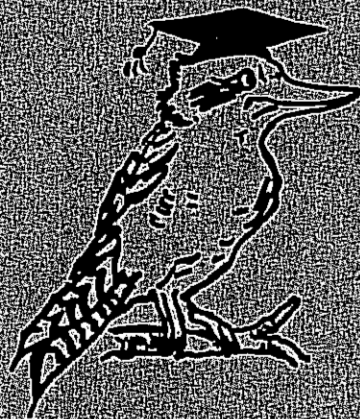


WORKING PAPERS
IN
AUSTRALIAN STUDIES

WORKING PAPER NO 46

**WOMEN AND THE BUSH:
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FEMININE***

by
Kay Schaffer



SIR ROBERT MENZIES CENTRE FOR AUSTRALIAN STUDIES

Institute of Commonwealth Studies
University of London
27-28 Russell Square
London WC1

Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies
Institute of Commonwealth Studies
University of London

WORKING PAPER NO 46

**WOMEN AND THE BUSH:
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FEMININE***

by
Kay Schaffer

South Australian College of Advanced Education

June 1989

Series Editor: Carl Bridge

ISBN: 1 85507 001 4

The central image against which the Australian character measures himself is the bush. "The Bush is the heart of the country, the real Australian Australia," wrote Francis Adams, a journalist who migrated to Australia from England in the 1880's. In his travel guide published in London in 1893 he lauded the "true Bushman" as "the man of the nation".¹ But he also tempered his praise with a recognition of the dangers which attend bush life, dangers which later writers would concur made the bush "no place for a woman".² Adams remarked that "The Anglo-Australian has perished or is absorbed in the Interior much more rapidly than on the sea-slope or in the towns".³ Adams' descriptions reveal several attributes familiar to the discourse on the Australian tradition: the male-as-norm and land-as-other; the bush as central and city as peripheral to self-definition; and the personification of the bush as the heart, the Interior--a mysterious presence which calls to men for the purposes of exploration and discovery but is also a monstrous place in which men may either perish or be absorbed.

When Adams wrote of death in the bush he may have been thinking of the fate of Burke and Wills, Australia's most celebrated explorers, who perished in July 1861 during their attempt to traverse the continent from south to north. His use of the term 'absorption' is suggestive of the power of the bush, like the fantasy of the primal mother, to suck up its inhabitants, assimilating them into its contours and robbing them of a separate identity. This is a powerful fantasy in Australia. It is one of the ways in which the feminine is present in the bush tradition--not necessarily in actual figures of women inhabiting the bush, but in responses to the bush itself. The landscape provides a feminine other against which the bushman-as-hero is constructed. Further, these narratives engage the reader in a process through which his or her own subjectivity is constructed. The fantasy of the bush as an absorbing landscape, capable of sucking up its inhabitants circulates through the narratives of history, fiction and film. It structures meaning for human events as well. It is one of a number of dominant representations for the Australian landscape which I will examine in this paper.

The Colonial Context

Within the Australian tradition the nature of man's relationship to the land is a central concern. The land as an imaginative construction, a fantasy, has taken many forms. Representations are not stable but heterogeneous. In the early days of exploration the land was imagined as a playground for man's rational-*cum*-scientific interests. Wild, untamed Nature, through Romantic constructions, came to be a source of man's knowledge and pleasure. Men of science discovered, through Captain Cook's voyages, a wealth of Australian flora and fauna previously unknown and unclassified. The zoological oddities

contributed to the idea of Australia as a land of oddities. "Nature. . . seems determined to have a bit of play, and to amuse herself as she pleases," wrote the Reverend Sidney Smith from London in 1817.⁴ When Nature yielded scientific riches she was described as playful, capricious. She was not, of course, amusing herself, but the new colonial inhabitants. Her riches, the plant and animal life which defied classification into the linear order of the Great Chain of Being, would eventually provide scientists with data to support a new theory of organic evolution.

