Gender and nation formation in late nineteenth century

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NOTE

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IMAGINATION

Madness and imagination

The image of madness in Lawson's writing is a recurrent one. Life in the bush entails back-breaking labour, the desolate loneliness and irreconcilable grief. In his exploration of human responses to such hardship, pain and loss, Lawson suggests that memory and imagination play active roles in the onset of madness. Thus, for example, in "Water Them Geraniums", Joe Wilson observes that when the sun sets in the bush, "old things come home to one".

And strange, new-old things too, that haunt and depress you terribly, and that you can't understand.¹

It is then that the past comes home to "newchum black sheep":

I used to think that they couldn't have much brains, or the loneliness would drive them mad.

Lawson's bushmen and women sometimes try to protect themselves against pain and grief by narrowing the boundaries of their imagined world to the immediate confines of the bush enclave. In this sense, madness can be understood as a strategy of adaption to the bush involving the restraining of imagination and the repression of memory. Here, what others judge to be mad or eccentric can be reinterpreted as the attempts of men and women to reconstruct their world as a more manageable but more constricted mental space in which the experience of actual loss is balanced by imagined restitution.

The bush as an imaginary space

There are features of the bush, to which the initial loss is attributed, which are conducive to this contraction of mental space. On the surface, it appears reasonable that those characters who are immobilised and confined to the bush may experience a similarly confined mental horizon because their contact with the rest of the world is restricted and because the labour of the bush exhausts the mind and depletes the capacity for emotional engagement.

Underlying this literal explanation is the representation of the bush as a constricted space of stultifying sameness which dulls the mind to other possible worlds making
imaginative "journeying" inconceivable. The bush is a place where structures of meaning based on difference are liable to disintegrate in the face of the "maddening sameness". Within the context of the journey as a narrative device, this lack of differentiation in the bush derives in part from the immobilisation of the isolation of its inhabitants, and in part from the point of view introduced by the narrator.

Meaning based on difference within the plot structure of the journey is derived from movement across boundaries that mark out points of departure and return. For the immobilised characters considered in the previous chapter, the bush is ambiguously interior and exterior space, and the basis for differentiation of space is consequently indeterminate. However, the 'mad' characters—Ratty Howlett, Maggie Head, Mrs Spicer and the Bush Undertaker—tend to represent the extremes of immobilisation and disengagement with the world beyond their immediate environment. Theoretically speaking, their representation is determined by the position they occupy in the narrative of the journey. As they do not move across the boundaries of interior and exterior space, to embark on journeys and return from them, they are constituted as immobile, and therefore, according to Lotman, as a "function of plot-space".

Earlier chapters of this thesis have suggested that those characters which are unable to return to interior space—swagmen, sprites and unmarriageable women—are indeed assimilated into the bush. Those characters which are bound to remain within the home, as the point of return for journeying bushmen—wives and mothers, and by extension, mad men—can be understood as functions of interior space. In particular, women in the home, their lives, and the spaces they occupy are opaque to the implicitly male observer who 'approaches' the home as a bushman returning home might do.

The journeying bushman observes the space of the bush and home from the road along which he travels. Understood in this way, the lack of differentiation of the bush may be a consequence of the point of observation. The bush lacks discernible differences and a sense of depth. In "The Bush Undertaker", for example, "a low line of bare brown ridges formed a suitable backdrop to the scene". Lawson describes the bush in "Water Them Geraniums". Here the viewing subject is Joe Wilson, as he travels down "a dreary, hopeless track":

There was no horizon, nothing but the rough ashen trunks of the gnarled and stunted trees in all directions, little or no undergrowth, and the ground, save for the coarse, brownish tufts of dead grass, as bare as the road, for it was the dry season.
In "The Drover's Wife", the bush is described in terms of "its everlasting, maddening sameness of the stunted trees".

Bush all round—bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten native apple trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few sheoaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek.

Though the Drover's Wife has "few pleasures", one she does retain is her Sunday afternoon walk with her children along the bush-track. There is a ritual quality to this walk for which "she dresses herself, tidies the children, [and] smartens up baby". There is, however, no sense that the ritual has lost its point for her, as is the case with Mrs Spicer's ritualised actions. The Sunday walk is not simply a sign of bourgeois respectability, signified by her observance of the Sabbath. Although her pleasure in and commitment to this walk are acknowledged, the meaning for her, and her children, is undercut by the sense that strangers would not understand it because, for them, "there is nothing to see, however, and not a soul to meet". In both "The Drover's Wife" and "Water Them Geraniums", it is assumed that the reader would experience the bush as a stranger who "might travel for miles without seeming to have moved".

