Journal of
Australian Colonial History

Bushmen and Bush Parsons:
The Shaping of A Rural Myth

The 2010 Russel Ward Annual Lecture
University of New England, 15 April 2010

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In his celebrated, much contested, but still provocative thesis, Russel Ward proposed that in the nineteenth century the unique lifestyle of the colonial bushman was critical for the development of what he called the 'national *mystique*'.[1] Originating among workers in the remote pastoral industry, Ward argued that the bushman ethos was subsequently promoted through the labour movement to a much wider audience. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the bush legend was given an additional, literary veneer through its adoption by magazines such as *The Lone Hand* and the *Bulletin* and the work of writers such as Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy and A. B. 'Banjo' Paterson. Since the publication of *The Australian Legend* in 1958, the Ward thesis has been revised and reviewed in many directions. Feminist critics, notably Marilyn Lake, have pointed out the Australian legend was far from universal and, indeed was significant as much for what it excluded — women, foreigners, and Aboriginal people — as for what it included, notably single, white, British men.[2] Even the rural origins of the legend have been challenged by Graeme Davison, who demonstrated that, whatever its hypothetical origins in the colonial outback might have been, the core audience for the later, literary promotion of the bush legend

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[1]   R. Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne, 1966 [1958], p. v. Italics in original.

[2]   M. Lake, 'The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculinist Context', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 22, 1986, pp. 116-31; M. Lake, 'Frontier Feminism and the Marauding White Man', *Journal of Australian Studies,* Vol. 29, 1996, pp. 12-20. For the racial basis of settler colonialism, see M. Lake and H. Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality*, Cambridge, 2008, p. 15; P. Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2006, pp. 387-409.

was not rural people so much as single, urban men.[3] For this audience, the bush represented an alluring alternative to the low-paying, monotonous jobs of the expanding cities.

Historians have had less to say about religion and the Australian legend. However, Ward himself was in no doubt that Australia was better off without religion, and this applied to his personal philosophy as much as to the historical development of the Australian mystique. He had endured what he later called 'my peculiar Methodist upbringing', and at one stage thought seriously about a clerical career. Like other left-wing Protestants, he felt a strong commitment to the 'social gospel' and continued to see Christ as a friend of the poor even when his belief in the miraculous foundation of Christianity melted away in early manhood.[4] These views are reflected in *The Australian Legend* where, together with women and foreign workers, institutional religion was one of the things which the traditional bushman is said to have despised. According to the opening pages of Ward's classic: '[The bushman] is a "hard case", sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally'.[5] For Ward, the literary Australian bush was a place for real men where they could escape the burdens and norms of urban society, including the restraints and sectarian bigotry of institutional religion. And he illustrates this view with a couplet from Henry Lawson's poem, 'The Shearers':[6]

> They tramp in mateship side by side --
>
> The Protestant and Roman --
>
> They call no biped lord or sir,
>
> And touch their hat to no-man!

The anti-clericalism of the bush is not a negative quality, for, as Lawson goes on to suggest (in a verse not quoted by Ward), there is

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[3]   G. Davison, 'Sydney and the Bush: An Urban Context for the Australian Legend', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 18, 1978, pp. 191-209.

[4]   R. Ward, *A Radical Life: The Autobiography of Russel Ward*, Melbourne, 1988, pp. 93, 103.

[5]   Ward, *The Australian Legend*, p. 2.

[6]   *Ibid.*, p. 246.

a kind of natural morality there which more than makes up for the want of official religion:

> No church-bell rings them from the track,
>
> No pulpit lights their blindness –
>
> 'Tis hardship, drought, and homelessness
>
> That teach those Bushmen kindness.[7]

Ward argued that the anti-clerical bent of the bush endured well beyond the era of the convict worker and was just as strong in 1905 when Paterson published a poem called 'My Religion', which Ward thought was an old bush song.[8] This attacked all forms of denominational cant, whether Roman, Jewish, Episcopal or Muslim; the only religion for the bushman was the fellowship of the common man: 'To be upright and downright and act like a man, / That's the religion for me'.[9]

Inspired at least in part by Ward, most historians have agreed that the Australian bush was a masculinist, secular domain in which religion had little force or appeal.[10] In her 2009 Russel Ward Annual Lecture, this argument was put in a new way by Babette Smith, who endorsed Ward's view of the paradoxically liberating force of the convict voyage to Australia, in the course of which information relating to birth, marriage, social standing and religion might, conveniently, be abandoned.[11] In her major revisionist history of the convict legacy, *Australia's Birthstain*, Smith has also argued that clergy

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7   H. Lawson, 'The Shearers' (1901). It may be interesting that Ward also chose not to quote the first four lines which suggest that the mateship of the bush is based on a shared whiteness: 'And though he may be brown or black, / Or wrong man there or right man, / The mate that's honest to his mates / they call that man a "white man!"'

8   Ward, *Australian Legend*, pp. 182-83.

9   *Ibid.*, p. 183, citing Paterson, *Old Bush Songs*, Sydney, 1905, np.

10 For assessments of religion, women and the bush legend, see S. Kennedy, *Faith and Feminism: Catholic Women's Struggles for Self-Expression*, Sydney, 1985, pp. x-xv, and A. P. O'Brien, *God's Willing Workers: Women and Religion in Australia*, Sydney, 2005. See also P. Hempenstall, 'The Bush Legend and the Red Bishop: The Autobiography of E. H. Burgmann', *Historical Studies,* Vol. 19, 1981, pp. 567-72.

