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The Irish in Grass Castles: Re-reading Victim Tropes in an Iconic Pioneering Text
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The bush nationalist tradition in Australia is replete with hero myths relating to explorers and pioneers/settlers and with pastoral histories which paint the settler/pastoralist as benign. His (rarely her) conquest of the land is legitimised in narratives of suffering and endurance. Despite the decline of the cattle industry in the late twentieth century, romanticisation of pastoralism remains one of the bulwarks of Australian nationalism, symbol-formation and identity partly because of the nation-building fictional enterprises of the 1890s (like the poems and fiction of Paterson, Lawson and Furphy), which were re-read and revalued and made canonical in the 1940s and 1950s.1 Bush nationalism and the pioneer mythos and their icons, and their ways of institutionalising the narrative of settlement, are, however, increasingly contested territory, as Aboriginal perspectives are more often registering as active agents in the national conversation and their influence on white settlers more likely to be noted, a phenomenon even registering in popular culture mobilisations of bush nationalism, for example Crocodile Dundee. Indeed, in the north-west of Western Australia, the Bunuba warrior Jandamarra, sometimes dubbed 'the Black Ned Kelly', who offered serious resistance to the premier iconic settler family of Australia in the 1890s is celebrated in schools, by a tourist trail which documents his daring exploits, and by an annual celebration.

INTERDEPENDENCE OF PASTORALISTS AND ABORIGINES

Since the early 1970s, revisionist historians and anthropologists have problematised colonialist pioneer/settler narratives, Australia's sanctifying myth of origin.2 They have documented the pastoral industry from both
sides of the frontier, often using Aboriginal oral testimony as part of their methodology. What is interesting about the histories that were subsequent to those of Reynolds and Rowley is their strongly regional nature, which points to a sea-change in understanding among mainly white historians of the independent nature, indeed sovereignty, of Aboriginal 'nations', and a backing away from pan-Aboriginalist assumptions. Most of them are, significantly, highly collaborative in nature. They also concur in foregrounding the extent to which Aborigines in a number of different communities not only offered resistance to white settlers, but also cooperated with them in order to be able to continue to safeguard and properly tend their own country, and at the same time minimised the costs of an economically questionable industry. In the era before welfare services took over with rations in the 1950s and pensions in the 1960s, and full wages had to be paid to station-workers after the Wave Hill strikes in the 1970s, white pastoralists were undoubtedly guilty of benign paternalism (at best), exploitation (at least), massacres at worst (Roberts). Massacres on the frontier have rarely been successfully prosecuted in Australia as Roberts convincingly demonstrates in the first volume of his history of the Gulf of Carpentaria, and perpetrators have employed a lexicon rich in euphemism: 'dispersals' and in the Duracks' case, 'inevitable punitive expeditions'. This chapter does not seek to minimise the gross, often criminal, abuses of physical and economic power which marked the frontier.

However, the evidence is strongly available in these works and in a body of Aboriginal life-writing and testimonii that Aboriginal stockmen (and women) often avoided the victim/resistance stereotypes, leading truncated ceremonial lives on their own land, and deriving a measure of satisfaction from their roles as skilled bushmen/stockmen. The absolute debt which explorers owed to their guides, and pastoralists to their workers' intimate knowledge of land that was otherwise lethal for Europeans, and police to their trackers (who often engaged in unsavoury expeditions and massacres European police themselves did not dare to undertake) has been richly and continually documented, by historians rather than by the hagiographical dynasty memoirists. Foster makes it very clear that there were significant advantages to pastoralists in having Aboriginal people live on their own country and exercise their traditional rights on pastoral leases as a form of subsidised access to a cheap and flexible workforce. Rations could be provided, with government subsidy, when the workforce was needed in the dry, and bush tucker (cost-free to the pastoralist) resorted to in the wet.7 Pastoralists and their Aboriginal workforce constituted a highly complex interdependent system, which allowed indigenous people a measure of cultural continuity:
Fishing and visiting waterholes, hunting and collecting bush foods and medicines, travelling across country on musters, sharing information with younger workers, checking on sites of significance, speaking language with contemporaries, sitting at camp fires retelling stories or listening to grandparents, sharing rations and learning to ride were all activities which allowed for the transmission and integration of existing secular knowledge.8

Certainly, secular European knowledge was garnered by Aboriginal people working as station hands, but the distinction between secular and sacred knowledge in relation to Aboriginal knowledge is not apposite in relation to Aboriginal culture, and Jebb's comment makes little sense. On the indigenous side of the frontier, to engage in the maintenance of country, to eat its symbolically invested produce and to enact Aboriginal forms of sociality is to be engaged in what Bradley, avoiding the European sacred/secular distinction, would call super-vital activities,9 on the boss's time but also securely within Aboriginal time, in which dreamtime and historical time are coterminous. It was also, before the end of the pastoral era, in important ways, to be at home.

