Convict Hero-Villains: A Study of Convict Protagonists in Gothic Fiction from Australia

Lea Rudolph-Buergisser
20729829
MA, University of Zurich, 2007

This thesis is presented for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy of
The University of Western Australia

School of Humanities
English and Cultural Studies

2015
Abstract

This study focuses on novels that make use of the Gothic to explore Australia’s convict history and have a male convict as their protagonist. In fact, the transported convict can be considered a special figure which has been resurfacing in Australian literature for over 150 years, as exemplified by the texts analysed here: James Tucker’s *Ralph Rashleigh* (c. 1840s), Marcus Clarke’s *His Natural Life* (1870-1872), John Boyle O’Reilly’s *Moondyne: A Story from the Underworld* (1878), William Hay’s *The Escape of the Notorious Sir William Heans* (1919), Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* (1997) and Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001). It analyses the protagonists of these fictions by using the concept of the Gothic hero-villain as defined by Leslie A. Fiedler and others, among other Gothic conventions. The study of these texts is prefaced by an introductory survey of the history of convict transportation to the Australian colonies. I trace how the representation of the convict changes over time, an approach which provides me with a useful framework for comparison and allows me to illustrate the different cultural discourses that have emerged with regard to Australia’s convict history.

My central argument is that Australia’s convict origins were repressed for generations, and that Gothic literature has allowed the return of this experience into the cultural discourse, with most texts illustrating how the penal past was dealt with in the various time frames in which they were published. I draw on historians such as John Hirst, Robert Hughes, Stuart Macintyre, David Andrew Roberts and Babette Smith, who discuss the shame associated with the convict past, often referred to as the “convict stain”, and how this past has only reluctantly been acknowledged at personal and official levels. The Gothic genre commonly deals with the repressed past. According to Allan Lloyd Smith, for example, the Gothic “is about the return of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present” (*American Gothic Fiction* 1). This concept can fruitfully be applied to the texts analysed in this study.

*Ralph Rashleigh*, written by Tucker while a convict at Port Macquarie, foreshadows convict Gothic tropes that occur in most of the other texts included here. Moreover, as part of his search for how best to represent the convict experience, Tucker includes a variety of character types, including a Gothic villain and a hero of sensibility. Joe, the protagonist in O’Reilly’s *Moondyne*, embodies some of the core
characteristics of the Gothic hero-villain also found in later texts. Both these novels by men who had actually been transported suggest that the convict experience lends itself to Gothic treatment.

Clarke’s *His Natural Life*, one of the first published examples of Australian convict Gothic fiction, is central to this study because Clarke depicts Richard Devine/Rufus Dawes as a Gothic hero-villain and introduces key convict Gothic motifs such as cannibalism and homosexual rape, with the aim of critiquing the British transportation system. Hay’s *Heans* centres on a, from a modern viewpoint, morally dubious gentleman-convict, and provides insights into how affected Australia was by changing class hierarchies and status anxiety in both the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Moreover, Hay is the first author to link Australia’s penal past with the tragic fate of Tasmania’s Indigenous people.

In the chapter on *Jack Maggs*, I argue that Carey subverts Dickens’s *Great Expectations* by turning the convict into a hero-villain and placing him centre-stage, and by foregrounding several Victorian taboos which depict the imperial centre in dark and degenerate terms. In contrast, the novel’s happy ending in Australia provides a late twentieth-century perspective on the country’s penal history. The protagonist in *Gould’s Book of Fish* is a very different hero-villain. In this novel, Flanagan successfully brings together postmodernism and the Gothic to highlight how the penal past continues to haunt present-day Australia, and how official history has functioned as a metanarrative to silence the voices of convicts and Aborigines.

Collectively, the novels can be said to belong to a tradition of convict Gothic fiction, a tradition that goes on beyond the most recent novels analysed in this study, as Australia’s convict history, as well as Aboriginal dispossession, continues to unfold in postcolonial Gothic writings.
CANDIDATE’S DECLARATION:

This thesis does not contain work that I have published, nor work under review for publication.

Student Signature........................................................................................................................................

Coordinating Supervisor Signature...........................................................................................................
Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to acknowledge and thank my supervisors Associate Professor Kieran Dolin and Professor Judith Johnston. I could not have wished for better guidance and support than I received from both Judy and Kieran. Their exceptional knowledge and advice have made this thesis infinitely sharper than it would ever have been without their unerring and invaluable feedback, and their kindness and professionalism have made the whole PhD experience much less daunting than anticipated.

I am also thankful to the many other people who have assisted me in various ways throughout the last years. As I had two girls while writing this thesis, my heartfelt thanks go out to everybody who helped look after Ellie and Jackie, including my husband, my family, Amelia, Lisa L., Lisa S., Antonia, Melisa and Caro. I am very grateful that I was able to combine early motherhood and my studies in a way that allowed me to be there for my young children.

I furthermore would like to thankfully remember my uncle Manfred, who sadly passed away two years ago. The money he left me allowed me to finance my studies once my scholarships ran out. I’m sure this would have been to his liking. I would also like to thank my parents for their amazing support, both financially and with the girls, especially during the last few months before submission.

Finally, I will never forget how encouraging and patient my husband has been throughout this journey. Thank you, Laurence.

Dedication

To my daughters, Ellie and Jackie
# Table of Contents

Abstract iii

Candidate’s Declaration v

Acknowledgements vii

Dedication vii

Introduction 1

(i) Australian Convict Gothic in Critical Perspective 2

(ii) Australia’s Convict Past: The Historical Context 19

(iii) A Brief Description of Each Chapter 35

1. James Tucker’s *Ralph Rashleigh* and John Boyle O’Reilly’s *Moondyne: A Story from the Under-World*: Two Texts Written By Actual Convicts 39

2. *His Natural Life*: Marcus Clarke’s Famous Nineteenth-Century Convict Gothic Novel 65


4. Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs*: Australia and *Great Expectations* 147

5. *Gould’s Book of Fish*: Richard Flanagan’s Postmodern Retelling of the Convict Past 171

Conclusion 199

List of Works Consulted 209
Introduction

This study focuses on novels that make use of the Gothic to explore Australia’s convict history and have a male convict as their protagonist. In fact, the transported convict can be considered a special figure which has been resurfacing in Australian literature for over 150 years, as exemplified by the texts analysed here: James Tucker’s *Ralph Rashleigh* (c. 1840s), Marcus Clarke’s *His Natural Life* (1870-1872), John Boyle O’Reilly’s *Moondyne: A Story from the Underworld* (1878), William Hay’s *The Escape of the Notorious Sir William Heans* (1919), Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* (1997) and Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001). By applying the concept of the Gothic hero-villain as defined by Leslie A. Fiedler and others, among other Gothic conventions, to the protagonists of these fictions, I trace how the representation of the convict changes over time, an approach which provides me with a useful framework for comparison and allows me to illustrate the different cultural discourses that have emerged with regard to Australia’s convict history.

My central argument is that Australia’s convict origins were repressed for generations, and that Gothic literature has allowed the return of this experience into the cultural discourse, with most texts illustrating how the penal past was dealt with in the various time frames in which they were published. I draw on historians such as John Hirst, Robert Hughes, Stuart Macintyre, David Andrew Roberts and Babette Smith, who discuss the shame associated with the convict past, often referred to as the “convict stain”, and how this past has only reluctantly been acknowledged at personal and official levels. The Gothic commonly deals with the repressed past. According to Allan Lloyd Smith, for example, the genre “is about the return of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present” (*American Gothic Fiction* 1). This concept can fruitfully be applied to the texts analysed here, which collectively can be said to belong to a tradition of convict Gothic fiction, a tradition that goes on beyond the most recent novels analysed in this study, as Australia’s convict history, as well as Aboriginal dispossession, continues to unfold in postcolonial Gothic writings.¹

¹ Although this study focuses on convict Gothic literature, some of the primary texts also deal with the devastating impact British colonisation had on Aborigines, as will be explored in subsequent chapters.
Throughout this study, I frequently refer to both Gothic criticism and Australia’s convict history. Therefore, this introduction offers a critical perspective of the Gothic genre in relation to Australian convict Gothic and an overview of recent historical research that has been carried out into Australia’s penal past. It concludes with a brief description of the contents of each chapter.

(i) Australian Convict Gothic in Critical Perspective

In *Gothic Literature 1825-1914* Jarlath Killeen notes that “reading too much… Gothic Criticism … produces a feeling of vertiginousness and bewilderment” (166). The amount of criticism on the Gothic is in fact daunting and exciting at the same time. Yet, no matter the dizzying body of work it has generated, the Gothic defies any clear-cut and tidy definition. Fred Botting provides a useful description of the genre in terms of excess:

Gothic signifies a writing of excess. It appears in the awful obscurity that haunted eighteenth-century rationality and morality. It shadows the despairing ecstasies of Romantic idealism and individualism and the uncanny dualities of Victorian realism and decadence. Gothic atmospheres – gloomy and mysterious – have repeatedly signalled the disturbing return of pasts upon presents and evoked emotions of terror and laughter. In the twentieth century, in diverse and ambiguous ways, Gothic figures have continued to shadow the progress of modernity with counter-narratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values.

*Gothic 1-2*

The genre has been approached from a variety of viewpoints, including psychoanalytical, historicist, feminist, colonial and postcolonial ones (Andrew Smith 5). Today, according to Killeen, “historicism and formal and ideological ambivalence represent critical orthodoxy” (184), but many key Gothic concepts such as the uncanny go back to Freud and psychoanalytical readings of literature, as will be explored in more detail below. In fact, the various approaches don’t have to be mutually exclusive, as Smith highlights:

Reading the Gothic historically enables us to see how writers respond to earlier Gothic texts; it also enables us to relate such texts to the historical contexts within which they were produced. Such an approach does not … necessarily
preclude using a psychoanalytical perspective to help decode certain scenes or characters, which can then be related to the wider historical picture. (7)

In what follows I establish historicist and psychoanalytical theories of the Gothic as my main interpretative frameworks.

One of the founding works of Gothic fiction in English literature is Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*. It was published under a pseudonym in 1764, but after its initial success, Walpole added his name and the subtitle *A Gothic Story* to the second edition. As Botting and Markman Ellis explain, in the eighteenth century the term gothic was associated with the medieval Dark Ages and Germanic tribes, including those who had settled England. Because some of these barbarous tribes had contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire, everything gothic was viewed in a negative light as compared to Enlightenment rationalism, which preferred classical rules and privileged classical values. Nevertheless, in the late eighteenth century interest grew in gothic history and culture, which came to stand for an idealised chivalric past (Botting, *Gothic* 22, Ellis 23). In his introduction to the second edition, Walpole states that his “gothic story” is “an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability: in the latter nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success” (9). The term gothic was thus ambiguous in meaning before it became associated with literature. As Jacqueline Howard puts it in *Reading Gothic Fiction: A Bakhtinian Approach*, “at its inception, there existed the idea that Gothic fiction is not a ‘pure’ genre, but a combination of styles” (12). This is still true of the Gothic today.²

*The Castle of Otranto* introduced many of the key tropes and figures found in Gothic novels (and plays) from the 1790s, such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe and *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis.³ Typically, Gothic literature from this period is associated with “[t]ortuous, fragmented narratives relating mysterious incidents, horrible images and life-threatening pursuits” involving “[s]pecters, monsters, demons, corpses, skeletons, evil aristocrats, monks and nuns, fainting heroines and bandits” (Botting, *Gothic* 2). Usually set in the Catholic south of Europe, these novels have been read, *inter alia*, as a reaction to the Enlightenment and the political upheavals

---

² In fact, as I will discuss in the subsequent chapters, the texts analysed in this study often combine several genres.
³ Walpole, in turn, had been influenced by the Graveyard poets, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, among others.
experienced during the second half of the eighteenth century. Already in 1800, for example, the Marquis de Sade interpreted Gothic novels as a product of the American and French revolutions (Howard 29). Or, as Leslie Fiedler argues in Love and Death in the American Novel: “[c]hildren of an age which had killed kings and bishops [and] cast down the holy places of their fathers, found it hard to convince themselves that specters did not walk with rattling chains, or that ancestral pictures did not bleed” (132).\(^4\) In American Gothic Fiction (henceforth American Gothic), Alan Lloyd Smith emphasises that “[t]his early Gothic could be at once both an attack on superstition and ignorance from an Enlightenment point of view, and at the same time an endorsement of the values and beauty of the past and tradition; a celebration of reason and daylight but one invoking a poetics of emotion and the night-side” (133, italics in original).\(^5\) Following, for example, Mikhail Bakhtin’s view of genre, the Gothic has thus from its beginnings been rooted “within a socio-historically specific context” (Howard 3).

Accordingly, in the nineteenth century the Gothic underwent significant changes. Although ‘traditional’ Gothic literature continued to be published during the first decades of the new century, rapid developments in contemporary scientific and pseudo-scientific thought led to scientists, madmen and criminals becoming new stock figures of the genre, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein being an important example. During the Victorian period, growth of the middle classes and increasing urbanisation saw the Gothic translated to new locations: the bourgeois domestic setting and the urban environment. Examples for the former include Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre and Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights, while Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations exemplifies the latter (Alexandra Warwick, “Victorian Gothic” 30-32).\(^6\) Overall, there was a move away from eighteenth-century stage machinery, the (explained) supernatural and external agents towards what Smith calls a “progressive internalisation of ‘evil’”. A good example of this internalisation is the emergence of the ghost story, in which “the ‘monster’ lives with you, invading your domestic spaces” (87) – as, for instance, in Henry James’s novella The Turn of the Screw. Smith further explains that in Gothic

\(^4\) See also Ellis 14.

\(^5\) ‘Night-side’ is here taken to stand in opposition to reason and daylight, as the nocturnal Gothic counter site to the Enlightenment, as a space of poetic imagination and transgression.

\(^6\) The nineteenth century also saw the publication of the so-called ‘Newgate novels’, based on real-life criminals. Other fiction, such as Alexandre Dumas’s The Count of Monte Cristo, Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables and Charles Dickens’s A Tale of Two Cities also focus on criminals, as did the sensation novels. Some of these texts influenced Marcus Clarke in the choice of his subject matter, as will be discussed in the chapter on His Natural Life. Peter Carey’s Jack Maggs, instead, provides a neo-Victorian take on the nineteenth-century bourgeois domestic setting and the developing urban environment.
fiction evil is often defined by the threat it poses to civilisation, and cites Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as examples of domestic threats related to the idea of degeneration (100-101). Other *fin-de-siècle* novels such as H. Rider Haggard’s *She*, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* explored anxieties related to the British Empire (see Patrick Brantlinger’s notion of Imperial Gothic).

By that time, colonial expansion had already resulted in the spread of the Gothic genre to many corners of the globe. One might ask how the Gothic could develop in ‘new’ countries such as America and Australia, with no ready-made ghosts, subterranean passages and crumbling fortresses. This is certainly a question that early Gothic writers such as Charles Brockden-Brown pondered. However, as Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy explain, “[d]efinition of national identity or literary tradition is bound up with the historical forces that shaped that identity or tradition.” Consequently, “rather than exploring such familiar [English] settings as ancestral houses, decrepit castles, precipitous mountains and windswept moors,” the Gothic underwent significant changes when transplanted into a variety of other global environments (51). Consider the United States, where according to Lloyd Smith “unique cultural pressures led Americans to the Gothic as an expression of their very different conditions.” These included “the frontier experience, with its inherent solitude and potential violence; the Puritan inheritance; fear of European subversion and anxieties about popular democracy which was then a new experiment; the relative absence of developed ‘society’; and very significantly, racial issues concerning both slavery and Native Americans” (*American Gothic* 4). To list just a few examples, Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat” and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* all deal more or less explicitly with the slave trade, while Native Americans haunt Charles Brockden-Brown’s *Edgar Huntly* and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables.* However, even though “the Gothic addresses nationally specific contexts” in these texts (Smith 48), it should be noted that, “[w]hether framed in terms of struggle with England’s central rulership, the legacies of imperialism, or those of slavery, each of these modes of

---

7 Note, though, that the Gothic also exists in other languages and countries which have never been colonised by England.

8 In fact, Lloyd Smith states that ‘certain aspects of the American experience may be understood as inherently Gothic’ (*American Gothic* 25), thus agreeing with Fiedler, who claims that American fiction is ‘almost essentially a gothic one’ (142).
‘national Gothic’ are structured by a common narrative of the buried past that rises up to haunt the present” (Spooner and McEvoy 51).

The Gothic is in fact commonly associated with the repressed past that returns to disturb the present, as David Punter emphasises when discussing Sigmund Freud’s uncanny – a crucial concept of the genre. According to Punter, “the uncanny is occasioned when an event in the present reminds us of something in the (psychological) past, but something which cannot be fully remembered, a past event, or situation, or feeling, which should have been locked away or buried but which has emerged to haunt a current scene” (“The Uncanny” 130). The German word for uncanny, unheimlich, is the negative for heimlich, which means both ‘homely’ and ‘in secret’. Thus, Killeen describes the concept as concerning “the means by which that which is most known to us, that which is closest to us, that which means most to us, is estranged, up-ended: the way that the homely and domestic become the unhomely, the strange” (130). Freud himself wrote that “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar’ and that ‘this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (944).

Lloyd Smith explains that Freud further introduced “some major themes involved in the uncanny which are also often found in Gothic fiction: the double, the repetition compulsion, and the idea of the omnipotence of thought” (American Gothic 137, italics in original). Poe’s “William Wilson”, “Ligeia” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” and Stevenson’s Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde are good examples of the uncanny effect of doubles in Gothic literature (137-38), while Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw exemplifies the uncanny effects of repetition. The uncanniness of omnipotence of thought, on the other hand, is related to the idea that “the story-teller has a peculiarly directive power over us; by means of the moods he can put us into, he is able to guide the current of our emotions, to dam it up in one direction and make it flow in another” (Freud 951).

Avril Horner points out that “Freud’s essay and terminology have been adopted by critics of the Gothic who thereby read texts as codified forms of instinctual drives and

---

9 See, for example, also Botting, Gothic 1-2 and Lloyd Smith 1 (American Gothic) regarding the return of the past in the Gothic.
mechanisms of repression” (251). Yet, as already mentioned, strictly psychoanalytical readings are no longer popular, or, as Smith writes, “whilst early readings of the Gothic from the 1980s frequently relied on predominately psychoanalytical approaches, such a perspective has, in recent years, been criticised by more robustly historicist critics” (6-7). Ellis, for example, highlights the fact that, “as the term ‘psychoanalysis’ was first coined by Freud in 1896…it could be concluded that the gothic inhabits a world of representation categorically pre-Freudian” (13). Nevertheless, as Lloyd Smith points out:

The psychoanalytical perspectives opened by Freud have proved very useful in understanding the Gothic, not so much through their applications to the lives of authors…as in the interpretation of particular works, and in the tropes of Gothic more generally. That may be in part because Freud himself drew on Gothic texts in reaching his conclusions, for in many respects the Gothic seems to have prefigured and shaped his ideas. (American Gothic 140)

Smith similarly points out that the Romantic Gothic “developed a version of the self which appears to be strangely Freudian before Freud. This relationship is not a tenuous one, as evidenced by the fact that Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” gains most of its conclusions from a reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s short story “The Sand Man” (1816)” (88). At any rate, Spooner and McEvoy emphasise that Freud’s theories are still part of “a key body of writing that continues to inform our understanding of the Gothic” (128), whereas Lloyd Smith notes that “the uncanny, whilst a psychological concept, can also be used to bring to light historically contextualised anxieties” (American Gothic 15).

Like the uncanny, the concept of transgenerational haunting, which was developed by the two post-Freudian analysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, can also be applied fruitfully to Gothic texts. Lloyd Smith explains that in their work as practicing psychoanalysts, Abraham and Torok focus on the idea that “a family secret [that is ‘the Phantom’] may be passed on unknowingly by parents or other close relatives to a child, who is then affected by this encrypted secret, without being conscious of what it is” (“The Phantom” 216). Because every mother “is herself a child of another mother there is a ‘genealogical inheritance’ of the unconscious.” The ‘Phantom’ thus stands for the

---

10 Spooner and McEvoy further include publications by Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Terry Castle in their list of texts with which the Gothic is often approached (128). I will come back to Michel Foucault later in this section.
“unknowing awareness of another’s secret, introducing, ‘via the concept of “transgenerational haunting,” a novel perspective on the potential configurations of psychic history and on their role in pathogenic processes and symptom formation’ (Rashkin 37)” (American Gothic 147). As Lloyd Smith further points out, this process also “describes very well the inscriptions of family trauma within the Gothic, in which an inherited secret very often determines the plot” (American Gothic 147). The idea of the ‘Phantom’ is, for instance, relevant for Gothic texts such as Brown’s Wieland, Herman Melville’s Pierre, and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Marble Faun and The House of the Seven Gables, at the heart of all of which lies a family secret.

Important in the context of this study is the idea that the Gothic deals imaginatively with a society’s Phantoms, which can be understood in literal and symbolical, personal and social terms. As Lloyd Smith explains, it is possible “to read the sense of ‘secrets’ more widely, to include secrets handed on by non-family members, such as between the children and the governess in The Turn of the Screw, or cultural secrets, the unspoken encrypted knowledges of history, as seen in Toni Morrison’s Beloved” (“The Phantom” 217). In fact, Beloved, as well as The House of the Seven Gables, for example, not only revolve around family secrets, but also engage with the atrocities of the slave trade and the dispossession of Native Americans respectively, that is, they address “unspeakable, or at any rate unspoken ... secrets... in a larger cultural sense.” Thus the Phantom can signify “everything that is denied within the culture, and yet remains the truth” (American Gothic 148-9). As I will show in subsequent chapters, while the Native American dispossession and the legacies of the slave trade are recurrent themes in American Gothic literature, the convict past, which was repressed well into the twentieth century but has kept emerging in Australian Gothic fiction, can be read as one of Australia’s Phantoms.11 This concept can moreover also be applied to how white Australia for many decades denied the tragic impact British colonisation had on the continent’s Aboriginal people; indeed, it is to a certain point still debated by some today, almost 50 years after W. E. H. Stanner introduced the phrase ‘Great Australian Silence’ in his 1968 Boyer lectures to refer to the silence on Indigenous Australians in Australian history after white settlement.12

---

11 See section below, on Australia’s convict history, for a discussion of how Australia’s convict past was repressed and forgotten for generations.

12 A few of my primary texts deal with both these Australian Phantoms. For example, as will be discussed in Chapter Five, in Gould’s Book of Fish Flanagan engages not only with Tasmania’s convict past, but also illustrates the local Aborigines’ suffering under British rule. The ongoing debates over the
Australia was settled precisely during the period when Gothic literature was first established in Britain. However, while Gothic architecture was a preferred style in the colonies, early commentators saw no place for Gothic literature in the antipodes. Consider Frederick Sinnett’s well-known essay “The Fiction Fields of Australia”, which was published in 1856. Gerry Turcotte explains that, according to Sinnett, “Australia could not compete with English antiquity, but … its literature of the everyday should stand on equal grounds” (“Australian Gothic” 279). As Sinnett put it,

[n]o Australian author can hope to extricate his hero or heroine, however pressing the emergency may be, by means of a spring panel and a subterranean passage, or such like relics of feudal barons…. There may be plenty of dilapidated buildings, but not one, the dilapidation of which is sufficiently venerable by age, to tempt the wandering footsteps of the most arrant *parvenu* of a ghost that ever walked by night. It must be admitted that Mrs Radcliffe’s genius would be quite thrown away here; and we must reconcile ourselves to the conviction that the foundations of a second ‘Castle of Otranto’ can hardly be laid in Australia during our time. (23)

Sinnett’s is a formulaic Gothic which is inextricably linked to the European past. As already discussed above, however, the Gothic is about more than aristocratic ghosts, subterranean passages and medieval castles. In fact, a few essays and an anthology have been published in recent years which emphasise that the Gothic has existed in Australia since convict times, although overall Andrew Ng’s comment that “[i]t is curious how little attention has been paid to the Gothic tradition in Australian literature” (149) nevertheless remains valid.

Turcotte, for example, points out in “Australian Gothic” that the genre “has been a consistent presence in Australia since European settlement” and that, following Freud’s uncanny, “it is certainly possible to argue that the generic qualities of the Gothic mode lend themselves to articulating the colonial experience in as much as each emerges out of a condition of deracination and uncertainty, of the familiar transposed into unfamiliar space.” Moreover, “[f]rom its inception the Gothic has dealt with fears and themes which are endemic in the colonial experience: isolation, entrapment, fear of pursuit and

interpretation of Australia’s colonial past and the development of modern Australia, often referred to as the ‘history wars’, will also be considered in Chapter Five.

13 See, for example, Gelder, “Australian Gothic” for a discussion of Gothic architecture in Australia.
fear of the unknown” (278). As the following chapters will illustrate, these fears and themes are highly relevant to the literature covering Australia’s convict period. In their introduction to *The Anthology of Colonial Australian Gothic Fiction* Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver further argue that it “might be helpful to regard the colonial Australian Gothic as a restaging of European and American Gothic tropes, even as it departs from them in order to assert its identity as a unique and popular local genre” (3). Turcotte agrees that “the anxieties of the convict system, the terrors of isolated stations at the mercy of vagrants and nature, the fear of starvation or of becoming lost in the bush are distinctly Gothic in effect – and dare one say, uniquely, originally Australian” (280).

In “Australian Gothic” Gelder also emphasises that “Gothic tropes seemed to lend themselves all too readily to the colonially perceived Australian interior” (*Routledge* 116). Consider, for instance, Marcus Clarke’s 1876 preface to a collection of poems by Adam Lindsay Gordon, a “colonial writer, adventurer and renowned horseman” who had committed suicide in 1870 because of mounting debts (116). The preface famously describes the Australian landscape in terms of “weird melancholy,” leading to what Gelder calls “an escalating sequence of Gothic horror images” (116):

> The Australian mountain forests are funereal, secret, stern. Their solitude is desolation. They seem to stifle, in their black gorges, a story of sullen despair. No tender sentiment is nourished in their shade… The sun suddenly sinks, and the mopokes burst into horrible peals of semi-human laughter. The natives aver that, when night comes, from out of the bottomless depth of some lagoon the Bunyip rises, and, in form like a monstrous sea-calf, drags his loathsome length from out the ooze. From a corner of the silent forest rises a dismal chant, and around the fire dance natives painted like skeletons. All is fear – inspiring and gloomy. No bright fancies are linked with the memories of the mountains. Hopeless explorers have named them out of their suffering – Mount Misery, Mount Dreadful, Mount Despair. (“Adam Lindsay Gordon” 645-46)

14 See, also, Turcotte’s 1991 PhD thesis “Peripheral Fear”, an early example of literary criticism on Australian and Canadian Gothic which was published in 2009 as *Peripheral Fear: Transformations of the Gothic in Canadian and Australian Fiction*. I will return to this text when discussing Clarke’s *His Natural Life*. In this chapter, page numbers refer to Turcotte’s essay titled “Australian Gothic” from *The Handbook of the Gothic*.  
15 Please note that Gelder has written two essays called “Australian Gothic,” one published in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic* (2007), the other in *A New Companion to the Gothic* (2012). In this chapter, page numbers refer to the *Routledge* publication.
This passage has been variously interpreted. Andrew McCann, for example, focuses on its representation of Aboriginal people. He claims that the Australian landscape depicted in the preface offers uncanny pleasure because it is animated by mysterious forces which go back to a stereotypical evocation of the Aboriginal corroboree. Thus, “a stereotype of Indigenous culture, or its metonym, the bunyip, … can be experienced as an object of aesthetic pleasure” (Marcus Clarke’s Bohemia 172-73). Gelder, instead, reads it in terms of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” arguing that Clarke projects Gordon’s melancholy onto the Australian landscape. According to Gelder, the passage represents “the loss of a certain kind of colonial optimism, expressed through Gordon’s own ‘manly admiration for healthy living’.” With the suicide of a settler-adventurer “[a] shadow [falls] over the colonial ego, … in which case it could well be that Clarke’s account gives expression to the ‘Weird Melancholy’ of settler colonialism itself” (117). The passage certainly illustrates how in colonial Australian Gothic literature the bush is depicted as a naturally Gothic space “which closes down the promise of a fulfilling colonial future” (Gelder and Weaver 5). In fact, pace Sinnett, the Australian bush was often rendered in Gothic terms in colonial narratives (Gelder and Weaver 4). This is also true of several of the texts analysed here, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

I will come back to Clarke later on in Chapter Two, as he made Australia’s convict past the topic of his novel His Natural Life. In general, Gelder and Weaver explain that “[t]he colonial Australian Gothic is intimately tied to the violence of settler life in Australia: colonials killing other colonials, Aboriginal people killing colonials, and colonials killing Aboriginal people.” Thus the genre turns towards precisely those stories of death and brutality that might not otherwise be told in colonial Australia, playing out one of the Gothic’s most fascinating structural logics, the return of the repressed: quite literally, as graves are dug up, sacred burial sites uncovered, murder victims are returned from the dead, secrets are revealed and past horrors are experienced all over again. In this way, the colonial Australian Gothic gives us a range of vivid, unsettling counter-narratives to the more familiar tales of colonial promise and optimism we are often asked to take for granted. (9)
In addition to Clarke, other colonial Australian authors who employed the Gothic include Anna Maria Bunn, Rosa Praed, Barbara Baynton, Henry Lawson, and William Astley. Astley was a prolific contributor of short stories to the *Bulletin* in the early 1890s. Published under the pseudonym of ‘Price Warung’, the primary aim of Astley’s tales was to illustrate the depravity and inhumanity of the English transportation system, termed ‘the System’ by Astley. Although many of his stories thus deal with Australia’s convict past, this study does not analyse them in detail because they contain no hero-villains (the tales are too short to allow for complex character development). Nevertheless, Astley is an important convict Gothic author, whom I will briefly discuss later in this Introduction and return to repeatedly when examining my primary material.

In the twentieth century, according to Turcotte, writers such as Christina Stead, Hal Porter, Kenneth Cook, Joan Lindsay, Thomas Keneally and Frank Moorhouse adapted the genre successfully throughout the decades. Turcotte further explains that in the 1970s, Patrick White “developed his own brand of Gothic, one which blended a metaphysical with a scatological darkness, and a scathing language which attacked what he considered to be Australia’s ‘dun-coloured realism’” (283). In fact there are Gothic elements in several of White’s texts, including *Voss* (1957) and *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976). The same decade also saw the emergence of Peter Carey, whose *The Fat Man in History*, *The Tax Inspector* and *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* all employ Gothic tropes (284). His novel *Jack Maggs* will be analysed in Chapter Four. In the 1980s, several female authors used the Gothic “not only to question the mores of Australian society, but also to comment on and condemn patriarchal values” (284). Examples include novels by Barbara Hanrahan, Elizabeth Jolley and Kate Grenville, who has continued to employ the Gothic mode in the twenty-first century, including in her novel *The Secret River*, which will be briefly discussed in the conclusion.

Overall, Turcotte points out that “the Gothic has proved resilient and flexible and as appealing to postcolonial writers as it was for their predecessors in articulating the tensions and problems of their community” (284). In fact, Gothic fiction is often

---

16 For more examples of colonial Australian Gothic, see Gelder and Weaver’s *Anthology*, which contains short stories by some of the authors mentioned above, as well as by less well-known writers.

17 Although both *A Fringe of Leave* and *Voss* contain convict characters, these novels are not analysed in this study because the protagonists are not convicts.

18 See also Naomi Britten, who in her 2008 PhD thesis “Tracing a Tradition of the Literary Gothic in Australian’s Women’s Fiction and Film Narratives”, considered several female Australian Gothic authors as a community of writers to trace a tradition of the Gothic and to explore how this tradition is continually questioned and redefined from a female point of view.
implicitly structured around the concerns of the age in which it is written, in many cases replaying contemporary issues in a historical setting; the novels analysed here, for example, are all set in the convict past, but only Tucker’s *Ralph Rashleigh* was actually written during the transportation period. Jerrold E. Hogle explains in “‘Gothic Romance’” that the Gothic “allows what has been abjected to show itself to us, albeit in disguise, as a return of the repressed that unsettles the ideological ‘norms’ behind ‘realistic’ explanations with which we protect our conscious psyches from facing the complete history of our modern ‘selves’” (222), while Punter reminds us in *The Literature of Terror* that in the Gothic “the hidden violence of present social structures [is conjured] up again as past” (198). In addition to analysing how they represent Australia’s convict past, a further aim of this study is thus to investigate what the primary texts reveal about the socio-historical contexts of their authors, and what “ideological ‘norms’” are unsettled by the repressed material that resurfaces in the novels analysed here.

Turcotte concludes his summary of the Australian Gothic by highlighting the fact that for Aboriginal people, who have often been “constructed as the monstrous figures haunting the Australian landscape,” the Gothic has “functioned as a silencing discourse” (285). Nevertheless, Mudrooroo employed the Gothic in *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the End of the World*, while Tracey Moffatt has “used the Gothic mode to re-write White Australian readings of Aboriginality in two of her films: *Night Cries* and *Bedevil*” (286). As Gelder points out, “Australian cinema has explored the Gothic since the 1970s,” often involving “mysterious experiences in the bush…especially those involving inexperienced metropolitan travellers who find themselves stranded in some remote and often deranged outback location” (“Australian Gothic” 120). Jody Dwyer’s *Dying Breed* (2008) is a recent example of such a movie. Set in the Tasmanian wilderness, four hikers run into the descendants of Alexander Pearce, a figure who will be addressed later in this Introduction and in Chapter Two.

Tasmania, in fact, has been ascribed its very own type of Gothic by Jim Davidson. Although it attempted a clear break with its past by changing its name from Van Diemen’s Land to Tasmania in 1856, for Davidson the island’s landscape contains “absences, not yet fully expiated – the slaughtered Aborigines, the downtrodden

19 See, for example, Clarke’s description of Aboriginal people in the quotation above.
20 It should be noted that Mudrooroo’s Aboriginality is contested.
convicts, and hunted species like the diminutive Tasmanian emu and the Gothically named Tasmanian Tiger” (307). Tasmania’s penal history certainly lends itself particularly well to be explored in what McCann calls “convict Gothic” (195) in his review of The Anthology of Colonial Australian Gothic: not only did the island receive a disproportionately large number of convicts, but it was also here that Macquarie Harbour and Port Arthur were built, that is two of Australia’s most notorious penal centres, where convicts who had re-offended in the colonies were sent for further punishment. Not surprisingly, several of the texts analysed in this study are at least partially set in Van Diemen’s Land. However, not only Tasmania can be depicted as a Gothic locale: Australia as a whole is often described as a ‘natural’ prison, a big, uncanny jail where walls are unnecessary.

As this brief summary of Australian Gothic demonstrates, Turcotte, Gelder, Weaver, Davidson and McCann agree that Australia’s convict past is a source for Gothic literature. Or as David Matthews puts it: “[c]onvictism, the ruined monuments of which [can] still be seen on the landscape, [is] Australia’s own equivalent of castellated culture, a repressed and melancholic past” (9). Arguably, the most famous ruined monuments of the convict period are the remnants of Port Arthur, “a kind of primal site in Tasmania’ (Gelder and Weaver 8). According to John Frow, the former penal centre is ‘a memorial … its ruined traces bearing ambiguous witness to a whole system of punishment, involuntary exile, and unfree labour which has come to represent the foundational moment of the Australian nation” (2).

Similarly, the transported convict has emerged as a fundamentally Gothic figure not only in colonial literature but also in fiction from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries set in the transportation period. So far, however, literary critics who have studied convict themes have not focused on the Gothic as a primary mode in relation to convict characters, in fact until now no study has offered an in-depth analysis of several convict texts from a Gothic perspective. Likewise, “a glaring omission for readers of Australian literature is the

---

21 Tragically, Port Arthur has become a doubly-haunted site, as in 1996 thirty-five people were killed there by Martin Bryant. Frow points out that “[n]obody uses Bryant's name, but his denied presence is everywhere. Nobody knows the forms which will lay the ghost. Nobody knows what kind of monument will insert this story into the other story for which this site is known, into that other past which is barely available for understanding” (2).

22 Only Turcotte provides a Gothic reading of Clarke’s His Natural Life in comparison with two Canadian texts. In contrast, in her PhD Dissertation “The Use of Convict Themes and Convict Imagery by Postwar Australian Writers of Fiction”, Joy Bignell investigates how Porter, White, Keneally, Ireland, Anderson and Hanrahan deal with religious, spiritual and social themes. Laurie Hergenhan, instead, in Unnatural Lives: Studies in Australian Convict Fiction is interested in social change and again does not concentrate
lack of much discussion of the representations of convicts and transportation in popular culture” (3), as Habel notes in his 2009 review for JASAL of Babette Smith’s Australia’s Birthstain.

The next section will illustrate that according to recent historical research the transportation period was not quite as ‘gothic’ as it is commonly imagined – not least because of how it has been depicted in Gothic works such as Clarke’s His Natural Life and Astley’s tales, which have been criticised by some historians for portraying the convict system in overly dark and violent terms. However, I will contend that convict Gothic authors have focused on the excesses of the convict system because this part of Australian history was collectively repressed and forgotten well into the twentieth century. Moreover, it can be argued that penal centres such as Norfolk Island, Macquarie Harbour and Port Arthur, where convicts experienced almost unimaginable physical punishments, were virtually predestined to resurface in Gothic literature, which has dealt with situations of excess, entrapment, persecution and torture since its inception in the eighteenth century.

Notably, the prevalence of physical punishment common in the convict colonies well into the nineteenth century contrasts sharply with significant changes in how prisoners were punished in Europe in the same period. Michel Foucault explains in Discipline and Punish that “[a]t the end of the eighteenth century, torture was to be denounced as a survival of the barbarities of another age: the mark of a savagery that was denounced as ‘Gothic’” (39). In fact, while until the late eighteenth century the focus of punishment was on the body of the criminal, and physical punishment was a theatrical spectacle for everybody to see, in the nineteenth century there was a shift away from the punishment of the body to the punishment of the soul, which culminated in Jeremy Bentham’s concept of the panopticon, a prison designed in such a way that inmates could be observed at any time, but without them being able to verify if they were being watched at any given moment.23 In Australia, however, this shift from “the body” to “the soul” on the convicts themselves. Neither Bignell nor Hergenhan invokes the Gothic as a primary trope, nor could they consider the more recent novels I analyse.

Contrary to popular belief, the panopticon was never in use in Australia. See, for example, Jacqueline Z. Wilson’s Prison: Cultural Memory and Dark Tourism, in which she explains that Bentham’s “design was never put into practice in Britain on any significant scale … nor anywhere in the Empire, for that matter, and certainly played no significant part in prison design in Australia.” In fact, “[a] conceptual reliance upon Bentham’s model is … peculiarly inapt in the Australian context, not least because the convicts’ location and role in the colonial social and economic structure made surveillance especially problematic” (36). Wilson further explains that the panopticon is often confused with the model prison
did not take place until later in the nineteenth century; instead, the ““Gothic”” practice of physical torture was the paramount mode of discipline throughout the convict period. Thus, as Stephanie Trigg puts it, “it is easy to see how Australian cultural history since the nineteenth century has constructed its convict past in Gothic terms, as the dark underside to colonial settlement; the punitive underbelly of Enlightenment” (xiv).

The physical punishments described in Ralph Rashleigh, Moondyne, His Natural Life, Jack Maggs and Gould’s Book of Fish are shocking, and graphically highlight the sheer power officials of the system hold over the convicts. According to Punter, impotence is “one of the principal structures of Gothic fiction” (“Terror” 247). Gothic convict characters are often placed in situations of unbearable powerlessness, yet constantly try to regain some sort of control over their own situation, both on an individual and collective basis. Consider, for example, Astley’s short story “How Muster-Master Stoneman Earned his Breakfast”. In this tale, convict Glancy is so desperate that he kills a guard in order to be hanged. Having actively orchestrated his own death, Glancy’s power struggle ends badly: the ‘System’ is undefeatable, as Stoneman, its agent, cruelly reinforces – and demonstrates to all – the convict’s impotence by ordering Glancy to be gratuitously flogged before being taken to the gallows.

In “How Muster-Master Stoneman Earned his Breakfast” no one is innocent; rather, Astley’s tale complicates the distinctions between good and bad characters found in early Gothic fiction. Traditionally, in fact, Punter explains that impotence used to be illustrated in Gothic fiction by placing an undefended female figure “amid terrors which she cannot understand” (247), thus neatly distinguishing between the persecuting and the persecuted (239). Take Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho, for example, in which innocent Emily is harassed countless times by Montoni (while Valancourt, the novel’s passive hero of sensibility, is mostly ineffectual in his rescue attempts). Montoni is one of the original Gothic villains, who, together with Walpole’s Manfred in The Castle of Otranto, Radcliffe’s Schedoni in The Italian, and Lewis’s Ambrosio in

---

Pentonville, on which the separate prison in Port Arthur was based (which was only finished at the end of transportation to Tasmania, thus affecting a very small number of convicts). This was confirmed in a private email from Ken Lee, a resource centre officer of the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority.

24 Heans, instead, deals with surveillance as a form of psychological violence.

25 In contrast, Astley’s tales concerning ‘The Ring’ depict successful attempts by convicts at regaining control. Or, as Dixon puts it, the Ring becomes “a subversive other ‘empire’ that resists the values of the British Empire” (85)
The Monk, represents a new type of literary character that emerged as part of Gothic fiction towards the end of the eighteenth century. In these early works, the villain is the primary antagonist, as opposed to the heroine and the (passive) hero of sensibility, and no matter how attractive in a twisted way, he lacks real psychological or philosophical depth (Lewis’s Ambrosio being a possible exception). Soon, however, the villain takes the place of leading character and turns into the more complex and ambivalent figure of the hero-villain. This involves a shift in his social position: as McEvoy explains, while early Gothic villains “are in positions of power, acting from within the system,” in later Gothic texts, hero-villains “are outsiders and tend not to be associated with institutionalised power” (“Gothic and the Romantics” 24). Consider, for example, Heathcliff in Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights, whose fascination lies precisely in his otherness (Stoddart 178-79).

The hero-villain, “one of the most characteristic – and charismatic – figures of the [Romantic] period” (McEvoy 24) which continues to appear in contemporary fiction and film (Helen Stoddart 179-80), is “an invention of the Gothic form, while his temptation and suffering, the beauty and terror of his bondage to evil are among its major themes” (Leslie A. Fiedler 128). In Love and Death in the American Novel, Fiedler describes the Gothic hero-villain as the “forgivable victim of passion and circumstance, as admirable sufferer” (133), whom, in McEvoy’s words, the reader is expected to feel for: “[m]any texts demand empathy with the villain, who is now also a warped hero” (24). “His brow furrowed, his face frozen in the grimace of pain, his eyes burning with repressed fury, his mind tormented with unspeakable blasphemies,” still according to Fiedler, the Gothic hero-villain is a blend of Richardson’s Lovelace with the Wandering Jew, Don Juan, Faust and Heathcliff (133). The Gothic hero-villain is thus connected “to a number of similar male figures including Milton’s Satan, the eighteenth-century ‘man of feeling’, and above all, the Byronic Hero,” as Stoddart similarly points out (176). For Fiedler, Faust is important because he is fully aware of

26 Note that the transformation of the Gothic villain into the hero-villain predates the Byronic hero. Nevertheless, this latter hero type proved very influential in the further development of Gothic hero-villains (see, for example, Peter Thorslev’s The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes). Note, also, that some similarities notwithstanding, there are important differences between the Gothic hero-villain and other hero types. For instance, contrary to the (Gothic) villain he is not a misogynist and he is not interested in recreating the world in his own image, while in opposition to the noble outlaw and Scott’s dark hero, he does not form his own organic society of men whom he loyally leads. For studies of various hero and villain figures, consider Clarence Boyer’s The Villain as Hero in Elizabethan Tragedy (1914), Joseph Campbell’s The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949), Alexander Welsh’s The Hero of the Waverley Novels (1963), Walter Reed’s Meditations on the Hero (1974), Atara Stein’s The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction and Television (2004) and Mike Alsford’s Heroes and Villains (2006).
the consequences when he chooses to be damned, this diabolic bargain being essential to the Gothic novel. As Fiedler explains, damnation “means various things to men of varying belief: a commitment to the vagaries of the unconscious; an abandonment of the comforts of social life – of marriage and the family, wealth and recognition; a rejection of all bonds of love and sympathy, of humanity itself; a deliberate plunge into insanity; and acceptance of eternal torment of the soul” (133). In subsequent chapters it will be seen that Fiedler’s description of the Gothic hero-villain fits Rufus Dawes in Clarke’s His Natural Life and Jack Maggs in the novel of that name by Carey remarkably well.

The concept of the hero-villain can however also fruitfully be applied to the other convict protagonists analysed here. For one, Stoddart explains that one of the narrative functions of the hero-villain is the exposition of repression, the figure being “intrinsic to the social critiques of a number of texts” (178). Botting similarly points out that the “outcast … is not the cause of evil and terror…. Real evil is identified among embodiments of tyranny, corruption and prejudice, identified with certain, often aristocratic figures, and, more frequently, with institutions of power manifest in government hierarchies, social norms and religious superstitions” (Gothic 92). In the case of Australian convict Gothic, real evil is consistently identified with Britain’s transportation system, while the convicts are archetypal outcasts of society, being both criminals as well as victims of this violent and wrongful organisation. As I will argue, this ambivalence at the heart of the convict protagonists can successfully be approached through the figure of the hero-villain, who, put simply, is a hero and a villain not just because he is a villain in the role of the protagonist, but because he is both a good and a bad man whose life arouses the reader’s sympathy. He is bad because he is capable of cruel and criminal acts, but at the same time the following characteristics make him sympathetic: 1) he makes his own rules and moral codes that conflict with the accepted moral laws of his society, which are, however, represented as flawed; 2) he experiences feelings of remorse and guilt; and 3) he has a compelling motive for his actions and knowingly chooses damnation. Furthermore, this figure usually has dark hair and striking eyes, mysterious and humble origins and a rebellious and impulsive nature, as well as being extraordinary and charismatic, taller than average, manly and strong, and capable of experiencing empathy and love.

The figure of the hero-villain thus provides me with a useful framework with which I can analyse the convict characters and trace how their representation changes over time
from the stereotype first established by Clarke in *His Natural Life*. This comparison will in turn shed light on the different cultural discourses that have emerged in regard to Australia’s convict history. Before turning to the primary texts, however, in the following section I provide an overview of Australia’s convict past.

(ii) Australia’s Convict Past: The Historical Context

The novels and short stories analysed in this study cover various phases of the convict period in Australia. Tucker’s *Ralph Rashleigh*, for example, takes place in New South Wales and present-day Queensland, while Rufus Dawes in Clarke’s *His Natural Life* experiences the brutal conditions at secondary places of punishment in Van Diemen’s Land and on Norfolk Island. In Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish*, the eponymous character Gould is present when the British establish their first outpost in Van Diemen’s Land in 1803, whereas O’Reilly’s *Moondyne: A Story from the Under-World* is set in Western Australia, which received convicts from 1850 until 1868. The aim of this section is thus to provide an historical background of the transportation period, which will be useful when discussing the individual texts later on.

Britain began transporting convicts to Australia in 1787, when on the 13th of May the ‘First Fleet’ set off for Botany Bay, carrying approximately 1420 people, about half of them convicts, the rest comprising officials, marines, their wives and children, and ships’ crews (Frost, *First Fleet 1*). Robert Hughes explains in *The Fatal Shore* that “[n]one of the convicts could have had any idea of their destination. Before them yawned a terrifying void of time and space. They were going on the longest voyage ever attempted by so large a group of people. If they had been told they were off to the moon, the sense of loss, deracination and fear could hardly have been worse” (77). He further depicts the dreadful conditions on board: often chained and seasick, the convicts spent most of the eight months at sea below deck, although they were allowed up during the day when the weather was fair and no land was in sight (78). The quarters were extremely cramped: “four transportees lying in a space seven feet by six feet, the dimensions of a modern king-size bed, were the norm” (69). Furthermore, as soon as the fleet moved into tropical waters, “waves of vermin crept out of each vessel’s woodwork, up from the bilges,” a “fermenting, sloshing broth of sea water mixed with urine, puke, dung, rotting food [and] dead rats” (79). On one ship, “convicts fell sick from the bilge effluents,” and the stench would have been overpowering (79). Yet, as
Alan Frost points out in his recent publication *The First Fleet: The Real Story*, after 252 days at sea about 1373 people reached Botany Bay on 20 January 1788, which means that the death rate was approximately 2 per cent (3-4). To put this into perspective, the average death rate when transporting convicts to the American colonies – a much shorter journey – had been around 14 per cent (4).

Hughes has repeatedly been criticised for being overly Gothic in his representation of convict Australia, and Frost not only highlights factual errors leading to rather dark and extravagant depictions in *The Fatal Shore*, but also in the works of other Australian historians, such as Manning Clark and A. G. L. Shaw (*First Fleet* 1-4, 140). In fact, over the past decade, several historians have taken advantage of rich archival material to shed a different light on the convict period. For example, in *Voices from Tocal: Convict Life on a Rural Estate* (2008), Brian Walsh follows the lives of 143 convicts who were assigned to a rural estate in the Hunter Valley. In *Closing Hell’s Gates* (2008), Hamish Maxwell-Stewart describes Macquarie Harbour (one of the most notorious secondary places of punishment) from its beginning, when conditions certainly were horrifying, to its end, when it had lost much of its deterring reputation. Taking a wider approach, Babette Smith, an independent scholar, retraces the lives of over a thousand convicts in *Australia’s Birthstain: The Startling Legacy of the Convict Era* (2008). In addition to *The First Fleet: The Real Story*, Alan Frost, an emeritus history professor of La Trobe University, also published *Botany Bay: The Real Story*, both in 2011, while Stuart Macintyre offers a good summary of the convict years in *A Concise History of Australia* (2009). More recently, *The Cambridge History of Australia* (2013) includes chapters on the convict period by Emma Christopher, Maxwell-Stewart and Grace Karskens. By and large, the works of these historians support each other, and, taken together with earlier publications, offer a fascinating account of the transportation period in Australia.

To briefly return to the First Fleet, contrary to expectations based on James Cook’s short stay there in 1770, Botany Bay turned out to be unsuitable for a colony. Slightly to the north, however, Port Jackson, the natural harbour of present-day Sydney, looked promising (Macintyre 27, 30). Once all the ships had anchored, a small party went on land at a site they named Sydney Cove, where they met some of the local Aborigines.

---

27 See, for example, Macintyre 71 and Turcotte, who in “Australian Gothic” explains that *The Fatal Shore* is “a work of non-fiction which has been criticised in many quarters for its Gothic ‘gorification’ of convict hardships” (282).
Arthur Phillip, captain of the fleet and first governor of the new colony, strove for an amicable relationship with the local tribes. Tragically, however, the British invasion of Aboriginal land soon led to violence on both sides. The devastating impact British colonisation had on Australia’s Indigenous people will be discussed later on, in particular in Chapter Five, on Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish*. Here, my focus is on the convicts and the transportation system.28

The first few years of British settlement in New South Wales, called the ‘starvation years,’ were hard. The vegetables brought along failed to thrive, a small herd of cows got lost in the bush and Phillip had to cut rations more than once, remarkably distributing them equally (see, for example, Hughes 96 and Macintyre 30-31). In addition, the colonists suffered from a great sense of isolation in an alien world without any contact with Britain for over two years. Although the arrival of the Second Fleet brought news from home, it otherwise exacerbated the situation, as it had many sick and infirm convicts but only few supplies on board (a supply ship had been sent in 1789 but struck an iceberg on the way). Unlike on the First Fleet, the conditions on the Second Fleet were truly hellish: in the hands of merchants only interested in making a profit, a quarter of the convicts it carried died on the way (Hughes 104-105, Welsh 46).

Considering how far Botany Bay was from England and how little was known about it makes one wonder why the authorities decided to transport convicts there. It almost seems absurd to send around 1400 people, half of them criminals, on an eight-month-voyage to a place which had been visited by the British only once before, for just one week eighteen years previously (Macintyre 27). In the past, most historians have claimed that the only relevant reason for choosing Botany Bay was that politicians needed a new ‘dumping ground’ for convicts once they could no longer be sent to the American colonies following the American Revolution – a rather depressing reason for a momentous decision. Having first considered a couple of other sites such as Das Voltas Bay along the west coast of Africa, according to these historians New South Wales was chosen as a last resort among growing pressure because the prisons were overflowing. The First Fleet was then haphazardly and hurriedly put together and these undesirables sent off to the limits of the known world (see, for example, Hughes 64-70 and Frost, *First Fleet* 1-3).

28 Consider Inga Clendinnen’s *Dancing with Strangers* for an interesting study of the interactions between Aborigines and whites during the first years of the colony.
Other historians, however, argue that Botany Bay was also decided on for different reasons. As Macintyre sums it up, “the new colony was a product of maritime exploration, trade and penology” (29). Frost offers the most in-depth analysis of why Botany Bay was chosen, based on research carried out among archives in England and Australia. He shows that the First Fleet was in fact carefully planned and equipped, and that the reasons why Prime Minister Pitt and his advisers finally settled on the South Pacific were based, *inter alia*, on Cook’s observations that flax and tall pines grew in abundance on Norfolk Island, of which the British navy and commercial fleets were in constant need for sails and masts not only back in England but also in the East Indies (Frost, *Botany Bay* 186, 219). Furthermore, as Macintyre explains, “[t]he British loss of its American colonies at the end of the eighteenth century signalled a new phase of empire. Britain turned of necessity away from the Atlantic to the East, and settlement of Australia was part of its expansion in Asia and the Pacific” (18), envisaged for both political and commercial reasons. Sending convicts to Botany Bay would not only take pressure off the prisons back home but also provide labour to assist this expansion by building essential infrastructure in the new colony.  

As to the convicts themselves, Frost writes that  

[i]t is one of the abiding myths of Australian history that many of those sentenced to transportation were poor people convicted for stealing a loaf of bread to feed their starving family, or a handkerchief worth a few pennies; that they were the hapless victims of a savage penal code and an uncaring, class-driven society ….. However, the plain fact is that the majority of eighteenth-century convicts sentenced to transportation were convicted of crimes that we continue to consider serious. (*Botany Bay* 54)

---

29 The fact that in hindsight the flax and pines on Norfolk Island turned out to be unsuitable for naval purposes does not invalidate the argument.
30 As an alternative to transportation, politicians also considered building penitentiaries in Britain. Especially Jeremy Bentham was a vocal opponent of transportation, advocating instead his idea of the panopticon, a prison built in such a way that inmates could be observed at any time, without knowing, however, if they were being watched or not. He received some land and money to start building, but the project failed, partly because of the high costs and because transportation became the established way of ridding Britain of its criminals. Only in the nineteenth century were proper penitentiaries built, where solitary confinement and absolute silence were implemented, leading to some inmates becoming insane or committing suicide. Others were sent to Australia after two years in such penitentiaries, some of them mentally ill due to the conditions they had experienced in the British prisons (see, for example, Grass 24, 26, 33 and Hirst 14-15). As pointed out already in footnote 22, in Australia a ‘Model Prison’ was built in Port Arthur. This prison, however, was not based on the panopticon, but rather on Fentonville, a famous English penitentiary, and was only finished at the end of the transportation period. Notably, John Boyle O’Reilly includes several descriptions of English prisons in *Moondyne*.
Hughes, moreover, points out that “one-half to two-thirds of the convicts carried previous convictions” and adds that, unlike commonly imagined, “[m]ost were city-dwellers, not villagers or peasants” (159). Smith similarly found that, although most of the male convicts she studied were convicted of theft and burglary, some had committed worse crimes, such as murder, manslaughter and grievous bodily harm. She further highlights that a “case-by-case examination of the convicts makes it plain that there can be no black-and-white conclusion about whether they were members of the criminal class or ‘just’ poverty-stricken working-class people who turned to crime. They were all of those things” (108). What is clear is that today these criminals would meet with a much less severe punishment than in eighteenth-century England, where the penal code was harsh: over 200 offences could result in a death sentence. But the King’s Mercy was frequently administered, and the criminal then usually transported overseas instead of being hanged (Hughes 36). This option of mass forced emigration, however, came to an end when the American colonies rebelled in 1776 (Frost, *Botany Bay* 1), which was one reason why prisons then started filling up. Other reasons include an increase in the crime rate due to periods of peace time, when the poor could not find ready employment in the armed forces, and the burgeoning industrialisation, which made many jobs redundant (Grass 20-21).

