Carey is not particularly concerned to ‘patent’ any particular
model as ‘the Australian type’. Rather, his characters, as in Bliss, are often
overweight and fond of illegal drugs, wan and wasted as in The Tax
Inspector, or simply, as in Illywhacker, too unreal for ‘good taste’. Carey,
defending both his views of Australia and his use of myth and legend in
the face of criticism, has argued that he is simply ‘busily reinventing what’s

PUBLISHED BY FRANK CASS, LONDON
there [in Australia]. In typically cryptical fashion Carey seems to be saying here that while we may not always find the end product to our liking, the original imprint nevertheless remains the same. Carey’s work is thus overtly revisionist in its tone; his project to de/reconstruct our myths and legends.

Palmer’s work, by contrast, was integral to the establishment of these myths and legends. Thus in his Legend of the Nineties Palmer examines, some would argue invents, the ‘legend of the Nineties’; a legend which his own fictional works would in turn come to be concerned with. In an essay written some years after his Legend of the Nineties, and published in Fellowship, Palmer asserted:

Thirty years ago life in Australia was not moulded by our coastal cities, it took its character from the Bush. The lean, bronzed man from the station, the selection, or the small township was the accepted national type. Not a bad type, after all. Palmer believed that a change in Australian society had come about as a result of the shift from the bush to the coast, from the squat camp to the city; of the arrival, in other words, of a kind of ‘modernity’. The presence in Legend for Sanderson of the Belgian immigrant, Leo Besanck, in the coastal village is representative of this process. As a northern European Besanck signifies a notion of High culture not commonly recognised in a pre-Whitman Australia. Palmer as an intellectual may have been attracted to the glamour of this culture, but if he was it did not pre-empt his feelings of discomfort towards a type which he regarded to be so unlike ‘the lean, bronzed man from the station’. Palmer nevertheless seems to have felt that there was room for improvement in the national type. Thus in Legend for Sanderson he sought to construct a hybrid between the ‘lean, bronzed’ but dull type and the articulate but pale product of a European upbringing. To this extent the novel is about the relationship between the sophisticated but pretentious Besanck, whom Heseltine refers to as intellectually sterile, and the naïvely heroic Neil Sanderson. Thus, at the conclusion of Legend for Sanderson, we read, ‘The curse of this country is that it doesn’t remember its heroes. No instinct to set up memorials. No record of men who put society before self (and) devoted their life to the public good’.

Legend for Sanderson is about the making of old Sanderson’s legend, and it is this legend, the construct of (hi)story, that his son Christopher Neil Sanderson attempts to (dis)cover in the novel. Brought up by his natural mother and away from his father, young Sanderson is not particularly keen to talk about his past. This is especially the case when he is required to look at his (lack of) relationship with his father. As a result of his mother’s tales about old Sanderson’s skewed morals, Neil has been brought up to hate his father. The result is a rather troubled relationship between both Sandersons (the living and the dead). Along with the town folk, Neil Sanderson believes that his father never really cared for him, and their two very brief encounters turn out to be even nastier when the father engages in a de facto relationship with his former nurse. Laura, the narrative voice explains, is a woman much younger than Sanderson Senior, ‘with a heart of gold and the emotional balance of a rabbit’. She is also still young and clearly very attractive: ‘She was hardly fifty yet: she must have been quite a young woman, an attractive one at that, when she went off with Sanderson. And probably she would bloom again’. Finally, although Laura is ambitious and calculating, in practice she is a rather confused femme fatale. Her love for Sanderson results, not only from a disturbing desire to secure her financial independence, but also from a commendable ‘maternal instinct’.

