Literary Imaginings of the Bunya

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By the time that Europeans became acquainted with the bunya, the gum tree was already well established as the iconic Australian tree. The genus Eucalyptus, with all its locally specific variants, was both distinctive to the continent and widely dispersed throughout it. In contrast, the bunya tree (classified as Araucaria bidwillii in 1843) grew in a small area of what is now South-East Queensland and was seen by few Europeans before the 1840s, when Moreton Bay was opened to free settlement. The physical distinctiveness of the bunya tree, and stories of the large gatherings which accompanied the triennial harvesting of its nut, aroused the curiosity of early European explorers and settlers, and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the bunya tree achieved a special status in local civic culture. Although heavy logging had largely destroyed the great bunya forests, the tree was planted extensively in school grounds, around war memorials and in long avenues in parks.

Despite its circumscribed habitat, then, it might seem somewhat surprising that the bunya tree has only sporadically captured the literary imagination of South-East Queensland writers. It is, after all, one of the most easily recognized local trees because of its distinctive cone-shaped top, its whorled branches, its sharp and spiky leaves, and – in season – its large cones. There are, too, many precedents for locally specific trees appearing prominently in literary imaginings of a place: the Pines of Rome and the Lombardy Poplar are just two examples. Several of the sporadic appearances of the bunya in Queensland literature, are, however, of considerable significance: the bunya tree was integral to Rosa Praed’s representation of Australia as part of the ancient continent Lemuria, and the triennial bunya feast inspired a ballad by Cornelius Moynihan.

John Oxley made the first written reference to the bunya tree in 1823, reporting that the convict castaways Pamphlett and Finnegan told him that their companion, Parsons, was attending a bunya feast. Stories told by other convicts who had lived with local Aboriginal people – notably, George Mitchell, James Bracefell (‘Wandi’) and Jem Davis (‘Duramboi’) – provoked scientific and commercial interest by early colonists such as government botanist Allan Cunningham and Moreton Bay’s Foreman of Works, Andrew Petrie. Cunningham’s observations are preserved in government reports. Petrie’s association with the bunya was part of early colonial
Queensland folklore, and in fact the tree was originally known locally as Petrie's Pine or *Pinus petriean*: Petrie's claim to have been 'the first person who risked my life with others in procuring the first plants of this tree' was reported by John Dunmore Lang in *Cooksland* (1847). However, no comprehensive published account of Petrie's quest to locate the bunya tree existed until his son Tom Petrie's memories, recorded by Tom's daughter Constance Campbell Petrie, were published in *The Queenslander* from 1902, before appearing in book form as *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences of Early Queensland* in 1904.

Despite Cunningham's recognition of the 'remarkable character' of its fruit, and Andrew Petrie's enthusiasm for the qualities of its timber, Ludwig Leichhardt appears to have been the first European to develop the notion of the bunya as a 'noble' tree. Through their publication by Lang in *Cooksland* (1847), his descriptions became widely disseminated in the colony and beyond. On 7 August 1843 Leichhardt wrote to Lieutenant Robert Lynd: 'The Bunya-Bunya tree is noble and gigantic, and its umbrella-like head overtops all the trees of the Brush.' A few months later, on 9 January 1844, he wrote even more enthusiastically to Lynd: 'I have travelled again in those remarkable mountain brushes, out of which the Bunya-Bunyas lift their majestic heads, like pillars of the blue vault of heaven.'

Leichhardt's descriptions cast the bunya as sublime, perhaps even gothic: like the spire of Salisbury Cathedral in Constable's paintings or the pointed fir trees in Caspar David Friedrich's, the 'majestic' and 'gigantic' bunyas link earth and heaven. Leichhardt also foreshadowed some of the epic possibilities of the bunya feast which were later developed by Cornelius Moynihan as the 'gathering of the clans'. He initially observed that the bunya 'gives rather a feast to the black-fellows than food', remarking that the three month long feast 'draws the clans from near and far'; and a little later he rhapsodised that 'many a Bunya-tree looks down on the capers of the sable children of forest and brush, of plain and mountain, of the seacoast and the country inland.'