11 B. Smith, 'Legend and Reality: The Genius of Russel Ward', *Journal of Australian Colonial History,* Vol. 12, 2010, p. 182.

were chiefly responsible for bequeathing to future Australians a sense of shame about their convict origins.[12] Yet not everyone has agreed that the bush cannot be reconciled with religious interpretations of the Australian landscape and people, or that religious affiliation was so easily discarded. Most recently, Meredith Lake has provided a careful re-interpretation of the Ward thesis by noting the complex relationship between the 'frontier' in the work of both Ward and Frederick Jackson Turner, suggesting that for colonial churchmen, it was natural to think of the bush in terms of the scriptural wilderness.[13]

I do not intend to challenge Ward's main argument about religion and the bush. Certainly, if we look in contemporary nineteenth century writing about the bush — such as those edited by Ward for the *Penguin Book of Australian Ballads* (1964) — religion is conspicuous by its absence. [14] Indeed, most bush writing, such as that represented by Douglas Stewart and Nancy Keesing's collections published in the 1950s, which draw on Banjo Paterson's *Old Bush Songs* (1905),[15] described by one authority as 'the closest that Australia can come to a body of folk lore',[16] is riddled with anti-clericalism. In this respect, Australian bush ballads mirror the anti-clericalism of much older, English rhyming verse written for a popular audience, such as the Rhymes of Robin Hood, which probably date to the fourteenth century. While Robin himself is always portrayed as pious and religiously observant, poems such as *Robin Hood and the Monk* represent certain members of the clergy,

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[12]   B. Smith, *Australia's Birthstain: The Startling Legacy of the Convict Era*, Sydney, 2008; For Ward's deployment of convict history, see D. A. Roberts, 'Russel Ward and the Convict Legend', *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2008, pp. 37-58.

[13]   M. Lake, 'Protestant Christianity and the Colonial Environment: Australia as a Wilderness in the 1830s and 1840's', *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, Vol. 11, 2009, pp. 21-44.

[14]   R. Ward (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Australian Ballads,* Mitcham (Vic), 1964.

[15]   A. B. Paterson (ed.), *The Old Bush Songs: Composed and Sung in the Bushranging, Digging and Overlanding Days*, Sydney, 1905; D. Stewart and N. Keesing (eds), *Australian Bush Ballads*, Sydney, 1955; D. Stewart and N. Keesing (eds), *Old Bush Songs and Rhymes of Colonial Times*, Sydney, 1957.

[16]   V. Smith, 'Poetry', in L. Kramer (ed.), *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, Melbourne, 1981, p. 304.

especially monks as duplicitous, avaricious and much more concerned with materially enriching their own abbeys, convents and churches than in helping the poor man.[17] Translated to the Australian bush, the bush parson takes the place of Robin Hood's venal monk and grasping abbot, all of whom prey on decent rural people battling to make a living in a hostile land. Below, I review some of this colonial Australian writing. My examples will be presented more or less in chronological order and will focus on two themes: the bush as a place without religion; and the bush parson.

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In the earliest days of colonial settlement, the bush was seen as peculiarly devoid of religious landmarks. Even for Irish Catholics, who were conventionally tied to their faith in ethnic stereotyping, religion was something which was part of home and its comforts rather than the bush and its secular temptations. In around 1800, the Irish balladeer James Garland might address the 'Catholics of Erin' in the voice of a convicted rebel who was transported for his religion:

> They say I was a traitor, and leader of the Papist band,
>
> For which, I'm in cold irons, a convict in Van Diemen's Land.[18]

However, in the printed Australian ballads, which were so important for the development of the popular myth of the bush eulogised by Ward, God is almost entirely absent, though He may be invoked by a curse or, occasionally, desperate prayer.

The trope of the absent God is invoked by Eliza Hamilton Dunlop in a poem written in the wake of the Myall Creek massacre in 1838. In it, 'an Aboriginal Mother' tells her surviving baby that her murdered husband and son were on a heavenly mission to bring the hideous slaughter of her people before the Christian God:

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17   A. J. Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-Medieval Stories in Historical Context*, London, 2004, pp. 111-33.

18   J. Garland, 'The Banished Defender', in P. Butterss and E. Webby (eds), *The Penguin Book of Australian Ballads*, Ringwood (Vic), 1993, p. 31. From a broadside in the National Library, Dublin.

> Yes! O'er the stars that guide us,
>
> He brings my slaughter'd boy:
>
> To shew their God how treacherously
>
> The stranger men destroy;
>
> To tell how hands in friendship pledged
>
> Piled high the fatal pire;
>
> To tell, to tell of the gloomy ridge!
>
> And the *stockmen's human fire*.[19]

This is a landscape of horror in which the priest and the parson intrude hardly at all. And while Dunlop thought that the imposition of religious norms would restrain the brutality of the frontier, masculine writers were not convinced. One ballad which summarises in the most chilling fashion the idea of the bush as a place where morality and religious people do not belong is 'Branded' by 'Jackarandalo'.[20] This tells the tale of a young boy called 'little Jack' (Jack Hardwicke) who, when ordered to brand stolen calves, defied the owner, Bill, saying: 'I will not be a thief- / God says, "Thou shalt not steal"'. Enraged by this impudence, the boss pins Jack against the fence and brands him on the face:

> And if you wish to save your skin
>
> You'll do as you are bid,
>
> Or you may cut your coffin-wood,
>
> My fine, religious kid.

This, however, is not the end of it. Jack disappeared into the bush and no-one knew what had become of him until one night, while the boss was in town, his family homestead was raided by Aborigines led by 'some armed white man'. The full horror of revenge was exposed when it was revealed that the tribe was led by none other than 'little Jack' — and that they had taken Bill's baby girl with them.

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19   'E. H. D', 'The Aboriginal Mother, from Myall's Creek', *Australian*, 13 December 1838, p. 4. Emphasis in original.

20   'Branded' by 'Jackarandalo', in Steward and Keesing (eds), *Australian Bush Ballads*, pp. 376-81. Regrettably, this is not dated by Steward and Keesing.

When recovered, her face had been branded by the same brand which Bill had used on Jack years before:

> Twas thus that Hardwicke fed at last
>
> His wild, unholy hate -
>
> Revenge comes round to every man
>
> Who has the strength to wait.

