7. Recollections of Squatting

As Curr’s public service career flourished, he was able to purchase a more comfortable home in St Kilda. From 1875 until his death he resided with his large family at ‘Alma House’ on the north-west corner of Chapel and Argyle Streets. It was an 11-room brick residence, which was valued at £2,300 in 1889. Probate records provide some insight into the nature of Curr’s family life at Alma House; he owned, for example, a piano, a billiard table and a library of 500 books.¹ The financial security Curr regained in the 1860s enabled him to provide his children with a quality education. His eldest son Edward was singled out for overseas tuition by the Jesuits at Namur, Belgium, and at the college of Mondragone, near Rome. Curr did not record the nature of his daughters’ education, but his three younger sons, Justin, Hubert and Ernest, attended Xavier College in Melbourne.²

In his ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ Curr provided a brief but positive account of his wife Margaret: ‘She has been invariably the best of wives, and on looking round I cannot help noticing how few of my friends have been as favoured as myself, in this particular’. It is predictable that Curr would speak favourably of his wife in a memoir dictated to his daughter, but there is no evidence to suggest any tensions in his marriage. He attributed his conjugal happiness to clearly defined gender roles within his marital relationship, noting that his wife was the ‘supreme mistress’ in his home: ‘If at any time I have taken any part in our domestic concerns, it has merely been occasionally to tender my advice’.³

Very little evidence survives to indicate Curr’s style of parenting. A notable exception is an ‘agreement’, which he apparently asked his three younger sons to sign in the late 1870s:

We promise neither to throw stones nor to talk to children in the street and if one of us sees another of us break this engagement we promise to tell Papa of him, and if we are found breaking this promise we sincerely trust Papa will whip us without mercy.

[Signed] Justin Curr, Hubert Curr, Ernest Curr⁴

This note, retained by the Curr family for well over a century, suggests a degree of paternal authority that was not unusual for the time. A contrast to this

¹ Edward M. Curr, Wills and Probate: PROV, VPRS 28/P2, Units 266, 494, Item 40/072; VPRS 7951/P2, Unit 150, Item 40/072.
² Edward M. Curr to E.M.V. Curr, 26 November 1883, 4 and 19 December 1883, Murrumbogie Papers.
³ Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
⁴ Justin, Hubert and Ernest Curr, Undated Agreement, Murrumbogie Papers.
s tern discipline is found in a letter written by Curr to his eldest son Edward in 1883, which displays considerable pride in his younger sons’ achievements. Curr reported that Justin (17) ‘had four honourable mentions and got a football prize’, Hubert (15) was ‘well spoken of by his master’, while Ernest (13) ‘has given satisfaction and carried off the grand elocution prize at the Christian Bros and is lauded in the Herald’.5 Curr was clearly pleased by his sons’ studious ways, noting in another letter: ‘It is very gratifying to find that their masters have taught them so to appreciate study’.6

While Curr did not neglect his other children, he certainly favoured his eldest son, whose career he carefully fostered. E.M.V. Curr was more than a decade older than his younger brothers and clearly carried the future hopes of his family. He returned from his overseas education in 1871 and worked briefly for the wool-broking firm of his uncle Hastings Cunningham. After five years at the Bank of Victoria (during which time he played football for St Kilda) he commenced a career as a pastoralist, with the strong encouragement and financial assistance of his father. Edward M.V. Curr recorded in his memoirs that in 1879 ‘Papa advanced me £700’, which he used to establish a station in north-west Queensland called Constance Downs. In 1882 he sold this station and searched for new country around Normanton and the Gulf of Carpentaria. His uncles Marmaduke, Julius and Montagu Curr were all active in the pastoral industry of northern Queensland, which might explain his focus on this area. In 1883 E.M.V. Curr formed a partnership with Messrs Richardson and Little in the Austral Downs station, which was situated in the Northern Territory to the west of Mount Isa.7

It appears Edward M. Curr invested most of his available funds in his son’s remote pastoral ventures and as a result had relatively little money available for his own use. He wrote to his son in 1883: ‘I am still hard up and do not expect to have £100 to my credit as long as two boys are at college’.8 In spite of this, he was content to support his son’s commercial ambitions: ‘It is enough that when you are able you will send me say £150’.9 In 1885 E.M.V. Curr sold his share of Austral Downs for £3,000, a good return on his initial investment of £1,850.10 He returned to Melbourne where he stayed for several months because his mother was ill. Margaret Curr died in April 1885 at the age of 55 and was buried in the family grave at St Kilda Cemetery. Soon after his wife’s death Edward M. Curr purchased over 2,500 acres of freehold land (and several

