

*Aboriginal Culturation of the Environment in South Australia and excerpts
from the novel The Glass Harpoon*¹

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Introduction

The colony of South Australia was unique among the colonies that were set up in Australia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in that it was established by an English company with significant capital and a unique plan for colonisation which would attract both capitalists and workers and which would attempt to replicate the class structure of England (Pope, p.6). There were no convicts or transport ships, but free settlers, many seeking religious freedom, many with a hunger for land, many furthering the fortunes of large families in England.

Wheat and wool growing, as well as the securing of certain timber supplies, were primary concerns of settlers, and to justify incursion into aboriginal land the concept of 'terra nullius', empty or unoccupied land, was established and was well accepted by the time of the establishment of South Australia in 1836. However, there were many early explorers, all over Australia, who noticed that the land in many places had been cultured, that it even bore the appearance of a 'gentleman's park' (Gammage, pp.5-17) with large open areas placed within woods. Adjacent these places, signs of permanent settlement were observed. Major Mitchell, exploring northern Victoria in 1836, remarked upon the park-like arrangements; fields of millet were even observed (Mitchell, p.85)

First Excerpt

So the culturing of the environment had been occurring in Australia for thousands of years before the arrival of European settlers (Gammage, p.vii). The creative piece which follows is set in the early 1839, less than three years after the establishment of the colony of South Australia. The central character, Matthew Larkin, had been sent to South Australia in the company of his older brother who was responsible for establishing a land holding in the

¹ This paper is a contribution to the *Placescape, placemaking, placemarking, placedness ... geography and cultural production* Special Issue of *Coolabah*, edited by Bill Boyd & Ray Norman. The Special Issue is supported by two websites: <http://coolabahplacedness.blogspot.com.au> and <http://coolabahplacedness-images.blogspot.com.au/>.

new colony. Of an excitable and inconsistent temperament, Matthew has been set to unsuitable work in the Governor's office copying documents. In the first excerpt, he witnesses the spearing of a swan by aboriginal people and comments on the attitude of species preservation shown in their hunting practices, comparing this to European methods. Matthew then meets the man who is his counterpoint throughout the novel, the lower class artist Cawthorne (Jones, p.75-78). Their shared enthusiasm for the natives and their culture brings them together, but ultimately tears them apart. In this excerpt the two men are establishing their connection and they go to an affray, which has been arranged between two native tribes, and which Cawthorne has been invited to attend because of his rare friendship with the native people (Hosking, p.172). Cawthorne tells Larkin tales of native burnings (Gammage, p.3) and of almost comical settler misunderstandings. They walk through a landscape which in 1842 was a glorious wetland with an abundance of birdlife (Harding, 173), but which in modern times is suburbs and roads. They go to the place of affray which is an open area within forest (and which is still called Black Forest), which has been procured by deliberate and consistent native burning. Certain indigenous Australian grasses respond positively to burning every three years or so (Gammage, 14), and the fresh growth attracts game which can then be relatively easily speared by hunters waiting among the trees. The piece closes with Cawthorne's revelation over the reason for the affray itself (Jones, 80); Larkin is stunned and even more viscerally drawn to the native culture.

Diarium of Matthew John Larkin, 12th day of September 1839

Dear Diarium,

Since seeing the natives while out walking some three weeks past, I have been drawn to return there by a force within me which I myself do not fully understand. Their village lies past the stern little gaol which is still being built and around the bend and out of sight of the town proper. Dear diarium, with one's back to the gaol and viewing the river as it meanders to the North and the West, it is the most beguiling aspect. The trees here afford not shade enough to block the light, but to simply make a filter of it, so that one is dappled by sun and shade in equal degrees and the effect is balmily pleasant.

Yesterday a swan as black as pitch was swimming on its own and this fact alone was enough to arrest my mind, as it is the trait of these swans to form a pen or gaggle out of some instinct of self-preservation. And then I noticed there was a mother with her babes in train moving away some twenty yards distant. In between the two a native man, his body was glistening and streaming with water as if he had recently emerged from it, with his hands thrust outwards in a shepherding gesture to drive the mother and her babes away. Then from among the rushes that snuggle into the bend in the river emerged two shadows of figures. Slowly, like wraiths in a dream, they stretched up to their height and as they did so an arm was raised and in each right hand there was a spear of more than two yards in length. The sight of them sent a wave of sensation through me such as I have never experienced before. Their left legs barely broke the surface of the water as they leaned forward in perfect balance to prepare their spears for flight. The silence which hung over

the river was a thing of itself, so perfectly still that I could hear a bird cheep in an old gum tree on the hill one hundred yards to the north, as if impertinent, foolishly unaware of the silent drama that was played out in its neighbourhood.

