Gender and nation formation in late nineteenth century

Susan Elizabeth Rowley
University of Wollongong


This paper is posted at Research Online.
NOTE
This online version of the thesis may have different page formatting and pagination from the paper copy held in the University of Wollongong Library.

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG
COPYRIGHT WARNING
You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following:

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.
CHAPTER 5

SWAGMAN INTRUDERS

Introduction

The two previous chapters examined representations of women out of place. These women were represented beyond the domestic domain, cast into a no man's land. In the case of unmarried women, their disfigurement disqualified them from unambiguous femininity. Though they may have 'passed' as a man, they were not seen as able to take on the characteristics of masculinity. Unable to embark on the male journey of nation formation, disfigured women were also disbarred from achieving the maturity of womanhood that marriage and motherhood was supposed to bring. Mature women, fending for themselves and their children of necessity, laboured 'as men'. Their loss of femininity was evidence of their pitiful plight. Significantly for the imagined national community, their labour was only rarely depicted as productive. Tensions resulting from women's productive farming were seen to play out not in the public domain, but in the home as these women came to exercise a degree of authority and independence that over-wrote their submission to men.

Since men's journeys and their labour symbolically represented the struggle to forge the nation through the conquest of land, men's 'proper' place may be seen as lying outside domesticity. I have argued that the plot of this journey motif usually connoted the expectation of homecoming, but as long as land remained untamed, the object of the quest was yet to be attained and the bushman was required to set off again. The journey was also constituted as the passage of life. In this sense, a bushman achieved maturity in the pursuit of his quest. Like warriors, young men chafed at the confinement of the domestic world. Only those who achieved their goals or succumbed to failure remained in this 'world cast aside'. Thus, men in the home were represented as 'out of place'.

This chapter examines the recurring image of a man who is 'out of place'—the swagman in the home. The swagman, it is argued, represented a highly ambivalent figure in bush mythology. His standing in the imaginary formation of the nation was insecure. Further, it is possible to read in the accounts of his incursions into the domestic sphere an unresolved and contentious issue: that of the possible threat he
represents to the safety of isolated women and their families. For women, the threat posed by his intrusion could be seen as the direct threat of violence and rape from the swagman himself. But for women the threat of the swagman, it will be argued, also can be read metaphorically as a covert expression of the fear of domestic violence. For men, on the other hand, the incursion of another man represented a potential threat to his property and his family. The possibility even existed of the swagman supplanting them during their absence.

This discussion takes up the issue of the swagman intruder. In particular, it explores the covert expressions of concern over domestic violence which was implicitly sanctioned by the privacy of the home, but increasingly subject to public debate (albeit conducted through allusion and euphemism).

The swagman in nation formation
As Leigh Astbury has shown, the swagman was a recurring image in the popular press, and in the painting and literature of the late nineteenth century. The phrase, "on the wallaby", Astbury comments, may have suggested poverty and hardship, but it came also to connote independence and self-reliance, and the plenitude of the natural environment on which the swagman depended.1 Whilst the experience of depression gave the image of the swagman a topical reference, the images themselves draw on the already-established conventions of representation of the unsuccessful gold-digger "down on his luck". Consequently painterly representations of the swagman are cast in a nostalgic mode which softens the expression of hardship and forestalls enquiry into the social conditions that underpin male itinerancy and unemployment. Nevertheless, the interpretation of these images as signifying the 'democratic spirit' of the diggers, and the freedom of unencumbered masculine nomadicism erases the expression of isolation and despondency that also inform the representation of swagmen.

The desire to constitute the land as a 'bountiful garden' able and willing to support men living 'off the land' is offset by both the recognition of drought conditions in the early 1890s and the mythic representation of the environment as hostile and barren. Consequently the depictions of the swagman are ambivalent ones. To some extent, this ambivalence articulates a lack of ease about the romanticisation of the swagman's 'plight'. As we saw in the previous chapter, the recognition of the plight of poverty was filtered through bourgeois constructions of class difference, and middle class
observers sought to distinguish between the 'genuine' unemployed in search of work and unemployable and absconding vagrants. Whilst the swagman could be included in the cast of frontiersmen, or represented as a potential revolutionary against the inequitable class system, by the late 1890s, both the idealisation of frontier culture and the revolutionary spirit of the early years of the decade were counterpointed by the imperative of a stable, but not necessarily egalitarian, social order implicit in the idea of Federation.

The depiction of the swagman's situation was thus unresolved. And the swagman himself remains an ambivalent figure in bush mythology. This ambivalence towards the swagman can be explained in a number of ways.

Firstly, though he is perhaps the most nomadic of all bush characters, in terms of the journey motif, the swagman usually is seen as homeless and thus as having no point of return. Like the spirit-girls, he cannot re-cross the boundary to interior space to complete his journey. He is unable to complete the rite of passage on which he has embarked. He is no longer impelled by his quest. Though he may be compelled to wander without destination, many of the visual and literary representations of the swagman suggest a deep-felt yearning for home. The recollection of home is carried with him in memory and in treasured tokens. In Lawson's poem, "The Heart of the Swag", the swagman's keepsakes, wrapped and cocooned deep in his swag, are "the key of his life":

There are broken-hearted secrets and bitter heart reasons—
They are sewn in a canvas or calico bag'
And wrapped up in oilskin through dark rainy seasons,
And he carries them safe in the core of his swag.²

This image of wrapping and burying, protecting and concealing the still-caring heart conveys both his unendurable expulsion from the world he has left behind, and his memories and mementoes which symbolise his yearning for it. Death is now the only point of return:

There's a friend who will find, when he crosses the Border,
That the Heart of the Man's in the Heart of his swag."³
For such a figure, death is the only return to the fold, and the image of a swagman's death is reminiscent of Monsieur Caloche's death:

hungering, thirsting, hunted to the death—he lay down on the hot, dry plain, and gave up the hopeless game of life.4

The second element in the ambivalent representation of the swagman lies in his relationship with the land. According to Lotman, characters who are immobile with respect to plot-space, and who cannot cross the boundary between interior and exterior space, are constituted as a "function of the plot-space". To the extent that he is 'of the land', the swagman cannot also be its master. In the imaginary formation of the nation, the swagman's place in the cast of the nation's journeymen is insecure because his relation to the land and its conquest is ambivalent. He treks the far outback country, and his travels register the European presence on the land. Nevertheless, doubt is cast on his participation in the struggle to claim the land by his vagrancy and unemployability, for that struggle rests on the intertwining of the themes of journeying and labour. The swagman may be looking for work, and may work willingly and hard in return for his keep—and if this is the case his labour complements the journey motif. He may, however, be a 'sundowner' who lives off the settlers as he lives off the land, extracting food and lodging without giving anything in return.