The way prisons were run in the eighteenth century also differs markedly from today. Most gaols at the time were private enterprises, where men and women mingled freely. As long as transportation was working, many criminals were shipped off without spending much time in prison. Most long-term inmates were, in fact, debtors, who often lived there with their families.\footnote{This continued into the nineteenth century (see, for example, Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit*).} With money, such a stay could be relatively pleasant (Grass 15, Hirst 78). Criminals waiting to be hanged were also incarcerated, but minor offences led to corporeal punishment. In fact, as already mentioned earlier, in the eighteenth century “punishment was deliberately punitive and visible: executions, stocks, pillories and even brandings served to identify and injure those who had broken the law physically, and to dissuade others from doing the same” (Grass 8). But, when following the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 convicts could no longer be transported *en masse*, gaols filled up to such an extent that hulks – decommissioned ships anchored in the Thames and other waterways – became *impromptu* prisons to hold the spill-over from the local gaols. Contrary to popular belief, conditions on the hulks...
were not as terrible as depicted by Hughes, Clark and Shaw (Frost, *Botany Bay* 58-59). Many of the overcrowded county gaols, however, were truly miserable places, as John Howard highlighted in his tour of English prisons in 1777 (Grass 21). In comparison, living conditions after the early ‘starvation years’ were much better in New South Wales. As Frost points out, the colony was flourishing by 1800 and, “benefiting from a better food supply, a benign climate, and free from the usual childhood illnesses, the first generation of native-born colonists grew up six inches [i.e. 15 cm] taller than their parents” (*The First Fleet* 101). The vast majority of these native-born colonists were children of the convicts.

In total, approximately 162,000 convicts were sent to Australia over a period of eighty years. Of these, 24,000 were women (Hughes 244), but this overview concentrates on the experiences of male transportees, in line with the study’s focus on male convict protagonists. John Hirst offers a good history of early New South Wales in *Convict Society and Its Enemies* (1983). During the first years there, most convicts worked for the government, clearing land for agriculture, building roads and so forth. Instead of having to work a fixed amount of hours per day, they were soon put on task work. In their own time, many spent their time drinking, gambling and stealing, but some did extra work, for which they were paid in goods (Hirst 35-36). As there was no literal prison, the First Fleet had brought tents along for the convicts (Frost, *First Fleet* 102). Later they had to arrange their own accommodation and were encouraged to cultivate a bit of land for themselves. If they had family, they got an extra day a week off. Soon it became the practice to assign, that is lend, convicts to officials, free emigrants and ex-convicts, who were called emancipists (see, for example, Hirst 36-41).

Walsh explains that there were several levels in the New South Wales convict system. Assignment, which was crucial in establishing agriculture in the colony, became so popular that most convicts were assigned upon arrival. Depending on a variety of things, including their behaviour, their occupational background and to whom they were assigned, convicts would then either move closer or further away from liberty. If an

---

32 See, also, Dickens’s *Great Expectations*.
33 Marriage was always encouraged, but most couples lived together happily without officially tying the knot. Women thus cohabitating were often referred to as prostitutes and were used to prove how ‘depraved’ the convicts were.
34 The terms ‘convict system’, ‘transportation system’ or simply ‘system’ are used to describe transportation, assignment and secondary punishment in Australia. Among the authors discussed here, only Hughes capitalises the term, similarly to Astley in his tales.
assigned convict kept his head down and worked quietly, he could receive a ‘ticket-of-leave,’ which allowed him to travel within a certain area and choose who to work for. At the end of his sentence, or earlier for exceptional services such as tracking a bushranger, he would obtain a conditional pardon, which made him a free man in the colony, or a complete pardon, which gave him the option to return home. This usually depended on whether he had been transported for a fixed period, usually seven or fourteen years, or for life. If, however, he further offended, he would be taken before the local magistrates, as masters could not punish their convicts. In fact, masters had to abide by certain agreements by law, and if they failed to do so, assigned convicts could be withdrawn. Assignees also had the right to lodge formal complaints about their masters. Thus, a convict’s situation differed markedly from a slave’s (although of course there were always cases where masters abused their convicts). For slight offences a recidivist convict was typically ordered to the triangle or solitary confinement, then sent back to his master. Otherwise, he would be returned to the government. Depending on the gravity of his offence, as a further punishment he could be put in a gang (but not ironed), ganged and ironed, or sent to a secondary place of punishment such as Port Macquarie or Norfolk Island, that is, to a remote penal station. In Tasmania the same system was implemented.

If an assigned convict was fortunate, he would not only live in relative comfort while serving out his sentence, but also learn valuable skills, which could be useful once he received a ticket-of-leave or a pardon. Certainly, the work performed by many convicts was extremely hard and tedious, and the emotional impact from being forcefully separated from loved ones back home would have affected many strongly (see, for example, Walsh 122). But soon Australia lost some of its terrifying potential back in Britain, even leading to some criminals committing crimes on purpose to be transported (Smith 63). Macintyre explains that in 1819 commissioner Bigge was sent out to investigate the state of New South Wales under governor Macquarie, who allegedly “favoured the fallen over the free,” taking the side of emancipists as opposed to free immigrants (51). The British government, however, wanted the criminals to be deterred, and “Bigge was accordingly to inquire into the prospects of New South Wales both as a gaol and a colony, but above all the instructions of the minister for the colonies

---

35 For female convicts, slightly different rules applied.
36 See, for example, Hirst and Walsh.
37 In Western Australia, the assignment system was never in use. Instead, convicts only worked for the government.
emphasised that transportation should be ‘an object of real terror’” (54). As a consequence of Bigge’s report, life became much tougher for convicts. For example, assigned convicts “were no longer allowed free time at the end of the day, or permitted to receive ‘indulgences’… There were fewer pardons and no more land grants to convicts on the expiry of their sentences” (69).

Secondary places of punishment also played an essential role in making transportation to Australia again “an object of real terror”. Port Macquarie in New South Wales was established in 1821, Moreton Bay in present-day Brisbane in 1824, Macquarie Harbour and Port Arthur in Van Diemen’s Land in 1822 and 1832 respectively (Macintyre 70). In Western Australia, no such centre was built. Norfolk Island was initially settled in 1788, when Phillip sent part of the convict population there from Sydney in order to start the flax and pine industry. Even more remote than Botany Bay, “the fate of the refractory convict on Norfolk Island was one of prolonged and hideous torture” (Hughes 114). In 1814 it was abandoned but resettled as a secondary place of punishment in 1825, with the aim of providing “the ne plus ultra of convict degradation” (Governor Darling, quoted in Hughes 456). Once again, convicts suffered under extreme punishments. John Price, Norfolk Island’s most notorious commander, “began by hanging a dozen mutineers and was accused by his own chaplain of ‘ferocious severity’ that included chaining men to a wall in spread-eagle position with an iron in the mouth” (Macintyre 70). Murder was repeatedly committed in order to be sent to Sydney for trial, and death by hanging was considered a welcome end to many a convict’s sufferings (Hughes 115).38

Macquarie Harbour was located on the remote west coast of Van Diemen’s Land and separated from the settled regions on the east coast by apparently insurmountable mountain ranges. It could only be reached through a narrow and treacherous sea passage called Hell’s Gates, and for much of its duration it truly was a dreaded place where convicts suffered under terrible living and working conditions. Soon convicts were left in no doubt “that [Macquarie Harbour] was a place where day upon grinding day the cold, the wind, the rain, the dull clank of irons and the weight of work would burn callouses into gnarled palms, drive pain into tired joints and fix dread in the firmest of

38 Price was beaten to death by felons several years later when working as inspector general of prisons at Melbourne (Macintyre 71). Clarke based his character Frere on Price, and several of Astley’s short stories are set on Norfolk Island during Price’s regime.
hearts” (Maxwell-Stuart 58). Against the odds, almost immediately convicts started to escape. Most of them died close by, were recaptured or returned, but some did manage to make it all the way to the settled areas. The most notorious bolter was Alexander Pearce, who first absconded in 1822 with seven other convicts and survived by eating some of his fellow escapees. When he was recaptured, the authorities didn’t believe his story and sent him back to Macquarie Harbour. Soon he absconded again, this time in the company of a convict called Thomas Cox. About a week later Pearce was found, carrying some half-eaten remains of Cox with him. Pearce claimed he had killed and eaten Cox not because of lack of food, but following a quarrel (Maxwell-Stuart 62-70).

Port Arthur was the last secondary place of punishment to be established. Closer to Hobart, it allowed Governor Arthur to keep a close watch on ‘his’ establishment. Hughes points out that “[f]ar more than Macquarie Harbour or even Norfolk Island, Port Arthur has always dominated the popular historical imagination in Australia as the emblem of the miseries of transportation, ‘the Hell on earth’… Yet the records clearly show that Port Arthur, though certainly a place of misery for its prisoners, was by no means as bad as either Macquarie Harbour or Norfolk Island” (400). The main way in which Port Arthur subdued its inmates was through “unceasing labour” and “harassing vigilance,” turning the convict system into a machine, “to which vindictiveness and pity were equally alien” (400). When transportation to Tasmania ended in 1853, 12,700 sentences had been served at Port Arthur (affecting approximately one in six convicts), thus playing “a much bigger part in the punishment of habitual criminals … than Macquarie Harbour or even Norfolk Island” (402).

A punishment common in all penal stations as well as in the main settlements was flogging. Hughes provides shocking quotations of real-life floggings, many of which occurred on Norfolk Island. There one prisoner, for example, received 2000 strokes in the course of three years, leaving his back “quite bare of flesh, and his collarer [sic] were exposed looking very much like two Ivory Polished horns. It was with some difficulty that we could find another place to flog him” (Robert Jones quoted in Hughes, 115). The lash used at Macquarie Harbour was called the thief’s cat. “Just 50 strokes

---

39 Clarke’s character Gabbet is based on Pearce, and cannibalism has become a recurrent trope of convict Gothic fiction, as will be discussed in later chapters.

40 It thus came closer to the penitentiaries established in Britain in the nineteenth century.
was enough to cut a man round the throat, under the armpits and across his ribs and belly. A full 100 lashes was designed, not just to turn him into a bloody mass, but to punch the wind out of his lungs and the spirit or resistance out of every inch of his being” (Maxwell-Stewart 83).

Smith argues that “[f]loggings received by convicts in Australia pale by comparison with soldiers in the British Army, where the men continued to be flogged for many years after transportation ceased” (94). Be that as may, the lash was used much more often in the Australian colonies than in England, especially following Bigge’s inquiry. Bigge, “at one with his British masters,” recommended “the efficacy of a culture of terror to counter resistance and insurgency”, as Raymond Evans explains (59). As a consequence, “[f]loggings increase exponentially” in the two decades after his report, “with the maximum strokes per whipping doubling by the year 1830 to 100 lashes”. Evans further points out that “[i]n 1835, there were more than 7000 floggings … in NSW for a population of some 27000 people, in sharp contrast with fewer than 250 per annum administered across the whole of England and Wales, among a population exceeding 12 million.” On average, “around 26 per cent of the entire male cohort in New South Wales was flogged annually,” and “[t]here was a much higher statistical probability of being flogged at least once over a five-year period than of not being flogged at all” (60). It is thus not surprising that the excruciating pain and degradation many convicts suffered through the lash has become emblematic of the transportation period and plays an important role in several of the primary texts analysed here.

The infamies of Norfolk Island and other penal settlements not only served their deterrent purpose in Britain, but also played a crucial role in the abolition of transportation (Macintyre 70). Smith explains that, starting in the 1830s, several different interest groups fought for the end of transportation both in Britain and the colonies by focusing on the excesses of the convict system. They all compared it to slavery, which had been abolished in the British Empire in 1833, and highlighted the supposed depravity of the convicts to raise moral concerns. There were reports of

41 Note, also, that according to Walsh’s study, up to 45 per cent of the Tocal assignees were flogged (91).
42 Transportation to New South Wales (which also included present-day Queensland) was suspended in 1840 and officially abolished in 1850. In Van Diemen’s Land, which had been settled as a penal colony in 1803, transportation continued until 1853, while Western Australia, founded without the help of convicts in 1829, did so badly that 21 years later it requested convicts from Britain to help build vital infrastructure. The last ship carrying convicts to Australia arrived in Fremantle in 1868. Victoria and South Australia were proud to be convict-free colonies, although of course ex-convicts and absconders also made it there. These dates are taken from The Fatal Shore.
homosexuality, at the time called the ‘unnatural’ or ‘nameless’ crime, being rife on Norfolk Island and in the work gangs (200-222). Shocked clergymen were told of rapes during confessions, and this was welcome fodder for anti-transportationists such as Reverend John West in Van Diemen’s Land and Sir William Molesworth in England, who portrayed transportation as “a variation of slavery, but most particularly as an instrument that created homosexuality” (341).\footnote[43]{Smith points out, however, that in fact few doctors confirmed that the ‘crime’ was widespread (based on sexually transmitted diseases) (239). As she writes, “it is impossible to gauge the extent of homosexuality in the colony – if it even matters” (240). But it is perhaps telling that Tasmania was the last Australian state to legalise homosexuality – in 1997 (327).} According to Smith, initially most ex-convicts had felt no particular shame about their convict past. But the anti-transportationists’ voice was so loud that towards the middle of the nineteenth century, when emancipists and their children came close to being outnumbered by free immigrants, ex-convicts became concerned that having been transported meant association with the ‘unnatural’ crime. Therefore, “[f]or the protection of their families, if not for themselves, it became necessary for ex-prisoners to hide their past” (253). Later in the century, the rise of social Darwinism, eugenics and criminal anthropology compounded the idea that criminals were a distinct species (280-81). As a consequence, many descendants were kept in the dark, and only since the late 1960s have family researchers started exploring the archives, often to discover their convict ancestry (4).

Smith thus considers the claims made by anti-transportationists about homosexuality among convicts to have been a key contributing factor in the creation of a feeling of shame associated with the convict past, often referred to as the “convict stain”.\footnote[44]{The concept of a “stain” was already used in the nineteenth century. For example, when celebrating the end of transportation in Launceston on 10 August 1853, “colonists began singing an anthem set to the tune of ‘God save the Queen’, extolling how the [anti-transportation] League had ‘Broken Tasmania’s chain / Wash’d out the hated stain’,” as Chris Holdridge explains in “The Pageantry of the Anti-Convict Cause” (154).} Alison Alexander in *Tasmania’s Convicts* (2010) questions the role homophobia played in the anti-transportation campaign, but Damien Barlow highlights the importance of the Molesworth committee in producing “the first large scale public discourse on antipodean convict sexual perversity” (35), and Dan Huon similarly posits “homosexuality as a potent weapon in the hand” of the anti-transportationists, suggesting that “the emotive emphasis on homosexuality might help explain why the ‘hated stain’ of convictism was so potent and long lasting”, as David Andrew Roberts summarises it in “Remembering ‘Australia’s Glorious League’: The Historiography of Anti-Transportation” (213).
As will be seen in subsequent chapters, the Molesworth Report was an important historical source for Clarke’s *His Natural Life*, and homosexuality is a recurrent topic in several convict Gothic texts. Important here is the fact that, even if some historians may dispute how important homophobia was in contributing to the convict stain, the existence of the stain is uncontested. In fact, in addition to Smith, a variety of other historians have discussed the embarrassment or shame associated with the convict past, both at a personal and official level. Hirst, for example, argues that the strongest influence of the convicts lies “in the trauma of a nation which had to come to terms with its shameful origins” (*Australian History in Seven Questions* 137), as for “over a century Australians upheld a taboo of not mentioning the convicts”, which “covered the shame” but “did not remove it” (138). For Hirst, this explains the importance Gallipoli has had in ‘making’ the nation: according to him, the events on the shore of northern Turkey freed Australia “from the self-doubt about whether it had the mettle to be a proper nation,” the “deepest source” of this “self-doubt” being the “convict stain” (140-41). Macintyre notes the “reluctance to acknowledge the convict stain” in his *Concise History of Australia* (71), and, together with Alison Bashford, draws attention to the “great social fault-line of early colonial society … between felon and free,” which “lingered on into the twentieth century, when convict origins were perceived as shameful elements in a family history” (Introduction 9).

Thus, Australians collectively forgot, or rather repressed, the transportation period. Consider also Hughes, who argues that “[t]he obsessive cultural enterprise of Australians a hundred years ago was to forget [the convict history] entirely, to sublimate it, to drive it into unconsulted recesses” (596). Deborah Oxley similarly explains that:

> [u]naddressed guilt surrounding conquest, mixed with the criminal identity of the first white population and the penal nature of the experiment created what became known as ‘The Convict Stain’. One prominent response in the nineteenth century was to deny the past. It was believed that the nation’s unpalatable origins needed to be cleansed, to be whitewashed; Australia’s convict past, on the whole, was considered best ignored.

(“Counting the Convicts” 115)

On a public and institutional level, convicts were omitted from school history and celebrations (Smith 33, Hughes xi, 599). During major national events, such as the Centenary of European settlement in 1888, Federation in 1901 and the Sesquicentenary in 1938, convict history was avoided. Instead, “parades focused on merino sheep and
sheaves of wheat. With no respectable alternative, the gold digger with his pan became ubiquitous” (Smith 2). When Lord Beauchamp told journalists in 1899 “‘Greetings! Your Birthstain you have turned to good’ [o]utrage was the local response to such an unAustralian frankness of the unmentionable subject” (3). Even at the Bicentenary celebrations in 1988 only Prince Charles referred to convicts directly (3). The Australian government, instead, “withheld support from a private re-enactment of the voyage of the First Fleet” (Bashford and Macintyre, Preface xxii).

“Denied its voice as history, the convict experience became the province of journalists and novelists” such as Clarke and Astley, who revived the convict past in their Gothic texts by focusing on the brutalities of the transportation system (Hughes xiii). This is one reason why Smith is heavily critical of both authors. She claims that, as only a minority of convicts were sent to penal stations and/or experienced floggings, His Natural Life and Astley’s tales misrepresent what a typical convict’s fate in Australia would have been like (320-321). As mentioned earlier, His Natural Life will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two. With regard to Astley, it is certainly true that his tales concentrate on the excesses of Australia’s convict past: at times melodramatic, at times bitterly ironic, graphic scenes of extreme violence, cruelty, murder and suicide abound in his stories, exemplifying Botting’s argument that “Gothic signifies a writing of excess” (Gothic 1). In addition, Astley employs a wide range of Gothic tropes such as the horror of burial chambers, cannibalism and (homosexual) rape, the return of the repressed, satanic ceremonies, and desperate struggles for control and assertion. His convicts, moreover, are not only shipped to Australia, but often pushed further away into the nightmarish realms of the secondary centres of punishment, while the ‘System’ turns into an autonomous and evil power which brutalizes its officials just as much as its prisoners. At the same time, however, the stories are characterised by an interesting insistence on historical truth. For example, in most tales Astley includes ‘facts’ such as prisoner numbers, quotations from official records and ship indents, and incorporates historical identities such as Maconochie, Price, and Arthur in order to support the impression that he represents true events.45

45 Astley had a political agenda when writing his stories, which coincided with the editorial stance of the Bulletin regarding secession from the empire. In the process, he turned topics frequently found in fin-de-siècle imperial Gothic on their head: instead of reflecting fears of “regression or going native” and of “an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism” (Patrick Brantlinger 187), Astley’s tales blame the English transportation system for the degeneration of human nature he perceives in both convict and post-convict Australia. As Richard Auckland puts it, Astley’s tales represent both a “savage
Similar techniques are frequently used in Gothic fiction. Walpole, for instance, claims in *Otranto* that he is merely translating from original documents, introducing his novel by stating that “[t]he following work was found in the library of an ancient catholic family in the north of England” (5) and emphasising that he “cannot but believe that the ground-work of the story is founded on truth” (7). However, Astley did, as a matter of fact, actually read many documents. As B. G. Andrews explains in his introduction to a collection of Astley’s tales titled *Tales of the Convict System*, Astley “studied the whole of the transportation literature – parliamentary papers, newspapers, broadsides, books, pamphlets, diaries, letters, even the convict records themselves – and also supplemented the record by inspecting the convict settlements before they were deteriorated and by interviewing the survivors of the early days before they died” (xi). Andrews further points out that most of Astley’s tales can be tied to “a specific source, or at least linked with a specific incident in convict history,” and in an appendix discusses the historical background of each story included in the collection. Nevertheless, he also highlights that Astley was “neither scrupulous nor ingenuous in his methods,” and that if “the historical truth conflicted with other considerations … it was seldom revered, more often rearranged, manipulated, and even jettisoned” (xxi).

No doubt, Astley paints a one-sided picture of the transportation period. However, Andrews correctly emphasises that, biased or not, there is enough evidence to suggest that some of the chilling incidents portrayed in Astley’s stories really had taken place. Or as H. M. Green puts it, Astley’s “nightmares are, in essence at least, a part of history” (612). Yet, if we are to believe that Astley merely writes up what he has discovered in his sources, how are we to reconcile these ‘facts’ with the Gothic tropes present in the tales? To a certain point, both the nature of the narrated events and some of his own comments are problematized by his insistence on historical truth, as his descriptions of the mysterious proceedings of the Ring, the uncanny workings of the ‘System’, the excessive violence and degradation render the tales’ professed veracity

indictment of penal policy” and “a satiric picture of the vaunted civilization brought by British institutions to the antipodes” (417).

46 Moreover, Auckland points out that “Astley’s account of the warping, dehumanizing effects of a system under which absolute power is complemented by the notion that the internee is radically other or subhuman has lost none its relevance” (419). Sadly, many incidents from real life could be given to support this claim. A recent example that springs to mind is the abuse of prisoners by American military police personnel in the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. Consider also the Stanford Prison Experiment, where college students were divided into two groups, guards and prisoners. After just a few days, the experiment had to be aborted as the guards turned sadistic, while the prisoners showed signs of extreme stress and depression (see: [http://www.prisonexp.org/](http://www.prisonexp.org/) for more information).
questionable. In this sense, Astley’s stories estrange the past by leading the reader to hesitate between historical/realist and Gothic modes, to doubt whether these ‘true’ stories could actually have taken place, whether the convict experience could really have been so dark and brutal. At the same time, however, restricting ‘truth’ to what is historically verifiable is limiting at best. Arguably, Astley’s combination of historical/realist and Gothic elements makes his stories all the more powerful, precisely because this mix underlines the tales’ foundation in reality, no matter how inconceivable this reality may seem. In fact, the Gothic elements in Astley’s tales involve a heightening of actual recorded events in order to reveal aspects of the experience of the System, including its extreme cruelty and its perverting of justice in favour of sheer power, that realism (with its commitment to the probable and the seeming true, the vraisemblable) cannot reveal.

Astley’s emphasis on the ‘System’, his insight into the institutionalisation of a violent maintenance of power, and his representation of an uncanny doubling of this system in the convicts’ own ring is historically grounded but also estranging in a way that almost anticipates Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925) in its representation of a total institution. In comparison with *His Natural Life*, like Clarke, Astley “condemned the brutality of the system, rather than the depravity of the convicts, and for [both] this reflected on the morality, not of Australia, but of England” (Richard White, 27). In contrast to Clarke’s novel, however, whose upper-class protagonist is unjustly sent to Australia and, in the original version, eventually regains his old social status, Astley’s convicts are “agitators for social justice, starving men forced to steal, or innocents ‘bearing the brunt of some rich or great man’s crime’” (Andrews, Introduction xv), who, shockingly degraded under the ‘System’, usually meet a violent end.

Thus, Astley’s convicts stand in sharp contrast to the men whose lives Smith follows in her book. Her convicts were able to build a successful life in Australia, and she is not alone in emphasising that for many convicts, being transported turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Nevertheless, it important to note that not all convicts managed to thrive. Janet McCalman and Rebecca Kippen point out that “… most male convicts who finished their servitude failed to find a wife in the colonies and left no discoverable

---

47 This issue will be further explored in Chapter Five “Gould’s Book of Fish: Richard Flanagan’s Postmodern Retelling of the Convict Past.”
descendants,” and that “Australia’s history of convict founders was written by the ‘winners’” (“Population and Health” 296). Moreover, even if only a minority of convicts were sent to secondary places of punishment, penal stations were “absolutely integral to the System [sic]: they provided a standard of terror by which good behaviour on the mainland of New South Wales … would be enforced” (Hughes xiv). Smith’s account of the history of the convict stain is nevertheless fascinating and important, and her book has been endorsed by historians such as Frost. But from a literary perspective, Australia’s convict history seems to simply lend itself well to the Gothic genre. Arguably, this is not surprising: the Gothic typically exposes the dark underside of modernity, or, in this case, the cruel underbelly of the British transportation system. As Turcotte puts it, “with the advent of the transportation of convicts [Australia’s] darkness seemed confirmed. The Antipodes was a world of reversals, the dark subconscious of Britain. It was, for all intents and purposes, Gothic par excellence, the dungeon of the world” (“Australian Gothic” 10).

Based on the recent historical studies discussed above, convict Australia was probably not gothic to the extent commonly imagined. But, as John Rickard writes in Australia: A Cultural History, the past still has the potential to unsettle:

[for several generations the convict inheritance was an embarrassment, which, made bearable by pretence that most of the convicts were harmless poachers or stealers of a loaf of bread, really served to discourage the pursuit of history. Then, as historians braced themselves to face the facts of transportation, it dawned on many Australians that the primitive convict society of New South Wales was an extraordinary beginning for a nation, and more a cause for astonishment than shame. Yet even as Australian history began to flourish as an enterprise, it seemed as if the old uneasiness had not been entirely dispelled, indeed, as the myth of the convicts’ innocence was dismantled, the sense of the nation’s original sin gathered unconscious force. …. In a young country such as European Australia history lies very close to the surface. It can enrich lives by making sense of our surroundings and our dilemmas, but it also has immense capacity to disturb. (24)

Gothic texts often illustrate how the repressed past has a way of returning, often in disturbing ways, or, as Allan Lloyd Smith puts it in American Gothic Fiction, the Gothic “is about the return of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present” (1). As I will explore in the following chapters,
this is exactly what happened with Australia’s convict history: as the transportation period was collectively repressed and forgotten, it found a way back through Gothic writings which not only illustrate the excessive brutality of the penal past but also show how this past continues to affect the present.

(iii) A Brief Description of Each Chapter

The following chapters offer a chronological analysis of Australian Gothic novels that represent convict transportation. Chapter One focuses on James Tucker’s Ralph Rashleigh (c. 1840s) and John Boyle O’Reilly’s Moondyne: A Story from the Underworld (1878). These two novels are the only narratives analysed in this study which were written by actual convicts. Ralph Rashleigh, written by Tucker while a convict at Port Macquarie, foreshadows convict Gothic tropes that occur in most of the other texts included here. Moreover, as part of his search for how best to represent the convict experience, Tucker experiments with different types of heroes, reflecting a concern about how to portray a criminal protagonist. Moondyne was written once O’Reilly had escaped to America. Joe, his protagonist, embodies some of the core characteristics of the Gothic hero-villain also found in later texts. Both these novels by men who had actually been transported suggest that the convict experience lends itself to Gothic treatment.

Chapter Two centres on Marcus Clarke’s His Natural Life (1870-1872), an important nineteenth-century narrative which, as Roslynn Haynes puts it in Tasmanian Visions, has become the “arbiter of cultural memory as well as the source of mythology” with regard to Australia’s convict past (43). One of the first published examples of Australian convict Gothic fiction, this text is central to this study because Clarke depicts Richard Devine/Rufus Dawes as a Gothic hero-villain and introduces key convict Gothic motifs such as cannibalism and homosexual rape, with the aim of critiquing the British transportation system. This chapter also contains a discussion of just how controversial Clarke’s subject matter was, writing only a few decades after transportation had ceased to Australia’s east coast and Tasmania.

Chapter Three focuses on William Hay’s The Escape of the Notorious Sir William Heans (1919), the first twentieth-century novel analysed in this study. This text differs greatly from the earlier narratives in that there is little excessive physical violence.
Instead, Hay is interested in surveillance as a form of psychological violence. The novel revolves around a, from a modern viewpoint, morally dubious gentleman-convict, and reflects Hay’s own struggles trying to live like an English gentleman in what he thought of as a hostile environment. Thus, Heans provides insights into how affected Australia was by changing class hierarchies and status anxiety in both the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Moreover, Hay is the first author to link Australia’s penal past with the tragic fate of Tasmania’s Indigenous people.

Chapter Four, on Peter Carey’s Jack Maggs (1997), argues that in this radical NeoVictorian rewriting of Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations, Carey subverts Dickens’s novel by turning the convict into a hero-villain and placing him centre-stage, and by foregrounding several Victorian taboos which depict the imperial centre in dark and degenerate terms. Carey’s narrative is furthermore also haunted by spectres of Maggs’s past (both from growing up in England and as a convict at the penal centre of Moreton Bay), which starkly contrasts with the life he can eventually build for himself and his family in New South Wales. The novel’s happy ending provides an interesting late twentieth-century viewpoint on Australia’s penal history, as will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

Chapter Five examines Richard Flanagan’s Gould’s Book of Fish (2001). In this novel, Flanagan successfully brings together postmodernism and the Gothic in his search for what he considers a more authentic depiction of both Tasmania’s penal history and the tragic fate of its Indigenous people than is commonly done by outsiders. Critical of traditional historical novels, Flanagan addresses his island’s brutal past from a local and contemporary perspective, in the process self-consciously deploying stock convict Gothic tropes, some of which lose their haunting quality. In the same vein, Gould, the novel’s eponymous protagonist, is a very different hero-villain from those encountered in the earlier texts. Highlighting how the penal past continues to haunt present-day Australia, one of the novel’s key concerns will be shown to be the way in which official history has functioned as a metanarrative to silence convicts and Aborigines.

As this brief description of the contents of each chapter already indicates, the primary texts included in this study vary widely in their styles, thus incidentally
illustrating how the Gothic is a mixed genre. At the heart of each narrative, however, lies a concern about what happens when a group of people (the officials of the transportation system) holds almost unlimited power over another (the convicts), a concern that remains as valid today as it was in the past. Similarly, Australia’s convict history and Aboriginal dispossession continue to unfold in postcolonial Gothic writings from Australia, as exemplified by Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* (2006), which will be briefly discussed in the conclusion.

---

48 Consider Jacqueline Howard, who points out in *Reading Gothic Fiction: A Bakhtinian Approach* that “at its inception, there existed the idea that Gothic fiction is not a ‘pure genre, but a combination of styles,’” an observation that is still true today (12). Among the texts included here, *Rashleigh*, for example, mixes the Gothic with the picaresque, while Hay called *Heuns* a romance.
Chapter One

James Tucker’s Ralph Rashleigh and John Boyle O’Reilly’s Moondyne: A Story from the Under-World: Two Texts Written By Actual Convicts

This chapter analyses two of the few novels written by convict authors. James Tucker most likely wrote Ralph Rashleigh while serving his sentence in New South Wales in the 1840s, whereas John Boyle O’Reilly published Moondyne: A Story from the Under-world in weekly instalments from November 1878 after having escaped to America from Western Australia in 1869. Tucker was sent to Australia for blackmail, O’Reilly for seditious activities, and they met very different fates in the penal colonies. The two novels also differ, both in their plots and styles: Ralph Rashleigh has been described as a picaresque and romance narrative, while H. M. Green calls Moondyne an “idealistic extravagance” (283). Both novels, however, explore how best to depict convict life from the point of view of someone who had actually been transported. As part of this exploration, Tucker experiments with different types of characters, including a Gothic villain and a hero of sensibility. Rashleigh is moreover important because it contains several common eighteenth-century Gothic tropes as well as foreshadowing convict Gothic themes that occur in most of the later texts explored here. O’Reilly’s Moondyne is a striking mix of Gothic elements and an idealistic spirit. Most interesting in the context of this study is the fact that the protagonist Joe embodies some of the core characteristic of the Gothic hero-villain. Notably, both Tucker and O’Reilly make use of Gothic tropes and figures to represent convict life in penal Australia, which suggests that the convict experience is essentially a Gothic one.

Ralph Rashleigh tells the life of its eponymous hero, an English clerk turned petty criminal who is sent to Australia for the term of his natural life, having committed several burglaries. In the colony Rashleigh is first assigned to a schoolmaster, but soon displeases the authorities with speeches against the government. Thus starts a long series of misadventures, including hard labour at the Emu Plains agricultural establishment, assignment to the despicable Arlacks, a prolonged and involuntary sojourn with terrifying bushrangers and a sentence at the Coal River, a secondary place of punishment in Newcastle. Rashleigh and several other convicts eventually manage to escape from the penal centre, and, after much bloodshed between Aborigines and the bolters, he is adopted by an Aboriginal tribe, with whom he lives for four years before being forced to leave when the chief – his adoptive father – passes away. He then
wanders on with his Aboriginal wives until he rescues two English ladies and a small boy from a shipwreck. Together with the rescued party, he is picked up by a passing vessel and returns to Sydney, where he eventually receives a conditional pardon and soon after is killed during a fight with Aborigines.

Considered the best of the early texts about convict Australia, so far Ralph Rashleigh has mostly been described in picaresque and romantic terms. As yet, in fact, no one has focused on its Gothic elements, even though the novel illustrates that Tucker was clearly aware of the Gothic literature popular in his time, and many passages include settings and themes also present in later Gothic convict fiction. Remarkably, however, it could not have influenced other nineteenth-century authors such as Marcus Clarke and William Astley because it was not published until 1929: while Ralph Rashleigh was most likely written between 1840 and 1845, it lay forgotten until it was brought to an exhibition of the Royal Australian Historical Society in 1920, by a man who only knew that his wife had inherited it some 50 years earlier from her father, Alexander Burnett. The president of the Historical Society, C. H. Bertie, thought it was a memoir and sent it to a publisher in England, who printed a heavily edited version of the story under the title of The Adventures of Ralph Rashleigh: A Penal Exile in Australia (1929). Thus, in a way Ralph Rashleigh encapsulates the Gothic return of the repressed: as the publisher’s note of this edition highlights, “[a] convenient fire destroyed most of the records some years ago, and hundreds of Australians sighed with relief and consigned their sheep-stealing, murdering or revolutionary ancestors to the oblivion of a short memory. Now, the history of the colonies needs this particularly exciting chapter to make it complete …” (5).

In 1949 Colin Roderick began to search for the author’s identity. It took him two years, but eventually he managed to link the novel to James Tucker, and to trace his life in the Colonial Secretary’s archives in Sydney’s Mitchell Library. Convinced of the novel’s value, Roderick arranged for what he calls a ‘verbatim’ reproduction of the original manuscript through Angus and Robertson in 1952, thus emphasising his claim for the authenticity of the text. Thanks to Roderick’s efforts, it is clear that Tucker’s first-hand experiences of many facets of the convict system placed him in a unique position.

49 The novel also includes comic passages (consider, for example, the section describing the convict theatre) and, similarly to William Astley’s short stories, is often ironic in its style.
50 Throughout this chapter I quote from the 1975 Angus & Robertson Classics edition based on the 1952 verbatim publication.
to write about it from the inside. As Roderick points out in his foreword, “[t]he story of how [Ralph Rashleigh] came to be written is as fascinating as that of its discovery” (v). Tucker’s biography, summarised below, not only puts into context some of the novel’s episodes but also helps illustrate the various aspects of convict life discussed in the Introduction.

Roderick further explains that Tucker was born in Bristol in 1808. Although not from a wealthy family, he received a relatively good education and began to work as a clerk at the age of 14. In 1826 he found himself unemployed and with a mother to support. A cousin offered him a job on a farm; soon, however, they had a falling-out and Tucker left. His cousin gave him £5 before he went, but two days later Tucker wrote him a letter, demanding another £5 or else threatening him with the charge of unnatural crime. Thus, aged 18, Tucker was convicted for “feloniously, knowingly, and wilfully, sending a certain letter … threatening to accuse … James Stanyford Tucker with indecently assaulting him the said James Rosenberg Tucker, with the intent to extort money …” (quoted in Roderick, viii). Condemned to transportation for the term of his natural life, he arrived in Sydney in 1827. According to Roderick, during his first years in the colony Tucker most likely spent some time at the Emu Plains agricultural establishment and in a road gang. He might also have been assigned at some point before receiving a ticket of leave in 1835, eight years after his arrival in Australia. Three years later he lost his ticket for drunkenness and was sent to a probationary gang in Parramatta for two months before being ordered to the Hyde Park barracks as a clerk. He was granted another ticket of leave eighteen months later but lost it in 1844 for misdemeanour and was condemned to the penal settlement of Port Macquarie.

As Roderick puts it, “[t]he establishment there was a tottering relic of a vanishing system. Its convict personnel of a few hundred lost souls contained only 30 men sound in wind and mind” (x). Fortunately for Tucker, he became storekeeper for the superintendent, which gave him considerable privileges compared to the many invalids and lunatics comprising most of the convict population. In fact it is highly probable that Tucker wrote his novel while at the penal settlement; Roderick emphasises that Tucker used government paper, ink and time to write his manuscripts (which further to Ralph Rashleigh also included three plays), which indicates that the government officials in charge actively encouraged him in his literary ambitions. Roderick also notes that based on what he found out about Tucker’s trajectory in Australia, it is unlikely that the
convict author ever came in contact with bushrangers or Aborigines. Moreover he could not have been sent to the Coal River settlement in Newcastle, because it was closed before he arrived in the colony. Instead, Roderick speculates that the incidents from that section of the novel are based on information Tucker gathered from “his chance taproom acquaintances or … the old hands … at Port Macquarie” (ix).

When Port Macquarie was broken up in 1847, Tucker received another ticket of leave. It is possible that Tucker gave his manuscripts to Burnett shortly after leaving the penal station (Burnett had been a fellow convict, who, unlike Tucker, made good in the colony. They first worked together in the 1830s, and met several times in their lives.). In 1849 Tucker yet again lost his ticket for absence from the district. He was sent to a prison in Goulburn, received another ticket some years later, but lost it once more before being granted another one for the Moreton Bay district in 1853, aged 45. By this time his police record would have made it impossible to gain employment as a clerk. Roderick was unable to discover how Tucker spent the rest of his life, except that he died in an asylum at the age of 58, although “he was presumed to be 72 – a sad commentary on the wreck that he must have been by 1866. Thus the author of Ralph Rashleigh slipped out of ken, the pitiful relict of a wasteful system, a piece of human wrack without will to direct himself or power to master his environment” (xi). Roderick concludes by noting that Tucker “had known the system at its worst” and that, while he “was the victim of a system that produced many more like him, so his book, quite apart from the miracle of its merit as a work of art, remains a significant commentary upon that system. It is the only novel of abiding stature to have been written by a man who during all his Australian life was never anything but a convict” (xi). Other critics such as H. M. Green, Elizabeth Perkins, Dellys Bird and Laurie Hergenhan agree that Ralph Rashleigh stands out as the best convict novel written by someone who had directly experienced the transportation system.

As already mentioned, Tucker’s novel has repeatedly been described in terms of the picaresque. Perkins, for example, notes that in Ralph Rashleigh “the formality of the eighteenth-century picaresque novel is sharpened by the irony of the authorial voice…. Although some of the events Rashleigh experiences have a stark immediacy, they are usually also presented as ‘adventures’ which befall ‘our exile’, ‘our rambler’ or ‘our adventurer’ (143). In Unnatural Lives, Hergenhan argues that Tucker probably chose the picaresque form because:
its looseness suited the rambling tone of travel books in disguise which the convict and pioneering scenes initially invited. In addition, Tucker wrote without knowledge of the new resurgence of realism of the Victorian novel. The more diffuse forms of romantic adventure and of eighteenth-century picaresque (Smollett and Defoe) would have been the main basis of his reading before and after his transportation in 1827. (16)

In addition, he points out that there is little characterisation throughout Ralph Rashleigh. Many characters in fact are mere caricatures (consider for example the Arlacks), and one of Tucker’s favourite styles is “inflated, literary language used for incongruous or ironic effect” (22). Nevertheless, the novel is very effective in making clear where Rashleigh’s alliances lie. Moreover, little characterisation does not necessarily make a novel picaresque. According to M. H. Abrams, the first picaresque narratives emerged in sixteenth-century Spain. He further explains that “[p]icaro’ is Spanish for ‘rogue,’ and a typical story concerns the escapades of an insouciant rascal who lives by his wits and shows little if any alteration of character through the long succession of his adventures. Picaresque fiction is realistic in manner, episodic in structure … and often satiric in aim” (191).

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the picaresque novel underwent several changes as it flourished throughout Europe, particularly in Germany, France and England. As Hergenhan highlights above, two of the most influential English writers of the picaresque in the eighteenth century were Defoe and Smollett. Most likely, Tucker was aware of both authors – consider, for example, the striking resemblance between Tucker’s title and Smollett’s The Adventures of Roderick Random (1748) and The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle (1751). It is also interesting to note that Defoe’s Moll Flanders, from the novel of the same name, is transported to America as punishment for her crimes, while Jack, from Defoe’s novel The History and Remarkable Life of the truly Honourable Colonel Jacque commonly Colonel Jack is kidnapped and sent to Virginia as a slave. There are, however, several important differences between these English narratives and Tucker’s novel. For example, in Smollett’s Roderick Random bad people are “invariably punished” with “humiliation or disgrace” (Bjornson 235), while both Smollett’s and Defoe’s picaresque heroes eventually lead happy and

---

51 Please note that in this chapter all quotations from Hergenhan stem from Unnatural Lives.
52 Traditional picaresque heroes have disreputable origins and a desire to climb the social ladder, which leads them to infamy from which they are finally redeemed by religious conversion (see, for example, Alexander Parker 102-03).
prosperous lives. Rashleigh, on the other hand, never realises his dream of marrying into the Marshall family, instead being killed prematurely by Aborigines. Arguably, Tucker experienced too much hardship, injustice and despair in Australia to envisage a long and happy life for his hero, unlike the main characters in the English novels. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that the picaresque, with its focus on a rogue protagonist, would have been an attractive model for a convict writer, and there certainly are many picaresque elements in Tucker’s novel.53

As Adrian Mitchell emphasises, however, Ralph Rashleigh illustrates a literary awareness that goes beyond the picaresque. References are not only made to Defoe and Smollett but also to Fielding and the Newgate novels, while Tucker’s Aborigines remind Mitchell of James Fenimore Cooper’s Native Americans.54 Mitchell further explains that the novel “begins well in the picaresque yet ends with the romance” (43) and concludes that “Tucker derives his particular charm from the colourful mixture of styles” (44). Although it has thus been established that Tucker had several literary modes available as models, previous critics have failed to recognise the presence of the Gothic in Ralph Rashleigh, even though Gothic literature was just as prevalent in his day as, for instance, picaresque and romantic novels. This might at least partially be explained by the fact that so far most commentators on Ralph Rashleigh wrote before the surge in Gothic criticism, which started in the 1980s.

In fact, Tucker’s novel contains numerous Gothic allusions and passages. Consider Rashleigh’s involuntary stay with the convict bushrangers, during which he resembles less and less an insouciant rascal, while Foxley and his men are described as banditti, reminiscent of Ann Radcliffe and other eighteenth-century Gothic authors.55 For example, when Rashleigh discovers that the bushrangers have set a building on fire which not only houses two hated policemen but also a mother and her children, he is “horror-stricken” and wrings “his hands in agony of horror,” the screams of the victims “[agonising his] inmost soul” (148). Yet his attempts to stop Foxley and his gang remain ineffectual. Struck down, he is left on the ground “senseless” and, upon waking,  

53 For an interesting discussion of more recent picaresque fiction from Australia see Ronald Blaber and Marvin Gilman’s Roguery: The Picaresque Tradition in Australian, Canadian and Indian Fiction, which explores the picaresque in a postcolonial and post-modern context.
54 As Mitchell points out, Cooper’s novels became popular in New South Wales soon after their publication (44). Cooper published various types of writing from 1820 to 1851, which means that Tucker could indeed have read some of them.
55 Also reminiscent of eighteenth-century Gothic is the repeated use of the word ‘terror.’
he remains “passive” (149). This establishes a pattern of behaviour for the remainder of his sojourn with the bushrangers: numerous times Rashleigh is horrified by their violence and tries to intervene on behalf of the victims, but this only results in him being threatened or hurt and unable either to escape or prevent the gang from committing their terrible acts. Rashleigh is thus placed in a situation of entrapment and impotence not unlike that of Emily in Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho*, for instance, while she is a captive of Montoni.

As already mentioned in the Introduction, according to David Punter the exploitation of impotence is “one of the principal structures of Gothic fiction” (“Terror” 247). Traditionally this exploitation of impotence is illustrated by placing an undefended female figure “amid terrors which she cannot understand” (247). The terrors Rashleigh encounters do not belong to the explained supernatural as is the case with Emily, but he is nevertheless deeply affected by what he experiences. This is made evident by several nightmarish visions and dreams. Consider the following passage, which shows how tormented Rashleigh is by the horrific crimes he is forced to witness:

> [T]he state of Rashleigh’s sensorium conjured up the most appalling visions of demons, furies and disembodied spirits colleagueed to punish his wicked and guilty companions as well as to lavish torments upon himself for being their unwilling associate. Never did mortal pass hours of such intense pain….

> [Having been forced to drink rum,] his diseased imagination presented the most vivid representation to his inward vision of the last dread place of final torment spread with lakes of never-dying flame, where foul and gibbering monster fiends of all kind of hideous and indescribable shapes exhausted their ingenuity in inventing fresh and unendurable tortures for himself and the bushrangers.

(184)

This scene is reminiscent of the final moments of *The Monk*, although here the emphasis is on the fact that Rashleigh is an innocent victim, unlike Lewis’s Antonio. Traumatised by his time spent with the bushrangers, Rashleigh continues to be haunted by them long after the bushranging episodes. For instance, in a nightmare which takes place following Rashleigh’s escape from the Coal River settlement, Rashleigh’s childhood sister is “transformed into a hideous spectre, whose demoniac features still

56 The one exception being when he distracts his captors during the Marshall scene, thus enabling a couple to flee and alert the police.
57 It could in fact be argued that Rashleigh’s status as a prisoner and captive of the bushrangers feminises him.
bore a faint resemblance to those of the departed Philip Foxley [leader of the banditti], who, grinning horribly, appeared to strangle the solitary sleeper” (251).

Like the good characters in *Udolpho*, Rashleigh is further distinguished from the bushrangers by his ability to appreciate the sublime and the beautiful in nature: a Romantic sensibility. While travelling through the Australian bush, Rashleigh and his captors reach

the summit of a lofty range, where a prospect equally unexpected as it was beautiful and varied burst upon the sight of the enraptured Rashleigh, whose tormenting feelings … all gave way before the majesty of nature, and he drank in large draughts of delight in contemplating the lovely scene now expanded before him…. In the background rose the lofty heights of gloomy mountains, whose variously undulating sides were chiefly clad with the dark evergreen foliage of New Holland, though here and there might be seen upreared the giant form of some rude and fantastically shaped peak or rifled cliff whose grey bosoms were boldly exposed in naked sublimity. … Rashleigh surveyed [the charms of the landscape] in a reverie of pleasure, until the iron hand of Foxley smote upon his shoulder, and his deep harsh voice demanded, ‘Are you dreaming?’

Aroused to a sense of the dull and dread realities of his present condition, Rashleigh turned mechanically and followed the party, who struck more deeply among the hills. (166-67)

Similarly to Emily, the magnificent views offer Rashleigh a moment of respite, allowing him to briefly forget the dreadful situation he is in. In fact, this passage evokes Radcliffe’s innumerable vistas across the Alps and the Pyrenees – only the ‘evergreen foliage of New Holland’ alerts the reader to the fact that this passage is set in Australia, not continental Europe.\(^58\) Foxley, instead, is oblivious to nature’s splendour. The leader

---

\(^58\) At other times, Tucker emphasises how different and sombre Australian landscapes are. For example, at one point Rashleigh finds himself “immersed in the almost twilight gloom of an Australian forest, where the deepest silence ever prevails. No warbling choristers here greet the merry morn with jocund flights of song. No lowing of herds or bleating of flocks awakes the slumbering echoes. The feathered tribes are here entirely mute or only utter either discordant screams or brief harsh twittering” (115). While this quotation brings to mind Clarke’s Gothic ‘weird melancholy,’ the following passage is altogether more sinister. Here the landscape is “a fitting scene for [a] horrid tragedy”: “not a sunbeam could penetrate the umbrageous canopy of boughs, whose formation and evergreen hue bore a striking resemblance to that of the funeral cypress or yew. Not a sound disturbed the silence of the mighty world of the forest, and all nature seemed hushed in horrid anticipation of the scene of barbarity which was about to disgrace the men here assembled…” (162-3).
of the gang recalls early Gothic villains such as Montoni, as he, too, is an outlaw willing
to murder, rape and generally commit gratuitous violence. Moreover, his physical
appearance matches the description of early Gothic villains: when first introduced, he is
described as having a “stature far above that of his fellows, and muscular in
proportion,” while his “truculently diabolical look” results in a “shuddering fit” in
Rashleigh (150). In another passage, attention is given to the “diabolically savage
expression of [Foxley’s] features, the compressed lips and glaring eye-balls of the
desperado evincing a ferocity and thirst for blood which were truly appalling” (161).

In keeping with the Gothic, Foxley’s terrible acts return to haunt him. Towards the end
of the bushranging episodes, Rashleigh and the bushrangers find themselves “in the
recess of a darksome and rocky ravine,” where at nightfall Foxley is struck by “a kind
of fit, with his eyes wide open, foaming at the mouth, raving incoherent muttering
sounds and gnashing his teeth” (197). What follows are three days of madness,
accompanied by torrential rain and fierce thunderstorms. Foxley,

whose soul was so despoiled with blood-stained guilt that it might have dyed the
waters of the vast ocean, was here delivered up a prey to the sharpest pangs of
remorse…. Often he would seem to have his staring eye-balls fixed on vacancy,
until a strong, fierce shuddering came over his whole frame, and he fell to the
earth, raving ever that he was being choked, or that dogs were tearing him
piecemeal. (199)

Together with Rashleigh’s nightmarish dreams, this scene is notable for its inflated
emotional register of expression, and illustrates a level of openness to the irrational
which is typical of the Gothic.

The passages I have quoted so far illustrate the influence traditional British Gothic
literature seems to have had on Tucker: Rashleigh’s impotence during his stay with the
banditti-like bushrangers, his affinity for the sublime and the beautiful, his nightmares
and Foxley’s madness all bring to mind typical elements of eighteenth-century Gothic
texts which were popular during Tucker’s time. Foxley, moreover, is depicted as a
Gothic villain, while Rashleigh can best be labelled a passive hero of sensibility,
another familiar character in eighteenth-century Gothic novels, who, as explained in the
Introduction, later disappeared as the villain moved centre stage and became a hero-
villain. This, of course, means that neither Foxley nor Rashleigh is a Gothic hero-
villain: the former’s crimes are simply unforgivable, while Rashleigh is far too inactive and un-heroic during the bushranging scenes to fall into this category.

It can in fact be argued that Rashleigh most resembles a ‘picaro’ up to his arrest in Sydney, but, once confronted with the horrors of Emu Plain, the brutal bushrangers and the unimaginable sufferings at the Coal River settlement, loses much of his roguish attitude, and instead gradually turns into a passive hero of sensibility. Rashleigh then undergoes a further transformation after his escape from Newcastle, when, as Mitchell accurately points out, he mutates into a “Tarzan of the antipodes” as he “suddenly acquires tremendous strength, drives off hordes of Aboriginals in an amazing display of bravery, courage and physical prowess, and demonstrates a degree of bush-sense, cunning and endurance far beyond anything that could have been expected” (43). Thus, it seems that as part of his search for how best to represent the convict experience, Tucker experiments with different kinds of heroes, including the picaresque and romantic types, as well as the hero of sensibility. Tellingly, this last type prevails during the central part, which contains the bushranging episodes as well as most of the scenes about convict life, that is the most violent and shocking chapters of the novel.

Tucker’s depictions of the convict experience also first introduce tropes found in later convict Gothic texts. Hergenhan writes that in Tucker’s novel “[d]etails of cruelty and physical privation can be vividly caught with a Defoe-like directness and detachment” (17). Ralph Rashleigh is certainly memorable for the graphic immediacy with which many convict scenes are described. Although the language in the following passage from the Coal River settlement is not quite detached, it is a good example of how “[t]he bare detail or incident can be left to speak for itself” (17):

Our adventurer was gazing at him [a convict who had won in a battle for a bone], half in pity and half in dread that he should soon be as craving as the other, when a slight sound caused him to lift up his head; and just behind the unconscious wretch, who was chewing the bone so greedily, Rashleigh was struck with horror to see the man that had striven with him for the possession of

\[59\] In sharp contrast, the last stage sees Rashleigh changed into a “man of scrupulous integrity,” respected by all who know him (303). It should be noted, however, that Tucker only dedicates the last two pages of the novel to Rashleigh’s re-entry into society, and chooses a premature death for his hero at the hands of “bloodthirsty barbarians,” who cruelly maltreat his remains (303). This supports my earlier claim that Tucker could not envisage a long and happy life for his hero.
his morsel, who, with features now expressing the most fiendish rage, stood over his late opponent bearing an enormous iron rake, used for gathering shells on the beach, which he uplifted as in the act to strike his victim on the head. Ralph uttered an involuntary cry and sprang forward to arrest the murderer’s arm. Alas, he was too late! The blow had fallen, crashing through the sufferer’s skull with such irresistible force that the man’s head was crushed as if it had been paper; while the hungry wretch who perpetrated this atrocity cried out, “Aha, I’ve got it now!” and seized the piece of half-gnawed bone that had dropped from his victim’s nerveless grasp, and which, though it was now all bespattered with brains and blood from the dying man, yet the other, brutalised by hunger, crammed in that state into his mouth, holding out both his hands to the overseer, who now came running up, to secure him with a pair of handcuffs. (228-29) Hergenhan correctly suggests that “[t]he picture of the convict cramming his mouth and immediately holding out his hands in welcome to the handcuffs makes its point with a terrible brevity,” and stresses how words such as ‘morsel’ and ‘gnawing’ illustrate the degradation of the convict-murderer in animal terms (26). However, Hergenhan does not draw any attention to the fact that the convict killer is described as “brutalised by hunger,” which explains not only why he commits murder but also why he then crams the bone into his mouth even though it is “bespattered with [the] brains and blood” of the man he has slain. This is important because Tucker here indirectly critiques the transportation system, which, as it is in charge of the rations, can be held responsible for driving a man to murder by keeping him near starvation. Further to being a good example of the horror, dread and pity Rashleigh and the reader experience when confronted with shocking violence, this passage thus also foreshadows later convict Gothic texts such as Marcus Clarke’s His Natural Life and Astley’s “The Liberation of the First Three,” in which the authors criticise the transportation system by highlighting how hunger not only turns convicts into killers but also into cannibals.60

In the next passage, a convict does not murder a fellow prisoner but an overseer. Convict Bright has spent a night in the ‘Belly Bot,’ a series of “cells about seven feet by four in area and eight feet high, into each of which they were literally crammed in an erect posture, until it was absolutely impossible any more could be stowed in them, when the doors, which shut from the outside, were closed upon them, squeezing them in

60 Note, also, how Rashleigh is once more unsuccessful in his attempt to prevent violence.
tight against each other” (87). The next day he asks his overseer, Tom, why he had been sent there:

“For a lark, you b———,” replied Tom.

“Then take that for a lark!” responded Bright, at the same time swinging his axe down with irresistible force, so that he sank the head of the weapon to the poll of the overseer’s skull, until the edge protruded beneath his victim’s jaw.

So fell had been the blow that he could not disengage the axe again: but the dying man having sunk on the ground before him, he placed his foot on the body.

... This man was soon after tried and hanged for his crime. When called on for his defence, he only said that he was tired of life, and all that he was sorry for was that he had not killed a hundred such wretches instead of only one. (88)

Clearly, Tom’s goading reply to Bright’s question is the last in a long series of unbearable provocations, and Bright’s extreme act can be read as a desperate response to the arbitrary power held by the officials of the system. In fact, there are numerous incidents in Ralph Rashleigh in which violence seems to be the only answer to the awful sense of impotence and entrapment inherent to most convict experiences. This episode is moreover memorable because it resembles so closely one of Astley’s short stories, “How Muster-Master Stoneman Earned his Breakfast,” which, too, is about a convict who, knowing that his action will result in his own death, is wretched enough to take control over his destiny by killing an overseer.