The message of this gruesome tale would appear to be that the rules of the bush defied formal religion and that those who were sticklers for morality had the fullest potential to betray their white brothers and become 'unholy' murderers. The boss, who mellows with age, is the sympathetic character; the white man who pays lip service to conventional morality but who adopts the murderous regime of the blacks, is the outsider.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

If the bush was seen by early writers as essentially godless, it is not surprising that the clergymen who ventured there were generally seen as journeying into hostile territory. In secular literature, the rural clergyman, indeed clergy everywhere, were incorporated into an anti-clerical, anti-imperial stereotype. According to Allan Grocott, who provides the most comprehensive study of the colonial clergy (initially undertaken as an MA(Hons) degree under Ward at the University of New England), 'The *bush parson* of late nineteenth-century fiction was ... an unattractive oddity, an object of ridicule and a person to be avoided'.[21] It is easy enough to find evidence of this literary prejudice. Again, I will present examples more or less in chronological order, bearing in mind that anti-clericalism in popular verse has a venerable ancestry which is far older than Australian colonisation and is not dependant on an Australian locale for its social bite.

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[21]   A. M. Grocott, *Convicts, Clergymen and Churches: Attitudes of Convicts and Ex-Convicts Towards the Churches and Clergy in New South Wales from 1788-1851*, Sydney, 1980, p. 176. Emphasis in original.

The first objection to the bush parson was the unnecessary expense he created and his constant demand for money. In George Dunderdale's *The Book of the Bush* (1870), the parson is seen essentially as a parasite — as in this story, told by Bob Castles about his experience working for a miserly squatter called Shenty in 1852.[22] Shenty loathed educated men and, while he could neither read nor write, he paid a lame former schoolmaster on a miserly forty pounds a year (the same wage as an illiterate shepherd) to educate his children and write his cheques.

> A parson came along one day lifting a subscription for a church, or school, or something. He didn't get anything out of old Shenty, only a pannikin of tea and some damper and mutton. The old cove said: 'Church nor school never gave me nothing, nor do me no good, and I could buy up a heap o' parsons and schoolmasters if I wanted to, and they were worth buying. Us squatters is the harrystockrisy out here. The lords at home sends out their good-for-nothing sons to us, to get rich and be out of the way, and much good they does. Why don't you parsons make money by your eddication if it's any good, instead of goin' round beggin'? You are all after the filthy lucre, wantin' to live on other folks.' I was holdin' the parson's horse, and when he got into the saddle, he turns to old Shenty, and says: 'From rottenness you sprung, and to rottenness you'll go. Your money will drag you down to hell; you'll want to throw it away, but it will burn into your soul for all eternity'.[23]

It is actually hard to tell from this who has the worse of the encounter: is it Shenty with his miserly self-sufficiency, or is it the parson with his sanctimonious but toothless threats?

While Shenty and his diatribe passed away, no doubt unlamented, in the 1850s, the anti-parson stereotype lived on. If anything, in the 1890s the theme acquired additional satirical

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22   'A Bush Hermit', in G. Dunderdale (ed.), *The Book of the Bush*, London, 1870, pp. 127-37.

23   *Ibid*., p. 156.

animosity at the hand of a new generation of literary versifiers. For Henry Lawson 'bush parson' was more or less a term of abuse. In the collection, *While the Billy Boils* (1896), he writes of a character called 'Stiffner', proprietor of a New Zealand pub who was the essence of hypocrisy: 'He'd been a spieler, fighting man, bush parson, temperance preacher, and a policeman, and a commercial traveller, and everything else that was damnable'.[24] The bush parson's reputation for acquisitiveness was bad enough; it was even worse that he was constantly either getting lost or calling for assistance with his horse. For example, in the complicated cartoon called 'The Parson's Horse' (1 June 1892), a parson unwittingly bought a stolen horse from a more knowing, if less than honest, bushman, only to be chased as a horse-thief himself by the original owner.[25] Even if the parson was sometimes a better horseman than most bushmen were prepared to admit, he was generally seen as out of place in the bush. Livingstone Hopkins (1846-1927), better known as the cartoonist 'Hop', expressed this vividly in his depiction of the Australian Christmas. In blazing heat, overdressed and overfed, the Australian bourgeois would go: 'Perhaps to a corrugated iron church to hear a corrugated iron parson preach a corrugated iron sermon on a Material Hell — which is British if not cooling'.[26]

Almost the only bush ballads with an explicitly religious theme are the humorous (not to say racist and bigoted) anti-Irish verses of 'Banjo' Paterson, such as 'Father Riley's Horse', or 'A Bush Christening' (about a priest who christens a reluctant child after the name of a bottle of Irish whiskey), or another by 'Priam' (about a priest who accidentally baptises a pig instead of the baby of a large Irish family).[27] 'A Bush Christening', first published in the *Bulletin* in 1893, begins likes this:

> In the outer Barcoo where the churches are few,

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[24] H. Lawson, 'Stiffner and Jim (Thirdly, Bill)', in H. Lawson, *While the Billy Boils*, Sydney, 1896, p. 27.

[25] 'The Parson's Horse', 1 June 1892. Wood engraving, State Library of Victoria, IAN01/07/92/13.

[26] 'The average Australian Christmas', c. 1900. Brush and Ink drawing, National Library of Australia, Bib ID 2231808.

[27] Steward and Keesing (eds), *Australian Bush Ballads*, pp. 331-36.

> And men of religion are scanty,
>
> On a road never cross'd 'cept by folk that are lost,
>
> One Michael Magee had a shanty.

The scenario of the ignorant priest and his pious but equally intellectually lacking rural parishioners, formed part of a familiar comic scenario. While Paterson wrote the best-known version of the tale of the bush baptism, others turn on the difficulties of performing the ritual owing to the drought, or the incongruity of the age of the candidates. In these tales, both parson and people, who are generally Irish Catholics, are the butt of the joke.

