

*David Brooks*

## Field's Kangaroo<sup>1</sup>

*What manner of animal is this? he thinks. This dog-*

*faced bear who has swallowed a python?*

- John Scott, *N*

SPARE A THOUGHT for Barron Field's 'The Kangaroo', a most intriguing poem. Not, perhaps, the first written on Australian soil, but one of two poems in what by all accounts was the first book of poetry published in the colony of New South Wales, a slim volume called *First Fruits of Australian Poetry*, printed by the government printer, George Howe, in 1819, and subsequently re-published by his son Robert (George having since died of the dropsy) in an expanded edition in 1823.

Although it has occasionally found defenders, 'The Kangaroo' has been much maligned<sup>2</sup>, largely as a poor attempt to adapt English Romanticism to an Australian subject, and the desire to display it in anthologies of Australian poetry has come and gone. Mitchell and Kramer, for example, in their *Oxford Anthology of Australian Literature* (1985), chose to pass over it, as did Gray and Lehmann in their supposedly comprehensive *Australian Poetry Since 1788* (2011). Although the poem does contain some awkward lines, its principal crime – and embarrassment – seems to

---

<sup>1</sup> First published in *The Kenyon Review* (March/April 2017).

<sup>2</sup> 'Poor are the first fruits of a Barron Field,' wrote Edward Smith Hall, another colonial bard, in 1828, 'To human industry is wont to yield; – /Poor are the first fruits of thy sterile brain,/Conceiv'd by folly, and brought forth with pain!', and it has gone on: 'poetically slight' (Michael Ackland); 'comic' (Paul Kane)...

have been to rhyme 'Australia' with 'failure', though on the one hand it's hard to see as a crime and embarrassment a rhyme so often and so ruefully quoted, as if it contained a deep, sad truth, and on the other hand the understanding that the poem is actually *saying* this – i.e. substantiating a connection between Australia and failure – is misleading. Indeed, the way that this preemptive and adventitious misreading – the poem, generally speaking, has been subjected to *raiding* rather than reading – usurps the poem at the outset denies us one of our poetic jewels: a rough diamond, admittedly, but a diamond nevertheless. Not only is Field in fact saying something quite different, but his poem is laden with interesting details, and, in its intellectual engagement with its subject, represents a rather extraordinary achievement. In his struggle with the kangaroo, arguably, we get an index of the whole initial and much-protracted intellectual encounter with Australia or, to put this differently, the eighteenth/nineteenth century Western mind's encounter with its other. More than enough, I would think, to earn the poem a permanent place in the rather bleak, troubled, and betimes quite gothic dawn of Australian writing.

But where to start? Perhaps with the poem's own dawn: its epigraph, *mixtumque genus prolesque biformis*. The quote is from book six of the *Aeneid*, and, while the particular line quoted might have been chosen for other reasons – it is in book six, for example, that Aeneas descends to the Underworld (Australia = bottom of the world = Underworld) – Aeneas is not a casual reference in English poetry at this time. Aeneas settled in Italy after the fall of his native Troy. His son would become one of the founders of Rome. And, according to the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*, his grandson, Brutus, would become the founder/discoverer of Britain (its name derived from his own), at that time a wild and desolate place on the westernmost edge of the world, inhabited by giants. The antipodean ring this might carry (Abel Tasman's surmise, when he saw the cuts in the trees that took to be footholds, that the people of Van Diemen's Land must be giants) is only confirmed when we consider that the *Aeneid's* author is Virgil, chosen by Dante to be his guide through Hell and Purgatory (after all, Virgil had been there before), and so to explain, as the pair emerge from one into the other, having just walked along the spine of Lucifer (recumbent giant, frozen in Lake Cocytus), that they are now in the Antipodes. If the world is a giant man, Virgil might have been saying, we are now where the feet are.

Giant feet. *Macropoda*. Field's poem is off and bounding before its own first line has started. And as to the actual text of the epigraph, that translates as 'the two-formed offspring of a blended birth', and refers to the Minotaur, the hybrid progeny – the head of a bull and body of a man – of Pasiphae (wife of King Minos) and the white bull of Poseidon. This, too, is a rich summoning on Field's part. One could mention a few stories here – how Minos had asked

Poseidon for help in defeating his brothers for control of Crete; how Poseidon had sent him a mighty bull on the understanding that it would eventually be sacrificed in his honour; how Minos, cheating, had kept that bull and sacrificed another; how, to punish him, Aphrodite had made Pasiphae fall in love with the bull; or how Pasiphae had had the royal craftsman, Daedalus, make a wooden cow into which she could climb, to experience the white bull's potency. Daedalus, subsequently, built the labyrinth in order to imprison their offspring. But we could go to Virgil for this – it's all there, in book six of the *Aeneid*. Field's poem, as we shall see, will present its own menagerie.