In this sense, the bushrangers can be considered the most successful convict characters in Ralph Rashleigh, because they manage to escape from their jailers and take revenge for what they were forced to endure under the transportation system – at least until the authorities catch up with them. When fate delivers overseer Huggins into their hands, one of the group remembers the cruelties he had suffered under him:

It is not twelve months ago since I was under you in your infernal gang, and one day when I wanted to go and see the doctor, you put me in the lock-up. You left me there thirty-six hours, handcuffed over a beam, both wrists twisted above my head, all my weight hanging on my hands, and my toes only resting on the ground. You delighted in nothing but tyranny, as long as you had the power. But now, our turn is come; and you may say your prayers, for you are standing on your own grave! (170)
Upon hearing this, Foxley, the leader of the gang, explains

[t]hat tricing men up to a beam is a very common trick of his. Why, not a month ago one of the deputy overseers was tried for killing a poor devil of a crawler who was very sick and wanted to go to hospital, but Mr Huggins ordered him to be triced up, and the other obeyed him, and handcuffed the man over a pole for two days and a night. The first night the deputy was told the man was dying; but he only answered, ‘Let him die and be damned, there’s too many of his sort in the country.’ So the next night, when the doctor came round at last to see him, the poor fellow was dead and stiff. (169-70)

The above quotations highlight the bushrangers’ sense of injustice and revenge, and are a further example of how cruel the transportation system becomes in the hands of tyrants such as Huggins, although this does not justify how this “hapless wretch” (169) is then treated: having stripped him naked, the bushrangers leave him to die tied onto an ant nest. When the gang passes the spot the next day, Rashleigh (who in vain had tried to save the overseer from his fate) is amazed to see that “nothing remained of Huggins but bones, not quite clean certainly, but with little indeed of flesh to be seen upon any part, except the head, which was still nearly untouched” (173). Interestingly, another of Astley’s short stories, “The Pegging-out of Overseer Franke,” contains a strikingly similar incident. In fact, it is striking that some of these passages anticipate scenes described in both Clarke’s *His Natural Life* and Astley’s tales, especially if one bears in mind that *Ralph Rashleigh* was only published in the twentieth century but had been written by a convict who, unlike Clarke and Astley, did not base his novel on research carried out decades after transportation had ended.

Evidently, the bushrangers commit many horrendous crimes, and it would have been easy to represent them in entirely negative terms. But the above extracts illustrate that Tucker wanted to show that these outlaws, too, had suffered under the transportation system. This, as well as many other passages, contradict Hergenhan’s claim that Tucker does not extend much sympathy to fellow convicts and the outlaws. Hergenhan furthermore argues that Tucker was attempting to re-enter English society and thus wrote with an English audience in mind, which, in his view, explains many characteristics of the novel. For example, most convicts and emancipists are either of Irish or Cockney origin, and, while this could simply be attributed to historical fact, they are undeniably described in racist terms. In contrast, the only respectable
emancipists encountered by Rashleigh are the very English Marshall family. Thus, although Hergenhan points out that Tucker would have been under some constraints as a convict writer, he concludes that Tucker is mainly driven by his “wish to be accepted back into society,” and therefore undercuts “the inevitable social protest” present in some parts of the novel (16) in order to confirm the values of the middle-class he aspires to belong to (29).

I agree that Rashleigh is depicted in very different terms compared to most other convicts in the novel, who are often portrayed as hopelessly degraded and always ready to betray each other. In keeping with the hero of sensibility, for example, he does not commit a single act of violence until he escapes the Coal River settlement, and then he ‘only’ kills Aboriginal warriors and two treacherous fellow escapees, who are Irish of course. Nevertheless, in my view there is more social protest in Tucker’s novel than Hergenhan allows for. For example, unlike Clarke’s innocent Richard Devine, who is sent to Australia unjustly, Rashleigh is a criminal. Moreover, Tucker did not choose Rashleigh to be guilty of some pardonable crime, such as stealing a loaf of bread to feed a starving family. Instead he commits a series of burglaries to finance an idle lifestyle, while his fellow bolter Roberts, a Nottingham boatman who is described in admiring tones, is sent to Australia for “rioting and demolition of machinery” (239) – hardly offences upon which the middle classes would have looked favourably. At any rate, pace Hergenhan, Tucker repeatedly expresses empathy for the convicts while at the same time condemning the corruption of the transportation system.

The prisoners’ impotence and the corruption of those in power are two key concerns of several convict Gothic texts, as will be seen in the following chapters. Moreover, Tucker’s novel contains many settings also found in later convict Gothic fiction, such as convict ships, government farms, secondary places of punishment and the Australian bush. Most notable, however, are the many passages in Ralph Rashleigh which highlight the brutalities of the transportation system: the Emu Plains farm, the Arlacks and the Coal River Settlement all depict the convict experience in its worst possible terms. In fact, Tucker, who, once arrived in Australia remained a convict until his death 39 years later, almost exclusively represents the transportation system by graphically focusing on its excesses, which, as already mentioned, is how Botting describes the

---

61 This would have been acceptable to the genteel English middle classes of his time. See, for example, Patrick Brantlinger’s Taming Cannibals: Race and the Victorians.
genre in *Gothic*. This is also the case in Clarke’s and Astley’s purely fictional convict 
Gothic texts; and it can be argued that the style in *Ralph Rashleigh* resembles that of 
Astley’s tales, in which violence, power, corruption and impotence lead to a type of 
“realism [that becomes] actually unreal” (Green 575).

As pointed out in the Introduction, Babette Smith criticises Clarke and Astley for 
misrepresenting typical convict life. Tucker, however, directly experienced “the system 
at its worst” (Roderick xi), and *Ralph Rashleigh* can be considered “[his] despairing 
search for a spiritual home, which is nowhere to be found in the colonies” (Bird 32-3). 
This is paralleled by the novel’s ending: just as Tucker did not succeed in becoming a 
respected member of society, Rashleigh never fulfils his dream of marrying Jane Bates 
(the sister-in-law of the worthy Marshall), but dies an untimely death at the hands of 
hostile Aborigines. In an article on O’Reilly, Veronica Brady explains that the Gothic is 
a “mode of conception and expression and a fictional system for making sense of the 
experience of displacement.” In this light, the convict experience can be considered 
inherently Gothic, as the transportation system not only removes prisoners from their 
society but also literally displaces them from their native land. Brady furthermore writes 
that this experience of displacement often signals “the breakdown of the traditional 
imperatives of ethical and social existence” (106), which aptly describes Tucker’s 
situation in Australia and is reflected in his violent depictions of convict life. In fact, 
although Tucker makes use of various literary styles throughout his novel, most of the 
scenes which illustrate the transportation system employ the Gothic. This makes him an 
important precursor to the later convict Gothic texts analysed here. Moreover, even 
though *Rashleigh* does not contain a Gothic hero-villain, it does contain a Gothic villain 
and a hero of sensibility, that is two key characters of Gothic fiction before the hero-
villain moved centre-stage.

Dedicated to all who are in prison, *Moondyne: A Story from the Under-World* is a very 
different novel from *Ralph Rashleigh*. It was first published in serial form under the 
name of *Moondyne Joe* in the Bostonian weekly *The Pilot* in 1878, nine years after 
O’Reilly had absconded from Western Australia.62 The novel was then republished in

---

62 Moondyne Joe was the nickname of Joseph Bolitho Jones, one of Western Australia’s most famous 
convicts. He became notorious for his escapes, and spent long periods in the bush. According to A. G. 
Evans, it is quite probable that O’Reilly and Jones met, although only briefly, as from 1866 Jones was 
locked up in an ‘escape-proof’ cell in Fremantle prison, which has become a tourist attraction since. 
O’Reilly’s novel is only very loosely based on Jones’s life.
book form under a variety of titles, including *Moondyne: A Tale of Convict Life in Western Australia* and *Moondyne, or, The Mystery of Mr Wyville*. Page numbers in this chapter refer to the historical print edition of the British Library, which is based on the 1889 version of the novel. O’Reilly is best-known for his daring escape from the penal colony, as well as the minor role he played in the audacious *Catalpa* rescue, which saw another six convicted Fenians bolt to America. Even though not only *Moondyne* but also several of O’Reilly’s poems are based on his involuntary stay in Australia, there are just a few entries about him in histories and companions to Australian literature, probably because he only spent thirteen months in Australia and wrote his novel in the United States. 63 For example, there is no mention of him in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia* (1998), *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* (2000) or *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (2009), although *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (1988) makes a passing reference. In contrast, in *A History of Australian Literature* (1961) Green claims that out of *The Broad Arrow* by Caroline Leakey, *His Natural Life* and *Moondyne*, the latter is “by far the best.” (283). A. G. Evans, O’Reilly’s most recent biographer, argues that *Moondyne* “is a key work in understanding O’Reilly’s life because there is so much of himself in it – both in a biographical sense and as an expression of his social philosophy” (210). Equally, some background information about O’Reilly is useful when approaching the novel. As there are many more details available about O’Reilly than Tucker, what follows is meant to be a brief overview of key events in O’Reilly’s life, based on Evans’s *Fanatic Heart: A Life of John Boyle O’Reilly* (1997).

O’Reilly was born in Ireland in 1844, into a relatively wealthy, well-educated and very patriotic family. In his childhood he witnessed the Great Irish famine, and at about eleven years of age he became an apprentice at a local newspaper. When the proprietor died four years later, O’Reilly moved to Lancashire, where he found work at another newspaper and enrolled in the 11th Lancashire Rifle Volunteers. Although he was not a revolutionary at the time, Evans points out that some of his friends and fellow expatriate soldiers “were close to new political movements in Ireland and America” (22). The Irish Republican Brotherhood, commonly called the Fenians, was a secret revolutionary society formed in Dublin in 1858. Its aim was to put an end to British rule and to establish an independent republic by rising up in arms. O’Reilly returned to his home

63 In fact an informative entry in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* (1985) points out that O’Reilly is much better known in Ireland and America than Australia.
country in 1863 and soon became a trooper in the 10th Hussars in Dublin. In 1865 he joined the brotherhood and became very successful at recruiting members in his regiment. Later that year, however, the British authorities became alarmed at the signs that rebellion was imminent and took severe measures to pre-empt the uprising. Accused of not informing his commanding officer of the intended mutiny, O’Reilly received the death penalty, which was commuted to twenty years penal servitude in July 1866.

Before leaving for Western Australia, O’Reilly spent several months in both Irish and English prisons, including Pentonville, Dartmoor and Millbank, which features in Moondyne. He finally was transported in 1867 on the Hougoumont, the last ship to take convicts to Australia. Of the 280 convicts on board, sixty-two were Fenians. Even though O’Reilly was a military Fenian, he spent little time in the main convict section, instead being allowed to stay with the civilian Fenians, who were housed apart from the criminal convicts in slightly more comfortable circumstances. He nevertheless saw enough of the conditions most convicts experienced en route to vividly write about them in his novel. The Hougoumont arrived in Fremantle in January 1868. Due to his background, O’Reilly was first assigned to the library at Fremantle Prison. Soon after, however, he was transferred to a party of ordinary convicts who were building the Bunbury-Vasse road. Having already bolted three times while a prisoner in England, O’Reilly now knew that a successful escape had to be carefully planned. With the help of a few free Irishmen, a plan was hatched to purchase a passage on board an American whaler. The first boat inexplicably left without picking O’Reilly up, and he spent two nerve-racking weeks hiding on the coast near Bunbury while his friends frantically tried to arrange a passage on another whaler. In March 1869 he was finally rowed out to the waiting Gazelle.64

It took O’Reilly eight months to reach America, but he eventually arrived in Philadelphia in November of the same year, aged 25. He settled in Boston, where he became a successful editor and later co-owner of the newspaper The Pilot. He married and had four daughters, and, in addition to Moondyne, became well known for his poems. Throughout his life in America he was a champion of the Irish cause. At the

64 Note that there are some parallels between O’Reilly’s experiences of the English prison and transportation system and those of Robert Devereux, Christopher Koch’s fictional Irish hero from his novel Out of Ireland (1999).
same time he became a loyal citizen of the United States, as well as constantly “taking up the cause of oppressed minority groups such as the Jews, the indigenous Indians of America and, most especially, the Negroes” (215). He died at the relatively young age of forty-six, officially of accidental poisoning. However, as Evans explores, a nervous breakdown and ensuing suicide is also possible (he had attempted to kill himself while a convict in Western Australia). According to Evans, “[t]he memory of his own imprisonment burned in him” until the end of his life (185), and, although “in every other respect [he] demonstrated a charitable, forgiving and generous nature… [O’Reilly] carried with him to the end of his life a bitter and unforgiving hatred of England” (208).

In the context of this study, O’Reilly’s novel *Moondyne* is particularly interesting in the way it depicts its main character, who at various points in the novel is referred to as Joe, Moondyne (Joe) and Mr Wyville.65 Bringing to mind Fiedler’s description of the Gothic hero-villain discussed in the Introduction, Moondyne is “a remarkable being,” with a body of magnificent strength and proportion and a “large, finely shaped head, with crisp, black hair and beard, a broad, square forehead, and an air of power and self-command” (15), while his deep, resonant voice sends a thrill through everybody who hears it (177). “Naturally powerful in mind, body, and passions,” he is “no common criminal nor common man” (21). Yet a criminal he is, having been transported for poaching deer in Lord Scarborough’s park to feed his starving mother and sisters – a decidedly more forgivable crime than the burglaries Rashleigh commits to fund an indolent way of life, if also more serious and daring than the proverbial loaf of bread.

Being both a convict and a sympathetic victim, Moondyne/Wyville embodies the core ambivalence found in the protagonists who will be discussed in the following chapters. He further recalls the Gothic hero-villain because he uses his wealth to implement his own rules and moral codes that conflict with the accepted moral laws of his society, which are, however, represented as flawed. In fact, the novel can be read as a fantasy on power: the gold mine which Moondyne’s Aboriginal friends share with him gives him unimaginable influence, without, however, having a corrupting effect. On the contrary, at the end of the novel the fortune enables Moondyne to put into action his humanitarian ideas as Comptroller General of Convicts in Western Australia, thus further showing

65 In addition to the protagonist having multiple names, the novel also contains two main plots, as will be discussed further on.
that he is not a “common man.” Nevertheless, his convict past continues to haunt him: once stamped as an outcast, he remains a mysterious outsider who is unable to fully re-enter society even though he acquires vast riches. Instead, having implemented his penal reforms and lost Alice to Sheridan, he goes on a suicide mission and dies a heroic – if futile – death trying to save Draper and his wife Harriet from the flames of an Australian bushfire. In this he resembles Tucker’s Rashleigh, who is killed by Aboriginal warriors before he can realise his dream of marrying Jane Bates.

There are, moreover, also specific Gothic elements in O’Reilly’s novel. The bush, for example, is described as an uncanny natural prison several times, as the following two quotations illustrate. In the first instance, when “the tired wretches” from the road parties gather “round the camp-fire outside their prison hut, the dense mahogany forest [closes] weirdly around the white-clad group” (9); in the second passage, convicts have before them the bush, in which, “as in their lives, all [is] dark and unknown – tangled underbrush, gloomy shadows, and noxious things,” while behind them, “clear and open, [lies] the straight road they [have] made – leading to and from the prison” (11-12). In addition, the bushfire which kills Wyville is depicted in terms of a Gothic inferno, highlighting nature’s terrifying power of destruction that offers no escape:

Flocks of parrots and smaller birds whirl’d screaming, striking blindly against the horsemen as they flew. With thunderous leaps, herds of kangaroos plunged across the road, and dashed into the deadly alternative of the swamp. The earth was alive with insect and reptile life, fleeing instinctively from the fiery death. Great snakes, with upraised heads, held their way, hissing in terror, toward the water, while timid bandicoot and wallaby leaped over their mortal enemies in the horrid panic. (316-17)

Also important are the passages of the novel that depict the workings of the transportation system, which are illustrated both by the example of Moondyne’s experiences as a convict and by reflections made by the narrator, as in the following quotation:

At the time the laws of the Penal Colony were exceedingly cruel and unjust to the bondmen….

The crying evil of the code was the power it gave these settlers (free settlers and emancipists) to take from the prisons as many men as they chose, and work them as slaves on the clearings. While so employed, the very lives of these convicts were at
the mercy of their taskmasters, who possessed over them all the power of prison
officers.

A report made by an employer against a convict insured a flogging or a number of
years in the terrible chain-gang at Fremantle. The system reeked with cruelty and
the blood of men. It would startle our commonplace serenity to see the record of the
lives that were sacrificed to have it repealed.  

Similarly to the passages in Ralph Rashleigh about the Arlacks, this extract highlights
how the unchecked power given to free settlers and emancipists over their assignees
leads to corruption and abuse, and emphasises the impotent position the convicts are
placed in. Notably, however, contrary to how the transportation system was run in New
South Wales and Queensland, where Ralph Rashleigh is set, in Western Australia the
assignment system was never in use. In fact, there are several unhistorical elements in
Moondyne. Consider too, for example, how O’Reilly constructs Western Australia as a
penal colony from its inception, when in actuality it was founded free. This twisting of
the historical record allows O’Reilly to paint the British transportation system in an
even worse light and to turn Western Australia into a Gothic site of “slaves and
bondmen” (8), a dark “Under-world” as O’Reilly puts it in the subtitle of the novel.

The term underworld has associations of the netherworld and organised crime, of the
underground mine and the antipodes. In a way it can be argued that Moondyne survives
this Australian hell to help others, before returning there to die heroically. Overall,
however, it is not the antipodes per se that are represented as an underworld, but rather
the way in which English law is implemented there through the transportation system.
Most of the passages depicting convict life occur in the first book of the novel.
Although Evans points out that in this book O’Reilly is “closest to documentary
writing” when he gives “a vivid picture of convict life in Fremantle and of road building
in the bush near Bunbury” (211), its primary aim is not to provide a factual account of
the transportation system but rather to highlight convict suffering at the hands of the
English law. The mobilisation of sympathy for the oppressed is common in Gothic
texts, and similarly to the novels discussed in later chapters, Moondyne criticises the
English law by depicting the degradation its main character and other convicts
experience at the hand of the British transportation system. Thus, the protagonist Joe is
described as a “quiet, silent, patient, obedient” man (17) who does not deserve the
cruelties he is subjected to in Western Australia. Nevertheless, understandably having
absconded, he is condemned to the chain-gang, “the depth of the penal degradation”
Eventually Joe bolts again, this time with the help of an Aboriginal tribe he had met during his first escape. His Aboriginal friends call him Moondyne, which has “some meaning more than either manhood or kingship” (Moondyne 24), an early indication that he is no ordinary man.

Not only interesting for its indictment of the convict system, Book One is also remarkable for its Lemurian style in the sections that depict Moondyne’s interactions with the local Aboriginal tribe: O’Reilly’s description of the Aboriginal characters evokes images of the noble savage, or, as Green puts it, “the secret desert kingdom with its vast treasure of gold; the Aboriginal chieftain with his beautiful daughters, who obviously owe something in both names and characteristics to the Maoris; all this is matter of dreamland” (284). In fact, the Aborigines in Moondyne differ markedly from the Aborigines in Ralph Rashleigh, in which Australia’s Indigenous people are depicted in very negative terms – arguably to highlight the physical and moral superiority of Rashleigh.

Green further calls Moondyne an “idealistic extravaganza, whose structure, so far as there is a structure, is quite incredible,” considers the plot a “fairy-tale,” and criticises the novel for “its loose and rambling structure and its tendency to be … ‘high toned’” (283-4). In my opinion, however, it would be more precise to describe Moondyne’s structure as contrived rather than loose, as there are parallels between the plots, and most of the main characters are in some way related. In the second book, for example, the attention surprisingly shifts to a little English village called Walton-le-Dale (which O’Reilly had visited while living in Lancashire). It tells the story of a young girl called Alice Wamsley and her two suitors, good Will Sheridan and evil Sam Draper. Alice chooses Draper over Sheridan, who however finds out that Draper already has a wife, Harriet. In vainly having tried to warn Alice, Sheridan ends up living in Western Australia as a successful sandal wood exporter. Nine years later he decides to return to England as he still grieves for Alice, who, he fears, must be deeply unhappy with Draper. His misgivings turn out to be correct: once back home, he discovers that Alice has wrongly been imprisoned for murdering the baby she bore Draper. While in

66 See also Paul Longley Arthur’s Virtual Voyages: Travel Writing and the Antipodes 1605-1837 for an in-depth discussion of this style of exotic travel romance.

67 The various ways in which Aborigines are represented in several convict Gothic texts will be further discussed in Chapters Three and Five, on William Hay’s William Heans and Richard Flanagan’s Gould’s Book of Fish, respectively.
England, Sheridan also meets Sir Joshua Hobb, Chief Director of Convict Prisoners, as well as mysterious Mr Wyville, an immensely wealthy and influential Western Australian of whom, however, Sheridan has never heard before. Several hints lead the reader to infer that Wyville is in fact Moondyne Joe.

The novel thus comprises two main plots, that of Moondyne/Wyville and that of Alice, both of which are plots of injustice redressed, one of the central themes of the novel. The two story lines become entwined in the third book, where Wyville’s interest in Alice’s case is first raised. Notably, both the plots and the structure of Moondyne are very similar to Charles Reade’s It is Never too Late to Mend (1856). For example, in Reade’s novel there is also a girl who is deceived by a villain, while her true lover is forced to Australia, where he becomes rich and eventually returns to England to marry her. Another plot focuses on a convict who suffers terribly in an English model prison. When a new chaplain arrives, the atrocities are uncovered and successful reform introduced. Based on these similarities it may well be that O’Reilly was aware of Reade’s novel. Interestingly, It is Never too Late to Mend also served as a literary model for Clarke’s His Natural Life, and there are in fact several parallels between Moondyne and Clarke’s text, too. His Natural Life was serialised from 1870 to 1872 and first published as a novel in 1874, which means that it predates Moondyne. According to Evans, it is nevertheless unlikely that O’Reilly knew Clarke’s novel. Possibly, the parallels between His Natural Life and Moondyne can in part be explained by the fact that they both drew inspiration from Reade’s novel.68

The similarities between O’Reilly’s and Clarke’s novels include a focus on the violence and corruption of the transportation system, a deceived heroine and a protagonist who changes identity several times. Joe first becomes Moondyne and later Wyville, while Clarke’s Richard Devine changes into Rufus Dawes, and, in the original version of the novel, further assumes the identity of Tom Crosbie before eventually changing back into Richard Devine. There are, however, important differences between these two split characters. The various stages Clarke’s Devine travels through in the course of His Natural Life will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two. In comparison to O’Reilly’s protagonist, it should be noted that, like Clarke, Devine comes from an upper-class background and assumes another name to protect his estranged wife from finding out

68 The parallels between It Is Never Too Late to Mend and His Natural Life will be briefly discussed in Chapter Two.
that her father had been a swindler. As a consequence, he is transported to Australia as an ordinary convict, and in the original version eventually regains his old social status. Joe, instead, belongs to England’s rural poor and is transported under his original name but, as already mentioned, later changes into Wyville thanks to Aboriginal gold, which allows him to reform the penal colony (under his new laws, the convicts are treated like men instead of brutes to help them establish a sense of self-respect, while the officials’ power over the prisoners is curbed). O’Reilly’s protagonist is therefore an idealistic character, who, being a victim of aristocratic privilege, reflects the author’s upbringing under English rule in Ireland as well as his experiences as a convict. In fact, O’Reilly’s principal aim in Moondyne is not only to critique the transportation system, but Britain’s social and judicial system as a whole.

Accordingly, Moondyne also depicts the prisons in England in a negative light (in sharp contrast to the improvements Wyville implements at the end of the novel). Although innocent, Alice is sent to Millbank, where O’Reilly himself had been incarcerated before being transported. Evans points out that “the severest punishment of Millbank was the silence, broken only by the clanging of the cell doors and the Westminster chimes every quarter of an hour, all day of every day of every week for the seven months O’Reilly and his companions were incarcerated there” (43). In the novel, Alice spends years in solitary confinement before Wyville reads about her in the prison register. O’Reilly explains that Millbank is based on Bentham’s panopticon and, comparing it to the old jails, writes: “[b]etter the old dungeon, with all its gloom; better for the sake of humanity. The new prison is a cage – a hideous hive of order and commonplace severity, where the flooding sunlight is a derision” (94). This and many other passages illustrate that Moondyne is not just an “idealistic extravaganza,” but rather offers an informed opinion on the debates about penal policy by someone who had experienced it from the inside. Hobb, for example, who is described in scathingly ironic terms, stands for the condemnable English penal system, while O’Reilly’s social theories are expressed both through the narrator and Wyville.

O’Reilly’s social outlook at the time when he wrote his novel was radical, as exemplified by the following passage, in which he uses the metaphor of the poisonous

---

69 Evans also points out that prisoners were allowed no contact with other inmates or the warders, which led to increased insanity among the prison population. See also my section convict history in the Introduction.
upas tree to illustrate how the “seed of crime is in the flower of aristocracy,” which leads millions to have “evil for heritage,” while a lucky few have “entailed estate[s]” (120-21). When asked how he would reform society if he had absolute power, Wyville answers that he would burn the law-books and title deeds, and further explains that:

‘At present the laws of civilization, especially of England, are based on and framed by property – a depraved and unjust foundation. Human law should be founded on God’s law and human right, and not on the narrow interests of land and gold.’

‘What do you propose to effect by such law?’ asked Lord Somers.

‘To raise all men above insecurity, which is the hotbed of lawlessness,’ answered Mr. Wyville.

‘But by what means can law make poor men rich?’ asked the nobleman.

‘By allowing no one to hold unproductive land while a single man is hungry.’

This quotation is particularly relevant in the context of the ‘Irish Land question,’ which involved large tracts of land being owned by absentee landlords, many of them English aristocrats, and was a major contributing factor to the Great Irish famine. Often, these areas were split into increasingly smaller plots and sublet to peasant farmers without any contracts, allowing landlords to raise rents at will (Evans 9, 211-2, but see also, for example, Terry Eagleton’s Heathcliff and the Great Hunger (53-67). Notably, none of the novel’s story lines are set in Ireland, but also in England large tracts of land were owned by the nobility and legally out of bounds for hungry peasants. Overall, passages like this indicate that part of O’Reilly’s agenda when writing Moondyne was to show that the poverty and despair he had witnessed when growing up in Ireland was a direct consequence of English law.

Nevertheless, as Evans explains, even though O’Reilly “identified himself with the underprivileged and working classes, and called for a fairer distribution of private property,” he did not advocate socialism, instead believing that “there must be a Christian alternative to capitalism on the one hand and socialism on the other.” O’Reilly’s faith was important. For example, James Jeffrey Roche, his first biographer, points out that O’Reilly’s religious beliefs probably helped him view his fellow convicts “with eyes of mercy, seeing how many of them were the victims of cruel, selfish, social conditions” (70). In fact, most convicts are represented in a sympathetic light in Moondyne, rather than being portrayed as degraded criminals ever ready to betray each
other, as is often the case in Tucker’s novel, but also in *His Natural Life*, in which most convicts are corrupted and degenerate, thus serving to highlight the moral worth of Devine/Dawes. Arguably, however, this not only reflects O’Reilly’s religious beliefs, but also further contributes to depicting the transportation system as a wholly unjust execution of justice.

In addition, it should be remembered that O’Reilly wrote his novel after he had lived in America for over nine years, or, as Bruce Bennett puts it, “[m]any of the attitudes and values in the novel were … in part the product of a decade of freedom in ‘the land of the free’” (165). Similarly, although “[p]enal reform remained one of O’Reilly’s concerns to the end of his life, … his views on transportation as a means of imprisonment actually changed from the harsh one expressed in *Moondyne* to one of guarded support for the system” (Evans 214). For example, eleven years after the novel was first published, O’Reilly wrote a letter to a Quaker reformer in which, “[l]acking 20th-century knowledge of Stalin’s gulags, [he] expressed his belief that the Russian system of work camps was to be preferred to the then current system in England which confined inmates to lonely cells isolated from human fellowship.” In the letter, O’Reilly defends his opinion by “referring to the freer, healthier treatment of transportees in the colonies” (214), remembering that “[t]he feeling of relief at the open-air associated labour in Western Australia, after the rigours of Pentonville, Chatham, Portland and Dartmoor, was actual enjoyment,” and that “[t]he climate was always healthful and delightful” (quoted in Evans 214). This further illustrates that O’Reilly does not offer a balanced account in *Moondyne*. Rather, like Tucker, he focuses on the Gothic excesses of the transportation system.

Unlike Tucker, however, O’Reilly was not a criminal but a political prisoner who managed to escape from his convict fate. Moreover, by the time he wrote *Moondyne*, O’Reilly had become a productive and well-respected citizen, as opposed to Tucker, who composed *Ralph Rashleigh* while imprisoned in a penal centre, and remained a convict for the rest of his life. The very different fates of the two authors are reflected in their respective novels. As seen above, Tucker illustrates Brady’s Gothic “breakdown of the traditional imperatives of ethical and social existence” by depicting convict life in overwhelmingly violent terms, which arguably reflects his own permanent entrapment in the transportation system. O’Reilly, instead, focuses on the suffering of the convicts in order to strengthen his indictment of England. At the same time, his successful life as
an expatriate in America is mirrored by the novel’s idealistic tone, which looks beyond the brutalities of the transportation system “to the dream of another world which may be realised in exile” (Brady 108). In fact, the Gothic elements in *Moondyne* jostle with this idealistic spirit, which may well have been born of O’Reilly’s escape and later life in America and implies a belief in the possibility of reform.

Yet at the end of the novel, Moondyne is killed along with evil Draper and Hariett (who had deceived Alice and murdered her baby), as opposed to Alice and Sheridan, who are happily reunited and inherit Wyville’s vast estate. Brady speculates that “it is perhaps the lurking sense of impossibility of making dream prevail … which leads the novelist finally to carry his hero right out of the world” (108). Interestingly, while Moondyne’s death is notable considering that one of the main themes of the novel is injustice redressed, it is in keeping with the typical fate of the traditional Gothic hero-villain. Helen Stoddart explains that this figure “serves more to throw social and sexual repression into relief than he does to demonstrate the possibility of legitimate redress or reform” (178). Thus, the hero-villain “may temporarily function as a vehicle for fantasies of unregulated desire and ambition or for sympathising with the socially persecuted,” but in the end “the undeniable nature of his ‘otherness’” provides “a means of distancing and disavowing his actions as unfeasible or illegitimate” (179). In *Moondyne*’s case, the protagonist precisely functions as a “vehicle” “for sympathising with the socially persecuted.” In line with O’Reilly’s idealism, under his assumed identity of Wyville he is also shown to successfully implement “legitimate redress” and “reform.” But his violent death highlights that for this extraordinary character it is ultimately impossible to overcome his otherness and fully re-enter society. In contrast, in the original version of *His Natural Life* Dawes can return to his ‘Devine’ nature. In the revised version, however, Dawes also meets a violent end, drowning just as he is about to finally escape. As will be discussed in the next chapter, one reason for this is that ‘convict-phobic’ Victorians were not ready for an outcast who, having experienced the horrors of the transportation system, is ‘unstained’ enough to be able to rejoin respectable society.
In this chapter, I argue that Marcus Clarke’s convict protagonist is not simply the innocent hero he is often summarised as. Instead, I contend that in the original version of His Natural Life, (henceforth OV) Devine is depicted as a Gothic hero-villain from the outset: he is introduced as a “strange figure,” with “his grey eyes – almost black in the lamplight – vindictively fixed upon a hot coal,” seemingly “lost in moody thought” (OV 37), and is further presented as “a young man … with strongly marked, but by no means handsome features. The brow was contracted by an apparently habitual frown, and there were wrinkles round the full grey eyes that told tales of hard living and strong passions” (OV 39). Hints towards a suspicious past further portray the as yet unnamed character as a “gambler, idler, profligate,” haunted by “the serious follies of [his] ill-spent, ill-cared-for youth” (OV 46-7). At the end of the novel we moreover find out that at this point in time he is involved in the criminal activity of selling fake gemstones, and has just abandoned his wife.

A few pages later, a similar picture is drawn when introducing young Richard Devine, who is remembered by the townspeople as an “ill-built, awkward lad,” who inherited his father’s strong will and imperious manner. Under careful supervision and a just rule, he might have been guided to good, but, left to his own devices outside, and galled by the iron yoke of parental discipline at home, he had fallen into bad company, and become reckless and profligate. After three years of village dissipation, college scrapes, and London riot, he had quarrelled with his father – or his father with him – and gone off, no one knew whither.

Thus, in the original version of His Natural Life, Devine is established from the start as a protagonist with a dubious background and questionable traits. Although in the revised version his dissolute youth is less emphasised and his noble heritage is stressed, an abridged rendering of the above block quotation is still given. Furthermore, in this version of the novel his status as an illegitimate son makes him a problematic protagonist for a Victorian text.70

---

70 Notably, in the revised version Dawes and Rex, both illegitimate sons of Lord Bellasis, die, while in the OV, Frere is killed by his illegitimate son, Dick Purfoy. This is one of several examples in the novel of
An outsider from the beginning in both versions, Devine/Dawes’s ‘otherness’ is maintained throughout the text, as he stays aloof from the main body of the prisoners for most of his convict life, and in the original version continues to shy away from society when living as Tom Crosbie in Victoria. As discussed in the Introduction, hero-villains typically are outsiders, but this is not the only feature that makes Devine/Dawes a compelling convict hero-villain. In fact, Fiedler’s description of the Gothic hero-villain perfectly fits Clarke’s protagonist: he not only is the forgivable victim of passion and circumstance over and over again, but also consciously decides to sacrifice himself by taking on a false identity instead of revealing his true name. As a consequence he is condemned to the hellish world of the penal stations for the term of his natural life, which deprives him of precisely the “comforts of social life – of marriage and family, wealth and recognition; … of all bonds of love and sympathy, of humanity itself” listed by Fiedler (133). Furthermore, the core ambivalence at the heart of the Gothic hero-villain is also present in the two main names by which Clarke’s character is known: ‘Devine’ obviously refers to all that is good in him, but, less transparently, Dawes can be interpreted in alchemical terms as symbolising “black corruption” (Abraham 41).

Clarke’s *His Natural Life* has been widely acknowledged as an important nineteenth-century Australian novel, both as a literary and popular text. As such it has been hugely influential. In *Unnatural Lives*, for example, Laurie Hergenhan points out that it provides “the main image of the convicts as more sinned against than sinning and as suffering brutal punishments” (47), while Roslynn Haynes explains that “Clarke’s work of fiction was embraced as the text of fact. It retrospectively determined the perceived history of Port Arthur not only for Clarke’s contemporaries but, less accountably, for generations since, becoming the arbiter of cultural memory as well as the source of mythology” (*Tasmanian Visions* 43). At the same time critics emphasise that *His Natural Life* is more than ‘just’ about convicts. As Hergenhan puts it, Clarke’s novel explores “moral and social themes revolving around ambiguous concepts of ‘nature’: of what is considered ‘natural’ in society, and also of what distinguishes the ‘civilised’ from the ‘uncivilised’” (“In Search of Marcus Clarke: A Memoir” 56). According to Elizabeth Webby, Clarke presents something akin to a “scientific experiment: will a naturally good man become corrupted if placed in an overwhelmingly evil and negative...
environment?" ("Colonial Writers and Readers" 62). Thus, Clarke sends wrongly convicted Richard Devine/Rufus Dawes not only to one but three of the worst Australian penal settlements.

*His Natural Life* was first published in serial form between 1870 and 1872. Clarke then immediately started revising it; two years later it was printed in book form. The main differences lie in the beginning and the end: the serialised version concludes on an optimistic note, as Dawes can recover his ‘Devine’ nature and return to his family, as opposed to the volume edition, in which Dawes drowns just as he is about to finally escape from his imprisonment. Earlier commentators tended to criticise the melodramatic nature of the novel, which is replete with extraordinary coincidences typical of nineteenth-century sensationalist fiction. Since the 1960s, however, melodrama has lost much of its pejorative meaning. As Hergenhan remarks, “[recently, *His Natural Life*] has been seen as successful not in spite of its melodrama but partly through it” (*Unnatural Lives* 47). Melodrama and the Gothic have close connections. Peter Brooks, for example, points out in *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976) that “[m]elodrama shares many characteristics with the Gothic novel,” including a preoccupation with “nightmare states, with clausturation and thwarted escape, with innocence buried alive and unable to voice its claim to recognition” (19-20). Recent Gothic critics also highlight the links between the Gothic genre and melodrama (see, for instance, Fred Botting’s *Gothic* and Andrew Smith’s *Gothic Literature*).

But Hergenhan, who in *Unnatural Lives* reads the novel as “a projection of Clarke’s own experience” (48), does not mention the Gothic in relation to *His Natural Life* – his study was first published in 1983, just as literary interest in the Gothic genre started to grow. Several more recent studies, however, have recognised the novel’s Gothic characteristics. Gerry Turcotte, for example, compares Clarke’s text to two Canadian Gothic novels in a chapter of *Peripheral Fear* (1991). David Matthews, in “Marcus Clarke, Gothic, Romance” (2005), convincingly argues that Clarke continues to oscillate between approaching and retreating from the Gothic throughout his writings. In Matthews’s view, this ultimately reflects Clarke’s search for a home and “whether he could ever find Australia ‘homely’” (14). In *Tasmanian Visions: Landscapes in Writing*,

71 John F. Burrows’s “*His Natural Life* and the Capacity of Melodrama” (1974) was one of the first critical texts to appreciate the melodramatic nature of Clarke’s novel.
72 Please note that in this chapter all page numbers from quotations by Turcotte refer to his text *Peripheral Fear*. 
Art and Photography (2006), Haynes reads His Natural Life as a key Gothic text that led Tasmanians to regard their landscape as morally damned for over a century, whereas Damien Barlow, in “‘Oh, You’re Cutting My Bowels Out!’: Sexual Unspeakability in Marcus Clarke’s His Natural Life” (2007), looks at the novel from a queer theory perspective, highlighting, inter alia, how its allusions to sodomy have been dealt with since it was first published.

For my study, His Natural Life is seminal because, in addition to being the most famous nineteenth-century Australian narrative, it can be considered one of the first published convict Gothic texts. This chapter will focus on the key themes that Clarke introduced to convict Gothic fiction, which not only reflect his extensive knowledge of Gothic literature and foreshadow typical tropes of fin-de-siècle texts, but, importantly, also influenced later convict Gothic texts. Moreover, in line with the overall scope of this discussion, which is to trace how the representation of main convict characters in Australian Gothic prose changes over time, special attention will be given to Richard Devine/Rufus Dawes. While in the past Dawes has variously been described as a principled survivor, a brutalised Prometheus and an Everyman, as well as an allegorical, melodramatic and gentlemanly hero, I will argue that the term Gothic hero-villain can fruitfully be applied to Clarke’s famous convict as he descends into the nightmarish world of the penal stations.

Clarke started writing His Natural Life when he was 24 years old, seven years after his arrival in Melbourne. By that time he had already established a reputation as a brilliant writer of articles, short stories, sketches, verses and pieces for the theatre, and had also published a novel, Long Odds. But Clarke’s ascent to Melbourne’s literary world had not been straightforward. Born in England in 1846, he lost his mother when he was four years old. As a consequence, his father, a well-to-do lawyer, became a very private person, who buried his grief but also, according to Clarke, neglected his paternal duties. A few months after his mother’s death, Clarke, an only child, met the brothers Cyril and Gerard Manley Hopkins. The three boys eventually went to school together, and Cyril and Clarke stayed in touch after Clarke emigrated to Australia. Cyril Hopkins later wrote a biography which drew on the many letters the two exchanged once Clarke left England. Cyril Hopkins’ Marcus Clarke, which remained unpublished for over a

---

73 Technically speaking, James Tucker’s Ralph Rashleigh, which was written in the 1840s, predates His Natural Life. However, as explained in the previous chapter, Tucker’s novel was only published in 1929.
century, became available for the first time in 2009, edited by Hergenhan, Ken Stewart and Michael Wilding. It offers a fascinating insight into Clarke’s experiences in the colony, as well as providing details of his childhood in London. In addition to Hopkins’s work, Brian Elliott’s *Marcus Clarke*, which was published in 1958, also offers an interesting account of Clarke’s life.

Clarke attended Sir Roger Cholmeley’s Grammar School in Highgate where, at the age of 16, he was looking forward to a stay in Paris and a career with the Foreign Office. As Elliott points out, this profession would have well suited his skills, while at the same time leaving ample time for his literary interests, which he had fostered since an early age (*Marcus Clarke* 19). Suddenly, however, his father became mentally ill and was sent to an asylum. What made matters even worse was that his father’s apparent wealth had inexplicably disappeared, leaving Clarke with hardly any money at all. A diplomatic career was now impossible. In consultation with his relatives, he decided to emigrate to Victoria instead, where an uncle was a country judge. He visited the Hopkins brothers before his departure, and Cyril later remembered him as still “eager and affectionate”, but “subdued and reserved, and reticent about his future plans and recent reverses” (45). Clarke left for Australia in March 1863, a few months before his father died. One can only imagine the impact this tragedy had on him.

Arriving in Melbourne in June 1863, he spent the first months reading, writing and exploring the city. Eventually, his uncle helped him find a position as clerk in a bank. Although he was well liked, it soon became obvious that Clarke was not meant for such a position. He was transferred to the gold department, which included trips to country outposts. While thus employed, Clarke travelled to several Victorian goldfields, an experience he was later to incorporate into the original version of *His Natural Life*. Even though this position offered more excitement than working in an office, Clarke’s employment with the bank came to an end in 1864. He went on to work on Swinton and Ledcourt, two stations up country, following in the footsteps of many other young immigrants hoping to eventually own a profitable sheep run. He stayed over two years, also going on two outback expeditions looking for suitable farmland. The second, which took him all the way to Queensland, proved disastrous, with one member of the team tragically dying. At the same time conditions for settlers were becoming less propitious. Thus, in 1867 Clarke found himself back in Melbourne, looking for another occupation.
As already mentioned, Clarke had always held literary ambitions. In the bush, for example, he wrote most evenings, and reportedly entertained the station hands with impromptu translations of Balzac. He had four stories published in the *Australian Monthly Magazine* in 1866, and, once back in Melbourne, he became an *Argus* staff writer in 1867, thus finally finding a job to match his talents. Much of his journalism revolved around city life, exploring both upper and lower bohemia, although, as Elliott notes, “his experience in the country was not wasted. As a journalist it stood him in good stead, and as an introduction to hard colonial reality it was invaluable” (*Marcus Clarke* 74). H. M. Green argues that *His Natural Life*, a “gloomy and powerful story … is by no means characteristic of the work of its author, who was a wit, a humourist and a practical joker…” (335). Certainly, many of Clarke’s writings are clever, ironic and amusing. But Clarke was a prolific author, who published a wide range of texts and experimented with various literary styles. As Hopkins points out, already as a child, Clarke “seemed to have … a decided bias in favour of whatever was strange, mournful or grotesque,” although “he knew how to suppress this side of his character from the observation of his schoolfellows, most of whom supposed him to be given up entirely to the coining of jokes and the composition of clever nonsense, incapable of serious thought” (*Cyril Hopkins’ Marcus Clarke* 49). Clarke’s predilection for the ‘strange, mournful or grotesque’ found expression throughout his writings, including *His Natural Life*.

In 1869 Clarke married the actor Marian Dunn. The following year he became clerk to the trustees of the Public Library, Museum and National Gallery of Victoria. This curbed his literary independence but was a welcome addition to his income, helping to support his growing family, which soon included six children. Even if Clarke had, as Elliott explains, “made his compromise with life in Australia,” he was ambivalent about his exile: in one “resistant corner of his mind he saw himself still as the Englishman abroad…. His was the fate, and also the outlook, of many another genteel intellectual émigré” (*Marcus Clarke* vii). Furthermore, Clarke’s “temperament was mercurial, and the shock of the misfortune and the loss of confidence which his father’s catastrophe had caused left him permanently unstable” (*Marcus Clarke* 45). Hergenhan similarly argues that “there is some evidence from Clarke’s life and journalism that his imaginative identification with the convicts derived from the painful dislocations of his colonial experience” (*Unnatural Lives* 49).
Haynes further notes that:

[Clarke was] always conscious of difference and superiority, even while feeling deep compassion for the destitute and outcast. Despite his continuing reputation as one of Melbourne’s foremost journalists, Clarke’s personal life was increasingly torn apart by recurrent bankruptcy, alcoholism and a breakdown in his family life, inducing depression and a decline in self-respect that resonates in [His Natural Life]. Clarke recorded his strong sense that at Port Arthur the ‘“smell of it” [convictism] remained – remains’, and he reflected ‘how thin is the planking of “favourable circumstances” which is between the best of us and such a fate’. It is this awareness, augmented by his own identification with the outcasts of Melbourne’s ‘Lower Bohemia’, that gives his story of long-dead convicts such immediacy.

This is more thoroughly expressed in the revised version of His Natural Life than in the original text. In fact, the last section of the serialised edition celebrates “post-gold rush Australia as a land transformed, a place to make a new start” (Webby, “Colonial Writers and Readers” 63), where even an escaped convict can make a fortune and eventually return to England. In contrast, the volume text ends with Australia still firmly a penal outpost and Dawes drowning. Arguably, the looming insolvency and other misfortunes Clarke experienced while revising the text influenced the pessimistic ending of this version. Clarke himself passed away at the age of 35, too poor to afford the medicine necessary to treat his pleurisy and ensuing complications.

Today, Clarke’s novel is usually referred to as For the Term of His Natural Life. It should be noted, however, that this title was never used in Clarke’s lifetime, being introduced in 1882, a year after Clarke’s death. As pointed out above, His Natural Life was first published in serial form in the Australian Journal between 1870 and 1872. Two years later, the novel was published in one volume by George Robertson in Melbourne, still as His Natural Life. It has, nevertheless, become the custom to use the longer title to refer to the numerous reprints based on the 1874 volume edition, as opposed to the serial version, which is generally referred to as His Natural Life. The

---

74 As previous critics have pointed out, the original title carries much more meaning and is certainly more poignant than the longer title. Elliott gives a possible reason for the success of the longer title: ‘for the term of his natural life’ is “an obvious phrase … [which] stresses time and endurance rather than nature.” He argues that “the change was acceptable for the public, for whom the book became tantamount to history – its function was mythopoeic – and therefore ‘term’ (meaning a period of unpleasantness which had come to its end) seemed to make plain sense, whereas the stress on ‘nature’ raised philosophical questions lying for the most part beyond the common colonial range of thought” (Introduction xi). In fact,
book version was most recently republished in 2001. Edited by Lurline Stuart, it was brought out under the shorter title as an Academy Edition by the University of Queensland Press. In contrast to the book version, the serialised text has been published in volume form only once. Edited by Stephen Murray-Smith, it came out in 1970. In this chapter, page numbers for the original, serialised version will refer to Murray-Smith’s edition, while page numbers for the revised version as first published by George Robertson (hereafter RV) will refer to Stuart’s edition.

While this chapter focuses on the OV, by and large critics have preferred the RV, even though Murray-Smith points out that the OV “has many distinct merits” (Introduction 16). It is also interesting to note that, 47 years after first writing about the novel, in his recent essay “In Search of Marcus Clarke” (2012) Hergenhan wonders “if the shorter version of [His Natural Life] has been preferred to the longer partly because it is more accessible and being shorter, easier to read” (63). Certainly, although the entire novel has often been dismissed as melodramatic and its coincidences described as absurd (Wilding, Marcus Clarke 19, 29), much of the criticism has been directed at the OV, in particular at its last three books, which were deleted in the RV. Wilding, moreover, criticises the OV for ending in Europe: “oddly the serial has its final chapter set in Europe … they have all made good in the antipodes and return ‘home’ to regain the family property in the old world. This is the traditional plot of the colonial novel” (Marcus Clarke 29). Green similarly states that the OV is “far inferior” to the RV (243), adding that “there is also a semi-allegorical ending, which is simply childish” (244), and Elliott writes that “[n]onchalantly indifferent to the stalest clichés, Clarke even permitted himself to dabble in his schoolboy fancies about alchemy” (157), which in Elliott’s opinion amounts to “silliness” (159).

Lindy Abraham, however, has compellingly argued that, far from being childish and silly, the alchemy motif “forms an integral part of the novel’s symbolic structure…. The central concern of the novel is the relentless exploration of the trials and torments, the sufferings and the joys of the human psyche. That this theme is to a large extent expressed in alchemical terms has not been noted” (38-9). The alchemical motif, a 'for the term of his natural life’ was the legal formulation (see, for example, transcripts of the proceedings at the Old Bailey, London’s central criminal court from 1674 to 1913). Charles Dickens also used it in Great Expectations, when Mr Jaggers says: “[Magwitch] was expatriated for the term of his natural life” (332). It can thus be assumed that the phrase was very common in nineteenth-century parlance.

35 This edition was further reprinted in 1980, 1984 and 1987.
source of the Gothic in the OV which is absent in the RV, allows Abraham to explain numerous aspects of the novel, including the names of the main characters, the four stages Devine travels through (Devine/Dawes/Crosbie/Devine), and many more. It further emphasises Clarke’s continuing interest in the ‘strange, mournful or grotesque.’ For instance, he and Gerard Manley Hopkins had “collaborated on a Gothic tale involving alchemy and the reanimation of the dead” (Wilding, Introduction x). Entitled “Prometheus,” this tale was written when he was approximately 13 or 14 years old. As Hopkins points out, Clarke “was the author of various experiments in prose and verse before as well as immediately after leaving school, the most notable being the weird and powerful verses, ‘The Lady of Lynn’” (24). In fact, Clarke clearly was familiar with a wide range of Gothic texts, as will be highlighted further on, and employed the genre throughout his writings. To list just a few examples, consider his planned “Priestcraft and the People” (which was meant to resemble John Ruskin’s The Stones of Venice), “Cannabis Indica” (1868), “Holiday Peak” (1873), his famous preface to Adam Lindsay Gordon’s collection of poems Sea Spray and Smoke Drift (1876) and his last short story, “The Mystery of Major Molineux” (1881), which was included in The Anthology of Australian Colonial Gothic Fiction (2007).

In His Natural Life, the main source of the Gothic is the buried material of the convict past, a fact also noted by Matthews: “[t]he repressed material [Clarke] discovered at Port Arthur takes Gothic shape in his hands and Rufus Dawes/Richard Devine is subjected to the full Gothic horror of the penal colony” (15). As discussed in the Introduction, this genre is in fact commonly associated with the repressed past that returns to haunt the present. In His Natural Life, this can most obviously be applied to Dora/Sylvia, as will be illustrated later. More generally, as also illustrated in the Introduction, starting in the 1850s, the convict past was collectively repressed and forgotten until well in the twentieth century, and it is thus not surprising that Australia’s penal history found its way back into the collective consciousness through Gothic texts. It is, however, also important to remember that Clarke had formed a liking for Gothic literature already as a child, and had written several Gothic texts before he turned his attention to Australia’s penal history. Thus, it likely was not only the fact that the convict past lends itself to the Gothic, but also Clarke’s literary tastes that contributed to establishing Australia’s penal past in Gothic terms for generations to come.
In fact, according to recent historical publications the transportation period was not quite as ‘Gothic’ as it is commonly imagined – not least because of how it has been depicted in *His Natural Life*. Clarke nevertheless based his novel on substantial research he had carried out studying convict records in the Melbourne Public Library, as well as travelling to Port Arthur, where he found “haunting human remnants of the abandoned convict system” (Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives* 50).76 Impressed by what he had read and seen, he almost exclusively focuses on the excesses of the transportation system in the novel. For example, Dawes is the only convict in the OV who can eventually rejoin society, but he is distinguished from the other prisoners by being of upper-class background and innocent of the crime he has been transported for. Moreover, it is not the system that rehabilitates him, but rather his true nature and the love kindled by Dora. In contrast, most of the other major convict characters are thoroughly brutalised, and many die while still prisoners. Consider, also, how much of the novel takes place in penal stations, where in reality only a small percentage of the convicts was sent. The assignment system, on the other hand, which helped many transportees build a future in Australia, is barely mentioned. However, even if Clarke presents a one-sided picture of the penal past, Hergenhan makes a valid point when he writes that “the selective picture obviously distorts the history of the convict system, though whether it distorts the historical forces expressed through that system is another question” (*Unnatural Lives* 8). Or as Wilding puts it: “the extreme case can reveal the true nature of the system” (Introduction xx) – similarly to Astley’s tales as discussed in Introduction. Ultimately, Clarke represents the transportation system as the dark underside of British justice, as will be further explored.

Elliott points out that Clarke was first of all a novelist, and that *His Natural Life* should not be read as “an historical document” (Marcus Clarke 162). Even so, Stuart emphasises that, “[a]lthough Clarke’s characters were fictionalised, the incidents and events of penal life were based on fact often so dreadful that, as the novel took shape, there must have been some reader-resistance to his handling of the convict theme” (xxxi). Hergenhan also shows that “[s]ome early reviewers recoiled from the violence, physical and moral, which they thought made the novel ‘unsuitable’ reading” (*Unnatural Lives* 48). Elliott goes further, explaining that to dismiss the novel as melodramatic often involved “a denial of the realities of the Australian convict

76 One convict Clarke saw there was Mooney, who in *His Natural Life* draws the ‘lucky straw’ and is killed by a fellow convict to escape the insufferable conditions at Norfolk Island.
settlement…. Many nationalistic critics wanted that era of colonial brutality moved from the centre of literary attention” (Marcus Clarke 19). This precisely highlights the Gothic’s tendency to focus on repressed material, on issues that have been hidden but insist on resurging, on “the unspoken encrypted knowledges of history,” as Lloyd Smith puts it in “The Phantom” (217).

In fact, even though transportation had officially been abolished to New South Wales and Tasmania in the 1850s, Elliott explains that “the colonial world was still very vividly aware of [the convict past], and treated [its] lingering presence as a scar” (Introduction xxviii). Moreover, although the transportation system had never operated in Victoria, settlers there were terrified of ex-convicts bringing their ‘stain’ to the colony. See, for example, Stefan Petrow’s “‘Convict-Phobia’: Combating Vandemonian Convicts in 1850s and 1860s Victoria” for a discussion of how “vehemently and determinedly” Victorians “opposed the introduction of convicts to their colony,” which included the passing of two Acts that were considered so severe, so illiberal and “so far removed from the general principles of English law” by the Colonial Office that it “never gave them official sanction” (260). All this contributed to making His Natural Life a very controversial novel. John Barry provides a concrete example of just how sensitive Clarke’s subject matter was: the widow of John Price, on whom Dora was based, and most likely also Thomas Rogers, the model for Reverend North, were living in Melbourne when His Natural Life was printed. Both Mrs Price and Rogers were widely known figures, which makes “Clarke’s venture even more extraordinary and its muted reception more understandable” (4-5).

To justify his choice of such a contentious topic, in the OV Clarke added footnotes to particularly horrid scenes to prove that such incidents were based on historical fact.\footnote{There are of course episodes in the novel which are not based on any evidence. For example, there is no record of any boys jumping off cliffs at Point Puer, as Michael Roe points out in “Historical Background” (588). See also L. L. Robson’s “The Historical Basis for The Term of His Natural Life.”} In the RV, instead, he added an appendix with a list of his historical sources as well as an introductory note in which he compares His Natural Life with novels by Charles Reade, who “has drawn the interior of a house of correction in England” and Victor Hugo, who “has shown how a French convict fares after the fulfilment of his sentence” (RV 13). According to Ian Henderson, Clarke’s “most significant debt is [in fact] to Charles Reade” (“‘There Are French Novels and There are French Novels’: “Charles Reade and
the ‘Other’ Sources of Marcus Clarke’s *His Natural Life*” 58). It is certainly true that Reade’s *It is Never Too Late to Mend* contains many similarities to Clarke’s text: it is also a long and rambling work with a convict who suffers terribly in an English model prison, adventures on Australia’s gold fields, and an innocent heroine who is deceived by the novel’s villain.78

Clarke thus retrospectively legitimises *His Natural Life* by likening it to two famous nineteenth-century prison novels which have a reformist penal agenda.79 As Murray-Smith points out, Clarke’s “choice of topic was a highly appropriate one,” as “a series of writers … had demonstrated over the past twenty years and more that crime and punishment were topics of perennial popular interest” (9-10). In addition to Reade and Hugo, Clarke clearly also knew Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, Alexandre Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo* and the so-called ‘Newgate novels,’ all of which employ the Gothic to a greater or lesser extent. Turcotte further compares *His Natural Life* to H. G. Wells’s novels *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and *The Invisible Man*, which focus on “humanity’s reversion to a primal state,” a typical concern of *fin-de-siècle* fiction. In fact, although Clarke’s novel predates Wells’s texts, *His Natural Life* not only explores issues around man’s “descent toward the bestial” (121), but also other common concerns of Gothic texts from the end of the nineteenth century, as I will discuss in more detail below. Hergenhan, moreover, points out in *Unnatural Lives* that Clarke was aware of American authors such as Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. These two writers of course greatly contributed to the American Gothic.