In the light of post-colonial histories and testimoni, it is instructive to re-read one of the iconic texts of the pastoral era, Kings in Grass Castles by Mary Durack,10 a popular often-reprinted best-seller.11 In this context, I wish to draw attention to its ideology drawn often quite explicitly from Irish nationalist land policy, and to point out the extent to which it is riven with instabilities. In particular, I intend to demonstrate the ways in which at crucial points in the narrative tropes of Irishness, usually associated with victimhood, are mobilised to rationalize the land-grab and to deflect attention from Durack complicity in massacres.

Kings in Grass Castles reveals the extent to which Irish-identified land-hunger and pragmatism drove the enterprise of pioneering within the extensive Durack pastoral dynasty, which settled vast tracts of remote south-west Queensland and the Kimberleys. Consciously in the writing, Aboriginal resistance is a mere footnote to the swelling theme of pioneer heroism in the face of murdering natives. But the repressed text demonstrates that their success intimately depended on their ability to co-opt Aboriginal stockmen, in particular Pumpkin, Ulysses and Boxer. These real-life characters are sentimentalised: for example, Pumpkin, a general factotum and 'mainstay of the station' (stockman, horse tailer, blacksmith, butcher, gardener and general handyman), is referred to as a 'guardian angel'. Pumpkin's authority was such that he was deemed by Patsy to have run the Cooper's Creek property (p.274). He was a rare Aboriginal stockman, confident enough to argue with his employers, and to resist their
authority if the situation warranted it (pp.273–4). Such a degree of give and
take across what was not just a racial divide but also a class one was
uncommon.¹² Pumpkin is not, however, listed in the index;¹³ indeed, no
Aborigine is. The familiar humanity of known and trusted Aborigines
(often given demeaning European names; for example, Melonhead,
Kangaroo, Pintpot and Pannikin) is not extended to other more hostile
defenders of territory in the Kimberleys. And, although Patsy understood
that his retainers would suffer ‘broken hearts’ and illness away from their
own country and kin (pp.179, 276), he nevertheless committed his most
loyal retainers to permanent exile, and undoubtedly mortal danger, in the
Kimberleys.

The Duracks’ very survival they unwittingly owed to Boxer, a skilled
indigenous diplomat, linguist and law-man who, described as ‘unreliable’
by his European bosses because of his frequent absences on Aboriginal
business (pp.330–1), was both serving his own ends by keeping up his
traditional knowledge base, and presumably gathering/distributing
intelligence friendly to the Duracks to whom he remained loyal. The point
of his absences is clearly not understood by the writer, who uses the
phenomenon of Boxer’s two-way life as a grandstand for enunciating the
family’s defence against charges of slavery. For Durack, to be an
Aborigine living outside the pastoral domain was to be ‘skulking in the
hills’ (p.332). Mary Durack in 1959 was talking of events that happened
half a century and more before. She was certainly not self-conscious of the
extent to which her language ‘others’ and dehumanises Aborigines: ‘boys’
change hands in return for a jar of jam (pp.306–7); they are ‘strange, wild
people whose ways they [Europeans] would never understand’, and in
discussing the ‘yella-fella’ issue, ‘genetically remarkably good specimens,
better adapted to the environment than the whiteman and better to the new
way of life and philosophy than their full black brothers’ (p.372), a
language no doubt identical with that used of stock.