The arms of the spear-throwers loomed back and then silently forward and the spears, which had seemed until a moment before to be a fully attached part of the hand and arm, were now in flight and with a barely audible whoosh they both struck the swan, one in its breast beneath the neck and the other deep in its abdomen. Both spearheads protruded clean through to the other side. The first sign of death or injury was the deep red blood that now oozed into the stream, and as the heavy, handled end of the spears sank slowly into the water the two barbed and sharpened heads rose like totems and the very sun seemed to salute them and to bounce its rays off their extraordinary crystal heads in triumph, as if the elements themselves proclaimed the righteousness of the deed of death.

This all happened so quickly, my eyes were still adjusting from the half light of the trees to the brilliant sunlight of the glinting river and I could scarce believe that it had truly happened. But what spell had seemed to be cast over the river was suddenly broken by the cheery handclapping and jabbering of the natives who strode forward to collect their prey; they evinced the contented smiles of those who have well performed a task at which they should not fail but which, when done well enough, still is all the credit to them. I supposed that were one spear to strike the bird, then that would have been enough, but that both had made their deadly mark was credit indeed. The sudden change in their demeanour could scarcely be believed, so carefree and joyful of life did they seem, where they had been sombre and so full of purpose just one moment before. They were soon joined by the third, the shepherd, who had gently all the while been moving the mother and her three babes away toward the rest of the pen, to safety.

Never before have I seen such savagery displayed in the killing of the buck and at the same time such gentility of deference to the mother and her babes. In England would not a hunter have killed them both and thrown the cygnets to the dogs?

The throwers pulled their spears all the way through the carcass for there was no pulling them back through the way they had entered. Then one of them slung the swan by its neck over his own shoulder, and what a splendid sight it made; the barbed points, like harpoons, glinting curiously in the sun, the jet black swan, a trickle of red at its throat, against the dark brown body of the native as they waded off to throw the dead bird at the feet of their women for the plucking and the gutting.

I have seen nature; I have seen the savage. I stood transfixed for several minutes after they had gone, wondering that there could ever be such completeness in an act or transaction that I would witness or take part in. But eventually I turned to make my way back up the river towards the settlement, for there was nothing left to do.

And that was when I saw him, the man I now know as Cawthorne. He was standing, like me, near river's edge, facing the action I have just described, except that, unlike me, he appeared to have been watching with hands in pockets. His face was turned towards me, his

feet and whole body still facing the very recent action, as if he had not wanted to turn himself and risk the making of a sound, the better to summarise my character undetected. As I stood there he took his hands from his pockets and pulled a pipe from his coat then, with a conscious nonchalance, began to stuff it in preparation to lighting.

I walked up the small slope towards him.

‘A pretty little show,’ was all he said.

‘I thought they were marvellous,’ I replied with my eager enthusiasm. He merely lit his pipe and nodded three times as if contented with my answer.

‘Come, to my cottage. I will show you some of their weapons.’ His very abrupt way of speaking and the directness of his manner bespoke a man not cultured in the ways of society. His trousers and shirt were sound, befitting some form or shopkeeper or civil servant, but old, perhaps five years past their best. All of this did not shock but rather please me, for I had until this time been kept with only my brother and those such as were deemed suitable by my absent father who stayed in England. I had to tell him that there was nothing more I would delight in than to visit his place, but that I was bound to return to my employment and that I would spend the remainder of the day copying the Governor’s dispatches to England.

‘You will come to me tomorrow then, at ten o’clock. I will show you my collection of native spears and things. And there is something else.’

‘What is that?’

‘There is to be an affray.’

Diarium of Matthew John Larkin, 15th day of September 1839

An affray! An indeed what an affray it was, such that no human being besides a tribesman may behold. The sole exception to this rule until this day has been Mr. Cawthorne, who is protected by the natives from all violence. So much I have learnt these past three days. Mr Cawthorne does paint most proficiently an image upon canvas and the natives hold him in a position of respect for this power. That he would spend afternoons in his front parlour making images of *them* is a matter that makes them speak of him with reverence. His person is vouchsafed through the native communities and me, as his friend, along with him; to think that I, in as little time as three weeks in this colony, have become only the second white person to gain this honour.