If we were to focus on this very brief synopsis of the novel, Legend for Sanderson would appear to be concerned primarily with the troubles and trials of Sanderson Senior, his shonky business deals and inveterate penchant for women much younger than he, alcohol, and gambling. Not a very enlightening portrait of the national type perhaps, but; ‘not a bad type, after all’. Ironically, however, Chris Sanderson is almost entirely absent from the story. In fact, his presence resides primarily in the constant allusions to his past brought about by the son’s continued, and really half-hearted, quest for the father. While at all times a rather contrived tale, Neil Sanderson’s search for his father is necessary in order to highlight the personal difficulties he is facing in the present. Hence the past returns to haunt the present: the John Howard whom Keating once dubbed Lazarus whose resurrection reflects the nation’s anxieties about the future.

In this context Neil’s infatuation with Leo Besanck becomes symbolic of his genuine desire to find a surrogate father. Their relationship is depicted largely in terms of traditional mateship terminology, an overtly masculinist cliché on whoring and gambling, coloured by a healthy attachment to sun and soil. Men will be men, and if Young Sanderson is not to turn into a little sissy through the lack of a father figure, it is important that he be able to establish a close rapport with Leo Besanck. Yet Besanck’s status too is ambiguous. As a northern European he partly acts as a signifier of high culture, the civilised, articulate Other to the taciturn Australian. He is, in a sense, the oracle through whom Palmer passes judgement on a certain ‘lean,
bronzed, national type'. Thus when Neil, feeling somewhat unwell, and worried about his failure to keep up with the sugarcane workers (mostly Irish and Italians), remarks, "We ought to be able to stand anything they can. Aren't highly civilised people the most adaptable?" Besanck replies: "Highly civilised? The men of this gang? Of the country around?" There is in Besanck's sarcasm a very clear sense of the Italians and the Irish being 'White but not quite'.

Besanck's contempt for the workers in the canefields, juxtaposed as it is to Neil's nativist retort, "Well, they're white, aren't they?" is here suggestive of the way in which Besanck is potentially too civilised. His 'sterile intellectuality' remains associated in the novel with a certain 'je ne sais quoi'. While this is, on the one hand, desirable as a sign of European sophistication, it is, on the other hand, given its symbolic allusion to an effete disposition, also essentially to be despised. As Palmer writes, 'there was a delicacy about [Besanck's] hands, which were long-fingered but capable, carefully tended, scrubbed patiently to take out the grease of washing-up water and the grime of saucepans'. The effete character is a recurrent one in Palmer's work. In his short story 'Father and Son' race and sexual difference is here translated into anything other than desire. Later, as his infatuation for Swayne attains new heights, Neil comments; "I couldn't find anyone else capable, carefully tended, scrubbed patiently to take out the grease of washing-up water and the grime of saucepans."

The narrative at times suggests of the way in which Besanck is potentially too civilised. His mouth. This sense of 'loved mateship' (homosocial/sexuality) is a constant in all of Palmer's works. It manifests itself in particular through the level of physical attraction that underscores the relationships between male characters, frequently of different age groups. While on the surface the bond is one premised on an emotional need, in Neil's case for a surrogate father-figure, it is also an erotically charged one. In an earlier work, Men are Human, another young man remarks; '[i]t was because of something that went out from the old man unconsciously [that] you couldn't live with him without surrendering to his influence in the
Neil’s fault then is not so much to fall in love with Besanck but to do so with someone so obviously unsuited for the gallery of national types.

Harry Heseltine is clearly right then to assert that a ‘latent homosexuality’ pervades Legend for Sanderson. However, his suggestion that Palmer was oblivious to it is extremely questionable. A degree of homoeroticism pervades the work. Neil especially is always hankering after a smile, a feather-light touch, the minutest acknowledgment by Besanck of some affection. At the end of the sugarcane season, for instance, as he prepares to set off, Neil insinuates his desire that Besanck accompany him: “I’d like a long spell of just loafing — thinking over what to do next. What about you, Leo?” .

Leo’s noncommittal reply angers Neil who almost before he realised it ... was on the road with swag up, making for the ranges. His ears were tingling, the blood burning behind his eyes. “Knocked back!” , he was repeating. “Every time I’ve made an advance towards being friendly he’s knocked me back ...” .