Unlike many settlers,¹⁴ or even their near-neighbours in the Channel
Country, Alice Duncan-Kemp and her father, the Scottish amateur
ethnologist, William Duncan,¹⁵ the Duracks demonstrated very little
curiosity about Aboriginal culture, language or law. In pursuit of his own
‘civilising’ agendas, Costello (a Durack associate) unwittingly exposed a
young couple on Thylungra intent on making a ‘wrong-way’ marriage to
death, without questioning the ethnocentrism of his mission (p.129). Their
mission was to make money and homes for their own tribes in the
wilderness, and particular Aborigines were viewed as potential friends
only if they were instrumental in achieving those objectives. Despite the
strength of their own clannish mores,¹⁶ their awareness of Aboriginal
kinship loyalties and ties to land was non-existent. The Irish Bishop
Gibney, an outspoken critic of settlers of the north-west of Western Australia, was perhaps harsh in his assessment of pastoralists of the period when he described their lack of fellow-feeling in these terms:

In the main, the civilizing influence of the employing white settler over his ‘niggers’ has been that of the shepherd to a good dog – he is treated well if he works well. They are made useful animals – white labour-saving machines and nothing more...17

The family saga makes clear too that it is not the country itself which the Duracks find homely: ‘they found it no land for loving at first sight’ (p.39). Indeed, Giblett’s case that they experienced it as cruel and sadistic is compelling.18 Rather, the motive force for the Duracks was to people the Cooper Creek region, and later the Kimberley with their own numerous tribe of interdependent Irish families:

...what sort of a father is it would hear of country like this [the Kimberleys] for the taking and not be securing it for his boys? How could I expect them to settle down here knowing of this pastoral paradise out west? (p.207).

Although the writer makes some gestures of common cause between the tribalism of the colonialised Irish and the Aborigines (p.150) and some solidarity as ‘underdogs’ (p.341), both being understood to be outsiders (Richardson), and Patsy Durack can intellectually endorse the view that the Aborigines were ‘the original owners of the soil’ (p.340), this amounts to little more than class-based rhetoric in the first case, and intellectual liberalism which did not give any cause for pause or interfere with in any way the wholesale appropriation of that land. He assumes it is ‘for the taking’. Patsy, from 1869:

rode about throwing open thousands of square miles of country between Kyabra Creek and the Diamentina [sic]. Sometimes this ‘throwing open’ meant no more than riding through, making contact with the local tribespeople, observing the waters and general topography for future reference, but often it entailed the careful selection and pegging of properties for relatives, friends or possible purchasers (p.125).

It was the better-Australian-educated nephew of Patsy, Michael, who was more aware than Patsy of the systemic injustice done to the Aborigines, though his daughter Mary Durack quite self-consciously draws veils over
the ‘inevitable unauthorized punitive expedition’ (pp.329–30), often writing as if these were unavoidable, despite her father’s insistence that they were.

THE MATTER OF IRELAND AND TROPES OF VICTIMHOOD

The matter of Ireland looms large in Durack’s family saga and is deployed strategically at crucial points in the narrative. Chapter 1, entitled ‘Roots’, is a highly conventional framing narrative of ‘ancient wrongs and of glories still more remote’ (p.27), laden with Irish historical tropes drawn from nineteenth-century nationalist primers (she tracks a well-worn path from Brian Boru, via the Book of Ballymote, confiscation of the monasteries during the Reformation, Wild Geese and the Famine, and brewing poteen as a consolation for tenancy). Two essentialising details serve the pioneer mythologizing and chime with wider already well-institutionalised discourses of Australian identity: she melds the Irish stereotype, of a ‘[stubborn] refusal to bend the knee’ (p.28) with the Australian stereotype of the laconic bushman. Irish nobility/kingship is the subtext which explains this identity formation of rebelliousness (p.28). Their Irish past may be ‘a blank to [the] Australian-born’ Duracks (p.29), and she may be aware of the dangers of victim narratives, but this cultural amnesia does not stop Mary Durack, two generations later, from invoking its tropes, in the spirit of ‘join-the-dots’, at the start of her narrative and at cruces in the narrative. Her first paragraph, inscribing the family’s Irish experience, becomes in fact a leitmotif for experience in a different kind of land and very different colonial conditions half a world away:

Generations of Duracks were born around Magerareagh, which belonged to Galway until 1899, when it was moved within the boundary of Clare, and the farm on which they paid rent to some ‘upstart landlord’ lay close by on the slopes of Sleive [sic] Aughty Mountain. The land was poor and subject to the whims of shifting bog, serving as a constant reminder to my people of the chip they had carried on their shoulders since the year 1542 when their ancient heritage of Ogoneloe [sic] had been granted, in fee simple, to their traditional enemies. (p.27)

This passage articulates a sense of being embattled, both by the nature of the land itself (too wet in the northern hemisphere; too dry in the southern) and also by their own sense of entitlement/loss. The sense of victimhood is simply
transposed and inverted in Australia, the lessons of colonialism well learnt, and compassion for the disinherited Aborigines was not part of the learning.