To meet the place appointed for the affray we walked away from the little town of Adelaide along the rough and winding road to the Bay, which it is said six years ago was traversed at the rate of one mile per hour, or six and a half hours for the trip. It is now smoothed in some parts, but still is just as quick to walk as drive. A horse would have been the soundest

way but of steed we had none and anyway it was said that a beast would frighten the natives and disturb the purity of the affray that was before us.

After about a mile and a half we struck to the south away from the road and into the forest which was densely wooded and of dark grey peppermint box trees, rough of bark and standing nearly as high as a cricket pitch is long. Mallee box there were about as well and everywhere were grass trees which are here called yakkas and which are best avoided because of their hard protruding flower spikes which can put out a man's eye if he is not careful. Black and white magpies warbled to us from their places in the branches and overhead flocks of Cape Barren Geese passed over in profusion and, rushing in little gangs from tree to tree, were magnificently coloured parrots in red and green and blue and yellow which, when sighted on the wing and in a bunch made the most pleasing sight, as did the pink and grey galahs which flew fearless across our track.

As we walked along Cawthorne said to me, 'You seem well pleased with the native.' There was an upward inflection in his voice at the end of his sentence which made it more into a question that invited my response.

'Oh, indeed, sir. They are most extraordinary. I wish to learn so much more about them. I have watched them fashion weapons from wood, with their hands and what are seemingly the most ancient of tools.'

'Stone tools, sir, which they have used for twenty thousand years, and now detest.'

'Detest, sir?'

'Hmm, I speak too strongly perhaps. They may seem untouched to you sir, these natives, but much has changed in the five few years since the arrival of our good colonists.'

'Indeed, sir?'

'You wish to learn of the natives?'

'Indeed, sir.'

'You can accompany me on some of my forays and you will learn a great many things, if you've a mind.' I replied that I would indeed like to learn and experience whatever there was to know about these extraordinary natives.

We walked on to the black forest of the plains, in which a clearing, I was told, had been set aside for this affray between the tribes, and Cawthorne told me of a great many things. It seemed as if he was so glad to have an ear, the only people I had seen him with to this time had been his own mother and the natives themselves.

'When the British peoples arrived in this place, dear Larkin, there was a fear and a general commotion among all about the native. They were astounded to see the hills all alight with

flames and smoke; it was as if the holocaust were to be rained upon them. But it was nothing more than the native burning off to suppress the growth of trees and to create more grassland for their wildlife. But the goodly colonist saw this as a presage of evil. They had heard of the Indians of the Americas and knew that smoke signals meant a preparation for war. A stockpile of weapons was created and all were braced for attack, but of course the native was in the hills simply because it was high summer and they were not so foolish that they would sit in a daub hut in the middle of the plains now were they.

‘So when the season turned they appeared one day, in their normal camp by the river, where you saw them only yesterday. In April it would be, when the heat dies from the sun and the time is right for moving down from the hills, they simply walked down and set to collecting wood for their fires.’

I looked to my right from a hillock we were surmounting and there was a lagoon of fresh water several feet deep and on it a flock of wild ducks and some black swans too, with their tails up and beaks probing beneath the surface for greenery – pelicans sailed by in their never ending quest for small fish.

‘And made access of all this,’ I waved to the lagoon, one of many that stretched down from the reedbeds of the River Torrens to the Patawalonga Creek near the Bay.

‘Aye, and there is less of it now than there was even five years ago.’

‘There is not game for all, white man and native alike?’

‘Hah!’ he exclaimed again, ‘in twenty years the blacks will be the servants of the whites, who will be masters over all. But look, we are near.’

And indeed before us at two hundred yards a clearing was emerging to our sight as if by magic from the middle of the black forest. It was as large almost as the best cricket ground and surrounded on every side by trees, and covered with grass that would be a grazing animal’s delight. On the edge of this space a group of thirty or more native men were standing together and talking vehemently to each other. They were armed with shields and spears and their voices seemed to be rising in pitch; even in the two minutes or so it took us to traverse the distance did the clamour increase. More men were arriving, emerging from the forest and they filled me with fear as their faces were so serious and full of intent. Cawthorne held his hand up for us to slow our pace, then stopped to think for a moment. ‘Through here,’ he said, and quickly plunged back into the trees to skirt around to the other end of the clearing. The going was not difficult as the trees are never close together here and one needs only to avoid low hanging branches as there is no undergrowth of note such as one hears of in tropical places. The sun came through the trees in a pleasing way and our walk was not unpleasant. Soon the trees thinned out and the clearing became apparent once more and we espied another group of men sitting together calmly with their shields and spears. Some of these I recognised as men I had seen at the river camp. Cawthorne approached them at once and commenced to engage them in conversation in their native tongue, a feat which astounded me, so little had I expected it. I had heard a few of the

natives speak a word or two of broken English, but here was Cawthorne passing the time of day with them! I was filled with admiration of his skill.