This latter is the image of the 'feral' swagman which we find in the description of "The New South Wales 'Sundowner'" in Cassell's Saturday Journal (For the Homes of the People) published in 1890. As an outcast of society, the swagman becomes part of nature:

This strange class of Australian nomads has, by force of circumstances, adapted itself to the animal life of the bush.5

Sundowners are likened to animals resting in the heat of the day, tramping in the cool of the early morning and late afternoon. They are compared with native, not domesticated animals which are less well adapted to the dry summer. Looking like "black objects" silhouetted against the setting sun, "they creep slowly along the dusty track".
The image of the environment of which the swagman is part is not an arcadian one. Rather, it is either the 'weird and melancholy' bush described by Marcus Clarke, or the hostile, untamed land that resists men's efforts to bring it to the national heel. Cast in these terms, the swagman is likened to the *femme fatale* "spirit of the bushfire", who is part of the natural world and threatens to erase the signs of the settler's domestication of the land as national territory. The particular threat that the swagmen evoke is that of fire. The swagman takes the hospitality in bush society as his "right", demanding food and shelter at the stations, against the unspoken threat of setting fire to the tinder-dry grass, and the destruction of fencing, livestock and homes.

Far away, the outcast "sundowner", tramping on his lonely way, looks back to see the blazing scene, overshadowed by the drifting smoke spangled with gold dust, and stops to hear the roar of flames as they sweep on their pitiless path of destruction.

Nevertheless, as *Cassell's Saturday Journal* reminds us, in the isolation of early colonial "squatting life", the swagman was virtually the only means of communication in the "thinly-populated back country". As such, in Australian mythology, he came to represent the link between isolated settlements, and form a communication network which sustained the 'imagined community' of people who had little or no face to face contact. Benedict Anderson emphasises the importance of communication in the imagining of the national community. In bush mythology, the print media which are so central to Anderson's thesis are sporadic and unreliable, and travellers carry news from station to station and lonely bush hut. Consequently, though his standing in the dispersed bush community may be in question, the swagman plays a significant part in its integration.

Representations of swagman in exterior space (the bush, which is the domain of men) do not depict him 'out of place'. Rather, by virtue of his ultimate homelessness, he has become absorbed into the bush: he belongs in the bush by nature rather than by his actions to dominate nature. The ambivalence that is inscribed in representations of the swagman in the bush is heightened when he is represented within the domestic domain. It is to this image of the swagman "out of place" that I now turn.
Mad or bad?

The nature of the threat posed by the intruder swagman is unclear, partly because it is frequently conveyed through covert allusions and intimations rather than named directly. The representation is unresolved because it gives expression to a number of contested discourses and changing institutional practices which were themselves unresolved. The first of these to be considered here are those related to criminality and lunacy. The blurred and shifting boundaries between these suggest that the images in bush mythology of mad swagmen and of wicked swagmen may be articulations of the same motif, that of the threatening male intruder in the domestic sphere.

The late nineteenth century witnessed changes in the discourses of criminality and lunacy which were to have implications for the representation of male vagrancy. The recognition and treatment of criminality and lunacy were being transformed by changes in popular perceptions of deviant behaviour, police practice, prison reform and the medicalisation of madness. The romantic valourisation of the swagman is counterpointed by alternative perceptions of him as a social problem at a point in time when the characterisation of that social problem was itself undergoing transformation. Whereas both lunacy and criminality had been constructed as manifestations of moral depravity, the 'problem' they represented was in the process of redefinition.

In the first instance, as Stephen Garton has argued, it was the police who decided whether they were dealing with criminal motives or mental disturbance when they met with violent and disruptive behaviour, such as fighting, suicide attempts, wild and drunken behaviour, domestic violence and breaking windows. In either case, because it was violent and disruptive behaviour which attracted police intervention, both the prison and the asylum populations were predominantly male. S.G. Foster has observed that in Victoria in the 1880s "the police and the public decided who was mad, and the doctors then tried to show how and why they were mad." The early 1890s saw a dramatic rise in both prison and asylum rates of admission. The rate of prison admissions fell significantly from 1895, perhaps reflecting an easing of social conditions as the depression abated. However, Garton suggests that admissions to mental asylums continued to rise until 1920, as a consequence of the greater willingness of police to apprehend and charge people with being of "unsound mind".
Police were in part responding to prison reforms which in the 1890s sought to narrow the definition of who should be in prison. The Comptroller-General of Prisons, Frederick Neitenstein, determined to keep out of prison such persons as first offenders, old feeble vagrants, diseased and friendless incapables, inebriates, lunatics and juveniles.  

Whilst these people were no longer to be included in the prison population, the chance that they would be apprehended by police was still strong. No longer considered criminal, they were still perceived as socially disruptive and incarceration was still seen to be appropriate as a means of removal. It seems likely that these categories were increasingly deemed to be 'lunatic' and that the characteristics of the asylum population remained largely a consequence of the central role of police in lunacy committals. Drunkenness, as Mark Finnane notes, remained a police offence here and in Ireland, partly as a consequence of popular resistance to seeing it as a disease or as justifying incarceration. The effect of de-criminalising the "old feeble vagrants, diseased and friendless incapables, inebriates, and lunatics" is significant for this thesis. It is on the basis of this group that the representation of the intruder swagman was constructed. 

Single, rural, itinerant male labourers made up a high proportion of the asylum population. Whilst this may have been in part a consequence of the social reality of the rural labour market and "bush life", it also reflected the use of lunacy charges by police to permanently remove unemployed men and vagabonds from the local community by sending them to city asylums. Both medical and popular discourses attributed the madness of single rural vagrants to "isolation, nostalgia, drink and sunstroke". Garton comments that case papers revealed a marked correlation between vulnerability to incarceration and isolation, itinerant labour, poverty and drink. Once again, there are striking similarities between this asylum population and the representation of the intruder-swagman. 