'Kangaroo, Kangaroo!', it begins, 'Thou Spirit of Australia', and we could pause right there, to point out, say, that in the late 1970s Ken Warby built, in a Sydney backyard, the wooden speedboat with which he broke the world water speed record and which he called the *Spirit of Australia*; that Australia's national airline, Qantas, dubbed 'the flying kangaroo' for the motif carried on the tail of its planes, has also styled itself 'The Spirit of Australia'; or, more pertinently, that Field himself is thus, at the very outset, presenting the kangaroo as emblematic of its wider place, encouraging the reader to see some of the things he says about his macropod as things said about Australia itself.

A more pertinent point is that, already, in his second line, Field is making a bolder and more topical statement than we, two hundred years on, are likely to realise. Matthew Flinders, in a voyage of 1802 and 1803, had become the first to circumnavigate the Great South Land. He chronicled his expedition in *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, a book in which, in a passage discussing the name 'Terra Australis', he makes the following suggestion:

Had I permitted myself any innovation upon the original term, it would have been to convert it into Australia; as being more agreeable to the ear, and as an assimilation to the names of the other great portions of the earth.

Flinders' book was published in 1814, his plan to write up his voyage having been long delayed by his arrest, as a suspected spy, on the French island of Mauritius. It was a further three years – 1817 – before Governor Macquarie received a copy and began to use the term 'Australia' in official correspondence. Field's very use of the term 'Australia', this is to say, is arguably the first in poetry anywhere.

Let's look at the first stanza in its entirety:

Kangaroo, kangaroo!  
Thou Spirit of Australia,

That redeems from utter failure,  
From perfect desolation,  
And warrants the creation  
Of this fifth part of the earth,  
Which would seem an after-birth,  
Not conceiv'd in the Beginning  
(For GOD bless'd his work at first,  
    And saw that it was good),  
But emerg'd at the first sinning,  
When the ground was therefore curst; –  
    And hence this barren wood!

Straight away we have that notorious rhyme. And straight away, too, we can see it's not so simple. The lines are trying to weaken, rather than strengthen, a connection between Australia and failure. The kangaroo *redeems* the land from 'perfect desolation' and in fact *licences*, as in *justifies*, its creation. But something like negative suggestion is still at work. In mentioning 'failure' and 'desolation', even if only to deflect them, the poem also places them in the reader's mind, makes the disconnection and the connection at one and the same time. Indeed it's stronger than this. The words 'utter' and 'perfect' make the statement comparative. The kangaroo redeems Australia from *utter* failure, from *perfect* desolation, but the failure and the desolation remain. Ambivalence. Right at the start. This whole stanza is quite literally *riddled* with it.

The 'That' in the third line, for example. We might almost automatically assume it to refer to the kangaroo, but, grammatically, it might also refer to 'Australia', or perhaps to the broader 'Spirit of Australia', in which case, as if we had turned an opal slightly, we might have revealed a rather different set of questions, such as What or Whom does Australia redeem from utter failure and desolation? And what conception of 'Australia' might we now be looking at? For here there would seem to be, hovering in the background, that sense of Australia as a possible new Eden that has so long been an aspect of Australian literature, a chance to get right, in this new place, the things that went so wrong in the old. That word 'redeems', in other words, might have a deeper resonance. But to fathom it we must read on.

Even in the twenty-first century there is no universal agreement upon the number of continents. Australia is the sixth or seventh, depending upon how one counts the rest. In 1819 it was probably regarded as the fifth, since the first confirmed sighting of Antarctica (by the expedition of von Bellingshausen and Lazarev) did not occur until the year after Field's poem was published. In referring to Australia as 'this fifth part of the earth', then, line six might simply be citing geographical fact. But it might also allude to ancient and enduring senses of the world

as made up of four cardinal points – four corners – or four elements (earth, fire, wind, water), in which case a ‘fifth part’ would be quite literally *out of thought*, not part of the earth’s original construction. And indeed this appears to be the sense of the stanza. The continent, as the seventh line now tells us, would thus seem ‘an after-birth’, and again there is a fork in the meaning: an after-birth as in something born afterward (as sustained by ‘Not *conceiv’d* in the Beginning’), but also the placenta, which, in the process of birth, is delivered after the child. If we take up the latter we have, potentially, reference to something which, while not part of the earth as originally conceived, nevertheless has sustained or nourished it. A mixture, here – perhaps a confusion – of mortal and immortal processes. The earth both born *and* created. Clearly we are not out of the woods yet (in fact we’re just approaching them!).