At the same time, scientists, philosophers and moral reformers began to take an interest in the native population. The Aboriginal people were variously described for popular readership. Some writers hailed them as noble savages, others dismissed them as wanton barbarians, still others studied them as the possible connecting link between man and the monkeys in the Great Chain. All natives were named as objects for white man's scrutiny and placed on the lowest order of human life. But the Aboriginal women, who "only seem to require a tail to complete the identity" were especially damned.⁵ During convict days the antipodean land of oddities came to be seen as a suitable dumping ground for criminals: "the dwelling place of devils in human shape, the refuse of Botany Bay".⁶

During the time of transportation, Australia became a "howling hell" on earth, a hostile wilderness. The women, unlucky enough to be sentenced to the penal colony, were invariably described as unregenerate reprobates, much worse a class of criminals than the men, women being "generally the refuse of London".⁷ During this time the image of Australia in England was one of exaggerated horror. As Coral Lansbury suggests, the representations may have served as an ideological device to control working class crime in Britain. The moral reformers in England created an image of moral depravity for the colony in Australia to mask and control the threat of civil disruption from within their own society. The signifying force of the feminine as evil, the she-devil, operates to name both the land and its inhabitants. But convict women, all damned whores, were especially damned.

The imaginative construction of the land as an alien wilderness is familiar to contemporary readers of Australian literature. Marcus Clarke's novel of the convict system, His Natural Life, represents Australia in similar terms as a land of exile and terror from which there is no escape. In Clarke's text Australia is represented as "a fantastic land of monstrosities" which tells its "story of sullen despair" in "the language of the barren and the uncouth".⁸ In his preface to the poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon, Clarke extends the metaphor of a monstrous, alien landscape, describing the spirit of the bush as one of "weird melancholy".⁹ We recall Henry Lawson's use of similar

descriptions of the bush--"a blasted, barren wilderness that doesn't even howl".¹⁰

Exploring the Landscape

To the early explorers, however, the land was imagined as an Arcadian paradise. Thomas Mitchell wrote evocatively of the allure of the luxuriant, verdant landscape of Victoria. "Of this Eden it seemed that I was the only Adam", he reported, "and it was indeed a sort of paradise to me".¹¹ He coined the phrase "Australia Felix" to describe the area, a phrase which later writers would use to express the possibilities for the whole continent. John Lort Stokes, Captain of the *Beagle* during the exploratory voyages of 1837-1843, referred to the pliant, virgin land which met his gaze as "the Plains of Promise". As the explorers penetrated the bush, often without success, they began to recognise its dangers and its mysteries. Charles Sturt, unable to reach his goal during the 1849 expedition into Central Australia wrote:

A veil hung over Central Australia that could neither be pierced or raised. Girt around by deserts, it almost appeared as if Nature had intentionally closed itself upon civilized man, that she might have one domain on earth's wide field over which the savage might roam in freedom.¹²

Charles Eyre wrote in a similarly imaginative vein as he headed West from Adelaide towards Western Australia. He detailed his self-confessed obsession with this landscape/this woman in the following way. He penned his desire to penetrate "the vast recesses of the interior of Australia, to try to lift up the veil which has hitherto shrouded its mysteries from the researches of the traveller".¹³ For both Eyre and Sturt the land takes on the features of a veiled, seductive, exotic, unknown but desired maiden. This same fantasy is evoked for viewers in the opening scenes of the film Picnic at Hanging Rock.

As land exploration and settlement progressed through the nineteenth century the land came to be seen as harsh, raw, obdurate, cruel, barren and fickle.¹⁴ The bush of Lawson's stories, "that everlasting maddening sameness of stunted trees [which] makes a man want to break away"¹⁵ becomes more familiar to Australians, replacing the earlier Arcadian fantasies. In the twentieth century the metaphor for the landscape as a body of lack is encoded in Hancock's pastoral history, Australia. In this text the land is represented as a wilderness, a void, a threat to be mastered. Hancock details this mastery in a central chapter entitled "Filling in the Vast Open Spaces"¹⁶. In The Legend of the Nineties

Vance Palmer remarks of the pioneers' vision, "Even the most patriotic spirits thought of Australia as a lean, unlovely mother. . .an enemy to be fought".¹⁷ It is not surprising, then, to find Miriam Dixson commenting that "Australia is like the body of an unloved woman".¹⁸