Bearing in mind, however, that the bush stories are not a direct representation of bush life, it is important to account for the interest of urban writers in the mad or bad swagman as a character of their bush stories. In this accounting, two factors seem significant. The first is the shift around the turn of the century from a rural inmate population to an urban one, resulting from an increasing concentration of police in
metropolitan areas, and the police use of lunacy charges to control the urban pub-
culture of the male working classes. The locus of male insanity was the same "twilight
zone" of boarding-houses, slums and dockside pubs in the inner city that formed the
territory of the bohemian life-style adopted by the writers of bush mythology. The
second factor in explaining the recurrence of the swagman intruder in the mythology
lies in the debates and public interest that accompanied the transformation in the
definition and treatment of both criminal and lunatic populations, the dramatic rise in
admissions to asylums, and the transition to an urban intake—in short, the public
construction of madness as a social problem.

Garton's study suggests that the group which was vulnerable to incarceration in
prison or asylums shared many characteristics with the fictional representation of the
threatening swagman. At a moment of overlapping and changing discourses, the
distinction between criminality and lunacy was unlikely to have been clear-cut. The
blurred boundaries between criminality and madness suggest that it may have been
difficult to decide which label was appropriate for the problematic behaviour of the
fictional swagman. For this reason, it is possible to interpret villainous and lunatic
intruders as instances of the same recurring theme.

Representations of madness in swagmen correspond quite closely with the kinds of
behaviour that were listed as indicators of lunacy in psychiatric practice. Garton
classifies these as exaltation, persecution and withdrawal. In the period 1880-99,
over half these cases suffered from feelings of persecution. The old man in Lawson's
story, "Rats", is arguably suffering delusions of persecution. When shearers come
across him fighting his swag out in the open on the "hot, lonely cotton-bush plain", he
explains: "I fell out with my swag, that's all. He knocked me down, but I've settled
him." 'Rats' is at pains to assure them that he fought fair because, he says, "he
knocked me down first!"

The swagman intruder
"Rats" is a funny story of a harmless old crank, with an ironical twist to its ending.
But "Rats" is about men—sane and insane—out in the bush. In the context of the
domestic domain, the question of whether harm is threatened is unresolved. "A
bushman in the horrors, or a villainous-looking sundowner" is represented as
confronting and frightening to such isolated women who develop strategies for
dealing with such men. The memory of the most recent encounter with a swagman intruder is fresh in the mind of the Drover's Wife:

Only a week ago a gallows-faced swagman—having satisfied himself that there were no men on the place—threw his swag down on the verandah, and demanded tucker. She gave him something to eat; then he expressed his intention of staying for the night.17

The Drover's Wife "generally tells the suspicious-looking stranger that her husband and two sons are at work below the dam, or over at the yard". In this case, the deception had failed and she met the threat head-on, armed with a wooden batten and the dog, Alligator. Confronted by a determined and armed woman and the fierce dog, the swagman cringes and agrees to go.

In Lawson's "Water Them Geraniums", Mrs Spicer tells of a bushman in the horrors who came to the door when she was alone with the children. The man, "dressed like a new chum", and "looked as if he'd been sleepin' in [his clothes] in the Bush for a month". She gave him coffee, which he drank and

"then he stood on his head till he tumbled over, and then he stood on his feet and said, 'Thank yer, mum'."18

When he left, she noticed that he wore no hat and carried two saddle straps. Though she sent Tommy to tell the police "that there was a man wanderin' about in the Bush in the horrors of drink", they were too late to prevent him from hanging himself that night. She recounts Tommy's discovery of the body and the children's sneaking off to view it "the minute my eyes was off them". But she casually admits not only that she had found the body before Tommy and the children were up, but also that she had deduced the previous night his intention to commit suicide.

The framing of this incident is significant to its impact and its meaning. The incident is inserted into a discussion about being alone in the bush. The story begins:

"One morning," said Mrs Spicer, "Spicer had gone off on his horse somewhere, and I was alone with the children, when a man came to the door."19

At its conclusion, Mary Wilson asks if she is afraid to live alone:
"And ain't you afraid to live alone here, after all these horrible things?" asked Mary.\textsuperscript{20}

For women, being alone in the bush is a consequence of the departure of their husbands, fathers, brothers and lovers. Those departures are necessitated by the journey myth that gives shape to the narratives of nation formation. If the swagman intruder is a real threat to the woman or children, whether motivated by madness or malevolence, and if she were unable to protect herself and her children, then she should be afraid to be alone. If this were the case, then men who leave their families to undertake the national journey, and to work away from home can be only ambivalently constituted as heroic, for their dependent families' threatened safety is the price of their mobility and independence.

However, the stories that explore the implications for women and children of the national journey give expression to deep-seated anxiety, not just about the safety of women and children, but about the security of, and responsibility for the family as the basic unit of the emerging national society. It was implicit in 'separate spheres' ideology that men were responsible for the good governance of the public domain while women were responsible for the domestic sphere. In terms of representation, such a distinction could be articulated in the competence of women to defend their realm from intruders, as are Lawson's bushwomen. In a sense, though, in this schema, all men would be intruders in the domestic sphere, and all would be 'out of place' there and this view does find expression in bush mythology. "I love but I cannot bide," says Break o' Day.

By the end of the nineteenth century, this construction of gendered autonomous domains was faltering, both rhetorically and in the social organisation of the domestic sphere. The domestic sphere, as ideologically constituted, was shifting from one of perceived autonomy to one of dependency. Not only was the relationship of husbands and fathers to the family undergoing change, but also, more significantly, the family was increasingly the site of state and public institutional intervention. Thus, the emergence of the swagman as intruder in the domestic domain can be read as suggesting anxieties not only about the sovereignty of women, but also about which men would exercise patriarchal rule over the domestic domain, and therefore over women.
In representation, the control over the domestic sphere is suggested by the authority to recount events that have taken place within its confines. In both the stories by Lawson, the account of the incursion of the swagman into the domestic arena is given through the eyes of the woman who fended for herself. In "The Drover's Wife", the woman remembers the event during her long night's review of her life. In "Water Them Geraniums", the story is reconstituted in the form of the bushwoman's yarn. Both women assume control twice over, firstly in the handling of the incident itself, and secondly in the shape it takes as a story. The woman in Baynton's story, "The Chosen Vessel", has no such authority in either determining the outcome of the intrusion or in its subsequent retelling.

