

Introduction to *Tom Hurstbourne or A Squatter's Life*

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My first reaction on reading *Tom Hurstbourne or A Squatter's Life* was surprise. When I first met them, the novel's editors, Gerard Benjamin and Gloria Grant had been very forthcoming about how they came by the manuscript – an intriguing saga in itself. However (and I hope they don't mind me saying this), I remember that they were deliberately a bit cagey about what the book was like as a work of fiction. What little they did say led me to expect something like a pioneering saga, with a straightforward life-narrative, probably beginning with the hero's childhood in the Old Country, then moving quickly to the Australian outback where the hero would undergo a series of challenges, hardships and adventures, suffering a bit along the way but emerging more or less triumphant at the end, sometimes with a wife, children and extensive landholdings. Quite a few Australian novels of this kind were published in the second half of the nineteenth century, and even more in the early decades of the twentieth – books like Miles Franklin's *All That Swagger*, Mary Durack's *Kings in Grass Castles*, Brian Penton's *Landtakers*, Roy Connolly's *Southern Saga*, Jeanie Gunn's *We of the Never Never*, and many others by lesser known authors.

These are worthy and interesting novels in their various ways, but in fact *Tom Hurstbourne* – despite its subtitle, *A Squatter's Life* – isn't very much like any of them. Forty or 50 pages in, it starts to resemble them for a while. Further on, it begins to resemble various other kinds of fiction as well – the bushranger romance, for example, once the character Jack Mason makes his appearance. Elizabeth Webby has remarked on the fact that *Tom Hurstbourne* precedes by some decades the bushranger romances of Rolf Boldrewood and Rosa Praed: like them, John Clavering Wood uses events from the lives of particular bushrangers – in his case, Ben Hall and Frank Gardiner – to flesh out the narrative, and like them he invests the bushranger figure with considerable glamour and charisma. But it also comes to resemble another common nineteenth century genre as well – that of the gothic melodrama, complete with Italian villains, a persecuted maiden, Fanny, and her loyal but powerless brother, the falsely imprisoned George. The novels of Anne Radcliffe and Wilkie Collins make their presence felt here, and Collins

and Dickens provided some elements of the detective story. Some characters seem to have their existence in two fictional genres at the same time: for example, the main villain of the piece, James Wilson, is simultaneously a cold, avaricious and unprincipled lawyer – a version of Tulkinghorn in *Bleak House* – and a tormented Italian avenger, Giacomo Savonaroli, enslaved by the destructive resentment of a ruthless and passionate mother.

Liberally interspersed through all this is another literary genre, perhaps the one Clavering Wood did best, and that is comedy. It is comedy of a fairly broad kind, heavy on the intrinsic humour of foreign and lower-class accents. The funniest characters are to be found in Australia, among the employees at Grange Downs, Tom Hurstbourne's station, which bristles with comic stereotypes – Billy Pintpot, for example, a short and aggressive little Cockney, and Judy Webb, his immensely tall and very plain Irish fiancée. Wood manages to capture Judy's thick Irish brogue on the page more convincingly than most. He also does the humour of intoxication well – another somewhat unfashionable comic genre these days. Here is Billy Pintpot at the end of a long drinking session:

Gradually one by one they went home, one or two the worse for potations, leaving Pintpot alone in his glory, very drunk and busily engaged in enlightening a sack of flour as to the athletic powers of the individual who was alternately hitting and addressing it.

'I ain't a bizzzzzzg 'un, old fellow, and I'm out of training in the bargain, but if you want to go in for a fiver, you know where I'm to be found ... I don't know what your weight is. Mine is six stone two, and if you can fight that weight, why I shall not be far off,' and rolling off the bench, Mr William Pintpot, with the evident intention of making good his word, fell at the foot of the flour bag.

So the novel has obvious affiliations with a number of different nineteenth century fictional genres. Most novels – indeed, most literary works – are shaped by more than one genre, and I don't want to labour the point. But I do think you'll find that the various different 'inputs' are more apparent, more easily identifiable, closer to the surface of the text than we'd find with most authors. And there's no denying that it causes some very surprising inconsistencies – or at least very rapid shifts – in the tone and style of the writing. James Wilson, for example, in keeping with his dual identity as English lawyer and Italian revolutionary, has the disconcerting habit of shifting from plain English into a kind of stilted, stagey archaism ('Dry thy tears, Mother mine') whenever he speaks with his mother, Carlotta, who speaks that way all the time. Here's a longer example of Wilson/Savonaroli:

So it is, and shall be, mother, yet more than our revenge will I attain, for unaided and alone though I be, I shall yet be courted and caressed by the proudest of England's nobles, and the richest of her sons shall be glad to welcome me to their home, and enroll me as a participator in their schemes. And Mother, if thou art the last of one race, then thy child shall found another, whose name shall be as proudly and gloriously known as his mother's.

