

## 4. Queensland Frontier Adventure— Emily Cowl: Excitement and Humour

‘They were wearing my things in a most grotesque and laughable way’.<sup>1</sup>



**Illustration 6. Thomas and Emily Cowl, ‘The Event of their Golden Wedding’.**

Source: Mrs T Holder Cowl, *Some of My Experiences during a voyage to the Gulf of Carpentaria and three years’ residence at Normanton in the early Seventies*, Besley & Pike Ltd, Brisbane, n.d.

Just as Eliza Davies sought to entertain her North American readers with an exaggerated depiction of Aborigines, so Emily Cowl’s aim was to evoke the excitement of living amongst Indigenous Australians on the Queensland frontier in the 1870s. Initially presenting her tale to a Pioneers Club in Brisbane, her two lectures were published as *Some of My Experiences during a voyage to the Gulf of Carpentaria and three years’ residence at Normanton in the early Seventies* in about 1912.<sup>2</sup> Her publisher, Besley & Pike Ltd, printed works into the mid-twentieth century on politically conservative topics such as the Australian (later Federal)

<sup>1</sup> Mrs T Holder Cowl, *Some of My Experiences during a voyage to the Gulf of Carpentaria and three years’ residence at Normanton in the early Seventies*, Besley & Pike Ltd, Brisbane, n.d.: 28.

<sup>2</sup> Just prior to publication, Thomas and Emily Cowl celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. This date was 19 February 1912. As the Cowls lived in Thorroldtown, now the north-eastern Brisbane suburb of

Country Party and the 1935 Silver Jubilee celebrations of King George V. As well as substantial imperial works relating to World War I and missionary activities in Burma,<sup>3</sup> publications on sea travel were also produced. It was in this genre that *Some of My Experiences* found its place.

Emily's text is a complex mixture of stereotypes of Indigenous 'savagery' and enlightening pictures of Aborigines' individualism and humanity. The backdrop to the action is the brutal frontier of colonial Queensland, with the menacing presence of the Native Police. Like Davies, however, Emily enlivened her text with the literary conventions of popular nineteenth-century novels. Although she presents a confused melee of messages, she is so firmly in control of her well worked-over material that her stories and her self-identity are projected with a keen and steady eye on effect. Her prime aim is to entertain her audience.

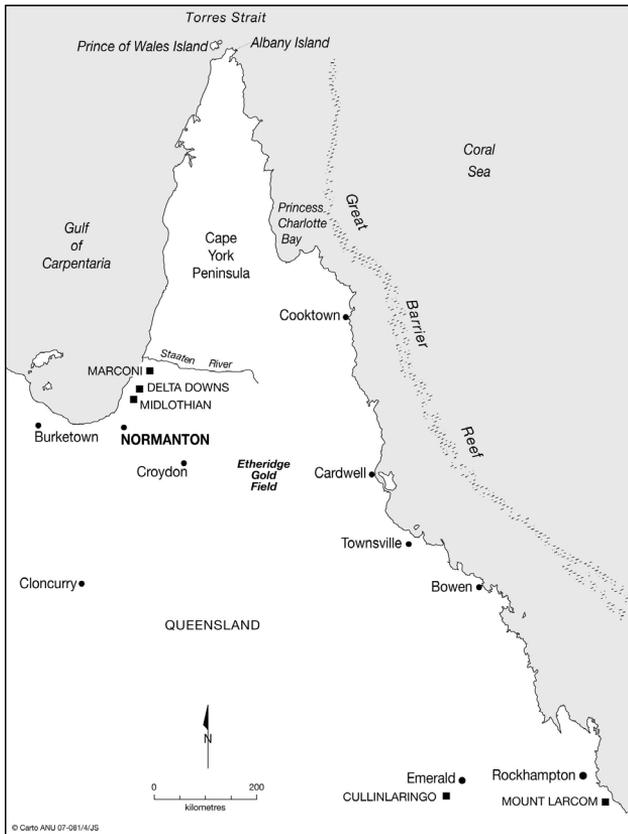
Unlike Eliza Fraser and Davies, Emily was a long-term colonial resident. As a town-dweller, however, she differs also from the three settlers that follow, by being removed from direct involvement with Aborigines. Comprising 37 pages, Emily's text melds historical details relating to her voyage to northern Queensland and her three and a half years' residence in Normanton with her own version of Aboriginal behaviour, presented in thrilling escapades. These represent the Kurtjar<sup>4</sup> as opportunistic, daring and fun-loving people, their light-heartedness often aimed at the newly arrived settlers. At the same time, Emily appears to take care to accommodate her audience, many of whom had pastoral connections, by incorporating in her text the presiding racial attitudes that Aborigines must be 'controlled' and white men and women protected from their depredations. The result is an ambivalent picture in which the innocuous Aborigines nevertheless earn the epithets, 'dangerous' and the euphemistic, 'mischievous'. Within this mixed presentation, Emily's own racial attitudes are difficult to discern, remaining masked behind her motivation to amuse and her care not to offend the supposed racial perceptions of her audience.

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Wooloowin, from 1888 to 1899, and from 1901–1905, the Pioneers Club at which Emily spoke, would appear to have been in Brisbane. In 1900, the Cowls' address was, 'Hyde Park, Townsville', *Wise's Queensland Post Office Directories*.