You might walk for twenty miles along this track without being able to fix a point in your mind, unless you are a bushman.

The monotony "makes a man long to break away and travel as far as trains can go, and sail as far as ships can sail—and further". The Drover's Wife and the stranger, it is implied, would perceive and respond to both the bush and the activities of its inhabitants in different ways. In "Water Them Geraniums", Lawson introduces a third point of view—that of a Bushman:

...a Bushman soon picks out differences amongst the trees, half unconsciously as it were, and so finds his way about.

There are in these accounts of bush perception implicitly three different viewing positions from which to observe the bush: that of the stranger, who is unable to discern differences; that of the bushman traversing the bush by blazing a track or fixing a point in his mind; and that of the character who inhabits this bush and who is herself a fixed point in the bush. But the reader need not become aware that s/he may not see the bush through the bushwoman's eyes. Consequently, the Sunday walk of the Drover's Wife is an ambiguous image. Does the phrase, "there is nothing to see" describe her
perception of the bush? The reader might "be unable to fix a point in your mind", but a bushman would "pick out differences". The Drover's Wife is not a bushman, or a traveller. Though she is walking through the bush, she remains part of it. She "is used to the loneliness of it" and "would feel strange away from it".

The reader sees the bush almost invariably through the eyes of an outsider, at times a stranger, at times a bushman-traveller. Sometimes the bush is seen from the track to form a backdrop which appears static, shallow and undifferentiated. At other times, the bush may seem impenetrable or empty. The reader may be unaware that s/he observes the bush from vantage points which permit only fragmented and incomplete vision. Aspects of the bush world may be obscured from view, or patterns of meaning may be implied that would not be shared by the inhabitants of this space. This partial vision may be exaggerated when the reader must depend on an unreliable narrator or one who lacks the skill or experience necessary to discern differences in the landscape which might be obvious to its inhabitants.

The narrator's journey

It is frequently the narrator himself whose presence constitutes for the isolated bushmen and women the breach in the imaginatively constricted world, and reminds them of the loss and grief which they sought to erase from the mind. The narrator establishes both a bridge into the bush world for readers and a yardstick by which the sanity of its inhabitants can be gauged. Given the perceptual, intellectual and experiential limitations of many of Lawson's character-narrators, whether we consider Joe Wilson, in "Water Them Geraniums" or Jack Ellis in "The Babies in the Bush" or the unnamed narrator of "No Place for a Woman", his ability to differentiate between madness and sanity may be similarly limited. The narrator, observing the apparently indeterminate actions of the inhabitants of the Bush, tries to render them meaningful through the designation of madness.

The realisation that these characters are 'mad' is typically a gradually dawning one in which actions earlier seen to be normal are recast in the light of later insight. It takes some time for the bushman narrator to realise that Ratty Howlett is mad. "Trav'lers and strangers failed to see anything uncommonly ratty about him," we are told. Initially, his actions are seen as 'normal' for isolated bushmen.

I notice now, though I didn't then—and if I had it would not have seemed strange from a bush point of view—that he didn't ask for news, nor seem interested in it.
Yet, though his habit of bailing up travellers could have been those of a "normal" bushman who "only wanted to have a yarn", the narrator finds aspects of the yarn itself "queer". Ratty did not seek 'news' and did not show interest in the world beyond his immediate surroundings. The yarn is punctuated by Ratty's questions, asked after an uneasy pause in a queer tone: was he married? did he know anything about doctoring? It is in these questions that Howlett's underlying and never-met needs are expressed. His concerns remain essentially private, and though his contacts with others sometimes draw them into his world, he no longer belongs to theirs. He is not, through these contacts with travellers, depicted as being drawn into an imagined national community.

