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# Delos of a Sun God's Race or Mammon's Desmesne: Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Austraha*

## **Abstract**

Last sea-thing dredged by sailor Time from Space Are you a drift Sargasso, where the West Halcyon calm rebuilds her fatal nest? A new Desmesne for Mammon to infest? Or lurks millennial Eden 'neath your face.

# Delos of a Sun God's Race or Mammon's Desmesne: Katharine Susannah Prichard's Australia

Last sea-thing dredged by sailor Time from Space  
Are you a drift Sargasso, where the West  
Halcyon calm rebuilds her fatal nest?  
A new Desmesne for Mammon to infest?  
Or lurks millennial Eden 'neath your face.

Bernard O'Dowd's Poetry Militant was to become an inspiration to Katharine. She loved and often quoted his poem 'Australia'. She lived much of her life by the precepts of O'Dowd's early poetry. The ethos of his 'Young Democracy' was to become a large part of her personal philosophy: 'when millions trampled in the muck succumb to want and crime; are ye who read content to such sweet juices from your time?' In fact Katharine continued to live by O'Dowd's inspiration long after he confessed himself an 'extinct volcano'.

But Katharine's own awakening to Australia had commenced long before. It is already apparent that as a child she was enraptured by the Australian bush. It was Katharine, the girl Han of *The Wild Oats of Han*, who had run weeping from the hall for her display of withered wild flowers. She needed no instruction to see beauty where others had failed to find it, colour and form where only the scrub was known. The bush, which to D.H. Lawrence was 'a dismal grey terror', to the young Katharine was a place of delight where the wild flowers, her shy bush people, hid.

While holidaying as a young governess at Corner Inlet in 1906 she wrote 'Diana of the Inlet'. Without inhibition she conveyed her rapture in the silent cathedral of the rain forest garlanded in white clematis. The story itself remained unpublished until 1912, when it was accepted by

Alastair Crowley for *The Equinox*, the strangely mystical journal of his cult. Katharine had been promised a handsome fee for the article but instead found herself paid, some considerable time later, with a presentation copy of the deluxe edition bound in white leather of *The Equinox* and the offer of election as 'Princess of the Morning Star', an honour which she hastily declined. Re-reading the story many years after, Katharine was totally dissatisfied by the improbable fantasy she had written and critical of the extravagant language. The surviving copy of 'Diana of the Inlet' is heavily scored through and amended, but it serves as an indication of the depth of Katharine's life-long love for the Australian country and her first attempt to convey her sense of its beauty to her readers through a language tentatively fashioned for the land itself.

Strangely, her first published work, 'The Letters from the Back of Beyond', serialised in *New India* in 1906, as the letters of a city girl in Central Australia, show little of her later appreciation of the outback and the lives of the people on a remote cattle station. Katharine wrote of the country in the language of Lawson and Furphy. She drew heavily on her imagination in her description of the country people, conforming to the conventional images of earlier writers. Her employers' children were described as 'cradled to the corroboree'; as 'dark skinned as little niggers'; 'rough and ignorant young savages' — terms that would be wholly repugnant to Katharine in her later years.

Chastened by her employers' outraged protest and a gently ironical poem from her father, Katharine resolved that she would in future write from personal experience, a rule rarely broken in her later fifty years of writing. The land, Australia, remains a constant element in all of Katharine Susannah Prichard's novels, with the single exception of her first novel *Windlestraws*, a romantic fantasy set in London, which remained unpublished until after the success of *The Pioneers* in 1915 — then largely disowned by Katharine herself. It is often unlisted in the bibliography of her work. Nature remains one of the three fundamental bases of Katharine's work first identified by Jack Lindsay as the triad of nature, man and work. It is undoubtedly a romantic view of Australia that Katharine sees and describes often with great sensitivity and beauty in each of her succeeding works. Later she was to claim that she had embarked deliberately on the course of celebrating the beauty of the Australian land as a reaction to Lawson's 'grey and distressing country'. It may well be that she chose at a later time to place emphasis on this aspect of her writing, but it would seem to me that the evidence of her own work shows that her love of the country and her joy in conveying it to others was primarily instinctive. The same feeling for the beauty of the land,

wherever she found herself, shows in her private letters. There was no ghost of Henry Lawson and his mates, and the spectre of Barbara Baynton's tortured land did not exist, in her letters to me and her friends, Hilda Esson and Nettie Palmer.

The Australia of Katharine's time was still ruled by the ethos: 'if it grows cut it down; if it moves shoot it'. The ideas of environmental protection and conservation were unheard of. The days when the nation would mobilise to protect the environment of Southern Tasmania from destruction were far away. It would be unreal to suggest that Katharine's vision of the beauty of Australian nature had widespread influence in effecting the transformation. Her readership in Australia was confined to the 3,000 to 4,000 of a first edition, until *Coonardoo* became a set text in our colleges and universities. It is true, however, that the influence of her work had a considerable role in awakening fellow writers to the natural beauty of Australia. It was perhaps to be expected that the artists first discovered the real Australia. McCubbin, Streeton and Julia Ashton were painting the Australian scene with loving sympathy before it was discovered by the Australian writers and poets. The poets of Katharine's own time, Furnley Maurice, Bernard O'Dowd and Louis Esson, knew the glories of the bush and wrote of it in our own idiom, rather than in poetic images borrowed from the old country.

But I believe that it was Katharine's vision of Australia that first awakened prose writers to a land very different indeed from the one that they had come to know through the works of Furphy, Baynton and Lawson. It is in 'Working Bullocks' that the environment first becomes the central element in Katharine's work. 'The Pioneers' and 'The Black Opal' before that had used the environment as a background to the narrative in her stories. In 'Working Bullocks' the big timber country of South West Australia was the symbol of man's increasing encroachment upon nature and the leitmotif of the novel. The story of Red Bourke the bullock driver, the girl Deb and the working men of the timber forests, who were themselves compared with the working bullocks of the title, is told as if in music, weaving through the re-echoing theme of the karri. Nettie Palmer wrote in 'Fourteen Years':

'Working Bullocks' seems to me different not only in quality but in kind. No one else has written with quite that rhythm and seen the world in quite that way. The creative lyricism of the style impresses me more than either the theme or the characters.... She has woven a texture that covers the whole surface of the book with a shimmer of poetry. As you read you are filled with excitement by the sheer beauty of the sounds and images. It is a breakthrough that appears as important for other writers as for KSP herself.

Katharine did not repeat the experiment of using the natural background to a novel as the major element in its construction. In each of the later novels the sense of place remains, together with man and work as equal parts of the triad. Perhaps the concentration shifts in 'Haxby's Circus' to character and narrative. In *Coonardoo* the relationship between the station owner, Hugh, and the aboriginal woman Coonardoo is the dominant element of the story. In *Intimate Strangers*, the Goldfields Trilogy and *Subtle Flame*, Katharine's last novel, theme is more important than place. But in each of the later novels nature remains vividly drawn in the terms of her own idyllic vision of Australia.

It may be difficult for others to share her rapture about the harsh landscape and the rough country of the gold prospectors and cattlemen of the North West. As a child of five I was with her at Turee Station, the scene of *Coonardoo*, and with a child's perception remember only the heat, games in the red dust with aboriginal children, flies and sandy blight. Even now, returning to Coonardoo country from the safe altitude of 20,000 feet, I look down upon the red soil, the low blue hills, the dry creek beds and washaways and find awe rather than beauty in the land below me. To step out from the safe air conditioned comfort of the plane into the parching heat of the North West that strikes like a physical force is to marvel that Katharine could see beyond the physical discomforts and find beauty in the wilderness. It is a perception of Australia that is now shared by a new generation of visual artists — the cinematographers of the renascent Australian film industry. A mass audience of Australians and cinemagoers throughout the world have now seen Australia through their eyes. The view of the outback conveyed in Ken Hannan's *Break of Day*; dawn over the Blue Mountains in the opening scenes of *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* directed by Fred Schepisi: the flight of pelicans from the Coorong estuary in *Storm Boy*; the red expanse of the South Australian back country sheep stations in *Sunday Too Far Away*. This too is Katharine's country.

But there is a darker side of O'Dowd's Australia. In the biography *Wild Weeks and Windflowers* I suggested that Katharine had been blooded for revolution when she first encountered the poor of London, the hunger marchers and soup queues, the pathetic lines of destitute men and women seeking a bed in the Salvation Army shelters. There in the great city of London she found Mammon's desmesne. She saw not only the glory of Empire, but also the reality of poverty. The image of the city became for Katharine a counterpoint to the unspoiled Australia of the outback. Rarely explicitly expressed, perhaps only subconsciously realised, the city is present in all of the novels. In 'The Black Opal', New

York is the contrast to the simple life of the opal fields; New York, centre of the opal buyers intent on taking over the independent miners for mechanised exploitation (a contest still waged at Lightning Ridge in the 1980s); New York, the scene of Sophie's implied degradation.

'Haxby's Circus' was constructed with the intention of making a parallel between the life of the circus and the circus maximus of life. However, I find it difficult to perceive whether this intention is fully carried out. Perhaps the boxing tent scene deleted from the Cape edition of 'Haxby's Circus' but restored in the American edition published under the title 'Fay's Circus' demonstrates most clearly her intention of making the analogy between the exploitation of the circus folk for the crowd's pleasure, and the savage glee of the crowd in the gladiatorial contest of the ring. This scene is used again in 'Subtle Flame' with great effect.

In *Working Bullocks*, *Coonardoo* and in the play *Brumby Innes* Katharine falls back on using a young and helpless woman as representing the values of the town — a much less successful device, I believe, and one which she seems to have used to allow her to make the point and to get on with the real business of the novel. Of the four characters only Molly in *Coonardoo* and May in *Brumby Innes* are at all fully developed characters, and it is questionable whether they fairly represent the qualities of the city life that Katharine seeks to hold in contrast to the country ideal.

The comparison between the free and independent life of the individual prospectors in the early goldfields, and the wage slavery of the workers in the industrialised goldmines is made more effectively in the Goldfields Trilogy. Through the three books of the trilogy, *The Roaring Nineties*, *Golden Miles* and *Winged Seeds*, Katharine shows the effect of the growth of industrialised mining on the men of the fields. She traces the change from the ethos of mateship, the mutual interdependence of the miners, the government of the mining communities by the roll-up, the general meeting of the miners camp to mete out justice and to take decisions on matters of common interest — a way of life eroded and eventually replaced by the rule of the mining companies and the ownership of the gold by the foreign-owned companies. Cut-throat competition replaces the cooperation of the prospectors' camp; exploitation turns man against man; industrialisation ravages the land, and drives the aborigines from their traditional camping place. The image of the dispossessed is vividly conveyed in the conclusion of *Golden Miles* when Kalgoorla, the Aboriginal woman, is driven from the land and retreats among the dumps and slime heaps, waving her stick at the

silhouette of the invading poppet heads, screaming her curses against them. I found the image so forceful that I suggested to Katharine that it should be a conclusion to the novel. However, she was reluctant to leave the impression that her opposition was simply to industrialisation. She did not want to be understood as advocating the return to the primitive life of the alluvial gold prospectors. It was her real intention to expose the effects of the system of private ownership of the resources of the land. At this point of time in her writing she was not content to leave that message to symbolism.

Twice Katharine turned directly to urban Australia as the setting of her novels: in *Intimate Strangers*, the novel set in Perth in Western Australia during the great world depression, and *Subtle Flame*, Katharine's last novel, dealing with the emerging peace movement against a background of the Korean War. *Subtle Flame* returned to the newspaper world of Melbourne which Katharine had known herself as a young journalist on the *Melbourne Herald*. In both books Katharine is dealing with places that she knew personally and for which she had a deep personal affection. Neither the Melbourne of her youth nor Perth, in which she spent a greater part of her life, were treated in terms of aggressive hostility. Indeed, the tranquil beauty of Swan River in the early morning light is described with loving appreciation. In both novels Katharine's point of attack is more explicitly directed not to the symbols of capitalist exploitation, which she had previously made the cities, but rather to the system itself. In *Intimate Strangers* the system is the cause of the Great Depression and the personal tragedies that befell her characters, and Katharine herself. In *Subtle Flame* it was the system that permitted the continuation of war between nations and stifled opposition through the established press. In both novels Katharine was no longer prepared to leave solutions to implication and analogy. She deliberately employed the militant characters of the novel to express the political solutions that she believed in. She now accepted Maxim Gorky's dictum and recognised that she must state her place in 'the war for or against'. Her own position was unequivocal. When she felt it necessary, she augmented the statements of her characters by direct authorial intervention, a device regarded as taboo by the literary critics of her day, and perhaps of this day. But true to her own aesthetic her message always sprang directly from her material. Under no circumstances would she permit the importation of views or events that came from outside her subject. She had directly rejected the suggestions of the Communist Party of Australia's leadership that she should submit her manuscripts on 'The Real Russia' for consideration by the Party. She similarly refuted the



suggestion of her Soviet critics that she had understated the role of the Communist Party in the Western Australian goldfields, pointing out that the organisation barely existed at the time she wrote about. She replied with vigour to Australian Party critics who suggested that she had failed to create a working class hero. Equally she remained unrepentant in the face of criticism of Australian academics and press critics who regarded the Goldfields Trilogy and *Subtle Flame* as mere propaganda. Katharine claimed that she was recording the militant and working class characters of both the goldfields and the city in her novels. It seemed that Reds were permitted to exist only under the nations' beds, not in its literature.

Katharine had long known that she tended to idealise her heroes and reduce the villains to black and white. Her brothers had told her when she first began to write 'all your geese are swans, Kattie'. Katharine accepted the criticism. 'Perhaps I can't help idealising, although I like to think I am a realist,' she wrote. And of course she was both. *Intimate Strangers* and *Subtle Flame* show, I suggest, that Katharine Susannah Prichard was equally at home in literary terms in both urban and rural settings, although her instinctive identification was with nature.

The contrast in her attitude to the Australia of the city and the bush is most vividly illustrated in her image of the wild white cockatoos wheeling and screeching their eerie greeting to the dawn at Coonardoo's Wytaliba Station, and Percy the balding grey parrot screaming abuse from his cage on the verandah of the slum terrace in *Subtle Flame*.

And in both of the urban novels Katharine finds retreat from Mammon's desmesne to the 'halcyon calm' of her own Australia — to the sea at 'Kalatta' (where we had spent carefree holidays as children), or to the cottage in the deep rain forest of Ferntree Gulley in the Dandenong Mountains beyond Melbourne where Katharine herself had taken refuge fifty years before. Here David Evans and Sharn, his young comrade and fellow worker for peace found love in their mutual dedication to the peace movement, a conclusion too true to seem credible to those who believed it to be more than a front for Communist propaganda. But the deep bush that sheltered the cottage at Ferntree Gulley existed in 1960 only in Katharine's memory, its dawn symphony of bird song long silent.

Katharine Susannah Prichard's own testimony to her native land was published in 'Australia, the Land I Love' which first appeared in *The Home Annual* on 1 October 1936, reproduced in *Straight Left* (Wild & Woolley, Sydney, 1982).