3 Owen Wildman, *Queenslanders Who Fought in the Great War*, c. 1920 and Gordon S Seagrave, *Burma Surgeon Returns*, 1946, are two examples. Besley & Pike Holdings Ltd was registered as a public company in Queensland in 1957 as an envelope manufacturer and printer, *Jobson's Year Book: Public Companies of Australia and New Zealand*, 1972.

4 Kurtjar territory stretched from the coast of Gulf of Carpentaria to the Smithburne River in the south, to the Staaten River to the north, and inland as far as the present homesteads of Delta Downs and Macaroni station. Normanton is situated on the southern boundary of this land. While the Kurtjar have been nominated in this chapter as the representative group in the Normanton region, six other Indigenous groups, including the Areba people, also lived in the area, Charles Bynoe, *Memories of Normanton: An Aboriginal Perspective*, Normanton State School, 1992, Author's Note: 1–2.



**Map 4. Emily Cowl. Northern Queensland showing places mentioned in the text around Normanton near the Gulf of Carpentaria, the Etheridge Goldfield and the Rockhampton district.**

Source: CartoGIS, College of Asia and the Pacific, ANU.

Emily took pains to present herself as a respectable, middle-class lady, of sober tastes and tidy habits. These middle-class values she struggled, but succeeded, to maintain in the harsh environment of far northern Queensland. In August 1871 she travelled to Normanton on the Norman River, 80 kilometres inland from the southern coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria, after her husband, Thomas Holder Cowl, had been appointed manager of the Normanton telegraph station.<sup>5</sup> A civil servant with the Queensland Electric Telegraph Service, and previously based in Toowoomba, Cowl was directed to establish a new branch station in Normanton, oversee the proposed connection through Normanton of a submarine cable from Java and, thereafter, to perform the important task of transmitting telegraphs

<sup>5</sup> 'Thomas Holder Cowl J.P., telegraph-station master, telegraph-station, Normanton', R R Whitworth Compiled Under the Authority of the Postmaster-General, *The Official Post Office Directory (Professional, Squatting, and Trade) of Queensland*, F F Bailliere, Brisbane, Sydney, 1874: 154.

from the wider world to the Australian colonies. Hoping to gain the contract, the Queensland government had approved the construction in June 1869 of an overland telegraph line that traversed Cape York Peninsula from Cardwell on Queensland's eastern coastline. It was opened, in preparation for the overseas connection, in January 1872. The subsequent decision, however, to connect the telegraph along the Port Darwin to Adelaide line, and not through Normanton<sup>6</sup> resulted in the Cowls' move to Cooktown in March 1875.

In spite of her public persona, Emily's beginnings were comparatively lowly. Born Emily Jane Ferguson in County Fermanagh, Ireland, in 1844, she was the daughter of a cashier. Thomas Cowl, born in Hull on 7 July 1843, appeared to have had similar working class connections. The son of a merchant, his occupation on marriage was registered as 'Purser'.<sup>7</sup> After Thomas's working life at telegraph stations in the coastal towns of Bowen and Townsville the Cowls retired to their home, Cooyah, in Dickson Street, Thorrolldtown, near Brisbane.<sup>8</sup>

## Setting the scene

Adventure was the primary theme of Emily's presentation. Her first talk dealt with the trip from Brisbane along the east coast of Queensland and around Cape York to Normanton. In this initial lecture, which formed the first section of her published work, she set the scene for her first-hand experiences with Aborigines. Revealing her knowledge of the literary tradition of captivity narratives, she referred to the legendary adventures of white men and women who had been castaways after shipwreck and who trusted their lot with the Indigenous peoples of the coastal regions.

Setting sail from Brisbane on 9 August 1871, the *Countess of Belmore* finally gained favourable winds and a high tide that freed her from a Moreton Bay sandbank, and propelled her into the open sea. As the 60-ton schooner sailed north along the Queensland coast, she passed bays, inlets and towns, which Emily tracked and described. A secondary theme in this part of her story was

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6 For a discussion on the rivalry between Queensland and South Australia for the Overland Telegraph connection, cf. Bauer 1964, Appendix I: 263–265.

7 Although Emily Cowl's marriage certificate states her age at marriage in Sydney in February 1862 as 22 years, her death certificate records that, on her death on 3 June 1925, she was 81 years of age, suggesting that she married at 17 or 18. On her death certificate, her age at marriage is recorded as 18 years. Emily's birth year can be most closely identified as 1844. Thomas Cowl's stated age of 23 years on his marriage certificate was similarly inflated from his correct age of 18. He died on 24 January 1916, aged 73, New South Wales Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration, Marriage Certificate registration number 1862/000149; Queensland Death Certificates, 1925/B45859 and 1916/427; *The Historical Society of Queensland Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2, February 1916: 63.

8 *Wise's Queensland Post Office Directory*, 1895 to 1900. Thomas Cowl retired in 1900. In 1913, he and Emily lived at 'Balma Carra', Eagle Junction, Brisbane, *HSQJ*, Vol. 1, No. 1, August 1914: 11.

the primitive nature of the coastal settlements compared with the progress of the ensuing 40 years. Here she weaves into her descriptions of the passing landscape the legends of shipwreck survivors, who were taken in by and who lived among Aborigines in various locations along the northern Queensland coast.

The peril of sea voyages was a theme that had captured the imagination of European writers at least since Daniel Defoe took the marooning of Alexander Selkirk on Juan Fernandez Island in the Pacific Ocean in 1704 and turned it into the story of *Robinson Crusoe*.<sup>9</sup> Emily evoked the danger of her own voyage, which took place before ‘lighthouses, lightships, buoys and beacons mark[ed] the dangers all along the Inner Route between the Great Barrier Reef and the mainland’.<sup>10</sup> She described how the *Countess of Belmore* struck the coral reef but was freed by the efforts of crew members.