Australian settlement is imaged in *Kings in Grass Castles* as an unstoppable tidal movement, and later (citing John Dunmore Lang, whom she regards as a race-enemy), as a ‘flood of Irish popery’ (p.35), beyond the constraints of the law. She cites Governor Bourke (is his Irishness significant to her?) approvingly: ‘Not all the armies in England . . ., not a hundred thousand soldiers scattered through the bush could drive back these herds within the limits of the Nineteen Counties’ (of New South Wales) (p.34). She strategically mobilises another trope of the rebel Irishman to obscure a silence in the narrative, that of the literal decimation of the Karuwali within a ten-year period in the Channel country of southwest Queensland.19 In the account of the pacification of the Channel Country Aborigines, Grandfather Patsy is represented as having a ‘thoroughly Irish antipathy’ and ‘half-humorous contempt of the police’ (p.155). The context is an account of the savagery of the native police:

When news [of the murder of several Aborigines in retaliation for the murder of Maloney] reached Thylungra Grandfather rode after the police party in a towering rage, demanding an explanation of their policy.

‘What kind of a law is it that will train blacks to murder their own countrymen?’

‘Nothing of the sort,’ he was informed. ‘We never recruit blacks for service in their own district. A Kalkadoon will shoot a Boontamurra at the drop of a hat and vice versa. They’ve been at each other’s throats for generations.’

Whether or not they ever made an honest attempt to reason with the now totally unpredictable tribespeople it was soon clear to all that the black troopers rode to kill – to shatter the old tribes, the Boontamurra, the Pita-Pita, the Murragon, the Waker-di, the Ngoa, the Murrawarri and the Kalkadoon, to leave men, women and children dead and dying on the plains, in the gullies and river beds. (p.154)

Although Durack’s memoir must be given credit for naming these realities and for its moral sensibility (the pioneering sagas of de Satgé, Collins and Costello, by contrast, fudge such realities),20 nevertheless the displacement of responsibility for massacres from pastoralists onto indigenous people for their own demise and the fissures in her own narrative are breathtaking when, barely a page later, she reports:
For years the black police would ride, until the country could at last be declared safe from menace – safe and quiet and the songs of dreaming stilled for all time. The police would earn the praise and thanks of the settlers for their work and a few die in the cause of duty (p.155).

In the sequel, *Sons in the Saddle*, Durack makes clear that Boxer, one of the Aboriginal retainers, was used to lead police parties to cattle spearers and rewarded for his work.²¹ Although Watson admires the transparency of Durack’s memoirs (pp.26–9),²² there is much in Durack’s chronicle to disturb a contemporary reader, and ‘Irishness’ is the discursive formation designed to generate affect and disarm the reader at critical points like the one above. The tropes she mobilises are a curious amalgam: the wild west is invoked, with the Aboriginal police, dutifully and heroically, acting as the bringers of peace in the ‘unsettled districts’, and this inapposite referent is yoked, contradictorily and sentimentally, with social Darwinist melancholia for the demise of whole nations. What these tropes obscure is the role of the native police as murderous agents of even more murderous settlers. Mary Durack’s jocular reminder of her grandfather’s Irish foible of police resistance, ‘I’d sooner have an outlaw put his feet under my table ... than any of that murthering gang’ (p.155) (that is, the police, or native police), is a strategic attempt to rebuild semantic coherence, to paper the fissure in her own narrative, by returning to the subject of injustice towards indigenous peoples. It is, however, inapposite and inadequate to the gravity of the situation, and serves to rationalize in retrospect ‘land hunger’ (p.177), a land-grab, or wealth-creation enterprise (complete with account books, p.185). Patsy Durack may not have been a killer, may have had distaste for it, but the grand-daughter’s writing reveals that she was obscurely aware that the family profited from it, and was complicit in silencing it, and that she must continually displace and repress the guilt in constructing the family-focused pioneer mythology by taking refuge in tropes of Irish victimhood.