Besanck is clearly an experienced man in this game, and in time, having spiced up the air, he does follow Neil into the ranges, where they spend the night camped together. As Besanck approaches the makeshift camp, Neil pretends, with almost dire consequences, that he never really cared for his presence. His ‘eyes burning resentfully bright in the fire glow’, Neil answers Besanck’s mock procrastinations in an aggressive tone, “Perhaps that’s what my mind’s saying now. I don’t have such a hankering after company either” .

Again, however, experience wins the day, and confronted with Besanck’s detachment Neil soon realises how precarious his hold is over the situation. Recalcitrant but magnanimous, Neil declares; “Well, I want your company, if you’re so damned intent on making me say it. I was only grizzling because I thought you wanted to shut me off. Sit down, you old humbug, and spread your blankets”. There was a new peremptoriness in his voice. Confidence had gathered in him .

As the relationship develops so does Neil’s confidence of his ability to keep Besanck interested. As he comments, again to himself: ‘No need to worry any longer about his power to hold Leo to the life they had chosen!’ .

The night together brings a new sense of spiritual and physical harmony to the troubled young Sanderson. As they lay side by side, he felt something physical, not merely physical, flowed across to him from that prone figure . . . He looked forward to the days ahead, the happy tramping along the crest of the ranges, long talks around the campfire nights, and, it might be, the sealing of some permanent bond before they dipped down to Port Cowrie .

Slowly, but surely given the intensity of Neil’s courtship, Besanck begins to adopt a more responsive stance. Then, as Neil at one point stalks off in a huff and disappears for a while, Besanck ‘quite naturally’ assumes he has found himself a girl. He need not have worried. When Besanck follows in pursuit he finds an angry but conciliatory Neil more than willing to make amends. Then, in spite of Neil’s angry denials, he declares, his voice resonant with pain: “You want to be left alone?”. Neil’s reply, “I didn’t say that!”

42 anticipates the frustration he will later experience when faced with Besanck’s thick-witted reaction: “Your one thing”. .

They do, indeed, but Neil’s frustration is exacerbated by Besanck’s blatant inability to read what the ‘one thing’ really is. Fortunately all is not lost, and in time he is absorbed in the swirl of Neil’s passion. As Besanck remarks, ‘in spite of his mockery he was being beaten down. He could not cope, physically, with that youthful gusto swirling against him like a stream in flood, changing direction slightly at every check, sweeping him off his feet. He felt his will slipping, giving ground.’ .

Who wouldn’t ...?

It is difficult not to read the sheer gush of these passages as a parody of the very notion of mateship. Two men brought up in the school of hard knocks, both having grown up semi-orphaned, and used to the gruelling demands of sugarcane cutting under the harsh Queensland sun, perform for one another a bashful pas-de-deux, Romeo and his Romeo. The vrai tour de force is, however, yet to come. In a scene which resonates with echoes of the ‘kiss-of-life’ of many a Mills and Boon, Neil is brought back to life, metaphorically but almost also literally, by Besanck. As he dived “into the darkening water ... Neil felt [a] dull shock, a spraying of blood across his brain, a burst of brilliant lights. Afterwards he remembered nothing ...” .

He is saved only by Besanck’s gentlemanly actions. Later, wallowing in the delights of having been rescued by Besanck, Neil proceeds to take the novel into ultimate camp sublime: ‘He grinned uncertainly, stretched out an impulsive hand. A sense of well-being seeped through him, in spite of the stiffness of his neck, the dull ache in his head. To be drawn from that submarine darkness into life again — how good it was! Leo hadn’t hesitated to go in after him, and Leo was a poor swimmer. Scared of sharks, too!’ .