The association of shipwreck and the mystique of ‘captivity’ by ‘savage’ Aborigines was a particularly potent recipe for storytellers. The Eliza Fraser saga exemplified its fascination. Eliza Davies, too, had encountered stormy seas in gales in the Irish Sea, in the Australian coastal waters, and when rounding Cape Horn during her return to Scotland in 1847, fearing shipwreck and, in her case, death in the watery depths. Emily Cowl incorporated the exotic mix of castaway and capture into her narrative with her own examples. She drew attention to the site between Bowen and Townsville where James Morrell lived for 20 years with the Jurn and Bindal people after shipwreck in 1846.<sup>11</sup> She recounted the story of the Frenchman, Narcisse Pierre Pelletier, who was shipwrecked as a 14-year-old cabin boy on board the *St Paul* and rescued in October 1858 by members of the Makadamas at Princess Charlotte Bay on the far north coast. He lived for 16 years with the Makadamas until forcibly ‘rescued’ by a seaman in 1875 and returned to France. He is believed to have returned in about 1881 to live with the Makadamas, remaining with them until his death in the 1920s.<sup>12</sup>

Emily also recalled the fate of Barbara Thompson,<sup>13</sup> who was rescued after shipwreck in 1844 by the Kaurareg people of Muralag (Prince of Wales Island), off the northern tip of Cape York Peninsula), where she lived with the Aborigines for almost five years. Her story has become part of Australian folklore, replicating although not surpassing, the tale of Eliza Fraser. Emily states that Thompson

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9 Selkirk requested to be put off the *Cinque Ports* after quarrelling with the captain and was rescued four years and four months later by William Dampier, Preston and Preston 2004: 313.

10 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 6.

11 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 6. Henry Reynolds cites 17 years, Reynolds 1990: 19.

12 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 9; Murray 1969: 14–15; *The Sun*, Sydney, 5 August 1974: 14.

13 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 3, 7–8. Barbara Thompson’s maiden name, ‘Crawford’, is the nominated term used by Emily Cowl, who has also heard her name as ‘Margaret’. Barbara Crawford had eloped, aged 16 years, with seaman, William Thompson. In October 1849, Barbara was ‘rescued’ by the crew of the survey ship, H.M.S. *Rattlesnake*, commanded by Captain Owen Stanley from whom the account was handed down, Goodman 2005: 254–262; Moore 1978: ix, 9, 229–230.

was 'not ... molested or in any way harmed by the blacks. [The Kaurareg] had merely fed and looked after her, taking her with them as they moved from one hunting ground to another'.<sup>14</sup>

Emily's representation of the Yadhagana people of Albany Island on the northern tip of Cape York Peninsula was of friendly, calm and courteous individuals. When she bartered a piece of tobacco for an Indigenous necklace, she praised the use of 'pretty pieces of nautilus shell'. She admired the 'beautifully made' spears, purchased by the passengers as benign items of trade—transactions that denoted peaceful intent, not warfare. In similar fashion, she described an intricate outrigger canoe, with its grass matting sail and central wickerwork platform, implicitly appreciating Aboriginal ingenuity. She also recorded the generosity and cooperation of the Yadhagana, who returned to the schooner in the evening with gifts of a turtle and fish, although failing to elaborate on whether the gesture may have emanated from courteous rites of welcome or reciprocal obligation rules. This action replicates the observation of Joseph Banks at Cooktown in 1770 when the Kuku-Yalanji people offered fish to the crew of the *Endeavour*, after a fish had accidentally been thrown to them.<sup>15</sup>

In this first section of her work, Emily presents her conflicting messages. Along with the accounts of Indigenous care for needy white men and women and the 'intelligent and courageous' Yadhagana, she also endeavoured to portray the idea of fearsome, dangerous Aborigines who, during the time of the Cowl's voyage in August and September 1871, were said to be lurking in the bushland along the Queensland coast. Emily builds up this picture by referring to the 'numerous and hostile' Aborigines 'hiding in the scrubs'. She expressed to her audience her alarm that she would be 'at the mercy of the blacks' if the passengers were required to land. When the captain and crew went ashore to find firewood on Prince of Wales Island, Emily reported that they were 'well armed, because the natives on the island were well known to be dangerous'.<sup>16</sup> This ambivalent assessment of Indigenous intent is characteristic of her attitude throughout her tale, similarly applied to the second part of her presentation that deals with her adventures in Normanton.

## Into isolation and desolation

Emily and Thomas Cowl arrived in Normanton on 5 September 1871. An outpost of empire, new and remote, Normanton had been declared a town in August 1868. Settlement was established as an alternative site for Burketown,

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14 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 9–10; Cf. Darian-Smith 1996.

15 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 12–14; Beaglehole 1962, Vol. II: 92.

16 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 5, 8, 17, 14, 11–14; Beaglehole 1962, Vol. II: 92.

150 kilometres to the west, after an outbreak of fever, brought by boat from Java in 1866, had decimated that town's population. Building in Normanton began in May 1867 after William Landsborough had navigated the Norman River earlier that year. The town served as a depot for goods transported between the port and the cattle runs and mining ventures in its hinterland. The successes of the recently discovered, although ultimately short-lived, Etheridge Gold Field, 300 kilometres east of Normanton and the Cloncurry copper mines, 400 kilometres south of the town, had contributed to Normanton's growth during the 1860s and 1870s.