The text offers further Irish-inflected rationalisations for the pioneering enterprise. When Patsy is criticised by his sons as excessively reliant on Church advice, wearing his religion on his sleeve in a specifically Irish form, his defence of the pioneer enterprise is couched in biblical (and tribal) terms:

And who could say that he had not been blessed when he rode into the lonely land with his hand in the hand of God? He had loved the country and its wild people and both had served him well. His family had grown up about him with strong bodies and good minds, his flocks and herds had increased and multiplied. He had brought people and life to
the wilderness. There were homes now on the inland rivers and roads criss-crossed the vast, grass plains. He had been self-reliant, hard-working, purposeful, but every day he had acknowledged the help of God and his need of it. Some of the young people, like his own son Michael, could run rings around him in a theological argument, but their religion had become a formal thing and the saints who were so close and real to an Irish generation were far away from them – high and strange upon their heavenly thrones.

Would these young fellows, riding a new wilderness, be equally blessed? Had he done right to set them upon this adventure without wives and families to soften the harshness and loneliness of their pioneering work? Many may have considered John Costello and himself imprudent in bringing women and children to Cooper's Creek and yet it would never have occurred to them to have left their families behind. Nor would they have considered postponing their marriages until life seemed plain sailing. It had seemed to them that little worthwhile could be achieved alone. How could the country have come to life without the families – the women he had sometimes wished to the bottom of the sea, the children who had not all been spared to them? (p.280)

The rhetoric is familiar in colonialist writing, but it begs a raft of questions, especially in relation to questions of land and ownership. Curiously, Patsy's repressed guilt is ameliorated by his relationship with Pumpkin: 'Somehow talking to Pumpkin helped him to cast aside his doubts. He saw it as a sign of age to lose faith in youth.' (p.281). His consolation and purpose in living was his dynasty, and biblical tropes served to give these desires shape. Curiously, too, he bound his retainers into his religion by conferring on them medals of St Patrick and St Christopher and, with their freedom, gave them horses (p.280). There is no mention of money changing hands at the point of the retainers' release.

The pastoral lands they finally acquired as a result of their epic two-year, 5,000 kilometre overland journey from Coopers Creek via the Gulf to the Ord river are also designated the 'Promised Land' (p.221), despite having to share them with hostile indigenous defenders of the territory, and crocodiles. Even termite mounds are accorded the language of sublimity and bring biblical images to mind (p.222). Mary Durack represents her family's first view of the promised land (curiously from a hill abutting a river they named after themselves, the Durack river) in a register not previously heard in the memoir, that of gothic and emphatically anti-romantic sublimity: the alien and intimidating nature of the country is
acknowledged and immediately assimilated in a metaphor drawn from liturgical or regal splendour:

Now plains and parklands faded into rugged country where they rode in weird cities of termite strongholds. Scarcely a shape that human sculptors might devise had not been wrought by these myriad white ant builders, working in the dark, conjuring fantastic biblical images, hooded and cloaked, squat Buddhas, gorillas, and madman’s castles with domes, turrets and minarets. Each took its colour from the surrounding earth – red, ochre, dun-grey – some so small and fine as to crumbles under the horses’ hoofs, others looming fifteen feet above the spinifex... Far and away to the north and west ranges fell from flat tops or rugged pinnacles in folds like sculptured drapes of pallid gold studded with emeralds of spinifex (p.222).

...Meanwhile Stumpy Michael and Emanuel rode on through speargrass foothills and climbed ridge upon ridge to a range summit broken like the battlements of an ancient castle. Far below stretched the golden Kimberley savannah lands, cut through by green ribbons of timbered gullies and creeks (p.225).

Dominion rather than homeliness is the note struck here, though the sense of being potentially mastered by the earth itself is also strong. What makes the landscape homely are the tenuous waterways, their chief reason for abandoning the Cooper Creek area where water was far less reliable or provided in oversupply in the wet. Gothic sublimity and utopic rhetoric are in the above quotation strangely dialogical: they serve both to legitimate appropriation but also to defend it as much is made of the much more aggressive resistance they experienced in the East Kimberley compared with the Channel country. The landscape description also displaces the nature of the threat. Stumpy Michael and his party only narrowly escaped attack by a ceremonially decked attack-force of Kimberley defendants, courtesy of the vigilance of Pintpot and Pannikin, the Channel country retainers (p.224). Durack both criticises her ancestors and simultaneously disarms criticism by talking of the pastoral invaders as ‘bound to the context of their times’ in regarding indigenous people as ‘another hazard to be overcome with the rest’ (p.256). However, there is a defensiveness in the strategy on a range of issues: the dangers to stock and pastoralists, and the lethal stealth of Aborigines are continually insisted upon (pp.307); she is fatalistic about antagonism being reduced to an ‘us or them’ fight for survival (p.320); there is an avoidance of the ethical implications of the manoeuvre whereby they acquired new biddable station workers:
overlanders had somehow acquired a few native boys between eight and fourteen years old. How they got hold of them was nobody’s business, but whether by fair means or foul they were to stand a better chance of survival in the years to come than their bush tribespeople (p.291).