Further to highlighting the connection *His Natural Life* has to other ‘crime’ and Gothic novels of the nineteenth century, the literary background of Clarke’s novel helps establish it as more than ‘just’ about Australia’s transportation system. Ian Henderson, for example, argues in “‘There Are French Novels and There are French Novels’: Charles Reade and the ‘Other’ Sources of Marcus Clarke’s *His Natural Life*” that focusing on Clarke’s literary borrowings “enables the reconstitution of *His Natural Life* as a work of Victorian modernity, interested as much in contemporary issues of international significance – issues like the ‘marriage’ question and the place of

78 There are, however, also important differences. For example, while in *It is Never too Late to Mend* the chaplain is successful in introducing penal reform, Reverend North is utterly incapable of fighting the transportation system.

79 In addition, he explains that his novel is to serve as a warning not to repeat the transportation of prisoners, all the more timely because, when *His Natural Life* was serialised, France was sending convicts to New Caledonia.
spirituality in modern life – as it is in reconstructing Australia’s convict past.” For instance, Henderson points out the topicality of Clarke’s reference to Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s *Paul et Virginie* and Dora and North’s discussion about ‘bad French novels’. The latter are anachronistic for the setting of *His Natural Life* but allow Clarke to explore questions regarding sexual morality and desire, as exemplified in the treatment Dora receives from Frere, North and Dawes. Henderson’s article is a timely reminder that *His Natural Life* is about more than just Australia’s convict past, although the novel remains best remembered for its brutal depiction of the penal system.

If many readers recoiled from the novel’s brutality and the reception was lacklustre overall, there was some praise when the OV was first published. Prior to revising his novel, Clarke asked Sir Charles Gavan Duffy for his opinion and advice. Duffy described the novel as “a singularly powerful and original one” but also “marred by serious faults” (quoted in Stuart xxxiv). In particular, he criticised the unconvincing motive for Dawes’s sacrifice and recommended that he expunge the last three books, concerned with Dawes’s life after his successful escape from Norfolk Island (Stuart xxxiv). However, Duffy did not suggest that Dawes should die. The revision “was a long and painstaking task” (Stuart xxxix). Regarding a more credible motive for Dawes’s sacrifice, Clarke finally decided that Dawes hides his true identity to protect the honour of his mother. He thus substituted the entire first book with a short prologue, which led to further changes. For example, unlike in the OV, there is no mystery concerning the reason for Devine’s silence, nor is his true identity hidden from the reader. (The one puzzle that remains is the true killer of Bellasis. This is uncovered at the end of the RV).

The plot then moves straight to the *Malabar* and remains fairly similar to the OV until Dawes can escape from Norfolk Island in North’s guise. As in the OV, Dawes and Dora (now Sylvia), are finally reunited on the ship. After Sylvia remembers that it was Dawes who had saved her, the two die in each other’s arms. Consequently, the three final books are deleted, which called for adjustments throughout the RV. For instance, Rex’s return to England to claim the Devine inheritance now takes place earlier, and there is no need for characters such as Arthur Verne, Dick Purfoy and Dorcas (in the RV Sylvia

---

80 See Henderson’s “‘There Are French Novels and There are French Novels’” and “Treating Dora in *His Natural Life.*”
and Frere do have a daughter, who however dies when still a baby). It has been claimed that Rex’s success in impersonating Devine is made more plausible because he is now Dawes’s half-brother, another illegitimate son of Lord Bellasis, a character who was absent in the OV. Arguably, however, this just adds another coincidence to the plot, which is certainly no less melodramatic than the OV. As Clarke discloses in the final book, John Rex is now, moreover, the real murderer of Bellasis. North, the most important religious character of the novel, also has a closer connection to Dawes in the RV, as he could have helped prove Dawes’s innocence but kept quiet because he robbed the body of Bellasis to destroy evidence of betting debts he had held with him. This, of course, renders North even more questionable morally than in the OV. In fact, as Webby correctly points out, both main clergymen in the novel are presented as far from admirable. The Rev. Meekin is sent up as an effeminate fop for whom the Christian faith is a mere profession, someone who has no insight into the sufferings of his fellow men, and no ability or desire to help them. The Rev. North, although treated more sympathetically, and powerfully presented … is an alcoholic and a potential adulterer, and, in the revised version, even guilty of the robbery for which Devine is convicted. (“Colonial Writers and Readers” 62)

Crucially, the fact that the RV ends on a tragic note affects the whole meaning of the novel. Dawes cannot regain his ‘Devine’ status, Frere does not receive his comeuppance and, more generally, no optimistic alternative is presented to the dark and depressing image of Australia as one big penal colony. Notably, Clarke found it very hard to let Dawes die. As Elliott explains, “[t]he revisionary act which caused Clarke most agony of mind was the killing of Rufus Dawes…. his death makes For the Term of His Natural Life a different book. R. D. was not conceived as a tragic hero but as an allegorical one. To kill him off and finish the book at that point was a drastic alteration. … Something truly is lost” (Introduction xxxvii). Clarke’s original plan was that through Crosbie, Dawes “should become Richard Devine again, the natural man restored, with humanity, charity, love, honesty redeemed and brought back to [his] central place in the plan of life” (xxxix). Although, according to Elliott, the RV does achieve a “spiritual elevation – a kind of redemption – for Rufus Dawes, … it does

---

81 There are also subtle changes in the development of several characters, including Dawes, Frere and Dora/Sylvia. See, for example, Burrows, “The Capacities for Melodrama” and Joan E. Poole, “Maurice Frere’s Wife.”
nothing to restore Richard Devine” (xxxvii). It has been convincingly argued that one reason why Clarke finally decided to drown Dawes was that his readership was not ready for a novel in which a man who has been confronted with the horrors of the transportation system is allowed to live on, or as Webby puts it: “Clarke’s radical faith in humanity was clearly too much for the burghers of Victorian Melbourne who felt that an ex-convict, however innocent, could never again rejoin respectable society” (“Melodrama and Imagination” 216-17).

McCann and Henderson have emphasised that Clarke was acutely aware of the market he was writing for. It is thus likely that, following the lacklustre reception of the OV, he adjusted his text to make it more palatable for the local audience. At the same time he was also hoping that his novel would gain success in England, which can further explain not only Dawes’s death but also some minor differences between the two versions. Citing Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* as an example, Elizabeth Morrison points out that English texts were “presented in a totally different context and totally different market” when serialised in Australian colonial newspapers, and often slightly changed (313). The same would also have applied for Australian texts when published in England. While such changes could often be attributed to “compositorial idiosyncrasies or editorial policy” (313), in this case Clarke himself undertook many small adjustments when revising his novel. Sarah Purfoy’s sexual allure, for instance, is considerably toned down, while Dora is turned into a less coquettish Sylvia. Consider also how Clarke changed the title of chapter 5 of Book II in the OV from “How society made criminals forty years ago” to “The Barracoon” in Book I of the RV. Whereas the title from the OV clearly indicates who is responsible for the degradation of the prisoners, in the RV the title draws attention to the similarities between convict and slaves, but does not openly criticise society.

Although the RV can thus to some extent be considered less sensational and more suitable for a genteel audience, Turcotte considers it to be more Gothic than the OV because it concludes with a “more unsettling open-endedness” (124). The OV, instead, seems “trite and facile”, as it returns “Dawes to prosperity and [suggests] a spurious healing of evil and injustice, one which is artificial in the context of this tale of terror,

---

82 See, for example, John Burrows’s “His Natural Life and the Capacities of Melodrama,” Joan E Poole’s “Maurice Frere’s Wife: Marcus Clarke’s Revision of *His Natural Life*” and Henderson’s “Treating Dora in *His Natural Life*”.)
and one which is anti-colonial in as much as Dawes’s ascension to the Devine is completed by a return to Empire” (125). In contrast, according to Murray-Smith the RV contains the more typically Victorian ending, whereas “for Dawes not to die, but to survive and even to be vindicated in circumstances in which personal tragedy and defeat remain nevertheless ineradicable, is the bolder and harder dénouement” (16-17, italics in original). I agree with Murray-Smith. Compare, for instance, Dawes’s successful return in the OV with Charles Dickens’s Magwitch, who, although he manages to get back to England, has to die in Great Expectations – arguably to meet the conventions of the time.83

Moreover, the fact that the RV ends on a much darker note than the OV does not diminish the Gothic qualities of the OV. For one, traditional Gothic novels tend to conclude on a ‘facile’ happy note. In my opinion, however, there is more to the ending in the OV than just being “trite and facile.” On the one hand it can be taken to reflect Clarke’s own desire for a successful return home to England, which looked increasingly unlikely when he was revising the novel. As already mentioned, this in part may in fact explain the gloomy ending of the RV. On the other hand, Devine survives to be reunited with the wife he had tried to escape from many decades ago, a cripple he does not love. This is a more unsettling conclusion than remaining in Australia to live happily ever after, an ending which apparently would have been preferred by those who claim that the OV ends on an anti-colonial note. Furthermore, the conclusion of the OV makes perfect sense when taking into account the alchemical motif discussed by Abraham. Note, also, that in the OV Clarke plays with a common fear of Victorian England, that of the return of the “unexpected ex-convict” (Richard White 21), while, as a wrongly convicted prisoner who survives the horrors of the penal stations, Dawes becomes a living reminder of British injustice.

At any rate, at the heart of both versions of His Natural Life is the nightmarish world of the transportation system, which Clarke depicts in Gothic terms, similarly to Tucker and John Boyle O’Reilly. As discussed in the previous chapter, Tucker and O’Reilly highlight the excesses of Australia’s penal past by focusing on the extreme violence of the transportation system and the physical privations suffered by the convict experience, and suggest that the convict experience is essentially a Gothic one. Remarkably, Clarke included, and often developed more fully, all of the above themes, even though, unlike

83 This will be further discussed in the chapter on Peter Carey’s Jack Maggs.
Tucker and O’Reilly, he had not experienced penal life himself, nor could he have been influenced by the two convict authors. For example, both Tucker and O’Reilly show that the system corrupts not only convicts but also officials. This is the case in *His Natural Life* as well. Consider the following episode, in which Dawes refuses to continue flogging Kirkland. Macklewain, the doctor of the establishment, grumbles “a little below his breath, for he wanted his breakfast, and when the Commandant once began to flog, there was no telling where he would stop.” Burgess, instead, is determined “to break the man’s spirit. ‘I’ll make you speak, you dog, if I cut your heart out’,” and “[laughs] his hardest” when Dawes finally does give in (OV 468). Burgess is thus depicted as an active sadist who rejoices in scenes of repulsive brutality (as well as condoning homosexual rape, see below), while the doctor is so inured to violence that he merely feels sorry for himself when his breakfast is postponed. When Kirkland dies as a result of the flogging, this is considered an inconvenience by Burgess, as it could potentially reveal to the authorities what goes on at Port Arthur. Quickly, the commandant looks at a way to whitewash the incident and, in consultation with Macklewain, reaches the conclusion that the convict must have had some heart disease. Outraged, North writes a report, which, however, comes to nothing, illustrating how officials at all levels, from overseer to the magistrate in Hobart, collude to cover up the inhumanity of the system. In contrast, North and Dora are the only two free characters of the novel that empathise with the convicts, but they are both incapable of fighting the system, North being a captive of his own weaknesses and Dora of her upbringing and her husband, Maurice Frere.

The ironically named Frere figures paramountly among the corrupted officials. While the RV focuses on Devine/Dawes from the beginning, Frere is the first character to be introduced in the OV: “Mr Maurice Frere – bowed as to his legs, burly as to his body, red as to his hair, and coarse as to his general bearing – prided himself upon his rigorous attachment to old English customs and old English ways” (31). In fact, in the OV he is continually linked to the phrase ‘old English,’ which is not only sarcastic but further indicates that the British justice system, which he will come to represent, lies at the heart of the novel’s polemic.84 As the novel progresses he is furthermore also compared

84 In the RV, Frere is less often associated with ‘old England,’ possibly a further indication of how Clarke adapted the novel for an English audience, which arguably would not have particularly relished these frequent allusions. In contrast, in the RV, the fact that Lord Bellasis is the real father of Dawes contributes to Clarke’s criticism of British society and the British justice system, as Burrows argues. To a certain extent, according to Burrows, the figure of Lord Bellasis represents the corruption at the heart of
to animals, a sign of degradation reserved for convicts in Ralph Rashleigh. Superficially resembling Gothic characters such as Ann Radcliffe’s Montoni in The Mysteries of Udolpho in his brutal desire for control, he is a much more complex character than early Gothic villains. For example, although unlikeable from the beginning, he does not start out as the infamous commandant of Norfolk Island. Rather, he can be considered a prime example of how power corrupts someone who is naturally inclined to brutality: with each new position he occupies, he assumes more authority and, in turn, becomes more cruel and reprehensible.

Taking pride in how well he understands his prisoners, his closeness to the convicts makes Frere stand out among the other officials. As Wilding argues, “Clarke presents Frere’s relationship to the convicts as a symbiotic one: he is bound by his sadism and authoritarianism to his victims, they are bound to him by their admiration for power and the servility of their defeated wills” (Marcus Clarke 26). On Norfolk Island, where he is out of reach of any supervising agency, his inhumane behaviour reaches its highest pitch. He takes control of the island by turning the most perfidious convicts into constables and by making corporeal punishment, which apart from floggings includes such horrifying devices as the spread-eagle and the stretcher, the norm. North notes in his diary that “Frere rejoices in his murderous power” (OV 631), while the narrator remarks that “[t]he authority of the Commandant was so supreme that men lived but by the breath of his nostrils” (OV 648). Feeling nevertheless a minimal kind of constraint as long as Dora and North are present, Frere looks forward to being “left alone on the island to pursue his ‘discipline’ unchecked” (OV 657).

Not only despicable for how he treats the convicts, Frere also acts dishonourably on several occasions, most notably following the Macquarie Harbour episode, in which he is left stranded with Dora, her mother and Dawes. Unspeakably irritated by Dawes’s skilfulness and the friendship he forms with Dora, Frere unashamedly lies following their rescue to make sure that Dawes is sent to Port Arthur instead of receiving the well-deserved pardon which both Frere and Dora had promised him. With Dora’s mother

English society, as he is a nobleman who has abandoned the ‘natural’ responsibilities that come with his class. “Instead, this figure is replaced by “self-seeking parvenus like old Devine and his true heir, Maurice Frere, who is dependent on his favours because ‘the abolition of the slave trade had ruined the Bristol House of Frere’.” For Burrows, this ultimately leads to “a gross failure to distinguish between the truly criminal and the weak or unfortunate, all of whom are caged together between decks on the ‘Malabar’ (sic)” (301).
dying shortly after the ordeal and Dora losing all recollections of the events, only Frere and Dawes know the truth, and the system of course believes the official, not the convict. Thus, Frere is not simply a one-dimensional sadist, as is the case with officials in Tucker and O’Reilly, but a more rounded character, who, in addition to being gradually corrupted by unlimited power, is also a disgraceful liar (although he does, a few times, express morsels of doubt and regret). The fact that in the OV Frere is finally killed – by his own illegitimate son no less – is undoubtedly a satisfying fate. In the RV, Frere is not shown to get his just deserts. Nevertheless, he remains a brutal cheat, in sharp contradistinction to Dawes.85

Dora, who as a child strongly disliked Frere, later marries him out of a false sense of gratitude, as his lie leads her to think that it was he and not Dawes who rescued her from certain death. She is nevertheless left with a sense of dread about the whole episode and remains haunted by what she cannot remember. Thus, in both versions of the novel, Dora/Sylvia can best be described as a Gothic heroine-victim, as only Haynes has mentioned in passing: “Sylvia Vickers, the classic Gothic heroine-victim, has lost her mental faculties for some years after the trauma of her West Coast experience and continues to suffer in her repressive marriage, subjected to the mental cruelty of her coldly brutal husband Maurice Frere” (222). The marriage between Frere and Dora is in fact a good illustration of Freud’s uncanny: looking on the surface like the perfect match, this familiar tale is based on a lie and turns into a nightmare. In the past, Dora’s memory loss has often been regarded as a mere “plot-contrivance” (Hergenhan, “The Corruption of Rufus Dawes” 213). Arguably, however, rather than simply adding to the melodramatic nature of the novel, Dora’s amnesia and later recovery illustrates how repressed material typically returns to the surface in Gothic literature. Consider the following passage by John F. Burrows, who, writing in 1974, does not analyse the text from a Gothic perspective, but convincingly argues that Sylvia’s memory loss is one of the novel’s most powerful centres of meaning. In a ‘mechanical’ analysis of Clarke’s melodramatic strategy, her loss of memory is not so much a convenience as an embarrassment…. In figurative terms, however, [it] epitomizes the novel’s effort of moral definition. Against all sanctions of

85 Note that Dora’s father, Major Vickers, is the only government official who occasionally doubts whether sheer brutality is really the best way to treat the convicts. However, as Burrows points out, “he is in a position to hold himself aloof though not unimplicated, an increasingly impersonal instrument of ‘the King’s regulations’” (297).
Meekin’s church, her father’s official standing, and the fixed opinion of her elders, Sylvia’s vestigial recollections of Macquarie Harbour increasingly coincide with her deepest instincts to hint at the inconceivable – not merely that convicts may not congenitally be beasts, not merely that King’s officers may be so, but that she herself has married a beast and cast a man aside. When Dawes confronts her in Hobart Town, when she encounters the wretched children of Point Puer, when she comes upon her husband’s torture-cell: blow by blow, received opinion crumbles until it is swept away by the climactic tempests of mind and sea and, in full memory and understanding, she accepts that the inconceivable is the truth.

(300)

To cite just one example of how haunted Dora is, before reading Rex’s account of the mutiny of the Osprey, she feels that “were it related truly, she would comprehend a something strange and terrible, which had been for many years but a shadow upon her memory. Longing, and yet fearing, to proceed, she held the paper, half unfolded, in her hand, as, in her childhood, she had held ajar the door of some dark room, into which she longed and yet feared to enter” (OV 427). Inevitably, however, the repressed material keeps resurfacing throughout the narrative, and with every step that she journeys deeper into the hell of the penal stations, the vague recollections become more frequent and disturbing, until she arrives at Norfolk Island, where she comes face to face with the brutality of her husband and finally comprehends the truth just as she is about to leave. In this she differs from classic Gothic heroines such as Emily in The Mysteries of Udolpho, who never doubts the power structures of her society. Dora, instead, is eventually forced to confront the fundamental wrongs of the system in which she lives. Once she has acquired this knowledge, however, she is not allowed to survive. Instead, being a captive as much as the convicts, she drowns in both versions of the novel, as nature conspires with the system to make sure that the departure from the island leads to her death.86

As previous critics have noticed, nature often appears to be in league with the transportation system in His Natural Life. The penal settlements are ‘natural prisons,’ where the need for guards and bars is minimal, while little sustenance is offered to those

---

86 Dora is not the only character in His Natural Life with whom past events catch up. For example, as mentioned above, in the OV Frere is murdered by his illegitimate son, who was born to him by one of his convict maids. Frere abandoned her once she got pregnant, and she died during childbirth. Another character whose past comes back to haunt him is Rex, as will be discussed further on.
who try to escape, as the following description of Macquarie Harbour demonstrates:

“[t]he air is chill and moist, the soil prolific but in prickly undergrowth and noxious weeds, while the fetid exhalations from swamp and fen cling close to the humid, spongy ground. All around breathes desolation; and on the face of nature is stamped a perpetual frown” (OV 231). As a result, Gabbett resorts to cannibalism, but, not having enough mates to survive on, he is ‘vomited forth again’ by the forest when he tries to run from Macquarie Harbour (OV 257). Nature is thus attributed “a malign agency”, which according to Matthews “is a favourite technique of Clarke’s, usually linked to Gothic effect” (12). Haynes also points out that “[l]andscape is a central element in Clarke’s Gothic setting” (222) and further stresses the importance of chance in the novel: “[c]hance – the signature of an amoral, arbitrary, if not malign, Nature – pervades the whole novel, and the natural descriptions are an integral part of the mechanism whereby chance affects individual lives, usually for destruction” (64). “Pictures of an isolated figure or a group of figures in an alien landscape, hostile or indifferent,” are in fact often found in the novel (Hergenhan, “Corruption” 213). See, for example, the wanderings of the Port Arthur bolters, or Dawes’s escape following his attempted suicide, during which he soon grows desperate not only because of lack of food, but also because the landscape, “a barbarous wilderness” (OV 280), turns into a labyrinth where he completely loses any sense of direction, finally ending up where he began his journey, a powerful illustration of his physical and metaphorical entrapment.

While Clarke’s evocative descriptions of nature contribute to the Gothic tone of many passages in the novel, in one central Gothic episode, no evil agency is ascribed to nature, as Matthews has also noted. Instead, during the famous night that Rex spends in the blowhole, nature merely provides “an exhibition of the harmless life of the Australian ocean,” which no naturalist, explorer or shipwrecked seaman “would have found … frightful.” But in a rare moment of insight, Rex wonders whether “he – a monster among his fellow-men – [is] to die some monstrous death, entombed in that mysterious and terrible cavern of the sea” (541). His vivid imagination then turns the innocuous creatures of the sea into “ghastly and awesome shapes of death and horror,” thus creating a Gothic experience for himself and the reader. After a long series of all “creatures that could be ingendered by slime and salt,” his shadow finally appears “to

87 Nature takes on Gothic characteristics not only in His Natural Life, but in other writings by Clarke as well. Consider, for example the famous ‘weird melancholy’ in his introduction to the collection of poems by Adam Lindsay Gordon (see also Introduction).
take the shape of an avenging phantom,” and Rex falls shuddering on his knees as “all the phantoms of his past crimes” seem to arise “to gibber at him” (OV 543). This, of course, reflects his guilty conscience, which is unusual for Rex, who is not normally plagued by any scruples. In fact, if Frere represents the inhumanity and brutality of the system, Rex can be considered a prime example of the cunning criminal (Gabbett, instead, epitomises man at his most degenerate, as I will discuss further on).

Early on, Rex is described as “a clever lad, without much principle, [who] would lie unblushingly, and steal deliberately, if he thought he could do so with impunity” (OV 189-90). Thus corrupted before he is transported, he is ‘King’ of his gang in England, and remains a ringleader in the penal colony. Clarke repeatedly depicts him as a dishonourable and brutal liar, who revels in bodily pleasures and uses his sharp intellect for repeated escapes, which nevertheless only ever lead to temporary spells of freedom. His last escape involves impersonating Dawes’s true identity when, eventually managing to return to England, Rex convinces the Devine family that he is their long lost brother and uncle (son in the RV). Finally, however, his true identity is revealed. Severely having abused his mental capacities with alcohol, he suffers a stroke, from which “he recovers only sufficiently to live on as an invalid-prisoner” of Sarah Purfoy (281). Thus, he ends his days imprisoned not only in his impotent body and mind but also at the mercy of the wife from whom he has tried to escape for much of the novel: “Rex was led from the room by the woman whose office it was henceforth to nurse him till he died – died, ignorant of her tenderness, a mere animal, lacking the human intellect he had in his pride abused” (OV 896). Occupying an interrelated role to Dawes in both versions of the novel, in the OV he therefore in a sense meets a similar fate to Dawes, who finally returns to Dorothea, the woman he does not love and whom he abandoned before being sent to Australia. But Dawes returns to his wife of his own accord, to right a past wrong. Rex, instead, tries to evade Sarah until he is left ‘a mere animal’. In short, similarly to Gabbett and Frere, Rex serves to highlight Dawes’s moral worth.

---

88 Abraham offers an interesting reading of the many names Rex is known under, which, according to her, can all be explained from an alchemical point of view.

89 As several critics have pointed out, this subplot recalls the so-called Tichborne case, in which a butcher from New South Wales claimed to be Roger Tichborne and succeeded in deceiving ‘his’ mother, Lady Tichborne. However, as Elliott points out, most likely “Rex’s attempt to defraud the Devine family … was planned before the Tichborne case came into prominence” (Introduction xxx).
As already pointed out, however, Dawes is not an unequivocally good character; rather the battle between good and evil can be observed within Clarke’s protagonist throughout the novel. For instance, having worked hard to build the coracle while marooned with Frere, Dora and her mother, he is tempted to steal off in the boat by himself, which would mean certain death for the other three members of the party. This is a cruel scheme, but readers can sympathise with Dawes because they are aware of all the injustice he has suffered to date, and have just witnessed Dora’s mother and especially Frere treating him badly. However, approaching the vessel, he spots the words Dora had written in the sand the previous day: “GOOD MR DAWES” (OV 344). Ashamed, he abandons his plan and instead departs with the other three, thus sacrificing his chance at freedom for a second time. This episode aptly illustrates why Dawes is a sympathetic character: he not only suffers intolerably under the laws of his society—which however are represented as morally flawed—but is also capable of feeling remorse and guilt. Ultimately, the good side usually wins in Dawes, often with the help of Dora, as in the episode just mentioned. In fact, Dora plays a crucial role in Dawes’s redemption, with North also being influential at times.

Marooned on the beach, the small group is reduced to a “‘semi-savage state’,“ in which Dawes’s natural superiority can express itself, whereas Frere’s official authority becomes meaningless. As Hergenha correctly points out, Clarke here highlights “the corruption of a society that gave birth to the convict system, the falsity of social distinctions and their supporting values” (“Redemptive Theme” 37). Once back in the claspers of the system as a consequence of Frere’s base betrayal, it is the thought of Dora that keeps Dawes going: “[d]uring the dull misery of his convict life at Port Arthur, one bright memory shone upon him like a star. In the depth of his degradation, at the height of his despair, he cherished one pure and ennobling thought – the thought of the child whom he had saved, and who loved him” (OV 404). Having been sent to Port Arthur instead of receiving his promised pardon, he reasons that Dora is ill and incapable of coming to his aid. He tries to tell the authorities the truth, but this only results in further punishment. Finally, he is sent to the Coal Mines, the epitome of convict misery at Port

90 In the OV, he is placed in a similar situation again at the end of the novel: when confronted with Verne’s true story, he is tempted to act in his own interest as opposed to that of Dorcas and Arthur, but the loving memory of Dora prompts him to prove that Rex is an impostor. This, of course, can only be done by giving himself up as Rufus Dawes. As he knows that the punishment for escaped convicts is hanging, he thus once more consciously chooses to sacrifice his own life for the benefit of others.

91 In this, Dawes resembles Rochester, who is saved by Jane Eyre in Charlotte Brontë’s novel of the same name.
Arthur. Later he is told that she has died, at which news all hope leaves him. Recoiling even more from his convict companions, he flees into a dream-world, in which he “[groups] all the phantasmata of happiness and love” around the figure of the innocent child, with whom he imagines living in “some quiet nook in the world’s end ... happy in a purer affection than the love of man for woman” (OV 406). The little figure only disappears “when his misery [becomes] too great for him to bear, and he [curses] and [blasphemes], mingling for a time in the hideous mirth of his companions” (OV 407). Thus, the worship of Dora becomes his “religion” (OV 406), until he realises that she is alive when he is brought to Port Arthur for the trial of the mutineers of the Osprey. This is a key moment in the novel: not being able to understand her “monstrous ingratitude,” he concludes that there is “no justice, no heaven, no God!” (OV 440).

Sent back to Port Arthur, two weeks later Dawes is ordered to flog Kirkland, which results in a scene of sensational brutality. Although he has received the lash many times before, he has never been told to flog someone else. When Dawes is reluctant to obey the command, Kirkland whispers to him “‘Go on, Dawes,’ ... ‘You are no more than another man’ (OV 464). According to Hergenhan, the only critic to have written two articles that focus on Dawes, Kirkland here acts as “a kind of tempter, by suggesting to Dawes that he is no better than others, and shares in their corruption” (“Corruption” 214). In my opinion, however, Kirkland, who is a rare innocent soul in the novel, is trying to ease Dawes’s conscience: they both know that if Dawes does not follow Burgess’s orders, someone else will. It should further be remembered that, although Dawes has tried to avoid becoming like his many degraded companions, he has only just experienced incomprehensible rejection from the only human being he loves. Arguably, in fact, it makes perfect sense that, at least temporarily, he now no longer sees any point in trying to be better than his fellow convicts. But the good side of his nature once more gains the upper hand: he refuses to continue with the flogging when Kirkland faints. This further serves to distinguish him from convicts such as Gabbett, who, grinning, is then brought in as flagellator.

The agony of Dawes’s mind finally explodes when he is severely flogged in Kirkland’s stead:

Having found his tongue, the wretched man gave vent to his boiling passion in a torrent of curses. He shrieked imprecations upon Burgess, Troke and North. He cursed all soldiers for tyrants, all parsons for hypocrites. He blasphemed his God...
and his Saviour. With a frightful outpouring of obscenity and blasphemy, he called on the earth to gape and swallow his persecutors, for heaven to open and rain fire upon them, for hell to yawn and engulf them quick. It was as though each blow of the cat forced out of him a fresh burst of beast-like rage. He seemed to have abandoned his humanity. He foamed, he raved, he tugged at his bonds until the strong staves shook again, he writhed himself round upon the triangles and spit impotently at Burgess, who jeered at his torments.

(OV 467)

Hergenhan argues that in this episode “Dawes in a sense joins Frere, Burgess, Gabbett, Rex and North, all the characters inside the System and out who to varying degrees and in various ways ‘lose their humanity’” (“Corruption” 216). Notably, however, Dawes only ‘seems’ to have abandoned his humanity. Furthermore, Dawes’s behaviour in this passage is not only understandable but further serves to illustrate the struggle between good and evil inherent in the Gothic hero-villain. An innocent character such as Kirkland cannot survive such a flogging, while a completely corrupted figure such as Gabbett turns sides and becomes an ally of the system. Dawes, instead, here finally gives vent to very strong and credible emotions, which make him a more fully developed character than both Kirkland and Gabbett.

In addition, he is clearly set apart from Frere, Burgess, Gabbett and Rex in his capacity to empathise with others. When straight after the flogging scene North asks him for forgiveness, “a ray of divine pity [penetrates] his gloomy soul. He seemed to catch a glimpse of a misery more profound than his own, and his stubborn heart felt a human sympathy with this erring brother” (OV 469). Thus, Dawes’s humanity is reconfirmed immediately after his blasphemous ravings, and further highlighted when he recovers in hospital. According to Hergenhan, Dawes here “becomes [further] dehumanized, in the sense of losing essential human values” (“Redemptive Theme” 39), because he realises that “the agony of the wretched body can force the soul to quit its last poor refuge of unarmed Indifference, and confess itself conquered” (OV 482, italics in original). Instead, I contend that this passage illustrates Dawes’s ability to experience empathy, an important characteristic of Gothic hero-villains, as this insight allows him to understand the desperate action of a convict who killed his comrade in order to be sentenced to death. In fact, following his outburst Dawes is not simply reduced to the same degraded level as his fellow convicts, but now manages to pity and relate to them on a human level. Moreover, although after the capture in Hobart Town “he had given loose rein to
his hatred and despair” and wondered “‘what matter if I become like one of these?’,” during his time in hospital he also remembers how he blushed as he flogged Kirkland but felt a fierce joy when he flung down the cat. As Dawes realises, “he had miscalculated his own capacity for evil” (OV 481).

Similarly, Dawes never becomes degraded enough to partake in cannibalism or same-sex rape, two central topics of the novel, which help distinguish Dawes from other convicts and greatly contribute to the Gothic in *His Natural Life*. According to Turcotte, “[t]he Gothic always returns to the most taboo of subjects in order to create its moments of greatest terror.” In Clarke’s novel, “this subject is cannibalism, although sodomy too gets a brief mention” (123). Turcotte offers a close reading of some of the cannibal passages in *His Natural Life*, but it is also interesting to explore the wider associations of this ‘practice,’ especially in the context of nineteenth-century discourses about race and degeneration. In *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1996), H. L. Malchow points out that cannibalism is a typical Gothic trope, which, moreover, is often linked to sodomy. As Malchow explains, “it comes as no surprise” that cannibalism, both as event and as metaphor, should be a commonplace of gothic fiction, as well as of wider texts employing the rhetoric of the gothic for effect. Cannibalism evokes an even deeper response than Western sexual taboos, with which it has much resonance. It is such an obviously available trigger for sensational emotion that virtually all gothic literature employs some anthropophagic element, indicating the depth of fear/disgust response it evokes – from Frankenstein’s pulling apart of bodies to the soul- and blood-devouring demonism of Dracula. It is directly or indirectly suggested by the wide range of sadomasochistic gothic imagery: severing of body parts, drinking of blood, desecration of the dead, and handling, smelling, and ingesting the putrefied and unclean.

According to Malchow, the figure of the cannibal was most commonly associated with the “monstrous non-European.” As he points out, “[b]y the late nineteenth century, there was hardly a ‘primitive’ culture…that had not been accused of cannibal practice, cannibal inclination, or a least a cannibal past,” illustrating the imperial fear of the
primitive other: “[p]erhaps the single most emotive aspect of the monstrous non-European, the construction of the black savage that most closely relates to the gothic unnatural, is his presumed cannibal instinct” (41). In actual fact, even though Malchow does not completely rule out that cannibalism may have existed in some “‘primitive’ cultures,” he emphasises that any account of such cannibalism “must be treated with extraordinary scepticism” (41). In contrast, stories of convict cannibalism are based, however remotely, on historical fact: “the tale of the cannibal convict was a relatively recent creation of the post-1788 system of transportation and was formed explicitly on stories of escaped prisoners in the Australian and Tasmanian bush” (97). Similarly to starvation cannibalism encountered among sailors, the convict cannibal was considered even further degraded than ‘monstrous non-Europeans’ “in that in a perverted cannibalism … he fed almost exclusively on his own kind – that is, on other convicts” (97).  

The most famous cannibal in His Natural Life is Gabbett. Clarke based this character on the Irish convict cannibal Alexander Pearce, although Malchow mentions in passing that “however much Clarke’s story derives from the actual horrors of the system, his telling is strongly indebted to the gothic literary tradition,” as he turns Gabbett into a “gigantic Frankenstein’s monster” (99). Craig Cormick similarly points out that “Clarke’s portrait of the ‘unhuman’ and ‘animal’ Gabbett is far from the historical facts.” For example, rather than a giant, Pearce was quite small and “mild of countenance” (12). Moreover, unlike Gabbett, Pearce committed all of his cannibalistic acts during his escapes from Macquarie Harbour, never having been sent to Port Arthur. In contrast, Gabbett, who is often depicted as more beast than human, can be considered a prime example of what Max Nordau feared when he wrote Degeneration approximately twenty years after the publication of His Natural Life. Jenny Bourne Taylor explains that according to Nordau the degeneration of humanity, which “is “the outcome of modern civilization,” leads to “atavism, or reversion to more ‘primitive’ or child-like stages” (14). His “principal starting point was the account of mental heredity and degeneration which emerged in France during the 1850s,” based on the idea that environmental factors compounded by heredity “generated the process of family decline” (15). More generally, towards the end of the nineteenth century “[n]ew ways of

93 Note that in Great Expectations Dickens employs the image of the cannibal convict in a Gothic scene in which Magwitch threatens a horrified Pip that “[his] heart and [his] liver shall be tore out, roasted and ate” (6).
viewing racial evolution” loosely based on Darwin’s theory of evolution “opened up the possibility that devolution could also be occurring…. [If] ‘natives’ could be educated out of their savagery and into modernity, so too could the civilised revert back to their savage origins” (Ross G. Forman 104).

While British fantasy novels such as Rider Haggard’s She, Bram Stoker’s Dracula and Matthew Phipps Shiel’s The Yellow Danger explore ideas of degeneration from an imperial perspective, in His Natural Life the most overtly perverted character is a British national. Although he will be linked to cannibalism only later, already on the Malabar Gabbett is singled out as a returned convict, who has memories of Macquarie Harbour “that he did not confide to his companions” (181). Routinely described as a giant and a beast, during the attempted mutiny he turns into a “monster” that, “viewed through the thunderous gloom of a tropical night … brought to mind those hideously-grotesque pictures of the combats of evil spirits, drawn by the fantastic pencil of Goya. … the giant seemed less a man than a demon, or one of those monstrous and savage apes that haunt the solitudes of the African forest” (222). Thus, Gabbett is marked from the beginning as barely human, encapsulating fears of degeneration often expressed in Gothic fiction. For instance, the comparison to a savage ape anticipates Stevenson’s description of Mr Hyde, who is, moreover, often referred to as a wild beast as well. Note, also, that Goya’s The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters can be considered a Gothic symbol.

As the novel progresses, Gabbett further devolves, a fact which is carefully rendered in the text. We meet him again in Macquarie Harbour, where, having bolted with a few mates, he is the only one to return to the settlement. The wretch, as he sits gloomily chewing a piece of tobacco he has snatched “like a cur”, is

a spectacle to shudder at…. chiefly because, in his slavering mouth, his slowly grinding jaws, his restless fingers, and his bloodshot, wandering eyes, there seemed to live a hint of some terror more awful than the terror of starvation – a memory of a tragedy played out in the gloomy depths of that forest that had vomited him forth again – and the shadow of this unknown terror thus clinging on him, repelled and disgusted, as though he bore with him the reek of the shambles. (OV 257)

This “hint of some terror more awful than the terror of starvation” and the reference to shambles, meaning “a butcher’s slaughter house; a scene of carnage” (The Australian
*Oxford Dictionary*, definitions 2 and 3), are two of the first allusions to cannibalism in the text. Although the deed remains unnamed in the Macquarie Harbour chapter, the facts clearly point to what Turcotte calls Gabbett’s “culinary perversities” (122). As Turcotte also notes, Gabbett is eloquent only in his silence (OV 255), which further underlines his bestiality: “[o]ne of the principal manifestations of [t]he descent toward the bestial is found in the deterioration of language” (*Peripheral Fear* 121).

Soon after, Dawes stumbles over a corpse during his wanderings following his escape from Macquarie Harbour, a scene which “contributes to the aura of anxiety” (Wilding, *Marcus Clarke* 20). The passage can in fact be considered an example of how cannibalism is used to trigger sensational emotion in Gothic fiction:

> Stooping over it, impelled by an irresistible impulse to know the worst, he found the body was mangled. One arm was missing, and the skull had been beaten in by some heavy instrument. The first thought, - that this heap of rags and bones was a mute witness to the folly of his own undertaking, the corpse of some starved absconder – gave place to a second more horrible suspicion. He recognised the number imprinted on the coarse cloth as that which had designated the younger of the two men who had escaped with Gabbett. He was standing on the place where a murder had been committed. A murder! – and what else? What was the terrible mystery of this lonely spot? He turned and fled, looking back fearfully as he went. He could not breathe in the shadow of that awful mountain.  

(OV 279)

Fleeing “wild with terror,” Dawes looks back to see that “the sun, redly sinking behind a lofty pine that topped the opposite hill, shot a ray of crimson light into the glade below him. It was as though a bloody finger pointed at the corpse that lay there, and shuddering at the dismal omen, Rufus Dawes, averting his fate, plunged again into the forest” (OV 280). According to Burrows, this “[piece] of heightened description” illustrates how widely read Clarke was, as in works such as “[Mary Braddon’s] *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), and often in [Edgar Allan] Poe’s Tales (c. 1840), a morbid response to real or imaginary horrors likewise transmutes a natural redness into a bloody omen” (290).  

94 Notably, Burrows further compares *His Natural Life* also to Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, that is to novels that, together with Poe’s tales, have firmly been included in the Gothic canon.
Clarke returns to cannibalism in the last chapter of Book IV, entitled “The Valley of the Shadow of Death,” where cannibalism is finally referred to explicitly. It tells the story of six convicts, including Gabbett, who have bolted from Port Arthur. While wandering through the “horrible bush” (557), the men are finally affected by starvation to such a degree that they start killing and eating each other. As several critics have highlighted, “the prose itself is transformed by the subject of cannibalism, as though it … is inadequate to represent the subject…. [It] is quick, elliptical and sketch-like, utterly unlike most of the novel” (Turcotte 123). The whole chapter is characterised by a haunting style, and serves to further illustrate Gabbett’s degeneration. For example, although he is not the only member of the group who has eaten human flesh before, Gabbett is set apart from the others by being the only one who grins and jests about the matter. As one convict after another is killed and eaten, the narrative continues in its “restrained, detached manner”, which “makes the horror more telling” (Wilding, Marcus Clarke 21). Eventually only Gabbett and Vetch are left. When Vetch finally falls asleep, “the giant, grinning with ferocious joy, approached on clumsy tiptoe and seized the coveted axe.” Soon after, a group of sailors spot Gabbett, who beckons them and, “opening his bundle with much ceremony, offers them some of its contents” (OV 559). Clearly, the perverse joy Gabbett experiences when killing Vetch and his mad wish to proudly share the appalling contents of his package complete his descent to the less-than-human – from which there is no return: this is the last we see of Gabbett in the novel; later we are told that he was hanged.

Arguably, however, the chapter as a whole implies that, to a certain extent, it is understandable that cannibalism is considered and even resorted to under such circumstances. The convicts are shown to have no alternative except to starve. Ultimately, it is the system that has pushed them to this limit of the human experience, and it can thus to some degree be held responsible for their gruesome deeds. Interestingly, Malchow points out that convicts as a whole in a way represent “the cannibal cannibalized – in this case, by the law, a devouring system of justice that turned both paupers and criminals into laboring hands in workhouses and prisons and provided for their actual dismemberment in the dissection theaters of teaching hospitals” (97); Alexander Pearce’s body was in fact dissected following his hanging in

---

95 Interestingly, Clarke’s style here foreshadows many of William Astley’s short stories.
96 The text, instead, resumes “control over this mad force” at this point: as the sailors seize Gabbett, the prose becomes again more descriptive and controlled (Turcotte 123).
Hobart in 1824. At the same time, Malchow also writes that convict cannibals were often described as ‘having gone native’, i.e. that they picked up cannibalistic behaviour from living with Indigenous people (103). Clarke, however, does not provide such an explanation for Gabbett, who, moreover is not explicitly referred to as Irish in the text, unlike the actual Pearce.\footnote{As already pointed out in the previous chapter, the Victorian period was characterised by “anti-Irish hatred” (Malchow 47). Moreover, [s]tores of Celtic cannibalism had an ancient history, but the modern association of Celt and cannibal had a locus in – no doubt often fanciful – English stories of starvation cannibalism, reported in Ireland from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and resurfacing in the Great Famine of the 1840’s [sic]” (71). See, for example, also Patrick Brantlinger’s \textit{Taming Cannibals: Race and the Victorians}.} This makes him all the more uncanny, as he is not only (however vaguely) based on an attested real-life cannibal convict, but, unlike the barbarous Other of much Gothic fiction, also a white, most likely English, subject of British law. It is nevertheless interesting to note that Clarke first introduces Gabbett in the chapter which in the OV is called “How society made their criminals forty years ago”: to some extent even this degenerate convict can be considered a product of British society and of the transportation system.

Homosexuality takes up less space than cannibalism in \textit{His Natural Life}, and is never depicted explicitly. Nevertheless, “the unspeakable sexual practices”, as Barlow puts it, have “haunted the text and unnerved readers ever since its first publication” (34). In his queer reading of Clarke’s novel, Barlow argues that homosexuality is first alluded to on the transport ship \textit{Malabar}. Consider the following famous passage, which describes the prison of the ‘tween decks:

\begin{quote}
As the eye became accustomed to the foetid duskiness of the prison, a strange picture presented itself. Groups of men, in all imaginable attitudes, were lying, standing, sitting, or pacing up and down. It was the scene of the poop deck over again, only, here being no fear of restraining keepers, the wild beasts were a little more free in their movements. It is impossible to convey, in words, any idea of the hideous phantasmagoria of shifting limbs and faces which moved through the evil smelling twilight of this terrible prison-house. Callot might have drawn it, Dante might have suggested it, but a minute attempt to describe its horrors would but disgust. There are depths in humanity which one cannot explore, as there are mephitic caverns into which one dare not penetrate.
\end{quote}

(OV 153)

This under-world is too horrible to be described in any detail, illustrating the Gothic tendency to circumvent the unmentionable. At the same time, Clarke supplies enough so
that readers can imagine for themselves some of the ‘hideous phantasmagoria.’ More generally, by writing *His Natural Life*, Clarke precisely does “penetrate” some of the “depths in humanity,” even though he claims that they cannot be explored.

In Barlow’s opinion, “Clarke’s references to foul-smelling carceral spaces ‘that one dare not penetrate’, suggest the unspeakable interiors of anality” (36). Elaine Showalter similarly notes that in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) “the male homosexual body is … represented … in a series of images suggestive of anality and anal intercourse” (113). As Showalter further explains, “the burgeoning homosexual subculture that had begun in England in the 1870s was both identified and outlawed by the Labouchère Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which made all male homosexual acts, private or public, illegal” (Showalter 14). She also points out that “[t]he word ‘homosexual,’ which had been coined by the Hungarian writer Karoly Benkert in 1869, entered the English vocabulary when [Richard von] Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* was translated in the 1890s” (171). Together with Nordau’s *Degeneration*, Krafft-Ebing’s text was very influential in contributing to the public awareness of homosexuality and in turning it into a “sickness with symptoms associated with cultural degeneration and decay” (169). In fact, “many Englishmen regarded the homosexual scandals of the 1880s and 1890s, up to Oscar’s Wilde’s trial, as certain signs of the immorality that had toppled Greece and Rome” (3). More generally, the end of the nineteenth century was characterised by a fear of decadence, a term which was applied by the bourgeoisie to “everything that seemed unnatural, artificial, and perverse” (169), and extended to such fin-de-siècle Gothic texts as *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).

A contentious topic at the end of the nineteenth century, homosexuality, or the ‘unnatural crime,’ as it was called in Clarke’s time, was an even more controversial topic to include in a Victorian novel. Barlow explains that “Clarke’s sexualised representations of convict life were generally greeted with silence, rendered unspeakable,” a fact which, *inter alia*, is exemplified by various adaptations of *His Natural Life*, in which Kirkland’s gang rape was usually removed or at least sanitised (34). For example, as Webby explains in “Adaptations,” in the précis for a stage adaptation published by Bentley in 1886, there was no trace of the most controversial and taboo material: “the cannibalism, North’s alcoholism and loss of faith, and
Kirkland’s rape by Gabbett” were all omitted. She further mentions that out of the numerous early adaptations, George Leitch’s play appears “to be the only one to attempt to deal with the novel’s homosexual content”, which can be explained by the fact that Leitch himself was homosexual (598). While in later adaptations Gabbett’s cannibalism is often present, sometimes even for a comic effect, the novel’s homosexual incidents have been sanitised or omitted right through to the 1982 mini-series by Patricia Wayne and Wilton Schiller, and Peter Foster’s 1986 comic-book adaptation (603-04).

Also in the novel itself, Clarke never openly refers to same-sex acts. Nevertheless, in both versions he bases a whole chapter on a homosexual rape that moreover has a key influence on the character development of Dawes and North. Entitled “The Commandant’s Butler,” the chapter centres on Kirkland, a “thin, fair, and delicate” 22-year-old Methodist, who is transported for embezzlement, although the text implies that he was wrongly convicted (OV 449). Ordered to the chain gang for a trivial offence, the groom looks “at him with some pity as he [is] led away,” although “Kirkland [does] not quite comprehend this pitying glance” (OV 450). During the first night that Kirkland spends locked up with the other members of his gang, “the watchman at the gate of the dormitory heard scuffling and loud breathing. Being an experienced man, he smiled. The old hands were doubtless amusing themselves with the innocence of the educated convict” (OV 451).

The next morning, North passes by the dormitory and hears a voice: “‘Mr North ! Mr North ! … for the love of God, let me out of this place !’ Kirkland, ghastly pale, bleeding, with his woollen shirt torn, and his blue eyes wide open with terror, was clinging to the bars” (OV 451). North rushes to Burgess to beg for the release of Kirkland: “‘you know the character of the men in that ward. You can guess what that unhappy boy has suffered.’ ‘Impertinent young beggar!’ says Burgess. ‘Do him good, curse him ! Mr North, I’m sorry you should have had the trouble to come here, but will you let me go to sleep?’” (OV 452). While thus neither Burgess nor North say what exactly has happened to Kirkland, both of them, as well as the night watchman, are aware of what goes on in the dormitories. North is repulsed but unable to change the situation. In contrast, Burgess and the watchman are just as condemnable as the perpetrators, because they freely choose not to intervene, rather seeing this as a means to teach a prisoner a lesson. Thus, while at the end of the nineteenth century all forms of homosexuality were to be outlawed in England, here British justice, as represented by
its officials in the penal settlement, not only condones but effectively encourages same-sex rape as a type of punishment.

The text leaves no doubt as to how terribly this experience affects Kirkland. When Dawes, who is part of Kirkland’s chain gang but confined to a solitary cell at night, rejoins the other convicts in the morning, he is “struck by the altered appearance of Kirkland. His face was of a greenish tint, and wore an expression of bewildered horror” (OV 452). Later that day, Kirkland, a believing Christian, attempts to kill himself twice. Gabbett saves him the first time, no doubt to ensure further sexual satisfaction: “‘Hold on to me, Miss Nancy,’ says the giant, smirking his huge lips…. There seemed to be something in the tone or manner of the speaker which affected Kirkland to disgust, for, spurning the offered hand, he uttered a cry, and then, holding up his irons with his hands, he started to run for the water” (OV 453). Notably, the term “‘Miss Nancy’ was submitted as evidence of a convict slang term for a male ‘wife’” in the Molesworth Committee (Barlow 39). William Astley also made use of this expression in several of his short stories about convict homosexuality.

Interestingly, Showalter points out that “the suicide which ends Jekyll’s narrative is the only form of narrative closure thought appropriate to the Gay Gothic.” The same is also the case in Wilde’s novel, in which Gray “causes the suicides of a number of young men and then kills himself” (113). Unlike many fin-de-siècle texts, His Natural Life does not represent its author’s own conflicted homosexual feelings. But also in His Natural Life homosexual practices lead to death: following his suicide attempts, Kirkland is flogged so severely that he dies. Turcotte explains that

[i]n a sense, Kirkland, like many of the ‘soiled’ heroines of eighteenth-century Gothic texts (Antonia in The Monk, for example), must die as a result of being violated. The type of experience which his continuing presence recalls, as well as the need to deal with this experience in the long term if the character survives, are more expediently dealt with in absence. Although the unmentionable remains sub rosa, however, its horror has been inscribed into the text, suggesting an actuality that will remain no matter what conclusions are eventually drawn. (124)

98 Note that Gabbett is not only rendered bestial because of his cannibalistic and homosexual acts. He also enjoys flogging fellow convicts, which illustrates a disturbing lack of empathy: “[i]t was his boast that he could flog a man to death on a place no bigger than the palm of his hand. He could use his left hand equally with his right, and if he got hold of a ‘favourite,’ would ‘cross the cuts’” (OV 466).
At the same time, Kirkland’s death also highlights his innocence: as already mentioned above, he is simply too pure to survive in such a terrible environment as a secondary place of settlement.

The fact that Kirkland was the victim of a homosexual rape, as opposed to the heterosexual violation of eighteenth-century Gothic maidens, must have added an additional level of sensational horror for contemporary readers. However, Clarke not only employed homosexuality, especially same-sex rape, for sensational effect, but also used it to enforce his point about the shocking circumstances surrounding penal transportation to Australia. In this sense he might be compared to anti-transportationists such as John West and Sir William Molesworth, who, as discussed in the Introduction, used the ‘unnatural crime’ in their campaigns to abolish the transportation system, and whose publications were major historical sources for His Natural Life. In contrast, Ralph Rashleigh and Moondyne, as well as Caroline Leakey’s The Broad Arrow, for example, are silent on same-sex interactions (as well as on cannibalism). Conceivably, being/having been convicts themselves, Tucker and O’Reilly intentionally stayed away from this topic to avoid potential ‘contamination’. Or perhaps homosexuality was simply not as widely spread as zealous anti-transportationists made it out to be. In any case, Clarke would certainly have been aware of just how controversial it was to include homosexuality and cannibalism in his novel, and it is remarkable that, even though he made many amendments to render His Natural Life more suitable to both the domestic and the English market, he did not substantially change those passages that deal with these themes. Instead, he arguably used them to compound his critique of the British justice system, which in the novel provides the circumstances for these ‘practices’ to flourish.

Clarke’s inclusion of these topics was influential. Later critics of the colonial prison system, for example, often referred to His Natural Life as a euphemism for homosexual practices among inmates (Barlow 33), while both cannibalism and homosexuality were to become important tropes in Astley as well as some of the later convict Gothic texts discussed in subsequent chapters. Moreover, by making homosexuality a subject of the

99 The Broad Arrow, which was published in 1859, depicts the female lifer Maida Gwynnham. Leakey’s novel is considered an important precursor to His Natural Life (see, for example, Webby, “Colonial Writers and Readers” 62).
100 As already noted in the Introduction, Babette Smith, for one, points out that, based on sexually transmitted diseases, few doctors confirmed that the ‘crime’ was widespread (239).
novel, Clarke foreshadowed some of the most famous fin-de-siècle Gothic texts, whereas his incorporation of cannibalism reflects his familiarity with other nineteenth-century Gothic texts.

Kirkland’s rape takes place in Port Arthur, after Macquarie Harbour the second penal centre Dawes is sent to. Seven years later, we meet Dawes again on Norfolk Island, the final stop on his journey through convict hell. There, his villainous capacity for violent and criminal acts comes to the fore, even though this has often been glossed over by previous critics. On the island, Dawes is known as “the worst man”, and North witnesses his “wanton, unprovoked, and flagrant outrage” when he deliberately knocks a constable to the floor because he was caught smoking. North, through whom Clarke most explicitly criticises the transportation system, is shocked by Dawes’s behaviour, but he also pities the “poor wretch,” realising that he is “one of the monsters our monstrous system breeds” (565), and that the past seven years of ‘discipline’ have not “done him much good” (OV 587). When the reverend visits Dawes following the attack on the constable, he remarks how much the convict has changed: “[h]e has become a beetle-browed, sullen, slouching ruffian…. His face also has grown like other convict faces – how hideously alike they all are! – and, save for his black eyes and a peculiar trick he has of compressing his lips, I should not have recognised him…. How habitual sin and misery suffice to tantalise ‘the human face divine!’ (OV 587-8). In fact, Dawes is nowhere more removed from his ‘Devine’ nature than on Norfolk Island, where he is a leader of the Ring, a secret society of convicts that does not hold back from killing both fellow convicts and officials of the system (OV 582).

The situation drastically changes with the arrival of Frere. Implementing a cruel and strict discipline, he is still obsessed with Dawes, no doubt because of his betrayal following the coracle episode. He has him severely flogged and then sends him to grind cayenne pepper, in itself the most dreaded punishment, but even worse with a raw back: “In four days, Rufus Dawes, emaciated, blistered, blinded, [breaks] down. ‘For God’s sake, Captain Frere, kill me at once!’, he said. ‘No fear,’ said the other, rejoiced at this proof of his power. ‘You’ve given in; that’s all I wanted.’” Later Frere offers to make him a constable, but Dawes refuses, not being willing to betray his mates (OV 627). This episode thus not only further illustrates Frere’s sadistic obsession with Dawes and his blatant abuse of power, but also contrasts Frere and Dawes in regard to their moral worth: while Frere takes control of the island by turning the most perfidious convicts
into constables and spies, Dawes is unwilling to betray his fellow prisoners for personal gain. In fact, even though Dawes is portrayed in dark terms in much of Book V, the horrendous punishments that he suffers and his refusal to turn on his convict mates render him an object of sympathy even here, while North’s reflections serve to illustrate that Dawes has been made what he is by the system.

Desperate, Dawes enters into a pact with blind old Mooney and Bland, two convicts who are longing to die in order to escape the miseries of Norfolk Island. The scheme consists of drawing lots to determine who will be killed, who will act as the killer and who will merely witness the crime. Dawes, who draws the shortest straw, is to be the witness, which is considered unlucky because this role does not guarantee death. Instead, it chances upon Bland to act as murderer, for which he will hang. Mooney is ready to die, but Bland sits “gnawing his knuckles in excess of abject terror” when confronted with the reality of having to strangle his friend (OV 637). Seeing the corpse of the old man the next morning, “the full horror of the crime” bursts upon Dawes and he cries: “‘Oh! when a man is brought into this place his Man’s heart is taken from him and he gets the heart of a Beast!’” (OV 639-40). This touching episode serves as a striking reminder of the convicts’ humanity and further highlights the terrible consequences of the system as depicted by Clarke.