What is articulated in these constructions about the bush comes not from the bush itself but from the fantasies of those who view it. The bush functions as a locus of desire. Animated by man's desire, it takes on the seeming attributes of woman, whether described as a passive landscape or an alien force; a place of exile or belonging; a landscape of promise or of threat. This myth of the bush precedes actual seeing. And it is one constantly reproduced in the twentieth century through postcards, television, films, newspaper articles, picture books and ecological campaigns. Meaghan Morris, in a different context, has written of how this construction structures and motivates the visitor's vision. She describes the bush of the Australian imaginary as both void and plenum--"a reservoir of places where nothing might be, or anything might happen".¹⁹ She writes that the myth of the bush is both powerful and seductive because its meanings are reversible. The outback both seduces and repulses. It presents the fantastic possibilities of a spiritual quest and vision and also the nightmare fears of madness and/or death. This bush comes to us through our heritage of texts. It is understood through them, in all the force of its mystery, power and threat, as "our" possession. Texts "make sense" of the world. Narrative is the place where one's material history, social relations and subjectivity are produced.

Nineteenth century colonial outcasts from Britain identified the land as a place of exile. To them it was alien, foreign, strange. Speakers who identified with the land, either on behalf of British imperialism or Australian nationhood, imagined it as a threat to be mastered, an object to be possessed, an Other to be incorporated into or appropriated by the self. When the early explorers successfully penetrated Australia's inland barriers they evoked the land through Romantic metaphors - a bountiful gift, an exotic paradise, a pre-lapsarian Eden. When wealthy pastoralists established outback stations, they imagined it as a passive, pliant virgin awaiting consummation. But an ambivalence remained. The bush took on the characteristics of danger particularly for the bushman of the nationalist tradition. It threatened him with assimilation, isolation and death. It represented a force which might reduce him to madness, melancholia or despair. Man's identity, which might be secured heroically by his possession and control of the land as a primary object of desire, was called into doubt by the threat of the bush. The native son is rendered powerless in the face of this force. He becomes its victim.

Within the narratives of national identity, Australian native sons confront the British parent culture to determine who will have authority, power and presence in the land. National identity, constructed as a battle between fathers and sons, is a battle for mastery over physical and ideological barriers and boundaries. Sometimes, as is familiar within an American mythology, the prize is woman; but more often in Australia it is the land itself which is desired and possessed. What is assumed in the constructions of the masculine character is an otherness at their borders against which identity is measured. As should be obvious from the previous discussion, this otherness works in several contradictory directions. On the one hand, Australia is largely the "other" of England, the mirror image. In metaphoric terms, the child directs his gaze back to the parent whose authority he challenges, but whose recognition he desires. On the other hand, the Australian character asserts an independent identity through an assumed relation not to the parent culture but to the land as other. Representations of man's relation to the land attempt to fix the nature of Australia's unique difference from England and the native son's difference from all other colonial sons--as Australian. The land takes on the characteristics of feminine otherness in opposition to the masculine sameness of national self-identity. These symbolic associations present in the discourse on Australian identity are endemic to Western capitalist culture, but they take on an Australian specificity which deserves our attention.

In most cases male figures occupy the paternal position of the Father within a nationalist tradition but this is not necessarily the case. Those who attempt to control the native son on behalf of the Father--through religion, manners, morals, etc. can also be so named. And they are often women. This is the place of the Drover's wife; the role ascribed to "ladies" on the gold fields; and the responsibility cast on the shoulders of emigrant women in the 1850's who have come to be known as "God's police". In addition, since the construction opposes the natural to the cultural (and then valorises the natural), aspects of culture inherited from the parent culture (religion, intellectual and cultural pursuits generally, and also class divisions and the authority of members of the ruling class) are given negative value. Within the discourse, in relation to masculine-feminine dichotomies, that which is demeaned in value is also feminised. So, the city, urban life, morals, intellectual and cultural pursuits come to be represented as derivative, inauthentic, unnatural and thus "feminine".

But the land is the terrain on and against which both Australian men and women symbolically measure their identity. And the land as an absorbing presence is perhaps the most disturbing yet regularly recurring fantasy within a nationalist tradition. This suggests that the struggle for national identity continues to exert a powerful force on the

Australian cultural imagination. Its manifestations can be traced through various forms of the media which purport to represent both real and imagined events.

"Picnic at Hanging Rock"

That this particular fantasy continues to circulate in contemporary culture can be evidenced from its evocation in the popular film Picnic at Hanging Rock. The film was directed by Peter Weir and derived from a 1967 novel of the same name by Joan Lindsay, allegedly based on a real occurrence. Only with the publicity surrounding the film did publishers reveal that the book's claims to truth were a hoax. The film premiered in 1975 and received wide acclaim at the 1976 Cannes film festival. Critics praised the film for its depiction of "the awe-inspiring power of the Australian bush, which alienates some and hypnotically absorbs others," into the enigma and mystery of its animistic force.²⁰ The film, through commentary, takes its place within the associated meanings, figures and tropes of the Australian tradition.

In Picnic the audience participates actively in a film fantasy in which three young women and one of their teachers are absorbed into the bush. The audience gazes upon the innocent, pubescent Victorian maidens with fascination and desire, while it views the landscape around Hanging Rock as a mysterious force which will pose the ultimate threat of loss of identity. A question is set up for the viewer: who will possess the beautiful Miranda--Michael ("us"), the besotted youth through whose eyes the spectator engages with her image as an object of desire, or the dominating, enigmatic forces of Nature? The natural world threatens at every turn. Cicadas land on shirtsleeves; ants infect the picnic cake; even greenhouse plants grasp at human hands. "Civilisation" battles with the forces of nature while at the same time the delicate, wind-blown, idealised images of the innocent young girls fuse with those of the majestic bush.

In terms of both the narrative and the spectacle, the film sets up an identification between the main male protagonist and the audience. In Picnic his place is occupied first by Michael, a British son of the gentry visiting his relatives in the colonies and then Albert, the Australian "common man" and servant to the gentry, who becomes Michael's "mate". After the girls' disappearance, Michael emerges initially as the character who must solve the mystery. He mounts a one man search party and, Oedipus-like, sets out on a quest of discovery. Exhausted and overcome by the bush, Michael passes the "key" to the journey (cinematographically presented to the viewer as a fetish object in the form of a close up shot of a scrap of torn white lace) onto Albert, the Australian native son. Albert masters the precipice but finds only a lone survivor, the schoolgirl Edith, who has been dazed by

the bush and is unable to solve the mystery of her companions' disappearance.

In terms of an imaginary fantasy, Picnic imagines the bush as the most powerful and mysterious object in the film. The bush stands in the way of the protagonist's possession and mastery of the girls; its seeming power to absorb its inhabitants frustrates the viewers desire for a closure of narrative meaning. The story, as narrative and spectacle, denies the desire for a coherent self-identity. The film engages the viewer in an impossible scene of seduction between mother and child, the land and its inhabitants, outside of the constraints of the Father's law. As the schoolgirls become one with the bush without distinction they signify an attachment between mother and child beyond the cultural order of rules and restraints and reasonable controls. This is an intolerable threat to the ego within patriarchy. The paternal position is empty. The children are absorbed. The bush as primal mother, acts as a "fantastic land of monstrosities" (recalling Marcus Clarke's signification), exhibiting an omnivorous appetite of unbounded need, outside of articulation.²¹

The film Picnic at Hanging Rock illustrates the paradox that the bush is both "no place for a woman" and, at the same time, the place of Woman with reference to a Western symbolic order as it locates the feminine. The young women in the bush become the bush, without distinction. They are absorbed into its contours. Through them, viewers play out a fearful fantasy which circulates within the Australian imaginary. In terms of Australian identity, this film depicts the ultimate threat, that the land might actually absorb its inhabitants. Mastery over the land (and thus the self) would be denied. It is a powerful male fantasy, but one in which women participate as well.

Christian Metz has said that "the power of unreality in film derives from the fact that the unreal seems to have been realized. Unfolding before our eyes as if it were the flow of common occurrence, not the plausible illustration of some extraordinary process conceived only in the mind. . . Film is like a vacuum which our dreams readily fill."²² There is evidence that Picnic has had this powerful effect on the subjectivity of Australian viewers.