‘GOD’, that is, *conceiv’d* the world (the double sense of *bringing about physically* and *bringing forth in mind* is important here), in its original, four-cornered form, ‘And saw that it was good’. He did not make, or think about, this fifth part until Adam and Eve had committed their original sin, in eating of the Tree of Knowledge. This sin – embarking upon a process of knowing – occasions their exile. And exile in turn necessitates not only a place to be exiled *to*, but that that place be un-Eden-like, that it be ‘curst’, though for the moment we might put this cursedness aside in order to notice something else about these lines. We are a long way before Derrida’s articulation of the *supplement*, but there is surely something of it here, in the representation of the fifth part, in the relation of the after-birth to the born, and in the epistemological cast of diction (‘conceiv’d’) and image (the nature of the first sin). Australia, and the kangaroo as its avatar, are presented as something *outside received thought*, something happening to the *mind*.

‘And hence’ – another intriguing twist – ‘this barren wood!’, a phrase which most immediately signifies the land of desolation encountered in the opening lines of the poem but which surely should give even a casual reader some pause and amusement. This poem is written by a ‘Barron Field’ (‘Barron’ was his mother’s maiden name), and here we are not only given a ‘barren wood’, but an exclamation mark for good measure. Is this a signature? Has the poet thrown himself into the equation? Why? Could it be he who has somehow – also – been redeemed?

Perhaps ‘wood’ gives us a clue. It’s a key word, after all, in some of the most famous lines in Western literature, the opening of Dante’s *Commedia* (here in Dorothy Sayers’ translation), that great poem of exile:

Midway this way of life we’re bound upon,  
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,

Where the right road was wholly lost and gone,

Ay me! how hard to speak of it – that rude  
And rough and stubborn forest!

– and I am not sure that the original of these lines aren't in Field's mind here. In 1817, when he arrived in New South Wales, Field (1786-1846) was truly in the middle of his life, although there's no way he could have known it. And it's quite conceivable that he might have felt, at least for a time, in exile (there is plenty in his other writings to confirm this). Am I pressing too hard for an unlikely allusion here? Perhaps, but, first, the motif of exile will return, and second, such subtle allusion (allusion by the knight's move, I call it: two steps forward, one to the side: we've seen it already – again a reference to Dante – in the epigraph) would not be unique in this poem. Who would have thought, for example, that the opening lines of the third stanza –

She had made the squirrel fragile;  
She had made the bounding hart;  
But a third so strong and agile  
Was beyond ev'n Nature's art;  
So she join'd the former two  
In thee, Kangaroo!

– would in fact be, as John Byrnes points out<sup>3</sup>, a very clever recasting of Dryden's epigram on Milton:

Three poets<sup>4</sup>, in three distant ages born,  
Greece, Italy, and England did adorn,  
The first in loftiness of thought surpassed,  
The next in majesty, in both the last:  
The force of nature could no further go;  
To make a third she joined the former two.

But that, indicative as it may be of how Field's mind works, is to jump ahead.

At the heart of that first stanza, in the middle of its middle line, is the word 'seem', and the whole stanza turns upon it. The desolation, the failure, the barrenness, are – or may be – apparent only. This doesn't mean that the ambivalence is resolved, but it is reframed, shifted. The second stanza takes up this matter of appearances in its second line: 'Tho' *at first sight*, it tells

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Barron Field – Recultivated', *Southerly* 21.3 (1961), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Homer, Virgil (again) and Milton.

us, we might say that in the kangaroo's nature 'there may / Contradiction be involv'd', this is only an illusion and 'like discord well resolv'd / It is quickly harmoniz'd'. The *deep mental action* of this poem – as the first stanza foreshadowed, with the need to supplement the four-square earth with a fifth part, the need for God, who had 'bless'd His work at first', to make a correction to it – is about *coming to be*, a process at once of imagination and of realization. A process neatly caught, as it happens, in the next lines<sup>5</sup>:

Sphynx or mermaid realiz'd,  
Or centaur unfabulous,  
Would scarce be more prodigious,  
Or labyrinthine Minotaur,  
With which great Theseus did war,  
Or Pegasus poetical,  
Or hippogriff – chimeras all!