Although in October 1868, 43 purchasers of land at auction registered their address as Normanton, in 1871 there seemed to have been only seven residential dwellings, some unoccupied, and a few huts. According to Emily, the European population, including children, was about 40. The town consisted of one long, wide road (Landsborough Street), on which stood the Commercial Hotel, the Prince of Wales Hotel, the Court House and Police quarters, the Lands Office, the Land Commissioner's house, the Telegraph Office (with the Cowl's house attached), and a general store. Residents included the inspector of police, two acting assistant police inspectors, a land agent, customs officer, postmaster, cattle-brand inspector and telegraph officers, working under Thomas Cowl.<sup>17</sup> Among these male officials, Emily was one of the few women in the town, a factor that she utilised to enhance the interest of her story.

Emily's descriptions of Normanton as 'almost beyond the pale of civilisation' and 'far, far away from the comforts of civilisation' brought into focus the isolation into which a respectable urban resident had been cast. She depicted it as a 'wild, unsettled' place with 'many hardships to be endured', manipulating its desolation and remoteness by inflating the distances from Cloncurry and Townsville.<sup>18</sup> The themes of isolation and hardship tie into the idea of exile and wilderness, which in nineteenth-century literature was associated with the concept of Biblical banishment into which colonists brought the progress of civilised society and British law.

Her attitudes to landscape also complied with the current European perceptions of Australian scenery as barren and unattractive. While confirming the characteristic northern Australian estuary country of 'low mangrove swamp and salt pans', Emily described the environment around Normanton as 'devoid of scenery' in contrast to the 'lovely scenery of Toowoomba'. She depicted the flat terrain as boggy and mosquito-infested in the wet season, and bleak and barren in the dry season, except for sporadic clumps of coarse spinifex.<sup>19</sup> Emily

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17 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 20; *Normanton Centenary 1868–1968*, 1968: 5; *The Official Post Office Directory of Queensland*, 1871: 125.

18 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 2, 31.

19 Sullivan 1996: 4–5; Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 2, 18; *Normanton Centenary 1868–1968*, 1968: 5.

seemed to compare the sterility of Normanton with the civilised landscapes of the surrounding pastoral properties that had spread north from the Moreton Bay region from the 1830s. The underlying themes of hardship, danger and isolation at Normanton came together in Emily's first image of the town: the funeral of a young woman who had died from the complications of childbirth, because of the lack of medical care. It was in this frontier existence that hazardous adventures were waiting to happen!

In Normanton during the 1870s, disease and death were close at hand. The Norman River was crocodile-infested and fevers were rife. Emily wrote that she was to suffer from intermittent malarial fever for 17 years. The practical part she played in the civilising process was to bring into this inhospitable environment her medicine chest, along with her considerable resourcefulness, endurance and fortitude. She illustrated her success in medical emergencies with examples of her capable application of remedies and her overall expertise. Her intervention (unspecified by detail) in a case of threatened miscarriage, for instance, ensured that mother and baby were saved. This example—as well as the earlier reference to death in childbirth—reminded her audience of the tragedy that might befall women who ventured onto the desolate frontier of colonial Queensland.<sup>20</sup> Despite her succumbing to malaria, Emily leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that she is equal to men in robustness and enterprise, whatever her location.

Tony Roberts both confirms and qualifies the Cowls' medical skills. In *Frontier Justice*, Roberts relates that a traveller on his way to Normanton in November 1871 sustained multiple fractures to his collarbone after his horse bolted and dashed him against an overhanging branch. In agony, the horseman arrived in Normanton, where 'the Telegraph Master tried to set my bone but after six tries he gave up, telling me to go to the Bay (600 miles)'.<sup>21</sup>

To highlight the harsh environment of Normanton, and as a way to promote her public image, Emily referred to her previous genteel activities in Toowoomba where she enjoyed Christian fellowship in the company of her respectable female friends. Although both married and buried with Presbyterian Church rites, she taught in Church of England Sunday schools, recalling with pride the social success of some of her former pupils.<sup>22</sup> The only Christian clergy to visit Normanton was a Catholic priest to whom Emily extended an ecumenical

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20 Nikki Henningham has examined public concerns in the years following Federation about the suitability of women to live in tropical regions and the effect that might have in maintaining a 'White Australia', Henningham 2001: 311–321.

21 Reeves 1985: 171; Roberts 2005: 34.

22 Two prominent Queenslanders, who were children in Toowoomba between 1868 and 1871, were Henry Littleton Groom (1859–1926), member of the Queensland Legislative Council for 16 years, and his brother, (later Sir) Ernest Littleton Groom (1867–1936), member of the House of Representatives for Darling Downs, succeeding his father, William Henry Groom, D B Waterson, 'Groom, William Henry (1833–1901)'. *ADB*, NCB, ANU, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/groom-william-henry-3675text5741>, accessed 2 November 2013.

welcome. Otherwise, her Christian identity relied on the recounting of her past religious duties in Toowoomba. Together with wifely devotion, sobriety, cleanliness, and a Protestant work ethic, her allusions to religion project an image of a lady who has been cast out of a civilised environment onto a wild frontier.