When he returned he was excited. 'Let's be taking the shelter of that tree,' he said and indeed he directed us to a stout gum which had been selected for the very kind of low-hanging branch we had been avoiding on our walk around, and which afforded us an easy climb. No sooner had we been settled in our place than the group of shouting blacks we had avoided on our arrival drew together in a kind of broken, irregular line about one hundred yards away and facing the group of sitting men. They began to advance, making warlike motions of throwing and clubbing as they moved and contriving the most truculent faces also, rather as if a full-scale battle were already in progress and that imaginary assailants were before them. At this time the group of sitting men stood up to face them. Then all at once the shouting men ran forward, their spears were elevated and their shields clattered together and then together they halted before the other group and began to make the wildest antics I have ever seen. They crouched then jumped into the air, they growled and screeched, their eyes bulging, their tongues hanging out. Then of a sudden their spears were elevated together and they grouped themselves in a sort of phalanx of the kind one has read about in Spartan or Roman history. The shields were all held together above their heads in a tortoise shell effect and then deathly silence for a moment followed as if from nowhere by a sound not unlike the explosion of a small military shell, but of military shell they had none: the sound was the collected wind of each of one hundred warriors drawn in and expelled together. They did this six or seven times and at the last explosion, they all dispersed.

It was with amazement that I saw them then, each gather about them their own shield and spear or club and turn their backs on the other watching group and return to the place from which they had come. At no moment had the standing group, whose men I had recognised, made a move to their spears and shields, but were only watching all the while.

'And that,' said Cawthorne quietly but contentedly, 'is our little show for today.'

The whole had taken only fifteen minutes to conclude, but was of the most transfixing nature throughout. Every second I had expected a volley of spears to be hurled from the advancing group upon the other and for the sounds of screams to be on the air and for bloodshed to be all about the earth. But the affray, if that is what it was to be called, had ended with an astonishing abruptness and I was climbing down from our tree with a feeling incomplete, as if I had been cheated of some elemental experience. I felt as one does when tossed upon the seas in a small ship; a realisation that powers above us were at play, and that death and all human interest were as nothing. But here the calm that comes after the storm was curiously unwelcome, and I was as if robbed of something myself.

'But why did they stop? What caused them to regale themselves so fierce and then to turn away. I have never seen the like.'

'They had made their point.' I waited for him to go on. 'The Murray men had staked a claim.'

'Murray men?'

'From the river. They have come down here for a very special purpose, and that is to initiate their boys on this land, the land of the plains people - my friends, your friends - those they call the Ghanaa.'

'The experience did not appear to have provoked enjoyment among the plainsmen.'

'It did not. They are very displeased with the Murray.'

'Why do they not do it near the river, on their own territory?'

'Ah, can you not guess why they are here. Matthew?'

I remained silent.

'It is because of you.'

'Me?'

'You and your like. Our like. Did you not see two days ago that pair of Ghanaa men, fashioning out of wood their curved throwing stick.'

'I did, and speedy work they made of it too.'

'Aye, sir, with a metal hatchet that fairly glinted in the sun if I do properly recall the words you used to describe it to me.'

He had recalled it well. 'A white man's tomahawk gained in exchange for services rendered to the white man: carrying goods, chopping wood and whatever it is that the white man wants. Anything made of metal or of glass is the highest prize to them. What would the natives not do to obtain a metal axe? Can you imagine the hours of labour entailed in cutting a boomerang with an axe of stone. Or the infinite hours of grinding stone on stone to fashion the axe itself. No, the white man's axes and tomahawks are very superior to their own. Do you think these Murray men do not want them? Indeed each one of them would do anything in his power, take extraordinary risks, to be the man who brought one back to his tribe. They would risk a shot from a white man's rifle to secure such a prize. Why, to cut an opossum from a hollowed tree with a metal tomahawk is the work of a moment, sir.'