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5 Edward M. Curr to E.M.V. Curr, 19 December 1883, Murrumbogie Papers. Curr recorded that Ernest’s success was reported in the Herald on 21 December 1883.
6 Edward M. Curr to E.M.V. Curr, 4 December 1883, Murrumbogie Papers.
7 E.M.V. Curr, Unpublished memoirs, Murrumbogie Papers.
8 Edward M. Curr to E.M.V. Curr, 4 December 1883, Murrumbogie Papers.
9 Edward M. Curr to E.M.V. Curr, 19 December 1883, Murrumbogie Papers.
thousand more in leasehold) near Trundle, New South Wales. The property was named ‘Murrumbogie’ and was adjacent to another property selected (and later purchased) by his son. The following year Curr transferred the land and leases to E.M.V. Curr. In this way, Curr was able to help establish his son on a valuable pastoral station – a task he had not managed for himself in the 1850s.

Throughout this period Curr indulged his love of literature; moreover, his stable career and generous income provided ample opportunity to develop his skills as a writer. Curr read widely and was a regular contributor to newspaper columns on diverse topics. He appears to have derived considerable pleasure from writing at its most basic level; whether addressing technical matters or exploring topics of more general interest, his prose was rich and descriptive. Curr’s inclination to be an author had first emerged at Stonyhurst College, where he filled his leisure time writing reviews of books and novels. There was no shortage of literary inspiration from within his own family: his grandfather, father, and paternal uncles were all published authors. Curr pursued this literary interest during his final year of schooling in France, keeping the journal that is the earliest surviving example of his work. If he wrote anything substantial during his busy squatting years it has not survived, although he and his brothers assembled an impressive ‘Bush Library’ at Tongala, which featured at least 150 volumes.\footnote{Curr 1883: 359–360.}

By the mid-1850s Curr’s boyish fascination for literature and creative writing had matured into a marked ability to write competently, lucidly and argumentatively. The four letters he wrote to newspapers in New Zealand, attacking what he viewed as the land monopolising policies of the colony’s legislature, are considerably more accomplished than his earlier writings. In his final letter to the \textit{New Zealand Spectator} he explained that he was soon to leave the colony but would leave a significant legacy: ‘I have in writing these letters forged a good weapon, which may be taken in the hand of any future assailant of these agrarian injustices’.\footnote{Edward M. Curr, ‘Letter to the Editor’, \textit{New Zealand Spectator}, 30 January 1856.} Curr’s parting shot at New Zealand’s legislators displays a firm belief in the power of the written word. His self-confidence was affirmed when the \textit{New Zealand Spectator} republished his letters in booklet form shortly after he left the colony.\footnote{Curr 1856.} The weapon imagery alludes to the well-known proverb ‘the pen is mightier than the sword’, suggesting Curr was already very confident of the power of his prose.

Over subsequent years, Curr applied his abilities with considerable self-assurance to a variety of topics. Writing principally in the pages of the \textit{Argus}, he addressed many practical matters, including exploration, horse breeding, and stock disease. His letters were typically longer than necessary: it appears
he wished not only to convince his readers of a particular point of view, but equally he hoped to display his accomplished ability to write descriptively and creatively. These were not quickly written letters to a newspaper editor; they were confidently argued essays of literary merit, conveying as much about Curr’s enjoyment of writing as they did about the many topics he treated. This commitment to quality in writing regardless of topic is best illustrated by Curr’s *Essay on Scab in Sheep* (1865). While addressing a seemingly practical matter, Curr clearly intended that the essay would be one of literary worth:

> It is curious to remember that the little parasite of which I speak … should have attracted the attention of Celsus and of Aristotle, and that his ravages, which were sung by Virgil, should be under the ban of the Legislature of Old England, as well as of Young Australia.¹⁴

As Curr saw it, he was not merely contributing a technical essay on a sheep disease: he was engaging in an age-long discussion that linked him with the scientific and literary pursuits of ancient Greece and Rome.