## Tying the text to history

In her representation of the wild, uncivilised existence in Normanton during the 1870s, Emily evoked a past time in Queensland's history. Her story, set before the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* (Qld) (amended in 1899 and 1901), harked back to the period before Indigenous people were settled on reserves in the manner practised in other British colonies, including North America and South Africa.<sup>23</sup> In the early years of the twentieth century, Aborigines were rarely the topic of public concern, remaining out of sight and out of mind of city dwellers. The *Brisbane Courier* in 1905, for example, focused its attention on matters of the Australian Commonwealth, the British Empire, and news of the wider world, opened up by the electric telegraph.<sup>24</sup> Emily revived this historical amnesia by projecting images of Indigenous people in their 'native' state. On her northerly voyage, for example, she depicted the 'uncivilised' Yadhagana people as 'all quite naked, [with] not a stitch of clothing of any kind on men, women, or children'.<sup>25</sup>

Racial conflict forms the backdrop to her story. The writers of *Creating A Nation* represent the frontier of white settlement in the Australian colonies as 'a place of fear and desire, of struggle and survival where indigenous people and colonisers came into contact, interacted and clashed'.<sup>26</sup> According to Raymond Evans, 'both sides [of the Queensland frontier] bristled with weaponry. The passions of fear, anxiety and vengeance were running high ... and European attitudes towards Aborigines as the hated and despised "other" were intense'. G S Lang wrote in 1865 that in Queensland there was 'more destruction of the blacks in occupying new country than in any other colony'.<sup>27</sup> Aborigines died violently from the time when settlers ventured inland from Moreton Bay in search of new country for grazing and agriculture in the 1830s and 1840s. In 1841, for example, over 50 Aborigines were poisoned by flour laced with

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23 *Queensland Government Gazette*, 16 December 1897: 1387–1394. According to Edward Palmer, Aborigines were still living 'in their original state' on Cape York in 1903, and 'on some of the rivers flowing into the Gulf [were] still numerous', Edward Palmer, *Early Days in North Queensland*, [Angus & Robertson, Australia], Queensland Classics edition, 1983 [1903]: 214.

24 Based on research of the *Brisbane Courier*, January to May 1905.

25 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 13.

26 Grimshaw, Lake, McGrath and Quartly 1994: 131.

27 Evans 2003: 63; Palmer 2000: 45.

strychnine on Kilcoy station in the upper Brisbane Valley—killings that added to Indigenous resentment towards the British, already developing after their 1836 contact with Eliza Fraser and the other *Stirling Castle* castaways on Great Sandy Island to the north-west.<sup>28</sup>

Certainly, racial attitudes in nineteenth and early twentieth-century rural Queensland reflected the turbulent history of race relations in that colony. To build up her picture of perceived Indigenous savagery, Emily recounted the precautions taken by white settlers against Aboriginal attack, stating for instance that: 'All who left the town for the bush carried arms. It was not safe when travelling to camp alone'. Telegraph line repairmen worked in pairs for protection and travellers venturing outside Normanton made a practice of sleeping some distance from their camp fire, so as to disguise their actual location at night. Correspondence to the Colonial Secretary supports Emily's evidence. In 1874, officials based in Normanton wrote that it was 'positively unsafe to be out of doors after nightfall unless provided with firearms'. There were also fears that Aborigines would burn the town. Roberts, too, provides examples of white men afraid to travel alone during the 1870s for fear of Aboriginal attack.<sup>29</sup>

## Appeasing the audience

Emily's audience at the Pioneers Club most likely consisted of people who considered themselves to be superior members of colonial society and superior especially to Aborigines. Pioneers Clubs formed from ideas about national identity, which heightened during the 1880s. The concept of an Australian identity had begun around 1872 with the development a 'political training ground for the Australian-born'—the Australian Natives Association. Indicative of growing nationalistic sentiments, its membership by 1886 had risen to over 4,000 in nearly 60 branches. This early national feeling incorporated the notions of an 'Australia for the Australians'<sup>30</sup> and the exclusion from citizenship of 'aliens' such as the Chinese. National pride and exclusiveness therefore went hand and hand, and the development of Pioneers Clubs following the federation

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28 Evans, Saunders and Cronin 1993: 49; Yarwood and Knowling 1982: 195. Elaine Brown refers to a 'tradition of resentment towards Eliza Fraser' passed down to the Indigenous descendants of her rescuers, Brown 2000: 118.

29 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 29; Evans, Saunders and Cronin 1993: 45; Reynolds 1993: 49; Roberts 2005: 34, 38.

30 Coined by an Australian Natives Association (ANA) member. The ANA, membership of which was confined to white Australians born in Australia, grew out of the Friendly Society of Victorian Natives, Buxton 1977: 204–205.

of the Australian colonies on 1 January 1901 epitomised this marriage. The imperial attitude of white racial superiority necessarily prevented Indigenous people from being considered worthy of inclusion.<sup>31</sup>

The attitudes of separate racial identity and racial superiority found in the language and style of *Some of My Experiences* were therefore closely aligned to the supposed inherent values of Emily's assembled audience. She very likely pitched her representation of Aborigines in response to an expectation that her listeners were sympathetic to the views of settlers that saw Aborigines as barbarous subhumans without ethics or compassion.

The Pioneers Club that Emily Cowl addressed appears from her tone of reference to have consisted of female pioneers. An inclusive voice of mutual understanding with her audience, in relation to such feminine matters as a knowledge of female undergarments, the dangers of childbearing (although Emily herself was childless), and the foibles of husbands who knew nothing of the culinary arts, indicates a sharing, not only of cultural, but also of gender knowledge. She nevertheless adopted a 'Boy's Own' style of adventure writing, popular among men and women alike, to entertain her audience. This type of writing tapped into the nationalistic feelings of patriotic citizens of the newly established Commonwealth of Australia.