The narrative makes clear that Ulysses and Maggie were survivors of a massacre in retaliation for a spearing (p.330). Most tellingly, and the language reveals a repressed knowledge of complicity, she lays at the feet of police ‘the inevitable unauthorized punitive expedition’ (present writer’s emphasis, pp.329–30) in retaliation for individual European deaths. The subtext of massacres is strong and frequently the narrative hints that it knows more than it will divulge, even naming ‘[t]he conspiracy of silence that sealed the lips of the pioneers’ (p.301); nevertheless, every time she approaches the subject of massacres, there is a deflection of the narrative with Irish tropes. For example, 1892–3 was a very turbulent period in the East Kimberley with twenty-three Miriwoong people killed in retaliation for the death of trooper Collins near Durack’s and Kilfoyle’s Rosewood Station. Durack reports it in these terms:

At Argyle the old year ’92 ushered out to the tune of ‘Auld Lang Syne’ lustily rendered by the family and a large police party under Sergeant Lavery then organising a ‘surprise drive’ on the persistent cattle spearers. (p.340)

Durack complicity in the raid would seem almost certain, if only to the extent of providing a base for the troopers’ ‘military campaign’. However, the narrative minimises the settlers’ campaign, and again at a strategic point deflects the argument into Irish victim tropes that are only tangentially relevant but designed to represent Patsy in the best possible light and draw attention away from the perpetrators. Patsy is represented as siding with Irish-born Bishop Matthew Gibney, widely regarded as one of the most outspoken critics of ‘punitive expeditions’ against Aborigines. In October 1892, Gibney had been critical of the north-west settlers for engaging in indiscriminate killings of Aboriginal people in response to sheep killings. The report of his speech (originally published in the West Australian Catholic Record on 13 October) ignited a correspondence in the West Australian between 1 and 27 October 1892. Attacked by the (Protestant) squatter, Charles Harper of De Grey Station (Port Hedland), Gibney had risen to the sectarian bait and defended the ‘few real atrocities committed by the Irish...against the strong’ and Durack cites Gibney’s article, with strategic omissions. Mary Durack
registers that Irish atrocities constitute a red herring in the massacre
debate, but this insight does not prevent her from elaborating at length,
again making reference to a suite of narratives of Irish victimisation:

A keen admirer of the forthright Bishop and a loyal supporter of Parnell
and the Nationalist movement, much of his old fire returned as he now
denounced the increased powers of the police and the flogging of cattle
spears. His brother Galway Jerry disagreed with him, insisting that
nothing short of flogging was merited by blacks who would cut the
tongues and tails from living animals.

‘And how are we to teach them that such things are cruel and that
the branding, ear-marking and castrating that we do to the living beasts
are not?’ Grandfather demanded. ‘Just read here now what the Bishop
has to say of it all.’

Galway Jerry glanced cursorily through the letters.30
‘What! Not the Irish question again!’

‘The Irish question!’ Grandfather exclaimed indignantly.

And you but for the Grace of God born to starve in the poor famine
stricken country! Ye are like the rest of them, Jerry, born with a silver
spoon in your mouth and little thought in your head for the under-dog.’

‘It’s precious little silver we can lay our hands on these days,’ Jerry
laughed, ‘and there’d be none at all soon if we left the running of the
country to you and the Bishop.’

Grandfather had no higher opinion of the police in Kimberley than
he had had for the same body in Queensland.