Another, less ethnically loaded but also popular story was the tale of the encounter between the bushman and the parson, who this time is more likely to be a teetotal Protestant. Invariably, it is the bushman who is the winner in an exchange of wits. The folklorist, Bill Fearn-Wannan, refers to these stories as a 'popular folk motif', and compiled several examples of the genre.[28] While the published versions generally date from the twentieth century, we can assume that the stories circulated orally for some time before being recorded in print. The humour turns on the contrast between the foul-mouthed bushman, especially the bullocky, and the mealy-mouthed parson. For example:

> A bush parson came upon a bullock-driver, his wagon bogged to the axles, berating his team with language such as only a teamster could utter without singeing his moustache.
>
> 'My good man', said the parson, 'must you swear like that? Why don't you put your faith in Providence?'
>
> 'Providence! ' roared the bullocky. 'Why, that's the worst bloody bullock in the whole bloody team.[29]

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[28]   W. F. Fearn-Wannan, *Australian Folklore: A Dictionary of Lore, Legends and Popular Allusions*, Melbourne, 1970, pp. 408-09.

[29]   From B. Conin, *How Runs the Road*, Melbourne, 1948, reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 409.

Alternatively, the parson's authority is undercut by his failure to know the ways of the bush, or, indeed, his way out of it. Hence, the triumph of the bushman in the following war of logic:

> 'Why should you ask me to go to church?' asked the bushman of the bush parson.
>
> 'Why shouldn't I?' retorted the cleric.
>
> 'Well', said the bushman, 'aren't you the man who was bushed two miles from Hughenden? Of course you was. And if you couldn't make your way two miles in this world with your own eyes, how in the name of Hell could you guide me to a land you never saw?[30]

At a loss in the bush, abandoned by his horse, forever on the scrounge for a church or a religious cause no-one wished to support, the rural clergyman in Australia had a definite image problem.

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Not surprisingly, many clergy were unhappy with being made the butt of these stories and energetically attempted to redress the balance, firstly by the energy and piety of their religious lives, but also by rival literary productions of their own defence. Here, I would like to look at three or four novel-length accounts of life as a rural clergyman which attempted to rebut the stereotype and erect in its place the idea that the bush parson was part of the landscape — indeed something of an adopted bushman himself, inverting the old slur on its head. Beginning in the 1890s, there were a number of novel-length treatments of this theme from representatives of most of the major churches, as the following list indicates:

- Tom Bluegum [G. Warren Payne], *The Backblock's Parson* (1899) – Methodist

- Steele Rudd [Arthur Hoey Davis], *The Poor Parson* (1907) - Presbyterian

- C. H. S. Matthews, *A Parson in the Australian Bush* (1908); *Bill, a Bushman* (1914) – Anglican High Church

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30   From *Digger Aussiosities*, Sydney, 1927, reprinted in *ibid.*, pp. 408-09.

- John O'Brien [Patrick Joseph Hartigan], *Around The Boree Log and Other Verses* (1921) - Catholic.

One of the most interesting attempts to tackle the derogatory image of the bush parson was that of the Methodist preacher, G. Warren Payne.[31] Under the circuit system Methodists were better able than most denominations to expand with the Australian frontier. They were the first major church in Australia to become independent of their British founders and they were proud of their home-grown ministry which, in this respect, was well in advance of rival Protestants, including the Anglicans and Presbyterians, who remained directly dependent on recruits from Britain for much longer. In 1899, under the pseudonym 'Tom Bluegum', Payne published his first novel called, *The Backblock's Parson*. This celebrated the 'wild free life of bush and plain' in the unlikely character of an itinerant Methodist preacher; it was clearly intended for a Sunday School audience of restless teenagers.[32] It was written in the style of a rollicking bush adventure, complete with hard riding, encounters with bushrangers and a parson hero (a master horseman) who first rescues the lady and then marries her in the backblocks. Still calling himself 'Tom Bluegum', Payne followed this up with more stories for boys, including *Three Boys in Antarctica* (1912), *The Boy Ivory Hunter* (1926), and a memoir, *From Bark Hut to Pulpit*, which appeared in 1924. This was written in the same stirring, romantic style as *The Backblock's Parson*, and it includes Payne's romance with a lass with red-brown hair, chapters on horses, on itinerancy, on moral struggles with bush people such as shearers, teamsters and stockmen in the tropics and outback, before the preacher narrator finally gravitates citywards at last. Tragically, the frontispiece has the headstones of his two sons — one killed in action in France in 1917, the other later dying of wounds. It was these boys, presumably, for whom Payne's stories were originally written.

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31   For Payne, see J. Arnold and J. Hay (eds), *The Bibliography of Australian Literature*: Vol. 3, Melbourne, 2007, p. 609

32   T. Bluegum, *The Backblocks' Parson: A Story of Australian Life*, London, 1899, p. 10. For background, see E. G. Clancy, 'Ecclesiastical Stock Riders: Wesleyan Methodist Ministers in Nineteenth Century Rural New South Wales', *Church Heritage,* Vol. 9 , 1996, pp. 143-62.

It is unfortunate that we know so little about Payne. His itinerant ministry took him all over Australia, well beyond the bush circuits of earlier rural clergy. He deals with Aborigines on Palm Island and shoots crocodiles in the Tropics. Unlike the despised bush parson, Payne was proud of his horsemanship: 'Like most bush-bred Australians', he tells us, 'he could "sit anything with four legs"'; he also broke his own horses. Less endearingly, Payne was a racist who calmly recounted blood-curdling stories of atrocities against Aboriginal people in Queensland with thinly disguised sympathy for settlers who encountered 'niggers' or 'wild blacks' in their course of work. Yet, for Payne, the depredations of the Aborigines were less of a menace in the bush than the evil influence of alcohol. In a chapter entitled 'The Stockman', Payne succeeds in redeeming a bushman through the power of one of the hymns of Ira D. Sankey (1840-1908), the celebrated hymnographer whose collaboration with the preacher Dwight L. Moody had a major impact on promoting evangelical religion throughout the English-speaking world. Fortified by this conversion, Payne relates that 'The Stockman' found the strength to resist the lure of alcohol, choosing to fight the boss rather than join with him in a drunken debauch. As the Christian stockman threw a final punch, the boss's resistance collapsed: 'Keep your _____ religion, and be _____ to you', he said. To this the Christian stockman retorted: 'I am keeping my religion and by God's grace I won't be damned'.[33]

As we have seen, besides his poor horsemanship, the other perennial fault of the bush parson was his poverty and scrounging ways which came with no compensating bush skills. Indeed, the Australian country clergyman was perennially poor, but there was some occasional sympathy for his plight.[34] One novel with a sympathetic clergyman hero was *The Poor Parson*, first published in 1907 by Steele Rudd (Arthur Hoey Davis) after the enormous success of his stories, *On Our Selection* (1903). This tells the tale of the Presbyterian minister who is first welcomed by his bush

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[33] G. W. Payne, *From Bark Hut to Pulpit,* London, 1924, p. 114.