'I should say so. But glass?'

'Indeed, sir, to be cut into spear tips. I would not want one of those stuck in my leg I can tell you now. And tobacco. They love to make mimicry of the white man and all his ways, with pipe and smoke no less, poor devils.'

'And if they have it, the Murray men want it.'

‘And if the Murray men initiate their boys on this patch of land that gives those and possibly their close relations the right to hunt on this patch of land. And to hunt means to gather too and to gather means to trade for goods with the white man, and if that means to be of service to the white man, then so be it.’

‘They are fighting over us.’

‘Matthew, sir,’ and Cawthorne laid his hand gently on my shoulder as we walked, ‘they are fighting over us.’

Second Excerpt

In just three years of the colony of South Australia laws have been made to outlaw the ringbarking of trees (for the purpose of making shields) as well as unnecessary congregation and fighting, not to mention another which required natives to wear clothing at all times (Jones, p.79). This second excerpt comes a week after the first when relations between the two tribes, fighting essentially over access to white man’s bounty, have worsened further and a deadly affray is proposed. Larkin is impressed at the gentlemanly nature of the arrangements between the tribes, and by the ceremonial pre-lethal part of the engagement; victory without deference to traditional customs would be a disgrace.

Cawthorne was a historical figure in the early days of Adelaide (Hosking, p.172) where he arrived at the age of nineteen. He was strongly attracted to the aboriginal people, befriended them personally and made collections of their artefacts. Because of his low origins he could do this without incurring the rancour of polite society, but because of his ambitions to rise above his humble schoolteacher’s position he had also to make himself acceptable to Adelaide’s bourgeois rectitude. He forever straddled the two worlds, but in his early years he did actually witness and make account of battles such as the one described here (Jones, p.79). He painted the images of aborigines often in portrait and he also drew warriors dodging spears in affrays (Jones, p.73). His experiences in Africa had a profound influence on his attitude to the Australian natives and he drew sardonic amusement from the fears of the white settlers.

For Larkin the experiences in this scene have a different meaning. They confirm his fascination and he plunges deeper and deeper into what he terms the ‘savagery’ of native life, but which only serves to draw out elemental forces within him, to his ultimate extreme detriment.

Diarium of Matthew John Larkin, 27th day of September 1839

Cawthorne had no need to be warned by the blacks that an affray of proper and serious intent was near, for the evidence was all about. Three afternoons ago we saw that bark had

been stripped in sheets of three foot by four foot from the largest white gum trees by the river. The natives cut these pieces into shields and fit them with little twine handles that they fix with resin from the extraordinary yacca trees that abound in the plains. These trees grow to three feet high, then sprout the most enormous spikey spears of leaves from which the sticky substance can be pressed. Once each man has cut and fashioned his own shield it is daubed with a background of white and then, as if it were an image of the sun rising from each rounded end of the shield, there is added an arc of reddish ochre, which they make from the pulverisation of rocks. Once this is done and all other spears and clubs are in their proper place, then the panoply is complete and they are ready for battle.

These procedures are not unknown to the authorities of the town, as the events which I shall now relate will show. It has indeed become one of the white man's laws, which is strongly resented by the blackfellow, that no trees shall be so cut, for the purpose of the cut is well known and disturbances to the productive peace of the colony have too been made unlawful.

There is no such thing as ambush in the native set of mind. To surprise an enemy and to discharge spears without warning and preparation from both the sides would be a dishonour far worse than death: victory in these circumstances an insult to the great ancestors whom they venerate as gods. A date is set and a place agreed: it becomes the most civilised of arrangements, more like a duel between gentlemen; and more than that for, it seems, sometimes the outcome of the affray is set by elders before the skirmish even begins, and the whole is acted out as some kind of elaborate choreography, a deadly play within the greater play of life, which is itself but a touchstone to the greater world of spirit beings and dreaming songs.

Cawthorne and I left early and arrived at the pre-arranged clearing, further away from the town than the place of the ceremony we saw last week, to the south and west past the Black Forest, where the ground levels out and clears and space is there for an unimpeded run. This space has been burnt for hundreds of years, says Cawthorne, to make it into a grassland, to attract game to the new grasses that grow after burning. It does make the most pleasant clear space, bounded by forest on all sides, more as one would have expected to see in an English gentleman's park than here in the wild.