The bunya held few such communal associations for Europeans. Colonial writers remark upon the 'solitude' of the forests, and European imaginings of the bunya were strongly influenced from the beginning by the conviction – although there are no written accounts of this by eyewitnesses – that cannibalism was widely practised at the bunya feasts. Cunningham's 1829 field notes on George Mitchell's story include a reference to cannibalism, and in 1843 Leichhardt reported to his mother apropos of the bunya feast that:

'During that time the men settle their differences whilst the women go out to gather the pine cones, and there's many a black who never returns to his own country alive. His kinsmen proceed to devour the fallen brother, but they clean the bones of his trunk, limbs and skull, and the women carry them about in a small net. Some clans have a strange belief that the dead man's strength passes into whoever eats him and makes the latter twice as strong [as before]. Nobody has the slightest doubt that the blacks enjoy eating human flesh.'
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The Petries apparently shared Leichhardt’s view that Aborigines ate the flesh of the dead (again, without citing direct evidence), but denied that sacrifice was practised or that anyone was killed for the purpose of eating them. Tom Petrie specifically rejected the common belief that cannibalism was particularly associated with the bunya feast: ‘[p]eople speak of the great numbers killed in fight, but, after all they were but few…’.10

Many years after the last great bunya feast, in My Australian Girlhood (1902 – the same year as the complete publication of Tom Petrie’s memoirs), Rosa Praed introduced a new twist. It is worth quoting the passage in some detail, as it indicates the lurid tendency of Praed’s imagination:

In Moreton Bay, the depredations of the Blacks were more or less regulated by the yield of the bunya forests. In the good bunya years, there were always more murders; and in the bunya-feast times the squatters went in fear, and the women stayed about the house and all the men looked well to their weapons. ...

Then the kangaroos, iguanas and other beasts and reptiles of the bush are sacred, but the cattle are the white man’s and may be speared and eaten; and the white man – if he be alone and has not his gun ready – may be speared also, and roasted and eaten, to still the craving for flesh food, which seizes men after long abstinence. Sometimes the white man was too vigilant, and the cattle were well guarded, and the craving became greater than could be endured; and then an unsuspecting stranger from some outside tribe would be led to a quiet spot and hidden to look at a snake in a water-hole, or at the red sky, or at something moving in the grass; and while he looked, a warrior behind would strike him a blow on the back of the neck with a waddy, and that night there would be horrible feasting. Or else some plump young lubras, doomed beforehand and guessing their doom, would be sacrificed to the need.11

This description of cannibalism is based largely on standard colonial references and oral folklore, but Praed introduces the suggestion that Europeans were the preferred victims of Aboriginal cannibalism. The passage also gives a vivid and detailed depiction of victims being lured to their deaths (in contrast to Leichhardt’s version, that dead warriors were eaten so that their strength would pass to others). There is no eyewitness account of such actions in the colonial literature, but the specificity of Praed’s descriptions doubtless suited the predisposition of her colonial readers and reinforced her credibility as a reliable informant with her English readers.

By the time she wrote this passage, Rosa Praed had been living in England for 25 years. Born at Bromelton in 1851, she had spent her youth in the Moreton Bay area, and lived with her family at Naraigin (Hawkwood), the next station to Hornet Bank, when the Fraser massacre took place in 1857. Praed’s father, Thomas Lodge Murray-Prior, played a leading role in the violent and indiscriminate European retaliations. Praed wrote several times about her recollections of the massacres and
the circumstances surrounding it, and the passage on cannibalism cited above can perhaps best be understood as evocative of the terror, anxiety and guilt which she experienced as a young child living on the northern frontier of what was then New South Wales in the 1850s. In the Moreton Bay region, the bunya - through its powerful even though unproven association with cannibalism - acted as a lightning rod for such colonial anxiety. This anxiety, compounded of fear and guilt, is evident, for instance, in recurrent references to the legend that Andrew Petrie's blindness in old age was a punishment for collecting bunya plants, or, according to other accounts, for climbing Beerwah.

The contrast with the developing European mythology of the gum tree could hardly be greater. Rosa Praed inextricably links gum trees and mateship in her 'receipt' for quart-pot tea in My Australian Girlhood. 'You must have the quart pots, the pannikins, the ration-sugar, the gum-tree stick, and, above all, the mates. These things can only be got together in the bush.' In 'The Bushman's Love Story' (1909), Praed's London-based narrator - explicitly referring to a story by Henry Lawson - throws gum leaves on the fire so that the 'old familiar perfume' will act as a 'peacemaker' in a tense situation.

It would be misleading, however, to characterize Rosa Praed's representation of the gum tree as unambiguously cheerful. Praed often uses it as an example of the 'weird' and 'primeval' dimension of Australia. She also describes it as 'melancholy' and 'weird', part of a 'wild and utterly desolate' landscape which is 'all the same monotonous grey colouring'. In this incarnation, the gum tree belongs to 'antediluvian nature'; this uniquely Australian tree is a 'primeval survival' of ancient Lemuria, the land that existed before Atlantis. Today, palaeobotanical studies reveal that the bunya rather than the eucalypt is a 'primeval survival'; indeed, the bunya - like the Wollomi Pine - is popularly labelled a 'living fossil' or a 'dinosaur tree'. Rosa Praed seems to have some inkling of this later scientific discovery in her treatment of the bunya too as one of the symbols of the paradoxical nature of Australia as a 'young-old land'.