## 'Exciting' escapades

Physically separated from the Kurtjar, and not reliant on them as workers, Emily represented them as nuisances, who entered the town to pilfer 'buckets, tubs, pots, axes, tomahawks, clothes lines, anything portable'.<sup>32</sup> This observation complies with contemporary reports of the prevalence of Aboriginal looting in Normanton, a local official writing that, in 1874, 'nearly every house in the town' had been robbed.<sup>33</sup> To amuse her audience, however, Emily also included humorous anecdotes of Kurtjar daredevilry and sense of fun.

One example of theft was of four ducks, hanging from the Cows' veranda, awaiting a Sunday roasting. This occurred during the four to five months-long wet season, when food supplies ran low for blacks and whites alike. Ancestral memory and current research have established that the Kurtjar were largely coastal and river dwellers, heavily dependent on fishing. During the wet season, fishing became difficult because the Kurtjar were forced to move

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31 Lark and McKenzie 1988: 1, 3; *Memorandum of Association of the Australasian Pioneers' Club*, H J Gurd and Co., Sydney, 1915: 3–4. The term 'White Australia Policy' had been first enunciated in the Brisbane radical newspaper, the *Boomerang*, in 1888, Donegan and Evans 2001: 98.

32 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 27.

33 Evans, Saunders and Cronin 1993: 45.

to higher ground away from the coast. After colonisation, competition with superior European weaponry in the hunt for available food resources increased the Aborigines' vulnerability to hunger and malnutrition.<sup>34</sup> In the case of the white settlers, impassable roads meant that fresh provisions could not arrive, so Thomas Cowl resorted to shooting wild birds for the table. Displaying an ethnocentric attitude typical of white settler discourse in which Aborigines were seen to encroach on spaces 'owned' by settlers, Emily recalled that:

On this occasion ... [we] reserved two pairs [of ducks] for ourselves and gave the rest away. I plucked and prepared ours ready for Sunday and hung them under the back verandah in a cool place in front of our bedroom window. We left the window open when we went to bed, trying to get the room cool. Soon after midnight, we were lying awake feeling half dead in the sultry heat; the moonlight was streaming in the window; we saw a blackfellow fully armed with spears, etc., make a grab at the ducks; the string with which they were tied did not break, so he quickly snapped [sic] the legs with his fingers, and made off with the ducks – leaving the feet only for us.<sup>35</sup>

While the language of petty theft, the evocation of stealth, and the suspense of midnight lurking create an atmosphere of danger in Emily's retelling, the deed is nevertheless represented as having been performed quietly and innocuously.

The return of the Kurtjar a few weeks later provided Emily with her piece de résistance. She portrayed the moment with the immediacy of colloquial language and the tension of suppressed fear, recounting to her audience that:

We were in bed, my husband asleep, and there was no moon. Presently black forms appeared at the window. I awoke my husband and whispered to him not to move. The least motion in the curtains would have attracted the attention of the blacks who were armed with spears, and could easily have speared us where we were lying in bed. My clothes were on a sort of settee, placed under the window just as I had taken them off when retiring. We saw the blacks lean over the window-sill, take possession of all my clothes, and make off.<sup>36</sup>

Thomas Cowl ineptly gave chase. More successful were the Native Police, the armed and mounted Aboriginal policemen, led by European officers, who operated in the 'unsettled districts' against Indigenous peoples. As a self-governing British colony, Queensland had its own Native Police force, established under the guidance of the Commissioner of Police following the passing of the

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34 Bynoe 1992: 1–2, 24.

35 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 27.

36 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 28.

*Police Act of 1863*. Operating as a cheap form of law enforcement, it performed a similar role to various native mounted forces in African colonies and the native irregular cavalry in India. It had ‘no powers of law enforcement or crime prevention except in the case of indigenous people, and it actively participated in dispersion and decimation’. Notorious in Queensland, the Native Police force was, according to the nineteenth-century historian, William Rusden, a ‘machine for murder’.<sup>37</sup> During the early 1870s, two detachments of Native Police were stationed at Normanton.

When the Native Police found the Kurtjar,

They were wearing my things in a most grotesque and laughable way. One black fellow had on a certain garment of mine (no combinations in those days). I will leave to your imagination the result. Just fancy his black skin showing prominently – in the opening below the waist band of my white garment. A black gin had laced up my corsets and was wearing them on her head as a helmet and my stockings on her arms; another had on a skirt, another my bodice and no skirt, my chemise worn by another, and so on. This laughable description was given to my husband by the police officers.<sup>38</sup>

By referring to her ‘drawers’ and corset, Emily appears to have eschewed, in the interest of a good story, the strict moral code of modesty beholden of respectable women. Her sexual innuendo aims to titillate and perhaps shock her audience, and suggests that ladylike propriety was relevant only whilst in mixed company.

The Native Police ‘punished’ the Kurtjar. This term was one of the most common euphemisms for the murder of Aborigines. Emily’s reversion to a bland tone of explanation to describe this action indicates her confidence that she is complying with her audience’s racial views. In depicting the part played by the Native Police, she may also have been motivated by a utilitarian urge to provide her audience with an accurate account of events.