'At first sight' this may seem little more than a list of mythic creatures, but an argument runs through them: were the Sphynx or the mermaid to be brought into the realm of reality, or a centaur to prove not just a creature of fable, they – like the minotaur in its labyrinth, or the winged horse (Pegasus) that has become a figure of poetry itself, or its cousin-in-imagination the hippogriff, hybrid of horse and the already-hybrid griffon (body of a lion, head and wings of an eagle) – would not be more remarkable than the kangaroo, which *does* exist. Becoming, as I say: emerging, into a reality hitherto only imagined.

At the end of this rather Borgesean list of imaginary beings, moreover, Field adds 'chimeras all!', at once a dismissal of the list and the addition of another to it, as if a kind of afterthought, or there were something that, in this transition from imagination to reality, Field wants to make sure we carry across. A chimera is a wild fantasy, an impossible illusion, but also, of course, herself a mythic creature, another hybrid (head and body of a lion, a tail that becomes a snake, head and neck of a goat arising from the middle of her back), slain, eventually, by the hero Bellerophon, who was able to achieve this because he was riding Pegasus, and thus able to attack her from the air, out of reach of her heads and fiery breath (poetry assisting in the slaying of illusion?). She was also – a point which Field does not use, though it seems to beg to be here<sup>6</sup> – a child of Echidna, 'mother of monsters', herself half-woman, half-snake.

---

<sup>5</sup> I am observing Field's addition, to his second edition of *First Fruits*, of two lines about the minotaur, absent from most anthologised versions of the poem.

<sup>6</sup> A point not lost on a later poet, A.D. Hope, whose marvellous poem 'The Drifting Continent' turns upon it.

Even the mermaid has her side-story. This poem, Field's, might not talk about the *Australian* echidna (except very obliquely), but it ends with mention of her biological cousin the platypus, or, if one chooses to see it that way, with the footnote, after its last line, concerning the platypus ('The *cygnus niger* of Juvenal', that footnote tells us 'is no *rara avis* in Australia; and time has here given ample proof of the *ornyborinchus paradoxus*'). And Field, of course, does not *call* the platypus a platypus. He chooses, instead, to employ the term 'duck-mole', in currency at the time, perhaps to emphasise the motif of hybridity. When evidence of the platypus (*ornyborinchus paradoxus*) was first seen in England – a sketch, and a pelt (in a stinking barrel) sent by Governor Hunter in 1798 – it was greeted with considerable suspicion. Exotic animal forgeries had been coming from dubious taxidermists in the Far East for centuries. One favourite, apparently, was the mermaid made of the head of a monkey and the tail of a fish, artfully sewn together. The platypus, it was thought, with the bill of a duck, the tail of a beaver, the feet of an otter, was one such ingenious construction. And there is a good chance that Field would have known of these suspicions. The colony itself would have been rife with such stories, and perhaps he had read George Shaw's *Naturalist's Miscellany* (1799), in which the eminent naturalist, writing of Hunter's specimen, stated that it was 'impossible not to entertain some doubts as to the genuine nature of the animal'.

Four of the imaginary creatures we've just met – the Sphynx, the mermaid, the centaur and the minotaur – are human/animal hybrids, and of these at least two are allied with wisdom: the Sphynx, who asked the riddle at the gate of Thebes, and the centaur, who through the figure of Chiron is associated with teaching. But Chiron was an exception. The centaurs are just as well-known for lustfulness. Given to intoxication and violence, they symbolise our animal nature – or, rather, the animal nature from which we are supposed to have struggled to lift ourselves. It is interesting that Theseus figures in their story, as a warrior central to the victory of the centaurs over the Lapiths, since Theseus, too, figures large as the slayer of the minotaur, who could itself be seen as an embodiment of man's divided, civilised/animal nature – the labyrinth, from this vantage, symbolising our need to repress or imprison the animal in ourselves, and civilization, through the figure of Theseus ('maker of cities'), thus a victory over our baser nature.

What does this have to do with the poem? We have, first, in the human/animal hybrids, an association of the human with the animal, or evocation of the animal *in* the human, an association/evocation we might at first think a thing to be avoided. And we have, second, an association of the animal/human hybrid with wisdom – something (wisdom) with we shall find Field somewhat preoccupied. 'But what Nature would compile,' Field now tells us, taking up the earlier lines about discord harmonized in the kangaroo, and so rounding off the stanza, 'Nature

knows to reconcile; / And Wisdom, ever at her side, / Of all her children's justified.' Wisdom on the side of nature? Wisdom outside or beyond the *mythos* of the hybrid and imaginary creatures we've just had gathered for us? Wisdom associated with the Antipodes? And with an animal – 'the Animal'? Another ambivalence? We'll see.

We might say that this poem is strung upon four processes of becoming, one a movement from the Western mind into the antipodean, another from what Field himself might have seen as a divine explanation of being and creation to an explanation which not only accommodates a strong 'natural' component but sees that component as completing a story, harmonizing an earlier discord, a third, which we might describe as a deepening encounter with the Animal, and a fourth which we might see as a movement from imagination into reality, as if imagination had somehow been reality's antechamber, had induced or prepared us for it – as if, indeed, imagination *brings things about*, can be a harbinger of a new shape of reality. None of these are mutually exclusive; indeed they are very much interrelated. A wider 'reality' is approached as one draws away from the gravitational field of the Western mind; one is led toward this more open knowing by an animal – the kangaroo – that itself stands outside one's original understanding of being; the 'natural' supplements and challenges, or perhaps (for Field is a good Christian) merely clarifies, the original story of creation. This thinking is still four decades before Darwin's great work appears, but from our own vantage point we can see it fairly clearly on the horizon. Perhaps we should not be too surprised if Field's thinking seems groping and unclear – just about everyone's was, on these issues – but perhaps, too, it is a little clearer than at first appears.

Let me quote the third stanza, a little of which we've already met, then list a few of its features:

She had made the squirrel fragile;  
She had made the bounding hart;  
But a third so strong and agile  
Was beyond ev'n Nature's art;  
So she join'd the former two  
    In thee, Kangaroo!  
To describe thee, it is hard:  
Converse of the caméopard,  
Which beginneth camel-wise,  
But endeth of the panther size,  
Thy fore half, it would appear,  
Had belong'd to some 'small deer,'  
Such as liveth in a tree;

By thy hinder, thou should'st be  
 A large animal of chace,  
 Bounding o'er the forest's space; –  
 Join'd by some divine mistake,  
 None but Nature's hand can make –  
 Nature, in her wisdom's play,  
 On Creation's holiday.

Note the 'bounding *hart*' of the second line: it may pay to register that the *deer* thus introduced plays through the stanza that follows. We see it in 'small deer', we see it in the '*hinder*' parts of the 'large animal of chace' (surely a *hind*). And as for that awful 'To describe thee, it is hard': can we dismiss the possibility that it sacrifices a measure of grace here in order to catch an echo? The fourth and fifth lines of Dante's *Commedia* – we have already spoken of the first three – read 'Ay me! how hard to speak of it – that rude / And rough and stubborn forest!' A push, of course, this Dante business, I admit. There is, for a start, the question of translation (although how many possibilities are there for *Abi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura / esta selva selvaggia?*), let alone the fact that the one most readily available to Field (by Henry Francis Cary, 1805) does *not* use 'hard'. But in support is the curious fact that 'hard', in the Field, rhymes with 'pard' (or 'leopard', depending upon the version consulted) and that, at just this point in the *Commedia*, Dante himself, having tried to escape the dark wood, finds his way blocked by a leopard. Coincidence? Perhaps. But Field, as we've seen already, is a logodaedalist. We might choose to find support in another and more overt allusion, this time to Shakespeare. 'Small deer' may mean just that, a small deer, but it is given us in inverted commas – Field wants us to know that he's quoting – and in fact leads us to a line from *King Lear*, 'Mice and rats and such small deer', a reference to the diet of Tom O'Bedlam. And Tom O'Bedlam, of course, is Edgar, banished, exiled, just as was Dante, and just as it seems Field sees himself to be. Things in exile. Things in hiding. Things not as they seem. A personal tale, woven through the poem like a dark thread.

Allusion aside, the stanza is most immediately concerned, as was the previous, with the 'construction' of the kangaroo. Nature, having exhausted herself with the creation of the squirrel and the hart, and unable to come up with a third 'so strong and agile', has created her own hybrid, and combined the former two. 'To describe thee, it is hard:' – to take up at that awkward line – 'Converse of the caméopard'. Another hybrid, a combination of the camel and the leopard. But not a hybrid in the mythic sense of the minotaur, griffon, or chimera. This hybridity is *descriptive*. The giraffe (even now it is *Giraffa camelopardalis*) *looks* (although perhaps more so to someone who hasn't actually *seen* a camel) like a camel with a leopard's spots. The possibility

notwithstanding that it is ‘converse’ of the camelopard in that it begins with a small head but has large hindquarters, it is also *converse* in that other sense (we should have learned by now that, with Field, not all words are as they seem), of familiar or cohabitant with: i.e., like the camelopard, the kangaroo is a creature that *does* exist, that is hybrid of other creatures that *do* exist.