Praed spent her entire childhood in bunya country, and her descriptions of the forests bear the traces of an intimate familiarity:

The great ranges between our two rivers, the Auburn and the Logan, were covered with bunya forest. It is beautiful to ride through a bunya scrub, where a track has been cut, to see the huge yellowing cones hanging, each one larger than a man's head, and to watch the light falling in curious, pointed shafts from the dark pyramid tops of the tall trees, and glinting in diamond sparks upon the glossy green leaves of the lower branches, beneath which all is gloom, and only creeping things move.

This passage is suggestive of literary possibilities, and indeed the bunya makes a number of appearances in Praed's fiction, as well as in her autobiographical works.

In her Introductory Note to Policy and Passion: A Novel of Australian Life (1881), Praed penned an important statement about the role of the physical landscape in her Australian fiction:
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It has been my wish to depict in these pages certain phases of Australian life, in which the main interests and dominant passions of the personages concerned are identical with those which might present themselves upon an [sic] European stage, but which, directly and indirectly, are influenced by striking natural surroundings.18 [My italics]

In Praed's fiction, the bunya appears in two contexts: either as part of a colonial anxiety over cannibalism (for example, in Lady Bridget in the Never-Never Land) or as a key component of a sublime landscape (Policy and Passion and Outlaw and Lawmaker).19 The two contexts are linked by their connection with terror, an emotion that is clearly experienced in relation to the fear of massacres on the frontier, but it is also an essential element of Romantic notions of the sublime derived from Edmund Burke:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime: that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.20

Praed uses terror in her Australian novels to heighten the emotional effects of both action and character, and perhaps to counter the idea that the Australian landscape is prosaic and lacks striking features. It is also likely that Praed — who admired Leichhardt and called Queensland 'Leichhardt's Land' [sic] in her fiction — deliberately picks up on the echoes of the sublime in the explorer’s descriptions of the bunya.

In Lady Bridget in the Never-Never Land (1915), Colin McKeith’s account of the massacre of his family closely mirrors the story of the Fraser massacre and the squatters’ revenge. He prefices his story with a claim that the local blacks became 'meat-hungry' in the bunya season:

Our blacks weren’t regular cannibals, but in the bunya season they’d all collect in the scrubs and feed on the nuts and nothing else for months. Then after a bit they’d get meat-hungry, and there not being many wild animals in Australia and only a few cattle in those outlying districts, they’d satisfy their cravings by killing and eating some of themselves – lubras – young girls – by preference, and naturally, half-castes, as having no particular tribal status, for choice.21

According to McKeith, an act of kindness in saving the lives of two 'half-caste' girls exposed his family to treachery and massacre. He uses this experience to justify his role in the frontier wars — his gun is scored with 'a great many notches on the barrel of it', each notch marking a 'black-fellow' he has killed22 — which Praed had described in My Australian Girtwthhood as 'the sweeping away of the old race from the land'.23 The linking of the dying race theme to the bunya resurfaces a few years later, in a novel by Zora Cross, Daughters of the Seven Mile (1924),
a three generational family saga. The foundational moment – the murder of the ‘half-caste’ Madrack by the white Bill Wilson – takes place in a bunya scrub.24

A rather different treatment of the bunya occurs in two of Praed’s earlier novels, Policy and Passion: A Novel of Australian Life (1881) and Outlaw and Lawmaker (1893). Policy and Passion is set partly in the Koorong district (a fictionalized version of the region around Mt Maroon where Rosa Praed spent a large part of her childhood). Anthony Ferris, who has been in the colony for 10 years, refutes the claims of European travelers that Australia has no striking landscape features, exclaiming of this region: ‘Ah! we have mountains in the Koorong district, sublime with a wild grandeur that I have never seen equalled.’ Koorong Crag itself ‘had all the glory of inaccessibility; its turret-like summit surmounted a deep precipice of bare rock, which could be climbed by no man’.25 Below the precipice is a large waterhole with many bunya trees, a place that Praed represents as having supernatural associations for both whites and blacks. The black boy, Cobra Ball, whose mother died nearby, says: ‘That fellow Debbil-Debbil like it there’.26 For the white child, Angela, it is inhabited by a mixture of European and Aboriginal spirits:

There was a dim region beyond the Koorong Crag, mysterious now in the gathering twilight, which was the Paradise of water-witches and flower-elves, where dwelt the praying-mantis, the high-priest of the plain; the souls of black piccaninies [sic], which had attained the dignity of storm-spirits, and such-like mythic creatures which furnished food for Angela’s vivid imagination.27

After hunting kangaroos with hounds, the main characters picnic in the ‘sublime’ mountains. During a walk in the bunya scrub, the seductive but treacherous aristocrat, Hardress Barrington, is bitten by a snake, steps backwards, disappears over the precipice and breaks his arm!

In Outlaw and Lawmaker (1893), the sublime grandeur of the landscape is not attenuated by any such comic elements. The dominating presence of Mount Luya – Koorong in the earlier novel – conveys a sense of impending doom:

A little to the right rose Mount Luya, a majestic object, with its encircling precipiced battlement of grey rock, making it look like some Titanic fortress. Its strange rents and fissures and the black bunya scrub clothing its lower slopes make it seem still more grim and gloomy.28

The dramatic dualism in nature – Mount Luya is ‘majestic’ but also ‘grim and gloomy’ – mirrors the split nature of the central character, the outlaw and lawmaker of the title. Morres Blake, a Fenian, is the discredited younger brother of the Irish aristocrat, Lord Coola. In ‘Leichardt’s Land’ Blake is elected to parliament as a Radical and becomes Colonial Secretary, but he also leads a secret life as the infamous bushranger, Captain Moonlight. Blake’s motives are pure – ‘I have robbed, not for greed of gain, but for Ireland’29 – but his accomplices betray him and the Irish cause by stealing for personal gain. His nature, too, is dual: he is noble, but
also subject to recurring fits of excitement or madness, during which he is capable of terrible deeds.

Much of the novel takes place in bunya forests around Mount Luya, which lends an air of impending doom to the twin plots: the love affair between Elsie Valliant and Morres Blake, and Blake’s downfall. Blake and his guests – who include several English aristocrats in search of ‘picturesque’ landscapes – camp out at the foot of the mountain, near Barolin Waterfall, ‘the dread abode of the great Spirit Barolín’, which is ‘at the very heart of the mountains and among the Blacks’ old Bora ground’. Elsie is kidnapped by one of Blake’s accomplices, who imprisons – and perhaps rapes her – in a cave in Barolin Rock. When Blake rescues her, they ride through a bunya forest that is now seen as grotesque and foreboding: ‘There was something weird and unnatural in the black forest, with its funereal foliage and straight stems and grotesque pendant bunya cones. The stillness was oppressive...’. The tragedy quickly moves to its conclusion: Blake’s criminal identity is exposed, and the police close in on his secret hideaway of Barolin Rock just as news is received that Blake’s brother and nephews have died. The outlaw and lawmaker – now Lord Coola – does the only honourable thing and throws himself off the precipice.

What we have been mainly concerned with to this point is a range of associations and meanings for the bunya – gloomy, primitive, Gothic, sublime – which could conveniently be termed ‘Romantic’. Developing concurrently with that tradition is another, which shares some – though surprisingly few – associations with the Romantic tradition, and which might be thought of as a ‘Classical’ tradition. Here the bunya is invested with a more rational, civilised and (in the eighteenth century sense) ‘benevolent’ set of values.

The earliest appearance of the ‘enlightened bunya’, appropriately enough, is in a civilised and cultivated setting rather than its wild natural habitat, in a long philosophical and descriptive poem called The Two Visions; or the Contrast. The author, Robert West Mayne, a Dubliner, arrived in Queensland in 1858, aged 22, and worked as Manager on a series of pastoral stations, including ‘Coochin Coochin’ and ‘Jimbour’. The poem was, he said, ‘[his] first attempt at anything continuous’, and it was also, it seems, his last. It is a long rambling meditation on the Australian environment, alternately chatty and abstruse, full of literary allusions, scientific jargon, footnotes, and a certain Irish weakness for punning and self-parody.

Mayne was a professed disciple of the Anglo-Irish poet Thomas Moore, but his models for this poem are rather more neoclassical. The bunya makes its appearance in a manicured environment reminiscent of Alexander Pope or James Thomson:

Halfway adown an undulating slope,
That towards us turns with equable incline,
A lovely garden settles in the midst
Its roofed rorifluent recesses ramped
By native evergreens with clustered flowers,
Rejoicing in the rich and rosy hues
Peculiar to a semi-tropic clime;
And plentiful parterres of perfumed plants
BELINDA MCKAY AND PATRICK BUCKRIDGE

The senses satisfy of sight and smell,
While, by the banks, beside the blooming beds,
A row of “Bunya” rears such stately heads;
And foreign fruits, though few, are not forgot –
Some shady Citrus figure in the lot. 33

Mayne’s footnotes gloss the tree as “‘Bunya Bunya’, the fruit-bearing pine of Queensland.” In the same note he makes it clear that he has in his mind’s eye ‘the Botanic Gardens, Brisbane’, whose fine collection of native and exotic fruit-trees, assembled by its visionary Superintendent Walter Hill, was the pride of the young colony. 34 The food potential of the bunya was thus recognised by the early colonists, though there is no evidence that it was ever seriously developed. Its ornamental qualities were also admired, and it continued to be used in the landscaping of public parks and gardens in Brisbane until after the First World War. 35

If Mayne’s interests in the bunya were chiefly botanical and aesthetic, those of another Irish immigrant to Queensland, Cornelius Moynihan, were more literary, anthropological and historical. Moynihan arrived in Brisbane in 1871, at ten years of age. From the age of twenty until his death in 1915 he was Assistant Librarian to the Queensland Parliament and a prolific poet. The Feast of the Bunya (1901) was his best-known poem (though by no means his best), and it was presented as a gift to the Duke and Duchess of York on the occasion of their royal visit to Brisbane in the year of Federation – in a similar spirit, one supposes, to that in which the triumphal arch of living Aborigines was erected on the same occasion: as demonstrating the gratitude of Her Majesty’s native subjects for the benefits of her kindly rule.

Moynihan’s poem originated (as he tells us in a long Introduction) in a visit to the Bunya Mountains in the summer of 1896, at the request of ‘some members of a local literary society’. This resulted in a paper dealing with the history of the district, augmented by some thirty stanzas on the triennial ‘Gathering of the Clans’ that took place there on Mobolon, the highest peak, for the last time in about 1875. The remaining sixty-odd stanzas, those dealing with the return of the ‘white Aborigines’ Jem Davis, James Bracefell and John Fahey, the Hornet Bank massacre, and the Kilcoy poisonings, were added later (together with copious Notes) drawing upon published accounts of these matters by Archibald Meston, W.E. Roth, Henry Stuart Russell, J.J. Knight and Rosa Praed, and upon his own oral research.

Moynihan connects all these notable instances of ‘contact’ – somewhat speculatively – to the institution of the great Gathering or Feast: they are events that supposedly occurred on the way to or from Mobolon, or in its general vicinity. His insistence on those connections suggests that his underlying conception of its significance goes beyond what it represents of the social complexity and cohesion of Aboriginal civilisation. That this was a part of his conception is demonstrated in his historical reconstruction of the institution in its traditional form, as ‘the one ever-memorable event connected with the history of this fast-vanishing race’:
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Here was the ‘Gathering of the Clans’, the meeting-ground of the tribes for a distance of 200 miles. Blacks from all points of the compass — men, women, and children — joined in the great triennial Feast of the Bunya. At night, gathered round a hundred fires, those from the sea coast related to the astonished natives of the West strange tales of vast canoes, ‘like gigantic birds with white wings and filled with mysterious white men, whose glance was lightning, and whose voice was thunder, who came far away from beyond the horizon, where the sun rose from the waters of Toomgum’. Blacks from the interior told tales of the dread bunyip — vague legends of some unknown animal long extinct. The men fought during the morning and hunted during the afternoon. The gins collected the cones and conveyed them to Yamsion, six miles down the valley. Terrible hand-to-hand fights were of frequent occurrence. Old scores were settled and new feuds begun at these triennial gatherings. Fierce battles, resulting from the elopements of gins with the young men, ended in the death of several warriors, who were roasted and eaten. The departing tribes were watched, and stragglers waylaid, roasted, and devoured. ... And all the while they ate and roasted bunya nuts, and became fat and sleek ... The last great ‘Gathering of the Clans’ on Mobolon took place about twenty-five years ago.36

But even here, in a description of the event in its vanishing form, the fact of European coastal contact is already present, being received, processed and disseminated through the same channels as the ancient bunyip legends from further west. For all its internecine violence and cannibalism, the Feast seems — at least in Moynihan’s view — less a celebration of cultural separation and alterity than a busy zone of information exchange and a mechanism for resolving, or at least concluding, both personal and tribal conflicts.

The patriarch and father,
Banyabba from Tarong,
With all their royal kinsmen
Are there to swell the throng;
Wahpunga and Ulloola
Encounter on the height;
In deadly wrath the brothers stand,
Ulloola from the salt marsh land,
And he who hath the withered hand
Who slew his sire with fiery brand
At the dead hour of the night.37

The Bunya Feast also functions as a zone of literary exchange, mediated through the idea of genre. Moynihan observes in his Introduction that ‘there are enthusiasts who imagine they discover sufficient material in the great Bunya festival for an epic poem’. But while he can find here ‘the possibility of unity in action and
conduct' required for an epic poem on the classical Homeric pattern, he cannot admit the possibility of another, equally necessary epic quality, that of 'sublime thought'. His reason is an interesting one: it is the difficulty of 'thinking blackfellow':

Did ever civilized white man dare pretend to a full acquaintance with the mind and heart of the savage; in other words, "think blackfellow" so surely as to enable him to appreciate the feelings and passions of "God's image in ebony"? There may be materials for an epic poem – which can never be written in the absence of an aboriginal genius.

Moynihan certainly thought himself capable of writing an epic poem – he had already written one on the subject of the Eureka Stockade. But his tactful disinclination to project himself, imaginatively, into the minds of his Aboriginal characters – Tukiarka, for example, ravisher of the eldest Fraser daughter at Hornet Bank, or Thulupi, avenger of his runaway betrothed – means he cannot render the actions with the kind of emotional depth the epic requires. The highest of the European literary genres, the epic, is thus closed to him for this material, and he must content himself with the externally rendered actions and places characteristic of the ballad, a more debased genre.

This interesting poetic reticence on Moynihan’s part can be read as an act of inter-racial courtesy, a deliberate sharing of the bardic prerogative with the (hypothetical) Aboriginal poet who alone could write the epic of the Bunya Feast. That he could write even as freely as he did, possibly had to do with the fact that Duramboi (Davis), Wandi (Bracefell) and Gilburrie (Fahey) are all returning white men whose ‘thoughts’ he felt were accessible to him as an Irish-Australian poet working in a European tradition.

The bunya trees themselves are rooted in two worlds, the fascinating but alien world of the Feasts, extending back through the millennia and the more familiar world of the white loggers and pioneers, who have relegated the old, bunya-centred life of the Aborigines to the past. 'The tribes have vanished, “vague and shadowy in the mist moonlight of memory”', and on the track to Mobolion, the discarded tops of the ancient trees, 'sawn off where the branches commence, and in girth three times that of the largest specimen growing in the Botanic Gardens in Brisbane', bear eloquent testimony to the tragedy of dispossession and displacement.

But of course the bunyas have survived, though in reduced form, and so for that matter (in other places) have the Aboriginal people. In an odd but interesting passage Moynihan pays tribute to the contemporary white inhabitants of the Bunyas. Their community, he says, ‘may be described as in many respects an ideal state’; of simple harmony with the natural surroundings, of mutual help and co-operation, and strong family ties. Indeed, while soil and climate make the area ‘more European in character than any other spot on the Darling Downs’, it also represents a rebirth, almost a continuation, of the Aboriginal community it displaced.
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Far from the "madding crowd", surrounded by picturesque mountains, in the depths of the weird, melancholy bush, yet withal a place where the conditions of life are by no means hard, one is tempted to follow in the wake of those easygoing later aboriginal inhabitants, become negligent, more or less indifferent, according to one's disposition, and with little or no inclination to hit out in a new direction. 40

The utopian blending of black with white history foreshadows the cultural program of Rex Ingamells and the 'jindyworobaks' some thirty years later. (The very word 'jindyworobak', Ingamells asserted in his manifesto for the group, 'Conditional Culture', in 1938, means a 'joining' or 'splicing'). Moynihan's earlier vision of Aboriginal and European conjunction and continuity gains a certain conviction of its own by virtue of its sharp focus on the bunya tree, as a complex single icon of disappearance and survival.

(Moynihan's poetic musings on the European-Aboriginal connection were not always quite so serious. In an earlier long poem, 'The Bunyip of Wendouree', an element of Celtic whimsey comes to the fore. The poem is part fantasy, part humorous satire: Rob Roy M'Gregor, a Scottish Highland chieftain transported for poaching, meets a Gaelic-speaking bunyip who deposits him with an Aboriginal tribe for forty-five years, then gets him to Ballarat just in time for the Eureka Stockade! 41

The dignified seriousness of his treatment of the theme of continuity and conjunction in 'The Feast of the Bunya' is reproduced, with elaborations and variations, in Roy Connolly's 1940 novel of pioneering and frontier conflict, Southern Saga. Set in the Lower Burnett region in the 1850s, around a sheep station called 'Goolara', it is a story full of hardship and determination, love and cruelty, heroism and villainy, all conducted with maximum intensity and minimal subtlety. Connolly has little use for shades of grey, but at least his moral polarities are not racial ones: there are good and bad Europeans, and good and bad Aborigines in the novel. Indeed the novel has two heroes, not just one: Stephen Everett, the virtuous English owner of 'Goolara', and Coontajanderrah, a noble and generous Aboriginal chieftain who tries vainly to resist the escalating campaign of rape and murder being carried out against white settlers by Murra, alias Debil-Debil, a renegade ex-member of the notorious Native Mounted Police, who has been turned into a demonic instrument of violence by the brutal treatment he received at the hands of Hedley Hampton, the sadistic white commandant of the Native Police (who does, however, bear the suspicion of the 'taint' of 'black blood' in his background).

Coontajanderrah dies at the end of the novel, after having killed the evil Murra as the latter tries to attack Georgiana, the innocent (if slightly imprudent) young wife of Stephen Everett. He thereby exposes himself to capture by the even more evil Hedley Hampton, who has been pursuing him for seven years, and who now takes him into the bush and flogs him to death. He is found and buried by the grateful Everett.

Clearly 'reconciliation', an idea at the forefront of Indigenous debates in Australia for the last ten years, is also a theme – in a somewhat different sense – at the heart of this novel, published more than sixty years ago. It appears most obviously in a
deeply dysfunctional and destructive form, that of the Native Mounted Police, an organisation that ostensibly sought to develop co-operation between the races, but which in reality became a willing instrument of indiscriminate reprisal-massacres, driven by a mix of colonial subservience and intertribal hostility. The NMP might almost be called the demonic face of reconciliation, something built upon a fusion of the worst motives and abilities of both races, just as Murra/Debil-Debil represents the demonic face of Aboriginal leadership, posed against its angelic, or utopian face in Coontajanderrah.

The binary logic of Connolly's schema requires a similar utopian counterweight for reconciliation, and this is where the bunya is of real significance. It first enters the picture early on, when Coontajanderrah himself convenes one of the triennial bunya feasts. Both feast and tree are referred to as 'bonyi', the more authentically Aboriginal form, - 'the white men called it bunya' - perhaps in order to mark a clear separation from European culture and customs. Throughout his description of the Feast, Connolly emphasises separateness rather than difference or strangeness in the corroboree. Unlike Moynihan he has no qualms about describing it from the inside: the participants are unproblematically rendered in familiar romantic and heroic terms, and even the mandatory mention of cannibalism is softened and rationalised:

Coontajanderrah and his fellows were not true cannibals, in that they did not kill human beings for the purpose of eating them. They believed that the spirit of the dead one would rest easier if his body were thus disposed of, while they themselves would be rendered the stronger. The cultural activities and performances at the bunya corroboree — for example, Coonta's drama portraying a recent massacre — conform readily, in Connolly's account, to the classic European genres of tragedy, comedy and pastoral. ('Tragedy only too often in these times raised its sad voice'). He shares none of Moynihan's difficulty with reconciling the opacity of 'blackfellow thinking' with Western literary conventions.

Transparent though it may be to the European cultural gaze, however, the traditional Aboriginal culture that finds its highest expression in the bunya feasts is far from invulnerable. Its idyllic stability and self-sufficiency make it an easy prey to European violence, a fact which is demonstrated immediately after the feast has ended by the attempted rape of Coonta's newly betrothed, Kuloloi, by a white shepherd. The only hope of Aboriginal survival — and it is utopian at best — is for a reconciliation of black/white conflict on something like the model imaged in the Bunya Assembly, with its regular resolution of warring tribal interests and personal desires.

That hope is unmistakably symbolised at the end of the novel, when Coontajanderrah, having died in Stephen Everett's arms, is buried in a manner that testifies to the possibility of racial co-operation of a noble rather than a degraded kind:
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The service was pagan. Only to Everett of Goolara would the Wakka tribe ... allow unquestioned possession of the body. Everett of Goolara was sworn brother to Coontajanderrah and had the right to great privilege. So the blacks made Stephen the coffin of bark for which he asked.  

The grave is then marked with the appropriate sign of historical continuity, racial reconciliation and hope for the future—a young bunya tree!

When the grave had been filled in, Molloy planted a bunya pine in its centre. That had been Stephen’s idea, and the blacks approved it. In the years to come, from the verandah of his house on the homestead knoll, Stephen would be able to see the bunya growing ever higher, and know that its great kindly roots were gathering about the bones of Coontajanderrah, holding him firm in his native earth.

As a resolution for the novel, let alone a program for real reconciliation, the ending suffers from the ‘dying pillow’ assumption of earlier periods: Everett is now the ‘legitimate heir’ of the land he occupies because the Indigenous owners have been effectively dispossessed, even if he has been the innocent beneficiary of others’ crimes. Connolly’s heart, like that of his grandfather, the Irish pioneer John Connolly—Budgeree, or ‘Goodfellow’ to the local Wakka tribe—was in the right place; and the inherited meanings of the bunya as a symbol of continuity and conjunction between European and Aborigines in Queensland, gave him a way of expressing his optimism and benevolence.

The dual tradition of the bunya in Queensland literature—its Romantic and Classical representations—usefully highlights the complexity of Australian cultural history, exemplifying especially, perhaps, the disruption of ‘metropolitan’ cultural chronologies which can be particularly characteristic of a colonial culture. Equally, the duality may raise a doubt about the utility of such well-worn conceptual antinomies as Romantic and Classical; but whatever terms are used, there do seem to be some real and interesting differences between the two representations, such that the bunya evoked on the one hand (as for Leichhardt and Praed) the anxious frisson of terror in face of the savage and the primitive, while on the other hand (as for Moynihan and Connolly) it stood for the possibility of rational and moral solutions to the legacy of frontier violence, and of a future harmonious convergence between black and white in a process of widening civility. In both ways, the bunya seems to have performed a surprisingly important historical role in structuring, through literature, white people’s perceptions of their relationship to Aboriginal culture and history in Queensland. Just how Aboriginal perceptions of the significance of the bunya might compare with those exclusively European perceptions discussed in this paper would entail an investigation of a very different kind.
BELINDA MCKAY AND PATRICK BUCKRIDGE

Notes

1 Aboriginal understandings of the bunya are addressed elsewhere in this issue of Queensland Review.

2 George Mitchell's story as reported to Allan Cunningham, in J.G. Steele, Brisbane Town in Convict Days 1824-1842 (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1975), 109: Cunningham's rough notes on the bunya focus on its botanical character and the preparation of the nut for eating. Cunningham is more closely associated with another local Araucaria, the hoop pine which bears his name (Araucaria cunninghamii). Petrie's interest was primarily commercial in nature.


4 Tom Petrie, Tom Petrie's Reminiscences of Early Queensland (Dating from 1837) Recorded by His Daughter (Brisbane: Watson, Ferguson and Co., 1904).


6 Leichhardt, Letters, vol 2, 707. Leichhardt's descriptions of the bunya were well known to early Queensland colonists through their publication by John Dunmore Lang in Cook Island in Northeastern Australia (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1847).

7 Leichhardt, Letters: Leichhardt to Lynd, 7 August 1843, 666; Leichhardt to his mother, 27 August 1843, 671; and Leichhardt to Lynd, 9 January 1844, 708.


9 Ludwig Leichhardt to his mother, 27 August 1843, in Leichhardt, Letters, 671.

10 Petrie, Tom Petrie's Reminiscences, p 19. See also Doman and C Ryde, 41.


12 Praed, My Australian Girlhood, 54-62; Mrs Campbell Praed, Australian Life: Black and White (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885), 50-65. For a study of the Hornet Bank massacre, and an analysis of the accounts of it by Rosa Praed and her father, Thomas Lodge Murray-Prior, see Gordon Reid, A Nest of Hornets: The Massacre of the Fraser Family at Hornet Bank Station, Central Queensland, 1857, and Related Events (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1982). Reid is highly critical of Praed's inaccurate accounts of the massacre. See also Patricia Clarke, Rosa! Rosa! A Life of Rosa Praed, Novelist and Spiritualist (Carlton South, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1999), 16-19.

13 In Tom Petrie's Reminiscences, 252, Constance Petrie writes: 'The blacks had a strange idea about that same blindness - they declared that the spirit of the mountain [Beewarr] had caused it in order that Mr Petrie would be for ever afterwards unable to see his way up again'. See also Doman and C Ryde, 51.

14 Praed, My Australian Girlhood, 45-46.


16 Praed, My Australian Girlhood, 9-11.

17 Praed, My Australian Girlhood, 27.


20 Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, 2nd ed (London, 1759), Part I, Section VII, 78.
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29 Rosa Praed (Mrs Campbell Praed), *Outlaw and Lawmaker* (1893; London: Pandora, 1987), 278.
34 Walter Hill (1820-1904) was the first Superintendent of the Brisbane Botanic Gardens, appointed in 1855, retired in 1881. He made an important contribution to the development of agriculture and horticulture in Queensland with his pioneering efforts to find native plants and introduce exotics. He grew the first sugar cane in the Gardens in 1862, distributed more than 50,000 cuttings of cane, coffee, grapes, ginger, tobacco and other crops, and introduced the jacaranda, poinciana, mango, tamarind and pecan trees to Queensland. He was the author of the catalogue, *Botanic Gardens, Brisbane: A Collection of Economic and Other Plants*, printed for the Melbourne Exhibition of 1880.
35 An extant example is the alternating planting of bunyas and cottonwood trees around the perimeter of the Graceville Memorial Park.
37 Moynihan, *Feast of the Bunya*, 59.
38 Moynihan, *Feast of the Bunya*, 13, 14.
40 Moynihan, *Feast of the Bunya*, 23.
41 'The Bunyip of Wendouree and Other Poems by Cornelius Moynihan' (Brisbane, 1910). Typescript in Fryer Memorial Library, University of Queensland.
43 Connolly, 173.
44 Connolly, 172.
45 Connolly, 488.
46 Connolly, 488.