It's a rich brew. But Elizabeth Webby assures me that such language is quite standard in Victorian melodramatic plays and novels, so we need to make allowances.

What I've been suggesting is that *Tom Hurstbourne* can come across as a bit of a patchwork quilt, in which the half dozen or so distinct types of nineteenth century fiction are stitched together in such a way that the seams are highly visible. There's no doubt that this is a fault in the novel, but it's the kind of fault that is of enormous interest and value to anyone who wants to know how novelists in the past actually went about the task of writing a novel – what materials they'd be likely to draw upon, and what 'strategies', to use a fashionable word, they might use to assemble them. In the case of a young man as widely read in recent and contemporary fiction as Clavering Wood was, the choice of sources and models was very large. I've mentioned the various colonial genres with which he was clearly familiar – the pioneering saga, the bushranger romance, the convict narrative – and I've also touched on the popular melodrama. But he was also deeply interested in British fiction. Chapter 39 contains an interesting and thoughtful debate between Sir James Wilson (in plain-speaking mode) and George Lacey (who I think is Wilson's half-brother, though neither of them knows it at the time). Anyway, the debate – prompted by George's choice of bedtime reading – is about the writing careers of Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens and the popular Irish novelist Charles Lever. Thackeray and Bulwer Lytton are also brought in for comparison and contrast, and the whole discussion ranges quite widely and philosophically for several pages.

I said at the beginning that my first reaction to the novel was one of surprise. This was partly because I expected a pioneering saga, and it turned out to be several other things as well. But it was also because the first three chapters relate it to novels of a different kind than any I've mentioned so far, namely novels that are difficult to get into – but difficult in an interesting and challenging way. It's the great tradition of novels like *Tristram Shandy* and perhaps *Bleak House*, and in Australian literature Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot* and that great unread classic of our literature, *Such is Life* – books that refuse, in a perverse or playful spirit, to yield up the secret of exactly what's going on, or even of what kind of book they are; books that frustrate our desire for an easy read but keep us sufficiently intrigued to persevere with them until our feet finally touch solid narrative ground.

I'm probably slightly exaggerating the bemusing, disorienting effect of these opening chapters, but I was even more aware when I reread the book recently that what we encounter there is not the nativity of the hero but the fussy, gossipy voice of an elderly narrator. Here's how the novel begins:

Truth is stranger than fiction. In the world is more evil than meets the eye; more good. We are more prone to meet the evil than strive to overcome it – so I have thought, have seen – or this work would not have been written. It is a strange tale but a true one: a story of resignation, of virtue, of crime. Many are its lights, many its shadows. I have traced them from the life; the outlines are true, though the colouring be faulty. Many are its scenes and far distant from each other. I have been in all.

Nothing too remarkable there, but what follows for the next three chapters is not the story of Tom Hurstbourne, who is barely mentioned, but the *narrator's* family history, the *narrator's* views on life and love:

In introducing myself as Chasley [*he asks in the second paragraph*], shall I be egotistical? Shall I dwell a while on my own character such as it appears to me? It will give you a foreshadowing of my writing, and perhaps induce you to be lenient to my faults.

What develops from that is a rambling and apparently pointless anecdote about taking a friend's young son to a Shropshire race meeting where they attend a melodrama – described in some detail – and then a circus performance before the racing program gets underway.

To be frank, Mr Chasley (we never find out his first name) is a vain, fussy, gossipy, opinionated old duffer – a kind of cross between Emily Bronte's Lockwood and Jane Austen's Mr Woodhouse (two characters about whom we can be pretty sure the well-read author knew). He also seems as if he might be in love with Tom, which is his main motive for writing his story. This is somewhat speculative, but the analogy with the Biblical David and Jonathan – found here at the end of Chapter 3 – often carries this implication in literature:

And now reader, though I shall still be in spirit with you in the fortunes of those I depicture, yet henceforward the 'I' will disappear. It has already occurred too frequently, but as I love him whose history I write – even as David loved Jonathan in days of old – perchance you will pardon the transgression, for as man loves to dwell on childhood's scenes, even so do I, on those early days that led to my friendship with one whose heart, brave as a lion's, was still guileless as a maiden's.

He does disappear from the narrative until the final chapter, when he returns, as fussy and sentimental as ever, to announce happy endings for all the Hurstbournes. But the thought that I'll end with is that Mr Chasley never really leaves the novel, and that it really is his voice and his personality – with all his love of sentiment, romance, melodrama, beauty and exotic places and people – that dominate the novel throughout, and give it a greater unity and coherence than it might otherwise have had.

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