At the same time, North continues to be drawn to Dawes, making it his mission to save his soul. Notably, however, he several times misses the opportunity to come to Dawes’s aid because of his alcoholism. Frere, who has collided with North, resents the reverend’s interest in the convict. Out of spite he heaps more cruel punishments on him, which culminate in the torture scene where Dora finally comes face to face with her husband’s cruelty and the man who has haunted her for so many years. The encounter is also important for Dawes. Dora appears to him as “an angel of mercy” (OV 653) and, reflecting on the incident, he concludes that she must have interceded with his tormentor, having been unaware what he has suffered. Asking North to thank Dora for having released him, the priest once more fails him. Being furthermore unaware that Dora and North are about to leave together, Dawes nevertheless has a vision in which, in typical Gothic fashion, the reverend smiles with “infernal joy” and drags Dora “to the flaming gulf that yawns for him,” symbolising of course Dora’s fate should she elope with North (OV 665). North’s warped sense of guilt towards Dawes makes him pay the convict one last visit, during which he confesses to loving Dora. This prompts Dawes to
tell North, but not the reader, his story, in order to persuade him not to ruin her. North then rushes out of the cell and soon after commits suicide, while Dawes and Dora are finally reunited on board the sinking ship. Dora realises “[a]ll the agony and shame of the man’s long life of misery,” while Dawes, in turn, understands “the sad story of the young girl’s joyless life, comprehended how he had been sacrificed, knew for the first time the full extent of his wrongs” and feels that “she recognised, thanked, pitied, loved him!” (OV 685).

The path to Dawes’s redemption lies thus in his ability to love, or, as Elliott summarises it, *His Natural Life* aims to demonstrate “how the natural man, falling into the clutches of a de-natured, de-humanised institutionalised justice, is destroyed almost to the point of entire personal extinction; yet, retaining throughout the whole course of his despair one unextinguishable spark of human feeling, a remnant of human love, can in the end be brought back to life in a human sense” (Introduction xxvii). I agree that in the RV Dawes is the only character who can ‘be brought back to life in a human sense.’ In the OV he moreover is the only major character who manages to literally survive Clarke’s transportation system. This, however, illustrates that in both versions Dawes is an extraordinary figure, rather than an ‘Everyman,’ a ‘melodramatic’ or ‘gentlemanly hero’. Arguably, in fact, only a hero-villain can survive the transportation system in a human sense. Villains, instead, fall victims to the corrupting power of this dark underside of British justice, whereas innocent characters such as Kirkland die when confronted with the sheer brutality of the penal settlements. More generally, while readers could not sympathise with a character like Frere, a naïve or flawless hero could not convincingly survive Clarke’s nightmarish world of the transportation system – compare, for example, Dawes to Henry Savery’s unconvincing Quintus Servinton from the novel of the same name.

In addition, the fact that Clarke made his protagonist a hero-villain further highlights his familiarity with the Gothic genre. Importantly, however, *His Natural Life* does not simply replicate the British Gothic literary tradition Clarke grew up with. Instead, the novel is an example of how the genre can successfully address the specific cultural pressures of a variety of global environments; in this case the, at the time of writing,

101 As Henderson illustrates, out of Frere, North and Dawes, the latter is the only male character who eventually “alights on the ‘proper’ treatment of Dora,” treatment meaning in this case “both a male personage’s moral behaviour towards Dora, and his opinion or construction of her character” (“Treating Dora” 68).
very recent past of the transportation system in colonial Australia. Thus, in lieu of crumbling castles and underground vaults, the locus of the Gothic is often a penal station placed in a landscape that appears naturally predisposed to detain criminals; contrary to the licentious monks and male relatives who threaten or actually rape innocent maidens in eighteenth-century Gothic, the taboo topics in *His Natural Life* include cannibalism and homosexuality (which not only anticipate the genre’s concern with man’s descent to the bestial commonly found in *fin-de-siècle* fiction, but serve to criticise the British transportation system); while Dora is haunted by and eventually comes face to face with the fundamental wrongs of the culture in which she lives, as opposed to classic Gothic heroines such as Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, who do not doubt the power structures of their societies.

Ultimately, the novel demonstrates the devastating consequences that occur when a select group of people is given unlimited power over another. Excessive violence, degenerate convicts and sadistic officials contribute to an overall picture that seems to negate any positive view of mankind and depicts the transportation system as so warped that among convicts “the greatest villain is the greatest hero” (OV 128), whereas among the establishment it is figures such as Frere and Burgess that shape the course of the law. In this light, it is all the more fitting that Clarke chose a Gothic hero-villain as his protagonist. As discussed in the Introduction, this figure is “intrinsic to the social critiques of a number of texts” (Stoddart 178), while “real evil is identified … with institutions of power” (Botting, *Gothic* 92) – in *His Natural Life* Britain’s transportation system. Thus, a key narrative function of Devine/Dawes as hero-villain is to allow Clarke to expose this dark underbelly of British justice from the inside through a character that is good enough to elicit the reader’s sympathy and bad enough to be able to survive the system, although his capacity for evil acts pales in comparison to both officials and convicts such as Gabbett and Rex.

At the beginning of this chapter I noted that Haynes wonders why *His Natural Life* “retrospectively determined the perceived history of Port Arthur not only for Clarke’s contemporaries but, less accountably, for generations since, becoming the arbiter of cultural memory as well as the source of mythology” (43). Critical of Clarke’s text, she compares it to the much lesser known novel *The Broad Arrow*, in which Caroline
Leakey “shunned Gothic trappings” (222). Arguably, however, it is precisely because Clarke resorted to “Gothic trappings” – or rather, as Turcotte puts it, because he Gothicised ‘true’ historical occurrences (111) – that *His Natural Life* became a literary classic that has been widely considered a cultural authority on Australia’s convict past. After all, as seen in the Introduction with regard to the concept of the Phantom, the Gothic genre lends itself to exploring “everything that is denied within the culture, and yet remains the truth” (Lloyd Smith, *American Gothic* 148-9). The question of how Australia’s penal past is ‘best’ or most ‘truthfully’ represented has interested writers, critics and historians alike. I will return to this issue when discussing Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish*.

---

102 Of course one of the reasons why *His Natural Life* has had much more critical and popular attention than *The Broad Arrow* may be due to the fact that the latter was written by a woman: until the 1980s a male’s text generally took precedence over a female’s text.
Chapter Three

William Hay’s *The Escape of the Notorious Sir William Heans*:
A Gentleman-Convict’s Ordeals in Van Diemen’s Land

Like Marcus Clarke and William Astley, William Gosse Hay carefully studied historical records and literary narratives of the convict era, but *The Escape of the Notorious Sir William Heans* (1919), the first twentieth-century novel analysed here, differs markedly from the earlier texts. Unlike James Tucker, Clarke and Astley, who all emphasise the physical brutality of the system and the terrible conditions experienced at the penal settlements, Hay barely mentions corporeal punishments. Penal settlements figure in the background for most of the novel, and when Heans is eventually sent to Port Arthur, he works as a clerk and lives apart from the main body of prisoners even there. Instead of focusing on the physical excesses of Australia’s penal past to indict British justice, Hay is more interested in portraying a gentleman’s psychological battle to maintain his identity once he has become a convict. An Irish baronet who has been transported for abducting a lady, Heans can be considered a double outsider: ‘common’ convicts despise him for his considerable privileges and superior airs, while free society is reluctant to welcome him in its folds. Hay turns this hostile setting into a tensely haunting and ambiguous world, epitomised by Sir William’s strange relationship with Mr Daunt, commandant of the foot police, whose perhaps initially natural suspicion of Heans mutates into an obsessive and fatal preoccupation with the gentleman convict in the course of the narrative. The power struggle between Heans and Daunt is however just one of the novel’s plots. By intertwining several story lines, Hay draws a Gothic picture that not only includes Tasmania’s convict history but also the near-extinction of the island’s Aborigines.

*Heans* was not a successful novel. A hybrid of the Gothic romance, the novel of manners and the psychological novel, its style was at odds with the social realism popular when it was first published, and Hay’s approach continues to place “an exceptionally heavy burden of analysis and interpretation on the reader,” as I. D. Muecke points out in his introduction to the 1975 Rigby edition of *Heans* (v). It is hard to over-emphasize how different Hay’s style was from his contemporary writers. As Richard White explains in *Inventing Australia*, “[e]ven in the 1890s, in the imagery of bush, clear skies and sunshine which was developed by the younger generation of writers and artists, there was something of an obsession with happy youth, health and
wholesomeness. This was particularly true of Paterson’s ballads and Streeton’s paintings, and in the next few decades, their work was increasingly seen as the truest expression of the ‘real’ Australia – natural, cheerful and sane” (116). In 1890, for example,

Professor E. E. Morris condemned Marcus Clarke’s ‘weird melacholy’ as the hangover of a ‘fast life,’ and was thankful that ‘the great body of our nascent literature is cheerful and vigorous, as becomes the pioneer writers of a young and hopeful country’. Six years later another critic argued that Australian literature was characterised by the ‘sincerity with which the ‘wholesome pleasures’ of ‘this great wide land’ were depicted. In the new century, the stress on wholesomeness became stronger.

As a result, “the bohemian image of the outback was reduced to wattle, sunshine and ‘White Australia’” (119).

In addition to Muecke, the few critics who have written about Heans include R. G. Howarth, who enthusiastically considers the novel a masterpiece in his introduction to the 1955 Melbourne University Press edition, and Laurie Hergenhan, who dedicates a chapter to Heans in Unnatural Lives (1983). Since Hergenhan’s study, very little has been published on Hay. For example, he is briefly mentioned in The Penguin New Literary History of Australia (1988) and in the Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English (2005), but is not listed in The Oxford Literary History of Australia (1998) or The Cambridge History of Australian Literature (2009). His short story “An Australian Rip Van Winkle” (1921), however, was included in the Anthology of Colonial Australian Gothic Fiction (2007), which highlights the Gothic nature of Hay’s texts. Furthermore, Roslynn D. Haynes makes a few useful comments about Heans in Tasmanian Visions: Landscapes in Writing, Art and Photography, which I will come back to later.

Hay has, mostly pejoratively, been described as a melodramatic writer. Similarly to Clarke’s His Natural Life, the term melodrama often seems to have been applied to Hay’s novels as a value judgement rather than as a tool for analysis. But Heans, which is considered Hay’s best novel, deserves more critical attention, especially as part of a Gothic convict literary tradition. Howarth, Muecke and Hergenhan concur that Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James – all Gothic writers – had a considerable influence on Hay. Furthermore, in his more recent entry “Hay, Gosse
In the Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English (2005), Hergenhan remarks that Hay “uses melodrama (with mixed success) and gothic to push towards extremes.” So far, however, the novel has not been read from a Gothic perspective. Accordingly, the primary aim of this chapter is to analyse the Gothic elements in Heans, which I argue stem from the transportation system and the atrocities perpetrated against indigenous Tasmanians, as well as reflecting the author’s preoccupation with class in a fast-changing early twentieth-century Australia. Thus, the novel illustrates two principal themes of Gothic fiction. On the one hand, by addressing Tasmania’s convict past and the devastating consequences British colonisation had for the island’s Aborigines, Heans deals with the repressed past, with two of Australia’s Phantoms. On the other hand, the text exemplifies how the Gothic frequently re-emerges “during times of cultural crisis and … serves to negotiate the anxieties of the age by working through them in a displaced form” (David Punter and Glennis Byron, The Gothic 39). In fact, in line with Punter, who further reminds us that in the Gothic “the hidden violence of present social structures [is conjured] up again as past” (The Literature of Terror 198), Heans not only discloses some of Hay’s personal concerns, but also reveals wider cultural anxieties of his time.

In particular, I will focus on the characters of Heans and Daunt, as well as on the strange occurrences at Oughtryn’s mansion, the setting for the most Gothic chapters of the novel. Greatly different from the convict protagonists encountered so far, Heans can nevertheless also be considered a hero-villain, as I will explore further on. The tense relationship between Heans and Daunt can be read in terms of Hay’s struggles to accept the middle-class oriented world he lived in, a world that was incompatible with his somewhat anachronistic attempt to live according to the values of the late Victorian English gentleman. Class, which has played a central role in Gothic fiction since its beginnings, is in fact a key element in Heans. For example, much of the unease that pervades the novel stems from Heans’s problematic status as both convict and gentleman. Considering Sir William’s social standing, it will also be useful to compare Heans with Marcus Clarke’s His Natural Life and Christopher Koch’s Out of Ireland (1999), the protagonists of which are also gentlemen by birth. The tension so characteristic of the novel reaches its highest pitch at Oughtryn’s mansion. Here, the relationship between Heans and Daunt comes to a head amidst the uncovering of a past crime that is intrinsically linked to Tasmania’s convict history and the dispossession of its Indigenous people.
Heans was Hay’s fourth novel, and is typical in that it is set in Australia’s penal past and has as its protagonist an “‘odd man out’ … who is in conflict with the society he finds himself in” (Muecke iv). As Hergenhan explains, this mirrors Hay’s own feelings: due to his “class and his profession as full-time, commercially unsuccessful writer, Hay found himself at odds with Australian middle-class philistinism and materialism,” while his “defensive prickliness” further contributed to “his sense of being an outsider” (Unnatural Lives 75). Born in Adelaide in 1875, Hay later went to university at Cambridge, as was typical for the sons of upper-class families. His father’s death in 1898 released him from an obligation to study law and supplied him with independent means, allowing him to return to Australia and to fully dedicate himself to writing. However, Hay’s “seriousness was misunderstood by his relatives and acquaintances,” and his early novels were met with almost complete indifference in Australia (Muecke, “Hay, William Gosse (1875-1945),” Australian Dictionary of Biography). This lack of interest deeply affected Hay. As Muecke points out, local recognition was supremely important: he was the son of the Hon. Alexander Hay, M.L.C., a conspicuously successful public figure, and had always felt compelled to succeed in his own way – as a ‘man of letters’ – to prove that he was no mere socially privileged dilettante. ‘The way of the son of a great public man is full of thorns’, he wrote in 1907, ‘The great man’s friends are sure to be disappointed in him; his enemies necessarily pretend that they are’. Accordingly, after the poor reception of Captain Quadring in 1912, Heans became the novel which was to show beyond question his seriousness of purpose as a historical novelist. (Introduction xxii-xxiii, italics in original)

I will return to Hay’s father later. For now it should be noted that notwithstanding his rejection of “the ‘temper democratic’ and the ‘bias, offensively Australian’ of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australian social and literary scene”, Hay had “a deep love of Australia as a country, and had become aware, when studying at Cambridge, that Australia possessed a dramatic history which was in danger of being forgotten or discarded” (Muecke, Introduction i-ii). For example, already in 1907, in his novel Herridge of Reality Swamp, Hay wrote that “Manalians [i.e. Australians] are not proud of their early heroes, and mistaking a romantic, deeply enthralling, and, in many cases, heroic, history for a taint, forget these things nowadays” (284). As discussed in previous chapters, Australia’s penal history was collectively repressed and forgotten until well into the twentieth century. Arguably, not only Hay’s style was thus at odds
with the predominant literary preferences of his contemporary Australians, but also his subject matter.

The full title of Heans reads The Escape of the Notorious Sir William Heans (and the Mystery of Mr. Daunt): A Romance of Tasmania. In this chapter, page numbers refer to the 1975 Rigby version of the novel, which was edited and introduced by Muecke. The other influential edition came out in 1955, edited by Horwath, who also provided an introduction to the text. The 1955 edition furthermore contains a section called “Historical Background,” written by Morris Miller. Muecke writes that “a title less likely to attract the attention of serious-minded readers at the end of the First World War would have been hard to devise” (Introduction i), and that Hay “almost deliberately imprisoned himself within a genre, the romantic novel of action, adventure and mystery established by Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and Stevenson” (Introduction iii). Clearly critical of romance and melodrama, and thereby reflecting a common view of his time, Muecke argues that “Heans stands out as Hay’s best work because its melodramatic potential as an historical romance is held in check,” while “[b]oth title and story … have possessed ironic depths” (Introduction i). As he further contends, Heans’s full title “echoes the worst that nineteenth century popular fiction might offer. … But it is arguable that Hay was being deliberately ironic, even making a shy, personal joke, because in Heans he was pointing out the human realities behind an apparently public, popular legend” (Introduction vi).

I believe, however, that Hay’s reference to romance should be taken at face value. In my opinion, Hay was too meticulous an author to include the term in his subtitle for irony (consider, also, that his novel Stifled Laughter (1901) is subtitled A Melodrama). Rather, it should be noted what Hay wrote in a letter to Miss Earle Hooper: “When I began writing, just before the beginning of this century, Australian novels had relapsed entirely into fifth-rate tales of the ‘paddock and stockyard’ variety’, in spurious imitation of Rolf Boldrewood’s distinguished work. I felt it was necessary to try and raise Australian literature out of that desolate bog, and turned to her ballad-like and tragic history and its proper costumes” (quoted in Howarth x).

By turning to Australia’s past, Hay appears to have been inspired by Hawthorne, who had a strong appeal to Hay “because he was trying to do for America what Hay wanted to achieve for Australia – that is to invest its past with a romantic – further, a tragic –
interest” (Howarth xii). 103 Famously, Hawthorne also described The House of the Seven Gables (1852) as a romance, explaining in his preface that “[w]hen a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to write a Novel” (3). This distinction is often made between novels and romances. To start with M. H. Abrams:

The realistic novel is characterized as the fictional attempt to give the effect of realism, by representing complex characters with mixed motives who are rooted in a social class, operate in a developed social structure, interact with many other characters, and undergo plausible, everyday modes of experience. … The prose romance, on the other hand, has as precursors the chivalric romance of the Middle Ages and the Gothic novel of the later eighteenth century. It usually deploys characters who are sharply discriminated as heroes or villains, masters or victims; its protagonist is often solitary, and relatively isolated from a social context; it tends to be set in the historical past, and the atmosphere is such as to suspend the reader’s expectations based on everyday experience. (192)

This description highlights the romance nature of Heans: Sir William is not only the hero and victim of the narrative, but also a solitary and isolated character; Spafield embodies the brutal villain; and Daunt the master who abuses his position by turning to psychological warfare. Moreover, the narrative is set in the historical past, the events at Oughtryn’s mansion are out of the ordinary, and the whole text is characterised by a strange atmosphere.

Another recurrent feature of romance literature is the idea of the quest. As Barbara Fuchs explains, “[i]n the narrow literary sense, romance is the name given to a particular genre: the narrative poems that emerge in twelfth-century France and quickly make their way around Europe. … They are often organized around a quest, whether for love or adventure, and involve a variety of marvellous elements” (4). Andrew Sanders, in turn, points out that in the nineteenth century, “sensation novels returned fiction to the idea of the quest that figured so prominently in medieval romances. If the quest no longer had a spiritual end, the secular goals pursued by the writers of sensation fiction were to be achieved by a process of exploration, examination and ultimately, 103 As Hergenhan points out, Hay also felt a connection to Hawthorne on a personal level. For example, he compared his isolation as a writer to that of Hawthorne in a letter he writes to his fiancée: “[Hawthorne] has been such a great influence on my life because his case so singularly resembles mine” (quoted in Unnatural Lives 88).
resolution” (386). This common feature of romance literature is present also in Heans. In fact, Sir William’s escape attempts and his search to uncover the truth regarding Conapanny, Spafield and Surridge can be considered secular quests typically found in sensation fiction. On a more spiritual level, instead, lies Heans’s quest to be a true gentleman – “a difficult ideal” in his own words (406).

Abrams’s definition above further highlights the link between romance and Gothic literature. As Ian Duncan emphasises, “[t]he eighteenth-century Gothic novel is the first modern British fiction to identify itself as a distinct kind under the name of ‘romance’ (Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel 20). While Horace Walpole used the term in his preface to the second edition of The Castle of Otranto to refer to “fiction in vernacular languages,” a generation later, Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis “expanded Walpole’s repertoire of figures and proclaimed as ‘romance’ a fiction apart from modern life” (Duncan 20, italics in original), thus contrasting it with the novel form, which is chiefly occupied with “real life and manners, and the time in which it is written” (Duncan 20-21). Or, as Barbara Fuchs explains, “the last decades of the eighteenth-century see the introduction of a distinct new genre that quickly achieves great popularity: the Gothic romance, which self-consciously revives ‘medieval’ motifs in often sensational tales” (119) and soon “becomes associated with the most fantastical elements of the romance tradition” (121).

At first glance, both the Seven Gables and Heans do not appear to have much in common with eighteenth-century Gothic romances such as Otranto, The Mysteries of Udolpho or The Monk, although the Seven Gables is commonly considered a Gothic text, and I argue that Heans is one too. However, as already mentioned, according to Punter in the Gothic the hidden violence of contemporary social structures is revealed through images of the past. Or as Jerrold E. Hogle explains in “‘Gothic’ romance,” in the Gothic the Western middle class

104 Fuchs further points out that this sub-genre quickly achieves a striking popularity, which, however, also attracts considerable criticism. Thus the Gothic contributed to the modern fall of the category of romance from “‘high’ to ‘low,’ becoming increasingly associated with mass or genre literature” (121-122). In fact, today the terms ‘romance’ and ‘romance novels’ are often used derisively to describe popular novels aimed at a female readership. Based on a successful formula that can be endlessly repeated, they are often relegated “to a place at the very bottom of the literary hierarchy” (127-129). This is far from what Hay and Hawthorne had in mind when they described their novels as romances and serves to illustrate a point made by many literary critics of romance, i.e. that the term can refer to a multitude of different and contrasting texts. See, for example, Duncan 10, Fuchs 3-4, William J. Scheick 2, Gillian Beer 4-5. Note, also, how Duncan uses the expression ‘Gothic novel,’ while Fuchs writes ‘Gothic romance.’ The two terms are in fact often used interchangeably, both by critics and authors.
By connecting “a by-gone time with the very present that is flitting away from us,” in the *Seven Gables* Hawthorne reveals how “the wrongdoing of one generation lives into successive ones, and divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes a pure and uncontrollable mischief” (Preface 3). As Hogle further points out, Hawthorne’s Gothic romance “resurrects the complexities and ‘immemorial violence’ in the roots of American history,” while “ghostly remnants of many kinds now half-reveal … what the nineteenth-century American middle class has abjected from itself and put away into the past, even though it is all really part of its present, in order to construct its most powerful public stances by way of repressions it has long tried to deny” (223) – a process that aptly recalls the concept of the Phantom discussed in the Introduction, as well as drawing attention to the close link between the Gothic genre and the middle class, which will be further explored below. Whereas in the *Seven Gables* the abjected cultural anomalies that resurface include the Salem witch trials, in *Heans* Hay turns to two of Australia’s Phantoms: the near-extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines and the convict past. Moreover, in typical Gothic fashion, in both novels much of the action centres on a building: the Pyncheon family home in the *Seven Gables* and Oughtryn’s mansion in *Heans*. In fact, Oughtryn’s residence provides the setting for most of book II, which is by far the longest book of the novel, although it only covers five days out of the three years that Heans spends in the penal colony. Before turning to this haunted mansion, however, I would like to focus on the characters of Heans and Daunt, and on the sense of unease that pervades most of the novel.

Book I covers Heans’s first year in the penal colony, during which his family connections and his status as a gentleman ensure him considerable privileges. He is
given a job in the Government Architect’s office, takes up private lodgings with Mrs Quaid, an emancipist landlady, and receives a pass to ride about Hobart and certain surrounding areas, which allows him to regularly visit Paul Hyde-Shaxton and his wife Matilda, a friendly couple to whom he is distantly related. On the surface, circumstances thus are pleasant enough for Heans. It soon becomes apparent, however, that he considers life unbearable due to the restrictions he is placed under, which include curfews, reports and limited access to good society. He laments to his landlady, “‘Why, Mrs Quaid, I have been fretted abominably by these fellows [i.e. constables]: pulled up for nothing here, reported for less there … I know their arrogant, abusive methods’” (70). And to Mr O’Crone he explains that:

I sir – I have stood the indignities showered upon a prisoner …. My status is known to be such that I may be whipped at any time for disobedience or negligence, and the underlings do not forget it. I am repeatedly told that I am ‘dead to the law’. I can hold nothing of my own, no particle of property. I must obtain a pass from a reluctant source, or be within doors at sundown. Should I go out for a game of cards, every petty official I meet halts me, and orders out my permission. (120)

This short paragraph is a good example of how insulted Heans feels by these repressions, even though they are minor when compared to what most convicts experienced, both in reality and in the other texts analysed here. Moreover, he actually committed the crime for which he is transported, as opposed to Clarke’s Rufus Dawes, who is wrongly convicted and suffers incomparable hardship during the many years he spends in the clutches of the transportation system. Dawes, however, hides his background and is sent to Australia as a common convict. By contrast, Christopher Koch’s 1999 novel Out of Ireland offers a hero whose position differs significantly from that of Dawes. His hero Devereux is transported for sedition and retains his gentlemanly status in the colony. Although he thus finds himself in superficially similar conditions to Sir William and is also determined to escape, Devereux learns to make the best of his situation in the colony. In fact, unlike Heans, both Dawes and Devereux manage to adapt to their new surroundings. Dawes not only becomes leader of the convict ring on Norfolk Island but eventually also a successful businessman under the pseudonym of Crosby, while Devereux settles down with a convict girl and runs a
profitable plantation together with an emancipist. Heans, instead, deems himself too good for the colony and is incapable of overcoming class consciousness. Consider, for example, the derogatory ‘underlings’ and ‘petty official’ in the passage quoted above, or the marked distance he keeps between himself and Oughtryn. Notably, while this kind of attitude is likely to be questioned by the modern reader, Hay does not portray his protagonist’s behaviour in a critical way but rather shares Sir William’s class assumptions. Arguably, this reflects Hay’s own struggles to adapt to a changing cultural landscape. Unwilling or unable to envisage Heans accepting his new life in the colony, Hay thus depicts Hobart as a place full of tension and unease, which greatly contributes to the Gothic atmosphere of the novel.

According to Hergenhan, Hay achieves this sense of unease by means of two methods. Firstly, scenes are regularly “full of innuendo, a technique that may have been learned from [George] Meredith;” secondly, ordinary details are often illuminated in a peculiar way (Unnatural Lives 76). A good example of an ambiguous scene occurs in the first chapter. When we first encounter Heans, Daunt and Matilda, the narrator explains that Daunt “had slighted Heans (or Heans had fancied that he had) once already on the Hulk, and when [Heans] came in … he recognised him instantly, and entreated something of Mrs Shaxton in a low voice near the mantle-piece. It sounded like ‘mauvais sujet’” (5). Not only is the reader thus left in doubt as to whether Daunt had actually slighted Heans on the voyage out, but it is also not made clear whether Daunt really does describe Heans as a ‘bad fellow.’ This is reminiscent of Henry James’s Gothic novella The Turn of the Screw (1898), which is renowned for its ambiguity. In James’s novella, however, where through the manuscript the reader has direct access to the governess’s thoughts and feelings, most of the ambivalence stems from whether she is a reliable narrator or not. In contrast, in Heans the inner lives of the characters remain blurred. For example, it is not always clear what Heans and especially Daunt are thinking, or what motivates them. As a consequence, the reader has to fill a lot of gaps, which requires careful reading and allows for multiple interpretations. For instance, in a later chapter Matilda tells her husband that Daunt did intimate to her that Heans is “not so very desirable” during that first meeting (28). In this light, it also appears more likely that Daunt had

---

105 As in Chapter Two, when comparing Heans to Clarke’s novel I will be referring to the original version of His Natural Life.

106 Thus, actions and statements often become meaningful only in hindsight, which contributes to the “exceptionally heavy burden of analysis and interpretation” which is placed on the reader (Muecke, Introduction v). The sometimes obscure chapter titles also are important to understand the novel: often the
somehow insulted Heans on the prison ship, which would indicate that he had formed a
dislike for the gentleman before Matilda became a factor in their relationship, although
there is no way to establish this for sure.

Regarding the peculiar attention that is often given to ordinary details, consider how
often Heans’s complexion and that of other characters is described in grey terms, a fact
also noted by Morris Miller, who in ‘The Historical Background” points out that
“[e]very character’s expression of face, whether of strength or weakness, pales
somehow sometime somewhere, and its pallor seems part of a scheme to represent a
scene, cold, creepy, and austere” (xxiii-iv). Likewise, Hergenhan highlights that facial
expressions and body language are frequently described in a way that contribute to the
nervous strain of Heans: “it is not only the face and gesture of the hero that are often
strained and troubled, but the faces of everyone around him. Nowhere in the novel is a
gathering normally relaxed” (Unnatural Lives 77).107 A similar observation can be made
about Hobart and its surrounds. As Miller further notes, “[t]he elements of earth and sky
over-emphasize their greyness and winter dreariness; and men of courage as well as
fops take on pallor of countenance. These visual aspects are in keeping with the lack of
colour and gaiety in the Hobart of the time, as seen through the eyes of Heans, his
helpers and his keepers” (xxiii). Thus, “[t]he sunlight spots of earth in what is a lovely
landscape fail to be observed. Misty moonlight veils lands and buildings … The sea
sports its greyness, and howling winds shake the structures man has made. To the
Hobartian the naming of the Derwent estuary as the ‘sea’ or ‘channel’ gives a
strangeness and uncanny appearance to the environs of the story, rendering them unreal
and suspect” (xxiv). Words such as ‘strangeness’, ‘uncanny’, ‘unreal’ and ‘suspect’
serve to underline the Gothic nature of Hay’s text, even if, writing in the 1950s, Miller
did not recognize the novel as such.

The way in which Hay represents both the characters and the island in fact significantly
increases the Gothic tone of Heans. In Tasmanian Visions Haynes makes an excellent
point when she explains that:

[n]ature is not merely an objective, observable, ‘natural’ entity but one that is
culturally constructed and, as such, represents a complex identity. In Van

meaning of a chapter becomes clearer when checking what the chapter titles mean/refer to. Consider also
107 For a detailed discussion of how Hay achieves this, see Hergenhan’s chapter in Unnatural Lives.
Diemen’s Land in particular the fear, contempt and shame felt by the free settlers and the descendants of convicts, have been indelibly imprinted on the land through the recurrent images of prisoners, whether as wretched victims of a sadistic system or as ruthless and brutal murderers. (71)

While, as already mentioned, Hay is not interested so much in representing the brutalities of the system, like any author he moulds landscapes so that they fit in with his overall picture. Describing Hobart and its surrounds in unrealistic terms not only adds to the romance and Gothic character of the novel, but also serves to emphasise in what a distorted way Heans and most other characters in the novel perceive the environment around them.

Arguably, the reason for this lies in the extraordinary social circumstances created by the transportation system. Described as a beau and dandy back home, it is hard to imagine Heans nervous and tense before his conviction. Once arrived in the penal colony, however, this changes. Hay is very good at capturing the tension so characteristic of convict settler society. For example, as Penny Russell explains in “Gender and Colonial Society”, in early Sydney “military officers made it a general rule ‘to visit only those who were accepted at Government House.’ Status anxiety, exacerbated by vulnerability, was everywhere present, and the governor, as the ‘social apex’, provided one form of reassurance” (472).108 In Van Diemen’s Land, “‘the rapid alienation of almost all accessible grasslands to a small number of free settlers’ encouraged the creation of two societies, separate but coexistent. The landholding settlers of a colony they liked to call ‘Tasmania’ held themselves aloof, avoiding all contact with the ‘untouchable majority’…, the convicts and emancipists” (464-5). In Heans, passages such as Carnt’s and Oughtryn’s visits to Mr Magruder aptly showcase these strained interactions between members of the free and (ex-)convict classes. Moreover, many scenes in the novel have a tense feeling because they involve members of Hobart’s respectable society conversing with a convicted prisoner, under the fragile pretence that everything is normal when as a matter of fact such meetings would have been highly irregular.

Consider also the following excerpt from Stuart Macintyre and Sean Scalmer in “Colonial States and Civil Society, 1860-90”:

108 Similarly, in Heans the ultimate sign of respectability is to be invited to the Governor’s Ball and the soiree held at Oughtryn’s mansion in honour of the Lady Franklin.
A legacy of convict transportation and then the mass influx during the 1850s was the problem of origins. How was the ex-convict to be received in society, if indeed his penal background was known? How was the black sheep, exiled by his British family to the colonies, to be distinguished from an immigrant of good character? Character references and letters of introduction were one device, but these, too, were not always genuine. It was for this reason that manners assumed particular significance in colonial society. Dress, deportment, modes of speech, etiquette and even table manners marked the boundaries of respectability.

(206-7)

Russell further points out that “[q]uestions of pedigree and reputation loomed large in the tiny societies of the first half of the [nineteenth] century. … The most readily available mark of social distinction was to be recognised as a gentleman” (474). Sir William brings with him letters of introduction, and much attention is given to his clothes, his manners and his mode of speech as markers of his gentlemanliness. The problem for Heans, however, is not that his origins are in doubt but that he is both a convict and a gentleman. As such a liminal figure, what kind of role is he to occupy in this society? Governor Franklin seems to think that keeping him busy in some government-sponsored position is the best solution, but Heans does not want to accept that offer. For him the only way to preserve his social identity is to abscond.

Members of the lower classes are also conscious of their social status, and feel intimidated by the system. This leaves them very nervous when dealing with Sir William. Mrs Quaid, for example, likes Heans and acts as his messenger several times, but, being an ex-convict, she worries about her association with the ‘notorious Sir William’ and is scared of Daunt (69). Abelia and her father “were markedly cautious in their relations with [Heans] where these touched upon his connection with the System …, the laws, risks, and bounds of master and pass-holder being strictly taken for granted and never outraged. … Oughtryn and Oughtryn’s household had always been shy and wary – even ungenerous – with any situation threatening collision with authority, or Heans’ status” (247). In Abelia’s words: “‘We are very careful – so very careful of making trouble with people – people put over us’” (251).

109 Notably, questions of “pedigree and reputation” often find expression in Gothic texts. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century, “[t]he bourgeois family is the scene of ghostly return, where guilty secrets of past transgression and uncertain class origins are the sources of anxiety” (Botting, Gothic 74).
More generally, and in keeping with the Gothic, there is an overall sense of entrapment, and a feeling that no matter what actions Heans takes, the system is closely watching and anticipating his moves, twice in fact foiling his escape attempts. Consider, for example, the chapters in which Heans and Abelia travel through Hobart to keep the lavender pad safe from Daunt (when Daunt claims that Matilda used her husband’s money to finance the escape attempt, Sir William’s lavender pad becomes a crucial piece of evidence to prove that Matilda did in fact convey Heans’s own money to Captain Stiff). As Hergenhan puts it, this “episode is so ‘full of alarms’ and marked throughout by a gusty, unsettling wind, that it conveys intensely the fear and menace which is so characteristic of this novel” (Unnatural Lives 80). Another prime example is the passage in which Sir William is meant to reach a prearranged meeting point with Carnt during his second attempt to escape. Irrespective of how hard he tries, Heans cannot shake off the uncanny horseman who keeps following him.

The system’s interest in Heans is personified by Daunt, who obviously enjoys his position of power vis-à-vis Heans and never seems to miss an opportunity to highlight the fact that Heans is a convict. In fact, even if Hay stays away from the extreme physical violence found in Tucker, Clarke and Astley, Heans nevertheless also illustrates the debilitating sense of impotence convicts experience whilst prisoners of the system. For instance, when in the first chapter Heans intimates that he has to leave in order to abide by the rules, Shaxton clumsily cries: “‘Nonsense! … Daunt will manage that for us. What’s it? Must be past the Boundary before five, Mr. Daunt?’” Daunt, however, does not hasten to smooth over this awkward moment but rather leaves “a black silence for a full minute.” Finally he replies: “‘No, I’ll see him past Boundary,’ … with a look of steady, careful courtesy towards Heans.” When Shaxton then asks Daunt to give Heans a pass to break his rides at the Shaxton villa, Daunt gives “a sharp, good-natured laugh, saying ‘We’ll see – we’ll see’” (10). This passage is not only a good example of the uneasy moments Sir William’s liminal status as both prisoner and gentleman creates when he socialises with Hobart’s upper circles, but also illustrates how Daunt humiliates the gentleman convict by playing mind-games.

Daunt frequently leaves Heans puzzled, which greatly contributes to the tension Heans experiences in the colony. In the following passage, for example, the gentleman convict is unceremoniously summoned to the police headquarters for an interview with
Governor Franklin. Unpleasant in itself, the incident is made worse by Daunt’s cryptic behaviour:

Last, Daunt’s show of friendliness! What did the forgiveness of a man like Daunt mean? He might well have asked: ‘Did Daunt credit him with the weakness of being confused by a compliment? Was Daunt at the old game of stripping a foe’s heart of armour for the next man’s sword to play upon? Had Daunt, at sight of him forcing his way through that sea of police, been startled into one of his half-friendly moments? Or, more likely, had the man’s mistrust been allayed by the sight of his (Heans’) reply to Lady Franklin?’

(Devil or philanthropist, which was Daunt?)

Daunt’s cryptic behaviour and obscure motives recall what Punter terms ‘paranoid fiction’: “fiction in which the ‘implicated’ reader is placed in a situation of ambiguity with regard to fears within the text, and in which the attribution of persecution remains uncertain and the reader is invited to share in the doubts and uncertainties which pervade the apparent story” (Literature of Terror 183). In line with the overall tone of the novel, the motivation behind Daunt’s actions remains uncertain, and Heans continues to be unsure whether the commandant has evil intentions. Thus, a few days before Daunt dies, Heans still does “not credit [the commandant] with so much dislike for himself that he would descend to sheer evil-doing against him” (227). Fittingly, Daunt remains an ambiguous figure even in his death, as will be discussed later on.

The mystery concerning Daunt mentioned in the subtitle of the novel arguably refers to his behaviour and motives towards Heans, and can be read in terms of class. In fact, if Heans represents old world lineage, Daunt stands for the aspiring lower classes. As Russell explains, in the nineteenth century, “[t]he most readily available mark of social distinction was to be recognised as a gentleman.” However, in Australia this distinction was becoming blurred, until “traditional criteria disappeared altogether, so that anyone who reached a certain level in the occupational hierarchy or who possessed independent means might claim the label. … It made both for fluidity and competitive anxieties, for where ‘new men could not be excluded, the contentions for place and precedence were fearsome’” (Russell 474).110

110 Representing Daunt (as well as Spafield) as having humble origins is historically accurate. John Rickard highlights in Australia: A Cultural History that “[t]hose who policed the penal colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land were … a mixed lot. The colonial governors were usually naval or military career officers, who had often grown up in the service. Only a few, like Sir Thomas Brisbane, came from families of rank: most had relatively humble backgrounds. …. The rank and file soldiers …
The conduct of both Heans and Daunt aptly illustrate these “competitive anxieties.” To better understand the commandant, it is useful to turn to Matilda, the idealised heroine of the novel whose moral worth is not questioned, even though she twice colludes with Heans to help him escape. Her motto being “Homo sum, et nihil humani a me alienum puto” i.e. “I am a man, and count nothing human alien to me” (14), she is compassionate and remarkably candid towards Heans from the beginning. Her feelings regarding Daunt are well summarised by the following passage:

The strange man’s rumours and warnings, the double-meanings she knew him to employ, his kind actions, his excellent cleverness, his deferent, polite, sharp eyes, his lawful activity, filled her with distrust. She knew him for an alarmist; a man who, if with a sharp guard upon himself, instinctively exaggerated. While dismissing much of what he said as a sort of fussiness, her excitement for Sir William, facing unknowingly this man’s activity (this man’s – was it jealousy or stern probity) was feverishly increased. (41-42)

Daunt certainly is a stern official of the system. In my opinion, however, his behaviour towards Heans is driven less by his sense of probity than by the envy he feels for Sir William’s gentlemanly status. He resents the fact that a convicted criminal can saunter around the colony in impeccable clothes and gain access to the Shaxton household. Of humble origins and no doubt having worked hard to become a part of this social sphere, he is annoyed that someone born into it can retain at least some of its privileges even after having committed a crime. Not surprisingly, he obtains great satisfaction from observing how Heans’s exquisite wardrobe deteriorates in line with his social degradation, a process which is carefully described and contrasts with his own ascent from merely being “of the foot police” (5) at the beginning of the novel to becoming its commandant in book II.111

often had much in common with their charges. Some were forced into the Corps as a result of court-martial sentences. It was a standard practice for offending soldiers to be offered service in the Corps as an alternative to imprisonment. And from as early as 1793 ex-convicts in the colony were being recruited. Most members of the Corps had been labourers, and in social background were not so very different from the convicts, except that more came originally from the country and smaller towns. … colonial service, with its connotations of banishment and disease, was considered fit for the worst” (27).

111 In comparison to Daunt, Clarke’s Frere has a similar social background to Dawes. This is not surprising, as Clarke is not primarily interested in class in *His Natural Life*, but rather in highlighting the unmitigated physical brutality of the transportation system. Thus, unlike Daunt, Frere works on a physical level, enjoying the sheer violence he can unleash not only on Dawes but also on many other convicts. Daunt, instead, operates on a psychological level and reserves a singular obsession for the gentleman convict. Nevertheless, even if the two authors explore different ways in which to represent convict abuse, Frere and Daunt become increasingly evil throughout the narratives and thus both serve as examples of how authority and power corrupts.
Warning Heans early on to be careful, Matilda tells him that some of the system officials are wicked and that:

‘It is unbelievable, but I have been told how some have played upon it, when they were jealous of a prisoner; and one false step and they all must harden. I am afraid you are one who will create jealousy. I am afraid of your pride, sir, and that you will bring some annoyance upon yourself. … I know – it is the disappointed man you will have to fear – no gentleman will harm you. But some are highly placed and very powerful. Indeed, if they once begin to hate, their good impulses seem to go.’ (20, my italics)

This perfectly foreshadows what happens to Daunt. When he overhears Heans entreating Matilda to escape with him, his suspicion that Heans is attempting to abscond is confirmed beyond doubt. More importantly, however, this incident is bitterly disappointing for Daunt on a personal level because he is also in love with her. As Hergenhan points out, “the climax of Heans’s efforts to escape turns out to be Daunt’s breaking-point – it is not Heans alone who undergoes an ordeal. Even though Daunt is able to prevent the escape, thus becoming nominally the victor, he is in another sense defeated (Heans has won Matilda’s love)” (Unnatural Lives 80). Envious of Heans to begin with, Daunt’s dislike for the convict thus turns into hatred when Matilda falls in love not with him but with Sir William.

Later in the novel, the commandant slanders Matilda by claiming that she used her husband’s money to pay for Heans’s first escape attempt. This confirms what the above quotation already indicates: Daunt is not a gentleman, as opposed to Heans and Shaxton. In fact, Daunt’s slandering of Matilda is so ungracious that it sets him in sharp contrast to both Heans, who proves his chivalrous nature by speaking out in the cave and providing the lavender pad, and to Shaxton, who handles the whole situation in a gentlemanly manner. The lavender pad itself, moreover, a “gay and brilliant thing” (188), is a fitting object to be coveted by Daunt. Not only is it a piece of evidence he needs to destroy to save his face in the slandering scandal, but it also stands for Heans’s upper-class background and his success with women: it is engraved with Sir William’s

---

112 Heans’s entreaty to Matilda and the effect it has on Daunt is one of the most mannered passages of the novel.
113 It is important to remember that Shaxton also overhears Heans’s final interview with Matilda (100-103), but contrary to Daunt he does not seek revenge on Heans, instead collaborating with the prisoner to prove that Matilda did not use his money to finance the first escape attempt.
monograph and coat-of-arms, was given to him by a “lady of title” (138) (presumably the Lady Charlotte), and is willingly conveyed to Stifft by Matilda.

The lavender pad affair occurs in Book II, where the novel resumes approximately a year after Heans’s first escape attempt. By the by we learn that it was unsuccessful, but no details are given. Through the clemency of Governor Franklin, Heans has been spared the worst, that is a second sentence at Port Arthur, but has instead been assigned to Oughtryn, an emancipist who has worked his way up in the colony and is set on providing a “gentleman with some varnish” as tutor for his half-blind daughter Abelia (123). As a consequence, Heans now no longer frequents the Shaxton household, where he not only used to regularly meet Matilda and the captain, but also Daunt. Although Heans is aware that he has had “considerable latitude for a convict servant”, this of course represents a significant downward step for him (12).

Book II centres on the eventful week leading up to a ball in honour of Lady Franklin to be held at Oughtryn’s mansion, the location of which has been put forward by Daunt. In fact, even if, in keeping with the overall ambiguous tone of the narrative, this is never explicitly stated, it is not only implied that Spafield, the mad official who oversees the preparations for the ball, was dispatched to the mansion on Daunt’s orders, but also that Daunt proposes this location chiefly to annoy Heans. In other words, by suggesting Oughtryn’s house, Daunt manages to again be close to Heans, much closer actually than in Book I, as this gives him intimate access to Heans’s private quarters, which is deeply disturbing for the gentleman convict. In this light, it is useful to read the relationship between Heans, Daunt, Shaxton and Matilda along the lines suggested in another context by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). To start with, she reminds us of what René Girard writes in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961), that is, that “the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved” (Sedgwick 21). In Hay’s novel, the links between Heans, Daunt and Shaxton become even more intense than those between the rivals and the beloved: while Heans, Daunt and Shaxton interact closely – at times even physically – in Book II, Matilda herself moves into the background. For the remainder of the novel, Heans only sees her twice more from afar, never getting the opportunity to speak to her again, while Daunt’s interactions with her become fraught following his malicious comments.
Daunt’s remarks about a woman (that is, Matilda) using her husband’s money to help a prisoner abscond are a clear indicator of how much his judgement and behaviour are affected by his jealousy. As Captain Karne recalls in Oughtryn’s cave:

‘we heard Daunt and his prisoner fell out over some officer’s wife. It’s hard to see Daunt heart-struck on a woman!’

…I heard Daunt himself say, in a discussion on women, that the woman in a certain case was so infatuated she acted as go-between for a prisoner and a schooner captain. Yes – dropping her husband’s money from a fly in a by-street.

…Mind, I don’t think Daunt’s quite the thing. I mean, I think he is one of those men who doesn’t realise how much he guides himself by the letter. He thinks he can act a man-of-honour and think a cad. Look at the things he says. I’ve known him go on like a mean woman. These fellows are dangerous, Captain Shaxton.

The letter’s nothing but a fine uniform when your passions become involved. Any day they are liable to slop over into some satanic tyranny.’

(130, my italics)

Arguably representing Hay’s personal opinion of Daunt, this passage further corroborates that Daunt strives to be, but in actual fact is not, a gentleman. The following comment by Abelia moreover highlights how obsessed he is with Sir William: “Father says his mind is on you [i.e. Heans] too much – as if you were the place of a crime he had committed” (128).

The commandant’s fixation on Heans is reminiscent of earlier Gothic texts. For example, “Caleb Williams, Frankenstein, Confessions of a Justified Sinner, probably Melmoth, possibly The Italian” belong, according to Sedgwick, to a subgroup of the ‘classic’ early Gothic texts which all are “about one or more males who not only is persecuted by, but considers himself transparent to and often under the compulsion of, another male” (91). Then there is Dickens’s Great Expectations, a “paranoid novel” about bringing “men together under a wildly exacerbated homosocial bond of rivalry” (131) that leads each of the main male characters to being “bound, through a woman whom he is incapable of loving, to a far more intense relation with a man toward whom he can express nothing but the most intimate violence” (193). Also in Hay’s novel, acts of violence overwhelmingly occur within bonds of rivalry. Daunt’s slandering of Matilda leads to the fight between him and Shaxton in Heans’s room, and later to the commandant’s death during the duel with the captain. Heans hardly ever resorts to
violence in the text, but he twice fights with Spafield, which not only reflects the triangle between Heans, Spafield and Abelia, but further highlights the connection between Heans and Daunt. In fact, these physical clashes can be read as allowing Daunt to vicariously get his hands on Heans. Conversely, Hergenhan makes a compelling point when he suggests that: [i]n defeating Spafield’s attempt at murder, the extreme of malicious hate, Heans is also defeating Daunt, and it is fitting that Daunt should die within a few hours of Spafield’s death” (Unnatural Lives 86).

Including a duel in the novel reveals the fragile gentility of colonial Australian society, as well as fitting in with the romance nature of the novel. As Russell explains:

> The colonists of the pre-1850 era, conscious that their status was precarious, were a touchy lot, swift to defend their reputation for honour, dignity or commercial integrity, swift to resent a slur. Amongst the tiny minority who regarded themselves, or hoped to be regarded, as gentlemen, such disputes might take the form of an ‘affair of honour’. The custom of duelling was falling out of favour in Britain, and was strictly speaking against the law – but that did little to hinder a tendency to issue challenges amongst elites and their imitators. (473)

Notably, however, although Daunt injures Shaxton during the duel, he is then overcome with weakness and pain due to a recurrent ‘heart and stomach fever.’ Not being a gentleman, his death is thus strictly speaking the result of an inherent physical weakness rather than directly being caused by an ‘affair of honour.’

The chapter’s title, “Mr Daunt’s Carelessness” – rather ironic considering that it leads to his demise – shows that in Hay’s view the commandant deserves his fate because of his indiscreet remarks about Matilda and Heans. Awaiting death, Daunt calls for Heans, claiming that he wants to reveal “something deeply to [the prisoner’s] advantage” (361). However, when Heans arrives, Daunt passes away without speaking, in keeping with the ambiguity that has surrounded him throughout the novel:

> At last, as if by keen struggle he had arranged the matter, [the commandant] raised a wavering and dizzy stare, till it met and held upon Heans’ agitated face.

---

114 Heans is not in love with Abelia, but he considers himself her mentor and protects her from Spafield, who arguably is interested in her precisely because she is Sir William’s pupil. Note that there are two more triangles in the novel: one between O’Crone, Carnt and Madame Ruth, the other, set in the past, between Spafield, Surridge and Conapanny. In line with Hay’s world-view, in the three present-day triangles a man from a lower-class background loses out to a man from the upper class: Madame Ruth chooses the aristocratic O’Crone as opposed to Carnt, Spafield is killed by Heans, and Mathilda of course falls in love with Sir William, not Daunt. The triangle between Spafield, Surridge and Conapannya, instead, further serves to depict ‘lowly’ Spafield in a negative light.
An instinctive look of disbelief and cynical annoyance disfigured it, into which sprang something stern and complaining; and then, as with a better thought, and as if he would have washed the ill-feeling from his face before he made his revelation, he slightly shook his head and lowered his eyelids upon a strange, sharp smile.

He expires “with a look of hate upon his face” (364), and everyone present speculates as to what the mysterious message could have been.\(^{115}\)

So do the critics. Howarth offers a somewhat simplistic interpretation, writing that this is part of the mystery mentioned in the subtitle, “an element that can never be known” (Introduction xviii). Hergenhan argues that “the reliance on suggestions … is especially suited to the evocation of a deep sense of evil and of the aura of menace that can surround it, as the inexplicitness of The Turn of the Screw and Heart of Darkness may show. … It is fitting then that Daunt’s death should end in mystery, that everything about him should not be finally known, just as if Hay were suggesting that evil can never be thoroughly understood” (Unnatural Lives 83). Comparing Hay’s novel to James’s The Turn of the Screw and Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness of course further highlights the Gothic nature of Heans; both these novellas are perfect examples of the paranoid fiction Punter addresses in The Literature of Terror. At the same time, Hergenhan is not fully convinced of Hay’s presentation of Daunt, concluding that “[o]ne gets the impression that Hay may be personally entangled in his own ‘mysteries’, that he has not succeeded in thoroughly distancing and objectifying what he has to say” (84). In my opinion, it ties in with Daunt’s obsession that he asks for Heans to be present at his death, and it is feasible that the commandant wants to taunt Heans until the end – the hateful look on his face when he passes away indicates that he does not die a better man. Heans, in fact, is troubled by Daunt’s final request to speak to him, fearing to hear that Carnt, with whom he should have escaped that same night, has been captured. Thus, Heans cannot understand Daunt’s intentions even as the latter dies.

Having attempted two escapes under Daunt’s watch, Heans finally manages to flee once his enemy has been removed. Arguably, however, he finally succeeds the third time round not simply because the commandant is gone, but also because he now deserves his freedom. While earlier critics have contended that Heans is finally worthy of

\(^{115}\) As Hergenhan points out, this is reminiscent of Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, when the spectators speculate about the symbol Dimmesdale wears on his death (Unnatural Lives 82)
escaping because he has improved morally (Howarth) or because he has physically fought off the evil embodied by Spafield and Daunt, so that “good is seen as victorious” (Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives* 132), I argue that, in accordance with the romance quest, Heans has to overcome several challenges before he deserves to escape, all of which test his gentlemanliness. His original crime having been the abduction of a lady, Heans does not learn his lesson, instead asking Matilda to join him on his first escape attempt. This immediately disqualifies him from success at this point of the novel, even though this time round his behaviour is represented as more forgivable because he is genuinely in love with her (the original affair is described more as a dalliance). Another reason that makes him unworthy of escape early on is the fact that he uses Matilda as a go-between to pay for the ship. This is not gentlemanly behaviour and places her at risk, a risk that later eventuates when Daunt slanders her. Notably, Heans uses women for his own purposes several times in the novel, the most obvious other example being when he asks Abelia to carry the lavender pad through Hobart for him, a request that clearly distresses her. The main reason why he does not deserve to escape on the second attempt is because this would mean abandoning Abelia and her father in a moment of crisis, that is leaving them in the hands of Spafield. Again, this is not worthy of a gentleman. He redeems himself, however, by deciding at the last minute to abandon his escape plans to come to Abelia’s defence when Spafield attacks her in the cave. Notably, this selfless and chivalrous act comes at a great personal cost to Heans, because he thus knowingly sacrifices his second, and presumably last, chance at escape.

The actual escape happens to Heans more by accident than by actively planning it, which further supports the claim that he now merits it. On the surface, however, circumstances could not be worse for Sir William following the second failed attempt. In the final and very short book of the novel, Heans has been sent to Port Arthur as punishment for killing Spafield. Although he is still kept apart from the main body of convicts and given considerable privileges even here, this represents the low point in his trajectory as a prisoner. Nevertheless, the overall atmosphere of book III, especially after the intense week that encompasses book II, is characterised by a “strangely calm mood, the calm of passion spent” (Brian Elliott, quoted in Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives* 86). In fact, compared to Hobart and its surrounds, Port Arthur is described in idyllic terms: although “[p]erhaps the mountains were a trace too weird and goblin in shape” and “[p]erhaps the beautiful harbour was too full of a strangling seaweed”, Heans is agreeably surprised and amazed when he arrives at the “forbidden prison upon which he
had heard so many animadversions” (368). This depiction of Port Arthur markedly differs from those found in *Out of Ireland* and *His Natural Life*. According to Haynes, the contrast between Clarke’s Port Arthur and Hay’s is so stark that in places Hay seems deliberately subversive of *His Natural Life*. When Heans finally arrives in Port Arthur he finds a ‘haven-like village out of Goldsmith, backed by a tall English spire’. With thirteen years’ growth of English and Australian trees, ‘[t]he prison of Port Arthur was like a vignette in an old “Keepsake” and through Conapanny, the landscape, allegedly so hostile to escapees, becomes compliant in Heans’s escape.”

Rather than being “deliberately subversive” of Clarke, however, depicting the “notorious and romantic” Port Arthur (367) in a much more pleasant way than Hobart – and than Heans and the reader expect – is a further example of how nature is constructed to correspond with the general meaning of a text. Thus, Hay’s depiction of Port Arthur helps to underline how, once Daunt and Spafield are dead, Heans’s worst days in the colony are over, even though according to popular belief the penal station should represent the climax of his suffering.