We climbed a tree and each took boughs a foot thick if they were an inch, where we waited growing more uncomfortable with the minutes. The Ghanaa blacks at length appeared and gathered in the distance to the north and on our right, while presently the Murray men emerged from some distant camp and began to group themselves to our left as had no doubt been arranged between the tribes. After a considerable delay, during which there was much discussion among the men of each tribe, they began quite suddenly to form themselves into single lines and these faced up to each other at a distance of about a hundred yards. They then began to advance towards each other as if at some order or signal unseen to us. All at once they stopped and both sides began to shout and leap about as the Murray men had done the week before and with such extraordinary antic capering as one has never seen before: mouths gurgling with spittle, they leapt up and down and flexed their thighs and made such horrid expressions on their faces as a gorgon on an ancient shield, as if the

purpose was to frighten off their foe. A shout then suddenly emerged and this was the signal for battle as spears began to be discharged from both sides at the one time. A shiver went through my whole being as the rainbow of spears went up, forming pleasing arcs through the air so that for a moment there was a glistening dome of missiles producing an effect that was beyond reality. The idea that this opening salvo of spears had been for largely ceremonial effect was supported by the following more deadly action. Men took one step forward and threw with a round arm style, the spears humming along much quicker, no more than the height of a human thigh at their arc. The result of all this throwing was the most extraordinary leaping about as the spears of assailants were dodged, some jumping as a spear flashed through the legs, some taking a spear on the shield while capering left and right to allow another past, some hopping as would a kangaroo and deflecting another missile with a downwards flourish of the shield. The sight of two hundred blacks all throwing and cavorting at once was the most single extraordinary sight I have ever witnessed and one that could have been most amusing had the lethal potentials not been so great. I declare that any white man would have been dead and lying on the ground in an instant, but the amazing judgement and athletic movement of these fellows made incisions to the flesh the exception rather than the rule.

I glanced over at Cawthorne and shouted out, 'I say,' in my excitement. But he gazed ahead of himself with that extraordinary fixed and melancholic expression. I expect he heard me, but he gave no sign of recognition.

And still the spears came, it was difficult to see all in the dust, but possibly the women and children who had followed along behind were acting as collectors of some kind, and were passing a storehouse of spears to their men for second and third use. Then a Murray took a throw fair in the inner part of the thigh not eighty yards from our tree, and another man rushed forward to break the spear off so that it could be passed through. The face of the injured man was screwed in a torment of agony that I shall not forget. The Ghanaa men began to press now upon the Murray; their spears were coming still and it looked as if a slaughter may ensue. The feeling that was within my breast was of the greatest excitement I have ever felt. My body in the tree was so acutely aware of every sensation that I felt I had never been alive until that hour. The savagery of these acts was extreme and to think that it was somehow because of us, because of me, that this affray had occurred.

And then, suddenly, without any expectation, adding to the clamour and with a great thundering of hooves, five of the police rode up together from the direction of the town, with Captain Harrison the first among them, mounted on one of the mightiest and most fearsome horses I have ever seen. He took a pistol from his holster and fired it once into the air, with a look which, even among the famous cavalcade of Captain Harrison's looks, was the most ferocious of all. The effect was instantly galvanising on the black fellows. The throwing of spears ceased forthwith and they looked about themselves with blank expressions which turned in time to something surly or sulky in demeanour. With helpless looks the natives began to withdraw back into the lines in which they had been ranged some minutes before. Those natives who, some say, have been in possession of this ground for as long as twenty thousands of years. And where they could have turned and buried a shower of spears into the newly arrived entourage and surely wiped them away with little loss to

themselves, they merely looked indignant, affronted by this unwanted intrusion. They gave each other looks such as would be seen among a bunch of errant schoolboys whose prime amusement has been taken from them by the master. The Captain waved his pistol at them, and then motioned to a place before him, in signal that their weapons should be collected there. And what a piteous sight it was, the poor fellows broken hearted on both sides as they laid down their newly cut and carefully painted and anointed wocaltee shields, their uwinda and wirri, their midlah and cootpee.

Like poor mothers forced to give their babies away at the foundling house door, they stepped back and away with piteous looks at their shields and spears and then directed baleful glares in the direction of the police; looks that were reproachful and contemptuous in their countermanding sorrow. And then the Captain motioned to his men and all together the deadly hooves of the horses thundered over the pile of implements and there was such a crackling sound of breaking bark and wood that was raised to the heavens as you would expect from a burning house fire. They trampled back and forth for a space of time that must have been several minutes until the job of destruction was completed to the Captain's satisfaction.