Should we doubt that the use of ‘converse’ may be this less frequent one, we have, as if in a kind of linguistic confirmation, the strange construction upon which this stanza finishes:

Join’d by some divine mistake,  
None but Nature’s hand can make –  
Nature, in her wisdom’s play,  
On Creation’s holiday.

These lines make little sense and even seem contradictory. How – unless, of course, the ‘divine’ and ‘Nature’ are one – can a ‘divine mistake’ be made by ‘None but Nature’s hand’? And haven’t we earlier been told that ‘what Nature would compile, / Nature knows to reconcile’?. If, however, we read ‘Join’d’ in a similarly archaic sense, as *enjoined*, the gist changes: ‘prompted’ or ‘urged’ by ‘some divine mistake’, the lines might now read, only Nature is able to create – a reading quite consonant with the two lines that follow. We have been thrown out of Eden, and, in this fallen world, the world of the *mistake*, it is Nature’s task to continue the processes of Creation.

And so the poem progresses toward its end, an accommodation that sees the kangaroo, strange as it might at first have seemed, and Australia with it, as congruent with, rather than antipathetic to, existing creation. ‘For howso’er anomalous,’ the fourth stanza begins:

Thou yet art not incongruous,  
Repugnant or preposterous.  
Better-proportion’d animal,  
More graceful or ethereal,  
Was never follow’d by the hound,  
With fifty steps to thy one bound.  
Thou can’st not be amended: no;  
Be as thou art; thou best art so.

– the image fulfilling, as it were, the earlier promise of ‘a third so strong and agile’, in giving us an animal at once more graceful and more powerful than the deer, and (a suggestion that the kangaroo will elude our sense, our understanding still?) more suited to *out-run the bounds* of reason, understanding, or taxonomy that would pursue it.

‘When sooty swans are once more rare’ reads the first line of the final stanza:

And duck-moles the Museum’s care,  
Be still the glory of this land,  
Happiest Work of finest Hand!

We know, now, that Work and that Hand to be Nature’s. But the territory of the Supplement (as Derrida tells us in ‘...That Dangerous Supplement...’) is a tricky one. Nature might provide a supplement to a Creation – or a Creator – caught out by the unexpected sin of those to whom he had given dominion, but it is hard to imagine on the one hand that that sin *was* unexpected, or on the other that the Supplement was not already part of Creation. The ambivalence we encountered at the beginning of the poem seems to have continued. Just as the previous stanza, in attributing to the kangaroo a kind of finished perfection, also intimated its out-running the hounds that would pursue it, so Field himself, finishing his poem, offers us, through a footnote, a supplement of his own, at once completing his poem and showing that it is *incomplete*. ‘The *cygnus niger* of Juvenal’ – I have quoted it already – ‘is no *rara avis* in Australia; and time has given ample proof of the *ornithorinchus paradoxus*’.

Juvenal, in his sixth satire – (in)famous for its misogyny – had written that the truly beautiful and virtuous wife was as rare a bird (*rara avis*) – he meant impossible – as the black swan: *rara avis in terris nigroque simillima cycno* (‘a rare bird in the earth and most similar to a black swan). And yet, of course, the black swan – and by implication the beautiful and virtuous – is an actuality, and no rarity, in Australia. So too, by 1819, when Field writes his poem, time has well demonstrated the authenticity of the platypus (*ornithorhynchus paradoxus*: genus ‘bird-snout’; species ‘paradox’), treated with such suspicion in Europe, when the first specimens arrived there, that, courtesy of the eminent German anatomist Johann Blumenbach, that very doubt became part of its name.