[34] B. Roach, '"Neither Bread Enough nor to Spare": Paying the Anglican Parson in Early Colonial New South Wales', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society,* Vol. 90, 2004, pp. 1-21.

congregation, but then slowly gets into debt (horrifying in a Scottish community) as they fail to pay him his stipend. The novel opens: 'For many years the inhabitants of Narralane were wild and rough and irreverent. They never said prayers nor grace, and never went to church. They never knew any prayers nor grace to say, and never had a church to go to'.[35] These conditions all changed with the arrival of a trained minister and the building of a church. The poor parson got into the swing of Scottish Australian community life, enjoying sly grog, balls and bagpipes, community meetings, and a lifestyle of aspiration and rough and tumble integrated with unpretentious church attendance. Clearly this is Rudd's attempt to convert his fellow Presbyterians to the tradition of voluntary giving in the palatable format of a comic novel. In *The Poor Parson* it is the women who eventually shame their menfolk into paying for the church and the religious culture provided by their resident clergyman.

Payne and Rudd were writing in the same tradition as the books for boys analysed by historian Martin Crotty, which extolled goodliness, athleticism and patriotism in equal measure, and which he argues was critical to the creation of a loyal, middle class who threw themselves unquestioningly into the war effort in 1914.[36] Most juvenile adventure stories had a moral element in this period; however, the most important precursor to Payne is probably the Scottish writer Robert Michael Ballantyne (1825-1894), who began writing as a young clerk engaged by the Hudson's Bay Company in what was then mostly wilderness and is now Manitoba in north-western Canada. His first novel, *Hudson Bay*; *or*, *Every-Day Life in the Wilds of North America* (1845), originated in letters he wrote home to his mother in Edinburgh.[37] Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858) was an

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35   S. Rudd, *The Poor Parson*, Sydney, 1909, p. 1. For more background to the social milieu, see M. D. Prentis, 'Presbyterian clergy in colonial Queensland', *Queensland Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1998, pp. 86-96.

36   M. Crotty, *Making the Australian Male: Middle-class Masculinity, 1870-1920*, Melbourne, 2001.

37   R. M. Ballantyne, *Hudson Bay*; *or*, *Every-Day Life in the Wilds of North America, during six years residence in the territoes of the Hon. Hudson Bay Company*, London, 1845. Ballantyne went on to write *Snowflakes and Sunbeams, or The Young Fur Trader*

important influence on Robert Louis Stephenson — another moral, Christian novelist fascinated by the exotic locations of the empire. Missionaries, soldiers and sailors, explorers and young colonising adventurers are all featured in Ballantyne's novels, which can be seen as revisionist narratives which sought to uplift the reputation of colonists and colonisation which had earlier been decried by Christian commentators as the resort of the most debased species of humanity: convicts, slavers and plantation owners, beachcombers and mutineers. In *The Coral Island*, the boys' adventures include an attempt to rescue a native girl from pirates and place her with Christian natives; their efforts culminate when an English missionary manages to convert the native chief.

However, we need to get back to the Australian bush and the bush parson. In the more settled conditions of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Australia, the division between the rural hinterland, traversed by itinerant clergy and other religious agents, and the settled cities of coastal Australia, inspired a new generation to defend the old literary slur of the bush parson. Rather later than the other churches, the mainstream of the Church of England began missionary work in rural Australia, spearheaded by the 'bush brothers'. These societies were proud to be identified with the bush and were an effective response to the problems of ministering to remote locations in rural Australia.[38] In his outstanding memoir of the work of the Dubbo-based Brotherhood of the Good Shepherd, Charles Henry Selfe Matthews stated that the rarity of the appearance of any clergyman in the Australian bush was matched only by the negative image they had in the minds of most bushmen — something based, as we have seen, largely on literary sources. That stereotype suggested that the parson was a second-rater with airs and graces that had no place in the bush; he was a hopeless judge of horseflesh, and was perpetually on the scrounge. According to Matthews: 'Everywhere one goes "out-back" one finds the same

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(1856); *Ungava: A Tale of Eskimo Land* (1857); *The Coral Island* (1858), *The Dog Crusoe* (1860), and others.

[38]   R. Frappell, 'The Australian Bush Brotherhoods and Their English Origins', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History,* Vol. 47, 1996, pp. 82-97.

idea that the parson is a ''bloke'' who comes for a ''collection'''.[39] He provides a sketch of one such sorry specimen — with his trousers too short and his gloves too long in the fingers (see Figure 1). The real life of the rural clergyman was, for Matthews, far more mundane. While mediocrities were not unknown in the bush, most clergy were hard-working missionaries with a commitment to their rural ministry. If Matthews is any guide to the type, they had considerable insight into the challenges and limitations of the bush, and were only too aware of the restrictions under which they worked.