As if to celebrate the end of this passage of action the Captain fired one shot into the air from his pistol and waved it all about to the natives that they should disperse and as if to warn them of the consequences should they not. And so they turned their backs on the piteous scene of broken shields and of the diffusion of honour and nobility of purpose, and returned to their camps.

Satisfied that his purpose had been fully met Captain Harrison now wheeled around his horse and, having placed his revolver in the holster at his hip, with a gesture of his head he motioned to his men to return to the town with him. But as his mighty horse was gathering momentum his head turned to survey the scene about him one last time, and in this movement he caught sight of our two figures in the trees sixty yards or so from him. He pulled up his horse quite sharply and wheeled about and trotted up to face us from not more than twenty yards and close enough to be absolutely certain on whose visages he gazed. He was close enough to address us without raising his voice, but speak he did not. His look instead did return to that furious aspect he had shown when riding up. Then he turned and, flanked by his men on every side, he rode away towards the town.

When their exeunt was complete Cawthorne and I clambered down from our tree and went rummaging through the mangled remains. He found a shield that was half intact, its one remaining orbing ochre stripe had had its matching partner broken off and now resembled more a red and orange sun descending into a sea of white. Cawthorne regarded it for a moment then tossed it back into the rubble.

'Fit for the campfire and nothing more,' he said sadly.

I began collecting up some spear heads broken from their shafts by the horses' hooves. The third I found was of a glass-like substance so sharp that when I touched it I received a cut so fine as a sheet of paper can occasionally impart. I much prized this object from that

moment and it glinted in the clear afternoon sun as I held it up to inspect. I was taken by the way the sun reflected from its sharpened edges and I wondered why such valuable stone should be allotted the task of taking life, and not treasured and kept for decades or even centuries.

‘A pretty little mess to be describing in your diarium, sir.’

‘How did you know I was recording my experiences in the colony?’

‘These habits of industry are what differ us from the native, sir. When they have enough, they have enough; when we have enough it is only the beginning.’

I began to understand something of the meaning behind his observations.

‘But surely we will live side by side with these marvellous creatures.’

‘Ha!’ Cawthorne ejaculated in a sardonic, yet heartily amused manner. ‘Chopping firewood in exchange for flour, and shaves. You may call it living.’ He watched me hold up my spearhead to the sunlight whence it glittered in all directions like a kaleidoscope. ‘And magical spearheads.’

‘I say, Cawthorne. From what substance would the natives fashion such a blade? This is surely as fine as glass.’

Cawthorne took it from my hand. He did not hold it to the light but regarded it sadly then handed it back to me.

‘And glass it is, sir.’

‘It is glass?’ I held it up again. ‘But how ...’

‘Dear Larkin, when the natives come up to town to chop up firewood for the well-to-do they are paid in such kind as the rich can muster.’

I still was at a loss.

‘You have seen them smoking tobacco, like a white man does.’

I had.

‘You have seen their chieftain with freshly shaven face.’

I had wondered at this as well.

‘Well, the white man’s glass is more prized by them than any other thing. They fashion it to the point that you see in your hand, and fix it to their spears with cotton from the looms of

Birmingham. It gives them magic, or so they think. White man's magic, which brings them closer to the land of their dream.'

I regarded the object once more. Into each of the wings of the spear tip had been carved three devilish barbs as you might see upon a harpoon. And just as such barbs would bring a whale back towards its assailant when pulled upon, so they would inflict agony upon the wounded man who tried to extract one from himself by pulling it from the direction it had entered.

I shuddered with the thought of such a wound. The agonied extraction; flesh pulling away from flesh, the glass barb concealing pockets of meat that would so quickly putrefy in the antipodean heat. The idea came to me of the frontier, of the wildness just out of my reach; the idea of the wildness just within my reach. It was here, in my hand.

'They want to be near us, to take a part in our goods, perhaps to draw some kind of spirit from our strength.'

His voice was filled with disdain when he spoke of our strength. For Cawthorne truly was torn between our world and theirs; and at that moment, that harpoon of glass in my fingers seemed to hold some special power that burnt into my flesh and which held me in its special thrall. And I knew that I too was somehow a part of this world and also as much a part of another. But which? The idea radiated from that glass object through my arm and up into my brain that from that moment onwards somehow my life would be enacted among these people.