"The Chosen Vessel"
Whereas Lawson hints at the threat of violence, Baynton deals directly with fear and murder, and comes much closer to naming rape. Unlike Lawson's women, this young woman, alone with her baby, is fearful. Though she is not afraid of passing horsemen, she is terrified of swagmen.

...swagmen, going to, or worse coming from, the dismal, drunken little township, a day's journey beyond, terrified her.21

Earlier in the day, when a swagman had come to the house, she had given him bread and meat, telling him that her husband was sick.

She always said that when she was alone and a swagman came; and she had gone in from the kitchen to the bedroom, and asked questions and replied to them in the best man's voice she could assume.22

But the man was not deceived. Having seen a broken clay pipe, he asked for tobacco. When she told him she had none, he had grinned, knowing that "if there were a man inside, there ought to have been tobacco". The sexual nature of the threat he poses is thinly veiled:

She feared more from the look of his eyes, and the gleam of his teeth, as he watched her newly awakened baby beat its impatient fists upon her covered breasts, than from the knife that was sheathed in the belt at his waist.23
When the swagman leaves, she is aware that he has not gone far, and guesses that he intends to return. She attempts to fortify the house against his entry.

The doors inside she had securely fastened. Beside the bolt in the back one she drove in the steel and scissors; against it she piled the table and the stools. Underneath the lock of the front door she forced the handle of the spade, and the blade between the cracks in the flooring boards. Then the prop-stick, cut into lengths, held the top, as the spade held the middle. The windows were little more than port-holes; she had nothing to fear through them.

The image of the cracks in the walls is introduced as she comes to fear him. Earlier, he had "walked round and round the house, and there were cracks in some places". When he left, she watched him through the cracks and saw him turn and look back at the house. When she awakes at night, it is through the cracks that she sees his dark shadow as he moves along the wall, looking for access. The cracks serve as an image of bars and it is she who is trapped within. Before he discovers it, she remembers the slab that is held in place only by a wedge of wood.

Then she saw him find it; and heard the sound of the knife as bit by bit he began to cut away the wooden support.

Her house becomes her prison but she cannot deny her jailer access. Just as he is cutting away the last section, he ceases and moves cautiously away. Then she hears it too, the sound of the horse's hooves. She races to the door,

...and with the baby in her arms she tore frantically at its bolts and bars.

She frees herself, but does not find protection or safety outside. As the uncomprehending horseman outdistances her, she reaches the creek where "her prayers turned to wild shrieks",

for there crouched the man she feared, with outstretched arms that caught her as she fell.

Violation is implied in his "outstretched arms" and the "terms he was offering her if she ceased to struggle and cry for help", but it is "Murder" that she cries as his hands grip her throat.
There can be no doubt that the woman is alone, afraid and vulnerable to attack. Unlike Lawson's bushwomen she has few personal resources to draw on to meet her attacker. The food she gives him does not satiate his desire; her pretence does not deceive him that her husband is home; her barricades do not deny him access to the home. The woman who cannot secure her home against intrusion protects her baby with her violated body.

A. A. Phillips has commented that the detailed evocation of the husband in "The Chosen Vessel" was "unnecessary". "There was no need," he says, "to create for us the figure of the husband—his absence was all that the narration demanded of him."28 (Phillips finds Baynton's treatment of other brutalized and brutal husbands—Squeaker in "Squeaker's Mate" and Ned Stennard in "Bush Church"—similarly incidental, incongruous and obsessive. Since he identifies Baynton's "strange revulsion of feeling" as the expression of anger at the presence in Australia of "peasant decadence", he assumes that her treatment of husbands is superfluous to plot and theme.) The absent husband in "The Chosen Vessel", however, is implicated in the vulnerability of his young wife. The husband's anger and contempt for her fear has undermined her resourcefulness and reinforced her passivity.

She used to run at first when it bellowed its protest against the penning up of its calf. This satisfied the cow, also the calf, but the woman's husband was angry and called her—the noun was cur. It was he who forced her to run and meet the advancing cow, brandishing a stick, and uttering threatening words till the enemy turned and ran. "That's the way!" the man said, laughing at her white face.29

She is no more able to confront her husband than she is able to repudiate the malevolent swagman. She had wondered if she might confront him with brandished stick and threatening words, "but she was not one to provoke skirmishes even with the cow". When she realises that the swagman intends to return, the woman thinks of going to her husband. But rather than finding solace in the thought, she recalls only his contempt:

But in the past, when she had dared to speak of the dangers to which her loneliness exposed her, he had taunted and sneered at her. She need not flatter herself, he had coarsely told her, that anybody would want to run away with her.30
Baynton suggests a complex relationship between the inability of the woman to act to protect herself and her husband's callous contempt for her fears. Phillip's suggestion that the evocation of the husband is incidental to the narrative overlooks the ways in which the husband is indicted by the story. As Rosemary Moore observes, Baynton "saw how patriarchal values were exacerbated in the conditions of bush life to make the oppression of women in the bush more visible". Lawson's stories, by way of contrast, in allowing greater courage and strength of character to his bushwomen, do not indict in the same way the men who leave home.

Baynton's story suggests that there may be another level to the husband's culpability. This arises from a possible implicit identification of the husband with the tramp. The identification of husband and intruder is intimated through seemingly trifling clues. The woman's victim-like responses to the threats of both appear to occasion them pleasure. Though the place is isolated and unprotected even by day, the intruder returns at night, as the husband would. Having no money, she offers the intruder food as she would her husband. And she also offers him her mother's brooch, the only valuable item she brought to the marriage. But it is marriage that has taken her outside the charmed ring of maternal protection and left her defenseless.