Another bush brother, J. W. Eisdell, wrote a memoir which provides an interesting reflection on the self-conscious clerical attempt to counter the bush parson stereotype, especially for the majority of the clergy of all churches who were not born in Australia.[40] Eisdell was determined to show that he was the complete muscular Christian, the opposite of the ineffectual bush parson, or simpering new chum, of literary repute. His memoirs are not only 'cheerful', they show him to be manly, resourceful and ever ready to pitch in. Eisdell had come out to Australia in 1882 when a diagnosis of tuberculosis forced him to leave Oxford without his degree. While committed to his rural mission, Eisdell remained the self-conscious English clergyman throughout his time in Australia. Whether he was roaming the forest, travelling the back blocks of New South Wales to encounter shearers and Aborigines, or encountering wildlife ranging from kangaroos to plagues of rats and rabbits, Eisdell's narrative is always told from the point of view of an outsider. His British, metropolitan readers were expected to sympathise with his attempts to deliver a religious message to a rough, rural clientele. When he first tried to preach to shearers Eisdell was gratified at the warm response to his selected hymns and prayers. He was less well received on another occasion when he arrived at the same time as a show was being presented to the men. Before they would listen to a sermon the shearers demanded that he sing them a song, so he obliged with 'Three jolly sailor boys' and 'Wrap me up in my old stable jacket'. After this, he simply threw

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39   C. H. S. Matthews, *A Parson in the Australian Bush*, London, 1909, pp. 17-18.

40   J. W. Eisdell, *Back Country or the Cheerful Adventures of a Bush Parson in the Eighties*, Oxford, 1936, p. 130.

himself on their mercy and begged them to hear him preach: 'Look here, boys, I'm a parson, I have come twenty-five miles to see you, let me have five minutes' talk'.[41] To their credit — and Eisdell's relief — the men agreed.

Eisdell showed himself to be more self-conscious about his class than other clergy who threw in their lots with a rural ministry. Unlike Payne, who was proud if his converts used their fists to defend their embrace of virtue, Eisdell saw the sacraments as the key to a change of life. Like other bush brothers, he occasionally met a man of his own class, such as the remittance man who claimed to have been 'an officer in a crack regiment' who had 'come a cropper' through drink: 'He told me it was a great treat to him to speak to a man of the same upbringing as himself and he promised to go straight'.[42] On another occasion, he manages to persuade a man 'of good family and education' who had lost a fortune through land speculation to return to the practice of his religion. Retaining the last vestiges of his class standing, he refused to take the rations provided at stations to 'Sundowners'.[43] Anthony Trollope had also seen the Sundowner system as degrading, but Ward argued that it fuelled the classless solidarity of the 'nomad tribe' of rural workers.[44] For Eisdell's penitent, several years of desperation followed until at last he was redeemed; he got 'a decent set of clothes' and began attending church services, initially listening through the windows. Eisdell befriended him and got him in touch with his relatives. He returned to England, attended a theological college and in due course returned to Australia to work.[45] In this story, the bush is a source of danger and regeneration. However, Eisdell was also alert to the romanticism of the bush. He recognised the skill with horses and firearms which made the bushman something more than a labourer since a trained horseman always had the makings of a gentleman. It was no accident that Eisdell, like many rural clergy,

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[41]   *Ibid.*
[42]   *Ibid.*, p. 131.
[43]   *Ibid.*
[44]   A. Trollope, *Australia and New Zealand*, Melbourne, 1876, cited by Ward, *Australian Legend,* pp. 9-10.
[45]   Eisdell, *Back Country*, p. 97.

wrote at length about his experiences with horses, regaling readers with their names and anecdotes that illuminated their characters.

Dealing with class prejudice in the bush was one thing; it was to prove much harder to overcome the derogatory stereotype of the foolish Irish Catholic priest, who alternately tippled the altar wine and muddled the sacraments while augmenting the ignorance of his parishioners. Indeed, this comic stereotype is with us still in the character of Father Ted, from the eponymous television comedy which ran for three seasons from 1995 to 1998, for whom there are rich antecedents created by both Catholic insiders and Protestant outsiders. It is therefore surprising that it was not till well into the twentieth century that some effort was made to create a literary counter to the Irish Catholic buffoon priest. This was the target for the uplifting and gently humorous verses of Patrick O'Brien, the pseudonym of Catholic priest and writer P. J. Hartigan, who began writing sentimental tales and poetry about the world of poor Irish Catholics in rural Australia in the decades before the First World War. Inspired by bush writing of *The Bulletin* school, but without the anti-clerical animus, Hartigan's first collection, *Round the Boree Log*, appeared in 1921 and it became a major popular success.[46] A collection of unpublished verses, *The Parish of St Mel's* (1954) was published posthumously.[47] Other literary attempts to uplift the reputation of rural clergy continued in the following decade. There was, for example, *Parson on the Track* (1962), described by author Ivan Southall as a 'factual story of religious pioneers in the Australian outback'.[48] This was a history of the Anglican bush brothers prepared by one of Australia's best-known literary figures. Not an Anglican, Southall was attracted to the bush brothers as a source of material for outback stories. By this date, however, the bush parson had more or less run its course as a literary archetype, whether comic, polemic or hagiographical in character.

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46   J. O'Brien, *Around the Boree Log and Other Verses*, Sydney, 1921.
47   J. O'Brien, *The Parish of St Mel's and Other Verses*, Sydney, 1954.
48   I. Southall, *Parson on the Track: Bush Brothers in the Australian Outback*, Melbourne, 1962, p. 7.

The
Bush Parson
of
Fiction.

"HE WEARS TROUSERS VERY MUCH TOO SHORT IN THE LEG, AND
BLACK GLOVES AS MUCH TOO LONG IN THE FINGERS."

Figure 1: C. H. S. Matthews, *A Parson in the Australian Bush*, London, 1909, facing p. 2.
The sketch is signed 'C.H.S.M.', so is presumably by Matthews himself.