To abscond seems impossible, but, unbeknownst to Heans, the escape is now being plotted for him by his friends, among whom are the three women he eventually treated in a chivalrous manner: Matilda, Conapanny and Abelia. Once the plan has been communicated to Heans by Shaxton, all he has to do is to wait for certain signals and be ready to run off during one of his regular constitutionals with the convict chaplain, whom he will have to strike and bind. This is the only part of the plan that makes Heans hesitate. Conveniently, however, he is spared from having to hurt the priest, instead being able to flee without having to raise his hand. Running off during a storm, he meets Conapanny, who then leads him through the wilderness to the rescue ship.\(^{116}\)

Heans is thus a very different character from the other convicts encountered so far, especially Clarke’s Devine/Dawes. Unlike Heans, we witness Dawes swearing, blaspheming and committing violent acts in the course of *His Natural Life*. Nevertheless he is a sympathetic character: he not only suffers intolerably under the laws of his society - which however is represented as morally flawed – but is also capable of feeling remorse and pity. Introduced as a dissolute protagonist with a

---

\(^{116}\) This reinforces the point made earlier that most of the violence in the novel is limited to bonds of rivalry.
dubious background and questionable traits in the original version of Clarke’s novel, Dawes is a forgivable victim of passion and circumstance over and over again who, although he also keeps himself apart from the main body of convicts, eventually learns to relate to them on a human level. Representing in many ways the struggle between good and evil inherent in the Gothic hero-villain, Dawes survives the unspeakable atrocities of the system and manages to escape. Settling in Victoria, he becomes a wealthy businessman and is eventually cleared of the crime he was transported for. The novel concludes with him returning to England to right a past wrong: the abandonment of his wife Dorothea. If his recovery is part sacrifice (he fell out of love with her many decades ago), this also allows him to regain his Devine form and old social status.

Often described as frail and aging, Heans could not differ more from the impulsive and virile Dawes. Clarke’s convict takes on many roles in *His Natural Life*, including profligate son, sullen convict, leader of a criminal gang, successful entrepreneur, heartbroken man and protective (adoptive) father. In contrast, Sir William’s one distinguishing mark is that he is a gentleman. Treated with great respect throughout the novel, Heans never descends to the Gothic underworld described in the other texts analysed here, but manages to maintain a degree of exclusivity even at Port Arthur, the epitome of convict suffering. Clearly not conceived of as a hero-villain by Hay, today we can consider him as such for several reasons. For one, he is the protagonist of the novel but at the same time also a convict and an outsider to the society he finds himself in. More importantly, we might look past his gentlemanly status to see how he actually behaves. For example, Abelia’s criticism of villainous Daunt also applies to Heans. Abelia observes that ‘‘[Daunt] will nearly always accept an advantage from anyone, however little it is, and however lowly they’re situated’’ (128). The same is true of Heans, who has no qualms associating with Carnt and Captain Stiff, both of whom are of a much ‘lowlier’ social background than Sir William, but can help him in his endeavours to escape. Even more questionable morally, as already discussed, is how Heans uses women for his own ends.

Moreover, Hay chose Heans to be guilty, as opposed to Clarke, who sent Dawes to Australia for an offence he had not committed. Hay struggled “to find a crime that [he] could bear in a man for hero,” as Howarth quotes in his introduction (xii), and it is certainly interesting that Hay considered the abduction of a married lady an acceptable choice. Presumably, this suits the romance genre, in which the hero typically loses his
heart to someone else’s wife, although, as already pointed out, Heans’s affair with the Lady Charlotte S--t is described as more of a casual relationship than chivalric love. Once arrived in the colony, however, he is feminised to a certain extent, not only because of his airs and flawless wardrobe, but also because as a prisoner he is rendered impotent, thus sharing some of the powerlessness the female characters of the novel experience. In fact, Matilda, Abelia, Conapanny and Mme Ruth are all caught in a male-dominated world: Matilda is trapped in her marriage with coarse Shaxton, Abelia is limited by her father’s status as an emancipist and falls prey to violent Spafield, Mme Ruth is imprisoned for having shot her abusive husband, and, most tragically of all, Conapanny has not only lost her people but also her lover to white men. Arguably, Heans’s main redeeming feature is the sympathy he expresses towards these women.

If Matilda and Abelia bear their lot patiently, this is not the case for Heans: he is determined to escape at the first opportunity – or in other words, to break the law (although this illegal pursuit is rendered understandable because of how Daunt treats him). In this he resembles Koch’s Devereux, who, even though he adapts to life in the colony, nevertheless plans from the outset to eventually leave. Unlike Heans, however, Devereux was transported from Ireland for sedition, not a crime in Koch’s eyes, and arguably a nobler offence than abducting a woman. We’re not told what happens to Devereux once he reaches America, but his aim there is to join the Irish community in their fight for Ireland’s freedom. Dawes also returns to England for the greater good, that is in the interest of his adopted daughter Dorcas and to be reunited with his abandoned wife. Heans’s reason for absconding, instead, is purely personal. Anticipating Hay’s own progressive withdrawal from society, Sir William eventually settles down in Dieppe, France, where he spends the rest of his life in exile, far away from his friends and family. Although Heans thus does not end on a happy note, Sir William at least reaches a tranquil haven where he can attempt to further refine his gentlemanly behaviour, the difficult quest he shares with his author.

In fact, as mentioned earlier, “[l]ike his hero, Sir William, [Hay] was “by inheritance a ‘gentleman’ who felt both his status and his values threatened by a hostile world of change, including a prospective levelling down” (Hergenhan, Unnatural Lives 75). A Gothic reading of the novel supports the claim that it mirrors Hay’s personal attitudes towards class. Struggling to find his place in early twentieth-century society, Hay chooses as his protagonist a baronet to whom he gives his first name and a surname
very similar to his own. In contrast, Daunt and Spafield, the two most dislikeable characters of the novel, have a low-class background and cannot be considered gentlemen either by their birth or by their behaviour. In line with his own experience of the world, Hay thus conjures up the convict past as a place in which his gentleman hero languishes, while powerful men of humble origin act in perfidious ways. In this context, killing off Daunt and Spafield can be read as vicarious wish fulfilment on the part of the author, as a way to work through his status anxiety in a displaced form. The general outlook of the novel is nevertheless bleak. Heans has to leave Australia in order to maintain his status as a gentleman, which proves a challenge in itself: arrived in France, he engages “himself in being simply a generous, temperate, and noble person, passing his leisure in reading and talking for entertainment, and yet fall[ing] short of a difficult ideal” (406).

Instead of gentlemen, it is emancipists such as Oughtryn that eventually thrive in Australia. Continuing “to live at the old Mansion with his ghostly celebrities … the old man grew even eminent as he waxed in years, not only obtaining his free pardon, but being appointed, according to a familiar chronicle, a Commissioner of Crown Lands” (409). Oughtryn’s success can be read as a reward by the system for always having been extremely careful and obedient in his dealings with the authorities. It is also accurate from an historical point of view: “[g]radually (by sheer force of numbers as much as moral persuasion) emancipists won political concessions: the power to sit on juries, to hold political office, and, eventually, to participate in responsible government” (Russell 472). Moreover, Oughtryn treats Heans in a highly deferential manner because of the latter’s gentlemanly status. Contrary to Daunt and Spafield, he thus ‘knows his place’ and admires the upper classes. Arguably, this is what renders him deserving of success in Hay’s eyes.

There is, however, an interesting detail which has been overlooked so far. Hergenhan writes that Hay was “by inheritance a ‘gentleman’” (Unnatural Lives 75). Unlike Heans, however, who as a baronet presumably can look back to a long line of gentlemanly ancestors, Hay’s paternal relatives had a humble background: his father was given free passage to Adelaide from Scotland as a ‘warfer [sic] and packer,’ as Andrew Gosse Hay explains in his entry “Hay, Alexander 1820-1898” in the Australian Dictionary of Biography. Once arrived in Australia, Hay worked hard and saved enough money to eventually open a grocery and hardware shop. Profiting from a mining and
building boom, he later also became a proprietor of the *South Australian Register*, a director of two insurance companies, two banks, a gas company and a wharf company. He invested widely in city and pastoral land, supported many industrial and philanthropic projects, and held important political roles, spending 17 years as a Legislative Councillor, his long service being marked “by practical commonsense [sic], encouragement of industry, and enthusiasm to provide opportunity for young men of small capital; his last speech in the council was in vigorous support of free primary schools” (“Hay, Alexander 1820-1898”).

Alexander Hay had eight children with his first wife, Agnes Kelly, a bonnet maker. She died in 1870, and in 1872 Hay married Agnes Gosse, with whom he had four more children, including William Gosse Hay. Born in London, Agnes Gosse was the daughter of a medical practitioner and a cousin of Sir Edmund Gosse, a literary author and critic. No doubt William Hay was inspired by his mother’s side of the family to become a man of letters – not a role his father had envisaged for him. In fact, it is hard to imagine a parent and a child that differed more from each other than Alexander and William Hay: the father extremely successful and pragmatic, as opposed to the son, reserved, withdrawn from society and feeling misunderstood. Previous critics have indicated that his father’s success posed a problem for Hay. Notably, however, Hay senior was not only extremely prosperous, but had also started out as a member of the working class, thus epitomising what, according to Hergenhan, Hay seemed to feel threatened by, that is “a prospective levelling down” (*Unnatural Lives* 75). Hay’s depictions in *Heans* of men of humble origin who are un-gentlemanly villains or blindingly submissive of authority can therefore be interpreted as representing the author’s difficulties in accepting the social origins of his own father.

Gothic texts are commonly constructed around class anxieties. Take Punter, who writes that at heart the Gothic is a middle-class genre, or rather, that “Gothic can at one and the same time be categorised as a middle class and an anti-middle-class literature” (*Literature of Terror* 203). In *Gothic*, Botting likewise highlights the genre’s close and yet ambivalent connections with the middle class. In eighteenth-century texts, for example,

[0]ld castles, knights and malevolent aristocrats seem to fit into an enlightenment pattern identifying all things Gothic with the tyranny and barbarity of feudal times. Rational distancing and disavowal of past forms of
power, however, is belied by the continued fascination with the architecture, customs and values of the Middle Ages: Gothic novels seem to sustain a nostalgic relish for a lost era of romance and adventure, for a world that, if barbaric, was, from the perspective of the late eighteenth century, also ordered. In this respect Gothic fiction preserves older traditions rather than attacking the aristocratic legacy of feudalism. Yet narratives are dominated by values of family, domesticity and virtuous sentimentalism, values more appropriate to the middle-class readership that composed the increasingly large portion of the literary market in the eighteenth century. Aristocratic trappings of chivalry and romance are subsumed by bourgeois values of virtue, merit, propriety, and, within reason, individualism. The anxieties about the past and its forms of power are projected on to malevolent and villainous aristocrats in order to consolidate the ascendancy of middle-class values.

(4) Heans similarly reflects Hay’s nostalgic desire for a chivalrous and presumably more ordered past. Even here, however, the gentlemanly ideal is threatened by men such as Daunt, who encapsulate the, in Hay’s view, negative ascendancy of the lower and middle classes, notwithstanding his own humble roots. Heans thus also reflects an equivocal preoccupation with class, albeit from a different perspective.

Furthermore, although Hay’s concern about the role and place of the gentleman is peculiar, Heans reveals wider issues regarding class in the Australia of his time, thus shedding light on some of the “hidden violence of present social structures” typically conjured up as past in the Gothic (Punter 198). Russell, for example, points out that “[w]orking-class radicalism was a factor in [Australian] society from the 1840s, and by the 1890s was a force to be reckoned with, edged with the bitterness of aspirations to security, land ownership and independence thwarted” (471). On the other hand, “the upper houses of the colonial parliaments were relatively undemocratic,” and “specifically designed to check the levelling impulse of the popular will” (Macintyre and Scalmer, “Colonial States and Civil Society” 196). The resulting “[p]opular dissatisfaction fostered mobilisation,” land being a chief cause. In fact, ‘[m]any Europeans brought to Australia the dream of tilling their own patch of land” – a dream that Alexander Hay was able to fulfil. However, “by the middle of the [nineteenth] century, the south-eastern corner of Australia was mostly taken up by substantial sheep runs or subdivided by capitalists and let to tenant farmers. Frustrated by these barriers to sharing of the wealth, the gold-rush generation … sought the right to select a holding
sufficient to support a family and to acquire it on terms that would allow those without capital to achieve independence” (198).

Alexander Hay was notable for his “enthusiasm to provide opportunity for young men of small capital,” and his policy was “embodied in important new land laws in 1869” (“Hay, Alexander 1820-1898”). But, as Macintyre and Scalmer explain, “[a] popular demand was blocked by a small, privileged elite, which … used its entrenched position in the upper houses to block or sabotage the laws designed to throw open the land to the people” (“Colonial States and Civil Society” 199). The severe Depression in the early 1890s and the prolonged drought by which it was followed did not help to smooth class relations: “[t]rade unions confronted employers in violent disputes and the subsequent collapse of the labour market brought widespread destitution” (Introduction, The Cambridge History of Australia, Vol 2, 2). Soon, trade unions became increasingly powerful. Entering politics at the turn of the century, “[t]he ALP won 19 per cent of the vote for the lower house of the Commonwealth parliament in 1901, 31 per cent in 1903, 37 per cent in 1906 and 50 per cent in 1910, when it became the first working-class party in the world to form a majority government” (Macintyre and Scalmer, “Class” 360). No doubt the rapid growth of the Labor Party would have been concerning for someone who, like Hay, worried about a prospective levelling down.

But the novel’s concern with class is not the only way in which it discloses some of the social anxieties of Hay’s own times. Hay wrote Heans during World War I, a time in which “[t]he government assumed unprecedented control over economic and social life, with powers to inspect premises, seize documents, censor literature and detain citizens”, as Stephen Garton and Peter Stanley point out in “The Great War and its Aftermath, 1914-22” (49). Echoing the transportation system’s constant surveillance of Heans, during the Great War,

[a] host of regulations framed under a sweeping War Precautions Act (1914) enabled the federal government to implement, as Charles Bean wrote, ‘all kinds of precautions never thought of in peace-time.’ … A growing military intelligence and censorship bureaucracy monitored those suspected of acting or speaking against the war effort. Officials (usually military officers), censored communications of all kinds, including the post and newspapers, often ludicrously. Police and military officers investigated reports of disloyalty, and as
the war continued suspicion and administrative actions were untrammelled by judicial scrutiny. (49-50)

We don’t know if Hay was monitored in particular, but the war did pose a problem for him, that of whether to enlist or to continue working on Heans. Hay decided in favour of his novel, a choice that further alienated him from most contemporaries. In fact, at the outset, news of the war was greeted enthusiastically, and enlistment numbers were high. Those who did not enlist were met with scrutiny: “[a] November 1915 investigation by the Parliamentary War Committee … demanded of every ‘eligible’ that he inform it when he would enlist and if not why not” (Garton and Stanley 51-2). If those who decided not to go to war were treated with disdain, the soldiers were admired. In Inventing Australia, Richard White discusses how “[t]he digger emerged as the national hero. … [and] soon came to stand for all that was decent, wholesome and Australian. Not only did he embody Australianness, but he was its greatest protector” (125). Consider also the following drawing from the Anzac Book (1916), reprinted in Inventing Australia.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ As can be read on the Australian War Memorial website,
The ANZAC Book was published in 1916 from illustrations, poems, stories and other creative works from the soldiers on the Gallipoli peninsula. In November 1915 CEW Bean, an official war correspondent and eventually official war historian, called for contributions for the publication. Bean edited the work on the island of Imbros and after the Greek publisher fell through, arranged to have the work published in London by Cassell and Company. The book is composed of satirical and sombre pieces about the conditions of life at Gallipoli. It also provides a general outline of the April 25 landing at ANZAC Cove and the military advances, offensives and defensives undertaken in the following months until the eventual evacuation of the Allied forces at the end of December 1915. The introduction was written by General Sir W Birdwood, who explains how he named ANZAC Cove on the Gallipoli peninsula after the ANZAC forces. Bean contributed an editor's note in which he outlined the harsh conditions that the book was produced in, the significance it had taken on, and acknowledged the contributors. (29 Jul 2014. http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/ART19665/)
White adds the following caption to this sketch: “According to the Anzac Book (1916), even the most effete gentleman could be transformed into the Coming Man” (128). The vignette thus aptly illustrates the outdatedness of the gentleman type during the time of war.

Susceptible and defensive by nature, Hay was acutely aware of just how unorthodox his position on the matter was, as the following quotation from 1920 shows:

> During the War 1914-19. Such a time has, one would say, hardly ever been heard of, and will hardly ever be credited. Such an orderly remark as “I have straining work to do and must not be interrupted” was the remark of a maniac; the sane thing was throw all the nice and delicate effort of years to the offal; it was only a sham life; the only real thing after all is what you have left of physical strength [underlined in red ink]. “Business as usual” was a cry to raise a jeer or worse, and supposing your health had been dedicated to a life of work and your business need not allow you to leave it without a broken heart, so much the worse for you (18 July 1920). (quoted in Hergenhan, Unnatural Lives 90)

World War I thus compounded Hay’s feelings of living in a hostile world and likely contributed to the nervous strain and the incessant surveillance present in Heans.

In addition to the war and Hay’s struggle to adapt to a changing society, another early twentieth-century violence emerges in Heans, which however does not directly reflect Hay’s own battles: the plight of the Aboriginal people. In fact, by addressing Aboriginal

---

118 The ‘Coming Man’ usually refers to the “manly colonial” as opposed to the effeminate Englishman. See, for example, White 76 ff.
dispossession in the novel, Hay not only deals with one of Australia’s Phantoms, but with a form of social violence and injustice that was still rampant in his time (and continues, even if in different ways, today). Raymond Evans et al explain in 1901 Our Future’s Past that at Federation, Aborigines were few in number compared to a century earlier – perhaps a million or more then, but now there were only some tens of thousands remaining. Those surviving in Victoria and Tasmania, following the destructive impact of colonialism, could be counted merely in the hundreds. … By 1900, some two-thirds of the estimated 270 indigenous languages and 600 dialects were in the process of disappearing entirely, leaving their cultures appearing as ragged and emaciated as the Aborigines themselves. In many respects, it was still open season upon them: they could be killed with minimal legal interference against the culprits. Their women were sexual targets for predatory white men; their children were habitually taken from them; their labour was heavily exploited and they survived off monotonous and measly handouts. For all their trouble, they were regarded by most white Australians as either the lowest human beings on earth or the most ambitious of animals. … [Their] decline and ongoing plight were viewed more as a result of the uncontrollable laws of nature than of being a direct outcome of human motivations and acquisitive behaviour.

Thus it seemed a comparatively small step to conceive of the Aborigines as not only non-citizens but virtually as a non-people. (26-27)

In contrast, “British Australians fully shared [a] sense of superior right and of undoubted racial destiny. The white race alone, they believed, possessed the resourcefulness … to overrun other societies whose comparative weakness was interpreted simply as due to their cultural and intellectual inferiority and lower human worth” (25). “[B]y the time of Federation, this was no longer so much a matter of debate as a nationwide article of faith” (26).

Given this context, it cannot be stressed enough how remarkable the presence of Conapanny is in Hay’s novel. Writing long before the so-called history wars, before W. E. H. Stanner first coined the term ‘Great Australian Silence’ in his 1968 Boyer lectures to draw attention to the silence on Aborigines in Australian history since white settlement, Hay includes a sympathetic and resilient Aboriginal woman in his novel
who has suffered intolerably at the hands of the British colonisers.\textsuperscript{119} So far, Conapanny has only attracted little critical attention, even though she is essential in helping Hay escape. Haynes alone has noted in \textit{Tasmanian Visions} that

\begin{quote}
[o]ne of the few fictional suggestions of collaboration between Aborigines and convicts in Tasmania, where many of the worst outrages against the indigenous people were committed by convicts, occurs in Hay’s novel, when an old Aboriginal woman named Conapanny becomes the agent for Heans’s escape from Port Arthur. Both are, in effect, prisoners of the British establishment. But whereas Heans could not survive in the bush of the peninsula, Conapanny has the survival knowledge and skills necessary to find food and elude pursuit and the once proud Sir William is completely dependent on her for his escape. (70)
\end{quote}

It is interesting to compare Hay’s representation of Aborigines to that of James Tucker and John O’Reilly in \textit{Rashleigh} and \textit{Moondyne} respectively – in \textit{His Natural Life} and Astley’s tales, Aborigines are virtually absent. Being taken by a tribe, Rashleigh quickly not only learns how to survive in the bush but soon excels at all the activities he participates in. In addition to his physical prowess (which was completely absent when he was a captive of the bushrangers), he is also described as worthier than the indigenous people in the way he treats women. Tucker thus uses Aborigines to highlight the superiority, both physical and moral, of his convict protagonist. In stark contrast, O’Reilly’s Aborigines are mythical figures who serve to emphasise the corruptness of the English social system and to supply Moondyne with the financial means to fight it. Hay, instead, is the first author analysed here to not only include a likeable and admirable Aboriginal character in his novel, but to also provide background information on factual events and personages such as the Black War, Truganini and George Robinson.

In fact, in the narrative we are told that Conapanny herself helped Robinson during his mediations between the island’s Indigenous people and the Whites. A neighbour of the Oughtryns, she regularly pays a call:

The Oughtryns were rather flattered by than enduring of her visits, for she was something of a celebrity, being one of those faithful women who acted as guides and go-betweens to Mr. Robinson on his ‘pacifications’, in particular his last

\textsuperscript{119} The history wars and Stanner’s phrase will be further discussed in Chapter Five “\textit{Gould’s Book of Fish}: Richard Flanagan’s Postmodern Retelling of the Convict Past.”
journey over the swamps and snow from Western Bluff: indeed, it was said that, like Truganinna, she had saved his life from drowning. ... She was one of perhaps seven natives left in the island for various reasons, herself at the instance of Robinson, who had appointed her native-nurse to the children of the exiles.

We first encounter Conapanny when Abelia witnesses her tearfully begging Spafield for something (presumably an account of what happened to Surridge). When Heans later approaches, he makes out “something like a heap of old clothes spread on a bush.” Upon looking closer, he spots the “small old black-woman, pinched and grim of face, and sunk as it were in the earth rather than sitting upon it. ... Heans considered it more than likely that he had been observed by the native, whose senses would be more alert than his own, but she had given no sign. She seemed sunk in a kind of stupor of weeping, and plucked slowly at a bit of growing grass with slim black fingers” (155).

Conapanny is thus described from the start as blending in with nature and having stronger sensory faculties than the Englishman. During the actual escape this is confirmed, and her knowledge of and connection to the bush become an important part of the narrative.

But Conapanny not only helps Heans escape. She is also a key character in a melodramatic side plot in the manner of nineteenth-century sensation fiction. This storyline contains secret manuscripts (which are found and then disappear again), a murdered governor, a corpse hidden in a crevice, ghosts, a madman, and Conapanny herself, who is still looking for closure after the disappearance of her lover many years ago. Heans becomes the detective who within a few days manages to solve the puzzle, although, in keeping with Hay’s style, it does not make for straightforward reading. Covering over 200 pages, the puzzle is intertwined with the events that occur in the present of the novel, which, in addition to the Heans-Daunt-Shaxton-Matilda plot further include the O’Crone-Ruth-Carnt thread and Heans’s continual quest for escape. When Heans pieces together Conapanny’s tragic past, he strongly empathises with her: “‘I cannot get it out of my mind that she has been injured’” (193). Heans thus comes to see her in a very different light to how most contemporaries of Hay would have perceived Aborigines. Haynes points out that “Sir William’s significant escape is not the physical one from the confines of Port Arthur but the spiritual one from a past of self-centredness and arrogance, both personal and racial” (70). Perhaps his own (perceived) status as outsider
led Hay to be more sympathetic towards a people who were still suffering the consequences of British colonisation at the time he was writing *Heans*.

The novel’s Gothic murder mystery goes back to the early days of Tasmania’s colonial past and is set in Oughtryn’s mansion. Old, run down and flanked by a cave, the emancipist’s residence can be considered an archetypal Gothic dwelling. Consider, for example, the ornamental hand over the entrance door whose “carved fingers offered in their form rather a grip than a welcome” (157), or the image of an old fountain in the garden:

> [t]his little black figure … was only malignant and threatening. It was the figure of an epauletted soldier, prone on a rock with head thrown back, eyeing the sky, at whose lips was an iron trumpet through which the water – with a rather violent fancy – must once have risen and dropped. But when the eye sought for some fine aspiring face, fitted to the conception, it was haunted by a mouth and a brow wild with hideous surprise. It may be that such water as had splashed back upon the sandstone face had exaggerated, if it had not entirely defaced it, to this strange look. If not, the notes of that wild clarion had never brought the help so dreadfully desired, any more than had the water which had fallen upon it washed away the look of terror. (148)

Arguably encapsulating the threatening and malignant ways of the transportation system, the motif casts a dark gloom over the mansion’s garden.

When Mrs Quaid comes by for a visit, she forebodingly tells Heans: “‘Ah, a funny place! And funny doings, as I’ve ‘eard, and as this very founting will tell you, with its dead man a’blowing his ghostly tunes for others’ ears. Oho dear, I’m glad mine are deaf to them, and I pray yours won’t be opened to ‘em, sir, by violent doings, in this house’” (166). Later we find out that this fountain was made by Walter Surridge, a convict stonemason who used to work in the gardens of Oughtryn’s mansion, at the time the residence of Governor Collins. As is gradually revealed, in their youth Conapanny and Surridge fell in love. Having repeatedly been caught in the company of the Aboriginal girl, the convict is separated from her and imprisoned in the cave, but manages to leave one afternoon unobserved. Sneaking into the house, he spots the governor and, in his

---

120 Hay does not represent the relationship between Conapanny and Surridge in negative terms. This is striking considering how obsessed white Australia was with keeping the country racially pure at the time when Hay was writing *Heans*. 139
grief for having lost Conapanny, kills him. He then returns to the cave, which later is
locked. Climbing up the crack to escape, he accidentally shoots himself in the lower
back with a pistol he had stolen from the house and dies a terrible death. Spafield, then
known as Spars, used to act as a messenger between Conapanny and Surridge. He
knows that the latter is caught in the cave, but fails to come to his aid. Before passing
away, Surridge records his misfortune in his hat, which is later discovered by Heans,
thanks to whom Conapanny finally finds out what happened to her lover.

Spafield, instead, is forced to face his violent past when Daunt sends him to Oughtryn’s
residence. This is how the ex-convict turned government official is described when he
first arrives at the house:

He was a tall, full-complexioned, dark-looking man, high of cheek-bone, thick
of chin, but over his limber – almost skittish – friendliness, stared an obstinate
eye, coldly and covertly angry. … A hasty stare would have painted him that
sort of ragamuffin personage who has led the village pack of toughs in his
youth, and would spend his age, the revered of a certain class of toper, in its inn.

No worse. (156)

Representative of Hay’s style, this passage indicates that Spafield is, in fact, much
worse. Early on, Oughtryn remarks that “‘[t]here’s something amiss with him. … He’s
not a nat’rally scared man. He’s bore a bold life. I should – speaking under correction –
I should say fate was worriting him for something he’s adone’” (199). Unhinged to
begin with, at the old mansion the soldier is tormented by his previous misdeeds, as is
typical of the Gothic. He is confronted by Conapanny and haunted by the atrocities he
committed against the Aborigines during the Black War; he sees the ghost of the old
governor and disposes of Surridge’s remains in the middle of the night.

Acting like a madman, Spafield in turn disturbs the peace of the mansion’s residents,
foremost among them Heans. Frequently singing “some curious Indian or Native ditty,
in a rich harsh tenor: Morruda, yerrabà, tundy kin arrà / Morruda yerrabà, min yin guiny
wite mà là” (157), the soldier’s presence unsettlingly permeates the entire building:

Whether or not it was the odour of the man’s pipe, pervading the room, or his
unending, fluting jabber, which forced his image on Heans’ thoughts, he found
himself defeated in his attempts to read; and not for the first time during his
repast, reverted to the violent scene between man and black which had so
affrighted Abelia that morning. Conapanny’s wailing, too, rang on his mind with strange persistency.

As with Daunt, Heans cannot work out what Spafield’s motives are, which contributes to the paranoid tone of the novel: “A little brooding over and gathering yesterday’s incidents, and [Heans] was still inclined to the belief that the man was plaguing him personally; and a disquiet began to possess him lest his evident enmity might put a new hazard in three difficult days” (226).

When, early one morning halfway through the eventful week which encompasses book II, Heans reads Surridge’s manuscript and puts together the role Spafield played in the convict’s death, his dislike for the soldier becomes even stronger: “‘We have a horrid monster here!’ said Sir William, standing aghast in the breakfast-room” (226). The ensuing 24 hours span one of the most action-packed and tense parts of the novel. The day itself is mostly taken up by Heans and Abelia’s journey through Hobart to keep the lavender pad out of Daunt’s hands, an episode which, as already mentioned, “is so ‘full of alarms’ and marked throughout by a gusty, unsettling wind, that it conveys intensely the fear and menace which is so characteristic of this novel” (Hergenhan, *Unnatural Lives* 80). On the way home, Heans meets Shaxton and invites him in for a drink. Upon entering Sir William’s room, they find Daunt waiting for Sir William. This strained meeting escalates into a bitter fight between Shaxton and Daunt in which Shaxton is struck to the floor by the commandant. Dusk now sets in, but the day is far from over. Soon after Shaxton’s departure, Heans realises that the manuscript has been stolen, which troubles him greatly. As the only piece of concrete evidence against Spafield in his possession, he had intended to show it to Oughtryn to persuade him to get rid of the soldier (uncharacteristically, Oughtryn is absent all day and most of the night). A bit later, Heans decides to inspect the crack in the cave. On his way back to the house, he spots Spafield in the bushes on top of it. After a short conversation, the soldier throws a dead kangaroo rat impaled with a knife down at Heans. When Heans withdraws the knife, the small hands of the rat fall apart “with quite a human gesture of release” (276). Hergenhan rightly points out that this passage not only conveys the brutality of the soldier, but also “foreshadows the release that Heans is to win for himself after killing Spafield and being rid of the burden of Daunt”, a fact which “illustrates Hay’s ability to invest scenes with symbolic overtone.” He further notes that “[t]he accompanying atmosphere of eeriness and tension is also important” (*Unnatural Lives* 85).
This atmosphere is to continue. Later that evening, Spafield haunts the house with his loud, drunken singing, marching and ranting all over the first floor. Unable to concentrate on his reading, Heans listens to every sound the soldier makes when all of a sudden he hears “a dry, harsh cry, like an infant’s, but full of volume and hatefully daunted. Right upon it there was a heavy tumult and banging, then a great cry, and then a sudden ‘clashing’ of glass” (280): Spafield has become trapped in a linen cupboard (which used to be called the “Punishment Closet”) and has heard the old governor’s voice bidding him to “take [his] punishment” (281). Heans releases him from the closet, and, after having tried to reassure Abelia and the servant woman, once more retreats to his room. But the night is not yet over. What follows leaves Sir William and the writer full of regret that:

Some freer weapon than his is not in breach (sic) to delineate the last incident of that Wednesday night. It seemed to him such a curious and plausible occurrence that happened under his eyes and partially through him, that he would have wished to make a souvenir of it with some beautiful, monumental prose. The motionless witch of night, with its grey moon and streaky clouds, its occasional alarms, the ugly and fateful things which it had brought to life, the house yet wanting a master, the pair of boding women, the sly wretch above, and the uncanny shock he had put upon them (even if his panics were Heans’ strange ally), these were but the brooding beginning to the singular end. (282-3)

Arguably reflecting Hay’s own desire to write ‘beautiful, monumental’ prose, this passage introduces one of the most Gothic episodes of the novel.

In the dead of night, Heans is woken up by “the distinct and insistent ‘clanking’ of a chain” (285). He follows the sound to the cave, where he finds Spafield intent on removing Surridge’s remains. Drawn back to this older evil, Spafield here encapsulates the Gothic theme of the return of past guilt:

Indeed, the stable held a curious figure – a new and deadly effigy – balancing upon slow, sly limbs, muttering and waving with its pole along the cobwebbed wall, as if it would conjure to light, rather than drag from it, the bloody secret among the half-finished scrawls and wooden effigies so deeply graven there. There he panted, spoke, strove, and stared behind him; singularly silent for so large a figure; visible as a wraith is visible; every instant fading a little more out of lineament as the prong searched lower along the lip, and the chain answered and fell protesting over the walls. (287)
Having turned into a ghostly shadow as he is about to prise the dead stonemason out of the crevice, Spafield is not the only one to haunt the cave that night. Suddenly, Heans spots “something like a second human form passing between himself and the moon of the lantern on the wall. It was without sounds. It came out from the harness-cave…. He saw dimly who it was, as its head, bound in a white hankerchief, passed opposite the reflection. Gracious G–d, it was Conapanny, the native woman!” (288). When Spafield finally gets a hold of Surridge’s remains, Heans confronts him. Unwilling to relinquish the bundle of bones, Spafield attacks and eventually knocks Sir William out. Closely followed by Conapanny, Spafield then leaves the premises to dispose of the body.

In the above passages, the spying, mystery, power plays and general tone of threat and fear combine with the details of the setting to raise the narrative excitement and intensity of emotion. Moreover, they are important because they illustrate that Spafield is not simply a “ready-made villain” (Hergenhan, Unnatural Lives 83) whose sole purpose it is to unnerve Heans, just as Conapanny is not merely a quaint addition to give Heans some local colour. On the contrary, as already discussed, Hay’s inclusion of Conapanny is impressive: he is the first author analysed in this study to address Aboriginal suffering at the hands of the British, to combine Tasmania’s penal past with the near-extinction of the island’s Aborigines. Including Conapanny’s story in Heans makes the novel about more than the personal struggles of Sir William, and by extension about more than Hay’s own somewhat peculiar concerns. At the same time, the fact that she is a victim of Spafield – he not only played a direct role in her lover’s death but also participated in the atrocities against her people – renders this detestable character even more repugnant.

Two days after Spafield removes Surridge’s remains, he is to meet his own violent end. As mentioned earlier, when the soldier attacks Abelia in the cave, Heans aborts his escape plans at great personal cost to come to his pupil’s aid. What follows is a “protracted fight” which “is minutely described with such skill that the strain on Heans is wrought to its highest pitch,” as Hergenhan points out (Unnatural Lives 85). Proclaiming at the beginning of the clash: “‘You might have knowed, Mr. Silence, I’d never die in these caves!’”, Spafield ends up being killed in the same place in which he had abandoned Surridge many years ago, which adds to the feeling that he receives his just deserts. Hergenhan writes that “[t]he physical clash between Heans and Spafield in the stable, where Heans fights for his life, is the main climax towards which the novel
moves” (85). The fact that this clash takes place in a cave and is caused by an attempted rape further highlights the Gothic nature of Heans. Underground locations such as caves, catacombs and hidden passageways have been traditional settings in the Gothic for the pursuits of innocent maidens and murder since the time of Horace Walpole’s Otranto and Matthew Lewis’s The Monk. Also in Heans, this primitive space brings out the worst in Spafield. Sir William, instead, here proves his honourable nature, just as he does when he speaks out to defend Matilda’s reputation earlier in book II when Daunt slanders her in the same spot. This reinforces the point that, unlike Heans, Spafield and Daunt are not gentlemen.

Hay’s choice to focus on a privileged convict sets him apart from the authors encountered in previous chapters. Heans could not differ more from Astley’s prisoners, for example, most of whom are of humble origin and incredibly brutalised and degraded, while, in contrast to Clarke’s Dawes, he retains his gentlemanly status, never being confronted with the physical horrors of penal Australia. Not interested in indicting the British transportation system by exposing its physical brutality, Hay in fact stays away from the common convict Gothic tropes encountered so far, most notably extreme violence, cannibalism and convict homosexuality. This does not mean, however, that Tasmania’s convict past merely provided a convenient backdrop for Heans; on the contrary, Hay carefully researched Australia’s penal history, and aware that this integral part of Australia’s past was being repressed, purposely used it as a setting for most of his novels.¹²¹

Rather, in addition to revealing his own struggles to come to terms with a changing social order in early twentieth-century Australia, Hay’s anachronistic investment in the ideal of the gentleman highlights an aspect of the convict period much less evident in the earlier texts analysed here: as the historical research considered in this chapter confirms, Hay’s Gothic renderings of Hobart’s social life accurately reflect how deeply affected nineteenth-century Australia was by the changing class hierarchy and status

¹²¹ See, for example, Howarth, who in his introduction explains that Hay “elected to be … the novelist of earlier Australian history,” preparing himself for this “task” by setting “himself to follow a course of reading in early Australian history as well as in fiction, going to the sources of facts as much as possible, frequently visiting the territory he wished to describe, especially Tasmania around Hobart” (x-xi). As already noted earlier, Muecke points out that while studying in England, Hay “had become aware … that Australia possessed a dramatic history which was in danger of being forgotten and discarded (Introduction i-ii). Hay’s interest in Australia’s history is also highlighted in the following passage from his novel Herridge of Reality Swamp, already quoted at the beginning of this chapter: “Manalians [i.e. Australians] are not proud of their early heroes, and mistaking a romantic, deeply enthralling, and, in many cases, heroic, history for a taint, forget these things nowadays” (284).
anxiety brought about by the exceptional social circumstances created under the transportation system. At the same time, Hay is also the first author to include an Aboriginal character who is more than a caricature-like or mythical figure. Accordingly, the complex and haunting murder mystery surrounding Conapanny and Surridge’s love story is not only sensational and melodramatic, but also essential in exposing the tragic fate of the island’s Indigenous people at the hands of the British. In this, Heans foreshadows Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001), which also combines Tasmania’s penal history with Aboriginal suffering (in most other aspects the two novels could not be more different, as will become evident in Chapter Five). First, however, the next chapter will centre on Peter Carey’s novel *Jack Maggs* (1997), thus shifting the focus of this study from colonial to postcolonial perspectives of Australia’s convict past.
Chapter Four

Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs*: Australia and *Great Expectations*

As seen in the last chapter, *The Escape of the Notorious Sir William Heans* (1919) reveals Hay’s anachronistic investment in the ideal of the Victorian gentleman and his struggles to adapt to a changing social order in early twentieth-century Australia. Accordingly, not being able to overcome class-consciousness, his protagonist has to leave Van Diemen’s Land in order to maintain his status as a gentleman. Published in 1997, that is 78 years after *Heans*, the convict protagonist in Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* instead succeeds in eventually freeing himself of his misconceived ideals regarding Victorian England, including the figure of the English gentleman, and is finally able to embrace Australia as his home. This reflects a change in how Australians view their past and their country, a change which according to Carey took a long time to occur, as he explains in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel from 1993:

> Australia kept on being Victorian long after the British stopped being Victorian. People arriving in Australia many years after the Victorian era well and truly ended would see its vestiges there. In the outposts of the Empire these exiled people were still keeping up the standards, unaware that they were no longer the standards. Things like that happen when people feel they are exiled from where the center is, or from where home is. (104)

*Jack Maggs*, the first postcolonial novel to be analysed here, is a radical rewriting of Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* which shifts the attention to the convict, a liminal figure who, having been transported to Australia for the term of his natural life, illegally returns to London to both haunt and be haunted. The novel begins in 1837 with Maggs’s arrival in London after nineteen years in Australia to finally meet his ‘gentleman son’, Henry Phipps. In addition to these two characters, Carey introduces a number of fascinating Victorian personalities, including a version of Dickens himself in the figure of Tobias Oates. Links to *Great Expectations*, other Dickensian novels and Dickens’s life are numerous, yet the differences are equally important. Literary critics so far have mainly focused on a close comparison between Carey’s and Dickens’s novels (see, for instance, Brittan, Schmidt-Haberkamp, Thieme), on the metafiction and postmodernism of *Jack Maggs* (for example, Savu, Thieme), and on the meaning of authorship and Carey’s ‘relationship’ with Dickens (see Savu, Mukherjee). In addition, several critics have read *Jack Maggs* from a postcolonial point of view and commented on the fact that
Maggs is a convict (see Gribble, Ho, Maack, Meinig, Sanders, Vanden Driesen). However, no studies have been found which discuss the Gothic aspects of this novel or try to place *Jack Maggs* within the larger tradition of Gothic convict narratives from Australia.\(^{122}\)

In fact, although *Jack Maggs* differs from the other texts analysed here in that it is mostly set in England, it belongs in this study because of its Gothic nature and because its protagonist is a convict, who moreover perfectly fits the description of the Gothic hero-villain. In addition, even though Carey only includes the occasional flashback of Maggs’s time as a prisoner of the transportation system, his experiences as a convict are central to the novel because they continue to torment him once he is back in England, just as his tragic childhood affects him into his adulthood as well. In this respect, the novel is a good example of the Gothic return of the past, as will be discussed in detail below. Thus, the overall aim of this chapter is to explore how turning Dickens’s Magwitch into an ambivalent Gothic figure allows Carey to rework *Great Expectations* from a postcolonial perspective. Accordingly, I will address the features that define Maggs as a Gothic hero-villain, which will lead to a close reading of this character, as well as allowing me to draw comparisons with the convict protagonists encountered earlier in this study.

Moreover, contrary to *Great Expectations*, which is not a Gothic novel *per se* although it does contain pronounced Gothic scenes,\(^{123}\) Carey’s text contains a striking array of typical Victorian Gothic tropes. Thus, as I will argue, Carey not only subverts Dickens’s novel by placing the convict at the centre of the narrative, but also by employing (Victorian) taboo topics such as abortion, homosexuality, illegitimate relationships, suicide and child prostitution to depict London – the imperial centre – in altogether dark, violent and degenerate terms. Part of this chapter will therefore be dedicated to investigating the ways in which Carey’s narrative is haunted by the brilliant evocation of London and the Victorian home as sites of terror, as well as by spectres from Maggs’s past. Such a portrayal will necessarily lead to the exploration of a final key question with regard to the almost Arcadian (or very Gothic?) ending of *Jack Maggs*, which has left several critics dissatisfied. It is a question of identity and belonging: what

---

\(^{122}\) Only Thieme and Sanders make a reference to Marcus Clarke’s *His Natural Life*.

\(^{123}\) Consider, for example, Pip’s meeting with the convict Magwitch, or some of the episodes in Miss Havisham’s mansion.
does Maggs and Mercy’s future in New South Wales, in sharp contrast to Carey’s representation of the imperial centre and Magwitch’s fate in *Great Expectations*, signify in a postcolonial context for Australia? In fact, in his response to *Great Expectations*, Carey not only offers a counter-narrative to a classic Victorian text, but also provides a late twentieth-century perspective on Australia’s convict history.

Before turning to the novel, however, I need to briefly address the term ‘postcolonial’. Postcolonial studies usually refer to the “critical analysis of the history, culture, literature and modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England … and other European imperial powers,” as M. H. Abrams explains (236). Although these “studies have focused especially on … countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean islands, and South America,” the scope of such analyses have also been extended to the “discourse and cultural productions of such countries as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand,” that is to the so-called settler colonies as discussed, for example, by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Generally speaking, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin,

> [t]he critical questions raised in … settler colonies cluster around a peculiar set of problems which highlight some of the basic tensions which exist in all post-colonial literatures. The three major issues they raise are the relationship between social and literary practices in the old world and the new; the relationship between the indigenous populations in the settled areas and the invading settlers; and the relationship between the imported language and the new place. In critical practice these are often inextricably interwoven. (133)

As already outlined above, by rewriting a classic English novel, in *Jack Maggs* Carey is primarily concerned with the first issue, that is “the relationship between social and literary practices in the old world and the new.” Note that Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s book title is based on Salman Rushdie’s article “The Empire Writes Back With a Vengeance,” which phrase, in addition to being a pun on the *Star Wars* film *The Empire Strikes Back*, precisely makes reference to the ways in which postcolonial narratives respond to the literary canon of the metropolitan centre.

M. H. Abrams further points out that “[t]he rapidly expanding field of postcolonial studies … is not a unified movement with a distinctive methodology.” Nevertheless, several central and recurrent issues can be identified, including “the rejection of the
master-narrative of Western imperialism – in which the colonial other is not only subordinated and marginalized, but in effect deleted as a cultural agency – and its replacement by a counter-narrative in which the colonial cultures fight their way back into a world history written by Europeans” (236-7). Terms such as master- and counter-narratives highlight the links between postcolonialism and postmodernism (and will be further discussed in the next chapter, on Richard Flanagan’s Gould’s Book of Fish). Also Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin emphasise that “[p]ost-colonial writing and literary theory intersect in several ways with recent European movements, such as postmodernism and poststructuralism” (153). In their view, labels such as ‘post-colonial’, ‘postmodern’ and ‘poststructuralist’ are inconvenient because they “cover a wide range of overlapping literary and cultural practices” (159-160). Perhaps most useful here is the notion that postmodern theory can draw attention to the subversive nature of postcolonial literature as it questions the “authority of the European centre and its forms and expectations” (161).

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin do not distinguish between colonial and postcolonial literature. Rather, they use the term ‘post-colonial’ “to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (2). In this study, however, I apply the term postcolonial to Jack Maggs and Gould’s Book of Fish, but not to the early texts analysed here, which traditionally have been considered to belong to Australia’s colonial literature. See, for example, Gerry Turcotte’s “Australian Gothic”, which distinguishes between colonial and postcolonial Gothic Australian texts, or The Anthology of Colonial Australian Gothic Fiction, which includes writings by Marcus Clarke, William Astley and William Hay. Furthermore, it can be argued that, although Tucker, Clarke and Hay critique Britain’s transportation system, it is not their objective to question the “authority of the European centre.” (In this point, O’Reilly and Astley markedly differ: an Irish Revolutionary and a Republican respectively, they are both subversive of the empire).

If postcolonial studies and postmodernism have been shown to overlap, in recent years attention has also been drawn to links between postcolonialism and the Gothic. In

124 *Heans* was published in 1919 and “An Australian Rip Van Winkle”, the short story by Hay included in the *Anthology* in 1921, that is after the six Australian colonies federated and the Commonwealth of Australia was proclaimed. This, however, did not turn Australia into an independent country, but into a British Dominion. In 1931 Australia was given authority to conduct treaties and agreements with foreign powers, and this was formally adopted in 1942. Only in 1986 was Australia declared a sovereign, independent and federal nation.
“Gothic and Empire”, for example, James Procter and Angela Smith explain that “[p]ostcolonial Gothic might be said to cite and write back to familiar Gothic texts (including imperial ones) in order to unsettle or in some way disturb their grand narratives of colonial mastery/degeneration, relocating the horror from the locus of the colonised to the violence and abuses perpetrated by the empire” (96). In his rewriting of Great Expectations, Carey in fact employs the Gothic to highlight the corruption and violence present in the imperial capital as opposed to the Australian colony in which Maggs eventually settles. More generally, William Hughes and Andrew Smith argue that “an historical examination of the Gothic and accounts of postcolonialism indicate the presence of a shared interest in challenging post-enlightenment notions of rationality” (Empire and the Gothic 1). This is particularly evident in Gould’s Book of Fish, but also in Jack Maggs the increasingly irrational behaviours of Buckley, Oates and Phipps, for example, challenge such notions, as will be explored below.

First, however, let us consider Carey’s protagonist. As already mentioned, Maggs matches Fiedler’s description of the Gothic hero-villain remarkably well. In fact, to start with his appearance, Carey’s convict meets all the requirements with regard to the physical features of this figure. To list just a few quotations, he is “a tall man in his forties … big in his chest and broad in his shoulders …” (3), he has a “manly chest” (21), a “massive” physique (73), a “chest like a strong man in a circus” (90), a “bellicose bulk” (131) and “immense thighs” (172). Moreover, as is typical of this figure, the most notable characteristic are his eyes. They are “dark”, “inquiring” and characterised by an “unearthly flare and glare” (4); “malevolent” and “heavy-lidded” (55); “wild and red” (63); “frightening” (91), “contemptuous” (199) and “belligerent” (200). In marked contrast, Buckle, Oates, Constable, Phipps and the Phantom, a nightmarish figure which haunts Maggs, all have blue eyes and fair hair. Buckle, in particular, compares negatively with the virile Maggs. He has “mild blue eyes” (13), a “chicken neck” (154), “sunken cheeks and [a] bandy little duck-legged walk” (67)” and is a “wee wee chap, with his wee little legs and his wee little hands” (292). Not surprisingly, halfway through the novel, he begins to “cut a pathetic figure in [Mercy, his maid and mistress’s] eyes” (175). Also Oates is “short” and “slight” (29), and has “pale blue eyes” (33), which however can turn “hard behind those pretty lashes” (89). Just as Mercy becomes disenchanted with Buckle, so Lizzie, Oates’s sister-in-law and lover, realises in a moment of crisis that, while Oates “had always appeared to her as fierce and fatherly, … now she saw how the mantel was too tall for him, and how he
stretched to accommodate himself to its demands. It was a vision most profoundly
discouraging, and one she wished to God she had not seen” (213). Maggs’s physique
thus not only fits that of a typical hero-villain, but also powerfully underlines the
unmanly and weak bodies of the other major male figures.

With regard to the other characteristics of a typical hero-villain, Maggs fits these as
well. Being a transported convict makes him an outcast of English society par
excellence. Nevertheless, he is an extraordinary and charismatic figure. Whoever comes
across him experiences feelings of curiosity, attraction or repulsion, but no one is left
indifferent. Furthermore, he has mysterious and humble origins and is a rebellious and
impulsive figure. However, as already discussed, the most fascinating feature of a
Gothic hero-villain is the core ambivalence at the heart of this character. Maggs is in
fact both a hero and a villain, both a good and a bad man. He is egoistic, moody,
vviolent, threatening and aggressive, and abandons his two biological children in
Australia to return to an idealized England where he ends up committing murder. Yet, at
the same time, Carey depicts him in a way that arouses the reader’s sympathy, as critics
such as Hassall, Meinig and Savu have also noted. One reason for this is because he
himself experiences sympathy for other figures, pitying Sophina, Mercy and Lizzie, all
of whom have lost their fathers and suffered at the hands of males, as well as saving
Buckle’s footman Constable from being dismissed and feeling compassion for the old
butler when he dies as a result of Oates’s trick.125

In addition, he is a sympathetic character because he makes his own rules and moral
codes: he decides that England is the home to which he wants to return, without caring
about official laws prohibiting him from doing so at the risk of his life. He also has no
moral qualms about committing violent and illegal acts. This, however, does not reflect
particularly negatively on him. In fact, London’s, and by association England’s, society
is presented in such a flawed light in the novel that it cannot claim to be morally
superior. Consider, for example, Carey’s retelling of Maggs’s childhood, which
illustrates that the convict can hardly be held responsible for having been transported to
Australia in the first place.

125 The ability to feel sympathy distinguishes the Gothic hero-villain from the Gothic villain. Similarly,
the hero-villain is not a misogynist.
Moreover, in terms of feelings of remorse and guilt, it is revealing to consider what Maggs feels guilty of, and what does not trouble his conscience. It does not bother the returned convict to break into Oates’s and Phipps’s houses, threaten Oates, terrorize Buckle’s household, even to kill the Thief-taker, which underlines his capacity for criminal and cruel acts. Yet we are not expected to feel much sympathy for any of these characters. Equally, he does not express remorse for having burgled homes on Silas and Ma Britten’s orders. Maggs is, however, tormented by feelings of guilt about the deaths of Sophina, his childhood sweetheart, and their unborn child, as illustrated not only in the letters he writes to Phipps, but also because this repeatedly resurfaces from his unconscious when mesmerised, which powerfully shows how much he is affected by this past trauma (the other past trauma that keeps returning during the mesmerizing sessions is the physical and mental violence Maggs suffered in the penal colony, as will be examined later on).

Furthermore, Maggs accepts possible punishment and damnation because he believes his motives for his actions are compelling. This is true at least twice in the novel. Chronologically, the first, desperate, action is to plead ‘guilty’ in front of the court, the motive being to save Sophina from the gallows. As we learn the exact details of this event from Oates, we have to take them with a grain of salt, although the story is confirmed by Maggs. Fully aware of the consequences that pleading guilty carries (Silas, for example, feared being sent to America, and Tom “had an awful terror of transportation” (238)), this is a good example of a Gothic hero-villain choosing “to be damned” (Fiedler 133), like Clarke’s Rufus Dawes. In fact, at the time in which the novel is set, not much was considered closer to literal damnation than being sentenced to transportation. It is however a very noble motive that drives Maggs, willing as he is to sacrifice himself in order to save his beloved.

Maggs knowingly chooses damnation a second time when he decides to return to England to be reunited with his ‘son’ and subsequently enters into a sinister pact with Oates to find Phipps. Ironically, Maggs sees this as a return to his home, as finally severing his ties with Australia and “that race” (340). However, the picture of a homely England uncannily proves to be wrong, even though Maggs needs three weeks and the assistance of Mercy to realise this. Arguably, the most disturbing feature of Carey’s novel is in fact the distorted view that Maggs holds of his homeland, and his unrealistic hopes of a peaceful retirement in the company of Phipps. But why does he have such an
idealised perception of both, a perception which he claims helped him survive the horrors of the transportation system, but now poisons his mental health and risks seeing him dance the “Newgate Jig”? Below, Maggs describes to Oates the circumstances surrounding his meeting with the boy Phipps:

I was in an emotional condition, Toby. I had, the month before, been betrayed by my brother Tom. I had seen my childhood sweet-heart sentenced to be hanged. I had heard her cries and seen her struggle and kick as the turnkeys carried her away. I also was to be cast out of my dear England, not in a year or two as was the custom, but on the very next tide. I was feeling very bitter about my lot.

Then I see this little boy just starting out on the journey of his life, a very kind boy, with all his God-given goodness still undamaged. And I thought, so must you have been, Jack, before you were trained to be a varmint. I was much affected by this, Toby. It made a great impression. So when I finished my meal, I made this solemn promise to the little boy. I know exactly what I said. I spoke it out loud: and promised anyone who would listen that I would come back from my exile and take him from his orphanage, that I would spin him a cocoon of gold and jewels, that I would weave him a nest so strong that no one would ever hurt his goodness.

Maggs, at heart a good person, meets Phipps shortly after having experienced unspeakable mental pain and suffering. Thus it is not surprising that he transfers all his capacity and need to love to the innocent orphan who shows him some unexpected kindness, and promises Phipps a life he himself had longed for. Being a strong-minded individual, he is determined to keep his word.126

The above quotation is also interesting because it highlights the illusion Maggs holds of his “dear England”: while in retrospect he blames Ma Britten and Silas for having trained him to be a ‘varmint’, he does not make the connection between Ma Britten and Mother England, between his individual upbringing and the miserable lives of innumerable other children forced into poverty and crime due to the social conditions of the times. The question of why he cannot acknowledge this link will be addressed further on in this chapter. First, I would now like to consider what other elements make Carey’s counter-narrative a Gothic one, in addition to having a hero-villain as its protagonist. As I will argue, Carey further subverts Dickens’s novel by including an

126 Ironically, it could be claimed that everything Maggs does for Phipps leads to the decadence of the latter.
impressive collection of typical Victorian Gothic tropes, as well as by highlighting the horrors of Maggs’s childhood in London and of his life as a convict under the rule of the British transportation system.

Fred Botting explains in *Gothic* that Victorian Gothic shadows “the uncanny dualities of Victorian realism and decadence” (1), adds to earlier stock characters figures such as “scientists, fathers, husbands, madmen, criminals and the monstrous double” (2), consists of “narratives whose action centres on the urban, domestic, commercial and professional figures and locales” (6), where “the uncanny disturbs the familiar, homely and secure sense of reality and normality” (11), and the city becomes “a site of nocturnal corruption and violence, a locus of real horror; the family [becomes] a place rendered threatening and uncanny by the haunting return of past transgressions” (11), and “persons that [deviate] from its norms [become] fascinating objects of scrutiny” (12). Notably, all these features of the Victorian Gothic are present in *Jack Maggs*. For example, Oates the scientist is fascinated by mesmerism and enthusiastically starts out to map ‘the criminal mind’ (99), hoping, of course, to benefit from this excursion financially in his role of author. The past not only haunts Maggs but also Mercy, Oates and Phipps. Furthermore, similarly to Dickens and Clarke, Carey plays with the fear that ex-convicts could actually return from the antipodes: as White explains, “the unexpected ex-convict haunted respectable England right through the nineteenth century” (21). In addition, most of the action takes place inside houses which on the surface represent Victorian comfort and respectability. However, in the course of the novel it becomes clear that neither Buckle’s, Oates’s nor Phipps’s households represent the ideal Victorian home. In fact, Maggs’s arrival, which certainly has unsettling consequences for all three, is not the source for the decadence and corruption already present before the ex-convict makes his appearance.

When thinking of the Victorian era, one recurring image is indeed that of the middle-class home, not least because of the way it is idealised in many of Dickens’s novels. Studies such as Karen Chase and Michael Levenson’s *The Spectacle of Intimacy*, Lyn Pykett’s *The Improper Feminine* and Catherine Waters’s *Dickens and the Politics of the Family* offer great insights into the pressures and idealism surrounding the Victorian family and home, and on the background of their studies it is clear that none of the three
households at the centre of Carey’s narrative is up to the standard. Buckle, for example, a former seller of fried fish and groceries in one of London’s slums, has unexpectedly inherited 29 Great Queen Street from a distant relative. His sudden rise to fortune leaves him unprepared to run a middle-class household, which takes on decidedly chaotic characteristics. Scared of the servants already present, he brings with him Mercy Larkin, not only kitchen maid but also his mistress. They have known each other for several years, having become neighbours when Mercy and her mother moved to the same slum Buckle used to live in after Mercy’s father had died unexpectedly.