In such instances, it may be the narrator's response that is the underlying subject of the story. The fate of characters like Ratty Howlett or Mrs Spicer is already determined, and there is no suggestion that they will undergo a transformative experience that will return them to sanity and sociability in the 'real' world. As immobilised characters, they will remain functions of plot-space. It is the narrator's response that matters, and his response is typically a disturbed one because he realises that if he dwells in the bush, he will become like them.

While spatial descriptions reflect and reinforce the mental terrain inhabited by bushpeople, they also reflect the perceptions, experience and forebodings of the narrator. They articulate his dread of living in the bush without the possibility of returning home. In this sense, it is the narrator who emerges as the protagonist in these stories and these stories are episodes in the narrator's journey. Just as the realisation of Ratty's Howlett's madness was slow-dawning, so the narrator may realise later that he has verged towards madness during his prolonged stay in the bush.

It's only afterwards, and looking back, that you see how queer you got.8

The description of the bush is constructed around the experience and perceptions of the narrator as much as it is around those of the main character. For the narrator, the bush and its inhabitants are closely interconnected. The narrators can identify with these characters and realise that if they submit to bush life, they will tread the same path. Their incessant journeying is motivated not only by the imperatives of nation formation, but also by the need to avoid immersion in the life of the bush.

In these studies of eccentricity and madness in the bush, the spatial description may fulfil three functions, which Elrud Ibsch suggests are characteristic of realism or naturalism.9 The depiction of the bush serves to reinforce the content of the stories
(the weirdness and melancholy of the bush), to predict fate (the barrenness and desolation of the bush) and/or to duplicate metonymically the psychology or fate of the characters (the constriction of physical space). At first reading, it appears that the bush serves these functions with respect to the main characters (for example, Mrs Spicer or the Bush Undertaker). However, as the recognition of the narrator as protagonist becomes more compelling, spatial description functions to ambiguously elaborate and reflect his own relationship to the bush. This is most explicit in "Water Them Geraniums", of course, since Mrs Spicer's story is framed within that of Joe Wilson. The description of the "bush with no horizon" and its "everlasting maddening sameness" metonymically reiterates the psychic condition of Mrs Spicer. But it also contains the hint of the future for the observer, Joe Wilson and, as Brian Matthews observes, mirrors Joe's state of mind. The explanatory and predictive role of the description of the bush shifts between the fate and the psychic condition of the central character and the narrator.

As Brian Matthews also has argued, Lawson's writing is not contained within the conventions of realism. In bush mythology generally, the forms of literary narrative and visual representation are shaped by the historical cultural moment—the brink of modernism. Consequently, Lbsch's observations in relation to spatial description in the modernist novel can be usefully extended to Lawson's writing. In the modernist novel, says Lbsch, the fictional reality of space must be sought "not in the objects, but in the perception of the characters". Brian McHale also notes that the space of a fictional world in modern narrative is a construct "organised around a perceiving subject". Lawson's writing anticipates this modernist approach to the centrality of perception in the depiction of space. The evocative quality of the spatial descriptions emanates from the narrator's role as the perceiving subject.

The narration of Lawson's stories shifts between the realist use of a generalised "narrative perspective", in which the spatial description informs the reader about the bush inhabitants, and the modernist narrator as "perceiving subject" from whose point of view the bush itself, like the characters who inhabit it, is 'mad', weird or queer. However, at the point where the narrator is also the subject of the story, the spatial description can serve to highlight his own psychological state and his own fate. The narrator recognises that if he were to dwell in the bush, he too would be assimilated into it, and therefore become 'mad' relative to the standards of normality and sanity which he presently shares with the society at large.

The possibility of the narrator succumbing to madness is implicitly dependent on two factors: the first is the prolonged dwelling in the bush, and the second is the mental
23. Frederick McCubbin *What the Little Girl Saw in the Bush* 1904
oil on canvas 96.5 x 66 cm
faculty through which the response to this experience is formed. This mental faculty is that of imagination and memory. The bushmen and women who do not go mad "through hardship and loneliness" are those who have not "either the brains or the memory to go farther than [they can] see through the trunks of the apple trees. Implicitly the narrator does not lack either the brains or the memory for madness, since these are employed in the act of narration itself.

Two observations follow from this recognition of the vulnerability of the narrator to bush madness. The first is that his implied mobility, and his incessant travelling underwrites the reliability of his observation and narration. The narrator is necessarily familiar with, but not immersed in bush life. The 'objectivity' and 'reliability' of the account of bush life is a function of the transience of the narrator's encounter with the bush.