The trajectory of the bush parson, from anti-clerical literary stereotype to its successful challenge by writers such as Payne, Rudd, Matthews, Hartigan, Eisdell and Southall in the mid-twentieth century, needs to be seen in the social context of church planting in the Australian colonies. Initially, a small number of colonial and convict chaplains were appointed to the early colonies. As their numbers grew, they were placed under the direction of a Senior Chaplain, the first of whom was Samuel Marsden who was appointed in 1802. Following the recommendations of the third Bigge Report on ecclesiastical establishments in 1823 and the passing of the Church Acts (1836-1837), there were successful attempts to provide more systematic funding for clergy and churches.[49] However, even with limited government aid the demand for clergy of all denominations rapidly outpaced the supply of funds and personnel. Following the dramatic upsurge in emigration to British settler colonies, most of the British churches began to demand that the rising colonial churches should take on responsibility for the extension of work among British settlers in their region.[50] At first, the larger and better-funded churches attempted to do this by local fund-raising and various strategies designed to make a handful of trained clergy cover vast distances. In the Anglican diocese of Newcastle, for example, Bishop Tyrrell funded a home mission into the interior from the resources of the Diocesan Church Society, which was used to develop a ministry in what were called 'the bush districts of the interior'.[51] There they would attempt to cater for the frontier population of shepherds, selectors and the new hordes who were brought in by the gold rushes. From Melbourne, Charles Perry proposed that itinerant clergy might cater to the isolated settlements to regions he identified while on visitation to places such as Ballan and Bacchus Marsh. Mrs Barker, wife of the second Bishop of Sydney Frederic Barker, set up a school 'thereby relieving the

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[49]   The fullest account of the effects of the Church Acts is J. Barrett, *That Better Country: The Religious Aspects of Life in Eastern Australia 1835-1850*, Melbourne, 1966, esp. pp. 29-44.

[50]   For a history of the colonial missionary movement, see H. M. Carey, *God's Empire: Religion and Colonialism in the British World*, Cambridge, 2011.

[51]   E. Symonds, *The Story of the Australian Church*, London, 1898, p. 118.

anxieties of numbers of the country and bush clergy'.[52] However, the scale of the operation of creating a full institutional church in the bush was recognised to be beyond the capacity of the local churches which were struggling to meet the needs of those arriving and settling in city areas. Clerical accounts of bush life, such as that of Reverend Henry William Haygarth, are uniform in lamenting the lack of churches and ministers in remote rural parts of Australia.[53]

A more effective vehicle for redressing the lack of clergy was the colonial missionary society, which called on the resources of the churches in Great Britain and Ireland to fund church planting and ministers in settler colonies.[54] These societies have a venerable history. The oldest Protestant society was the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel which was established in 1701 and had been responsible for despatching chaplains and schoolteachers to British colonies and especially to those in America. Other important colonial missionary societies included the Evangelical Anglican Colonial and Continental Church Society, the Congregationalist Colonial Missionary Society, the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, the Baptist Colonial Missionary Society and the Colonial Committees (or 'schemes') of both the Free and the established Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Church of Ireland. The Catholic Church also provided funding for some colonial mission work through the French missionary auxiliary, the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

In the final phase of the colonial missionary movement there was a shift from a movement directed at British colonists to one focussed on the Australian bush. The commitment to the bush — sometimes it was called the backblocks or the outback, but the bush was the most usual designation for Australia's remote rural districts — marked a significant adjustment in the national psyche, from 'colonial' to 'bush' modes. By the 1890s, the old, pejorative and anti-religious connotations of the 'bush' were wearing thin. Now the bush was

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[52]   *Ibid.*, p. 82

[53]   H. W. Haygarth, *Recollections of Bush Life in Australia During a Residence of Eight Years in the Interior*, new ed., London, 1861, p. 26

[54]   Carey, *op. cit.*, esp. Chapters Three to Seven.

seen as romantic and patriotic — not just the churches but institutions of all kinds were rushing to attach it to different causes. It was seen as rather romantic when the term 'bush brothers', to whom I have already referred, was used for the Anglican brotherhoods who took up service in remote parts of inland Australia in the final stages of the colonial mission.[55]

Nevertheless, it was the Congregationalists rather than the Anglicans who first made self-conscious use of 'the bush' as a means to distinctively identify missionary work in Australian rural districts. Originally connected with the Colonial Missionary Society, the New South Wales Bush Missionary Society was established in 1856 to work among isolated and lonely settlers and their children. By the 1920s missionaries were looking back nostalgically over the work of the Society, recalling 'travels in the bush and the stirring welcomes they received from bush people and school children'.[56] In 1861, the London Missionary Society's 'Juvenile Missionary Society' changed its name to the 'Bush Missionary Society' (and in 1862 to the New South Wales Bush Missionary Society) and declared its object to be the extension of opportunities for Christian education.[57] This work included the establishment of Sabbath-schools and, if there were sufficient numbers, preaching stations in the interior of the colony. Following the model of travelling missionaries in the United States, the Society had engaged a missionary to sell or give away copies of the Bible and other books and tracts and to read the Scripture 'to those who would permit him to do so'. The Congregational Church also supported a Home Missionary Society for New South Wales, whose original purpose was 'introducing from England men fitted for the ministerial work in this Colony, and also to assist in sustaining ministers after their arrival. A third object was to send the

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[55]   Brotherhood of the Good Shepherd, *The Brotherhood of the Good Shepherd: A Church of England Mission in the Diocese of Bathurst*, Dubbo, NSW, 1913; C. H. S. Mathews, *A Parson in the Australian Bush*, London, 1908; Eisdell, *Back Country*; D. Sellick, 'An Australian bush brother: the journeys of Thomas Groser', *Early Days*, Vol. 12, 2005, pp. 474-87.

[56]   'Bush Missionary Society', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 June 1929, p. 8.

[57]   *Fifth Annual Report of the Juvenile Missionary Society, now changed to the Bush Missionary Society, 1861*, Sydney, 1861, pp. 5-6.

Gospel by the best means within their reach to the distant bush'.[58] Another well-publicised mission to the inland was the Australian Inland Mission, led by Reverend John Flynn (1880-1951), and funded by the Presbyterian Church from 1912.[59] Although it does not properly belong to the colonial era, the Australian Inland Mission was responsible for developing key services for rural Australians, including the Flying Doctor Service, which took both the bush parson and the bush doctor into the air. Less reputably, Flynn promoted a mission intended for the exclusive use of white Australians.