Emily’s story joins a rich literature of colonial reports of Aboriginal response to English clothing. An account by Janet Millett, wife of the Church of England chaplain at York, Western Australia, from 1864 to 1868, comes closest to the sort of hilarity, described by Emily, when Aborigines saw pieces of British female costume. Explaining a Balardung man’s reaction to her strange hat, Janet wrote that:

At the sight of me, (Isaac) burst into a loud guffaw, the cause of which was explained by his mistress, who said that I was the only woman

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37 Richards 1999: 1–2. Cf. Enders and Dupont 2001: 96–106; Roberts 2005: 259.

38 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 28.

whom Isaac had ever seen in a black beaver riding-hat, of the shape commonly called in the colony a “bell topper” ... he continued to stare at me and my hat ... and to chuckle merrily to himself.<sup>39</sup>

Emily's third example of Aboriginal pilfering reveals the traits of high spirits and risk-taking, recognised in young men of all cultures and times. She described how some Kurtjar men entered her house while the Cows were entertaining friends:

[A] party of men were sitting on my front verandah enjoying a smoke. I went inside to fetch something my husband asked for, and caught sight of a couple of black fellows in the half-hall, stealing the coats and hats hanging there. I raised the alarm and chase was given. The blacks were so closely pursued, they threw away what they had taken. They were all recovered, but the blacks got away.<sup>40</sup>

The uselessness of the garments to the Aborigines indicates that the Kurtjars' motivation was not theft, but was driven by an exuberant burst of excitement to indulge in adventure and fun. Given the results from previous bouts of merriment, this escapade showed bravery, if not foolhardiness.

The recognition of Indigenous ingenuity in stealing the cast iron flanges, which were used to hold the iron telegraph poles in the ground, is a surprising admission. Ignorant of the function of the line as a form of white man's communication, the Kurtjar used the iron to construct axes by securing it to a handle with vines and adhesive tree resins. Telegraph wire was similarly removed and used as spear points or as a valuable commodity for bartering. With the removal of the flanges, however, the poles fell down, breaking the line and forestalling Thomas Cowl's efforts to forge colonial progress in the north. Emily's failure to mention retribution is perhaps stranger, although in these cases the culprits were unseen and unknown, and blame unsubstantiated, making 'arrests' difficult. Conversely, Emily's outrage after the petty thefts at her house may have been fuelled by the insult of an intrusion by Aborigines into the sacrosanct spaces of her home, whether veranda, bedroom or hallway.

## H Rider Haggard or the American West?

Emily's final tale, her 'most exciting experience', replicates the sort of 'ripping yarn' of the romance genre of 'New Imperialism' adventure tales, popular between 1875 and 1914. H Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson and Rudyard

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39 Mrs Edward Millett, *An Australian Parsonage or, The Settler and the Savage in Western Australia*, Facsimile Edition, UWA Press, Nedlands, 1980 [1872]: 87.

40 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 28.

Kipling's stories and, in Australia, Rolf Boldrewood's *Robbery Under Arms*<sup>41</sup> are examples. By 1895, in a survey from an English school library, Haggard had far surpassed Sir Walter Scott in reader popularity.<sup>42</sup>

Robert Dixon has described these romantic adventures as 'a willed re-assertion of an imperial ideal on the wane' and declares that renewed vitality in the British race was most promising at the colonial frontier on the 'outskirts of Empire', where the 'machine is relatively impotent and the individual is strong'.<sup>43</sup> Characteristically romantic adventures of vigorous manhood, novels of the New Imperialism incorporated a masculine code of adventure and vitality. In Emily's exciting tale of escape from pursuing Aborigines, she chose to take equal precedence in the action with her husband—both partners fitting the stereotype of ennobling and invigorating figures at the outpost of British Empire and endeavour, in the mould of Haggard's protagonists.

Emily writes that, while enjoying an idyllic picnic, she and her husband were startled by an apparent Aboriginal 'attack':

Suddenly my eye caught sight of several large rolly-pollies of grass moving on the opposite side of the river towards the bank. We watched them for a few moments, then my husband exclaimed. "By Jove, wife! There's something wrong there – they are rolling against the wind." "Yes," I said, "and look – what are those black objects not far from yonder bank? Look! – each roll stops on the bank and then another black object can be seen in the river. See! – the objects are coming nearer – they are blackfellows swimming this way, evidently to attack us in this lonely place." Quick as thought we threw everything into the buggy, caught the mare, got her harnessed up were jumping on board when the first black made his appearance on the bank, our side of the river, a few hundred yards away. Others soon joined him.

They took a short cut for the Bluff under which we must pass by a more circuitous route to avoid being bogged in the salt pans. It was a race for life. If they reached the bluff first we were helpless. They would be above us – could hide, shower their spears and heavy stones upon us. Quite a number of blacks; they ran their quickest; we lashed our mare

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41 Rolf Boldrewood (Thomas Alexander Browne), *Robbery Under Arms*, first published in serial form by the *Sydney Mail* in 1882; and in book form by Remington, London, 1888.

42 In a list of books taken from a school library in a single term, published in *Longman's Magazine* in 1895. No details of the name or location of the school are provided, H Rider Haggard, *She: A History of Adventure*, Macdonald & Co., London, 1969 [1886], Introduction: p. xxi.