The woman's belief that the baby must not wake does not seem adequately explained by the narrative or by Phillips' explanation in terms of the fierce maternal instinct. Though she tries to protect it from harm, the threat that she has perceived in his "cruel eyes, lascivious mouth and gleaming knife" are of violation and physical harm to herself, not the baby. Actions which she considers taking to protect both herself and the baby are dismissed because they might wake it. The unanswered question that hangs in the air is why she thinks the baby's crying adds to the danger that they face. If she fears that the baby's crying might enrage the man, and attract to itself his violent intentions, then the question is raised of her prior experience of physical threat. Finally, her inability to invoke help from the passer-by could be taken as suggesting that the danger she faces is a 'private' one, which remains 'invisible' in the public domain. Peter Hennessey, riding to register his vote on election day, believes that she is a vision of the Virgin and Child, "and he knew the white figure not for flesh and blood".

These are, of course, faint traces, and I do not wish to overstate the case for reading "The Chosen Vessel" as a covert narrative of marital violation. It is, however, worth
commenting that much of the public discourses about marital violence, rape and sexuality was couched in covert and metaphoric language in this period. It is therefore to be assumed that any such references in bush mythology will also be rendered in fairly obscure and indirect terms. In fact, Lawson raises 'moral' crime in similarly indirect allusions in "Crime in the Bush" (1899):

There are things done in the bush (where large families, and sometimes several large families, pig together in ignorance in badly partitioned huts) known well to neighbours; or to school-teachers...—or even to the police; things which would make a strong man shudder. Clean-minded people shrink from admitting the existence of such things.

Though he says 'we want light on these places', Lawson himself was unable to go further towards illuminating the implied domestic sexual violations.

If the intruder is indeed the shadowy double of the husband, then the inference of marital violation is not the only possible one to be made. We might, alternatively, perceive in the swagman's violation and murder of his wife, a harm done to the husband whose wife who lies dead and baby, motherless. Or, another alternative is that the threat is one of displacement of the husband: the swagman has put himself in the position of the husband, and made 'use' of his home and his wife. Baynton's story is inconclusive on the question of the husband's loss on the one hand, and culpability on the other. There can, however, be no doubt that the shearer will not find things at home as he left them.

The suggestion that the story is open to alternative readings, from different points of view, raises the possibility of gender-specific interpretations of the social institutions of marriage and domestic relations. As noted earlier, Baynton differs from Lawson in her assessment of the danger which faces the woman left alone in the bush. Significantly, Baynton's writing has been described by A. A. Phillips as a release for her "nightmare obsessions" and "burdened subconscious". "She is driven by a need to free her own spirit from nightmare obsessions," says Phillips. However, in order for Phillips to sustain this interpretation, he must characterise a number of Baynton's strongest images as superfluous to the narrative. He suggests that both "the fierce power of the maternal instinct" and "bitter insistence on man's brutality to woman" force their way into the narrative and into "incidental detail". Thus, whilst Baynton's story represents the threat of male violence literally, her writing itself has been read as
the outpourings of hysterical fear in a manner that implicitly denies her control over her craft.

If the story is read as a covert expression of a troubling cultural practice that could not be named outright, then the characterisation of the husband is no longer "superfluous" to the narrative. On the contrary, the metaphoric equivalence of the husband with the intruder is central to the construction of the meaning of the narrative. Baynton's voice need not be seen as giving expression to her own subconscious and hysterical obsessions. What she expresses may reflect the repressed of the culture: the disquieting knowledge that the men who murder women are most frequently their husbands.

'Cranky Jack'
Although Steele Rudd's "Cranky Jack" is a very different kind of story to either "The Drover's Wife" or "The Chosen Vessel", themes identified in Lawson's and Baynton's writing are reiterated here in the context of a humorous account of the selector's life apparently from a boy's point of view. The story of Cranky Jack seems even more bizarre for its being told in the prosaic style of ironic and deceptively naive narration. In this story, the locus of female hysteria is Mother.

A man, who has neither name nor swag, appears out of nowhere, and offers to work for no wages. Dad Rudd "engaged him at once" and later names him Jack (Illustration 2). Rudd draws on the conventional discourses of madness to persuade the reader that he is mad. For example, Jack displays the symptoms of persecution, which, it was noted earlier, was a prevalent pattern amongst asylum inmates and coloured the popular concept of lunacy.

Jack cannot be read as a traveller, because he has no swag. His physical appearance suggests his homelessness, implying that he has been living in the wilds, and that he is himself a wildman:

Tall, bony heavy-jawed, shaven with a reaping-hook, apparently. He had a thick crop of black hair, shaggy, unkempt, and full of grease, grass, and fragments of dry gum-leaves.
Illustration 2: Fred Leist, ‘Cranky Jack’
(Source: Steele Rudd, *On Our Selection*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1987.)
His clothing seems to serve as a makeshift containment of his wildness. For example, when Jack takes off his hats, he yields to mad fantasies. The description of his shirt, made from a piece of blanket, with white cotton stitches "striding up and down like lines of fencing" also connotes containment. The stitches, likened to fences, function as metaphors for the boundary between nature and culture, constituted as a site of madness. The fence is a boundary which encloses and contains nature: his madness places him in the realm of the natural; his attempts to contain his madness signify his not-entirely successful attempts to remain in the 'real world'.

Later, Jack bolts from the house in fear and, tumbling through the fence, becomes a "wild beast":

He ... tumbled through the wire fence on to the broad of his back. He roared like a wild beast, clutched at space, spat, and kicked his heels in the air.  

When Dad, Dave and Joe find him he is sitting aside the highest limb of a fallen tree in a gully at the back of the grass-paddock.

And as the man's voice rang out in the quiet gully and the echoes mumbled round the ridge and the affrighted birds flew up the place felt eerie somehow.

Jack "allowed himself to be escorted home and locked in the barn". The barn in which Dad confines Jack for several days is not only an asylum, but also the place where domestic animals are kept. The final image of Jack is, in effect, one of his "successful rehabilitation", the wildman has been domesticated and transformed into "the best horse Dad ever had".

He slaves from daylight till dark, keeps no Sunday, knows no companion, lives chiefly on meat and machine oil, domiciles in the barn, and never asked for a rise in his wages.