The response of the mainstream of the Church of England to the challenge of ministering to the remote rural population of Australia was the bush brotherhoods. The first bush brotherhoods, an initiative of Nathaniel Dawes, were created after the 1897 Lambeth Conference.[60] Eventually seven bush brotherhoods were established in Australia where they had an important impact on the colonial church; at least thirteen brothers went on to become bishops.[61] They were a practical and flexible response to the need for a committed and mobile clergy to work on the colonial frontier. Many of the early brothers wrote up their memoirs, including those of Eisdell and Matthews to which I have already referred, and we therefore have a wider range of sources for their ministry than for other rural clergy. One important factor — certainly something which contrasts the bush brothers with the Evangelical Anglican Bush Church Aid Society — is the extent to which they depended on England for vocations. The bush in these hands became a discourse which appealed to an English audience of potential donors and recruits to a bush ministry. In the sad memoir compiled by the friends of Frederick Hulton-Sams following his death in April 1915, the former

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[58]   *Tenth Annual Report of the Congregational Home Missionary Society for New South Wales, 1859-60*, Sydney, 1860, p. 7.

[59]   I. L. Idriess, *Flynn of the Inland*, Sydney, 1991.

[60]   Frappell, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-97; R. Frappell, 'Imperial Fervour and Anglican Loyalty 1901-1929', in B. Kaye (ed.), *Anglicanism in Australia: A History*, Melbourne, 2002, pp. 76-99; R. A. F. Webb, *Brothers in the Sun: A History of the Bush Brotherhood Movement in the Outback of Australia*, Sydney, 1978.

[61]   J. W. S. Tomlin, *The Story of the Bush Brotherhoods*, London, 1949, p. 101.

bush brother was extolled as a hard-working rural minister in the Queensland bush, but also as 'Priest, Athlete and Patriot'.[62]

Evangelicals within the Church of England also learned to adopt the language of the bush in order to promote the cause of rural ministry in Australia. Evangelicals had been among the first to respond to the needs of colonial settlers and the main vehicle for this was the Colonial and Continental Church Society, formed in 1851 from a union of the Newfoundland School Society and the Colonial Church Society, which had originally begun its work in Western Australia.[63] In its promotional literature, such as the *Greater Britain Messenger*, the Colonial and Continental Church Society frequently invoked the frontier of the empire — its vast regions of thinly-settled territory, remote and isolated communities with neither schools nor clergy to keep them Christian. In 1919, in what was perceived to be a major break with the founding work of the Colonial and Continental Church Society, a number of Sydney-based Evangelicals in the Church of England decided to begin a new missionary society, to be called the Bush Church Aid Society.[64] In time, this would become the largest church organisation with a mission to 'the bush'. In a conscious break with tradition, the quarterly journal of the Society was called *The Real Australian*, indicating a conviction that the bush ethos continued to give validation to rural Australians, just as Russel Ward claimed. If this was 'the bush', however, then many others would call it a desert. The Bush Church Aid provided missionaries, nurses, deaconesses and hostel sisters, including large numbers of women, to some of the most desolate parts of Australia. They served the Far West mission of the bishop of Willochra in South Australia, and later the West Darling area of New South Wales, where they visited towns such as Wilcannia, Menindie, White Cliffs, Malparinka and Tibooburra. Later they advanced with the East-West Railway to take in the coastal

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62   F. Hulton-Sams, *The Fighting Parson. Impressions of his Five Years' Ministry in the Queensland Bush Recorded by Some Who Knew and Loved Him*, Longreach, 1915.

63   For an institutional history of the Colonial and Continental Church Society, see B. Underwood, *Faith and New Frontiers: A Story of Planting and Nurturing Churches, 1823-2003*, Warwick, 2004.

64   S. J. Kirkby, *These Ten Years. A Record of the Work of the Bush Church Aid Society for the Church of England in Australia, 1920-1930*, Sydney, 1930, p. 12.

regions of the Great Australian Bight. Such travelling stretched the idea of 'the bush' well beyond its original formulation by convict workers in the earliest days of the settlement of eastern Australia. It also marked a triumph of church agencies over the frontier.

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I have argued that Russel Ward was right. Religion was not, at least initially, a part of the bush legend. In its original formulation, bushmen had a rough-hewn ethos of their own which was seen as both more real and more moral than the expensive caring of the imported British parson. As Lawson, Paterson and other bush writers affirmed, the men of the bush had no need of a parson to teach them the essence of religion. It was something they had already intuitively grasped. However, as I have illustrated, challenges to the natural anarchy of bush society were launched by all the churches, beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century. While they were sorely stretched at first, their agents: itinerant Methodist preachers, Sunday School Teachers, Catholic priests, brothers and nuns, Presbyterian ministers and teachers, and Anglican clergy, teachers and missionaries, both from the High Church and the Evangelical parties, were soon to be found everywhere in Australian rural districts.

Writers of literary fiction and prose from all the major churches successfully challenged the derogatory literary stereotype of the bush parson. In novels, Christian ministers were seen as energetic, sympathetic to the needs of the bush people, frugal to a fault, and even capable of finding their way in the bush on horseback. In this literary counter-attack, the bush, once seen as so hostile to the presence of the Christian religion and its representative clergy, effectively fell to the bush parson. By the beginning of the Second World War, the Bush Missionary Society had seeded it with Sunday Schools, the Bush Church Aid was even sending out women in significant numbers to minister to rural families on the most isolated stations of the outback. And the bush brothers, journeying from their headquarters in inland towns, were — like the other agents of settler colonialism — here to stay. This essay has mostly drawn on literary sources, including novels, poetry, memoirs and institutional

histories, however they form an effective mirror to the pattern of social change, and the integration of church and society, in the Australian bush, which was so effectively evoked in the seminal historical writing of Russel Ward.