Following her husband’s death, Mercy’s mother first tried to make do by selling plum duff, but it was not long before she decided to sell her daughter, aged 13, as a child prostitute. Mercy’s innocence and hurt are illustrated in the following flashback, which is a chilling example of how Carey represents taboo topics in much more explicit terms than Dickens, thus undermining the authority and propriety of Victorian England:

They had not been standing on their pitch more than a minute when a tall gentleman … doffed his hat to her mama…. When, minutes later, her mother pushed her towards the man, and said, “Go with him”, she went willingly.

That was when the storm started, not in the still, humid street that was their destination, but in Mercy’s mind; years later, the confusion of her memory still blew dust and soot across that street and curled up into the evening sky.

…. He helped her into the doorway, and she took the door knob, expecting it to open. When she found it locked, she did not have the time to turn before she felt the stranger’s arms around her waist, and then he was squashed against her back with all his great weight, holding her clamped, talking to her all the time while he lifted the back of her dress.

…. What happened then happened, and like a broken plate was soon all pieces, most of them missing in the dark – the pain, the onions cooking in the butter, the smell of pipe tobacco on his whiskers, the wetness on her legs. (76-77)

---

127 As Waters points out, however, also in Dickens fractured families are prevalent, while “idealised ‘happy families’” are relegated “to the margins of the narrative,” both “in the early, as in the later, novels” (28). Thus, for example, in *Oliver Twist* “Fagin’s home appears to offer the comfort and cosiness held to be provided by the Victorian middle-class family circle. The function of the den as a refuge for thieves serves to literalise the figurative construction of the home as a haven or shelter in middle-class ideology” (34).

128 I am not suggesting that Dickens would have been unaware of issues such as child prostitution; on the contrary. However, due to the social constrictions of his time, he could not deal with them in such vivid terms as Carey in his fiction.
After finding her way back to her mother, they meet Buckle, who recognises them as his neighbours, guides them home and looks after them from this point on. No doubt his intentions are charitable, but by the time Maggs arrives in London, Mercy is Buckle’s ‘good companion’, hoping one day to become the legitimate mistress of his household. In the course of the novel, Mercy forfeits this chance because of her attraction to Maggs. Becoming bitterly aware of the fact that she is a stained woman, her experiences of poverty and prostitution haunt her, and she dreads what she will have to go back to when dismissed by Buckle.

But 29 Great Queen Street not only conflicts with Victorian middle-class ideals because it is deeply disorganised and the master sleeps with the maid, a one-time child prostitute and daughter of a mad woman. On top of this, one of the servants, Edward Constable, is a homosexual grieving the loss of his fellow footman Pope, who shot himself in the mansion’s attic because Constable had an affair with Phipps, Maggs’s ‘adoptive son’ and Buckle’s new neighbour. Homosexuality and suicide were taboo topics in the Victorian age, and turning Dickens’s loveable Pip into the rather despicable and homosexual Phipps may appear to be a surprising choice. In fact, it makes perfect sense from a postcolonial perspective. As discussed in previous chapters, in the nineteenth century homosexuality, or the ‘unnatural crime’, as it was called then, became one of the key issues resorted to in order to prove convict depravity. In Jack Maggs, however, Carey situates this ‘vice’ in the centre of the Empire as opposed to the supposedly amoral antipodes, thus turning this important Victorian precondition regarding penal Australia on its head. Moreover, in so doing, Carey also offers a late twentieth-century twist on a prominent colonial convict Gothic trope; as seen earlier, allusions to convict homosexuality and same-sex rape, especially, greatly contribute to the Gothic atmosphere in Clarke and Astley, both of whom use it to emphasise the degeneracy among convicts.

Neither Buckle nor Phipps are bona fide gentlemen, the first having been elevated to this social status by a chance inheritance and the second as a result of convict gold. And neither is Oates. Out of the three, he is the one who clings most persistently to the ideal of the Victorian home, bent on creating the safe haven for his family which he never

---

129 Heroines in sensation novels often had mad mothers. These heroines usually meet a tragic end, as Mercy probably would have, had she stayed in London. However, in Carey’s Australia she can lead a successful life, just as Little Emily can be redeemed in Australia in Dickens’s David Copperfield (see, for instance, Shannon Russell).
experienced as a boy. As with any merry Dickensian house, Oates’s home is “a place of books and laughter, of colourful rugs, of mirrors, these last being desired for their light: he would not have his son grow up in dreariness, or darkness. He had a long dining table that could welcome his wife’s aunts and uncles, and there was a splendid alcove in the parlour big enough to accommodate a twelve-foot-high fir tree at Christmas” (42). But Oates’s idealized Victorian home also contains a death mask and the cut-off hand of a criminal, and, more importantly, is corrupted through and through because of Oates’s illegitimate affair with his sister-in-law. Following the author’s discovery that he has not only ruined Lizzie but also made her pregnant, the cheerful home turns dark, as manifested in a pustule which shortly after appears on the breast of Oates’s son, a development which Oates understands to be a consequence of his actions: “as the great river of pus flowed forth from the lanced boil, Tobias Oates cried shamelessly.... In truth, however, the shame was very deep, and when he saw the evidence of infection pour forth from his son’s innocent body, he felt the poison to be all his own” (206). The boy’s pustule heals, but Lizzie dies a bloody, violent death as a result of a double dose of abortion pills, administered to her by both husband and wife (unbeknownst to each other) in order to maintain the hollow façade of bourgeois respectability. His marriage poisoned, this tragedy leaves Oates forever haunted. Moreover, because he had received the pills from Maggs, in his grief he blames the convict for his sins.131

The three London households are thus morally flawed before the convict arrives to torment them. Maggs’s presence does, however, have important and disturbing effects on the other characters, the most surprising perhaps on Buckle, who by the end of the novel has changed from a “mild apologetic little grocer” into a “hissing, dark-shelled incubus” (352). This astonishing transformation is remarkable considering that Buckle is the one who initially sympathises with Maggs and decides to shelter the convict because he has an older sister who was transported to “that same cursed place” (98). As Mercy is well aware, however, Buckle is a generous man, “but very spiteful when crossed” (136). Moreover, he loves his house, even worships it – after all it represents

---

130 See, for example, Armstrong and Bodenheimer, who discuss homes in Dickens’s personal life and in his fiction. They both mention Dickens’s love of mirrors and Christmas celebrations, and Bodenheimer also describes Dickens’s long dining table.

131 Critics have pointed out several parallels between Oates and Maggs, even describing them as Doppelgänger. For example, both had troubled childhoods, both have sweethearts who die a violent death, and both lose their unborn children due to abortion. In Great Expectations, Pip also has an alter-ego in the figure of Dolge Orlick (see Moynahan). Note, also, that Dickens was very fond of his first wife’s sister, who also died young, although Dickens’s biographers doubt that this fondness turned into a physical relationship (see Thieme 111).
his unexpected and sudden ascent to the middle class. Thus, the first, unforgivable, mistake Maggs makes is to insult Buckle’s very home by discrediting his silver and driving nails into doors and windows to keep the occupants inside. Secondly, Buckle is offended because Mercy feels attracted to the ex-convict, eventually hitting and dismissing her. In the end, jealousy and a hurt pride lead him to set in motion a sinister plan with the aim of having Phipps kill the ‘Australian’. In fact, at the close of the novel, not only Buckle, but also Oates, Oates’s wife and Maggs’s ‘son’ are ready to commit illegal acts. This powerfully illustrates the limits of rational human behaviour and depicts in Gothic terms “the awful spectre of complete social disintegration in which virtue cedes to vice, reason to desire, law to tyranny” (Botting, Gothic 5).

In addition to a fatal abortion, homosexuality, illegitimate relationships, suicide, child prostitution and a murder plot, most of them occurring in outwardly respectable Victorian homes, Carey further paints England in dark, violent and degenerate terms by focusing on dire poverty, misery and dirt. Consider, for example, the night Oates spends in a low lodging house in Fox Court, the fire which kills orphaned children in Brighton, and Maggs’s childhood, all of which compound the image of England as a locus of horror. Maggs’s childhood, moreover, continues to haunt the convict well into his adulthood, as do his experiences of the transportation system. The origins of Maggs’s traumas can in fact be situated in two separate periods of his life and two geographically distinct regions, the first stemming from his childhood and teenage years in London, the second from his time as a convict in penal Australia. In Gothic terms, both serve to illustrate the return of the past in the shape of Maggs’s tic douloureux and the memories that resurface when he is mesmerised.

We learn about Maggs’s tragic childhood through letters he has sent to Phipps, in the hope of rendering himself sympathetic in his ‘son’s eyes. Abandoned at birth in the mud flats underneath London Bridge, Maggs is found and ‘rescued’ by Silas Smith, Sophina’s father, and raised by Ma Britten, a midwife and abortionist, who, together with her son Tom, never lets him forget his origins. Neither Maggs nor Tom has an enviable upbringing. When nine years old, Tom is sent away to become a meat thief, working “the filthy, slippery floors amongst the sawdust, darting like a rat, a cat, and here a breast bone, there an end of chop fat, there a kick up the keyhole for his trouble” (102). At five, Maggs is a scavenger for the coal washed up on the riverbank, and by six he sorts bones and offal. Around this time, Silas decides that Maggs is ready for his first
lesson. Maggs enthusiastically follows Silas halfway through London, imagining the school where his benefactor is taking him. Instead he ends up on the top of a roof and is unceremoniously pushed down a chimney:

… there I was jammed in like a cork in a grog bottle, some foot below the top, coughing and wailing and choking myself with fear.

… I was afraid and imagined I would die.

... I have no idea how far down the chimney I was stuck, but in any case I was caught there a long time.

Then a great sheet of soot gave way, a thick lump of it, and I shrieked out in fright as I fell. The chimney was widening. In my alarm, I scratched at the walls, thus bringing down more filth into my panicked lungs.

… I was also very frightened, for it was dark in there, and I was forever coughing and choking on the falling soot.

… I began to cry.\(^{132}\) (108-09)

To his surprise, he does not die but finds himself in the most beautiful house he has ever seen, an image with which he will associate ‘England’ during his years as a convict. Back at Ma Britten’s after this terrifying ordeal, he hears that all along the reason why Silas had saved him was to turn him into a burglar.

Maggs becomes used to the chimneys soon enough, but there are plenty of other incidents in his childhood which serve to depict London in dark and violent terms. By the time Maggs turns fourteen, the Britten household is doing rather well and has moved to a better place, with two rooms where Ma receives her clients. It falls to Maggs and Sophina, who is now living with the trio and accompanying Maggs on his burglaries, to clean these rooms, in one of which they might “find blood in quantities enough to frighten any child, and discover things in muslin-covered basins that haunt me to this day. We said nothing about the plain room to each other, but emptied the contents of the basins into the cess pit at the back of the garden” (230). Tragically, along with Sophina’s conviction to be hanged, the most traumatic event yet to affect young Maggs will take place in this same room and end in the same pit: having fallen in love with Sophina, the two become very efficient at quickly picking the most valuable items in the houses they burgle, leaving enough time to enjoy themselves in one of the

---

\(^{132}\) This scene echoes the passage from Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* when Oliver is taken by Bill Sykes to perform a break-in.
grand bedrooms. Eventually Ma Britten finds out. Maggs gets a whipping, but Sophina, five months pregnant, is forced to have an abortion.

The next day Tom drags a clueless Maggs to the backyard:

[Tom took] me down through the house, down through the horrid little plain room, out towards the privy and the thistles to the brick wall, then along a little dirt track beside the wall, up and over a collapsing drain, and round the end of the wall. And here the smell was very bad – all kinds of excrements and rottenness.

Here Tom forced me to stoop and kneel beside the little drain as it pushed its way under the cheese shop. He kept me pinned, jerking my arm back a little now and then to remind me of the pain, and all the while poked into the filth with a stick.

- Look here, he said.

I feared he meant to push me into the cess pit, and so was undefended against the real assault.

Thus I looked.

- See, said Tom, it looks like a toad.

There lay our son – the poor dead mite was such a tiny thing. I could have held him in my hand. And on his queerly familiar little face, a cruel and dreadful cut.

Cannot write more at this time.

The circular repetition of words related to ‘fear’ and ‘darkness’ in the earlier passage about the chimney, the silence about the ‘things’ Sophina and Maggs encounter in the plain room, and the inability to write more when recounting the above episode aptly illustrates the failure of language when confronted with unspeakable horrors, as is often highlighted in Gothic literature.

Further to Maggs’s recollections penned down in the letters, his childhood traumas are made manifest in his adult life through his tic douloureux and the images that return during the mesmerizing sessions with Oates. The palsy on Maggs’s cheek is what first captures Oates’s interest, and during one of the sessions it becomes clear that this tic is linked to Maggs’s unborn child, who had a gash on one of his cheeks after having been aborted. In his mesmerised state, Maggs suddenly begins to weep uncontrollably when he sees his dead babe, with his sweet little cheek … cut open”. Wailing, Maggs clutches “at his own cheek, … dragging down on the flesh with his broad square nails” (222).
Oates then tells Maggs that the wound is healed, but Maggs shouts: “I want it, fool. It is all I have left of him” (223). This illustrates that he does not wish to let go of the past; rather, his pain is a way of remembering Sophina and their lost child.

Although Maggs’s childhood makes up a great proportion of the mesmerizing sessions (at one point Oates complains that he already has forty copperplates on Maggs’s love for Sophina), his experiences as a convict also resurface vividly when mesmerised. The horrors of the transportation system become real through images of the double-cat, a torturous flogging instrument with which Maggs was punished while a convict at Moreton Bay, a secondary place of punishment in present-day Brisbane, and the Phantom, the figure of a soldier which Oates has implanted into Maggs’s unconscious. If in the wider context of this study the concept of the Phantom as discussed by Lloyd Smith can be read as illustrating how Australia’s convict past was repressed for generations but has continued to haunt the nation as, once transportation had ended, it became a cultural secret (“The Phantom 217), in Carey’s novel the Phantom is a symbol of Maggs’s traumas of transportation, including floggings, imprisonment, displacement and loss. Starting out as a flog-happy shape-shifter who sometimes looks like Captain Logan, the abominable commandant of Moreton Bay, the Phantom eventually settles into the shape of a soldier of the 57th Foot Regiment. Deeply unsettling, at some point the Phantom crosses over from Maggs’s unconscious into his dreams. During one haunting nightmare, Captain Logan orders Maggs to be lashed one hundred times, until he can see the bone. All Maggs feels is “cold terror in his gut”, weeping and begging the Phantom to show mercy (123). Eventually Oates mentions Sophina to Maggs, which makes the latter realise how much the author has stolen from him during the sessions. In this moment of extreme distress, even in a conscious state Maggs can “feel the Phantom pulling with his strings inside his face, long lines of cat-gut knotted to his flesh” (296). Notably, the cat has not only mentally scarred him, but also visibly disfigured him by carrying off two of his fingers and etching a “a sea of pain” on his back, “a brooding sea of scars, of ripped and tortured skin” (95).

133 Another time, when during a session Oates suggests whipping the Phantom, the ex-convict becomes extremely perturbed and exclaims that he “can’t bear to watch a flogging” (92-93). In fact, no matter how hateful the Phantom is, Maggs, who has experienced the cat himself, cannot stand watching someone else being flogged, which highlights his capacity for empathy.
While Maggs has no problem identifying Moreton Bay, where the floggings occurred, with “hell”, a pit into which not even God can see (346), the other characters start having hellish visions in London. Buckle watches “Goats and Demons dancing in the flames above the coals” (188), Lizzie sees “ghostly figures, fictions rising amidst the skirts of flame” (334) and Oates is haunted by “the figures and faces of his fancy dancing before him. He saw the wraith of their dead child folding and unfolding in the skirts of fire. He saw Lizzie herself, her face smiling and folding into the horrible figure of decay. He could not bear it” (354). Leading up to the final climax, London itself seems “hellish – broken cotton bales, cracking whips, an omnibus alight on St Martin’s Lane – all the streets awash with a weary sulphurous kind of evening light”, the great sky now “so very black and swollen” (317), looking like “the Day of Judgement” itself (318). That same night, on the way to shoot Maggs, Phipps looks back along familiar Drury Lane, a street known for prostitution and suicides (Ackroyd, London, 141, 258):

but it was a wild and unexpected landscape in no way like the Drury Lane he knew. Great wooden beams criss-crossed the street, like intrusions in a nightmare. Others had been propped against the walls of shops. These beams were joined together like inverted, lopsided A’s, and something in their rude design brought to mind the gallows. A kind of fog now rose from the excavation, and in the penumbra of the gas light Henry Phipps imagined he saw a man’s body hanging from a beam, suspended above the pit.134

In contrast, Maggs struggles to perceive the darkness and violence present at the heart of England, because they conflict with the idealised image of his home country.

Notably, in fact, no matter his tragic past in England and the fact that he has become a successful businessman in Australia, throughout the novel Maggs emphatically distances himself from everything Australian. As he explains to Oates: “I’d rather be a bad smell here than a frigging rose in New South Wales” (250). Equally, he considers Phipps to be his real son, while denying the love and guidance of a father, which he himself never had, to his biological children. Not wanting at any cost to be categorised as an Australian, he clings onto an English identity, because perceiving himself as English allows Maggs to distinguish himself from “that race” (340). Arguably, the reason behind Maggs’s strong desire to be English goes back to his childhood. Like a victim bonding with the abuser, as a little boy Maggs yearned to be loved by Ma

---

134 While Phipps imagines a man’s body, compare this to Pip, who, in his imagination, sees Miss Havisham hanging from a beam in Great Expectations (see Johnston).
Britten, to truly belong to her family: “[she] liked me ‘be-in useful’, and I therefore urgently made myself a useful little chap, as if my life depended on it. … I did so like the feel of her strong arms … I would have done anything to get it” (103). Although in retrospect he recognises her as a “bitch” that had “raised him for a base purpose like a dog or a hen” (117), he fails to make a connection between Ma Britten and Mother England, as already mentioned. Similarly, as an adult, he wants to belong to England, to become a respected member of English society, and this disables him from seeing the horrors of the penal colonies as an extension of English brutality, perpetrated by English soldiers and officials. Only Buckle and Mercy recognise the link, Buckle exclaiming “God help us all, that Mother England would do such a thing to one of her own” (98) when telling Oates about his transported sister.

At the climax of the novel, Maggs is finally confronted with the reality thanks to Mercy and the very Gothic meeting with Phipps in the shape of the soldier-phantom. Mercy plays a crucial role in awakening Maggs from his delusions. She does this in two ways. Firstly, she shows a keen interest in Maggs’s two biological children. During the last, near-fatal night in Phipps’s house, she stubbornly keeps talking to a reluctant Maggs about them:

“You have babies in the place where you have come from.”

His mouth tightened in denial.

“My real son is an Englishman.”

“I meant your real children.”

“I am not of that race.”

“What race?”


“But what of your babes?”

“Damn you, don’t look at me like that. I am an Englishman.”

“You are their da, Jack. They walk along the street, they think they see your face in the clouds.”

[…]”

“What do you know?” he roared, his face turning a dark russet red.

“What…do…you…know?”

At which Mercy burst into tears and threw her head upon his broad chest. “I know what it is to lose a da.” (340)
At last, Mercy can show Maggs that he has to accept responsibility for his two boys, which consists of more than paying someone else to raise them (which after all is precisely what Silas did for Maggs). Secondly, she explicitly links the horrors of the transportation system to the King, and thus England: “‘Who lashed you, Mr Maggs?’ ‘He were a cockney named Rudder. A soldier of the King.’ ‘Then it were the King who lashed you,’ she insisted” (346). Shortly after, Phipps appears in the uniform of this same soldier, ready to shoot Maggs.

The climax of Carey's novel in fact brilliantly ties together Maggs's ‘day-time’ illusion of Phipps with his ‘night-time’ visions of the Phantom. In the veil of night, with a fierce thunderstorm raging outside, Maggs beholds “his nightmare: long, straight nose, fair hair, brutal dreadful uniform of the 57th Foot Regiment. The Phantom had broken the locks and entered his life” (351). Not only does the Phantom enter his life, but it does so in the person of his English gentleman ‘son’, in the very house Maggs has chosen for Phipps, at the heart of the British Empire. Frozen in front of this figure, Maggs is saved by Mercy, who fearlessly deflects the bullet aimed at him by raising her left hand and thus herself losing two fingers. Imprisoned in his illusions and nightmares, before this crucial encounter Maggs does not connect the horrors of the system with their origin – England – but with the geographical place – Australia. Finally having confronted his Phantom, following this moment of peripeteia he literally turns his back on England and returns to New South Wales, where he can lead a prosperous and happy life, freed not only of his false beliefs regarding Phipps and England, but presumably also having laid to rest his feelings of guilt towards Sophina and the unborn child, as he has finally found ‘Mercy’.

Moreover, the novel’s dramatic climax arguably not only symbolises Maggs’s liberation from his illusions, but also illustrates Carey’s own changing attitude towards white Australia’s origins. As he explains in “The ‘Contrarian Streak’”:

Australian history is filled with denial and false consciousness. I grew up thinking that we were English; my grandfather called England home. And somehow, when we imagined the convicts and soldiers, we always placed ourselves on the soldier’s side of experience. We thought the convicts were nothing to do with us. Later I came to believe that the convict experience was central in the formation of Australia.
Carey’s move from a point of denial to a point of embrace regarding the convicts reflects a shift from a colonial to a postcolonial perspective. The former is represented by Carey’s grandfather, who calls England home, and his own earlier identification with the soldiers, while the latter is represented by Carey once he has been able to distance himself from “the soldier’s side,” and instead focuses on the convicts, the Empire’s outcasts, whom he gives a voice by moving Dickens’s convict to centre stage. In fact, as Carey further puts it in “Magwitch is really my Ancestor,” an interview held by Igor Maver, “[i]f you’re an Australian and read [Great Expectations], you’re in a sense captive of Dickens’s point of view, and so even though you’re Australian you see Magwitch as a sort of dark, terrible Other” (158). Carey does not actually have any convict ancestors, but his novel, rather than portraying convicts in dark and terrible terms, finally recognises them not as ‘other’ but as an important part of Australian history. At the same time, Carey’s Gothic depictions of London as the Empire’s decadent and violent centre, which sharply contrast with the positive picture he draws of the Australia Maggs returns to, puts into perspective Australia’s English cultural heritage.

The novel’s happy ending has however been criticized by some as either being too abrupt and optimistic, or as undermining the postcolonial outlook by transforming Maggs, Mercy and their offspring into a perfect copy of the respectable Victorian family, critiques I contest. With regard to the first, like many earlier Gothic novels, Jack Maggs ends with a happy resolution for the main characters and briefly summarises the lives of the hero and heroine after their adventures. Traditionally, the protagonists return to the safety of their class and family. In a postcolonial twist, however, Maggs and Mercy leave the corrupted centre for a better life in the antipodes. In “Australian Gothic” Turcotte writes that in colonial Australia the Gothic mode lent itself “to articulating the colonial experience in as much as [it] emerges out of a condition of deracination and uncertainty, of the familiar transposed into unfamiliar space. It is the very quality which Freud identified as the condition of the uncanny, where the home is unhomely” (278). In Carey’s postcolonial novel, however, it is England – the ‘home country’ – which becomes uncanny, which is ‘unhomely’, while Australia is the place where Maggs and Mercy can determine their future and create a new home. In the end Maggs dies a peaceful death, contrary to the one imagined in Oates’s and Dickens’s

---

135 This was confirmed to me in an email by Kate Richter, who is listed on petercareybooks.com as a contact for Carey in Australia.
novels, while Mercy becomes a respected matron in a place where her past and her mad mother do not stigmatize her. In London she most likely would have met a very different fate: before moving to Australia, she feared to be turned out onto the streets after her falling-out with Buckle. Incidentally, Dickens supported a home which rehabilitated fallen women, on the premise that they would be sent abroad at the end of their stay (Ackroyd, *Dickens’s London* 170).

With regard to the second criticism, the life Carey imagines for Maggs and his family is a life that former convicts realistically could achieve with some luck and hard work. As Smith explains in *Australia’s Birthstain*, although the horrors of the penal settlements, especially those of secondary punishment, cannot be denied, the greater part of convicts obtained a ticket-of-leave after serving their term and then had a real opportunity at creating a successful future – notably without the prospect of ‘great expectations’. As pointed out in the Introduction, one has to bear in mind that Smith mostly focuses on the ‘winners’, that is on those convicts who made good in the colonies, who managed to found families and leave descendants. Nevertheless, her study illustrates that Maggs’s life as a convict emancipist does not represent an unachievable outcome. Note, also, that the novel is set in 1837, that is before anti-transportationists such as John West and Sir William Molesworth, with their focus on convict homosexuality, contributed to creating a stigma amongst convicts that led them to hide their pasts. Carey’s reassurance, moreover, that, even though prosperous and respected, the Maggs’s became known as “clannish and hospitable, at once civic-minded and capable of acts of picturesque irresponsibility” (356) highlights that they hardly meet the image of the perfect middle-class Victorian family.

Stoddart argues that the Gothic hero-villain

serves more to throw social and sexual repression into relief than he does to demonstrate the possibility of legitimate redress or reform … though the hero-villain may temporarily function as a vehicle for fantasies of unregulated desire and ambition or for sympathising with the socially persecuted, the undeniable nature of his ‘otherness’ … always ultimately provides a means of distancing and disavowing his actions as unfeasible or illegitimate. (178–9)

Stoddart’s statement accurately describes Maggs’s situation in London, the imperial centre, where, once having been transported he will forever remain an illegitimate outcast. Nineteenth-century Australia as constructed by Carey, instead, becomes a place
where the socially ‘other’ (albeit not the racial ‘other’), where convict hero-villains are not only temporarily sympathised with, but can prosper. In this sense, *Jack Maggs* continues in the direction of the movie *Great Expectations: The Untold Story* (1987), an earlier Australian retelling of Dickens’s novel directed by Tim Burstall, in which the attention also shifts to the convict. Similarly to Maggs, Burstall’s Magwitch is a much more active character than Dickens’s convict, in the end tricking the English authorities and returning to Australia to be joined by a loving Pip. However, compared to Carey’s novel, Burstall’s movie follows the original much more closely and does not focus as much on England and the transportation system as loci of terror, but rather concentrates on the relationship between Magwitch and Compeyson.

Compared to the colonial texts analysed so far in this study, however, *Jack Maggs* is the only novel to unequivocally allow a former convict a happy life in Australia at the end of his ordeals. In contrast, Moondyne, Rashleigh and most of Astley’s convicts meet a violent end in Australia, as does Dawes in the revised version of *His Natural Life*, while in the original version he finally leaves Australia, just as does Heans. The fact that Carey’s protagonist eventually finds peace and prosperity in Australia also distinguishes him from Dickens’s Magwitch, who has to die at the end of *Great Expectations*. In fact, Maggs’s eventual success in the penal colony completes Carey’s subversion of Dickens’s novel, while also highlighting how much perceptions about Australia’s convict history have changed since colonial times. For example, while one reason why Clarke eventually decided to kill Dawes in his revision was that the Melbourne he lived in was not ready for a novel in which a man who had been confronted with the horrors of the transportation system could live on and rejoin respectable society (see Chapter Two), in 1997 it is acceptable to have as a novel’s protagonist a convict who has survived infamous Moreton Bay and later becomes a wealthy and respected member of the colonial community.

Although Carey’s hero-villain thus no doubt reflects a greater acceptance by Australians of the ambivalent convict origins of white Australia at the end of the twentieth century, Elizabeth Ho draws attention to the “lack of critical attention paid to *Jack Maggs*.” According to her, this can be explained by the fact that when the novel was published, “[e]stablishing convictism as a foundational moment seemed to be at odds with ‘saying sorry’ for aboriginal dispossession.” – notably, in 1997 “the first Reconciliation Convention was held during which it was expected that Prime Minister John Howard
would finally apologise to indigenous groups for the actions of Australia’s first white settlers” (n. pag). If Carey does not address “the relationship between the indigenous populations in the settled areas and the invading settlers,” that is, one of the three major issues raised in postcolonial literature from settler countries as identified by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (133), Flanagan in Gould’s Book of Fish focuses on both convict abuse and Aboriginal suffering. As will be discussed in the final chapter of this study, his novel depicts colonial Australia in deeply Gothic terms, and illustrates that Australia has not yet dealt with its dark past.
Chapter Five

Gould’s Book of Fish: Richard Flanagan’s Postmodern Retelling of the Convict Past

As seen in the last chapter, Peter Carey’s Jack Maggs (1997) radically departs from Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations. Carey renders England in thoroughly Gothic terms while concluding with a positive representation of Australia: unlike Dickens’s Magwitch, Maggs eventually becomes disillusioned with his ‘mother land’ and manages to escape back to New South Wales, where he can finally settle down and, together with Mercy, found a large and successful, if somewhat peculiar, family. Richard Flanagan’s Gould’s Book of Fish (2001) does not contain such a happy ending. A strikingly different narrative from Jack Maggs, Gould’s Book of Fish is a circular text, in which the end eventually merges with the beginning, thus blurring the distinction between past and present. In fact, although Jack Maggs and Gould’s Book of Fish are both postcolonial novels, they engage with different narrative modes: Carey’s is a drastic rewriting of a Victorian classic, while Flanagan’s is most notable for its postmodern nature. What links the two texts, as well as the ones analysed earlier, is that they have a male convict as their main character and make use of the Gothic to engage with Australia’s convict past.

So far, however, Gould’s Book of Fish has not been discussed in relation to other Australian convict texts, nor has much been said about its Gothic elements. Instead, critics have focused on its postmodern and metafictional characteristics, while Flanagan has clearly distanced himself from traditional historical novels such as Marcus Clarke’s His Natural Life. For example, in 2002 he told Chris Wright how such texts “tend to adopt a posture of authority by using such facile devices as describing the smell of vinegar on the deck of a ship. In contrast, he describes Gould’s Book of Fish as ‘‘anti-historical’,” and “closer to the real Tasmania for it” (Chris Wright, “Swimming to Tasmania (Continued)” 2). The only Tasmanian author included here, Flanagan is passionate about his home island, and from interviews he has given on Gould’s Book of Fish and his other novels set there, it is clear that he feels a deep-seated need to depict

---

136 Only a few critics have mentioned its Gothic nature in passing: Camilla Nelson, Carmela Bird and Roslynn Haynes have called the novel Gothic, while Chris Wright considers Gould’s metamorphosis a “gothic-fairy-tale twist” (“Swimming to Tasmania (continued)” 1).
Tasmania in what he considers a more authentic way than is commonly done by outsiders.\textsuperscript{137}

The novel can in fact at least in part be considered Flanagan’s response to existing convict fiction, and the overall aim of this chapter is precisely to situate Flanagan’s novel within Australia’s Gothic convict literature. Attention will be paid to what makes \textit{Gould’s Book of Fish} Gothic, and to what kind of hero-villain William Buelow Gould, the eponymous main character, is. Crucially, Flanagan’s sceptical attitude to the genre of historical fiction and to the way in which Tasmania has been depicted by strangers raises the important question of how he addresses the island’s convict past. I argue that in \textit{Gould’s Book of Fish} Flanagan successfully brings together postmodernism and the Gothic in his search for an alternative way of narrating Tasmania’s penal history as well as the tragic fate of its Indigenous people. The two modes are well suited to investigating the island’s brutal past from a twenty-first century perspective. On the one hand, the Gothic first arose as a counter-movement to the Enlightenment towards the end of the eighteenth century (that is, contemporaneously with the British colonisation of Australia), and is a form that commonly reveals repression, horror, madness, violence, taboos and secrets.\textsuperscript{138} On the other hand, postmodernism rejects modernity’s grand or metanarratives, celebrates irony and parody, and acknowledges the importance of the past. By incorporating both modes, Flanagan is able to powerfully reimagine the atrocities that were committed under Britain’s colonial rule, while at the same time also highlighting how they continue to haunt present-day Tasmania.

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, labels such as post(-)colonialism, postmodernism and the Gothic “cover a wide range of overlapping literary and cultural practices” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 159-160). Here I consider \textit{Gould’s Book of Fish} a postcolonial text because it was written after Australia had become an independent country, and because it questions the “authority of the European centre and its forms and expectations” (161), in particular the “claims of an objective historical consciousness” (159). With this in mind, my main approach consists in investigating how the Gothic and postmodernism interact in Flanagan’s text. As several critics have

\textsuperscript{137} Consider also the following excerpt from an interview with Giles Hugo, in which Flanagan explains that in his novel \textit{Death of a River Guide} (1994) it “‘is one of the first times [that Tasmanians have] seen their own world – somebody has attempted to depict their world with honesty and love. They (Tasmanians) are a much-maligned people who have been misrepresented by others for a long, long time’” (Interview with Giles Hugo, “Richard Flanagan: The Making of a Tasmanian Best-Seller” n. pag.).

\textsuperscript{138} See the Introduction for a detailed discussion of the Gothic.
pointed out, the two are closely linked. Catherine Spooner, for example, explains that postmodernist texts are characterised by an “embrace of the popular, of genre fiction, of sensation and spectacle [which allows] plenty of room for the Gothic to flourish” (“Gothic in the Twentieth Century” 43), while in Modern Gothic Allan Lloyd Smith argues that “there is a curious ‘match’ between the last half of the eighteenth century and the end of our own” and reminds us that

the much-prophesied end of the Enlightenment and the debates between Habermas and Lyotard have some relevance to the astonishing rise of this extravagant popular mode [i.e. the Gothic] in the last thirty years from marginality to one of the central languages of the popular contemporary. The literary declension of terror is an inevitable response to the atrocity exhibition of the twentieth century, just as it was for the writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as they confronted the social, economic, and political instabilities of a new order, and the mayhem of a revolutionary period.

(Introduction, Victor Sage and Lloyd Smith 4-5)

Particularly relevant to this chapter is postmodernism’s preoccupation with modernity’s metanarratives. As Fred Botting explains in Gothic, postmodernism is characterised by a growing disaffection with the structures and dominant forms of modernity, forms that have become characterised as narratives themselves, powerful and pervasive myths shaping the identities, institutions and modes of production that govern everyday life. In this ‘postmodern condition’ the breakdown of modernity’s metanarratives discloses a horror that identity, reality, truth and meaning are not only effects of narratives but subject to a dispersion and multiplication of meanings, realities and identities that obliterates the possibility of imagining any human order and unity. … In the questioning of narratives of authority and the legitimacy of social forms, what can be called postmodern Gothic is akin, in its playfulness and duplicity, to the artificialities and ambivalences that surrounded eighteenth-century Gothic writing and were produced in relation to the conflicts of emerging modernity.139 (157)

---

139 In The Gothic, David Punter and Glennis Byron similarly highlight the Gothic’s and postmodernism’s links to modernity: as they put it, Gothic first originated “as a counter-discourse to the modernizing impulse of the Enlightenment,” while postmodernism is a “complex rebuttal and development of Modernism’s own post-Enlightenment progressive dictates” (53).
Striking in its “playfulness and duplicity”, *Gould’s Book of Fish* puts the spotlight on how history functions as a metanarrative. Like Gothic fiction, postmodern literature often turns to the past. Umberto Eco, for example, explains that “[t]he postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited” (*Reflections on ‘The Name of the Rose’* 67). The past is also a common point of interest in metafiction, that is fiction in which the author consciously draws attention to the artificiality or literariness of a work. Often found in postmodern texts, metafiction is closely linked to the Gothic, too. As Spooner points out, “[t]he ascendancy of what Linda Hutcheon calls ‘historiographic metafiction’ – or, self-conscious historical fiction – laid the past open for Gothic rewriting” (43). She further notes that, “[a]lthough historiographic metafiction is not always written in the Gothic mode, its concern with marginal voices, untold tales, and the difficulties history has in getting told lends itself naturally to Gothic treatment” (43-44).

A prime example of a novel in which the Gothic, postmodernism and metafiction come together to reassess the past is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, to which, incidentally, Michiko Kakutani has compared *Gould’s Book of Fish*. As Andrew Smith highlights in *Gothic Literature*, in *Beloved* “the apparent postmodern ‘narrative pastiche’ … is used ‘to contest history as a master narrative’, because it asks questions about who produces ‘history’” (147, quoting Rafael Pérez-Torres, “Between Presence and Absence: Beloved, Postmodernism and Blackness”). Likewise, Bill Ashcroft argues that in *Gould’s Book of Fish* Flanagan “brilliantly exposes the narrative strategies with which history is created, the strategies that marginalize and exclude the experience and the stories of the colonized [meaning here both Aborigines and convicts]” (“Reading Post-colonial Australia” 35). As Ashcroft further points out, “[t]he novel in this way performs an act of historiography that is extremely common in post-colonial writing” (35).

Flanagan was first inspired to write a novel about Tasmania’s convict past when he saw the fish paintings of the actual William Buelow Gould. Recalling the day he

---

140 Kakutani calls Flanagan’s novel “a huge, phantasmagorical work that combines magical realism, Joycean language and Melvillian intonations to examine the legacy of colonialism” that “turns out to be as inventive and visionary in its imagination of history as [Toni] Morrison’s masterwork, *Beloved*” (“Critic’s Notebook; Blurring Lines in Literary Sands” 1).
accidentally came across the *Book of Fish* at the Allport Library in Hobart, Flanagan tells Wright how much it astonished him:

‘The paintings had a beautiful luminosity to them. There was a great love and humanity in them. I’d never heard of this book of fish. Gould was known in a small way here, because he was a convict artist, but he has no great name because his is a rude man’s art. He was a hack. But these fish had something wonderful about them, and no one seemed to care. No one seemed to have noticed.’

What really struck Flanagan that day was the fact that Gould’s fish looked so *human*. ‘No paintings exist of any of the convicts who were sent to Sarah Island,’ he says. ‘So you have this death camp with no images of anyone who went there. All we have left are these fish. It just charmed me the way he [the actual Gould] had somehow smuggled out something of the people within. He had pleased his masters, but at the same time done something completely subversive.’

(“Swimming to Tasmania (continued)” 2, italics in original)

Inspired by these paintings, Flanagan set out to reimagine the “untold tales” (Spooner 43) of the convicts that had been sent to this “death camp,” “all those faceless people who have no portraits, who only exist beyond their bodies as a sentence of exile, a convict indent record, a list of floggings, a tattooed initial on a fellow felon’s chest or arms” (Gould’s Book of Fish 384).

Notably, in Gould’s Book of Fish, Flanagan addresses an historical period that not only is crucial for Tasmania as a whole, but for his own family as well, himself included: born and bred in Tasmania, Flanagan also happens to be a descendant of Irish convicts. As he explains in an interview with Kate Kellaway (“Hook, Line and Thinker”), one of his great-grandfathers was transported for the theft of 3.6 kg of cornmeal during the Irish famine, while another, called Ned Green, was convicted of belonging to a revolutionary society on the West Coast of Ireland. His family illustrates how generations of Australians have dealt with the convict heritage: “for years, the Flanagan family was in denial about its origins. The convict past carries a ‘huge emotion, a shame that deformed and crippled us as a people’” (n. pag). His grandmother

---

141 Superficially, Flanagan in fact matches the stereotypical image one might have of Tasmanians. As Wright puts it, “in many respects the cropped-haired, solidly built author fits the mold perfectly. He was born in the tiny town of Longford, in Northern Tasmania, to a working-class family (possum-snaring was not unheard of in the Flanagan clan). His ancestors were Irish convicts (a fact that will elicit a knowing nod from your average Sydneysite). And (of course, of course) he left school at 16 to work as a laborer” (“Swimming to Tasmania” I).
“was a woman of some snobbery, although very poor – and she didn’t think well of Ned.’ But one day she casually dropped the bombshell: ‘I think old Mad Ned might have been a convict.’ The records confirmed this. ‘It explained so much,’ Flanagan says” (n. pag.). The ‘convict stain’ followed Flanagan to Oxford, where he studied in the 1980s. As he recalls in an article he wrote for The Guardian in 2002:

I went to study at Oxford University in the 1980s on an imperial scholarship instituted by Cecil Rhodes. There I was routinely called by one don Convict, with that half affable, half patronising smirk so well practised in those dismal cloisters. "Oh, come on, Convict." Such cant was not the exclusive province of the right. Another don, a grandee of the left, told me, without a whit of irony, that Australia had no culture. (“My Commonwealth” n. pag)

Incidents such as these had a deep impact on Flanagan, and resurface in Gould’s Book of Fish. Consider, for instance, the scathing sarcasm with which he describes Professor Roman de Silva, the history expert who dismisses Gould’s manuscript as a fraud: “Professor Roman de Silva’s twitching movements and tiny, pot-gutted frame, his dyed jet-black hair swept up over his pinhead in an improbable teddy boy haircut, suggested an unfortunate cross between an Elvis doll and a nervous leghorn rooster” (17). In addition to looking ridiculous, de Silva is the perfect example of a narrow-minded academic who is quick to dismiss the manuscript as a fake because it does not conform to what is officially known about Sarah Island, that is, it does not coincide with the metanarrative version of Tasmania’s convict history. Recalling the don described above who told Flanagan that Australia has no culture, de Silva concludes his polemic with the following comments:

He said that the Book of Fish might one day find a place in the inglorious, if not substantial history of Australian literary frauds. ‘That one area of national letters,’ he observed, ‘in which Australia can rightly lay some claim to a global eminence.’

‘It need not be added,’ he added, sly smile almost obscured by the limp quaff leaning over his face like a drunk about to vomit, ‘that if you were to publish it as a novel, the inevitable might happen: it could win literary prizes.’ (20-21)

---

142 In her dissertation “The Nineteenth Century in the Recent Australian Imaginary,” Fiona Duthie similarly notes how according to Christopher Koch, “the convict past [has been] like a wound, scarring the whole inner life of Tasmanians” (quoted in Duthie 137).
Sid Hammet, the finder of the manuscript and narrator of the framing story, disagrees: “The Book of Fish may have had its shortcomings – even if I wasn’t willing to admit to them – but it had never struck me as being sufficiently dull-witted and pompous to be mistaken for national literature” (21). No doubt Hammet would be very surprised to learn that Gould’s Book of Fish ended up earning several prizes, including The Commonwealth Writers Prize, Overall Best Book Award, 2002, and the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award, formerly known as The Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction, 2002.

The above passage is a good example of how ironic and entertaining the novel often is, as is common for postmodern texts. While in this case Flanagan employs sarcasm to undermine de Silva’s supposedly expert opinion, thus questioning historians’ claims to objective truth, most of the time Flanagan’s sharp wit is directed at the British Empire and the European cultural heritage it exported to Australia. There are innumerable episodes in the novel that range from poking fun at the ‘mother land’ to portraying the devastating impact its colonisation had on Tasmania in particular, but also on other regions such as the Caribbean. To name just a few instances, consider the hoisting of a soiled sheet as opposed to the Union Jack when Van Diemen’s Land is first claimed for the Crown (which results in Gould’s first conviction), Voltaire’s bust which happens to be the perfect shape for sexual stimulation, Lempriere’s aspiration to become a member of the Royal Society, which finally leads to his own pickled head becoming a key piece of evidence to prove the depravity of Tasmanian Aborigines, and the Commandant’s attempt to reproduce or even outdo modern Europe on Sarah Island, a delusional project that inevitably ends in disaster. I will discuss some of these passages later on; for now it should be noted that this can in part be considered a reaction to Flanagan’s experiences growing up in the 1960s and 70s in a Tasmania deeply shaped by its colonial history. As he explains in “My Commonwealth”, “we were a people cowered by English culture” (n. pag.), and, “through my youth there was imposed on us a culture relentlessly English” (n. pag.).

This did not constitute an issue for earlier authors such as Tucker, Clarke and Hay, who, even though critical of the British transportation system, did not question the supposed cultural superiority of the British cultural heritage, in line with the times and social environments they lived in: Hay belonged to the establishment, Clarke had an upper-class background, and Tucker, also English, considered himself better than Irish fellow
convicts and Aborigines. In contrast, John Boyle O’Reilly, being a political prisoner from Ireland, condemns everything English in Moondyne Joe, while William Astley’s anti-British stance is apparent throughout his tales.

O’Reilly’s and Astley’s critiques of Britain represent personal world-views that do not reflect the dominant outlook of their times but the position of marginal groups. In contrast, the irony present in Gould’s Book of Fish mirrors a wider change in attitude. Flanagan himself points out that “[e]ventually … the situation changed: in the end the bastard England could not be sustained, and through my childhood in the 60s and 70s it crumbled. … We were finally beginning to look at the real Australia, in all its strangeness, its uniqueness, and its wonder” (“My Commonwealth” n. pag.). In fact, in addition to examining British colonisation and its transportation system, Gould’s Book of Fish also represents a compelling search for the ‘real Australia’: with its elements of the fantastical, the novel contains much that is strange, unique and wondrous, for all of which the Gothic is an appropriate vehicle.

For example, Flanagan’s novel contains a framing story in which the narrator Sid Hammet explains how he came across Gould’s book, a mysterious manuscript whose wondrous characteristics are stressed from the beginning. Bringing to mind such classic Gothic texts as Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto and Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw, in Gould’s Book of Fish one of the purposes of the framing story is to explicitly link the past with the present: when Hammet finds the manuscript in an old junk shop, its cover gives off a “faint, but increasingly bright purple glow” (12), until it turns into a “mass of pulsing purple spots” that spreads onto Hammet’s hands, until they, too, are “covered in purple freckles, twinkling in splendid disarray … it was as if [Hammet] had already begun a disturbing metamorphosis” (13). At the end of the framing story, this is exactly what happens: Hammet metamorphoses into a weedy seadragon, which turns out to be a metamorphosed version of Gould himself.

As Punter and Byron point out, “the lost manuscript is beloved of Gothic tradition” (The Gothic 51), allowing authors to play with notions of authority and provenance. However, if in Otranto the manuscript was meant to give the first edition some kind of authority (while, following considerable success, in the second edition Walpole acknowledged that in fact no such manuscript existed), here, in keeping with the metafictional nature of the novel, the “physical existence of the Book of Fish challenges
the reader’s preconceptions of what a book is and what a book can do” right from the
start (Ashley Rose Whitmore, “Reconfigurations of History and Embodying Books in
Gould’s Book of Fish” 5). For example, not only does the manuscript have a contagious
effect on Hammet, but it also continually evolves: “each time I opened the Book of Fish
what amounted to a new chapter miraculously appeared” (24), a hint of how one can
never gain a complete picture of the past, of how there are always more stories to be
told.

In keeping with its marvellous nature, halfway through the framing story, the
manuscript disappears when it spontaneously dissolves into water and is mopped up by
a bartender. What we then get to read is not a printed publication of Gould’s book but
the version Hammet, a forger and con-artist, writes down after the original is lost, in his
own words a “wretched copy” based on “memories, good and bad, reliable and
unreliable” (28). This immediately casts a doubt on the validity of the text, a doubt
which is enforced when (according to Hammet’s recollection) Gould describes himself
thus: “I am William Buelow Gould – convicted murderer, painter & numerous other
things. I am compelled by my lack of virtue to tell you that I am the most untrustwort
hy guide you will ever trust” (53). Further to framing stories and mysterious manuscripts,
unreliable narrators are also commonly found in Gothic fiction; consider for example
the governess in The Turn of the Screw, on whose questionable interpretations much of
the novella’s suspense hinges.143 In Gould’s Book of Fish the two (self-confessed)
unreliable narrators are juxtaposed with the experts and academics of the framing story
and Jorgen Jorgensen, the record-keeper of Sarah Island, all of whom can be considered
upholders and/or creators of some of modernity’s metanarratives. As already noted,
however, the opinion of de Silva, along with the verdicts of other modern professionals,
is subverted by the highly ironic ways in which Flanagan depicts them, while
Jorgensen’s archive, supposedly the repository of historical truth, turns out to be
something altogether more evil.

When Gould breaks into the room above his watery cell, he finds himself in the registry
of the settlement, a vast space with so many books it makes him “dizzy just to look at
them, to realise not only might there be this many books in the world, but that there
could be this many books in a single room.” Resembling nothing like “the amber charm

143 See also Spooner, who lists unreliable narrators among the Gothic clichés in “Gothic in the Twentieth
Century” (44).
of old libraries,” the room is “a shifting labyrinth of grey & blue shades, ugly & sinister” (280). Avidly reading through the records every night for the next week, Gould finds no chronicle of the penal colony he lives in, no evidence of the Commandant’s insane schemes. Instead, the records produce a version of Tasmania’s history that accords with official “expectations & not with reality” (284). At first, Gould is awed by Jorgensen’s “deranged achievement,” his “extraordinary conceit of an alternative world” (284), which creates “an image of the settlement that would persuade posterity of both the convicts’ animality & the administrator’s sagacity, a model of the power of unremitting, tempered discipline to transform pickpockets into cobbler & catamites into Christians” (287). Only slowly does it dawn on Gould that “in this universal history, all he had seen & known, all he had witnessed & suffered, was now as lost & meaningless as a dream that dissolves upon waking” (290).

Jorgensen’s “universal history” is a prime example of how metanarratives exclude and suppress marginal voices, and Gould’s realisation that all he and his fellow convicts have suffered is utterly lost is a pivotal moment in the novel. “[S]cornful of the idea that history can reveal objective, irrefutable truths” to start with (Wright, “Swimming to Tasmania (continued)” 2), here Flanagan goes further, emphasising how official documents can willingly omit and distort, thus misleading later generations and further exploiting the victims of history, in this case convicts. Or as Xavier Pons puts it in “This Sad Pastiche,” one of the novel’s arguments is that “official history is mostly a pack of lies, because written by the winners to justify their often barbaric actions, and if one is to achieve a true understanding of Tasmania’s early history one should use one’s imagination rather than official records, which amount to manipulations and fabrications” (Pons 68). A good example of how the Gothic and the postmodern come together in Gould’s Book of Fish, the records room scene not only exposes “the narrative strategies with which history is created” (Ashcroft 35, see above), but in its eerie setting also illustrates how in accordance with Gothic convention past misdeeds catch up with characters: a highly dislikeable figure, Jorgensen is buried under his own tomes when he attacks Gould, leaving him dead with one eye dangling “from its bloodied socket, forced out by some blow of a book corner or a shelf edge” (297).

---

144 While here it is officials of the system that distort the truth, in other writings Flanagan has accused present-day politicians and business people of misrepresenting facts. See for example the following extract from “A Letter from Richard Flanagan,” which refers to Tasmania’s forestry industry: “‘The Council is composed of bullies and thugs whose power in large part relies upon suppression of truth” (n. pag.).
Critical of historical novels and official histories, Flanagan is keen to emphasise that “‘there’s not much that’s true in [Gould’s Book of Fish]’ (“Swimming to Tasmania (continued)” 2). The real Gould, for instance, differs significantly from his fictional counterpart.\(^{145}\) There is, nevertheless, much that is based on facts in the text. As Pons points out, “Flanagan’s novel is in a sense a historical one: much of it takes place in the early nineteenth century, and many characters, including Gould himself, are historical figures. The book thus relies heavily on the historical context” (68). For example, “the novel’s topography is … a faithful and accurate mirror of historical reality,” while the many names of actual historical personages, as well as historical events and facts “act as reality effects, lending the novel a convincing historical dimension by asserting Gould’s credentials as a witness” (69-70). At the same time, as Pons further notes, the “historical basis of many characters and events is thrown into some doubt by a number of historical ‘mistakes’ made by the novelist, and made deliberately, not out of ignorance but out of a desire to subvert historical discourse itself” (70).\(^{146}\) In addition, there are the many “wholly imaginary elements – characters and events – whose very exaggeration and improbability runs counter to the credibility of the truly historical elements” (71).

Arguably, it is through this combination of historical details with absurd and fantastical components that Flanagan successfully critiques the workings of the British Empire. Especially powerful are those passages in which some of the most shocking incidents turn out to be based on historical fact, such as the severing and barrelling of Aboriginal heads for pseudo-scientific reasons, the horror of which can leave readers wondering how far-fetched some of the ‘truly’ imaginary elements really are. Such passages can produce a result akin to the “peculiar effect” described by Lloyd Smith in the following quotation. Comparing early Gothic texts with contemporary fiction, he points out that

> whereas early Gothic proposed a delightful excursion through the realms of imaginary horror, contemporary use of the Gothic register strikes a darker and more disturbing note. It is the horror now that is real, and the resolution that is fanciful. Hence the peculiar effect we sometimes find, when the actuality or

---

\(^{145}\) See Pons for a discussion of the differences, which reflect a certain symbolism. For example, the real Gould arrived in Tasmania in 1827 and died there in 1853, at the end of transportation to Tasmania. The fictional Gould arrived in 1803, at the beginning of Tasmanian colonisation, and “Gould’s (fictional) presence at that beginning creates a close, almost intimate association with the birth of the postcolonial condition of the island. On the other hand, 1853 marks an end, that of the convict system, and associating Gould with that end by sticking to the historical chronology would have suggested that the past is indeed past … something Flanagan vehemently denies by making Gould live on in Sid and in the weedy seadragon” (71).

\(^{146}\) Note that Peter Carey similarly plays with notions of history and truth in *The True History of the Kelly Gang* and *Jack Maggs*. 
realisation of the horrors of contemporary life strikes through the web of highlighted representation with an effect that may be comic, or grotesque, or uncannily chilling. (Sage and Smith, Introduction 5)

Although the horrors described in Gould’s Book of Fish are not contemporary horrors, they are grounded in the real because they are based on Tasmania’s violent past, and this certainly makes the novel darker and more disturbing than, say, Walpole’s Otranto or Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho. In fact, convict Gothic fiction in general is often dark and disturbing precisely because of the underlying knowledge that, however loosely, many shocking scenes are based on historical occurrences. Consider, for example, some of the horrifying scenes in Ralph Rashleigh, His Natural Life and Astley’s tales.

The extent, however, to which Flanagan includes the fantastic in his novel, and his focus on history as a metanarrative, set him apart from authors such as Clarke and Astley, who frequently refer to historical documents and records to substantiate and validate their discourse. Clarke, in particular, added footnotes to gruesome scenes in the original version of his novel, while the revised edition contains an appendix with a list of his sources. One of the first authors to depict the horrors of the convict system, he felt it was necessary to justify some of his subject matter by emphasising that such incidents were based on the truth. Roslynn D. Haynes explains that, as a consequence, “[m]ost readers regard Clarke’s His Natural Life as an authentic history of convict times,” (Tasmanian Visions 222). In fact, some of its typical themes, such as violence, depravity, cannibalism and homosexuality, have become stock ingredients of convict literature. In his review of Flanagan’s novel, Philip Mead provides a list of the “worked-over elements of the colonial past” so often found in historical convict fiction. They include the “blood-lusting whaler, wrongfully transported convict, sadistic overseer, drunken commandant/clergyman, cannibal absconder, rapist/sealer of the Furneaux Group, mutiny and its variations on the Admirable Crichton narrative, emancipist businesswoman (brewery/brothel), Aboriginal collaborator with missionaries, Great Conciliator, post-extinction tiger” (“The Strange Narrative Density of Tasmania” 15).147

---

147 As discussed earlier, this belies Frederick Sinnett’s judgment that there is no place for Gothic staples in Australia. In “The Fiction Fields of Australia”, which was published in 1856, Sinnett inextricably links the Gothic to a formulaic European tradition, arguing that the genre cannot flourish in Australia because it lacks such typical eighteenth-century elements as “a spring panel and a subterranean passage, or such like relics of feudal barons” (“The Fiction Fields of Australia” 23). Clearly, however, the Gothic is about more than aristocratic ghosts, medieval castles and secret tunnels. In fact, Mead’s list above of typical
Notably, Gould’s *Book of Fish* contains most of these common topics as well. To name the most obvious, Gould is not only unjustly condemned as a boy, but later also wrongly convicted of murder twice, Pobjoy and Musha Pug are perfect representatives for the sadistic overseer, the Commandant is not so much drunk but perennially drugged by laudanum, Capois Death tells a chilling tale of cannibalism, Twopenny Sal is abducted by a sealer, and her family ends up living for some time with Robinson, that is the “Great Conciliator”. Haynes writes that it is hard to imagine a convict text without at least some of the clichéd elements commonly found in this genre, especially in a Tasmanian context. According to her, “[i]t seems difficult, almost impossible, for contemporary Tasmanian novelists not to include convicts and/or Aborigines as a ready-made source of the shocking” (223). I would argue, however, that rather than being somehow compelled to use many of these stock elements, Flanagan self-consciously engages with them.