Jack's persecution fears are hysterical delusions and clearly unfounded, and so, it appears, are Mother Rudd's fears of Jack. Mother's belief that Jack "will take it in his head to kill us all" is dismissed by Dad as fanciful:

"Tut, tut, woman. Poor old Jack! He's as harmless as a baby."
It is at this point that Jack is given his name. In naming the man, Dad also defines him as harmless. Both Jack's and Mother's fears are seen through Dad's eyes as unfounded, incapacitating and hysterical. When a snake comes inside, Mother and Sal panic, climbing up onto sofa and table, shrieking, screaming, gasping, moaning. In response to their cries, Jack comes inside. He watches as the snake mounts the dressing table, then exclaims in fear that the snake is the devil, crying "The missus brought you". As the snake passes behind the mirror, Jack catches sight of his own image but believes he sees his father. He flees the image in mortal terror, as Dad comes in and kills the snake with a shovel, smashing the furniture in the process. Though Dad insists that he is not afraid, he barricades the house against Jack that night. The next day, however, Dad takes Dave and Joe to find Jack. At Jack's first movement, the men flee. But they go back, approaching Jack with immense care, and at last they bring Jack back and lock him in the barn. Incarcerated, Jack is still in mortal terror of his father. Eventually he gets out and smashes the mirror into fragments. Believing his father to be "dead now", he stays on at Shingle farm, as an unremarkable labourer. The women and the madman are unable to confront their fears, and their unreal fears incapacitate them. The men overcome the fears which are unfounded in the real world, their world, by confronting them and asserting their mastery over the imaginary threat.

Mother is afraid that Jack will turn into a homocidal maniac. When he shows signs of wildness, Mother, Sal and the children barricade themselves in the house against the intrusion of the lunatic. They watch in horror as soot begins to fall from the chimney into the fireplace, "where there was no fire".

They looked at each other in dismay. The children began to cry. The chain for hanging the kettle on started to swing to and fro. Mother's knees gave way. The chain continued swinging. A pair of bare legs came down into the fireplace. They were curled round the chain. Mother collapsed. Sal screamed, and ran to the door, but couldn't open it. The legs left the chain and dangled in the air. Sal called "Murder!"

But, of course, it is young Joe, not Jack. The intruder is not the feared outsider, but one of the family. Likewise, in the incident of the snake, it is Dad, not Jack, who swings his weapon wildly, in the manner Mother anticipates of Jack.
Dad came in with the long-handled shovel, swung it about the room, and smashed pieces off the cradle, and tore the bedcurtains down, and made a great noise altogether.45

Here is the reiteration of the barely perceptible theme inferred in the Baynton story: the threat of the intruder as a covert expression of the violence within the home committed by male family members.

In fact, Mother holds Dad accountable for Jack's presence, suggesting that Jack acts as his agent:

Mother began to cry, and asked him what he meant by keeping a madman on the place, and told him she knew he wanted to have them all murdered.46

The day after Joe came down the chimney, Mother reiterates her fear to Dad and adds: "It's not right you should keep him about the place". And again, after the snake incident, she insists that Jack is mad, to which Dad replies "Nonsense".

"Oh, of course it's nonsense," Mother went on. "Everything I say is nonsense. It won't be nonsense when you come home one day and find us all on the floor with our throats cut."47

It is not only that Mother holds Dad responsible for the threat of the madman's violence, but also that it is members of her own family—Joe and Dad—who actually come closest to realising her fears. It is Joe who breaches the defences of the home by coming down the chimney, and Dad who smashes the cradle and tears the bedcurtains down.

**Domestic violence in late nineteenth century Australia**

Domestic violence appears to have been widespread in late nineteenth century marriages, and significantly, the practices and perceptions relating to domestic violence were in a moment of flux. The grounds on which domestic violence was normalised were unstable and eroding. Reading the texts in this context, inferences relating to domestic violence do not seem too far-fetched. In fact, piecing together a history of domestic violence depends on inferences drawn from documents about related areas including spouse murder, divorce and psychiatric practice.
Judith Allen's study of domestic violence over the period 1880 to 1939 uses court records relating to spouse murder and divorce as an indirect means of forming an historical account of domestic violence. From her study of 303 male and 60 female spouse murders, she concludes that wife battering was the common factor in most of these cases, regardless of whether it was the husband or, less frequently, the wife who was charged with assault, wounding or murder.

The woman whose husband was removed by police, or who took a summons against her husband was a battered woman. The majority of female spouse murderers were battered wives. Women who deserted husbands did so to end being battered, and it was these women who came to be the main victims of malicious wounding and murder. Meanwhile, those women who died at their husbands' hands within the home were frequently victims of a battering that went too far.

Similarly, divorce cases reveal the prevalence of wife battering as a factor in the dissolution of marriage. The testimony of 60-75% of wives mentioned or described violence, whether the wives were petitioning for divorce or accounting for their desertion. This accords with Stephen Garton's findings of the prevalence of wife battering in the committal of wives to mental asylums. He suggests that domestic violence was an important factor in the genesis of mental breakdown in many women admitted to mental asylums in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The violence of sons as well as husbands appears to have been a common factor in the backgrounds of women inmates. Garton comments that "basher" husbands were sometimes charged by police with lunacy, but more frequently it was the victims who were so charged.

The high incidence of domestic violence in itself would not account for the metaphoric expression of concern or anxiety in the bush mythology. If it were simply taken for granted and condoned as a feature of married life, it could arguably remain invisible because it was unproblematic. But, in fact, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were witnessing changes in the institution of marriage and the avenues of State intervention in the domestic sphere.

In the 1880s, half of the wives killed by husbands died as a result of batterings that went too far. They were beaten for being insufficiently obedient, subordinate and attentive to the husband's needs and desires by husbands who regarded their actions as justified. In the 1890s, however, the discourse of patriarchal authority which
legitimated the disciplining of subordinate wives was being undermined. Wives were less prepared to endure violent marriages, and were more able to leave them, partly as a consequence of limiting the number of children they bore, and partly as a result of their increased ability to support themselves and their children.