Is that an end to the matter then? Not quite. Field, as his juggling of Nature and Creation testifies, is clearly troubled – *challenged* is a better word – by the southern continent’s presentation of creatures – the kangaroo, the echidna, the platypus – that are outside known creation and seem to rock its first premises. The challenge was widespread and the numerous attempts to dovetail creationism with such developments in natural science – catastrophism, separate creation, the ‘natural theology’ of William Paley, Lamarckian evolution, and their like – are the seed-bed of a new age of human thought and would see one of these creatures, the paradoxical and apparently system-defying platypus, become a cornerstone of Darwinian theory, and eventually dubbed ‘the animal of all time’.<sup>7</sup> Field, ironically, is one of the men-on-the-spot at the

---

<sup>7</sup> Mervyn Griffiths, cited in Ann Moyal, *Platypus* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2001), xiii and *passim*.

epicentre of this upheaval, and his 'Kangaroo' is close enough to the epicentre of his own thinking. But where, in all his juggling, he eventually fits, in the range of natural/theological options opening to him at the time, perhaps does not matter nearly as much as the mere fact that he *is thinking*. For what is it, after all, about this poem that sets it apart, if it is not the earnest and *intellectual* nature of its encounter?

And here, before my *coup de grace* (don't get too excited), a brief but necessary digression. As already intimated, Field's 'Kangaroo', in terms of poems about that creature, is something of a one-off. Alas there are, in the whole history of Australian poetry, few if any poems quite like it. One exception is a striking poem of the same title by D.H. Lawrence, who visited Australia in 1922 (and also wrote a novel, *Kangaroo*, that is not about the kangaroo at all). Like Field, Lawrence, in his attempt to describe his subject, resorts to hybridity: his kangaroo is part rabbit, part hare, part matron (with 'drooping Victorian shoulders'), and also, most intriguingly (but this is for another essay), part python:

Delicate mother Kangaroo  
Sitting up there rabbit-wise, but huge, plumb-weighted,  
And lifting her beautiful slender face, oh! so much more gently and finely-lined than a  
rabbit's, or a hare's,  
Lifting her face to nibble at a round white peppermint drop, which she loves, sensitive  
mother Kangaroo.

Her sensitive, long, pure-bred face.  
Her full antipodal eyes, so dark,  
So big and quiet and remote, having watched so many empty dawns in silent Australia.

Her little loose hands, and drooping Victorian shoulders.  
And then her great weight below the waist, her vast pale belly  
...  
Her belly, her big haunches  
And in addition, the great muscular python-stretch of her tail.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever else it may be that sets Field's and Lawrence's poems apart, each is performing a work of *introduction*. Their implied audience is not one that is well acquainted with the animal they describe. Far from it. The poets may at the same time – there can be no doubt about it – be performing an act for themselves, as in trying to help themselves understand something that is strange to and intrigues them (for Lawrence's poem, like Field's, is an intellectual encounter), but

---

<sup>8</sup> *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923). My copy text is *D.H. Lawrence: Selected Poems*, edited with an introduction by Keith Sagar (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972). The lines quoted are 16-24 and 27-28 of the poem.

they are also trying to present it to others who do not know it, by combining – using a vocabulary of – things (creatures) that they *do* know. Whether we see this, as some have done, as an act of intellectual colonisation, or, instead, as I think it might also be seen, as an attempt, through a kind of *bricolage* (all that hybridity), to apprise a cultural Other, they are trying to drag into their own imaginary something that is outside it. Each of them is writing back to England. An Australian audience, even in Field's time and with, comparatively, so little knowledge as yet of the country they are living in, may enjoy the description, but, having encountered the creature being described, will not *need* it in the same way. In something like a demonstration of the maxim that familiarity breeds contempt, their acquaintance will get in the way of – be far less likely to produce – this kind of effort. This kind of work – this mode – represents a particular moment of cultural encounter. It is as if the kangaroo has not yet, for the percipient, or the percipient's audience, the status of thing-in-itself.

That status of thing-in-itself, however (let us say *creature-in-itself*), has itself a double nature. Australians, in their familiarity with the kangaroo, can (as I've just suggested) accord it such status without *attending* to the creature at all – but there is also the possibility, surely, of a more attent and existential encounter. Indeed one would think that this kind of perception, the maintenance of novelty, *fresh seeing*, against the deadening effects of familiarity, is one of the roles, and gifts, of poetry. And it is not, after all, as if the *concerns* of Field's and of Lawrence's poems have disappeared; indeed the kind of epistemological anxiety – the anxiety of and about knowledge itself – that is caught, in these poems, in the abrading of the mythological and the real hybrids, so many of them part woman, part serpent (Echidna, we might note, while a baffling monotreme, is also the daughter of Tartarus and Gaia, part woman, part viper, the 'Mother of Monsters'), continues on in Australian poetry through Christopher Brennan's (and Henry Kendall's) Lilith, right through to the poetry of A.D. Hope (see the use of Echidna in his 'The Drifting Continent') or Robert Adamson. But somehow, after Field, after Lawrence, the vein, as far as the *kangaroo* is concerned, has panned out.