As has been noted, Curr’s first full-length book, *Pure Saddle Horses*, was published in 1863. The literary style evident in this book exhibits many of the characteristics of his later writings. To the modern reader the authorial voice often appears overtly modest and apologetic, as the following passage from the preface demonstrates:

> In offering this work to the public, none can feel better than the Author the necessity for asking some indulgence for entering on a theme which has already been treated of by so many. This becomes, apparently at least, the more needed by one to whom the subject is not professional … and who yet ventures to differ in opinion with many received authorities on the subject of the horse in general, and to call in question doings and customs which have been considered beyond the reach of contradiction.¹⁵

It was most likely passages like this one that prompted a reviewer to note the ‘classical and nervous language’ with which Curr put his case about horse breeding.¹⁶

Another writer of a more specifically literary bent later satirised a somewhat verbose passage from *Pure Saddle Horses* for comic effect. In his classic Australian novel *Such is Life* (1903), Joseph Furphy (alias Tom Collins) quoted *Pure Saddle Horses* during an extended discussion of the enigmatic Australian bushman’s

¹⁴ Curr 1865: 5.
¹⁵ Curr 1863: v.
ability to stay astride a difficult horse. Furphy’s ironic contention was that the perfect horseman was chiefly defined by his ignorance (‘the less brains he has, the better’) and he found a useful demonstration of his theory in Curr’s pages:

Edward M. Curr knew as much of the Australian horse and his rider as any man did; and this is what he says of the back country natives:-

‘They are taciturn, shy, ignorant, and incurious; undemonstrative but orderly; hospitable, courageous, cool and sensible. These men ride like centaurs,’ etc., etc.

Yes, yes - but why? Looking back along that string of well selected adjectives doesn’t your own inductive faculty at once place its finger on Ignorance as the key to the enigma. Notice, too, how Curr, being a bit of a sticker himself, is thereby disqualified from knowing that the centaurs were better constructed for firing other people over their heads than straddling their own backs.¹⁷

Furphy was a democratically minded chronicler, who was inclined to ridicule all his principal characters in equal measure. Consequently, his light-hearted jibe at Curr’s apparent ignorance of the anatomy of a centaur should not be taken too seriously. Nevertheless, Furphy’s insight was to note Curr’s overly elaborate use of language, which is often characterised by a ‘string of well selected adjectives’.

Much of the evidence Curr presented in Pure Saddle Horses derived from his own experiences in Australia and overseas. In time, he would direct his literary efforts increasingly towards the task of relating his own varied life experiences. A significant yet now largely forgotten example was a series of three letters he wrote to Melbourne’s Economist in 1869. They were titled ‘Experiences of Horses Afloat’ and ostensibly offered advice on how horses might profitably be exported to India. Curr did not intend, however, to confine his contributions purely to practical advice: such an approach would not have justified an entire broadsheet page of text spanning three issues of the newspaper. Curr wrote his letters under the alias ‘CIOS’ (Chief Inspector of Sheep) and began by suggesting ‘the great majority of shippers’ did not possess the necessary knowledge to transport horses at sea: ‘Previous, however, to considering the arrangements on which success depends, I have a mind to offer the reader some of my experiences of the matter’.¹⁸ Curr’s entertaining account of his horse-trading exploits occupies the first two parts of his lengthy account; only in part three does he turn to practical advice. His primary aim was to entertain his reader.

¹⁷ Furphy 1903: 279.
The subject matter for ‘Experiences of Horses Afloat’ was Curr’s first foray into horse-trading in 1855, when he exported two equine cargoes to New Zealand. Curr explained that he had sought the advice of an experienced horse-trader named Mr S— before he departed Newcastle with his first load of 100 mares. Mr S— suggested that Curr was giving his horses too much water (ten gallons per day instead of four) and insisted such a course ‘must be injurious on board ship’. Curr’s interlocutor further explained that he usually expected to lose at least one horse per day once they were loaded. Curr’s departure for New Zealand was delayed for eight days due to unfavourable winds, during which time he ignored his friend’s advice and continued to ‘overwater’ his horses. Despite hot weather, he did not lose a single animal.

My friend S—, I was told, was very much perplexed at what he heard and saw about my doings, and their success, which were, I believe, pretty freely commented on by persons interested in the shipment of stock, but he evidently to the last considered my ten gallons a horse to be a foolish and wicked innovation, coupled with an unaccountable obstinacy and vicious determination not to die (as they should have done), on the part of my horses. Frankly, an uneasy and disturbed manner on S—’s part led me to surmise that in some way or other, the even tenor of my friend’s truly philosophic mind had been disturbed, and his really kind spirit galled by the failure of his theory. He talked of allowing his nags, next trip, only two gallons a day. Really I should not have been sorry if one or two horses had died to keep him on good terms with his opinion. When one experienced pronounces oracularly against the doings of a novice, it is so provoking when things do not turn out as they should!!