Reformers looked to legal reform to minimise domestic violence. Bills were brought before Parliament in 1883 and again in 1889 to increase the penalties for wife beating. In practice however, there is evidence of widespread acceptance of the practice. The NSW Police Handbook instructed police "not to interfere in domestic quarrels, unless there is, or is likely to be a serious assault committed". Whilst domestic violence was formally a criminal action which attracted heavy penalties, in practice it remained part of the fabric of married life.

Cruelty alone was insufficient reason for the granting of divorce, although judicial separation remained a possible solution. Divorce reform aimed at altering the law to allow divorce on the grounds of cruelty alone met opposition on the grounds that this would open the floodgate of petitions from wives. However the Divorce Extension Act of 1892 did allow divorce on the grounds of cruelty alone, requiring however that the violence be corroborated by the husband's recent conviction for aggravated assault. In spite of the severe limitations to the divorce law reforms, family law came to displace criminal law as the proper forum for resolving domestic violence.

In the case of murder, and serious assault, too, there was a shift away from criminal punishment to psychiatric defence for the husband's actions, and psychiatric treatment for violent behaviour. Family law was supplanting criminal law as a site of redress, and psychiatric discourses were further undermining the notion that wife beating was a crime.

Wife beating was thus concurrently being de-legitimised and de-criminalised. A woman was far more likely to have been killed by her husband than by a stranger. Physical violence was more likely to have been a sustained feature of her marriage than an incidental occurrence at the hands of an intruder. It is in this context that the recurring image of the swagman intruder emerges.
Home Again

Frederick McCubbin’s painting *Home Again* (1884) (Plate 17) captures the moment of the return of the husband, who has been presumed to be dead. The young wife wears widow’s weeds, and appears to have taken in ironing as a means of earning an income to support herself and the baby which is signified by the cradle. Although the domestic objects on the mantlepiece are brightly polished, the worn and torn carpet indicates the poverty of recent times. The bearded man comes through the door, his arms outstretched and head and upper body reaching into the room. One foot is over the threshold, the other is still outside, and his pelvis lining up with the door jam: he is on the point of entry. The excited dog recognises the man, and greets him, paws on knee.

The dynamism of his pose contrasts with the stability of the posture of the young wife. She is turning towards the door, but leaning slightly away from it, one hand raised to her face, the other outstretched still holding the iron on the white sheeting. Her body, covered in black, with a grey-purple apron, is posed to suggest her sexual openness, vulnerability or availability. Her arm stretched back as she turns to face the door, and the lighted line of her neck and shoulder add to this quality of naivety and openness. But the arm nearer to the door is raised to her forehead, in a gesture both of protection and introspection. The expression on her face, too, is introspective, registering neither recognition nor alarm. Will she recognise him in the next second, complete her turn towards him, lifting the iron upright? Yes, perhaps, but this is a moment of ambiguity, before she connects this bearded swagman who bursts into her house with the husband whom she mourns. Though there may be rejoicing to come, this moment is ambivalent and charged with anxiety. Part of this anxiety stems from the iron still held down, scorching the white sheet perhaps, and the hole in the rug which echoes the shape of iron’s scorch. She is not yet moving or lifting the iron. Partly it is her own gesture which is ambivalent, yet static.

The room is divided vertically into sections. She stands in the well-lit part of the interior, cradle in the foreground, ironing a white sheet on a table covered with a red blanket. The contrived lighting that illuminates her has no source depicted within the painting. On the other side of the canvas and the room, the open door admits the light and a stray branch from the outside. Autumn-toned foliage fills the space of the opening. The fireplace can been just seen, with candlesticks, copper kettle, silver pot, plates, gilt-framed picture, and silver covered pot arranged formally on and above the
17. Frederick McCubbin *Home Again* 1884
oil on canvas 85 x 123 cm
mantlepiece. These objects are signs of the better-off days in the past, and her meticulous polishing indicates self-respect, and "respectability". In their orderly arrangement and polished brightness, they also imply a certain accommodation to widowhood and a degree of self-containment and pleasure which this 'intrusion' threatens to disrupt.

Between the figures is a dark panel, with a open closet set into the wall behind. Here are the signs of recent poverty and her labour: the worn carpet, the broom and wicker basket. The watering can and the brown jar holding flowers link the foliage inside the domestic space with the garden outside. If she moves towards him, they will meet in this ambiguous space.

The moment stretches before us as a tableaux. It is a frozen moment, not an image filled with movement. It is not a photograph catching instantaneously a decisive moment, but a formally arranged studio painting. (With this knowledge, we presume the iron is cold.) The arrangement of the interior into broad vertical panels, and the door leading outside suggests a theatrically staged scene. The broad simplicity of the spatial arrangement, and the colour blocks in various browns, with highlighting in red and purple, is offset by the many detailed lidded containers arranged in horizontal lines on mantlepiece and cupboard shelf. In addition to pots, kettles, jugs, baskets and watering can, the cradle and finally the house itself suggest containment, confinement and solitude.

The ambiguity and anxiety of this work are suggested by the woman's gesture and expression, the red and white covering on the coffin-shaped table, the darker space that separates man and woman, the images of containment and the stasis which undermines the narrative of the arrival. This ambiguity attaches itself to the man's unresolved identity. In the context of the literary texts examined in this chapter, it seems reasonable to suggest that this man is both swagman and husband, and that this is an ambiguous image of both an intrusion and a homecoming. It is an image that echoes Joe's emergence from the chimney in 'Cranky Jack'.

The unobtrusive brown pot holding flowers exactly midway between their heads reminds us of the possibility of great pleasure in the reunion. This optimism is countered by the hole in the carpet midway between their feet.
The itinerant usurper

If the painting and the stories suggest an ambivalent identification between husband and intruder, then an alternative interpretation of the underlying motivation for this motif is that the swagman represents a 'pretender' to the rightful place of the husband. This possibility is most readily seen in Steele Rudd's story "When Joe Was in Charge". The story begins with incidents that demonstrate Joe's boyishness, and unsuitability for real responsibility. But the second half of the story recounts old Casey's 'moving in' when Dad and Dave were away, and Joe was "in charge". Although Joe is clearly unable to fill Dad's boots, he was "proud of his male prerogatives". In spite of the pretence at having "a man in the house", in fact the household is fair picking for the lively, lazy Casey. Described as "a starved-looking, toothless little old man with a restless eye, talkative, ragged and grey", Casey inveigles his way in by charming Mother and Sal and pretending to be helpful about the house and farm. Like Cranky Jack, he is arrives from nowhere:

Not exactly a traveller, he carried no swag or billycan.