Palmer’s awareness of the homoerotic undercurrent that pervades his work is revealed in his use of a narrative strategy in which the men’s attraction to one another constantly alternates with their need to reinstate good, heterosexual, values. At the sight of Freda, for instance, we are told that Neil ‘felt something pass over his heart as if a wing had brushed it ... She was dazzling, she was adorable: oughtn’t he to say something to show he recognised it?’ .

Gold skin, honey-coloured hair, dew-soft eyes. Eyes like a gazelle. Gazelle feeding on a mountain ....” .

Clichéd they may be, but passages such as these work to assert young Sanderson’s healthy interest in nice, docile women. Unfortunately for Freda, a telephone rings and Neil’s
courage dissipates. It will be another two hundred and eleven pages until she finds out that he had indeed recognised 'it' – the honey-coloured hair and the 'dew-soft eyes'. When Neil finally declares himself to Freda he does it in style: "'I've been in love with you since that first night'", he says with passion; "all these years I've been here there's been no one but you'.

Neil's declaration of love is, however, to no avail. Two hundred and eleven pages is perhaps a bit too long to wait. In truth, however, it must be said that Freda does not make courtship easy. Faced with the fickleness of her character, Neil muses, in anguish; "The damned uncertainty of women! They flowed from one shape to another, even while you were looking at them". Her loose behaviour with 'the Laverton mill hands', combined with the fact that she is rumoured to have been engaged in an affair of the heart with one of the coloured folk of Luggertown, make Neil's life that much more difficult. It becomes clear that she is beyond his control; a 'surprise packet' indeed. Freda's desire to shock, her unbecoming demeanour, short, manly haircut, and ability to speak her mind ultimately combine with an already fairly insurmountable social gap to frustrate the relationship. While Neil, the boy old beyond his years, grew up with 'music, Scott and Dickens ...', Freda was 'always forgetting she'd grown up. Pretending life was some sort of ring-game with herself in the middle. She hadn't yet got over the days when she ran wild among the coloured youngsters of Luggertown.' Born a woman, thus 'Other than certain', Freda's (mis)fortune is heightened by her association with those Others of Luggertown, the coloured folk whose animality ultimately undermines her own already dimmed humanity. To be a woman or to be 'coloured' is to remain outside of the human condition. Apart from making her an unsuitable partner for Neil, Freda's halfhearted affairs with the Malay men function here in other ways. While her actions confirm her unsuitability for serving the procreatory needs of the (White) nation, she nevertheless refrains from tainting the race (the danger of racial contamination being absolutely central to the colonial project). The relationship, hardly surprisingly, does not therefore survive the neat designs which a legend for young Sanderson would one day demand of it. The 'gin' love(ter)s of the men whose monuments we celebrate in this country today remain invisible in the legends the nation has constructed for them and for itself. Through no fault of his own, Neil eventually parts with Freda, never to see her again. Unrequited love once more. Freda's transgressive behaviour and ontological fluidity provide the greatest obstacle to the plot's near foreclosure of unhealthy sexuality.

Despite his many flaws Besanck therefore proves to be substantially more trustworthy than Freda. As a man he is not 'uncertain'. Initially portrayed as an effete European, the son of a 'university professor and a Belgian governess' and as an 'odd fish, even for a foreigner', Besanck's rehabilitation starts with his move to the city. With the perception of 'latent homosexuality' now almost inextricable from his relationship with Neil, we learn not only that Besanck can parry amorously with the woman at the post office, but also that he is absolutely certain that 'she would respond in a flash ... if he asked her to come with him on one of the moonlight trips up the estuary. Perhaps one evening he would. She had a neat ankle, an amorous eye, even some liveliness of tongue'. One of the ontologically fluid, the post office woman is luckier than most others of her gender: she is only a half-wit. Alas, understandably enough given his high standards, she is not the one for Besanck, whom we find later on to have 'made friends with a Greek woman ashore', and yet later still to be engaged in a brief fling with Freda. Who's a loose woman now then? Although Besanck will eventually regret the fact 'that a woman had influenced him not merely through the body, but through the mind and will ...', in itself no mean feat for a female character in one of Palmer's works, the important thing here is that both Neil and Besanck are seen to harbour a healthy, if not particularly fruitful, appetite for the other sex. Ultimately of course neither is able to establish a lasting relationship with the various women they are attracted to. This is, however, perhaps the best indication of the ways in which the novel's convoluted narrative works to confirm, if simultaneously to defer, the currents of desire flowing between the two men. In the end, however, Legend for Sanderson negotiates the pitfalls resulting from the lack of an appropriate partner by leaving Neil's own tale unstitched.