Recent news events

The power of the fantasy of an absorbing primeval mother nature, evoked in the nineteenth century by Marcus Clarke, Francis Adams and others, and reinacted in Picnic at Hanging Rock continues to motivate personal, social and cultural responses to the bush. This can be seen with reference to a series of recent tragic events. The first

surfaced in a small news item in Adelaide's *Sunday Mail*, in December, 1986. It reported the disappearance of two teen-aged boys from their separate caretaker positions in remote areas of a vast cattle station in Western Australia. The article carried the headline: "Missing Boys: Mystery Deepens", and a central column sub-heading "Phone call a hoax". Photos of two adolescent boys, one an image of a fair-haired youth dressed in a school uniform, the other of a darker lad, smiling and in casual dress, formed border columns for the article. The visual and linguistic cues (photos, mystery, hoax) signalled a repetition of the Hanging Rock fantasy for readers. In one scene in the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* viewers glimpse through a magnifying glass at a newspaper account of the disappearance of the girls which is headed "College Mystery Deepens: Four Still Missing" over an oval school photo of Miranda. The *Sunday Mail* article with its heading, layout, pictorials and narrative re-envokes this scene from the film. The text describes how the boys "vanished without a trace", a phenomenon said by the reporter to "rival the fictional mystery of Hanging Rock for intrigue".²³

Four months later the mystery would be solved with the discovery of the skeletal remains of the two boys in a remote desert region 400 kilometres south-east of Halls Creek. Even at the time of their disappearance, speculation as to its cause might have surmised that the boys could have been anywhere--together or apart; on a holiday or on the run from a difficult situation; safely camping outback or in danger through lack of supplies. They could have been abducted or the victims of foul play. As it turns out they were allegedly attempting to escape from inhumane conditions imposed upon them by the property manager of a remote outback station. They perished when their car broke down, they ran out of water and were unable to summon help. Human error and inexperience were responsible for the mystery, not the inanimate forces of nature. The boys were not absorbed into the bush--although that fantasy was re-created by the news item and, later, reactivated for its readers by the tasteless photo of one of the boys' parched bones, scattered amidst desert scrub, which announced the tragic discovery on the front page of the press.

A month later a nine year old mentally retarded boy would disappear in rugged bushland in Wilson's Promontory National Park in Victoria. At the time of this writing his disappearance has not been explained. But the last press report quoted the grieving mother of the boy as saying "I believe my son was probably consumed by the forces of nature".²⁴

Tragedies like these sparked a front page editorial under the headline: "Realities of a harsh land no joke". The editorial was prompted by the death of an American tourist,

taken by a crocodile in the far north of the country. But the event was used to further encode the meaning of the land of the Australian tradition. The editorial, which opened with reference to the harsh land, ended with the following warning: "We are Australians. And we must learn to beware of Australia's capricious wonders as much as we love them".²⁵ In this instance, the death occurred on water not on land; the woman was American, not Australian; and her death was the result of an ill-considered decision to swim where crocodiles were known to breed. The editorial, which is ostensibly about her death, is actually about "Australian-ness", which arises out of man's relation to what is imagined as a harsh landscape, the bush, represented as a capricious wonder. Imagined in this way, once again, nature becomes an indomitable feminine force and man its passive victim.

People do die in the bush. And those deaths are tragic. But they could have been prevented. The victims died through misadventure, inexperience, loss of direction, misjudgement, exposure, lack of supplies, foolhardiness, and the like. The bush, itself, was not absorbing, consuming or capricious. These are imaginary constructions for the landscape which attend a long history of white settlement. The white Australian bush, for example, is not the bush of the Aboriginal dreamtime which has sustained tribal life in the outback for over 40,000 years, nor the mythic "land of milk and honey" as represented in the American colonial tradition which later became signified as the "whore with the heart of gold" when she yielded her riches in the 1850's. The relationship of white Australians to the bush produces very different bush from that of Aboriginal Australians. It also produces a very different "woman" from her construction in other lands. The discourse on the Australian tradition is a crucial site of narrative construction for "femininity". That meaning which Australian culture pours into the category of the feminine also engages its readers in cultural and social formations of the feminine which inscribe female subjectivity.

No Place for a Woman

All Western discourse positions woman as both subject and object. Discourse establishes a surfeit of representations for feminine otherness. Is there an Australian specificity which mediates this process in particular ways? In other words, how is life in Australia similar to and how is it different from that in other Western phallogocentric cultures? What is the relationship between the various representations of the feminine, attitudes towards the Australian landscape and the women who inhabit it, and the construction of subjectivities of women and men in Australia? We all are the effects of discourse. Meaning does not exist anywhere except where it is lived and made. The pre-eminent

meaning encoded in the nationalist myth of the land-as-woman is that of a harsh, cruel, threatening, fickle, castrating mother. She is dangerous, non-nurturing and not to be trusted. This is "no place for a woman"! But it is also a familiar place of Woman within the Australian tradition.