The second implication of the susceptibility of the narrator to bush-induced madness relates to an attitude to imagination on the part of not only the narrator, but also, implicitly, the writer. This attitude is one of wariness. The imagination, without which no tale can be told, has the capacity to derange the narrative, and to undermine its 'truthfulness'. The literary responses to this problem are not unlike the fictive responses of bush inhabitants to their experience of the bush. One response is to clearly delineate the products of 'imagination' from the representation of the 'real' world, to encircle the imagination within boundaries which indicate that this imaginary 'space' is not that of the real world. Richard Kearney alludes to this strategy when he comments that the nineteenth century imagination "felt more and more compelled to recoil into a magical world of its own making". Such a world appears as the product of the imagination, but it is not represented as holding up a mirror to the real world. Just as bush characters cannot inhabit delusive worlds without losing their footing in the real world, readers are warned against imaginatively 'inhabiting' these fantasies. The reader, like the narrator, should imaginatively travel through 'magical worlds'.

**Enchantment**

If an apparent distrust of imagination can be inferred from the associations Lawson draws between madness and imagination, then a similar wariness is evidenced in McCubbin's fairy paintings. McCubbin painted children watching fairies in the bush in such a manner as to reinforce both the childishness of imagination and, read in the light of an interest he shared with many of his contemporaries in the 'lost child' theme, the danger of succumbing to fantasy.
It is useful at this point to recall the work of Paul Ricouer on theories of imagination. Ricouer proposes that concepts of imagination can be ranged along two intersecting axes:

The space of theoretical variation can be oriented in terms of two opposite axes; on the side of the object, the axis of presence and absence; on the side of the subject, the axis of fascinated or critical consciousness.

At one pole of the first axis, "the image relates to a perception of which it is merely a trace, in the sense of a weakened impression. Towards this pole... gravitate all of the theories of the reproductive imagination. At the other extreme of the axis, the image is essentially construed in the function of absence, of what is other than present. The various versions of the productive imagination—portrait, dream, fiction—refer in different ways to this fundamental otherness." The productive imagination, and to a lesser extent, the reproductive imagination, "operates on a second axis according to whether the subject of imagination is capable or not of assuming a critical consciousness of the difference between the real and the imaginary". At one end of this axis, says Ricouer, "the image is confused with the real". At the other end, "where the critical distance is fully conscious of itself, imagination is the very instrument of the critique of reality".

It appears that these late nineteenth century artists understood imagination as "productive" but also as "fascinated", in the sense that fairies and hallucinations were confused with reality by those who imagined them.

The idea of bush enchantment held great charm for McCubbin, but its visual expression required the presence of child observers. What the Little Girl Saw in the Bush (1904) (Plate 23) depicts the bush in McCubbin's characteristic contemplative, 'plein air' and impressionistic style. His formal treatment of the bush—the brushwork and the compositional elements such as the back lighting and sense of depth—are similar to those associated with his famous 'national' pictures which were, and are still acclaimed for their 'truthful' representation of Australian bush and character. However, this painting suggests that the bush is, for some observers, a place of enchantment. In a clearing in the middle ground, two small fairies sit on a fallen branch, wings fluttering. Their features can barely be discerned, but they are facing towards the front, and their colouring is the pink-beige of European skin. In the foreground stands a young girl, in the brown tunic and white blouse of a school uniform. She stands almost beside a large fence-post, and a shadow falls to give the effect of a bar across her path, which is also blocked a little further into the painting by another log. The
presence of the child-observer suggests that the fairies become visible in the presence of the child who believes in their existence, and that the enchantment of the bush, though charming, is the effect of the child's ability to imagine it as inhabited by fairies. The placement of the fence and the diagonal bars formed by shadow and log which lie across her path into the bush suggest that an element of danger attends the enchantment of the child. The painting alludes to the popular 'lost-child' theme of nineteenth century literary and visual imagery. The bush fairies act as an enticement for the child to wander into the bush, perhaps never to find her way home again. This theme is more explicitly treated in *Childhood Fancies* (1904) (Illustration 4). In this painting, a swathe of fairies fly away towards the horizon while two children watch them from the pathway that would lead them to a point on the horizon that converges with the fairies' flight path.

Illustration 4: Frederick McCubbin, *Childhood Fancies* (1904)
The viewer does not occupy the children's position in either painting, and does not see the bush through the child's eyes. Rather, the viewer is located well back, out of the picture-space, and in *What the Little Girl Saw in the Bush* looks in over the child's head. Implicitly, the viewer is an adult for whom childish enchantment is intimate, charming and sentimental. The distancing from the child observer, however, undercuts the intimation that the fairies exist only in the child's mind, imparting to them the same degree of veracity as the bush itself.

Lawson and McCubbin both explored the notion of a "productive imagination", in which, says Ricouer, "the image is essentially construed in function of absence." Where the image is confused with or, mistaken for the real, Ricouer suggests that a "state of confusion" exists. In their treatment of fantasy, madness, enchantment and imagination, Lawson and McCubbin appear to have understood the imagination as having a capacity to generate imaginary worlds, which could be delightful or frightening. But they saw danger in the inability to distinguish these worlds from the 'real' world which they themselves inhabited. Like other intellectuals of their time, whose views are discussed by Luiz Costa Lima, they associated this form of the imagination with "the beguiling excesses of distant times or of young and naive peoples". Imagination, says Costa Lima, was the product of youth which the mature writer approached with envy and caution.

For all their concern that the unrestrained imagination would produce images that bordered on madness, these products of the imagination were remarkably European and quite conventional. McCubbin's sense of the enchantment of the bush drew on a vogue for English fairies, elves and the like, reflected in the popularity of European fairy tales and the Victorian and Edwardian genre of fairy painting. Lawson, in "The Babies in the Bush", was able to demonstrate a therapeutic role for this mythology in staving off the starker reality suggested by the 'lost child' theme.

By the end of the century, as nationalist realism began to lose its moral force and aesthetic interest, many visual artists began to show considerable interest in representing Australian landscapes with figures drawn from classical European mythology. By 1900, realism, naturalism and impressionism were becoming somewhat passé: aestheticism was finding favour once again as romanticism, symbolism and art nouveau captured the artistic imagination of the fin-de-siècle. The figure of Pan in a bush setting, says Bernard Smith, became increasingly common in Australian poetry and painting. Sydney Long's bush tableaux located mythical figures in art nouveau landscapes that suggested Australian bush settings. *The Spirit of the Plains* (1897) and *Pan* (1898) both employed the shallow theatrical space and
elongated and curvilinear forms of the art nouveau style. The landscapes were highly stylised, decorative and simplified. They did not aim to achieve the apparent specificity of location or visual verisimilitude that characterises realist interpretations of landscape. In *The Spirit of the Plains* and *The West Wind* (1909) lovely maidens inhabited mysterious worlds in which the birds responded to the music of the flute.

Nevertheless, Long's own response to these incursions of classical figures was ambivalent. In 1905, he wrote that "the Australian artist will never be able to people the bush with nymphs, or the rivers with naiads, unless he invents a special Australian brand, or forgets his native landscape. They will never look convincing among the gum trees". Long suggested that the Australian artist "will bid the aborigine blossom out in all his manly vigour, when sufficient time has allowed us to forget his failings." *The Flute Player* (1904) represented Long's attempt to incorporate Aboriginal figures into the Australian imagination. In this work the figure of an "Aboriginal" maiden plays her flute to an audience of entranced magpies. It is a lyrical picture imparting to the bush a romantic mystique, but it achieves its celebration of the Aboriginal figure only by inscribing her in a European mythology. For all that, it is a lovely picture giving eloquent witness to the paucity of ability of the colonial imagination to respond to Aboriginal inhabitation of the bush.

In these paintings, the bush becomes an enchanted arcady. But, though they explore the decorative and sensual potential of Australian landscape and flora, they do not seek to represent the nation as an "imagined community", or to articulate specifically Australian experience or character. The magical world they represented lies outside the cultural arena of nation formation. The imagination which appears unrestrained was contained within the arena of "Art" and drew for its inspiration on the conventions of European cultural fantasy and mythology. The wariness of imagination that can be discerned in Lawson's writing and McCubbin's fairy paintings would have significant implications for imagining Australia as a national community. But the extent to which the imagination, when 'unfettered', gave expression to European mythologies and enchantments suggests that the project of nation formation was still constrained by a colonial imagination.

**Realism and the "veto" of imagination**

The literary and visual exploration of madness and fantasy emerges out of an exploration of the capacity of the mind to construct images of that which does not exist. The treatment by Australian writers and artists of the late nineteenth century suggests a wariness of the "productive" imagination, which they associate with captivation by
illusions. Lawson's handling of delusive characters suggests that this was an imaginative strategy of adaptation to the pain and loss associated with bush life. Such delusions reflected the ability to form in the mind, and seek to inhabit, an alternative world in which pain and grief are ameliorated by the imagined erasure of their causes. McCubbin's wistful fairy pictures imply that the imagination associated with childhood is one of innocence and enchantment. In both cases, the "productive" imagination is able to imbue the experience of the bush with an innocence, mystery, beauty and optimism which were perceived as lying beyond the reaches of a realistic response. The aestheticism of the fin-de-siècle allowed the exploration of this imagery by containing it within the magic circle of an Art released from its obligation to imaginatively forge a national community.

Delusive madness represented the breaking of the mind in the face of an intolerable reality. But, it will be recalled, this was not the only possible response. Those characters like Mrs Spicer who could not find refuge in madness attempted to respond to the harshness of their existence by constricting the space of their imaginative world to their immediate surroundings and experiences. This strategy can be understood to invoke the "reproductive" imagination to form images only of that which is "present" in the world as it is known, and to eliminate speculation about what lies beyond the imaginary boundaries of the 'inhabited' world. Put in these terms, realism can be understood as a constriction of imaginative space.

The necessity of this imaginative restraint—the "veto" of the imagination, in Costs Lima's terms—was articulated in the aesthetic debates of the 1890s published in the Bulletin. As Douglas Jarvis has argued, the Bulletin's "rejection of aestheticism, classicism and romantic idealization as literary or artistic creeds is based largely on moral and ideological grounds."29 The aesthetic vogue of the 1880s, which found expression in popular fashion and taste as well as literary and artistic forms,30 was denounced as reflecting aristocratic and imperialist values, to the neglect of contemporary social conditions. Literary realism, Jarvis argues, was favoured on moral utilitarian and nationalist grounds, and seen as reflecting radical, egalitarian and nationalistic ideas. Jarvis comments that the Bulletin's literary preferences favoured "authorial reticence and the 'dramatic method' by which characters were made to reveal themselves through dialogue and action".31 The Bulletin looked for a concise realistic tale, dramatically but objectively reported with minimal "authorial intrusion", its plot built around an incident with an unexpected ending.32

In his study of the reception of the work of Lawson, Christopher Lee suggests that the "aesthetic values associated with nationalist authority" were those that privileged "the
'real' over the 'ideal', experience over imagination, [Lawson] the man over [Lawson] the artist, the place over the artist, and the local over the universal". Lawson's writing was valued for its apparent "artlessness", his detailed, objective style was seen to report 'truthfully' that which he observed, and his capacity for observation was derived from the depth of his experience of the bush. Nevertheless, as Jarvis argues, Lawson was able to play on his reader's familiarity with his attitudes, and his reputation for realism and authenticity to undercut illusions of dramatic realism. Lawson made use of an obtrusive authorial presence to give the impression of "a mature man remembering, retelling a past incident or a yarn 'heard in the past'. Jarvis explains Lawson's 'intrusion' of an authorial voice in terms of his dependence on his identity as an author, his ability to exploit his "public personality", and his "revelling in the technical difficulty". By contrast, in this thesis, it is argued that the embodied narration and implied point of view characteristically observed in bush mythology are integral to its representation of the bush as the imaginary space of nation formation. The interplay of past, present and future effected by the use of the narrator as a character who remembers the past and relates it to the present locates the 'present' of the bush story in the 'past' of the narrator, who implicitly is speaking in the 'present' of the reader. In this way, the bush mythology establishes a national past which appears to be continuous with the present.