In the early part of his narrative, Curr had established himself as a competent man who, while a horse-trading novice, was clearly in tune with the needs of his animals. When the winds changed and Curr finally departed, his voyage to New Zealand took 24 days instead of the usual twelve. Water became scarce, but Curr supplemented his supply by adding two quarts of seawater to every two gallons of fresh water: ‘I lost no horses from either hunger or thirst, whatever I may have done from other causes’.

Curr was deliberately talking up his innate horse wrangling ability for narrative effect; while he had proven Mr S— wrong on the issue of water, his inexperience of horse transportation remained. The narrative arc in the second instalment of Curr’s account reflects the adage that ‘pride comes before a fall’. Continuing with his rich description Curr explained:

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It was I think about nine o’clock in the evening of our eighth day out that I was reclining in the cuddy sky-light smoking my pipe. The skipper sat opposite on a hen-coop. The breeze was strong and gusty … For myself, though our voyage had sped but slowly, I was altogether in a pleasant mood. The air was cool and exhilarating, and though a bank of clouds was slowly rising to windward, the stars shone brightly overhead. From the hour, too, it may have been, but the smoothing charms of a glass of rum had lulled my spirit. My horses were all strong; I had lost none of them. Disquietude concerning them had ceased. Indeed, I had almost begun to doubt whether horses ever died at sea; at all events without gross mismanagement.  

Curr asked his Captain how it was that so many horses died while on board ships. The skipper replied that it was probably due to mismanagement and commended Curr for his seemingly effective innovation. He did, however, issue a warning: ‘before the end of the trip you’ll have your eyes opened, I know’. Curr continued:

I do not like to have my eyes opened. Constitutionally I am averse to the operation. I have always found it disagreeable. The very expression is uncongenial; it seems to imply the gaining of knowledge, doubtless, but in a sinister way: it impresses me somehow with the idea that the opening, will be (on the part of the eyes) to something disagreeable. However, I am digressing.

Curr’s recognition of his tendency to digress did not bring him to the point; in fact, he appeared actively to avoid it. He continued with an elegant but tangential description of the ship he had chartered – a retired naval vessel called the Waterwitch:

It was, as I have said, about nine o’clock; the labours of the day were over. We were just laying our course. The wind had increased. The old gun-brig was rolling and wallowing about between the seas as frolicsomely as a young lady porpoise in her most flirtsome mood, before the cares of a family have occurred to repress her buoyancy; much on the same style, I presume as of yore, in the days of her trim youth, when, freighted with jolly tars and blithe middies, her ensign flying at her gaff, and sporting some half-dozen long guns, she chased slavers off the coast of Guinea; or insisted on impertinent inquiries of suspicious looking craft along the Spanish main.

Eventually Curr came to the point and explained that the ship tossed so much in the rough wind that one third of his horses were seriously injured:

Inexorable confusion!— the dead, the dying, the injured, and the sound, all heaped together. As for myself, I presumed that I was just going through the process of having my eyes opened!  

Thirty horses died before the Waterwitch reached Wellington — ‘the ocean levied a heavy toll’. Curr’s entertaining description of the voyage thus served as an extended prelude to the practical advice he offered in his third and final contribution to the Economist. Although it was published 14 years before Recollections of Squatting in Victoria, Curr’s ‘Experiences of Horses Afloat’ is similar in style to the later work; through its rich description, tangential observations, prominent use of irony and autobiographical foundation, ‘Experiences of Horses Afloat’ is in many ways a prototype for Curr’s most famous work.

A Bilingual Poet

At around the same time that Curr was writing his humorous prose account of horse-trading, he was also applying his leisure time to the production of a volume of verse. He called it Des Bétises = Frivolities and it consisted of poems written in both French and English. Curr penned a version of each poem in both languages, with the corresponding verses appearing on either side of each page opening. His lengthiest poem was titled ‘Delphine’ and was inspired by the French Romantic novel of the same name, written by Madame de Staël in 1802. De Staël was exiled by Napoleon after the release of her novel, which offered a critique on the limitations of women’s freedom in an aristocratic society. Curr attempted to capture in verse the doomed romance of Alphonso and Delphine; the following two stanzas are representative of his bilingual creation:

Que le jeune Alphonse de Lautrec  
Dans le jardin d’un château,  
‘A l’ombre d’un grenadier  
Sur les bords d’un ruisseau  
Tout seul chantait les louanges  
De son espiègle cousine  
Jolie, jeune, svelte et brune,  
Sa bien-aimée Delphine.  