In fact, there are important differences in how Flanagan deploys some of the staples of convict fiction, in line with the novel’s postmodern nature. Gould himself, for example, varies from Devine/Dawes and most other characters analysed here in telling ways, although he also shares some of the crucial traits of the Gothic hero-villain that we have already encountered in the previous protagonists. For instance, even if he does not match Fiedler’s physical description of the hero-villain that fits Moondyne, Devine and Maggs, he is also characterised by a charismatic and empathetic personality, a rebellious nature that frequently causes him trouble, and a tendency to break the laws of his society, which, however, are represented as deeply flawed. Moreover, similarly to the other protagonists, one of the key narrative functions of Gould is the exposition of repression: in Gould’s *Book of Fish*, too, evil is identified with “institutions of power” (Botting, *Gothic* 92), while Gould is intrinsic to Flanagan’s critique of Britain’s colonisation of Tasmania and its transportation system.

To further compare Gould with Devine, as already discussed in the chapter on *His Natural Life*, Clarke’s protagonist is English, of gentlemanly origin and grows up in a prosperous household, but, sullen and rebellious, leaves home and later changes his name to Dawes to disguise his identity when accused of having murdered his companion. He does this in order to protect Dorothea, the wife he has abandoned, from

themes of Australian convict fiction illustrates how the Gothic can be adapted to different settings/times/countries, etc.
learning that her father was a petty criminal selling fake gemstones. Although Devine/Dawes is by no means a saint, this highlights his noble-minded nature, which triumphs again and again throughout the novel, no matter how hard he is punished and how deep he falls, and which finally guarantees his return to his old social status in the original version of the novel. Gould, instead, is “the bastard issue of a fair day’s passion” (54), the son of an Irish Catholic girl and a French Jewish weaver, who dies from a stroke in the act of fathering him. It is hard to imagine a more inauspicious beginning to life for anyone. In keeping with a common characteristic of the hero-villain, Gould is therefore cast as a quintessential outsider from the start, and continues to live on the fringes of society throughout his childhood and youth, remaining deeply scarred by his experiences. He grows up in a poorhouse, where the priest regularly attempts to molest him, is sold to a stonemason, eventually runs off to London, where he survives by prostituting himself, then turns to stealing and robbing until one evening he is threatened into joining Lieutenant Bowen’s mission to colonise Van Diemen’s Land as a deckhand. Thus, Gould is the most dismal of all convict protagonists analysed here. Arguably, his shockingly underprivileged upbringing serves to highlight the terrible living conditions experienced by the poor in nineteenth-century Britain, which adds to Flanagan’s denouncement of the Empire. Moreover, the shift from an upper-class protagonist to a protagonist of a mixed ethnic and low socio-economic background illustrates postmodernism’s interest in marginal groups, while the explicit mention of child sexual molestation and child prostitution reflects how notions of what can openly be addressed in a novel have changed since the nineteenth century.

Still a boy, Gould arrives in Australia in 1803, right at the beginning of its colonisation. Ostensibly a free subject, he commits an offence as soon as he sets foot on Van Diemen’s Land: when he is ordered to claim the island for the Crown by hoisting the Union Jack, he mistakenly raises a sheet “soiled with long clouds from Lieutenant Bowen’s languid afternoons with the Samoan princess Lalla-Rookh” instead. As a result he is sentenced to “seven years for theft of personal property, a further fourteen years for insubordination & twenty-eight years on top of that for mockery of the crown” – the number pattern reflecting the Empire’s self-importance (42). The irony here cannot be missed: this is arguably the most ridiculous ‘crime’ committed in any of the texts

---

148 Gould is followed by Jack Maggs, who has a similarly unpromising beginning to life and a traumatizing childhood. As already mentioned, however, unlike Gould, Maggs is eventually allowed a happy ending.
analysed in this study. In contrast, even if Dawes is incorrectly accused of murder, the
offence he is convicted of is as serious now as it was then, while most of the convicts in
the other novels are transported for entering and breaking, forgery or poaching. The
absurd punishment meted out to Gould for his misdemeanour, on the other hand,
represents the British penal settlement of Australia as a travesty of justice.

In the novel, however, this incident has all but laughable consequences. Furious,
Lieutenant Bowen takes his anger out on a few hundred Aborigines who arrive at the
beach shortly after, ordering the cannons to be opened upon them. Mr Banks is
“delighted to find most of their black bodies still intact” and has the convicts sever and
pickle the heads of the “blacks,” feeling “well pleased with the half-dozen barrels of
bobbing heads when they [are] finally presented to him” (42-3). This sets the tone for
most of the interactions between the whites and the island’s Indigenous population, as
well as literally foreshadowing Lempriere’s mad pseudo-scientific undertaking to send
Aboriginal skulls to England, which backfires terribly on him. As already mentioned,
the two incidents in the novel in which barrels full of severed Aboriginal heads are
shipped to England are based on actual fact: in “My Commonwealth” Flanagan explains
how, when being mocked by his dons at Oxford, “[n]ot 200 yards from where we were,
there stood a museum housing one of the greatest collections of pickled heads in human
history, assembled from around the world – including Tasmania – by an empire that
saw itself as the peak of civilisation but was rather a particularly remarkable
achievement of organised barbarism” (“My Commonwealth” n. pag.).

Again and again, Flanagan tells shocking stories of Aboriginal suffering. Consider, for
example, “the bleaching bones & skulls of savages slaughtered by sealers in their raids
for black women” and “the sloughing corpse of a black woman” who has been “staked
out on the ground, abused in a most dreadful fashion & then left to die. Parts of her
shimmered white with the light of the sun playing on moving maggots” (69-70). Or
Clucas’s gruesome boast about “bursting in on the camp fires of the savages on [a free
settler’s instructions] & shooting up a dozen or more & then cooking them on their own
fire,” and the sealer “who sliced off part of the thigh & ears of his woman, Jumbo, &
made her eat them as punishment for trying to escape” (70-71). Occasionally, the
Aborigines are shown to take revenge. At one point, for example, Gould comes across
an emancipist who is pulling the charred corpse of his mate out of a smouldering hut
after an attack by the “savages” (70), while Twopenny Sal tragically kills her two
children violently fathered by Clucas. All this paints a picture of a Van Diemen’s Land that is steeped in blood and violence: the novel contains many incredibly ghastly and violent scenes which leave some of the characters (and readers) deeply haunted. Thus, similarly to other convict Gothic texts such as Ralph Rashleigh, His Natural Life and Astley’s tales, one source of the Gothic in Gould’s Book of Fish is the frequent excessive brutality, a distinctive feature of the novel and the genre. Crucially, however, in Tucker, Clarke and Astley the violence centres primarily around convict life – Aboriginal suffering is not a topic in any of these texts.149

In contrast, Gould’s Book of Fish not only engages with Tasmania’s convict past but also addresses the “Great Australian Silence,” a phrase introduced by W. E. H. Stanner in his 1968 Boyer lectures to refer to the silence on Indigenous Australians in Australian history after white settlement. Notably, the novel was published during the heyday of the so-called history wars, a term that describes the ongoing public debates over the interpretation of Australia’s colonial past and the development of modern Australian society, with a particular focus on how Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders have been affected by colonisation. While progressive historians such as Henry Reynolds have emphasised that the white settlement of Australia constituted an invasion marked by violent conflict, guerrilla warfare and significant massacres of Aboriginal peoples trying to defend their land, conservative historians such as Geoffrey Blainey and Keith Windschuttle contest this, in their opinion, overly negative interpretation, which Blainey famously has termed the “black armband view of history.” Flanagan uses the expression “black armband” in his framing narrative, and the novel can clearly be read as an indictment of historians such as Blainey and Windschuttle.150 Flanagan’s inclusion of Aboriginal suffering is moreover a perfect example of how Gothic and postmodern concerns coincide in the novel. On the one hand, both Gothic as well as postmodern texts commonly reflect the concerns of the age in which they are written, in this case the history wars.151 Gothic fiction moreover typically deals with the

149 As already mentioned in the chapter on Heans, in Clarke and Astley Aborigines make virtually no appearance, while in Tucker they are represented as stereotypical ‘savages’ who serve to highlight Rashleigh’s perceived superiority. In fact, so far Hay has been the only author to include an Aboriginal character who is more than a stereotype: the powerful figure of Conapanny in his novel is remarkable. Moreover, Hay provides background information on factual events and personages such as the Black War, Truganini and Robinson. Nevertheless, Hay does not focus on the Aborigines to the extent that Flanagan does.

150 See also Jones 127, or, for example, The History Wars by Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clarke and Marc Delrez’s “Fearful Symmetries: Trauma and ‘Settler Envy’ in Contemporary Australian Culture”.

151 As Spooner notes, also “postmodernist fiction often replays contemporary critical concerns within historical settings (43).
repressed past, that is the ‘Great Australian Silence’, while Aborigines are a minority group who have been greatly affected by modernity and its metanarratives.

In fact, the controversy over frontier violence against Aborigines represents the battle between different versions of history, which has had very real repercussions for Australian politics and culture. Writing in 2003, Anthony Mason explains in his foreword to *The History Wars* that

> elements of [the historians’] competing visions of Australia were appropriated by the Labor Party and the Coalition parties, respectively, as persuasive means of articulating their political and electoral goals. The present federal government and its supporters have decried the so-called ‘Black Armband’ view of Australian history and have emphasised the successful European settlement, the Anglo-Saxon-Celtic legacy, the monarchy, and the sense of national unity and pride in our achievements. This emphasis, which strongly reflects elements of the Blainey view, is a more reassuring Australian story, whether wholly accurate or not, than that offered by Manning Clark [a progressive historian].

I say ‘more reassuring’ because it appears to offer common assumptions based on what was formerly an orthodox account of Australia’s past. But the common assumptions taken from the past are, in various respects, under challenge. We live in a multicultural society, which is no longer united, as it once was, by very strong common assumptions. (Foreword vii-viii)

As is typical of both Gothic and postmodern texts, *Gould’s Book of Fish* precisely questions the “more reassuring” “common assumptions” and “orthodox” accounts offered, in this case, by the conservative historians. At the same time the novel’s metafictional nature also highlights that, as Mason puts it, “[t]here can be no absolute certainty about the past” (viii), although clearly some propositions cannot be denied, namely the fact that “the Indigenous peoples of Australia were dispossessed against their will of much of their traditional land” (viii).

The locus for some of the most spectacular scenes of violence in the novel is Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour, the penal settlement which Flanagan turns into a fantastical nightmare. When Gould first comes ashore, his nose is “assailed by the effluvium of death” in a passage notable for its Gothic tone:

> Death was in that heightened smell of raddled bodies & chancre-encrusted souls. Death arose in a miasma from gangrenous limbs & bloody rags of consumptive
lungs. Death hid in the rancorous odour of beatings, in the new buildings already falling apart with the insidious damp that invaded everything, was seeping out of sphincters rotting from repeated rapes. Death was rising in the overripe smell of mud fermenting, enmities petrifying, waiting in wet brick walls leaning, in the steam of flesh sloughing with the cat falling, so many fetid exhalations of unheard screams, murders, mixed with the brine of a certain wordless horror....

(104)

Then he meets his fellow convicts:

We were not surprised when we felt upon us ... the malignant stare of that unholy army of the persecuted – filthy little clawscrunts & half-starved wretches, their pus-filled eyes poking like buttercups out of scaled scabby faces, their misshapen backs hacked & harrowed out of any natural form by endless applications of the lash; brawn-fallen, belly-pinched wrecks of men bent & broken long before their time, the one I thought the oldest only thirty-two years of age.

Nor were we at all shocked by how here all Nature was inverted – from the molly-boys to the nancy-men, one such blowsabella even getting about with a blind-tam hidden beneath his slops, a bundle of filthy rags he claimed was his baby....

(105-6)

These quotations illustrate how Flanagan’s take on some of the typical elements of convict Gothic fiction differs from the colonial authors analysed earlier. Firstly, none of the colonial texts are so forthright about the ‘nameless crime’ as Gould’s Book of Fish: here as well as in other parts of the novel, Flanagan makes explicit references to homosexuality and rape. In comparison, Clarke never directly refers to same-sex activities. Instead “the unspeakable sexual practices”, as Damien Barlow puts it, have “haunted [His Natural Life] and unnerved readers ever since its first publication” (34). Moreover, while Flanagan certainly does not condone sexual abuse, homosexuality itself is not portrayed as a sin in the text, as opposed to Clarke’s novel, where it serves to further alienate convicts such as Gabbett from its implied middle-class Victorian readership. In the above passage, for instance, the “molly-boys” and “nancy-men” are described as the logical outcome of such an unnatural place as Sarah Island, which shifts the depravity from the convicts to the British authorities. In other parts, Flanagan emphasises the homosexuality of major characters such as Roaring Tom and Capois Death (while, as already mentioned, Gould himself used to prostitute himself in his
youth in London), but their sexual orientation is not used to underline or imply any wickedness. On the contrary, Roaring Tom and Capois Death are likeable men deserving respect and empathy. In fact, while in Jack Maggs Carey situates this ‘vice’ in the centre of the Empire as opposed to the supposedly amoral antipodes by turning his equivalent of Dickens’s loveable Pip into a dislikeable homosexual (see previous chapter), in Gould’s Book of Fish Flanagan takes the taboo out of homosexuality, thus to a certain extent de-Gothicising this staple of convict literature. What still evokes horror is physical abuse and rape; however, it is not homosexuality itself which causes this in the novel, but rather the conditions created under Britain’s transportation system.\textsuperscript{152}

If homosexuality is no longer a source of the Gothic in Gould’s Book of Fish, the physicality of convict life as described by Flanagan most certainly is. The “gangrenous limbs & bloody rags,” “sphincters rotting from repeated rapes,” “steam of flesh sloughing with the cat falling,” “pus-filled eyes,” “scaled scabby faces,” “misshapen backs hacked & harrowed out of any natural form by endless applications of the lash” and “brawn-fallen, belly-pinched wrecks” are good examples of how Flanagan represents the bodily aspects of the convict experience in exaggerated and over-written terms, which greatly contributes to turning Sarah Island into a surreal, nightmarish world that serves to further criticise the British transportation system. Of course most other authors also include descriptions of broken and ill bodies, of beatings, lashings and murders. Flanagan, however, raises this to a new level of horror by including testing depictions of body parts and physical functions: the many scenes in which all sorts of bodily fluids make an appearance, from saliva, blood and vomit to pus and sperm, not to mention various passages in which excrements play a role, can result in sensations of disgust and rejection in the reader, feelings commonly evoked by the abject.

According to Julia Kristeva such feelings of loathing and repugnance are typically produced by matter such as “a piece of filth, waste, or dung,” the “cesspool,” “a wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay” and, most strongly, “[t]he corpse” (Powers of Horror 2-3), all of which make plenty of appearances in Gould’s Book of Fish. The abject is “of obvious relevance to Gothic horror, a genre

\textsuperscript{152} In the same vein, cannibalism, another preeminent convict Gothic ingredient, which however only makes a small appearance in the novel, does not serve to highlight the depravity of common convicts, unlike Clarke’s Gabbett or Astley’s cannibals.
which ‘abounds in images of … the corpse, whole and mutilated’, and of ‘an array of bodily wastes…’ (Creed 1993:10), as Kelly Hurley points out in “Abject and Grotesque” (138). She further highlights that “[t]he body’s secretions and excretions … are also foregrounded in [Mikhail] Bakhtin’s grotesque body.” In Bakhtin’s words, “[t]he body copulates, defecates, overeats, and men’s speech is flooded with genitals, bellies, defecations, urine, disease, noses, mouths, and dismembered parts” *(Rabelais and His World* 319). Hurley further explains that “[f]or Bakhtin this grotesque body is a richly comic body. … For Kristeva the grotesque-abject body is a body of fear, but fear tempered with fascination” (138). Notably, Flanagan’s novel not only contains many repulsive details about bodies, but also characters that are comical in their grotesqueness, foremost among them Tobias Lempriere, the settlement’s surgeon and man of science.

Daniel Brown explains that “sensational visions of human nature as irredeemably irrational and bodily, as erupting in the most weird and gross behaviours” were first introduced by popular Gothic novels as a reaction to the Enlightenment at the end of the eighteenth century (1). In *Gould’s Book of Fish* the most irrational, weird and gross behaviours can be found among the government officials and Lempriere. Consider, for example, the scenes involving Lempriere’s severed penis, the Commandant’s mask and Musha Pug’s ball sack, all of which are replete with grotesque imagery that serves to mock these representatives of the British Empire. The abject, instead, is mostly used to highlight the convicts’ shocking living conditions and the Aborigines’ suffering. However, as Jo Jones argues in “Dancing the Old Enlightenment”, there is more to this frequent reference to bodies and their (waste-) products, be they repugnant or absurd, than a wish to shock and ridicule.

Jones does not read *Gould’s Book of Fish* from a Gothic perspective, but her essay raises several concurrent points to this chapter. According to her, it is Flanagan’s consistent return to the body that grounds his postmodern narrative in the real (119). Basing herself on Lyotard’s discussion of the postmodern sublime, she reads *Gould’s Book of Fish* as a critique of the Enlightenment and the linearity of conventional history, and reaches similar conclusions to Ashcroft and Pons, that is that Flanagan’s novel can

153 Note that the fish paintings that are connected to members of the establishment (e.g. the porcupine fish with Lempriere, the sawtooth shark with Jorgensen) also serve to ridicule these characters, whereas those that are linked to convicts or Aborigines (e.g. the freshwater crayfish to Gould, the striped cowfish to Twopenny Sal) do not illustrate any negative aspects.
be considered “a self-conscious subversion of the classical historical novel” (115), whose aim is to show how “the colonial past and history in general is something that shifts, often according to the motivations of the story teller or reader, unable to be pinned down in any singular sense” (116). In this context, “the extensive use of bawdy imagery” and the exploration of “the extremes of physical experience” serve “to expose the limitations of the metaphysical and universal ideas of the Enlightenment.” Moreover,

[...]

This further highlights, as already discussed earlier, how the horror in Gould’s Book of Fish is grounded in Tasmania’s history: while we can never know for sure how many Aborigines and convicts died (thus opening up the past to imagination and the fantastic), suffering and violence were an indisputable reality both on the frontier and in secondary places of punishment, which renders the novel darker and more disturbing, qualities that Sage and Lloyd Smith consider typical of contemporary Gothic texts (see above). Notably, Jones also points out that, “[a]lthough Gould’s Book of Fish engages to a degree with Bahktin’s notion of the carnivalesque, its representation of the colonial past, as evidenced in the records room scene, requires engaging with a much darker aesthetic in order to give expression to the loss and unfulfilled longing that an honest search for history entails” (119).

One of the darkest and most Gothic passages in the novel occurs precisely in the registry. Once Gould realises that Jorgensen’s metanarrative has completely erased the pain and suffering experienced by him and his fellow convicts, he has the following ghostly vision:

My mind felt a sickening horror that is beyond words to describe. Gargoylish faces seemed to cluster at the windows far above & plead for something to appease their endless suffering that went unremembered and unrecounted. I felt as if those awful flayed skulls were advancing & receding – with their red bone
[sic] sticking through as though they had been gnawed by dogs – as if they wished me to make the past right, something that was totally beyond my powers. I had read & I had read, & still the past went unavenged & unnoticed, & how was it possible to remake it as anything else? Out of the staring, accusing sockets of the skulls of the Scottish weaver & Roaring Tom Weaver, & of Towtereh’s stolen skull & his grandson’s smashed skull crawled cockroaches. Fleas flew out of their jagged nose bones. The skulls began dripping putrescent tears of pus & blood that passed through the glass & spread all over me. In terror I brushed fiercely at my shoulders, my arms, my head as if I could so wipe them away; No! cried I, & No! Please leave me alone! But those fearsome shades would not leave & were begging of me what was impossible. I, who was covered in sloughing rotten flesh, who felt all the maggots that once had crawled over the staked dead black woman now crawling over me, who stank of all decay & of all sickness & of all return, saw the incarnation of a world passing me by in all its horror & all its beauty, & and how could I say that both were inescapable.

Ripe with Gothic imagery, this passage illustrates how much Gould has been traumatised by what he has witnessed during his long sojourn in Van Diemen’s Land. The haunting “gargoylish faces” and “flayed skulls” begging Gould to avenge their suffering belong to dead convicts and Aborigines whom Gould has encountered on the island, all of them victims of British colonisation and/or the transportation system. The Scottish weaver, a machine breaker, was maimed by the Cockchafer, a gigantic waterwheel used to torture convicts. Slowly dying in excruciating pain, he begs to be killed, a wish finally granted him when Capois Death smothers him with his palliasse. Roaring Tom Weaver was condemned to death for dressing in a maid’s petticoats. The executioner rushes his work, and as a consequence the noose fails to snap his neck. “Rather than rapidly dying, Roaring Tom thrashed around slowly choking, his roaring now a shrill gurgle. The hangman walked around to the front of the gibbet, shaking his head, leapt up, grabbed Roaring Tom’s thrashing legs, & hanging on, swung with him. … It was an awful thing” (257). Towtereh, chief of the Port Davey people and Twopenny Sal’s father, first led Gould to question his own assumptions and prejudices about “the savages.” He is decapitated after having succumbed to illnesses imported by the whites, and ends up a specimen in the barrels sent to England by Lempriere. Towtereh’s little grandson, instead, is killed by Clucas when the latter first abducts
Twopenny Sal, swinging him against the rocks and beating his brains out until he is dead (218), while the staked black woman is found by Gould on one of his escape attempts, as already noted earlier.

In addition to powerfully bringing home the incredible brutality so common in colonial Tasmania, this passage is also important because it differs from other Gothic convict texts that contain disturbing visions. Rashleigh and Maggs, for example, are haunted by their tormentors, while Rex is confronted “by all the phantoms of his past crimes” in Clarke’s famous blowhole scene (His Natural Life 543). Gould, instead, is visited by fellow convicts and Aborigines, which illustrates his close connection with other victims and his capacity to feel empathy – a key requirement of hero-villains. In fact, Gould’s Book of Fish is the only novel considered so far which tells of intimate friendships between ordinary convicts. In comparison, the main convict characters in the colonial texts are either of gentlemanly origin (Dawes, Heans), or at least distinguished from their fellow convicts by being or considering themselves superior in some way (Rashleigh, Moondyne), or else brute criminals depraved beyond imagination (most of Astley’s prisoners). Apart from Carey’s Maggs and Flanagan’s prisoners, only very few other examples exist of common convicts who are not rendered in despicable terms (but Maggs is an outsider who is not shown to have formed close friendships with other convicts; on the contrary, for most of the novel he holds them in contempt).

Remarkably, however, Gould, this most pitiable of all main convict characters, ends up embarking on a much more heroic and far-reaching undertaking than any of the other convicts analysed here. At first, Gould is overwhelmed by the demands of the skulls, pleading “for something to appease their endless suffering that went unremembered and unreckoned” (290). How is he to make the past right, instead of leaving it unavenged and unnoticed? Then, on New Year’s Day, 1831, he sets out to “once & for all [destroy] the Convict System” (309). His plan is to hand the penal records over to Matt Brady, that prophetic figure who is rumoured to be about to liberate all convicts from Sarah Island. Gould imagines that Brady would then “circulate a truthful account that exposed the horror of the settlement for what it truly was, which showed the lie of the official record, of all official records, & in so doing inculcate through the length & breadth of

154 Only Moondyne attempts something of a similar scale (and he succeeds in reforming the transportation system in Western Australia). Most other convicts act in their own interest or in the interest of their loved ones.
Van Diemen’s Land a spirit of revolt” (312). Of course none of this happens. To Gould’s great disappointment, Brady turns out to be altogether different from the myth created around him. The episodes in the novel about Brady are in fact a good example of how Flanagan weaves together historical fact with fiction to make readers realise how little of the past is or can be known in absolute terms.

Although Gould’s original plan does not eventuate, Sarah Island is nevertheless eventually destroyed with the help of the archive’s records. Gould’s nightmarish journey through “Transylvania” becomes a “torment beyond imagining” (314). Notably, however, the landscapes Gould travels through are hardly rendered in Gothic terms, unlike in previous texts. Arguably, it is not surprising that Flanagan, a keen environmentalist who appreciates and spends a lot of time in Tasmania’s wilderness, does not depict the island’s nature in dark terms. Instead, the horrors Gould encounters are man-made: again and again he stumbles across maimed skeletons and body parts of both escapees and Aborigines until he is joined by Capois Death, who in a gory scene full of visceral details is soon after killed by two Aboriginal men due to a fundamental miscommunication between the two parties. Clearly, in Gould’s Book of Fish humans are the source of the Gothic, not nature.

“[H]auling a sled of lies called history through the wilderness” (322), Gould is on the brink of starvation when he unexpectedly meets a small group of Aborigines, including Twopenny Sal, the Commandant’s mistress with whom Gould has had a secret relationship throughout his stay on Sarah Island. Gould is accepted into their circle as a friend, a further proof of his human decency. When Tracker Marks dies soon after (having been badly mutilated by redcoats for failing to lead them to Brady), Twopenny Sal uses the records to stoke a fire for Tracker’s cremation. At first Gould is horrified when he realises that the registers - “[t]he registers [he] had dragged for so many days with so great a sacrifice!” – are being used for this “manic antipodean auto-da-fé” (335). But after one of the most metafictional passages in the novel, where all of a sudden Gould inexplicably reads on paper what he has only just experienced, he realises the liberation that comes from burning Jorgensen’s metanarrative: “Onto that pyre I threw so many, many words – that entire untrue literature of the past which had shackled & subjugated me as surely as the spiked iron collars & leg locks & jagged basils … - that had so long denied me my free voice & the stories I needed to tell” (338).
Against a Gothic backdrop, he joins Twopenny Sal (whom he no longer calls so in recognition that this is not her true name but the one given to her by her oppressors) in her dance, “dancing so many things that lay so deep within my soul it felt like a purifying fire itself” (339). As Jones explains, here Gould and Twopenny Sal perform “a sublime ritual of grief and joy that purges them of the oppression of Enlightenment history and offers an expression of pre-modern, individual subjectivity, that, in itself, is a form of resistance to Enlightenment systems of categorisation and control” (126) – just as the Gothic is a resistant form of writing. Once the dance is over, however, Gould declines Twopenny Sal’s invitation to head into the wilderness with her and her children, which illustrates his inability to commit to a “pre-modern” way of living. Instead he continues his journey on his own, still hoping to find Matt Brady’s army. Eventually caught by Musha Pug, he is brought back to Sarah Island to finally be hung. Awaiting his sentence, he witnesses the infernal destruction of the settlement by the fire which had originally been stoked with its records. In the midst of the now apocalyptic colony, Gould is brought to the gibbet on a jetty, but manages to jerk his head out of the noose, diving into the sea below and metamorphosing into the weedy seadragon instead, the same weedy seadragon we first encountered in Hammet’s framing story at the beginning of the novel.

The text thus comes full circle, but not before the following important statement:

[W]e all make our accommodations with power, & the mass of us would sell our brother or sister for a bit of peace & quiet. We’ve been trained to live a life of moral cowardice while all the time comforting ourselves that we are nature’s rebels. But in truth we’ve never got upset & excited about anything; we’re like the sheep we shot the Aborigines to make way for, docile until slaughter.

Everything that’s wrong about this country begins in my story: they’ve all been making the place up, ever since the Commandant tried to reinvent Sarah Island as a New Venice, as the island of forgetting, because anything is easier than remembering. They’ll forget what happened here for a hundred years or more, then they’ll reinvent it, because any story will be better than the sorry

---

155 For a discussion of how Tasmanian Aborigines are represented by non-Aborigines, see Celia Wallhead’s “To Voice or Not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines: Novels by Matthew Kneale and Richard Flanagan.”

156 For a detailed discussion of this metamorphosis see Marion Gymnich and Alexandre Segão Costa’s “Of Humans, Pigs, Fish, and Apes: The Literary Motif of Human-Animal Metamorphosis and its Multiple Functions in Contemporary Fiction.” In particular, Gymnich and Costa argue that Gould’s transformation into a weedy seadragon reflects Flanagan’s criticism of colonization and his ecocritical thinking.
truth that it wasn’t the English who did this to us but ourselves, that convicts flogged convicts & pissed on blackfellas & spied on each other, that blackfellas sold black women for dogs & speared escaping convicts, that white sealers killed & raped black women, & black women killed the children that resulted.

(400-1)

In this passage Flanagan addresses the cultural myth of Australians’ disrespect for authority, and the very repressions of historical memory that have been the subject of the convict Gothic texts studied here. He insists to his fellow Tasmanians that they are implicated, that there is no point in blaming others for what is wrong about Tasmania, and that as long as they don’t understand this “sorry truth”, nothing will change – a conclusion that can be extended to Australia in general. Moreover, although the novel does not specify what kind of direction this change should take, the passage highlights that before any real change is possible, Tasmanians must find a way to genuinely acknowledge and remember their island’s past tragedies, or in other words, they must be willing to look past modernity’s metanarratives to consider the untold stories of convicts and Aborigines, to recognise the realities of frontier violence and convict suffering.

And change is clearly needed. Hammet’s Tasmania is a bleak place, where unemployment is rampant, government departments are shut down and the jobless and disabled “spend their termination payouts and disability pensions and unemployment cheques” on poker machines (34). Similarly, Gould’s book also offers a reflection on contemporary Tasmania. As already noted, both Gothic and postmodern texts are often implicitly structured around the concerns of the age in which they are written, and this is particularly evident here because of the circular nature of Gould’s Book of Fish, which explicitly links the island’s past with its present. In addition, the fact that Flanagan is an outspoken public figure who comments on contemporary Australia through his literary works, as well as essays and journalism, helps in drawing parallels between events set in the past of the novel and actual occurrences in present-day Tasmania.

The Commandant’s projects on Sarah Island can in fact be read as a satiric recapitulation of the history of modern Tasmania, which reflects Flanagan’s “associations with the environmental movement and his generalised antipathy toward orthodox Tasmanian politics,” as Jesse Shipway points out in “Temporality and Desire.
in Gould’s Book of Fish” (50). In particular, the Commandant’s monumental building projects serve to “allegorise [the politicians’] blind faith in the progress in engineering” (51). Nothing is safe: the Gordon River, the entire South-West wilderness, at some point even Queensland is sold in order to finance the Commandant’s demented visions. Referring to controversial modern-day issues such as the Franklin and Gordon River dam projects and the widespread logging of primary forests, these ventures, although often rendered in ironic terms, have serious implications. For example, hundreds of convicts die and thousands are maimed and crippled in the construction of the Great Mah-Jong Hall (that is the Hobart Casino), while the deforestation by Japanese loggers leads to severe erosion and finally desertification. The commandant’s railway to nowhere, moreover, is a key symbol of how, according to Flanagan, linear European thinking does not make any sense in Tasmania, just as conventional historical novels cannot capture the complex impact colonialism had on the island.157

More generally, Flanagan is dismissive of non-Tasmanian authors who, unlike himself, do not live there but capitalise on the island’s dark history in their texts.158 Notably, however, in His Natural Life Clarke did not set out to intentionally exploit the island and its inhabitants. Rather, one of his key aims was to explore what happens to a good man when placed “in an overwhelmingly evil and negative environment” (Elizabeth Webby, “Colonial Writers and Readers” 62). Deeply touched by the ex-convicts he encountered during his visit to Port Arthur, and keenly aware of how thin “the planking of ‘favourable circumstances’” is “between the best of us and such a fate” (quoted in Haynes, 60), he furthermore hoped that setting his novel in the convict period would act as a warning not to repeat the transportation of prisoners. In fact, His Natural Life is clearly critical of the brutal violence and rampant abuse of power characteristic of the British convict system, as are most other texts analysed here. In this basic sense, there is not that much difference between Flanagan’s text and its predecessors.

157 Consider, for example, the following comment by Flanagan: “‘Historians create these hermetic systems that don’t allow for any chaos or disorder,’ Flanagan says. ‘But life is chaos and disorder. It seems to be to be such a wonderfully European way of thinking: this railway line of thought stopping at all the stations of human progress. But in Tasmania, that’s a completely useless way of looking at things. It doesn’t explain a place like that.’ What does explain Tasmania, he continues, ‘are these circular stories that people tell, that don’t have a beginning or an end, that digress relentlessly, that somehow envelop the past and also explain the present, that remain with you’” (“Swimming to Tasmania (continued) 2, italics in original).
158 See, for example, Elizabeth Webby, who in “Literary Prizes, Production Values and Cover Images” notes that Chloe Hooper’s A Child’s Book of True Crime (2000) “is set in Tasmania, allowing for some additional frissons thanks to that island’s Gothic associations, though also attracting the wrath of those like Flanagan who actually live in Tasmania rather than just exploit it in their novels” (64).
What distinguishes *Gould’s Book of Fish* is that Flanagan primarily wrote it as a Tasmanian for Tasmanians, in the process appropriating the historical convict novel so as to address his island’s brutal past from a local and contemporary perspective. Thus, certain stock convict Gothic tropes lose their haunting quality, while others are deployed self-consciously. Homosexuality, for example, is no longer a source of terror, in line with the greater acceptance of same-sex relationships at the turn of the twentieth-first century as opposed to the nineteenth century. Instead, one of the novel’s key concerns is the way in which official history functions as a metanarrative to silence the voices of both ordinary convicts and Aborigines, a case in point of how Gothic fiction is often structured around present-day issues as well as dealing with the repressed past: written at the height of Australia’s history wars, the novel powerfully addresses the ‘Great Australian Silence’ and takes a clear stand against those who deny Aboriginal genocide. This also highlights how Flanagan successfully brings together the Gothic with postmodernism, a mode which is pre-eminently preoccupied with marginal groups and how they are affected by modernity’s metanarratives. Notably, Flanagan not only critiques the silencing effect of metanarratives, but, by presenting a new narrative from below, also restores Tasmania’s silenced voices.

Some critics, Haynes for example, express frustration at the fact that contemporary writers still return to the Gothic to represent Tasmania’s convict past. But, as Flanagan reminds us, and as is powerfully illustrated by Gould’s survival into contemporary times in the shape of a seadragon, Tasmanians have not yet come to terms with this part of their history, and it should thus not surprise that the Gothic continues to be the preferred genre to approach this dark period, after all it is “the perfect anonymous language for the peculiar unwillingness of the past to go away,” as Sage and Lloyd Smith put it (Introduction 4). By combining the Gothic with postmodernism and metafiction, however, Flanagan offers a more creative interpretation of Tasmania’s brutal past than has previously been done in convict Gothic fiction. As Pons puts it, Flanagan reinvents “history through the imagination to reveal a dimension of reality that eludes linear historical narratives” (75).
Conclusion

In this study, the concept of the Gothic hero-villain has allowed me to trace a tradition of convict Gothic protagonists in fiction from Australia spanning over 150 years. This inherently ambivalent character, a figure that is “intrinsic to the social critiques of a number of texts” and frequently serves to reveal repression (Stoddart 178), lends itself well to exploring the controversial penal origins of modern Australia, and how generations of Australians have dealt – or not dealt – with these origins. The individual authors I have analysed have approached the convict past differently, reflecting their social and historical backgrounds, although there are common convict Gothic tropes that have resurfaced throughout, including shocking violence, depravity, corruption, convict cannibalism and homosexual rape.

The protagonist of James Tucker’s *Ralph Rashleigh* (c. 1840s), the only novel which was written by a criminal convict, is an urban burglar, a realistic choice according to historical research. Influenced by eighteenth-century picaresque and Gothic novels, Tucker’s Rashleigh is best described as a picaresque hero in the first part of the novel. Once confronted with the horrors of the transportation system, however, he loses his roguish attitude and changes into a hero of sensibility, while Foxley, the greatest villain of the novel, is depicted as a *banditto*, a Gothic villain. A precursor of the later convict Gothic authors analysed in this study, Tucker thus turns to two staple characters of early Gothic fiction to represent the convict experience. At the end of the novel, in accordance with his own trajectory in penal Australia, Tucker’s protagonist does not manage to re-enter respectable society, but dies prematurely when attacked by Aborigines. This, as well as the depiction of convict life in predominantly violent terms, reflects Tucker’s permanent entrapment in the transportation system.

John Boyle O’Reilly’s protagonist Moondyne, from the novel *Moondyne: A Story from the Underworld* (1878), is an idealistic character, whose principal ‘villainous’ acts consist of poaching deer to save his family from starvation, and of absconding and returning to England under a false name – not crimes in O’Reilly’s view. His aim being to highlight Britain’s unjust social and judicial system, O’Reilly, a political prisoner, chooses as his convict a rural victim of aristocratic privilege, in line with his own experiences of English rule in Ireland. Although Moondyne, a charismatic and extraordinary character, survives the transportation system and eventually implements
humanitarian penal reforms in Western Australia, O’Reilly cannot envisage a happy
ending for his convict; instead he has him perish heroically during an Australian
bushfire, himself having escaped to America, where he managed to build a successful
life, although he also died relatively young, possibly having committed suicide.

In contrast to Moondyne, like his author Marcus Clarke, Devine in His Natural Life
(1870-1872) has an upper-class background. He is, however, sent to Australia as an
ordinary convict because he denies his origins when arrested for a murder he did not
commit, which allows Clarke to critique Britain’s transportation system from the inside.
Even though he is therefore innocent of the crime he is transported for, Devine/Dawes is
not as innocent as he is commonly portrayed: in the original version of the novel, for
example, he is involved in selling fake gemstones at the time of his arrest, while as a
convict his capacity for evil acts repeatedly comes to the fore in both versions of the
novel. As is typical of the hero-villain, Devine/Dawes is thus both a good and a bad
man, which in the context of this novel means that he is bad enough to credibly endure
many years in the clasps of the system, and good enough to elicit reader-sympathy. His
Natural Life was a controversial novel to publish at a time when Australia’s convict past
was considered a ‘stain’. In the original version of the novel, Devine eventually returns
to his previous social standing back home in England, which arguably reflects Clarke’s
personal ambivalence about his exile in Australia. In the revised version, instead, Dawes
drowns just as he is about to finally escape, one reason for this being that ‘convict-
phobic’ Victorians were not ready for a protagonist who experiences the horrors of the
system, yet survives them uncompromised enough to be able to rejoin respectable
society.

William Hay’s protagonist Heans, from the novel The Escape of the Notorious Sir
William Heans (1919), differs greatly from early convict protagonists in that he is not
exposed to the excessive physical brutality of the transportation system, but rather
suffers from psychological persecution at the hands of Daunt, commandant of the foot
police. A double outsider due to his social standing (‘common’ convicts despise him for
his considerable privileges and superior airs, while free society is reluctant to welcome
him in its folds), Heans is a morally questionable character from a modern perspective,
who, for example, happily uses women for his own ends several times in the novel. At
the same time, Heans’s main redeeming feature is the sympathy he expresses towards
these same women, especially towards Conapanny, a remarkable Aboriginal character;
Hay’s novel is in fact the first novel analysed here to combine Tasmania’s convict history with the near-extinction of the island’s Aborigines. Having to overcome several challenges that test his gentlemanliness before he deserves to escape, at the end of the novel Heans leaves Van Diemen’s Land in order to maintain his status as a gentleman, in line with Hay’s own perceptions that early twentieth-century Australia was no place for Victorian gentlemen. Unlike Dawes/Devine in the original version of *His Natural Life*, however, his convict past and illegal escape make it impossible for Heans to return home. Instead, he lives in exile for the rest of his life, separated from family and friends.

The muted reception of *Heans* indicates that both Hay’s style as well as his subject matter were at odds with mainstream Australian culture in early twentieth-century Australia, a period in which the country’s convict origins continued to be repressed. By the end of the century, this had changed, as is reflected in Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* (1997) and Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001). Unlike Devine and Heans, Carey’s and Flanagan’s protagonists share dismal upbringings, which in both novels functions to highlight the poverty and social injustice rampant in Britain at the time in which the novels are set. Moreover, Maggs and Gould are the only two protagonists encountered in this study that have a future in Australia. But their survivals of the transportation system take radically different forms and have different meanings. Maggs has to free himself of his false perceptions of Victorian England, which is depicted in deeply Gothic terms, before he can escape back to New South Wales and to a life of success and happiness, reflecting both how Australia has distanced itself from Britain in recent decades, as well as a greater acceptance by Australians of their country’s convict history. Flanagan’s Gothic depictions of penal Van Diemen’s Land, of convict hardship and Aboriginal suffering, and Gould’s survival into present-day Tasmania in the shape of a leafy seadragon, instead, highlight how official history functions as a metanarrative to silence the voices of both convicts and Aborigines, and exemplify how the past continues to unsettle, how Australians have not yet come to terms with Australia’s modern beginnings.

Australia’s convict history and Aboriginal dispossession continue to unfold in Gothic writings beyond the texts analysed here. Consider Kate Grenville’s novel *The Secret River* (2005), which was published four years after Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish*. Like the narratives analysed in this study, this text also has a convict, William Thornhill, as its protagonist and, similarly to *Gould’s Book of Fish*, also addresses the
Great Australian Silence, that is the silence on Aborigines in Australian history since white settlement. In many other respects, however, it differs markedly from the novels analysed here: it is, for instance, not set in any of the secondary places of punishment so prominent in most other texts, nor does it include typical convict Gothic tropes such as sadistic overseers/commandants, homosexuality and convict cannibalism. In short, Grenville’s primary aim is not to criticise Britain’s transportation system. Instead, she is interested in Thornhill’s trajectory once he has received his pardon and moves to the frontier of the colony, where his desire to possess his own piece of land conflicts with the presence of the local Aboriginal tribe, the Darug. Compared to Gould’s Book of Fish, moreover, which is striking for its postmodern and metafictional nature, the plot of The Secret River is remarkably linear and predictable. In fact, it can be argued that, just as Flanagan’s novel is a hybrid of the Gothic and postmodernism, Grenville’s text offers an interplay of history, realism and the Gothic in its exploration of Australia’s early convict settler history.

So far, however, only a few critics have remarked on the Gothic elements in Grenville’s text, even though Ken Gelder has pointed out in “Australian Gothic” that some contemporary films and novels “have staged a return to the colonial scene in order to animate its violence all over again: for example, Kate Grenville’s novel The Secret River (2005), which tries to recreate the mindset of a colonial settler involved in the massacre of Aborigines” (A New Companion to the Gothic, 390). In accordance with the novel’s third person subjective narration used to represent Thornhill’s nineteenth-century outlook, Grenville in fact employs numerous colonial Gothic tropes as discussed by Gerry Turcotte in “Australian Gothic”, where he explains that “the generic qualities of the Gothic mode lend themselves to articulating the colonial experience in as much as each emerges out of a condition of deracination and uncertainty, of the familiar transposed into unfamiliar space” (278). Accordingly, Thornhill feels deeply deracinated when he looks up at the antipodean night sky for the first time, trees incomprehensibly shed their bark, and the hot weather confusingly comes at Christmas. In addition, the novel employs the familiar convict Gothic image of Australia as a natural prison, where the characters are completely isolated and trapped.

Grenville’s initial descriptions of Aborigines, as seen through the eyes of Thornhill, are also reminiscent of colonial Gothic texts, in which, according to Turcotte, “the Aboriginal peoples were … constructed as the monstrous figures haunting the
Australian landscape, spectres more frightening than any European demon, because they represented a physical threat to settlers and to theories of enlightenment which believed in the civilising presence of Whites” (“Australian Gothic” 285). In the novel, Grenville shows how within the white community the sensational stories the settlers tell each other about Aborigines function to dehumanise the Indigenous people and to justify the atrocious behaviour by some of the white men. Moreover, as Turcotte further explains, “Aborigines also posed a greater threat to the very fiction of *terra nullius*, the obscene construction in British law which made Australia ‘a land owned by no one’, and therefore a place which could be claimed for the Crown” (286). This obscene fiction of Australia as “‘a land owned by no one’” lies at the heart of *The Secret River*: if, in line with nineteenth-century Western thinking, Thornhill and his family start out assuming that they can rightfully claim the land they settle on, gradually they are confronted with the fact that the 100 acres they have ‘taken’ are in fact part of the Darug’s homeland. Not willing to leave, however, Thornhill eventually facilitates and participates in a massacre against the local Aborigines, which ensures his hold on the land.

At the end of the novel, Grenville renders the familiar story of pioneering success in thoroughly uncanny terms. Although wealthy and respected, Thornhill is haunted by his dreadful crime and unable to truly feel at home on ‘his’ land. The mansion he builds is not entirely “what [he] had pictured. Something was wrong with the way the pieces fitted together” (329). The imported English plants fail to thrive in the garden which is surrounded by a high stone wall with only one gate so as to “keep out everything except what was invited in” (332). One of the two portraits he has commissioned is hidden because it represents him as a “delicate fellow” with a “pretty head” and a book in his hand that is upside down (336), whereas the other painting sums up “all of the things that had ever happened to him,” portraying him with an odd and puzzled look (337). As to his sons, moreover, while Willie is busily employed in Thornhill’s various enterprises, Dick is no longer a part of the family. Disgusted by his father’s action, he leaves sometime after the massacre to live with Blackwood, who, having witnessed the massacre in which his Aboriginal partner and child were killed, is reduced to a shadow of his former self. Hearing new immigrants refer to Dick as Blackwood’s son gives “Thornhill a shocked feeling, like the cut from a razor. There was the moment of cold nothing where the open flesh could be seen, and then the ache came on” (341).
Thornhill’s crime furthermore affects his and his wife’s serenity, as well their relationship: “whatever Sal knew, or guessed, was with them and could not be shifted. He had not thought that words unsaid could come between two people like a body of water. … Whatever the shadow was that lived with them, it did not belong just to him, but to her as well: it was a space they both inhabited” (339). The only thing that brings Thornhill “a measure of peace [is] to peer through the telescope” (349) every evening, obsessively scanning the ridge of the cliff on the opposite side of the river for any signs of Aborigines still living there – arguably he unconsciously believes that spotting a survivor of the massacre would alleviate his guilt. Occasionally, Thornhill thinks that he can discern someone between the trees, but each time he feels a new emptiness when he realises that it is just another trunk. The only Aborigine who is still alive at the end of the novel is an old man the Thornhills call Jack. When confronted with Jack, Thornhill feels “a pang. No man had worked harder than he had done, and he had been rewarded for his labour…. But there was an emptiness as he watched Jack’s hand caressing the dirt. This was something he did not have: a place that was part of his flesh and spirit. There as no part of the world he would keep coming back to, the way Jack did, just to feel it under him” (344).

As Grenville explains in Searching for the Secret River (2006), an accompanying memoir in which she describes how she came to write The Secret River, the novel reflects her own feelings of guilt and unsettledness, feelings she first experienced during a reconciliation walk in 2000, when an exchange of looks with an Aboriginal woman suddenly made her wonder what had happened when her great-great-great grandfather Solomon Wiseman, on whom Thornhill is loosely based, first arrived in Australia. In Searching, Grenville recounts that “[i]n that instant of putting my own ancestor together with this woman’s ancestor, everything swivelled: the country, the place, my sense of myself in it” (13). This powerfully illustrates what in “The Postcolonial Ghost Story” Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs call an uncanny experience in a postcolonial context:

[a]n ‘uncanny’ experience may occur when one’s home – one’s place – is rendered somehow and in some sense unfamiliar; one has the experience, in other words, of being in place and ‘out of place’ simultaneously. This happens precisely at the moment when one is made aware that one has unfinished business with the past, at the moment when the past returns as an ‘elemental’ force to haunt the present day. (181)
The implications of what ‘taking up land’ actually signifies were further brought to Grenville’s attention in a conversation with Melissa Lucashenko, a young Aboriginal writer, who made her realise that as a matter of fact Wiseman took the land away from the local Aborigines, likely by violent means. This too was an intensely disturbing realisation:

The words took up were standing in for some set of actions. The words weren’t the thing itself, they only pointed towards it. The thing itself lay behind the words, an object behind a screen. Of course I’d always known that. But the lack of fit between a word and the thing it stood for had never before come to me like a punch in the stomach.

Took up – suddenly it felt like a trick.

The trick itself was bad enough. The fact that I’d let myself be taken in by it was worse. Melissa and I had exchanged such small and harmless words. Family. From. Took up. But they were turning into grenades. (Searching 29, italics in original)

In the same conversation, Grenville also became bitterly aware of how difficult it was for her to answer Lucaschenko’s apparently simple question “Where’s your family from?” (27). Should she tell her about her and her parents? About her grand- and great-grandparents? About Sydney or London? Grenville “was surprised by a sudden savage envy. In spite of all the damage that had been done to indigenous families and their connection to their country, [unlike herself, Lucaschenko] could go to a particular spot on the planet and say, “this is where I’m from” (28, italics in original).

As Cynthia Sugars and Turcotte discuss in their introduction to Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic, disconcerting feelings of guilt and non-belonging are commonly expressed in white postcolonial Gothic literature from settler-invader locations, in which the uncanny, the Gothic and the postcolonial often are conjoined, resulting in unsettling experiences that illustrate a variety of possible phenomena, including

fears of territorial illegitimacy, anxiety about forgotten or occluded histories, resentment towards flawed or complicit ancestors, assertions of Aboriginal priority, explorations of hybrid cultural forms, and interrogations of national belonging and citizenship. All of these phenomena point to the continuing legacy of colonial history in settler-invader cultures, lingering traces that reveal ‘the return of the colonial moment’ in the narratives through which ‘our
ambiguously postcolonial cultures characterize themselves and their tendentious histories’ (Lawson 1995, 32, 20).

In Grenville’s case, ‘the return of the colonial moment’ can be narrowed down to the exchange of looks between herself and the Aboriginal woman on the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The ensuing sudden awareness makes Grenville doubt her territorial legitimacy, explicitly recognise Aboriginal priority, anxious to discover more about Wiseman, her convict ancestor, and eventually leads her to write *The Secret River*.

As already mentioned, in the novel Grenville offers the perspective of Thornhill, a perspective that is not acceptable in modern times, although legitimate in his own. This approach has caused a lot of controversy, with several prominent historians, in particular, attacking her in surprisingly vehement ways for her use of the historical record and her emphasis on the historical soundness of her novel. Inga Clendinnen, for one, dislikes Grenville’s use of empathy to imagine what life would have been like for someone like Thornhill but not that of the Aboriginal characters, and, together with Mark McKenna and John Hirst, has castigated Grenville for her “supposedly irreverent archival raids and subsequent fabrication of that which Mark McKenna called ‘sloppy comfort history’ (2),” as Amanda Johnson puts it in “Archival Salvage: History’s Reef and the Wreck of the Historical Novel” (11). Notably, among the authors discussed in this study, several could be accused of having produced fabrications based on “archival raids.” Take Marcus Clarke and William Astley, who both researched the transportation period and provide detailed footnotes and appendices to their narratives to highlight the fact that their texts are grounded in the truth. More generally, historical novels have been written for centuries now, but few writers of historical fiction have been criticised to such an extent as Grenville, who in turn in several essays, articles and public readings has felt the need to make clear the stance of her novel and to elucidate her literary, ethical and moral position.

Part of the controversy caused by her text can be explained by the fact that *The Secret River* was published at the height of the so-called history wars, a period of intense public debate on several different, often opposing, narratives about Australia’s modern history, in particular about what British colonisation had meant for the continent’s Aboriginal people. Illustrating that white Australia has not yet come to terms with its violent beginnings, this discussion was not simply about “what happened in the past,” as Sarah Pinto puts it, but “about the construction of historical knowledge in
contemporary Australia, about what the history of Australia ought to look like” (“History, Fiction and *The Secret River*” (183). Clendinnen, McKenna and Hirst were keenly involved in these debates, and what seemed to disturb them most with regard to *The Secret River* was the notion that a writer of historical fiction such as Grenville could compete with them for the best insight into the past as it ‘really happened’. As Pinto further points out, in the eyes of historians such as Clendinnen and McKenna, “the basis of [the fundamental divide between history and fiction] can be found in the relationship that only history can have to … the ‘real past.’ Indeed, the possibility of access to a real, authentic, and truthful past haunts the engagements of these historians with *The Secret River*” (190).

The idea, however, that history as a discipline offers greater insight into the ‘real past’ than fiction has been put under pressure for several decades. Historians such as Hayden White convincingly dispute the divide between history and fiction, emphasising that historical writing reflects literary writing in many ways (publications by Clendinnen and McKenna being prime examples of this!), while postmodernism and postcolonialism have challenged modernity’s metanarratives, including official histories, and the idea that the ‘real’ past can be accessed at all – as powerfully illustrated by Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish.*

In fact, as Camilla Nelson argues in “Faking it: History and Creative Writing,” “in recent times, history has participated in the broader crisis of knowledge engendered by the spread of continental theory. Its grand narratives have been contested by regional and local narratives, its imperial models by subaltern studies and histories of resistance” (n. pag.). Thus, the idea that history can illuminate past actualities is “at odds with the whole thrust of contemporary theory, which rejects not the past as such, but any idea that it can be recaptured directly – that history can function to uncover the truth” (n. pag.). In this sense, academic historians simply offer another version, another interpretation of the ‘truth’, just as Tucker’s *Rashleigh*, Clarke’s *His Natural Life*, Astley’s tales and Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish*, for example, contribute to an understanding of Australia’s penal past by highlighting its excesses.

---

159 Interestingly, *Gould’s Book of Fish* has not attracted much attention from historians, even though Flanagan offers a scathing attack on the role of official history in the novel (and is a trained historian himself). Arguably his text is so different in style to conventional historical texts that historians do not consider it as competition, unlike Grenville’s novel.
The Secret River offers yet another perspective on Australia’s convict history, and this is reflected in how Grenville portrays her protagonist. In Moondyne, His Natural Life, Heans, Jack Maggs and Gould’s Book of Fish, the convict protagonists are both extraordinary characters as well as victims of a malevolent system, hero-villains that we can empathise with because, although they are outsiders of their society who act against the rules and commit crimes, their behaviour is understandable and forgivable because the society they live in is shown as corrupt, and because they have compelling reasons for their actions. In The Secret River, instead, “[o]ur sympathy as readers with Thornhill and his problems becomes an increasingly awkward stance,” as Eleanor Collins puts it in “Poison in the Flour” (168). Considering that Thornhill commits a crime which from a modern standpoint is simply unforgivable, becomes a respected and wealthy member of a morally flawed society and does not acknowledge feelings of remorse and guilt, I would argue that he is not a hero-villain, even if he shares some of the other characteristics of the main convict characters analysed here. Thus, although like Maggs and Gould, Thornhill too starts out as a sufferer of Britain’s unjust social and judicial system, by turning her likeable convict into a perpetrator of genocidal violence against Aborigines, Grenville complicates the image of the convict as victim or as hero-villain that has proven so compelling and so fruitful for earlier novelists.
List of Works Consulted


Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory*


Bird, Carmela. “Re-imagining the Gothic in Contemporary Australia: Carmel Bird


211


Collingwood-Whittick, Sheila. “Discursive Manipulations of Names and Naming in


Eaden, P.R. and F.H. Mares, eds. *Mapped But Not Known: The Australian Landscape*


---. “Richard Flanagan: The Making of a Tasmanian Best-Seller.” Interview by Giles


Gall, Adam. “Taking/Taking Up: Recognition of the Frontier in Grenville’s *The


---. “A Rare Window into the Past is the Key to What We Are Now.” *Sydney Morning Herald* 11 Mar 2013. Web. 9 February 2015.


---. “Hay, Gosse William (1875-1945).” *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in*


---. “The Strange World of Sir William Heans [And the Mystery of William Hay].”
*Southerly* 27 (1967): 118-137. Print


Ho, Elizabeth Francesca. “Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* and the Trauma of Convictism.”


Malchow, H. L. *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain.* Stanford:


British Library Historical Print Edition, 1889. Print


Reade, Charles. It is Never Too Late to Mend: A Matter-of-Fact Romance. 1859.


Richter, Kate. “Re: Peter Carey Convict Ancestors?” Message to Lea Rudolph-Buergisser. 6 May 2015. E-mail.


Rooney, Brigid. “Kate Grenville as Public Intellectual.” Lighting Dark Places: Essays


Schmidt-Haberkamp, Barbara. “The Writing-Back Paradigm Revisited: Peter Carey,


Spooner, Catherine. “Gothic in the Twentieth Century.” *The Routledge Companion to


Wallhead, Celia. “To Voice or Not to Voice the Tasmanian Aborigines: Novels by


Welsh, Frank. *Australia: A New History of the Great Southern Land*. Woodstock:


