

Narrating Colonial Queensland: Francis Adams, Frank Jardine and ‘The Red Snake’

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In 1949, Clive Turnbull remarked that *Australian Life* (1892), a collection of short stories by Francis Adams, ‘is a book that deserves to be resurrected’. While two of the radical English writer’s novels have been republished over the last three decades, *Australian Life* — which Turnbull regarded as ‘perhaps the most noteworthy’ of Adams’ works of fiction — has not been resurrected either in print or online, and is accessible only in rare book libraries.¹ Republication here in *Queensland Review* of the original version of Adams’ short story ‘The Red Snake’, which appeared first in the *Boomerang* in 1888 and was later revised for *Australian Life*, may help to renew interest in Francis Adams’ carefully crafted but disturbing narratives of life in the Australian colonies in the 1880s.

Francis Adams (1862–93) first published ‘The Red Snake’ in the Christmas edition of the Brisbane *Boomerang* on 24 December 1888.² Adams lived in Brisbane on and off for about four years in the late 1880s, where he collaborated closely with the labour activist and Utopian William Lane, contributing frequently to Lane’s periodicals, the *Boomerang* and the *Worker*. During this period, he also published in the Sydney *Bulletin*, the Brisbane *Courier* and the *Queenslander*. When he returned to his native England in 1890 after six years in Australia, Adams selected a number of his short stories for inclusion in the collection *Australian Life*, which was published by Chapman and Hall in London in 1892. The book was divided into two sections, ‘Along the Coast’ and ‘Up-Country’, each of which begins with a chilling story about the massacre of Aboriginals: ‘The Red Snake’ and ‘Long Forster’ respectively.³ Adams’ careful selection, arrangement and revision of his stories enable *Australian Life* to work effectively as a retrospective collection for an English audience, but it is illuminating to look at the original versions in their Australian context.

For *Australian Life*, Adams revised the text of ‘The Red Snake’ in small but significant ways, presumably using the principle he adopted in another retrospective collection, *The Australians: A Social Sketch* (1893): ‘I have made any alterations, omissions, or additions which seemed in any way advantageous.’⁴ Some typographical errors in the *Christmas Boomerang* version of ‘The Red Snake’

are corrected in the later version, but other errors are introduced. Many of Adams' changes, however, have the purpose of rendering the *Australian Life* version of 'The Red Snake' accessible to a broader public than the almost exclusively Queensland-based readership of the *Boomerang*. The edition published below restores the original, more explicitly Queensland references, while at the same time incorporating 'advantageous' readings from *Australian Life*. For the purposes of a full comparison, all variant readings are recorded in the endnotes, along with explanatory material. The two illustrations that accompanied the *Boomerang* text are also reproduced.

The frame story of 'The Red Snake' is set in Brisbane, and records a very recent experience of the unnamed first-person narrator. Following a chance encounter with his friend Power on George Street 'last Monday', the narrator accepts an invitation to meet a member of the 'old original colonial school' at the North Quay home of Power and his 'mate' Carlyle the following evening — which is Christmas Day. However, readers of the Christmas 1888 issue of the *Boomerang* were not to be treated to a story of goodwill to all men. The interweaving of a tale within a tale translates the reader back and forth between a comfortable Brisbane veranda and the barely subdued far northern extremity of the colony, where Edenic beauty coexists with barbarous cruelty. The complexity of the narration — which, as Meg Tasker has observed, foreshadows the work of Conrad⁵ — creates an atmosphere of moral ambiguity around the colonial experience and its relationship to modernity. This effect can only have been compounded for *Boomerang* readers by the story's deliberate, even provocative, references to actual people and places.

Like the tubercular, chronically impecunious Adams himself, the framing narrator of 'The Red Snake' is 'a poor devil of a journalist, broken down with desperate work and disease'. A reference to his authorship of a novel entitled *Madeline Brown* invites the reader to identify the narrator with Adams himself, for in 1887 he had achieved some notoriety with the publication of a sensational murder mystery, *Madeline Brown's Murderer*.⁶ In the *Australian Life* version of 'The Red Snake', however, the narrator is distanced from Adams: now named Acheson (who is also the narrator of two other stories in *Australian Life*),⁷ he is the author of *Maud Harcourt*. In both versions of 'The Red Snake', the narrator is still grieving for 'a dead girl who had passed from a small happy home that she had left desolate to lie in the grassy earth under the shadow of the city's western hills'. Although Adams' own marriage to Helen Uttley had not been unequivocally happy, the dead girl is suggestive of Helen, who died in July 1886, a month after giving birth to their son Leith, who also died the following November: mother and son are buried together in Toowong cemetery, literally 'under the shadow of the city's western hills'.⁸ On Christmas Day 1886, Adams had probably felt as 'wretched' as the narrator of this story published at Christmas time two years later.

The story begins propitiously enough, as the framing narrator recounts in flashback an idyllic voyage by steamer along the Queensland coast to Port Darwin. (In 1887, Adams had made this journey himself, *en route* to China and Japan.) The narrator recalls the days spent 'steaming at full-speed inside the Barrier Reef' and reading Swinburne as 'one long dream of balmy loveliness' which lulled his

‘overworked, sick, fevered personality into a state of mild and optimistic rapture’. Early one morning, as the ship sailed through a narrow passage, the narrator experienced an epiphany in which opposites met, maintained their separate identities, but complemented and completed each other to form a greater whole: ‘Then in a moment I saw the perfection of the dual beauty, marine and terrestrial, their kiss and marriage clasp.’ This vision of repose, wholeness and transparency is strongly evocative of the qualities that Walter Pater ascribed to ‘Dorian’ culture, and which, anticipating Friedrich Nietzsche, he attributed to the influence of Apollo — ‘rational, chastened, debonair, with his unbroken daylight’.⁹ Adams’ idyllic scene also includes elements which, in Pater’s terms, were chthonian or Dionysian — ‘dark-green mangroves’, ‘dense tropical foliage’ and ‘shadow’. The contrast between transparency and opacity reinforces the dialect tension implicit in the image of land and sea as parted lovers coming together in a ‘marriage clasp’.¹⁰

Prompted by Power, the narrator retrieves a vague memory that the second officer on the steamer had pointed out the home of Frank Melvil, but that — transfixed by thoughts of what life would be like in this ‘Eden of bland repose’ (a phrase from Poe)¹¹ — he ‘did not regard’ what was said about ‘the man and the place’. As the story unfolds, however, the chthonic dimensions of ‘the man and the place’ unsettle and eventually displace the sunny, transparent, prelapsarian qualities of the narrator’s initial impression.

Frank Melvil would have been instantly recognisable to readers of the *Boomerang* — though not by the later, predominantly English, readers of *Australian Life* — as based on Francis Lascelles (Frank) Jardine (1841–1919). Jardine’s home at Somerset overlooked Albany Passage, the main shipping route that hugged the tip of Cape York Peninsula, and Albany Island. In ‘The Red Snake’, ‘Maidenhair Passage’ is located at ‘the point where the Great Barrier Reef comes in closest to the coast’, with Melvil’s home and ‘pearl-shell fishery station’ on the left and an island on the right. While apparently concealing with false names, Adams in fact reveals the identity of Melvil of Maidenhair Passage by this highly specific description. (Frank Jardine later made another literary appearance: in *Lady Bridget in the Never Never Land* [1915], Rosa Praed — whose sister Lizzie was married to Frank’s youngest brother, John Robert Jardine — drew on him in her depiction of Colin McKeith, who scores his gun barrel with a notch for every ‘black-fellow’ he has killed.)¹² I have no evidence that Adams actually met Jardine, but a likely source of his information on the man from the far north was the Brisbane *Courier* journalist and former editor of the Cooktown *Herald*, Reginald Spencer Browne. A friend and literary admirer of Adams, Spencer Browne is also almost certainly the source of Adams’ reference to the Cape Bedford massacre of 1879 in ‘The Red Snake’.¹³

Like the fictional Melvil, Frank Jardine became in effect a law unto himself in northernmost Queensland. Although not (as Melvil is reputed to be) the heir to a baronetcy, Frank Jardine was the grandson of Sir Alexander Jardine of Applegirth, Sixth Baronet, and the nephew of naturalist Sir William Jardine, Seventh Baronet. Frank’s father, John Jardine, had migrated to New South Wales in 1840, and held a number of government appointments before being made Police Magistrate at

Somerset, at the tip of Cape York Peninsula, in 1864. In 1865, 22-year-old Frank Jardine, his brother Alexander and eight others drove a mob of cattle overland to Somerset, a remarkable feat which made them heroes in colonial Queensland: they were elected Fellows of the Royal Geographical Society and received the Society's Murchison Grant, and the journals of the expedition were quickly published.¹⁴ The young Frank Jardine established himself on a cattle station near Somerset in 1866. In 1868, he succeeded his father as Police Magistrate, but was removed from the post in 1875 after repeated complaints about his cruel treatment of Aborigines, and his inability to distinguish between personal and government business. (In 'The Red Snake', the narrator pointedly refers to a parallel event in Melvil's life: 'I've an idea I've heard that he was very cruel to the blacks. Wasn't he a police-magistrate, or something, and was dismissed for going on a massacring party?') Just three years later, however, the government station was moved to Thursday Island, and Jardine again had free rein at Somerset. He used Malays and Samoans to run his pearling and copra businesses, and tyrannised the local Aboriginal people, who reputedly referred to him as 'Devil Man'. Adams' Melvil 'lives alone up there with blacks and kanakas. He's South Sea Islanders for his pearl-shell boats, and a mob of blacks to look after the sheep or work about the house.' Melvil too oppresses the local Aborigines, dispensing summary justice out of the barrel of his gun, and even passing himself off as a god.

In 1873, Jardine married Sana Solia, the seventeen-year-old niece of the King of Samoa. They had two sons and two daughters, and the marriage endured until Jardine's death from leprosy in 1919. Although Power asserts that Melvil 'doesn't think enough of the common domestic civilised female to get married' — thereby rendering invisible the inter-racial domestic unions that were common on the frontier — Melvil speaks at length about his love for an Aboriginal woman, Nini, with whom he had a son. Indeed, it is Power's reference to Nini that prompts Melvil's tale. The paradox of Melvil's loving tenderness in certain situations, especially his relationship with Nini, and his apparently limitless capacity for barbaric cruelty in others is an important theme of 'The Red Snake'.

Although he is based on a real person, Melvil is also of interest to Adams as a colonial 'type', just as the narrator himself — while clearly drawing on Adams' own character, views and life experiences — represents a particular type of modern cosmopolitan intellectual. In 'The Red Snake', the narrator is initially hostile to Melvil and the 'type' he represents:

'Do you know,' I said, 'I've a bit of a prejudice against these civilised people who go back into barbarism and loll away life there. I own our civilisation is a frightful failure, of course, but oughtn't we, who see this, to stop and try and make it better, not slither away and live like animals?'

However, when the two men meet at the home of Power and Carlyle late on Christmas Day, Melvil — who cuts an attractive figure with his 'fine' face, 'full of suppressed and quiet force' — exerts a seductive charm over the younger man.

The aristocratic Melvil is educated and highly intelligent. Despite his cynical assertion that reading ‘has been the cause of almost all the trouble and mischief in the world’, he nonetheless flatteringly informs the narrator that ‘I took up your book by chance and did not put it down until I had finished it. It is all false and diseased, the wretched, civilised life you draw there, but you draw it truly.’ Perceptively, he puts his finger on the intellectual and moral crisis faced by the young writer, suggesting that the ‘weary search for a new civilisation and a new life which goads the feverish modern man from city to city, from land to land’ is doomed to failure. Melvil’s scathing analysis of the state of contemporary civilisation is compelling, and the narrator makes no attempt to rebut it:

‘What is civilisation but pretence? Every social relation is a fraud. The very basis of it all — clothing — is one gigantic lie. For me, I prefer reality. A man’s soul should be in his body, not in his clothes. This sickly, barbarous, “civilised” hypocrisy disgusts me. Give us healthy, primal relations. They say we have sprung from apes, and certainly I think that we are going back to them. I,’ he proceeded in the same quiet tones, ‘do not think often of this. I think very little. But when I come down here into this wretched, dirty, stupid town I notice it.’

When Melvil reveals that Nini and their child had been spared ‘just before I came down’, the narrator (who has also recently lost the woman he loved) finds himself ‘curiously stirred’ and entirely receptive to the influence of the older man. ‘Lying in the lounge’ on the verandah, ‘quite in the dark’, he succumbs to the ‘genuine pleasure’ of listening to Melvil’s ‘musical voice’ — the ‘slow cadences’ of which ‘fell like a sound of deep running water’ — interwoven with a plaintive melody played on the piano and sung by a young woman. He is overwhelmed by emotion, and close to tears:

The dual lines of thought, suggested by his wonderful manner of telling all this and by the notes of the piano, proceeded unbrokenly as the girl came back to the original melody and played it with a lingering passion that made me seem ready to sob and weep.

The homoeroticism implicit in the opening of the story, with its evocations of Pater, Swinburne and Poe, erupts again as the narrator recounts his reception of Melvil’s tale. The domestic arrangements of Power and his “‘mate” [sic] Carlyle’ are highly suggestive, and Adams may well have had in mind the example of Oscar Wilde and artist Frank Miles, in whose circle he had moved in London in the early 1880s. (Earlier in 1888, Adams had written in the *Boomerang* that Wilde and Miles’ bachelor ‘at homes’ were ‘about the most amusing things in their way in all London’.)¹⁵ In the seductively relaxing environment of the Brisbane bachelors’ dark veranda, the framing narrator surrenders himself to the counterposed influences of masculine experience and female innocence. These ‘dual lines of thought’, together with the dualistic imagery of light and dark, re-evoked the dialectic implicit in the story’s opening scene, but the ‘kiss and marriage

clasp' achieved in the 'dual beauty' of land and sea — a vision of androgynous 'perfection' — here remains elusive.

When Melvil likens his love of Nini to the love of the Emperor Hadrian for the young Antinous, the analogy further destabilises sexual and gender boundaries by elevating the relationship between an older and a younger man to the ideal form of love. The young narrator is eagerly receptive to the implications of Melvil's classical reference: 'I felt as I suppose someone would do who had vivified the statue of a man of the old Pagan civilisations and was listening as it spoke.' Here, Adams surely has in mind Pater's writings on classical sculpture. According to Pater, the 'unexpressed pulsation of sensuous life' is 'still fervent in the relics of plastic art':

Filled as our culture is with the classical spirit, we can hardly imagine how deeply the human mind was moved, when, at the Renaissance, in the midst of a frozen world, the buried fire of ancient art rose up from under the soil.

The appreciation of classical sculpture is explicitly linked by Pater to homoeroticism in his analysis of Winckelmann, whose 'romantic, fervent friendships with young men ... perfected his reconciliation to the spirit of Greek sculpture'.¹⁶ And such indeed is the tendency of the narrator's thoughts as he recalls his memory of,

hours spent in the cool and shadowy Louvre gallery in Paris before the supreme bust of the Bithynian, the wonderful record of his mysterious, voluptuous, mocking beauty, rising divinely derisive through suffering and agony and the passion and grief of others.

After drowning in the Nile, the Bithynian-born Antinous (c. 110–130 AD) was deified by the grief-stricken Hadrian (76–138 AD) and lived on in art as an eternal youth. The 'supreme bust of the Bithynian' in the Louvre is probably the so-called 'Antinous of Ecouen', the sensuous and provocative androgyny of which is captured in the phrase 'mysterious, voluptuous, mocking beauty'.¹⁷

The memory of his fascination with the androgynous Antinous leads the narrator seamlessly back to the feminine strand in the 'dual lines of thought':

And all the while there were the notes of the piano, the sweet and simple musical reverie of the white-clad girl with her upraised face in the light of the candles — the girl come back for this one hour, in despite of fate, from her bed in the grassy earth under the shadow of the city's western hills.

The more the narrator becomes enthralled by Melvil's dominant masculinity, the more he aligns his own subjectivity with the passive, the innocent and the feminine. The music played and sung by the 'white-clad girl' — who is conflated in the narrator's imagination with the dead 'girl come back for this one hour' — carries the absent feminine into the home of Power and Carlyle, where it metaphorically

encodes the narrator's feminised desire. Just as the girl essays the notes tentatively and 'unskilfully' at first, but becomes more confident and passionate during the course of the evening, so the narrator's erotic response to the older man is tentative at first, but increasingly clear and insistent.

Melvil's tale is a Dionysian account of penetration and possession. Not content with seizing their land, Melvil oppresses those he has dispossessed and even seeks to control their religious mysteries. Even his gaze is penetrating: he vaunts his 'invariable discovery of any [Aboriginals] who had stolen or speared my animals' by simply by looking them in the eye. Then, in the guise of Biame, the god who strikes, he shoots the offender:

'I would say to the young men: "I am Biame, the figure of the man!" Then to the others I would add, raising my voice and speaking to each according to his grade: "Know me in the whirl of the boomerang! Know me in the rush and stab of the spear! Know me in the irresistible flash of the lightning! I am Biame. I slay you!" With that I would shoot the man right through the heart. It was because I knew their language and religion and social laws so well that I could bring new ideas of force and terror into them.'

This story is the usual farrago of colonial speculations and fantasies about Dreaming stories and initiation rites, and forms part of a long tradition of white men passing themselves off as gods. Adams appears to have had no local knowledge of the religious practices of Aborigines on Cape York, but rather to have used sources about the Gamilaraay- and Wiradhuri-speaking peoples for whom Baiame (also variously transliterated as 'Biame' or Byamee)¹⁸ Adams' references here to Aboriginal culture are incidental; their primary purpose is to lend a veneer of local colour to his portrait of the coloniser.

Early in 'The Red Snake', Power gives a disingenuous defence of whites who are accused of massacring Aborigines: 'a man needn't be quite a fiend because he'll shoot blacks when his blood's up'. He continues: 'Frank Melvil's a very decent fellow, take him all around, and kind-hearted too, and wouldn't hurt a fly unnecessarily.' Melvil himself, however, does not take refuge in such hypocrisy: 'From time to time, of course, I had had to shoot or poison some [of the 'blacks'], but not of late years. They were afraid of me.' His power over life and death secure, Melvil devotes himself to discovering the meaning of the sacred carvings and secret rites of the Aborigines. One night, he secretly watches a young warrior carving a snake into the rocks above the bora ground: 'He had been out there alone, fasting for days and nights, till the divine enthusiasm had come upon him, and now he was cutting out a sacred figure.' This man — the so-called Red Snake, whose very name alludes to the challenge he represents to Melvil's masculinity — plans to strike back and kill the false Biame in a surprise dawn raid. Melvil, despite his much-vaunted penetrative powers, is only alerted to the plot by the defection from the tribe of the 'young lubra' Nini. Confessing her love for Melvil — who cannot recall ever having seen her before — she offers herself to him regardless of the consequences: 'though she should be consumed, it

would be happiness'. Although Melvil has killed her only brother just two months before, and she is promised in marriage to the Red Snake, Nini is 'enthralled' by the men's mysteries and is drawn to Melvil because she believes that he is truly the god Biame, 'the whirl of the boomerang, the rush and stab of the spear, the irresistible flash of the lightning'. Thus the first act in Melvil's humiliation of his rival is his unwitting sexual conquest of Nini — which is mirrored in the frame narrative by the narrator's capitulation to Melvil.

Forewarned by Nini, Melvil plans and executes a single-handed counter-attack, in which he kills the Red Snake's fourteen accomplices. He spares the Red Snake from the bloodbath in order to emasculate him through a cruel, humiliating and lingering death: he takes his defeated rival to the bora ground and suspends him from a coolabah tree to be devoured alive in Dionysian fashion by dingoes. But the Red Snake, defiant even in defeat, has the final word, prophetically promising revenge. While this speech might be read as an acknowledgment by Adams of the importance of the land to Aboriginal people, he is more likely to have intended it as a variation on the Dionysian theme of the cyclical recurrence of destruction and rebirth:

Take all, but not yet without some vengeance-gift in return. The new Biame shall give of his own. The life that comes from him shall he give, and the love that shall comfort him, and then he shall rule and destroy as he will, till the hour of torment and impotence shall take hold of him also. Behold, before the black men were here the sacred land was here, and before the old Biame it was here, and after the white men are gone and after the new Biame is gone, it shall be here.

Melvil makes no reply, but as he rides off to lay out the fourteen dead warriors 'for their friends to come and see', he casts one last look back at the Red Snake: 'The dingoes were all round him, lolling their tongues out, grumbling and whining impatiently, glaring with their hollow, hungry eyes, working up their courage to attack and devour him.'

During Melvil's account of this final act in the subjugation of his rival, the passionate song of the young girl becomes increasingly insistent. As victor and vanquished look up at the rock with the carving of the red snake leaping at the flash of lightning, the words of the singer (*'The birds singing gaily that came at my call'*) become 'clear and distinct' for the first time and the 'plaintive melody whose divinity has not been utterly discrowned by even vulgar and senseless abuse' is identified as 'Home Sweet Home'. The words 'Home, home, sweet, sweet home!' are twice repeated and then, as the melody comes, so does the narrator. Overwhelmed by an orgasmic 'wild dark whirling' which coalesces into the form of 'a long thin snake', he loses consciousness:

'Home, home, sweet, sweet home!' And then, as the melody came, there came also a wild dark whirling of everything — waving trees and grass under dusky hills, snatches of birds' song and shouts and merry calls of children splashing in sunny shallows; wreathing mist

and the divine derision of a rising face; towering black, flat rocks, sunlit and cut with temple figures of reptile and natural faces; a girl with great deep, dark, liquid eyes, full of love, gazing piteously, and then with grey eyes and a lighter face smiling sadly and essaying the clear notes her young virginal voice. Then all grew confused, whirling, thudding terribly like a train at full speed, convoluting and extending itself in mid-air like a long thin snake, and whirled away into the rushing darkness and silence.

The ‘dual lines of thought’ — which encapsulate the story’s preoccupation with dialectics of light and dark, female and male, passivity and dominance, innocence and experience — not only fail to produce the transcendent ‘perfection of the dual beauty’ achieved in the opening scene, but atomise and collide with each other in a chaotic, involuntary yielding to Melvil. In stark contrast to the scene of transparent light and equilibrium of opposites that opens the story, the conclusion collapses the distinctions and categories that have underpinned the text: the spontaneous vision of androgynous cohesion of the ‘marriage clasp’ is inverted here into an equally powerful revelation of disintegration and loss of self. The narrator’s collapse brings together the two main plot lines of the text — Melvil’s account of the massacre and the narrator’s interior journey of self-discovery as he listens to the account — and also abruptly ends the congenial Christmas gathering at the home of Power and Carlyle. In a short coda, a semblance of order is restored. The narrator recovers consciousness, and tactfully blames the heat and overwork for his collapse. Only the final two sentences offer a brief, ambiguous gloss on the story: ‘Power’s face was there and Melvil’s, and they were both very kind. Melvil’s was even tender.’ Melvil the mass murderer is again the man who ‘wouldn’t hurt a fly unnecessarily’: like Pater’s Dionysus, he is ‘twofold’, a ‘Doppelgänger’.¹⁹

‘The Red Snake’ functions as a form of thought experiment: like many of Adams’ short stories, it quite closely resembles the fictional ‘dialogues’ on social issues that he published in his critical commentaries. Adams had been worrying away at the question of colonial violence for some time. In May 1888, he had published ‘Tony Forster’ which, as mentioned above, was republished as ‘Long Forster’ to open the ‘Up-Country’ section of *Australian Life*. In a sentiment echoed by Power in ‘The Red Snake’, Forster (like Melvil) is described by a mate as ‘about the softest-hearted cuss ever lived. He wouldn’t hurt a fly.’ But when his friend Jimmy Jackson is speared, Forster drives thirteen Aborigines into a cave and kills them one by one:

None of ’em made a sound, except a low sorter whimperin’ like blind pups. I caught hold of one by the neck with my hand and lugged him out and smashed his skull in with a blow of the tommyhawk. Then I reached in and got hold of another. It was a gin, and I gripped her by the leg and pulled her out, and ’bout broke her head off with a crack on the back of the neck. Then I laid hold on another one and smashed his skull in like the first one. And all the while I was reachin’ in and pullin’ ’em out they never made a sound, but kept up

that sorter whimperin' like pups when the mother's gone. I killed the whole lot. There was thirteen of 'um. I counted.

As he recounts the massacre, Forster becomes 'like a gigantic python. His eyes glared, his lips drew back from his bristling teeth.'²⁰ But when he speaks of his dead mate Jimmy, tears stream down his face and his body shakes with sobs. The story is chilling and repulsive but, unlike Melvil, Forster is a simple man of little education, who reacts in the heat of the moment to the murder of a mate: for Adams, the thought experiment still did not go far enough.

Melvil, on the other hand, is a man of education and sensibility, who initially appears to the narrator to have gone back to 'barbarism'. However, Melvil's contempt for 'sickly, barbarous, "civilised" hypocrisy' and his preference for 'reality' over 'pretence' not only contribute to his seduction of the narrator of 'The Red Snake'; they are also remarkably close to Adams' own analysis of Australian life in his non-fiction work *The Australians*, where he argues that even the 'horrible' aspects of the colonial experience are contributing to the emergence of a modern society unconstrained by the hypocrisy of the old world:

There are cruel features in the life — there are horrible features in it; but even in these there is an intensity, a directness, and a reality, which lift them, in my opinion, right above the eternally hideous and hypocritic vice of all the phases of our so-called 'Civilisation'.²¹

Elsewhere, too, Adams extolled the importance of powerful emotions like hatred in creating a new social order: in 1889, for instance, he wrote to William Michael Rossetti that 'With hate all things are possible',²² and his Christ in 'The Mass of Christ' (1893) lashes the rich and the priests with his 'cry / Of hate and retribution'.²³ The theme of scourging hatred is perhaps most extensively developed in the collection of revolutionary verse, *Songs of the Army of the Night* (1887), which contains what Adams describes in the Preface as several 'fierce ... even bloodthirsty' poems about labour reform.²⁴ Indeed, so incendiary were some of the verses that in the English editions of *Songs* Adams stated that he had 'withdrawn' some lines because he recognised 'the difference of freedom of speech in a caste and cant-ruled country like England and in a country like Australia, which is comparatively free from either cant or caste'.²⁵

At the same time, Adams had a strong sense that the anger he experienced was a form of righteous wrath — that it was not innate to his character, but rather a response to the hypocrisy of his era and its resistance to reform. In the Preface to *Songs of the Army of the Night*, he describes himself as 'one who was born and bred a member of the dominant class and whose chief care and joy in life was in the pursuit of a culture which draws back instinctively from the violent and terrible', but who has been impelled towards militancy by the failures of that culture: 'I will arraign my country and my day, because their iniquity would not let me follow out the laws of my nature which were for luminosity and quiet, for the wide and genial view, but made me "take arms against a sea of troubles" hoping only too often "by opposing to end them"'.²⁶ The urgency probably derives from

Adams' knowledge that his life would be short (he died by his own hand, in the end stage of tuberculosis, three weeks before his 31st birthday). 'The Red Snake' dramatises a similar dilemma faced by its 'overworked, sick, feverous' narrator, whose rapturous response to the idyllic opening scene is that of a nature attracted to 'luminosity and quiet' and 'the wide and genial view'. It is a measure of the narrator's cultural disillusionment that he succumbs — if only for the space of an evening — to the dangerous appeal of Melvil, a man who ultimately stands as a warning that freedom from the constraints of 'the wretched, civilised life' might be a cure that is worse than the disease.

Francis Adams' 'The Red Snake' is an enigmatic text. The original version, published in the *Christmas Boomerang* in 1888, makes unequivocal references to local people, places and events. In particular, it offers in Frank Melvil, a member of the 'old original colonial school', a thinly veiled representation of the infamous Frank Jardine of Somerset on Cape York Peninsula. However, Adams uses these 'real-life' allusions also as a starting point for an exploration of larger questions of civilisation and modernity. The story recounts a brutal massacre, but makes no direct judgment of Melvil's actions. There is a pervasive motif of homoerotic attraction, but the text's signification of such desire is evasive in the manner of other *fin de siècle* texts. Technically, the story is innovative in the complexity of its first-person narration, its interest in the fleeting moment, its anticipation of 'stream of consciousness' and its lack of closure. 'The Red Snake' holds up a mirror to colonial Queensland, but is also worth resurrecting as a fine early example of the modern short story.

Notes

- 1 Clive Turnbull, *These Tears of Fire: The Story of Francis Adams* (Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, [1949]), 45, 44. Francis Adams, *Australian Life* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1892). The republished novels are Francis Adams, *John Webb's End: Australian Bush Life* (London: Eden, Remington: 1891; republished Canberra: Mulini Press, 1995); and Francis Adams, *Madeline Brown's Murderer* (Melbourne: Kemp & Boyce, [1887]), republished as *The Murder of Madeline Brown* (Melbourne: Text, 2000).
- 2 Francis Adams, 'The Red Snake', *The Christmas Boomerang*, 24 December 1888: 17–18.
- 3 Adams, 'The Red Snake', *Australian Life*: 3–24; Adams, "'Long Forster'", *Australian Life*: 137–47. 'Long Forster' was originally published under the pseudonym 'Proteus' as 'Tony Forster' in *The Boomerang*, 5 May 1888: 11.
- 4 Francis Adams, *The Australians: A Social Sketch* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893), n.p.
- 5 Meg Tasker, *'Struggle and Storm': The Life and Death of Francis Adams* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 67.
- 6 Adams, *Madeline Brown's Murderer*.
- 7 In *Australian Life*, Acheson also narrates 'Long Forster' (137–47) and 'The Hut by the Tanks' (177–91). The character Power from 'The Red Snake' also appears in 'A Souvenir of Suakim' (94–102).
- 8 See Tasker, *'Struggle and Storm'*, 67.
- 9 Walter Pater, 'Winckelmann', *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1910), 204. In 'Diaphaneité', an essay read to a circle of intimates at Oxford in 1864 but not published until 1895, Pater makes it clear that qualities such 'transparency', 'wholeness'

