Gender and nation formation in late nineteenth century

Susan Elizabeth Rowley
University of Wollongong
NOTE

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Unfinished business—women in the bush

Literary narratives and visual representations of the late nineteenth century frequently employed the notion of the masculine journey as an image of nation formation. The journey represents a quest for nationhood which is to be achieved through the domestication of the land in the name of 'Australia'. Traversing the land, marking it out with tracks and fences, and writing these marks down as maps of 'known' territories is represented as the initial phase of this domestication. Much of the inland of the continent has seemed so resistant to even this territorial claim that such journeys of exploration and minimal intervention have played an integral part in Australian national culture. Bringing the land into productive use, a phrase that has masked destruction of the natural environment, has also been imagined as the achievement of men on the move. The bushman who embarks on this quest represents the 'one, yet many' of Australian nationalist mythology.

The imagined quest in both oral narrative and realist fiction has employed the linear plot development of a journey in which, in its simplest form, the protagonist leaves home, undertakes an adventure which transforms him in some way, and returns home. Late nineteenth century Australian literature and painting abounds with representations of journeying men in pursuit of the national quest. The centrality of the journey in bush mythology is suggestive of an approach to the analysis of texts, in which the differentiation and separation of interior and exterior space, and the differentiation and relationships of mobile and immobile characters are employed as central interpretative devices. In the literature and paintings considered in this thesis, late nineteenth century spatial constructions of public and domestic activities as 'spheres' were grafted over the spatial differentiation implicit in the journey motif. Accordingly, interior space was imaged as the privatised domestic domain of the bourgeois family, and exterior space, the public world. Significantly for this thesis, the public domain is the setting of activities relating to the formation of the nation. This is not to argue that cultural and social life was neatly divided between these "separate spheres", for in fact the public and domestic domains were in the process of a modernising re-formation and the
construction of gender relations was an arena of contestation with profound implications for domestic and public activities.

The journey motif functions not only as a quest but also as a pilgrimage. In bush mythology, the idea of the pilgrimage highlights the relationships of bushmen to one another and their ritualistic separation from the societies from which they came and to which they will return. Understood in terms of the fraternity of luminars embarked on a pilgrimage, mateship takes on a sacral but transient aura. Mateship belongs to the journey. On their return home, the pilgrims will no longer be pilgrims. Whether enduring friendships emerge out of the common experience after the disbanding is a different question. It may be tempting, however, to push the pilgrimage analogy beyond its explanatory value. The mateship relationship of bushmen to one another can be seen to be the kind of relationship also observed in other early modern journeymen's fraternities, and their liminal status partly the result of prolonged economic dependency exacerbated by modernisation. These journeymen too were in a special state of transition, one marked by close fraternal ties and economic insecurity. The distinction between being on a pilgrimage and 'on the wallaby' is not clear cut.

Finally, the journey motif represents the passage of life itself, the bushman playing 'Everyman'. It is because the journey can evoke the quest, the pilgrimage, the rite of passage and the passage of life that it serves as such a potent metaphor when harnessed to national discourse. It imparts to the nation an aura of the sacred, the heroic and the human, and produces a set of equivalences between these terms which serves as a powerful legitimation of the nation-state. The end of the journey—the return to the interior space of home, womb/woman or grave—is associated with the achievement of maturity on the part of both the traveller and the nation. To the extent that the national journey is gendered masculine, national maturity is equated with manhood.

The maturation of women appears in bush mythology also to be figured as a journey. It is a very different journey to that undertaken by bushmen however. A short distance stretched over the years from childhood to motherhood, the journey of young women brings them from outside the fence to inside the house. The positioning of young children outside the fence seems puzzling since the more usual representation of children places them with the mother. I have sought to explicate this apparent anomaly in terms of the historical context. 'Moral panic' in relation to falling birth rates and white child mortality rates, coupled with public controversy over the use of
contraception, distrust of mothering practices and increased public intervention in domestic and family lives underpin the image of the infant carried out into the public domain into the custody of men. For boys, it is perhaps explicable as a precocious oedipal transition since separation from the mother, and by extension the domestic milieu, is a necessary condition of entrance into the masculinized public domain. In Australian bush mythology, it is arguably young girls who take the harder path of parental separation in order to find their way back indoors. Young girls standing just beyond the fence that delineates domesticated land gaze inwards towards an enclosed, but blank space, which serves to signify female maturity. Young women wait by the sliprails for the return of bushman sweethearts.

Short though it may be, this journey of female maturation has significance for narratives of nation just as profound as the vast journeys of men, for the female journey leads women out of the arena in which the nation is formed in the imaginary. Paradoxically the action through which women are seen to enact their commitment to nation—childbirth—occurs in a space, of which the relation to the nation is deeply ambivalent. At the point of childbirth, arguably women's national destiny, the space in which they dwell seems both opaque to view and inexpressible in language. In nationalist discourse, women's experience of childbirth is frequently equated with men's experience of war. But unlike the male experience of danger, fear, injury and death in war, childbirth seems to be placed beyond the perimeters of national imagination.

It is because the implied narrators and viewing positions are those of bushman-narrators that female maturity and domestic space seems to deny representation, leaving only a loss for words and a lack of images. But the female journey inside is also determined by the function women play in masculine journeys of nation. Women characters move inside, out of the nation-space, and they do so in order to secure the narrative of nation-formation. They must vacate the space in the centre of the story to position themselves at the beginnings and endings of men's journeys. The representation of women's lives in bush mythology is over-determined by the dominance of the masculine journey motif in the formation of the nation.

Women who are disqualified from marriage and motherhood are represented as unable to complete the inwards journey. As children lost in the bush, they are in danger; as young eroticised bush spirits, they are danger personified. 'Disfigured' women for
whom marriage is unimaginable are depicted as stranded in the bush. (Age and racial difference are depicted as forms of disfigurement.) But whether they are inside or outside, female characters are in general immobilised in masculine journey narratives, and as such are "functions of plot-space", to recall Lotman's phrase. This kind of analysis of location and mobility is applicable also to male characters, who are immobile in the sense that they are unable to cross and re-cross the boundary between interior and exterior space. The image of the swagman always on the move, out in the bush is distinguished from the journeying nation-forging bushman-protagonists. Located outside, there is something feral about the image of the swagman. Located inside, he insinuates the question of danger and violation into the bush narratives. Since gendered spatial differentiation plays such a central role in bush mythology, the presence of women out in the bush, or men in the home connotes a break-down of the 'natural' order. Out of place, they become, in a sense, unrecognisable, their identity no longer secured by their location. The presence of men in domestic space seems particularly problematic and their representation is neither coherent nor resolved. At a time when men's role in relation to home and family was changing, these representations suggest that these changes were countenanced with ambivalence and anxiety. These men frequently are described in feminised terms, as though to be 'unmanned' was to become 'womanlike'. However, in the absence of the adult male members of the family, they also appear to present a threat, which is both sexual and violent, to the female occupants. As far as the absent and returning husband is concerned, the intruder represents the threat of displacement, which will prevent the completion of his journey. Such usurpers are the scoundrels of nation formation. But there is a disquieting suggestion of equivalence between the bushmen returning home and the swagmen pretenders, all the more unsettling because of the connotations of violation that pass between intruder and husbands, fathers and sons.

Though men in domesticity are feminised by their location, mature women out in the bush are not thereby rendered 'manlike'. Rather they become 'unwomaned', and gender emerges as a quality that can be lost or erased, and if this is the case, then it cannot also be constituted as the bedrock of human existence. Woman are represented as labouring on the land but in ways that contruct different relations with the land than those formed by journeying, hard-labouring mates. The land farmed by women is unlikely to yield, and the marks of women's labour are registered on their bodies and faces, and in the domain of the rightful place, the family and the home. The struggle
with the land is not seen to be "their making" but rather their "undoing". At a time when women's paid employment outside the domestic domain was a subject of considerable public consternation, this work was constituted in bush mythology as a social problem. This in turn has implications for the participation of women in the public arena of nation formation. Their work outside the home appears to have undermined their effective discharge of the national responsibilities which lay within the domestic domain, just at the moment when the nationalist project was anticipating the political formation of the Australian nation, the building blocks of which would be stable family units formed around breadwinners husbands and dependent wives. In bush mythology, women's work outside the home appears to be a source of authority for them within the home as well as beyond it, and it registers as a matter of concern that women grow willing to contest the will of their bushman husbands.

Whilst the journeying bushmen are represented as part of a fraternal community, other characters appear to be not only immobile but also isolated. Isolation characterises both women and men in the domestic domain, of women 'out of place' in the bush, and of those men in the bush who are unable to re-cross the boundary that marks the completion of the journey. In relation to implied standards of normality and sanity inscribed in these texts, these characters frequently appear queer, eccentric or mad. The representation of madness in men is achieved in the first instance through their characterisation as confined, immobile, isolated, domesticated, maternal and nurturing, rendering them in much the same terms as 'normal' women. Madness in women is differentiated from that of men in terms of a heart-mind opposition. Women's broken hearts and men's broken minds litter the bush.

This overtly gendered interpretation gives way to one which sees 'madness' as an adaptation to grief, grinding hardship and despair, a strategy of contracting the mental space within which to live. The constricted space of imagination and refusal of memory involved in this preservation of self represses imperfectly the 'real' world which is the site and cause of disintegration.

What is at stake here is the system of binary oppositions by which distinctions of gender were formed. As the bush was identified as a place of maddening sameness, the possibilities of meanings defined outside structures of difference was approached. Here cycles of decay and regeneration dispel the absoluteness of life and death; in the absence of 'civilisation', nature loses definition; where sanity is held at bay, there is no
madness; as these fundamental differences become muted, the certainty of sexual
difference is called into question. Seen in this light, the distinction between exterior and
interior space which is so critical to narratives of nation formation loses definition. It is
a trick of vision—like looking at skeletal cubes—that breaks down the distinction
between inside and outside while retaining the imaginary boundary that divides them.
Yet there is also a sense of textual refusal to acknowledge the implications of this
dissolubility of boundaries, a drawing back to more manageable constructs of known
structures of difference, and this refusal of imagination is inscribed into the nation as an
imagined community.

In the final analysis, however, the isolation, immobility and confinement of these
characters and the 'privatisation' of the domestic domain is seen to be a consequence of
their determination within the journey narrative of nation formation. Their parts in the
national imaginary are a function of their auxiliary and marginalised roles in relation to
those whose actions constitute the national community. If this were not the case, then
characters arguably could emerge as agents in their own stories, as members of
imaginary communities, and as historical actors in societies which are not necessarily
coterminous with nations. These perceptible but never fully articulated possibilities find
expression in the relationships between domestic domains and bush communities from
which journeying men are so frequently absent. It seems that the bushmen are barely
cognizant of social networks unless they are key players in them, but once again the
possibility of such networks is inscribed into national narratives in a manner that is
highly ambivalent.

Narrators, observers: authors and artists
The narrator or observer is himself an actor in the national imagination. There is
generally an inscribed point of view in both literary and visual forms. In the case of the
literary text, the narrator is frequently quite explicit also a character in the story: a
bushman of the travelling fraternity, a mate amongst mates. In the case of visual
representation, both the framing and elements of composition and treatment within the
frame construct a physical and ideological point from which the subject is viewed. The
observer sees the woman's domain of activities from outside, as it were, as though he
were approaching the house. Though the huts in the bush are not impervious to his
gaze, his vision is obstructed as he tries to catch a glimpse of life within through
doorways, windows and cracks in the wall. Within the home, the viewing position is
once again inscribed as masculine. The spaces of action appear to be those in which
men act at home and from which they survey the activities of others—by the fire, near the table, and towards the door.

In both the literary and visual texts, there is a lack of nuanced sensitivity to the ways in which women might move in domestic space, and the activities which might be meaningful to them though taken for granted by male observers of family life. The prevalence of a masculine point of view in representations of bush life makes the works which inscribe a female point of view almost shocking. Where the convention of the male observer implies detached contemplation, female observers seem to come in much closer for a more intimate engagement with the scene. Where female painters and writers do inscribe a female point of view in narration, they are likely also to overlay this with a masculine viewing position, so that there is a critical negotiation at the level of observation and narration between implied masculine and feminine perception.

It is not only domestic settings that are the subject of the narrator-observer's partial and motivated vision. The bush itself is seen implicitly from the road down which the bushmen travel, narrator amongst them. It is not, as it were, known from within, with the intimate intricate sensual knowledge of those who inhabit the bush. From the point of view of the bushman-narrator, these inhabitants are part of the bush, at one with their environment and not its master. Where his quest is to domesticate the land, they have become land-like, and there is an duplication in the spatial description and the physical and psychological make-up of these characters. The narrator's perception of the monotony of the landscape and threat of absorption posed by the bush represses the possibility of alternative responses by other characters who are, in any case, represented as 'functions' of the space they occupy in relation to his journey. The necessity of travel is reinforced by a compulsion to keep moving. The restless mobility of bushmen is motivated by fear of the bush, fear of becoming 'bush-like', as much as by the quest to claim the land for the nation.

But the partiality that is structured into the viewing position is offset by other aspect of narration in the literary texts. The implied narrator—Joe Wilson for example—is frequently recounting from memory the events of times past. Here the point of view is split between the perceptions of the narrator as a young man and his older, sadder reflections on his youthful limitations as an observer of and actor in family life. The layering of story on story, the episodic nature of many of the stories also creates the impression of multiple points of view and a fracturing of the coherence of the narrator's
authorial voice. The same incident or character can be the subject of a number of 'returns' so that the effect of a number of re-tellings spread across a number of stories can be prismatic. In addition, different authors tell different stories about similar themes from bush life. This is particularly significant in the case of Barbara Baynton, who has a way of re-defining those elements of bush mythology which lie at the heart of the formative narratives of nation. Flash Ned Stennard, in "Bush Church", can be read as Baynton's version of the bushman-narrator.

But the narrator is rarely a typical bushman—his 'city experience' sets him apart from his fellow-travellers, and allows him to act as a mediator between them and the implicitly urban readers of bush mythology. The narrator's authority as an observer in the bush derives from his experience of the world beyond it, and conversely his authority to report his observations to those outside the bush world derives from his participation in the social networks of the bush fraternity. Thus, his nation-forming quest is the covert but privileged journey of bush mythology: it is he who tames the land imaginatively and he is the protagonist who is transformed by his pilgrimage through the bush in which he dare not settle.

There is not, of course, a one-to-one relationship between narrators and observers inferred from the literary and visual texts and the authors and artists whose work they are. In the case of the male authors and painters, there appears to be an identification with their narrator-observers which is inferred from both their handling of the subject-matter and historical contextual evidence. The imagined national communities which they formed through their work were not simply that of the fictional bush, but rather a contemporary, predominantly urbanised society on the brink of modernisation. To the extent that they identified with their fictional narrators and occupied imaginatively the viewing positions of their observers, and to the extent that they conceived of their intellectual-artistic work as nation-forming, they were the protagonists of the stories they tell. The imaginative journey they took is as much a temporal one as it was spatial. Since bush communities and male bush fraternities were implicitly written into the past, the distance between bush and city was measured in years as much as miles.

Writers and artists of the 1890s constructed representations of pre-modern frontier cultures but were acutely aware of the significance of their work in writing a 'national' culture over a colonial one. With Federation immanent, they attempted to both forge a 'useable' national past and an anticipated national future worth living in. But the
representational conventions for these seemed to conflict with one another. The past was to be heroic and mythic, shaped around struggle and quests, effectively creating cultural origins that reached back to a time before history. But the specific feature of Australian nation formation lay in the struggle to domesticate the land. If the heroic past was to be shaped around this struggle, then the participation of women in that past would be determined by the masculine quest. This ascribed role for women was not in itself a problem. If they were not to be written in at the scene of struggle itself, their waving farewells and welcoming embraces would secure the departures and returns, but they would not figure in the imagined, fraternal communities of the national past. However, a modern national community of the future could not be cut to the same template. This would need to be based on a stable social order of which the basic building block would be the modern nuclear family. To write women into the nation may allow the representation of a stable social order, but it would be at the expense of a heroic national past that depended on their absence.

Nor was it only a question of incompatible imperatives structuring the representation of past and future. Even more problematic was the present, which ought to have formed the intermediary phase on a continuum from past to future. However, since the imagined bush community was shaped by its 'redress' of the urban present, the relationship between past and present was shaped by an implicit opposition of country to city. The present could not be seen to have emerged out of the 'past' of bush mythology, and nor did it sow the seeds of an acceptable national future. The relationship of past, present and future was characterised by discontinuity and historical rupture. This imparted to the imaginative formation of national community a sense of deep ambivalence.

**Modernisation of gender order—estrangement of the sexes**

Bush mythology constructed a rural society and a past in which were invested those values and cultural practices to which the urban present seemed inimical. As such, bush mythology represents an imaginative response to the processes of modernisation and articulates disquiet, uncertainty and at times, opposition to these changes. At the same time, it welcomes the end of British colonial rule and celebrates values of male egalitarianism, independence and solidarity that were associated with the labour movement. Male intellectuals, writers and artists who experienced an autonomous bohemian lifestyle to some degree identified similar values and autonomy in their
bushmen subjects and displaced onto them their aspirations towards leadership in forming a national culture.

The changes wrought by modernisation reached into almost every area of social life. This thesis has concentrated on two arenas of change and contestation—the formation of the nation-state and national culture and the re-formation of the gender order and contestation over the activities and relationships between men and women. Re-structuring of the gender order does not occur, of course, in isolation from other structural changes in the economy and the political system. Industrialisation and shifts in the economy towards an industrial capitalist base, with attendant shifts in trade unionism and labour responses, were integrally bound up with changes in women's employment outside the domestic domain, and women's paid and unpaid domestic labour. As a generalisation, bush mythology inscribes negative responses to women's employment outside the home. It was not that women were seen to be taking away men's jobs, as some trade unionists thought, but because economic self-sufficiency seemed to result in neglect of domestic responsibilities and refusal of male authority within the home.

The domestic domain was not outside the historical forces of change, although some may have believed that it ought to have been. The emergence of professions and professionalisation of aspects of childrearing and health care eroded some of the autonomy of the middle class household. At the same time, the Depression of the early years of the 1890s generated unprecedented levels of poverty, and provided the momentum for increased surveillance of and intervention in working class families' domestic lives by state and public authorities and private charitable organisations. The strident insistence on the rhetoric of "separate spheres of influence" masked very considerable transformations of the public and domestic domains, eroding their separation and 'self-rule' that the ideology apparently espoused. Whereas the basis of the separation of the spheres had been the delineation of authority of men and women, each enjoying 'sovereignty' over their own realm with implications of some degree of mutual interdependence, the 1890s witnessed the beginnings of a decisive shift in domestic ideology towards the model of breadwinner husband and dependent wife. Bush mythology appears to approve this shift and to view with disquiet the contestatory attitudes of women to this augmentation of male authority within the home.
When it comes to the most private, most intimate of relations between men and women, bush mythology falls silent, lapsing into inarticulate evasions. The measure of discomfort with sexuality is indicated by the bizarre treatment of childbirth in the bush. A sense that bedrooms and beds are significant in the relations between men and women is conveyed by the manner in which they intrude into some stories and very occasionally, paintings. It was not, however, only in bush mythology that discussion about sexuality was covert, coded and evasive. The other side of the coin is the open and at times vehement public debates about the falling birth rate, child mortality, women's use of contraception and mothering practices.

By and large, Marilyn Lake is correct in her observation that bush mythology articulates a conservative, masculinist position in relation to gender conflict. As such, it both forms a response to feminist campaigns for political, economic and cultural reforms and inscribes this response in narratives of Australian nation formation. Adapting the class–based formulation by Bommes and Wright, a conclusion of this study is that the masculinist representations of nation organised the experience of men at the same time as they disorganised and negated the mode of experience of women. In this 'dialectic of exclusion and inclusion', feminist oppositional forms were either transformed and absorbed or 'disqualified from the constructed field of public relevance', to become privatized and incomprehensible. It follows that the terms in which bush mythology register and explicate the process of modernisation are those of a masculinist nationalism. The other side of this process—but part and parcel of the process—is the negation of other contending modes of registering and explicating this process. In this moment of heightened political awareness and contestation, nationalist bush mythology can be read as a strategy that simultaneously forms and embraces masculine experience as the basis for imagining Australia as a nation, and represses and privatises feminine experience as lying outside the frame of reference of the national community. It has not been inevitably or invariably the case that women's articulation of the meaning of modernisation has been couched in terms of national culture. But in Australia, campaigns for female suffrage coincided with the emergence of nationalism and the anticipation of the achievement of the integrity and independence of the nation-state that Federation was understood to denote. Feminist campaigns for cultural reform were integrated with their campaigns for political participation, such that they too couched their programs of reform in terms of the nation.
Bush mythology is not a unified field of discourse. Not all the writers or painters of bush life were consciously articulating a national culture, and many approaches are made to the same themes from different perspectives. Bush mythology marks out points of uncertainty with a hesitation of narration and gives expression to contesting voices, sometimes covertly and parenthetically, sometimes eloquently and directly. Baynton examines the implications for women and communities of the masculine journey of nation. Lawson never fully distances himself from these implications, imparting that self-critical restlessness to his writing. Furphy ironically scrambles the narration, baulking at the mode of realist fictional prose that is privileged in national narration. Streaton and Roberts counterpoint their distinctively Australian bush scenes with representations of city life that could be anywhere in the world. McCubbin explicitly locates his bush images in the past and registers a sense of loss in the face of their passing, and the recurring presence of his own wife and children as models evokes an intimacy with his subjects that implicitly refuses the masculinist ideal of the journeying bushman. Far better then to read bush mythology as a polyphony of 'family' voices engaged in debating with tremendous commitment the significance of the times they were caught up in. Some of these voices may seem to ride over others, repeating themselves and speaking a little louder; but other voices may comment on the views they express and insist on alternative interpretations. The parameters of the discussion however are set by the bounds of the collective imagination in relation to representations of bush life, assumptions about gender, and the imaginative formation of Australia as a nation. This thesis has sought to demonstrate that this collective imagination was constricted by the difficulty of imagining relations between men and women outside the framework of the oppositionality of public and domestic life and the subordination of women to men. It is within this imagination that the national community was shaped.

**Imagining nations**

The limits to the imagination were not only set in place by these experiences of cultural and social dislocation. The formal discursive conventions within which the 'real world' and the emergent nation were imaginatively formed acted as a damper on the imaginative exercise. The 'effects of truth' produced through the forms of legends and realism and the appropriation of the modes of history and reportage constrained the work of the imagination to produce images of worlds that lay outside the realm of experience. The imperative of imagining a nation into existence acted paradoxically as a "veto on the imagination", to recall Costa Lima's phrase. If some almost tangible reality
was to be attributed to the notion of 'Australia', then the role of the imagination in producing that reality was necessarily repressed.

What Ricouer names the 'productive' imagination, by which images are "contrived in function of absence", was itself the subject of considerable distrust by these late nineteenth century intellectuals. This distrust partly reflected the hegemonic role performed by the related discourses of nation and history. But it appears also to reflect a discomfort with the proximity of imagination and madness at a time when madness was itself a subject of public concern. The creative imagination is caught up in the 'modernisation' of madness through its redefinition as the province of medicine rather than criminality or religion. Madness was grounded in the imaginative capacity of the mind to construct alternative but delusive realities.

A highly conventionalised imaginative world inhabited by European fairies was acceptable for children, but this acceptance required a dismissal of fantasy as a condition of maturity. Further, the interplay of madness and gender constructs contributed to a distrust of the imagination. The Western conventional association of madness with femininity appears to have been overlaid by a colonial awareness that in Australia it was men who made up the majority of the asylum population, and whose likely expression of madness took the form of delusion and hallucination. Women's patterns of depression and withdrawal seemed to confirm their lesser capacity for imagination. Their lives and their fictions would be close to the ground. Though they risked ceasing to care about the myriad of details that made up family and communal lives, it is implicit that they were unlikely to look beyond the day by day reiteration of everyday life to construct a national community on the basis of imagined bonds of communion. If this is the case, then it is the capacity of women to imagine themselves as part of nations that is at stake.

Whilst men were understood to have the great capacity to imaginatively form nations, they risked being subsumed by this imagination. A consequence is the perceived need to apply brakes to imaginative excess, to draw back just at the point when the boundaries of the imaginable seem to be reached. The lapses into inarticulateness and the sense of hesitation that has been noted in bush mythology are suggestive of this momentary approach to what lies beyond the imagination, followed by withdrawal.
In the face of spatial and temporal incommensurability of bush and city, and of past, present and future, it would have taken an act of 'productive' imagination to form an image of a nation as an articulation of what did (yet) not exist. But, by its departure from the perceived real world, such an image would assert the failure to have (already) achieved nationhood. The inability of bush mythology to come to terms with the changing relations of men and women underpins its failure to imagine Australia as a nation.