That, in a castle’s garden,  
Beneath a pomegranate’s shade,  
By where a silvery brook  
Its soothing murmur made,  
Young Alphonso de Lautrec  
Sung of Provençal belles the queen,  
His cousin — charming and brunette,  
The light of his eyes — Delphine!*  

* Curr 1868: 10.
Des Bétises = Frivolities was printed in Melbourne by Henry Dwight, a successful bookseller who had published verse by more prominent poets such as George McCrae and Richard Horne.\textsuperscript{24} Curr’s booklet appeared with two front covers, reflecting the bilingual nature of his project. The fifth page included a prominent disclaimer, warning the reader of his limited experience in French: ‘Lis si tu veux, mais je te dis d’avance; Je n’ai passé, que dix-huit mois en France’\textsuperscript{25} Curr dedicated the collection of poems to his sister Florence, who had joined the Catholic order the Sisters of Mercy. He was vaguely apologetic for inflicting his homespun verse upon his sister:

\begin{quote}
You’ll think, dear Finny, that it were enough
To write, and not to print, such sapless stuff;
Just hinting in your kindest, gentlest, way,
How much you deem I’ve led myself astray;
That if the woes of ‘Delphine’ must be sung,
Why should I venture on a foreign tongue?
...
Well then, dear sister, let me, entre nous,
In two words say the object I’d in view:
‘Twas about this trash, so quizzed my wife and daughter,
That I thought I’d make you partner in our laughter.
Remember, too, if it will spare vexation,
Printing, darling, is not publication.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

As further justification, Curr suggested to his sister that mirth should not be the exclusive domain of youth (‘is’t not well sometimes to play the fool?’) and concluded by describing the joy his poetry writing had brought both him and his family.

\begin{quote}
So in the ev’ning, whilst my little Mabel
With Ela danced as well as she was able,
And Constance played from her new music-book,
Or the three gathering round, would sing ‘Malbrouck;’
Justin the while climbing behind my chair,
Amusing himself shouting in my ear;
I’d at my table laughing pass my time,
In ill-known tongue scribbling the puerile rhyme.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{24} McLaren 1972: 121–122.
\textsuperscript{25} Curr 1868: 5. Roughly translated, Curr’s disclaimer explains: ‘Read if you wish, but I say in advance; I passed only eighteen months in France’.
\textsuperscript{26} Curr 1868: 7.
\textsuperscript{27} Curr 1868: 9.
Des Bétises = Frivolities is hardly a major contribution to either French or English verse; it is illustrative, however, of Curr’s flair for language and love of poetry. Later, when writing his most famous work, he regularly employed phrases in foreign languages to enliven his text. Moreover, as we shall see below, he frequently quoted great English poets, including Shakespeare and Byron. Des Bétises provides, therefore, a useful insight into the literary tastes of the author of Recollections of Squatting in Victoria.

Curr’s four major written works of the 1860s exhibit all the essential characteristics that came to fruition in his 1883 masterpiece. In Pure Saddle Horses he displayed his detailed understanding of the life and requirements of the Australian squatter; he also proved his ability to write a full-length book. His Essay on Scab in Sheep showed a determination to write with flair, even on technical matters. In both of these works he also revealed his capacity to tackle controversial subjects with confidence and authority. ‘Experiences of Horses Afloat’ displays Curr’s considerable talent for descriptive writing; it is also a prime example of his skill at story telling and his ability to use irony and humour when recounting his own experiences. Finally, Des Bétises reveals Curr’s aptitude for foreign languages and his broader interest in literature. Curr was able to combine all of these elements when he wrote Recollections of Squatting in Victoria. It might fairly be argued, therefore, that his best-known work was published as much for its literary accomplishment as it was for its value as an historical record of the 1840s.