'Keep it, Mr Larkin,' said Cawthorne. 'You may just as well engage with their power, as they will engage with ours. You will now be the colony's second best collector of native goods,' he spoke this last with his most powerful bitterness and irony.

Cawthorne was ready to depart and so my rapture was abruptly ceased and I pocketed the glass spearhead, that I may resume my gaze the next morning and no doubt on many subsequent.

That spearhead is before me now as I write and I do declare it to be the finest thing I ever saw, lest that finest of things be the fine red ochre and white painted shield that I glimpsed so briefly before it was trampled beneath the hooves of the Captain's giant steed.

Questions to consider

- How does the white man's commercial predilection directly affect the culture of the native in these pieces?
- Why should Larkin be so much more impressed by the spearing of the swan than he would be by a shooting?
- Why was Cawthorne so anxious to tell the story of the burning of the hills to Larkin? Would the author's purpose in relating this story be different from Cawthorne's?
- What evidence is there of social class in these excerpts? How could attitudes to class affect the physical environment?
- How does the attitude of the natives to affray remind one of chivalrous knights? Was there any other action in either of these pieces that could be seen as chivalrous, or which showed a selfless attitude to the environment?

And one to speculate on ...

- How might Captain Halloran's fury affect the immediate life of Matthew Larkin? How and why would the effect on Cawthorne's life be different?

Conclusion

These two extracts are ostensibly portraits of skirmishes between two native Australian tribes, over access to the perceived benefits that come from association with European civilisation (Jones, p.88). However there is much evidence of culturing of the land, in contradiction to the idea of 'terra nullius'. In the first piece the confrontation takes place in a clearing within the Black Forest, which could only have occurred by systematic native burning. Detailed knowledge of different trees and grasses was required to affect the comprehensive program of burning achieved by the natives. One grass may best be burnt every three years; another may shoot fresh growth for five (Gammage, pp.6-8).

Further, the piece describes the wetlands which survived in Adelaide well into the twentieth century; a band of lagoons stretched inland up to five kilometres from the coast from Semaphore in the north-west to coastal Glenelg eight kilometres south (Carter, p.173). These habitats provided a fantastic array of fish and game for native hunters. It may have been that the Murray men felt the plains could stand populating as well, as the population of the Kurna people, phonetically misspelt Ghanaa by Matthew Larkin in his diary, had been decimated even before the arrival of white man by disease which came down the River Murray from earlier settlements in New South Wales.

Important among the physical culture coveted by the native groups was the tomahawk. Possession of this prize meant the natives were now more quickly and effectively able to complete many domestic tasks, as well as fashion shields and spears etc. But to put these weapons to use in affray was now illegal. It was an inconvenience to white man's industry to have natives at war with each other, even if this war was ironically over access to the

white man himself. Native culture was further eroded, as laws were made against the practice of walking around unclothed.

In the second piece the natives are likened to schoolboys who have had their favourite plaything taken away (Jones, p.87). So it was with all of native culture. Within twenty years of settlement native groups were almost completely absent from the city of Adelaide, but at ceremonial occasions they would make a re-enactment of affrays of the bad old days (with blunted spears) just as a school pantomime would play amusing fairytales for teachers and parents. The dignity of the warrior was so quickly lost. One contemporary account records a native making the simple plea:

When white man fight in Adelaide, blackfellow say nothing. When blackfellow fight, policeman come break spears, break shields, break all no good. What for you not stop in England?' (Jones, p.88).

Such divine logic failed to convince white magistrates.

By the early twenty-first century the wetlands are covered with tangible evidence of European cultural hegemony: an airport, a 50,000 seater football stadium, a golf course and a range of housing estates. The black forest is a suburb. The re-culturing of the place is complete. Against this trend is the world's biggest collection of aboriginal artefacts that resides in the South Australian Museum. The collection is in a prominent place, proudly displayed, and spreads over two floors of museum space. School groups visit daily and many kids display a kind of awe at the interactive displays, at the collections of spears and nets, poisons, glues and handmade bags - the closeness of the natives to the earth, to their environment. Something of the awe perhaps that Matthew Larkin felt that day at the spearing of the swan, or of the bemusement that the inscrutable and conflicted Cawthorne felt at the restrained savagery of the affrays depicted in these pieces. Such is the fascination that will live on in many of us.

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