Anne Summers has suggested that the two predominant, enduring stereotypes for women in Australia are those of the "damned whore" and the "God's police". Despite this formulation and the historical remnants of convictism which support it, it would appear that the "damned whore" is not the predominant underside of the code for Australian femininity. Rather, it is the bad mother. In a society which still can refer to legitimate sex acts between married partners as "having a naughty" and can call to a new bride as she departs for her honeymoon "Don't forget to pack the Dispirin", sex is not an important cultural category of transgression. But motherhood is. The problem is that, until recently, the mode of existence for the bad mother-- the one who is harsh, obdurate, fickle, threatening; the one who fails to nurture her children; the one who cannot be trusted--in other words, the cruel mother construction which has served as a metaphor for the bush, was largely a fantasy.²⁶ This was the case until the fatal evening in August 1980 when Lindy Chamberlain inadvertently stepped into her shoes and into the Australian tradition.

The Chamberlain case

The Chamberlain case is interesting for the purposes of this study not in terms of Lindy Chamberlain's innocence or guilt but for the ways in which the media portrayed the event and the attitudes and opinions which coalesced around her. Within two days of the disappearance of the nine week old infant Azaria Chamberlain at Ayers' Rock police were convinced that they had a murder case. They surmised that Lindy was lying in her assertion that a dingo took the baby from its cot in the tent in the public camping ground at the base of the Rock. Although they could detect no motive, no evidence, no murder weapon, no body and no witnesses, they concurred that the mother had murdered the baby. A trail of suspicion dragged at Lindy's heels, aided no doubt by the media accounts of rumours of bizarre and unusual behaviour which led to her personification as an evil, daemonic monster, in league with the devil. In pubs across Australia the patrons stood up and cheered months later when she was convicted for the murder of her child and sentenced to life imprisonment in Darwin's Berrimah gaol, far from her family and new-born child, born while she waited in prison for the outcome of her second inquest and trial. She has since been pardoned for the crime and exonerated by the courts but not forgiven by a large percentage of the Australian population. It took seven years to sort

through the paranoia, lies, rumours, evidence, forensic tests and conflicting accounts between the police and Aboriginal trackers, the scientists, lawyers and experts witnesses, which led to her pardon. Still a majority of Australians are prepared to debate the issue. They have not forgiven Lindy.

Critics and cultural commentators remain baffled as to how this event could have captured the imagination of the nation and inflamed such harsh and irrational judgements for seven years. How could it be that the police, the press, eye witnesses, the jury which convicted Lindy of the death of the child, the inquiry which finally pardoned Lindy but failed to restore her innocence, and the hostile public which continues to denounce the mother in the most vitriolic rhetoric were all convinced without sound evidence of a mother's guilt? A recent *Time (Australia)* cover story suggests that "the question must ripen for a few years yet". The writer comments that "it is too early to expect everyone to dispassionately reassess their weird jumble of Azaria mythology, so deeply held and so passionately defended for so long".²⁷ A few critics have attempted to analyse the cultural phenomenon. They resort to a context of witchcraft, demonology, scapegoating and the like to make sense of it. They "know" that it was a uniquely Australian phenomenon, this "sacrifice in the desert", but no one can pinpoint why, exactly.

My investigation of cultural representations resonates with reasons as to why and how the bizarre event could have occurred. The media positions viewers and readers to receive meaning in certain ways. The codes of meaning through which the population interpreted the death of Azaria Chamberlain and the character of her mother had to have existed in the culture long before the event took place. Reports of the death of the baby gave shape to 200 years of historical constructions about the land waiting to solidify around a woman and an event. The disappearance of the child at Ayers' Rock allowed Australians to pour a century of fear and frustration, evidenced by the bush-as-cruel-mother representations, on to a woman who became the archetypally evil mother. The event was placed in a field of meaning and then explained in relation to that field. The meaning did not emanate from Lindy Chamberlain herself nor from events which actually occurred at Ayers' Rock in August 1980. The "meaning" which materialised around the infant's death already had been constructed within an Australian imaginary. The infant victim stood in the place of all the repressed and irrational fears about national identity--that the native son might succumb to the cruel mother; that the mother might ruthlessly harm her innocent children; that mother nature can victimise her sons; that identity, potency, authority of the self over the Other is never secure. These powerful imaginative associations are embedded in a psychic consciousness of what it means to be an Australian. It is likely that they were activated by the press in its construction of the Chamberlain case. It is not