‘Ye’re all useless anyway without the blacks to help you with the
dirty work,’ he remarked in reply to the sergeant’s complaint that they
had found the patrolling of the countryside a thankless task. (pp.340–1)

What the Bishop Gibney-initiated newspaper slanging match was about
was not punishments for mistreating animals but the much more sinister
enterprise of payback for the death of trooper Collins and eliminating a
guerrilla force led by Jandamarra.31 Stock-spearing was just the visible
manifestation of this warfare, and to render it the central issue was to
trivialise the power and tenacity with which the Bunuba attempted to hold
onto their lands, and the effects of the answering massacres conducted by
the settlers. The Catholic Record of 10 August 1893 talked of a ‘pile of
dead victims’ and a ‘massacre’32. The story of Bunuba resistance, mutinies
by armed native police, and the (overly romanticised?) Jandamarra whose
daring exploits, designed to humiliate the police, made Ned Kelly look like
an amateur must have been known to the Duracks because their associate,
Isadore Emanuel J.P., was closely involved with prosecuting the Bunuba
resisters. What interests me here, though, are the ways in which tropes of Irish victimisation (in this case the fall and death of Parnell which had occurred only two years previously) are mobilised to render the squatters the victim class. Patsy, Irishman and 'underdog' (p.341), is constructed as standing out against his own more complicit sons in an attempt to distance the family from the Protestant squatters more active in warfare against the hostile defenders of territory.

There is, of course, a palpable irony in the use of such terms as 'Irish' and 'underdog' on the frontier. While the Duracks may have a much more distinguished record in relation to Aborigines than many of their squat-tocratic peers, sentimental mobilisation of the tropes of Irishness is clearly a diversionary tactic and a means to cheap affect in Kings in Grass Castles, used in tricky and slippery rhetorical ways as counters in the construction of a pioneer hero mythos. Durack's identification with her own pastoral class may not be transparent in this text, but it is implied despite the smokescreen of class-based difference identified as Irish in this text. Further, what it demonstrates is the way in which institutionalising pioneer discourses which underline suffering, victimhood and fellow-feeling, enable the too-easy transformation of the 'wild' and 'savage' into the 'tame', and in turn paradoxically legitimate the theatre of cruelty on the frontier. Just who deals out terror is the barely repressed sub-text.

NOTES


13. Omissions of this kind are remedied in Sons in the Saddle (London: Constable, 1983), with many Aboriginal retainers being listed and more frequent deployment of the names of Aboriginal nations, and occasional references of an ethnographic nature, pp.74, 77, 138.


15. Watson, Frontier Lands and Pioneer Legends.

16. Ibid., p.27.


20. Ibid., pp.11–25.


24. See also Giblett, ‘Kings in Kimberley Watercourses’.

25. Ibid., p.542.


27. Ibid.

29. Durack cites Bishop Gibney’s response to Charles Harper of De Gray Station very selectively on p.340 of *Kings in Grass Castles*. She omits the reference to murders by settlers, and Gibney’s claims that attacks on sheep were occasioned by drought-induced famine, and overlooks his claim that the north had been depopulated by 50 per cent. The original text reads, with Durack’s omissions or changes in italics:

> ... the few real atrocities in Ireland were those of the weak against the strong, and founded on centuries of misrule. *Not so with the white settlers whose deliberate murders in no single instance met with the punishment that invariably overtook the blackfellow convicted of a similar crime against the invaders of his country. I can point to manifesto after manifesto issued by Nationalist leaders against genuine atrocities in Ireland, but I have never yet seen the squatters of this Colony, as a body, or their representatives, do anything but take part against the efforts of the Government to stamp out the willful and deliberate murders by the alleged ‘few’, of the original owners of the soil.* (West Australian, 19 October 1892, p.3).

Nor does she pick up the point made by Quabba, one of the defenders of Gibney, that Maoris had been recompensed for their land (Letter to the editor, West Australian, 15 October 1892, p.6).

30. Galway Jerry was subsequently murdered in 1901 by Aborigines. Although Durack denies that he had been involved with an Aboriginal woman and that payback for stealing women was unusual motivation for Aboriginal-initiated murder on the frontier, subsequent histories of black/white relations on the frontier would suggest that the intention to steal flour and stores was unlikely to have been the motive and that murders over women were common both among Aboriginal men themselves and also against white men who did not honour their reciprocal obligations (Roberts, *Frontier Justice*, p.107). Durack demonstrates her awareness of the breach of ‘tribal marriage laws’ white liaisons with indigenous women entailed, and declares such liaisons to have been ‘purely physical ... devoid of any emotional involvement’ (Durack, *Sons in the Saddle*, p.197).


32. Ibid., p.92.

33. Ibid., p.97.