Wild Horses and Wild Mountains in the Australian Cultural Imaginary

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Prologue

In May 2002, while cycling beside the Maribyrnong River in Melbourne's inner-west, I was confronted by a piece of graffiti scrawled on an underpass. The graffiti read: 'stockman myth is written in Koorie blood'. This simple text almost floored me. It set in motion a chain of investigations into the role Australian wild horses, or 'brumbies', have played in facilitating the process of 'indigenisation' for many Australians, and continue to play in mediating anxieties about legitimacy of origin.

This paper is part of that broader project. It takes as its focus one of the most recent textualisations of the brumby: *In Search of a Wild Brumby* by Michael Keenan[2]. This non-fiction/autobiographical work was marketed in 2002 as a 'Recommended Read' for the 'Year of the Outback'. Although widely publicised on ABC Radio National, the book staked no claim for serious literary status. On the contrary, the text was firmly aimed at the general public, linked to various websites about brumbies and enthusiastically received in the regional press[3]. It has prompted no critical articles to date in the cultural studies journals. Far from discouraging rigorous scrutiny, I would argue that this is exactly why the present analysis is warranted. Of all the stories that could get told about horses in Australia, Keenan's is the kind of story that *does* get told: and this is the forum it gets told in. The

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2 M. Keenan (2002), *In Search of a Wild Brumby*, Bantam Books, Sydney.

3 See (http://www.brumbywatchaustralia.com) and (http://www.michaelkeenan.com.au/bookshelf_review.htm).

significance of the text lies as much in its pre-eminence and uncritical acceptance in an empty field as in its own conclusions.

'Beautiful Lies'

The graffiti text from 2002 with which I framed this paper was a cultural comment of particular relevance in the aftermath of all the driza-bone in the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics, and the suddenly ubiquitous rash of whip–cracking, crag-leaping horsey wine posters. As Tim Flannery observed shortly afterwards:

> The Man From Snowy River is an archetypal Australian hero–one of the brave Aussies who tamed the rugged land… Yet our worship of the self-reliant stockman neatly sidesteps the fact that the men of the cattle frontier were the shock troops in our Aboriginal wars…There is a deep current in our colonial Australian society that resists these simple facts and clings to the great founding lie[4].

Flannery here inadvertently referred to one of the central ways in which the 'stockman myth is written in Koorie blood'. However, in situating his critique of contemporary Australia with the phrase 'beautiful lies', Flannery also provides an enduring resonance to the connection of wild horses and horsemen to Aboriginal issues. Non-indigenous Australians have had to play out their own often agonising quest for belonging on this land: they have had to find ways of reading it, of making their language(s) resonate with it, and of writing it with stories that place themselves in meaningful roles. As Bill Ashcroft, Gary Griffiths and Helen Tiffin pointed out in *The Empire Writes Back*, this process of 'indigenisation' was, and is, psychologically necessary for the well-being of all individuals who have been dislocated from their place and people of origin and seek a 'new life' in a 'new world'[5].

As Flannery's allusion to 'lies' suggests, migrants have often succeeded most powerfully and most 'beautifully' in forging a sense of identity for themselves in the creation of national icons now seen as damaging or even 'catastroph[ic]' in humanitarian or environmental terms[6]. The Man From Snowy River and the corollary mythos of the Snowy hydroelectric scheme are prime examples of this. The 'Man from Snowy' legends, originating in the 1890s but perhaps finding their apotheosis in Elyne Mitchell's novels of the late 1950s and 60s and George Miller's films of the 1980s, deployed the idea that the 'best' intruder (silver horse/Jim Craig)

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4 T. Flannery (2003), 'Beautiful Lies: Population and Environment in Australia', *Quarterly Essay* 9, pp. 6-7.

5 B. Ashcroft, H. Tiffin & G. Griffiths (1989), *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, Routledge, London, New York, p. 135.

6 Flannery, 'Beautiful Lies', p. 35.

could 'earn the right' to live in a privileged virgin space through demonstrating the ability to 'read' and survive the landscape more effectively than pretenders to that title. Indeed, in Mitchell's texts, the silver horses signally became *more* 'native'/suited to life in the high country than legitimately native animals and/or indigenous trackers employed to hunt them down.