the "reality" or the "facts" of the case which deserve closer scrutiny but the modes of representation which enabled the population to read the events according to pre-existing systems of meaning.

Woman as Scapegoat

Australian attitudes to women and the bush continue to be shaped by the narratives on national identity, often irrationally and with negative consequences. The tendency to resort to woman as scapegoat for doubts about the nature of the native son's authority in and on the land appears too often, the strategy is too repetitive, the explanation too easy. There is something else in this tradition, something that may not emanate from the land/the bush/woman itself. The "something else" caught in the web of the debate circulates around the ongoing question of identity. It surfaced clearly during the time of the sacking of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. At that time the Governor General, Sir John Kerr, asserted the political authority of the Queen in order to appoint Malcolm Fraser, the leader of the opposition, as Whitlam's successor. This unprecedented act had many political implications which have been debated by the press and public. Among other things, on the level of cultural myth, it overturned the traditional relationship between the Australian native son and the British parent culture. The event as cultural myth is referred to in an review of a new Bicentennial history entitled *Australia: Spirit of a Nation* by Michael Cannon. In the *National Times* article, the reviewer chastises the historian for his banal treatment of the Whitlam era, one which the reviewer claims embodies the classic Australian myth: that is, "game little battlers who get shafted by the British establishment while trying to buy back the farm".²⁸ Identity here clearly invokes the familiar chain of signifiers: man on the land struggling against both British parental authority and the forces of nature. But the question seldom asked and forever just beneath the surface of the identity saga is: who owns this farm? Who ever has owned it?

Recent concerns about British dominance over the affairs of state, American dominance within the media and American (more recently Japanese) dominance in the stock market jostle uncomfortably with the desire for a unique national identity. But the issue of identity, as coded within the Australian tradition, frames the news and acts as an interpretative framework for individual action, sweeping larger economic and political complications under the woodheap. Australians may be finding, as the Drover's Wife discovered at her peril, that the woodheap is empty. Beneath the facade of familiar representations of mother nature as an indomitable force is a system of power relations which can be more deadly than a king brown snake. Those power relations authorise certain meanings and block, deny or prohibit others. The discourse on national identity

preserves the place of the national character as an original, authentic Australian presence. To work effectively it must disguise the operations of power. The Bicentenary afforded Australians with an opportunity to both celebrate a national mythology and to call it into question. During the year within the country a plethora of dissident voices rose to challenge received traditions and speak from positions of difference. The disparate and differing voices of Aborigines, migrants, women, the aged, the unemployed and the dispossessed spoke from positions of otherness which confounded the desire for national unity. Beyond the national debate, questions about who owns Australia and who does, can or will speak for those who live there are if not high on a national or international agenda, at least on that agenda. It is the intention of this project to take part in that ongoing discourse of otherness.

* Note: This paper provides an overview of ideas and issues discussed at greater length in my study *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition* (Melbourne and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988). A version of this paper was first delivered at the Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, London, on 1 February 1989.