**Curr’s Literary Inspiration**

Recollections of Squatting in Victoria is greatly enhanced by its regular allusions to English literature. Such allusions were, of course, common in the literary culture of the period, but Curr’s particular enthusiasm for this approach played a key role in his literary success. His memoir is also notable for its frequent use of words and phrases in French. Taking his description of early Melbourne as an example, we read that during his first visit in 1839 he stayed at the cottage of a friend, ‘who resided en garçon on the Yarra … his family not having yet arrived to join him’. A few pages later Curr explains the apparent folly of auctioning town allotments without the provision of champagne and lavish refreshments – ‘the mise en scène would have been critically wrong’. Describing the arrival of a new servant woman at Wolfscrag, Curr relates that she ‘seized at once on my not very extensive batterie de cuisine, and transported it in a trice to the kitchen’. Subsequently, when recalling the spearing of 70 sheep by Aborigines on the
Murray River, Curr describes the resultant feast as a ‘rather costly déjeuner à la fourchette, in which my father had compulsorily played the part of absentee host’. 28

Curr’s linguistic experimentation extended to other foreign languages. From Portuguese, a language his father spoke fluently, Curr borrows entre rios to describe the principal portion of his squatting run between the Murray and Goulburn Rivers. 29 Curr’s text also features regular phrases from classical languages: when recalling the enthusiasm of the early Melbourne residents for separation from New South Wales, he suggests that Sydney officials ‘must have groaned from every pigeon-hole (ab immo pectore)’; later, he conveys the remoteness of Tongala by dubbing it ‘a sort of ultima thule’. 30 The regular use of foreign language phrases heightens the sense of literary accomplishment in Curr’s work and increases its appeal to the educated audience for which Curr was primarily writing.

Recollections of Squatting in Victoria is littered with literary references, some more identifiable than others. Not surprisingly, Shakespeare features regularly; for example, Curr borrows a phrase from Henry IV, Part 2, when marvelling at the ability of the Wongatpan tribe to sleep in their canoes among mosquito-infested reeds. Such a course was employed as a defence against hostile tribes, but it troubled Curr nonetheless:

it would be hard to imagine anything more miserable than a family passing a night in a damp canoe in the foetid atmosphere of a reed-bed – not, as the poet says,

‘Hushed with buzzing night-flies to their slumbers,’

but stung to madness by villainous mosquitoes, which generally abounded in the locality. 31

Various other poets were worthy of inclusion in Curr’s work. In Chapter 11, ‘A Ride to Muddy Creek’, Curr recounts the amusing story of a well-mannered Scottish inn-owner, who was tersely ordered by his senior partner to eject a drunken and penniless patron: ‘On this mild reproof, Mr. Nichol Forbes, like one of Ossian’s heroes, “On his hill of storm arose in wrath.”’ 32 Curr alludes to the works of controversial Scottish poet James Macpherson (1736–96), who

28 Curr 1883: 3, 11, 61, 195. En garçon – as a boy (bachelor); mise en scène – setting of the scene; batterie de cuisine – kitchen utensils; déjeuner à la fourchette – lunch on the fork.
29 Curr 1883: 217.
30 Curr 1883: 4, 127. Ab immo pectore – from the bottom of my heart; ultima thule – in medieval geography, a distant place located beyond the borders of the known world.
31 Curr 1883: 242. Curr adapts a phrase from Shakespeare’s Henry IV, Part 2 (Act 3 Scene 1), which appears in the original as ‘hushed with buzzing night-flies to thy slumber’.
32 Curr 1883: 111.
apparently produced English ‘translations’ of ancient Scottish-Gaelic epic poems narrated by ‘Ossian’. Another Scottish poet, Thomas Campbell (1777–1844), provided inspiration for Curr’s description of ‘The Deserted Camp’ of the Wongatpan, where he found only a mangy dingo that broke into ‘the dreary howl common to his kind’:

Again and again beginning at his lowest and ascending to his highest note, Pokka gave out his melancholy cry, reminding me of Campbell’s melodious line—

‘The wolf’s long howl from Oonalaska’s shore.’

I did not wait for him to finish his solo. A shot from my gun rolled him over in the midst of his melody ... terminating at once misery and mange, as well as some danger to my flocks.\(^3^4\)

Curr was very familiar with the English poets. In Chapter 15 of *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* he describes a moonlit night in 1842, when his brother Charles surmised he saw a ghost:

In the bright starlight nothing unusual met my eyes. The lamp in the shepherd’s hut I could see was out, and my kangaroo dogs were not there, but everything seemed quiet. Above the lamp of heaven was

‘Riding near the highest noon,’

and around everything was as cold and crisp as might be, so I paced backwards and forwards for a while, thinking of my brother, and perhaps, as I looked up to the sky, recalling Shelley’s verses—

‘Tell me, Moon, thou pale and gray
Pilgrim of Heaven’s homeless way,
In what depth of night or day
Seekest thou repose now?’