The above requires that the imagined formation of the nation is inscribed as a remembered past. The constricted space of imagination which gives room only to representations of what is perceived to exist in the real world is ambiguously also the partial access of the memory to a past in which painful and de-stabilising experiences are repressed. Memory and imagination are subject to the same wariness and constraint as they are brought into the service of the imaginative formation of the nation. Just as bush mythology was able to provide a 'useable' past, based on the selection of some historical elements and the erasure of others, so the role of the narrator as a perceiving, remembering subject of his stories ensured that the perception of the imagined past was determined by the present constraints on imagination.

Spatial metaphor—temporal journey
The narrator journeys through the bush. His point of view structures the readers'—or the viewers'—perceptions of the bush and its inhabitants. On his travels, his path intersects with those of other bushmen, the shearers, drovers, and other itinerant workers who rarely, if ever, visit the cities, and never call them 'home'. The narrator can identify and empathise with them because of his intimate familiarity with bush life, but he is different because, to the extent that the author identifies with the narrator, his journey is between the city and the country. The concepts and discourses brought to
bear are those formed in the urban milieu of the writer himself, which is implicitly constituted as the 'real' world. The structures of meaning that render the bush comprehensible are based on concepts and discourses formed in the urban milieu of the writer.

Many of Lawson's narrators could introduce themselves as Jack Ellis does in "The Babies in the Bush": "I am an Australian Bushman (with city experience)." As Christopher Lee has argued, critical responses to Lawson's writing emphasised his identification with the Bush in similar terms. "Henry Lawson is the voice of the bush," wrote A.G. Stephens in 1895, "and the bush is the heart of Australia." Nevertheless, in his 1892 exchange with A.B. "Banjo" Paterson, Lawson emphasised the importance of his, and Paterson's, mobility between city and country. "I am back from up the country", he wrote,—very sorry that I went—. It was for Paterson that he coined the phrase "City Bushman". The visiting relationship, that Lawson himself acknowledged, was integral to the nationalist, realistic and naturalistic depiction of the bush. In the case of the literary idealisation of the bush, Graeme Davison has demonstrated that the bush ideal was a projection of values revered by an urban intelligentsia, increasingly alienated from the city. Ian Burn has argued that the painters too projected their image of an ideal world onto the bush. But, he argues, the painters' response to the city was not that of an alienated intelligentsia. They approached the bush as urban educated, upper-middle class visitors, who found intellectual pleasure and recuperative contemplation in their bush sojourns.

The distance between the bush and the city served also as metaphor for the temporal distance between the past and the present, as artists and writers attempted to reconstruct the rural life of earlier decades. Writers and painters both spoke of the need to record characters and activities that they associated with the colonial pioneer history. They were aware that the process of modernisation which was underway in the late nineteenth century would irrevocably change Australian culture and character. In his address to the Society of Artists in Sydney in 1895, Tom Roberts was reported as saying:

"They were living in one of the most interesting epochs of time in these colonies. They were getting the last touch of the old colonial days. Men who came to paint here in 20 years' time would know nothing of it. Artists of the present time had the chance to paint it, and this they were trying to do. It was a life different from any other country in the world."

Lawson expressed similar sentiments in 1899 when he wrote a polemical piece on art titled "If I Could Paint":

"If I Could Paint":
Sunlight and scenery endure, and there are plenty to paint them, but types and classes are passing away or changing rapidly in Australia.\textsuperscript{44}

In the case of the painters, these spatial metaphors for a temporal distance are resolved visually. Artists painted rural scenes, ostensibly of the outback, but with their easels set up in the rural-suburban fringe where they established their ‘artists’ camps’. For all the apparent expansiveness of the landscape they sought to represent, they were engaged in a process of selecting vistas that excluded the suburban encroachment on which their camps were predicated. Helen Topliss comments that "[i]t is likely that the artists chose to paint an enclosed view of their undeveloped camp site to avoid the all too evident progress of surrounding land development. They were, in fact, recreating the landscape of a preceding era..."\textsuperscript{45} The apparently wide open spaces and unrelieved expanse of bush were in part the product of a form of visual censorship, the visual equivalent of the constriction of imaginative space that I have argued characterises bush mythology.