Notes

1. Francis Adams, *The Australian* (London, 1893) quoted in Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1966 pb. ed.) 47
2. The title of a short story by Henry Lawson, and a common refrain.
3. Adams, in Palmer, 47.
4. Sydney Smith, cited in Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768-1850: A Study in the History of Art and Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 170.
5. Peter Cunningham, *Two Years in New South Wales* (London, 1927), cited in Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1788-1980* (Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), 8.
6. T. Crofton Croker (ed.), *Memoirs of Joseph Holt, General of the Irish Rebels, in 1798* (London, 1838), cited in White, 17.
7. Letter of King to Portland (1 March 1802), cited in Miriam Dixon, *The Real Matilda* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1976), 124-5.
8. Marcus Clarke, *For the Term of His Natural Life* quoted in L.T. Hergenhan (ed.), *A Colonial City: High and Low Life--Selected Journalism of Marcus Clarke*. (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1972), 363-364.
9. Marcus Clarke, "The Australian Landscape: Comments on Two Paintings", revised and reprinted as the Preface to A.L. Gordon *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift*. (Melbourne: Clarson, Massina, 1876). Both versions are reprinted and compared L.T. Hergenhan, 467.
10. Henry Lawson, "Hungerford" in Colin Roderick (ed.), *Henry Lawson: Short Stories and Sketches, 1888-1922* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972), 106.
11. Thomas Mitchell, *Journal of an Expedition into the Interior of Tropical Australia, in Search of a Route from Sydney to the Gulf of Carpentaria (1848)*, quoted in Ross Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1984), 119-120. See Gibson, Chap. 4, "Experience in Purgatory" for an explication of the mythic elements in the narratives of exploration. Gibson does not attend specifically to the feminine signification of landscape in this study. He does make the metaphors explicit in his superb short film "Camera Natura."
12. Charles Sturt, *Narrative of an Exploration in to Central Australia* (Lond., 1849), II, 2 quoted in Gibson, 126-7.
13. Edward John Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery in Central Australia and Overland from Adelaide to King George's Sound, in the years 1849-41*, ((Lond., 1845), 1, 23 quoted in Gibson, 127-128.
14. See Lenore Coltheart, "Australia Misère: the Northern Territory in the Nineteenth Century", Ph.D.dissertation, Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland, 1982, xv. Coltheart identifies the terms:

"progress, development, growing, expanding, thriving, discovery and conquest" found in the narratives of Northern Territory land exploration as those derived from the four stages assumptions; the terms "hostile, harsh, obstructive, fickle, impoverished, deceitful, and raw" as those which define the land with reference to an Arcadian ideal, and "empty, sleeping, desolate, and forsaken" as coming from an Arcadian frame of reference but with the deliberate exclusion of the Aboriginal natives. I am grateful to Dr Coltheart for generously sharing her work and her enthusiasm for my project with me.

15. Henry Lawson, "The Drover's Wife", in Colin Roderick (ed.), *Henry Lawson: Short Stories and Sketches, 1888-1922* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972), 50.
16. W.K.Hancock, *Australia* (London: Benn, 1930; Brisbane: Jacaranda rpt., 1961).
17. Vance Palmer, *Legend*, 20.
18. Miriam Dixson, *The Real Matilda* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1976), 23.
19. Meaghan Morris, "Two Types of Photographic Criticism Located in Relation to Lynn Silverman's Series", *Art and Text*, 6 (1982), 68-9.
20. Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film, 1900-1977: A Guide to Feature Film Production* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980), 367.
21. For a description of primal fears and fantasies with reference to masculine identity and feminine lack see Robert Con Davis, "The Discourse of the Father", in Robert Con Davis (ed.) *The Fictional Father: Lacanian Readings of the Text* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 1-26. Davis discusses the "maelstrom" of maternal need outside of the articulation of the father's law in precisely these terms.
22. Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*. Trans. by Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 5, 23. Veronica Brady in a review of Graeme Turner's *National Fictions* calls attention to this dimension of the film as text as well. See her review in *Westerly*, 3 (1987), 91, 92.
23. "Missing Boys: Mystery Deepens", *Sunday Mail* (Adelaide) 4 Jan 1987, 3.
24. "My Son Is Dead: Mother," *Advertiser*, 4, July, 1987, 2.
25. Des Colquhoun, "Realities of a harsh land no joke," *Advertiser*, 1 April 1987, 1.
26. Henry Lawson engages the reader in this construction of the bad mother in his autobiographical story "A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father." See Colin Roderick (ed.), *Henry Lawson, Short Stories and Sketches 1888-1922* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972), 680-685. Almost without exception, critics have accepted the

narrative as truth and employed it as evidence to prove that the faults in Lawson's personality and writings can be attributed to Louisa, his mother.

27. A.N.Maiden, "Witch-Hunt: How the Chamberlain Case Touched a Nation's Inner Fears", *Time (Australia)*, 24 (June 15, 1987), 33.
28. David Greason, "Celebration of Worn Out Myths," *National Times* (11-17 Oct., 1985), 35.