It should be clear by now that my intention is not to 'out' Vance Palmer as a closet homosexual or otherwise simply to decry the political concerns of his fiction. Rather, following in a long line of male critics for whom Palmer's work has proved too good to resist, and specifically in the footsteps of Vivian Smith and Harry Heseltine, my aim has been to highlight and examine a crucial element in Palmer's treatment of the national type. For if we have now come a long way from denying anyone a place in the national family on the basis of their colour or sexual orientation, we are not as yet entirely comfortable with the notion of stalled reproduction inherent in same-sex sexuality. Love, in a colonial context, meant essentially the constant, crucial, increase in the numbers of White people. This, I suspect, may be the reason why Heseltine does not regard the blindingly obvious treatment of homosexuality in Legend for Sanderson as part of Palmer's 'intentions'. For the (pro)creation of a national type requires the services of a good, healthy heterosexual appetite. As in the British public school novel, so in Palmer, the demands of the national ideal must ultimately triumph. The novel may indeed at times appear 'tired', and
It came to be at a time when the question of national identity became central. In the last of his 1998 Boyer Lectures, 'A Spirit of Play', the Australian novelist David Malouf, argued that the large audiences at the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras are an indication of the way in which Australians have become more accepting of difference, sexual and otherwise and that the friendly crowds partly drawn from the suburbs illustrate a new spirit afloat in the land. Some might, however, disagree, especially in the light of recent political developments. Anne Manne, one of Australia's most reputed commentators, has replied to Malouf's assertion by suggesting that the lecture, and the others in the series, are yet another example of the way the myth of uttermost tolerance and joie de vivre as the quality par excellence of an Australian sensibility is, every so often, recycled by a fairly sedate intellectual elite to whom words come easy and to print even more so. Anne Manne, The Weekend Australian, 1 Jan. 1999. On this see also Mark Davis, Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1997). The Boyer Lecturers, named after Sir Richard Boyer, are delivered annually by a different Australian public figure or group of public figures at the invitation of the Australian Broadcasting Authority. Their aim, according to the ABC, is 'to present the results of their thinking on major social, cultural, scientific or political issues'. http://www.abc.net.au/rn/boyers/history.htm.

NOTES

9. Palmer, Legend for Sanderson, pp. 8 and 34.
10. Ibid., p.34.
11. Ibid., p.19.
14. Peter Pierce writes of Legend of the Nineties as a ‘book with a strikingly misleading reputation for coherence’ and notes that ‘in one response to Palmer, Wallace-Crab’s essay “The Legend of The Legend of the Nineties” the suggestion was made that Palmer’s title unjustly credited his book with the promotion of such a legend when he was in fact ambivalent towards it’. Pierce, p.84.
15. Palmer, cited in Smith, p.34.
17. Palmer, Legend for Sanderson, p.279.
18. One might note, in passing, the complexity of the sexual politics suggested by the father’s symbolic death (for Neil) at the hands of the mother. There is a sense in which a subtextual recuperation of the myth of the father is taking place here. In other words, by offering the mother’s (inevitably biased) account as the cause of Neil Sanderson’s hatred for his father, the narrative in fact seeks to instill a sense of doubt and of ambiguity. Was Sanderson really that bad? Did not the entrepreneurs of the Eighties at (all?) times put “society before self”?
20. Ibid., p.23.
22. Ibid.