In McCubbin’s painting, the interplay of past and present is more evident. A number of McCubbin’s paintings depict the bush and characters of the past against a background that suggests their future, which was the painter’s present. This relationship of foregrounded past to distant present is observed in, for example, Winter Evening, Hawthorn (1886) and The Pioneer (1904). This configuration establishes a peculiar ambiguity in the viewing position, in relation to time. In realist painting, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth argues, ”convention suggests continuity between virtual and actual space; it seems as if we could walk over the threshold into that realistically rendered world."\textsuperscript{46} If the viewer were to imaginatively step forward into the foreground of the painting, then this step would take her/him into the past, and the present would appear as though it were further back in pictorial space.

The past—the pioneering era—is called into play by the concerns of the painter for his (or her) own time, the present of the late nineteenth century. The representation of that past is selective and motivated by the needs to imaginatively redress the problems of modernisation at the turn of the century. However, the nostalgic representation of the past carries its own logical future, one in which the problems caused by discontinuity with the imagined past are erased. To journey imaginatively through the space of the painting is to travel forwards in time from a fictional past to a fictional present. This is the journey, from heroic past to optimistic present, through which the nation is formed imaginatively. Both the past and the present are formed within the exercise of imaginative restraint.
Conclusion
The ambivalent relationship between past and present that is inscribed in bush
mythology articulates the knowledge that one cannot inhabit the past. The literary and
visual representations of the bush suggest a movement between city and bush, present
and past. This mobility is critical to the construction of a meaningful image of Australia
as an imagined national community. In the bush mythology, immobilised men and
women who inhabit the bush become part of it, and seem queer, weird and mad to
others. Similarly, those who attempt to dwell in the fictional past of the Australian
nation formation may be assimilated to the past, which is a form of 'derangement'. The
problem of historical knowledge is how to "fix a point in the mind" without losing the
pathway back to the present.

The two chapters that follow examine this ambiguity of past, present and future in
national mythology, in relation to Benedict Anderson's concept of nations as imagined
communities.

1Henry Lawson, "Water Them Geraniums", A Camp-Fire Yarn, Lansdowne,
Sydney, 1988, p. 723.
2ibid., p. 719.
4ibid., p. 242.
5ibid.
7Henry Lawson, "No Place for a Woman", ibid., p. 581.
9Elrad Ibsch, "Historical Changes in the Function of Spatial Description in Literary
10Brian Matthews, The Receding Wave: Henry Lawson's Prose, Melbourne
University Press, Melbourne, 1972, p. 18.
11Leigh Astbury, "Certainty and Ambivalence in the Art of Frederick McCubbin", in
Bridget Whitelaw, The Art of Frederick McCubbin, exhibition catalogue, National
Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1991, p. 9; Graeme Turner, National Fictions—
Literature, Film and the Construction of the Australian Narrative, Allen and Unwin,
Sydney, 1986, p. 91; Ivor Indyk, "Reading Men Like Signboards: The Egalitarian
303-315; Ivor Indyk, "Some Uses of Myth in Australian Literature", Australian
Cultural History, no. 5, 1986, pp. 60-74; G.W. Turner, "Joseph Furphy and
Narrative Art", in Alan Brissenden (ed.), Aspects of Australian Fiction, University


18 ibid.

19 ibid.

20 ibid., p. 401.

21 The present whereabouts of *Childhood Fancies* (1904) is unknown; the painting is known through its reproduction in James MacDonald (ed.), *The Art of Frederick McCubbin*, The Lothian Book Publishing Co. Pty. Ltd., Melbourne and Sydney, 1916, republished by Boolarong Publications, Brisbane, 1986, plate xii (facing p. 44).

22 Paul Ricouer, *op. cit.*, p. 400.


25 It was noted earlier that Arthur Streeton and Charles Conder also produced Symbolist images of *femme fatale* inhabitants of the bush, which also symbolise the bush itself. The 1880s had marked a decade of aestheticism in the visual arts and particularly in design. By the 1900s a revived interest in fantasy and classicism found expression in the work of Lionel Lindsay, Rupert Bunny, Bertram MacKennal, Hugh Ramsey, George Lambert and others. Recently an exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW brought together works that could be identified with Australian Classical Revivalism: *Stampede of the Lower Gods: Classical Mythology in Australian Arts 1890s-1930* (curated by Deborah Edwards), Art Gallery of New South Wales, 19 October–26 November 1989.


32 *ibid.*, p. 60.


34 Douglas Jarvis "Lawson, the Bulletin and the Short Story", *op. cit.*, p. 60.


36 Christopher Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-123.