What *has* happened to discount the kangaroo so much in the national imaginary? To the dulling effect of familiarity just cited one might add various changes in aesthetic – the pervasive postmodernist turn from landscape and the 'natural' world, for example – but they would not explain the persistence of this intellectual vector – this *epistemological anxiety* – in other forms, and would seem in any case to pale in the face of one major and obvious alternative.

While not a true ruminant, like sheep and cattle, the kangaroo is a pseudo-ruminant, still ideally adapted to a diet of grassy material, and so (like the rabbit) a keen competitor for the same food supply as the sheep and cattle the raising and grazing of which have transformed

(some would say *trampled*) Australia. The clearing of land in order to supply pasture has been in some ways the kangaroo's dream-come-true, but also its nightmare. It is not the kangaroo's fault that its status as competitor has increased in almost exact step with the rise of the wool industry, but one would have to say that that has been its fate (one other thing it shares with sheep and cattle: the very thing that fattens it will see it slaughtered).

There's another back-story, or rather a forward one, and I'll make it my last. A story that entangles Field most ironically. The establishment of wool in the colony. A matter involving various figures in its early stages, Henry Waterhouse, William Cox, Samuel Marsden, but principally the voracious John Macarthur, who had perceived, very early, the possibilities of breeding sheep in the colony for something other than the purpose of supplying mutton. Macarthur purchased his first flock of sheep, to supply mutton, in 1795. In 1797, with broader ambitions, he, along with Marsden, purchased a small portion of a tiny flock (13!) of Spanish merinos imported from the Cape. By 1801 he had the largest flock of sheep in the colony. In that year, however, he hit a snag. Still a serving officer in the New South Wales Corps, he was challenged to a duel by his commanding officer and wounded him seriously. For this and other offences he was arrested under the orders of Philip Gidley King, the third governor of New South Wales, and sent to England for trial, since it was felt by King that no effective trial of the now rich and very influential Macarthur could be held in the colony. Although the English trial foundered, Macarthur did not return to the colony until 1805. His appetite for land acquisition continued to antagonise authorities, however, and within three years relations with a new governor, William Bligh, had so deteriorated that Macarthur helped lead a rebellion against him, the Rum Rebellion, that saw Bligh flee the colony to Hobart, where he remained, a governor in exile, until 1810, shortly before the appointment of the new, fifth governor, Lachlan Macquarie.

From 1810 to 1817, the year of Barron Field's arrival in the colony, Macarthur was in effect in exile in England, fearing arrest should he return to New South Wales. Throughout this period his wool ambitions were on hold. Upon his return, however, he pursued them vigorously. One might say that the years 1818-1822 were the true cradle of the Australian industry. In 1818 he wrote to Walter Davidson 'a most pessimistic account of his attempt to introduce the merino which "still creeps on almost unheeded", observing that he sold less than ten rams a year', whereas 'In 1822 the Society of Arts in London presented Macarthur with two gold medals, one for importing 15,000 lbs. of fine wool from new South Wales, the other for importing fine wool

equal to the best Saxon; in 1824 a larger medal was awarded for importing the largest quantity of fine wool.<sup>9</sup>

A small irony is that if it is the wool industry that has turned the kangaroo from object of awe, wonder and intellectual inspiration to, in so much of our impoverished imaginary, pest and object of murderous hatred, it was the purported founder of that industry who hounded the author of 'The Kangaroo' from the colony. The sixth governor of New South Wales, the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* tells us, 'Sir Thomas Brisbane, under whose command Macarthur's son Edward had served':

was impressed by Macarthur and his talents, and found his opinion reinforced by 'friends' in England. Brisbane's favour revived disturbance in New South Wales in 1822 when he made known his intention to appoint Macarthur to the magistracy. This proposal produced such opposition, culminating in an official protest from Judge Advocate John Wylde and Judge Barron Field, that Brisbane had to withdraw his offer, but the reverberations of Macarthur's injured dignity and wrath reached as far as London, producing the suggestion from Bathurst that the magistracy be offered to one of Macarthur's sons should either feel anxious to undertake the duties of this office. Both declined and Field was pursued by Macarthur's vituperation till he left the colony in 1824.

---

<sup>9</sup> *Australian Dictionary of Biography* on-line [<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/macarthur-john-2390>] accessed 28 December 2011.