He makes a great show at working – cutting wood, fixing fences, chasing the cows out of the corn, and mending the wire he had presumably cut to allow the cows to reach the corn. And so it is, that when night falls, Casey is still there. Taking "a lively interest in the selection", he stays on, till "every day saw Casey more at home at our place". In extending hospitality to travellers, and lending neighbours farm implements, Casey takes on the authority of the absent husband. In stealing the produce as it grows and the eggs as they're laid, he remains a usurper. When he falls out of a tree, he takes to bed and remains an "invalid" for three weeks:

He would have been invalided there for the rest of his days only old Dad came home and induced him to leave.

In Rudd's stories, patriarchal authority might be absurd, but there is rarely any chance that Mother might rule the domestic domain. Despite the very different genres of the writing of Steele Rudd and Barbara Baynton, they appear to be in agreement on the question of female dependency. Women belong in the home, but they do not exercise authority over men. In the absence of men, the domestic sphere is a domain in distress. Lawson, however, is far more likely to imply that women can and do run the
household. But for Lawson, as was argued in the previous chapter, the authority that accrues to women through their responsibility for the domestic sphere is problematic.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the representation of the swagman. The swagman appears as an ambivalent figure in bush mythology. Though representations of the swagman depicted in the bush at large have been seen to connote independence, freedom and egalitarianism, there are problematic aspects to these images that cut across such an interpretation. Looking at the swagman through the framework of the journey motif suggests that he is a man whose only return to interior space is death. Like the female bush spirit, he is mobile but unable to achieve the closure that the journey implies through a return to domestic space. He is thus represented as part of the environment rather than its master. Further, in bush mythology, I have argued, the journey motif is interlocked with the theme of masculine labour: together, these themes constitute the narrative of conquest of the land to forge the nation. The swagman, if he does not work, is ambivalently positioned in this narrative. On the other hand, the distinction between these swagman and itinerant labours and men in search of work is far from clear-cut, and the swagman forms an important link in communications between otherwise isolated communities. He is, therefore, more readily incorporated into the cast of nation-makers than are the lost girls of the bush.

When he is represented in the domestic realm, the swagman becomes an intruder. The nature and the consequences of this intrusion appear unresolved and contentious in the stories and painting examined here. Since the distinction that was drawn between insanity and criminality was blurred, problematic and undergoing transformation, the mad swagman and the malevolent one are arguably articulations of the same character. The issue then addressed by the stories examined here is whether this character presents a threat of violence and violation to isolated women and their children, and whether the women could overcome that threat. In Lawson's stories, the threat might be a real one, but the women are a match for the intruders. In Rudd's stories, the tramp is harmless and Mother's fears are hysterical. In Baynton's story, the threat is real and realised and the woman is vulnerable: it is the author herself who is described, at least by one critic, in terms of hysteria.
If the threat is not a real one, or if the bushwoman can allay it, then there is no question of the culpability of her absent husband. But, if the threat is real and if she is dependent on her husband's protection, then he must shoulder some of the blame for the danger she faces. In this case, his leaving is rendered problematic. Further, the stories by Baynton and by Rudd can be read as suggesting an identification of the intruder with the husband himself. This reading suggests, therefore, that these stories articulate covertly the troubling experience of violence towards women by male members of the household. In the late nineteenth century, even the feminist reformers swathed their references to sexual violation and marital trauma in veils of allusion and metaphor.

Read from the point of view of the absent husband, these stories recount incidents in which the bushman returns home, only to find that his 'place' has been filled by a usurper. Rudd's story of old Casey suggests this reading.

Within the logic of the journey motif, the 'point of return' may be erased with the murder of the wife and children. (Her spirit, unlike that of the faithful bush sweetheart, may be reluctant to nurture him on his journey.) This makes the completion of the journey unachievable. Similarly, if the intruder usurps the husband's rightful place, then the home is no longer his point of return.

In narratives of nation formation, desertion is the concomitant of the absence of men from home—even though they are engaged in nation forming labour and travel. The possibility of danger or of another man's occupation of the home suggests that a degree of ambivalence attends the idea of the journey. In these ways, social disruption is inscribed into the myths of nation building, undermining and challenging the stability of the social order of the imagined nation.

3 *ibid.*, p. 253.
4 "The New South Wales 'Sundowner'", *Cassell's Saturday Journal*, vol. 8, no. 337, Saturday March 15, 1890, p. 587.
5 *ibid.*
6 ibid.


10 Cited in Stephen Garton, "Bad or Mad?" op. cit., p. 99.


12 Stephen Garton, "Dimensions of Dementia", op. cit., p. 68.


15 Stephen Garton, Medicine and Madness, op. cit., p. 115.


18 Henry Lawson, "Water them Geraniums", ibid., p. 730.

19 ibid.

20 ibid., p. 731.

21 Barbara Baynton, "The Chosen Vessel", in Sally Krimmer and Alan Lawson (eds), Barbara Baynton, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1980, pp. 81-2.

22 ibid., p. 82.

23 ibid.

24 ibid., p. 83.

25 ibid., p. 84.

26 ibid., p. 85.

27 ibid.

29 Barbara Baynton, "The Chosen Vessel", op. cit., p. 81.

30 ibid., p. 82.


36 A. A. Phillips, op. cit., p. 32.


39 ibid., p. 38.

40 ibid., p. 43.

41 ibid., p. 45.

42 ibid., p. 47.

43 ibid., p. 42.

44 ibid., p. 40.

45 ibid., p. 43.

46 ibid., p. 41.

47 ibid., p. 43.


49 ibid., p. 8.

50 Stephen Garton, Medicine and Madness, op. cit., p. 145.

51 Judith Allen, op. cit., p. 4.
52ibid., p. 10.

53Steele Rudd, "When Joe Was in Charge", On Our Selection, op. cit., pp. 105-114.

54ibid., p. 96.

55ibid., p. 100.