Similarly, the construction work involved in the damming of the Snowy River in the 1950s provided a particular opportunity for a huge influx of European migrants to 'earn the right' to call Australia home through hard physical labour under adverse conditions. The idea that the Snowy scheme was the 'cradle of a new Australia' is encapsulated in the sub-title of a book on the project by Ivan Kobal[7]. Flannery, however, sees this project as no less than 'an environmental tragedy'[8]. He argues that 'the Snowy project was in large part created precisely to attract and give meaningful work to migrants'[9]–European migrants like Kobal, as opposed to the influx of Asian migrants many feared post-World War Two. While the project was undoubtedly successful in these terms, Flannery observes that the 'hubristic' and 'xenophobic' nature of the enterprise has now come back to haunt us. Victorian fisheries once fed by the Snowy have all but closed down and the dams have 'contribut[ed]…greatly to one of the most serious environmental crises ever to hit Australia–salination'[10].

The Snowy project also literally inscribed onto the land what *The Man From Snowy River* and *The Silver Brumby* inscribed only figuratively. By changing the geography and ecology of a river system, the project manufactured evidence that white Australians could harvest the natural resources of Australia *more* efficiently and productively than the prior inhabitants of the country–whom at that time, of course, were not widely considered to have 'farmed' Australia in any sense. Indeed, it was only really in the 1990s, post-Mabo, and largely through the publications of Tim Flannery himself, that popular conceptions of the Aboriginal occupation of Australia began to change. In his best-selling book, *The Future Eaters* (also an ABC TV series), Flannery demonstrated in a highly accessible way that the indigenous inhabitants of Australia were amongst the first peoples in human history to have deliberately changed their environment [11]. The 'beautiful lies' of The Man From

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7 I. Kobal (1999), *The Snowy: Cradle of a New Australia*, I. Kobal, Rydalmere, NSW.

8 Flannery, 'Beautiful Lies', p. 1.

9 Ibid, p. 2.

10 Ibid.

11 T. Flannery (1994), *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People*, Reed New Holland, Sydney. Whilst it must be noted that Flannery's account of this process remains highly controversial in scientific circles (see B. Debus [2003],

Snowy River and the Snowy hydroelectric scheme, on the other hand, were built on the premise of *terra nullius*: the belief that the Australian landscape was a blank slate or virgin wilderness waiting to be written over/penetrated by European Australians. When Flannery argues that it is precisely this cultural mythology embodied in the image of the stockman that has to change if Australia is to become truly 'postcolonial', he is primarily revealing the indigenous heritage and ecological catastrophe behind the 'stockman myth'.

In Search of a Wild Brumby

In Search of a Wild Brumby is an extremely interesting text to examine in this context. Here we have a text which celebrates the stockman myth, but purports to do so in environmentally and culturally sensitive terms. *In Search of a Wild Brumby* is the textual production of a 'fifth generation farmer from NSW'[12]. It comprises ten loosely-related episodes in Michael Keenan's quest to find, photograph and/or catch a wild brumby. Although Keenan at one point has the vague idea that catching a brumby would be a ideal way of obtaining a cheap horse for his grandchild[13], for the most part the stated 'quest' of the text is simply to ascertain the numbers, condition and impact of brumbies in the mountains of New South Wales and Victoria[14]. What the text becomes, however, is an increasingly frantic and fictionalised attempt to establish the virility and legitimate indigeneity of high country cattlemen and their brumby running culture.

The National Parks authorities in New South Wales and Victoria have been attempting to remove both cattle and horses from the high country in Eastern Australia on environmental grounds. It is argued that hard-hoofed animals destroy fragile vegetation, leaving soil systems open to erosion, especially above the snow line, and that they drink and pollute water and eat feed intended for native animals. Policies have been more extreme to date in New South Wales than in Victoria. In New South Wales, horse-riding in the national parks has been more or less outlawed, 'snow leases' for cattle grazing have been resumed by the Parks authorities, and a policy of culling brumbies has been followed quite mercilessly. Notoriously, over 500 brumbies were shot by helicopter in Guy Fawkes National

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'Correspondence', *Quarterly Essay* 11, pp. 112-16), it also indisputable that Flannery's views have achieved more popular currency than alternative accounts. It is this which is relevant here.

12 Keenan, *In Search of a Wild Brumby.*

13 Ibid, p. 16.

14 Ibid, p. 145.

Park in October 2000 in a way that has been labeled 'most unprofessional and cruel' by a number of animal welfare bodies[15]. While both horses and cattle are still permitted to some extent in Victoria's alpine parks, Keenan feels that, with each change of government, 'the mountain people…worried the remaining snow leases were about to be resumed'[16]. There are apparently 'some very outspoken Greens in the various environmental advisory committees' to the current Bracks government in Victoria[17], who position the mountain stockmen and their culture as detrimental to the ecological health of the high country.

To combat these charges, Keenan deploys a bipartite strategy. On the one hand, he tries to write back a kind of virile yet sensitive gallantry into the maligned figure of the stockman. In this, he is entirely consistent with his literary forbears in the tradition of 'adventure romance': writers such as Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling and Robert Louis Stevenson. As Elaine Showalter has observed, the 'revival of "romance" in the 1880s was a men's literary revolution intended to reclaim the kingdom of the English novel for male writers, male readers, and men's stories'[18]. So too with this new millennium attempt to reclaim the kingdom of the Australian bush. Keenan makes a number of remarks in *In Search of a Wild Brumby* seemingly designed to make a female reader cringe. 'I don't think there's any buck in that mare…but there's plenty of spirit in the redhead' is one such example[19]. It is also salutary that no woman qualifies for the finals of the Man From Snowy River Bush Festival in chapter four. This is, of course, exactly how it should be when described by Keenan as the modern equivalent of a 'medieval…jousting' match[20].

All of Keenan's rousing stories are emphatically by and about stock*men*. 'Armchair environmentalis[m]'[21], on the other hand, is either aligned with women by the text, or carefully given no gender signifiers. It is a 'woman interviewed on a local radio program' who espouses the view that 'parks had to become entirely wilderness to stop sediment flow into rivers and dams'[22]. This view is ridiculed by Keenan, who wonders 'whether she realised the massive amounts of sediment washed into rivers

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15 J. Duckworth (2001), *They Shoot Horses, Don't They? The Treatment of Horses in Australia*, Robins Publications, p. 147.

16 Keenan, *In Search of a Wild Brumby*, p. 147.

17 Ibid.

18 E. Showalter (1990), *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the* Fin de Siecle, Viking, New York, pp. 78-79.

19 Keenan, *In Search of a Wild Brumby*, p. 26.

20 Ibid, p. 66.

21 Ibid, p. 54.

22 Ibid, p. 59.

after a bushfire, which becomes an inevitable consequence once thick scrub replaces grassland in volatile fire regions'[23]. The book-learnt views of 'Green activists' like this woman are positioned in counterpoint to the hands-on experience of 'horse*men*' throughout the text[24], as if only one element of this binary opposition had earnt a fully enfranchised identity. And yet women are, of course, expected to find this kind of hyper-masculinity sexually appealing. After watching Keenan and Ted Taylor, 'Man From Snowy River' of 2001, kill a wild pig with an old fence post and a butcher's knife, the young women in Keenan's company are 'flushed with excitement'[25].

The other strategy deployed by Keenan to reclaim the importance of Australian horse mythology is to align the 'true' mountain stockmen with indigenous traditions. Considering that Keenan is himself a 'fifth generation [cattle] farmer', and therefore potentially one of the pastoralists whose claim to land ownership was threatened by the Native Title legislation of 1992, this is a highly political move. *In Search of a Wild Brumby* negotiates the perceived 'Othering' of mountain culture by the 'Green activists', who appear to hold the balance of power in state politics, in at least three difference ways which I will now discuss. All of these tactics rely on Keenan's implicit perception of a backlash against those previously empowered in this country, and positive discrimination in favour of the previously dispossessed. Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs have recently explored the multifarious ways in which this idea of a 'marginalised majority' circulates in contemporary Australian thinking[26]. Rather than overtly critiquing such 'political correctness', Keenan's response is to capitalise on it. By claiming an allegiance between the mountain stockmen and various aspects of Aboriginal culture, Keenan figuratively tries to trump the politicians at their own game.

The first way in which *In Search of a Wild Brumby* approaches the indigenous is to set up a dichotomy between the 'old' mountain men and the 'new breed' who masquerade in their name[27]. While the 'new breed' engage in brumby running as a kind of 'gladiator sport', catching and killing wild horses often with injury to themselves and their own animals[28], the old breed are symbolised for Keenan by Ernie Maskey, the indigenous lease holder of a large property backing onto Guy

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid, p.14; emphasis added.

25 Ibid, p. 42.

26 K. Gelder & J. Jacobs (1998), *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*, Melbourne UP, Carlton South, pp. xii-xiii.

27 Keenan, *In Search of a Wild Brumby*, p. 190.

28 Ibid, p. 186.

Fawkes National Park. In marked contrast to the young men of the Victorian gladiator 'cult', Maskey is positioned by Keenan as a 'brumby whisperer': he '[rides] in amongst the brumby mobs and communicat[es]…with them'[29]. According to Keenan, Maskey's grandmother 'was a fullblood Aborigine who reared a big family with one of the Cobleys at Razorback near Newton Boyd'[30]. Maskey is emphatically one of the heroes of Keenan's text. His phrase, 'they was beautiful'[31], is used as the title to chapter six, and his opinion about the dying stockman culture and its likely impact on the Alps is a running theme of the text[32]. Indeed, both with reference to Maskey and a number of his other friends, Keenan deliberately identifies and cites their 'Aboriginality', as if to give objectivity and credence to views about mountain culture which he shares.

The affinity of the 'old breed' of stockman with indigenous attitudes is also suggested by *In Search of a Wild Brumby* in a second way. Like Keenan himself, many of the mountain horse and cattle men are descended from Irish rather than British settlers. Keenan observes that many Irish families came to the goldfields near Mansfield in the 1860s: 'reared in a harsh environment, the first native generation was trained to survive. They knew the mountains almost as well as the Aboriginal tribes before them, and British colonial authority was as deeply detested as the occupying forces in mother Ireland'[33]. In this way, Keenan implies a coalition of interests between the indigenous peoples of Gippsland and the Irish: in their hatred of the British, he asserts that these marginalized groups 'formed close…bonds' with each other in and about the mountain country[34]. 'Irishness' in Keenan's text thus becomes a coded way of claiming postcolonial Australian legitimacy, at least in the Alps. The reader is, of course, constantly reminded of Keenan's own cultural origin by his frequent and admiring reference to fiesty 'redheads', already noted.

Keenan's historical alignment of Irish settlers and Aboriginal tribes in the face of a 'common oppressor' is a coalition of interests that many might question. While investigation of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, it is pertinent to note that Keenan's tactic allows him to position contemporary government authorities as 'the common oppressor'. In the final chapter of *In Search of a Wild Brumby*, Keenan argues that 'the cattlemen and brumby runners in the high

29 Ibid, p. 188.

30 Ibid, p. 140.

31 Ibid, p. 129.

32 Ibid, p. 189.

33 Ibid, p. 208.

34 Ibid, p. 84.

country…saw government resumption of land, originally acquired by their forbears, in the same light as the Aboriginal people did before them'[35]. This formulation situates the horse and cattle men as current heirs to the mountains *in the same way* that Aboriginal people were the heirs of the past. Furthermore, it is implied that their imminent 'dispossession' will be an equivalent tragedy. As one of Keenan's characters, 'Sneaky' Connley, laments, 'they [the authorities] snatched this land and never a shot was fired…In Kildare our ancestors made the rivers run in blood and …got it back'[36]. While the first clause of this sentence can be also interpreted as a virtual gloss on the dispossession of the indigenous inhabitants of Australia, the second clause marks a distinct divergence. *In Search of a Wild Brumby* seeks to both appropriate the dimensions of indigenous dispossession for the mountain stockmen and to appropriate the recuperation of that dispossession. It can be read as a 'shot' fired in a 'frontier war' of cultural relations which draws it strength from the legitimacy of the indigenous position.

The trump card held by Keenan, the third way in which his text engages with Australian discourses about the indigenous Other, is with reference to fire. As cited earlier, it is now common knowledge (albeit misguided in the case of the Alps)[37] that the Aboriginal inhabitants of this land used fire-stick farming techniques to prevent the build-up of undergrowth which inevitably leads to naturally occurring bushfires on a huge scale. Keenan explicitly solicits this indigenous knowledge and practice through the character of Maskey: 'one day all this country go up–big big fire, like white man never seen' Maskey unerringly predicts in 2001, referring to the consequences of the National Parks policy of removing cattle from the mountains[38]. This is a theme repeated numerous times in Keenan's text. Keenan argues that cattle and horses, far from being detrimental to the mountain environment, essentially replicate indigenous fire-stick practice of keeping undergrowth under control. Without this 'mega fauna' in the Alps, fire conditions potentially become unmanageable.

In the light of the bushfires of January and February 2003, which burnt out up to ninety percent of the alpine national parks, it is particularly tempting to concur with Keenan. These events would seem to demonstrate that the 'local horsemen'

35 Ibid, p. 215.

36 Ibid, p. 239.

37 Debus, 'Correspondence', p. 113. Debus points out that 'the high country's Alpine Ash forests were one of the areas we know Aborigines didn't *ever* burn extensively or frequently!'

38 Ibid, p. 189.

know best[39], and that the 'authorities' are ignorant, high-minded city-dwellers who focus their wrath on horses, doing little to address 'real' environmental issues[40]. This, indeed, seems to have been the consensus view of extracts from the *Cooma Express* newspaper published on the 'Brumby Watch Australia' website in the wake of the recent fires[41]. Like Keenan's text, these articles make for a powerful defence of mountain culture: powerful precisely because of the way in which the stockmen align themselves with indigenous practice against a seemingly cruel and 'misinform[ed]' government body[42].

And yet the comparison can surely only be taken so far. As Keenan is himself at pains to point out, cattle and horses have *not* as yet been excluded from the Victorian National Parks–a fact which made little difference to the catastrophic fire events of 2003. Keenan, in short, aligns the figure of the brumby and mountain stockman with the indigenous in a strategic attempt to avert dispossession. In its environmental and cultural sensitivities, his text perhaps attempts, in Flannery's terms, to 'lay the foundations [for]…a genuine end to colonialism' in Australia[43]. But in its reinscription of colonialist gender oppositions, and in its strategic commitment to coalition politics, Keenan's 'shot fired' is revealed to be yet another 'beautiful lie'.

Epilogue

If Michael Keenan critiques government policy which threatens the continued cultural availability of the Australian myth of the horse, it is interesting that another publication from 2002 critiques individuals and individual bodies whose horrendous treatment of horses reveals the often shallow basis of this myth. Jane Duckworth documents in her self-published sourcebook, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They? The Treatment of Horses in Australia*, how Australians remain the 'greatest horse-owning people in the world'[44]. No doubt fired by the iconography of *The Man From Snowy River*, many Australians dream of owning of a horse. Sadly, far fewer realise the physical and psychological needs of a large sentient creature–and, as Duckworth, points out, hardly anyone considers what they will do with the horse when they

39 Ibid, p. 143.

40 Ibid, p. 118.

41 See Brumby Watch Australia (2003), 'Snowy Mountains–Fire Situation', [Online], Available at http/: www.brumbywatchaustralia.com/SnowyMountain-FireSituation.htm [2/4/03].

42 Keenan, *In Search of a Wild Brumby*, p. 147.

43 Flannery, *The Future Eaters*, p. 68.

44 Duckworth, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, p. 13.

have finished with it[45]. By spotlighting conditions within knackeries, and also alternative cultural traditions of the horse such as 'hippophragy' (the eating of horse flesh), Duckworth perhaps inadvertently deconstructs the Australian myth of the horse[46]. There are, indeed, many other stories which *could* be constructed from the facts of horse treatment in Australia. In this context, it is salutary that the stories that do emerge, such as Keenan's *In Search of a Wild Brumby*, often romantically use the figure of the horse to focus broader issues of belonging and identity.

45 Ibid, p. 174.

46 Ibid, pp. 166-97.