After a few moments passed in this way, I returned to the hut and resumed my seat at the fire.\(^3^5\)

In recalling the night, Curr borrows from three famous English poets in quick succession. First, he employs the metaphor of the ‘lamp of heaven’, which appears in Byron’s early collection of verse, *Hours of Idleness* (1807).\(^3^6\) ‘Riding

34 Curr 1883: 150. Curr’s quote is from Campbell’s ‘The Pleasures of Hope’ (1799).
35 Curr 1883: 158.
near the highest noon’ derives from Milton’s ‘Il Penseroso’ (1631), while the verse from Shelley is from his poem ‘The World’s Wanderers’ (1820). The use of such rapid poetic allusion when describing an event long past is a clear indication of Curr’s central motive: his book is primarily a collection of creatively crafted and nostalgic recollections – not a dispassionate and accurate record of historical events. Curr’s suggestion that he ‘perhaps’ recalled Shelley’s verses implies, of course, that on the moonlit night in 1842 he did nothing of the sort. Curr thinks of Shelley when he recalls the moonlight: his book is a memoir, not a diary – a literary product of the 1880s not a disinterested and contemporary chronicle of the 1840s.

Of all the English poets, Curr’s major influence appears to have been Lord Byron, who features prominently and regularly throughout Recollections of Squatting in Victoria. For Curr, the allure of Byron’s poetry derived, at least in part, from Byron’s interest in Spanish subjects. Hence, when describing the grace and dignity of movement among the men of the Ngooralalum tribe, who were occasional visitors at Tongala, Curr refers to Byron’s Don Juan for a useful comparison:

Byron proposes, as typical of this sort of thing—

‘The Andalusian dame from mass returning,’

but though I have had, perhaps, more opportunities than his lordship of seeing and admiring the stately Andaluza, I can hardly give her the preference, in the point of erect and graceful bearing, over the Ngooralalum stalking forth from his camp wrapped in his opossum-rug.37

Later, when describing the hunting parties that met and caroused at ‘The Punt’ (Moama) in the late 1840s, Curr again quotes from Don Juan: ‘There’s nought, no doubt, so much the spirit calms; As rum and true religion’.38 Curr’s fondness for Byron is best indicated by the final passage of Recollections of Squatting in Victoria, where he reflects on the years he spent on the Goulburn River with his younger brothers:

Of the little circle who used to be merry at Tongala five-and-thirty years ago – alas!

‘Kaled, Lara, Ezzelin are gone,’

37 Curr 1883: 134. Curr quotes Byron’s Don Juan, Canto XII, LXXV: ‘She cannot step as does an Arab barb, Or Andalusian girl from mass returning’.
38 Byron, Don Juan, Canto II, XXXIV. See Curr 1883: 385.
and the two who remain are old; and the writer, in lieu of the stirring
pleasures of youth, has learnt to content himself with a book and an
easy chair.\textsuperscript{39}

Curr’s nostalgic conclusion is typical of the overall tone of his book; he
employed Byron’s verse to convey the sense of loss and regret he felt when he
recalled his youth. The quote is from Byron’s \textit{Lara}, an epic tale of a haunted
and doomed hero written in 1814. When read in context, Byron’s verse hints
at Curr’s broader implication: ‘And Kaled — Lara — Ezzelin, are gone, Alike
without their monumental stone!’\textsuperscript{40} The lack of recognition for Byron’s fallen
heroes suggests a parallel with the diminishing significance of the Curr family,
as its achievements in the 1840s faded from memory. On the penultimate page
of \textit{Recollections of Squatting in Victoria}, Curr had related his story of the ‘tall,
burly, good-tempered looking Scotchman’, who in 1854 had inveighed against
the ‘new chums’ who swarmed to Melbourne during the gold rush, lamenting
their ignorance of the Port Phillip pioneers: ‘I’ll give this gentleman [Curr] a
week to find a man who ever heard of his father, or of separation either’.\textsuperscript{41} By
closing the book with a quote from Byron’s \textit{Lara}, Curr implied (at least to those
familiar with the poem) that he regretted the poor recognition accorded the
pioneering squatters; particularly those, like the Currs, who had largely passed
from general knowledge: ‘Alike without their monumental stone!’