- and 'clear crystal nature' refer specifically to 'some unworldly types of character', his coded reference to androgynous men. See Walter Pater, 'Diaphaneité', *Miscellaneous Essays: A Series of Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1895), 247–54. Key passages and concepts from 'Diaphaneité' recur in Pater's published works, such as 'Winckelmann', which was first published in the *Westminster Review* in January 1867, and collected in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1873). Like Nietzsche, Pater drew heavily on Karl Otfried Müller, *Die Dorier* (1824), which was first published in English as C.O. Müller, *The History and Antiquities of the Doric Race*, trans. Henry Tufness and George Cornewall Lewis, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1830).
- 10 Pater discussed the chthonic, vegetative qualities of Dionysus — in contrast to Apollo — in 'A Study of Dionysus' in the *Fortnightly Review*, December 1876; it was reprinted in *Greek Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1873). See Walter Pater, *Greek Studies: A Series of Essays*, 1895 (London: Macmillan, 1910), 9–52. Bridgewater argues that Pater drew on unpublished work by Gerard Manley Hopkins for his distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian: see Patrick Bridgewater, *Nietzsche in Anglosaxony: A Study of Nietzsche's Impact on English and American Literature* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1972), 27–28.
 - 11 Edgar Allan Poe, 'To F...', *The Raven and Other Poems*, 1845 (London: Wiley and Putnam, 1846), 25.
 - 12 Mrs Campbell Praed, *Lady Bridget in the Never-Never Land*, 1915 (London: Pandora, 1987), 62.
 - 13 Spencer Browne, editor of the Cooktown *Herald* at the time, was an eyewitness to some of the events surrounding the massacre. See Major-General Spencer Browne, *A Journalist's Memories* (Brisbane: The Read Press, 1927), 27. See Tasker, 'Struggle and Storm', 78–79 for a letter from Francis Adams to James Brunton Stephens (February 1887), in which Adams reports Spencer Browne's high opinion of his work.
 - 14 *Narrative of the Overland Expedition of the Messrs. Jardine from Rockhampton to Cape York, Northern Queensland, Compiled from the Journals of the Brothers, and Edited by Frederick J. Byerley* (Brisbane: J.W. Buxton, 1867). See also A.J. Richardson, *Private Journal of the Surveyor attached to Messrs. Frank and Alexander Jardine's Overland Expedition to Cape York* (Brisbane: G. Wight, [1867]).
 - 15 Frances Adams, 'Frank Miles', *Boomerang*, 5 May 1888: 9.
 - 16 Pater, 'Winckelmann', *The Renaissance*, 184.
 - 17 The Louvre bust of Antinous is the 'Antinous of Ecoeu' (Accession number Ma 1082 [MR 413], presented to the Louvre in 1793), an eighteenth century copy of an original found at Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli. The Louvre also holds the 'Antinous Mondragone' (Accession number Ma 1205 [MR 412], purchased by Napoleon for the Louvre in 1807), in original Roman marble from c. 130AD. It is not a true bust, but the head of a lost colossal 5–6 metre statue. Self-consciously Greek in style, it was much admired by Winckelmann.
 - 18 In his work on the Gamilaraay (Kamilaroi) language, Presbyterian missionary William Ridley translated 'baiame' as 'God', and the notion that a deity corresponding to the Christian God existed universally throughout Aboriginal Australia was later popularised. Ridley published *Kamilaroi, Dippil, and Turrubul: Languages Spoken by Australian Aborigines* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1866), revised and enlarged as *Kamilaroi, and Other Australian Languages* (Sydney: Thomas Richards, Govt. Printer, 1875). See also H.M. Carey, 'The Land of Byamee: K. Langloh Parker, David Unaipon, and Popular Aboriginality in the Assimilation Era' in *Journal of Religious History* 22(2) (1998): 200–218.
 - 19 Pater, 'A Study of Dionysus', *Greek Studies* (1910), 44.
 - 20 Adams, 'Long Forster', *Australian Life*: 138, 146, 145.
 - 21 Adams, *The Australians*, 154.
 - 22 Letter from Adams to W.M. Rossetti, 7 Nov 1889, quoted by Tasker, 'Struggle and Storm', 47. Adams was referring in the letter to his involvement in the London labour movement in the early 1880s.

- 23 Adams, 'The Mass of Christ', *The Bulletin*, 28 October 1893: 21.
- 24 Adams, Preface, *Songs of the Army of the Night* (Sydney: Federal Steam Printing and Binding Works, 1888), 2.
- 25 Adams, *Songs of the Army of the Night* (London: Vizetelly, 1890), n.p. The note was also included in subsequent English editions.
- 26 Adams, Preface, *Songs of the Army of the Night* (1888), 2.