‘A most entertaining volume’

George Robertson published \textit{Recollections of Squatting in Victoria} in June 1883.
Very little is known regarding the circumstances of its production: it was likely
the result of several years of leisurely work, penned in stolen moments at Curr’s
city office or at home in Prahran or St Kilda. No correspondence survives to
establish how or when Curr wrote it, or if the text underwent substantial
redrafting prior to publication. Curr most likely wrote the book for his own
enjoyment, as he had earlier shown an enthusiasm for writing and a fondness
for entertaining reminiscences. It was probably not a highly profitable hobby,
although Curr wrote to his son in December 1883 that he hoped to receive ‘a
few pounds … from the sale of my book’.\textsuperscript{42} Nevertheless, it was a significant
achievement for Curr to have the book accepted by Robertson, one of the most
successful publishers of the period, whose prominent authors included Marcus
Clarke and Rolf Boldrewood.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{39} Curr 1883: 452.
\textsuperscript{40} Byron, \textit{Lara}, Canto II, XXV.
\textsuperscript{41} Curr 1883: 451.
\textsuperscript{42} Edward M. Curr to E.M.V. Curr, 19 December 1883, Murrumbogie Papers.
\textsuperscript{43} Holroyd 1976: 37–38.
7. Recollections of Squatting

During Curr’s own lifetime, *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* received favourable reviews. The *Argus* described it as ‘a most entertaining volume’ and noted that ‘his narrative gives one an excellent idea of the pastoral life of the period, with its hardships, its difficulties, and its vicissitudes’.\(^{44}\) The *Brisbane Courier* exclaimed that ‘one cannot lay it aside without a feeling of regret the narrative is restricted to a period of only ten years of the life experiences of such a facile writer’.\(^ {45}\) The *Argus* focussed on two important chapters of Curr’s book,

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\(^{45}\) *Brisbane Courier*, 13 June 1883: 5.
which have certainly contributed to its enduring value: ‘Changes in Connection with Flora and Fauna’ and ‘The Bangerang’. Since its publication Recollections of Squatting in Victoria has been increasingly recognised as an important early reflection on the environmental effects of European pastoralism; Curr’s account of the impact of livestock on soil structure and of the role of fire in Australian ecology have been particularly valued.\(^\text{46}\) The Argus reviewer anticipated this historiographical development:

In the seventeenth chapter [Curr] skims the surface of a subject deserving of more serious and scientific treatment. We refer to the changes which have been and are being brought about in the flora and fauna of Australia, in consequence of the occupation and cultivation of its territory by Europeans.\(^\text{47}\)

The Argus also presaged the enduring influence of Curr’s descriptions of Aborigines, identifying Recollections of Squatting in Victoria as a prelude to his major ethnological work: ‘One of the best chapters in the book is that which devotes to the Bangerang tribe of aborigines’.\(^\text{48}\) The Argus described Curr’s ethnography of the Bangerang as ‘an acceptable contribution to our stock of knowledge’, which presumably lent weight to the campaign to publish Curr’s more serious ethnological work, The Australian Race.

The final conclusion of the conservative Argus was that the squatters deserved their fortune, principally because of the unsavoury characters they were forced to employ on their stations:

> to be compelled to associate from day to day, for years together, with ‘horse stealers, machine-breakers, homicides, disorderly soldiers, drunken marines, house breakers, petty thieves, and so on,’ as a good many of the squatters were, was rather a high price to pay for subsequent … affluence.\(^\text{49}\)

Perhaps unconsciously, the Argus reviewer recognised a centrally important function of Curr’s Recollections of Squatting in Victoria: in his book Curr constructed for himself a position of social superiority over his convict shepherds and, of course, over the Indigenous people whose land he occupied.

It should be noted, however, that Curr never intended to write a dispassionate, and objective account of the 1840s; it is others who have wrongly assumed his book to be as much. The very title of Curr’s work is an explicit recognition of its subjective viewpoint. Furthermore, Curr wrote in his preface that his account


of Victoria’s early colonial life was ‘seen through the medium of individual experiences, possibly of not a very representative sort’. Nevertheless, Curr trusted that his reminiscences would be appealing to a wider readership: ‘An excuse for the publication of mere personal matters will, it is hoped, be found in the contrast their relation exhibits between the past and the present state of things in Victoria’. It is clear that Curr understood the value of his observations to posterity. He realised that the pace of change in Victoria all but guaranteed that a well-written memoir would find an enthusiastic audience. The steadily growing status of Curr’s book in twentieth-century Australian historiography demonstrates that he was correct.

50 Curr 1883: v.