43 Dixon 1995: 62, 2–3.

until she galloped like fury, covered with white foam. We managed it. Got under the Bluff and passed, just as they began to ascend. We were safe.<sup>44</sup>

Replicating Haggard's literary style, Emily builds suspense by the use of short, sharp sentences and emotive expressions of panic. While Haggard's works are 'saga-like stories of adventure', Emily compressed her tale into a potted account, in which she imitated the tone of Haggard's 'dramatic vitality' by resorting to the same literary devices of 'rapid narrative, abundant incident, fertility of invention, and a strong sense of dramatic effect'.<sup>45</sup> After the chase, the heroes emerge happy and safe from the black man's potential brutality and subterfuge.

The elements of the chase and split-second escape in this tale are also reminiscent of formulaic American Western adventures: the Cows flee for their lives just as American frontiersmen fled from Native Americans in stories of the Wild West. Emily appears also to have adopted the landscape associated with northern American stories of escape, incorporating craggy outcrops and, curving beneath them, a winding track on which white victims were open to Indigenous attack, and beyond which they raced to freedom.

The idea of the hostile alien on the other side of the frontier is a literary convention, independent of the reality of contact in different localities. For the sake of a good story, Emily has connected to this ingrained perception. Obscure as she was, Emily was not the first writer to have exaggerated, even lied, for effect: William St Clair's biography of the novelist and adventurer Edward John Trelawny observes that Trelawny invented stories about his life in the navy, refers to his 'daring deception' and notes that the 'lies acquire a life of their own'.<sup>46</sup> Malcolm Elwin, writing in the introduction to *She*, states that the 'fanciful improbabilities of Haggard's romances derive[d] from the habit of imaginative speculation developed during his years in Africa'.<sup>47</sup>

Clara Sue Kidwell's discussion on the creation of myth shows how historical reality was obscured in the case of the Native American women, Pocahontas (who 'saved' the life of John Smith, leader of the Jamestown colony), Sacagawea, the leader of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and Dona Marina (La Malinche), Cortés' mistress. According to Kidwell, American Indian women have been converted in literary reconstruction to the stereotypes of 'hot-blooded Indian princess, a la Pocahontas, or the stolid drudge, the Indian squaw plodding behind her man'. Kidwell points out, however, that these are 'not real people'.<sup>48</sup>

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44 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 29.

45 Haggard 1969 [1886]: xviii, xix, xii.

46 St Clair 1977: 1.

47 Haggard 1969 [1886]: vii.

48 Kidwell 1992: 98.

Like the representations of Native American women, Emily's image of treacherous Aborigines complied with Australian colonial settler values. Her audience and later readers would have been receptive to the idea of Aboriginal attacks on unsuspecting couples or family groups. Emily, however, may have sought inspiration in one such event. In 1875, the year that the Cows moved to Cooktown, Aborigines killed William and Elizabeth Conn on their farm near Cardwell, 400 kilometres south of Cooktown. These notorious murders were 'talked about for years and written about for decades'.<sup>49</sup> In what seems to be her contribution to the now vast collection of historical fiction, Emily was perhaps fantasising that, 'This is how it *might* have happened to me'.

Whatever the historical or literary basis of Emily's tale, the denouement of her story involved brutal retribution against the Kurtjar by the Native Police. According to Emily, these police contingents 'punished [the Aborigines] severely – or rather, to use the correct phrase "dispersed" the tribe to which they belonged'. 'Dispersal' was, like 'punishment', another nineteenth-century euphemism for 'murder'. Striving to embrace the supposed attitude of her audience, Emily writes: 'You will understand how troublesome and dangerous the blacks were in those days'.<sup>50</sup>

Emily's projection of the Kurtjar as dangerous and violent is unsubstantiated in other parts of her narrative, where no actual attack, injury or death occurred at the hands of the Aborigines. The only injuries mentioned in her text are a gunshot wound to the hand of a white man, shooting at the Kurtjar, and a damaged leg, when Thomas Cowl chased Aborigines in his bare feet, revolver in hand, and fell over a log. Tony Roberts' research verifies low European mortality rates from Indigenous attacks in the Gulf Country. Whereas the known murders of Aborigines were numbered in the hundreds, Roberts cites the deaths of Europeans by Aborigines from 1874 to 1901 to be 21. None of these involved women or children. The unprovoked nature of the portrayed potential attack on the Cows, while fitting the British perception of savage Indigenous behaviour, has been found by Roberts to be an element seen rarely in Indigenous culture.<sup>51</sup>

## Kurtjar point of view

In contrast to Emily's exciting tales in which malignant Aborigines terrorised white settlers, two direct descendants of the Kurtjar present a different story.

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49 Richards 2008: 28; Jones 1961: 201–202.

50 Cowl, *Some of My Experiences*, n.d.: 29. For other common euphemisms for 'murdered' cf. Reynolds 1996 [1987]: 48–50.

51 Roberts 2005: 263–264. Roberts found that the majority of attacks on Europeans in the early years of contact resulted from the interference of white men with Aboriginal women, Roberts 2005: 108.

Collective ancestral memories compiled by Charles Bynoe in *Memories of Normanton*, and Rolly Gilbert, born in about 1901, have identified the pressures on the Kurtjar people after settlers began to compete with them for sources of food and freshwater. The Aborigines were driven away from their hunting grounds and their freshwater 'soaks', which they had dug for their own use. Privations, exemplified by the theft of Emily's soon-to-be-roasted ducks, became acute at the end of months of flood when food supplies were depleted and when all inhabitants, whether black or white, strove to survive in the landscape's boggy aftermath.<sup>52</sup> Emily provided an insight into Kurtjar need with her report that domestic fowls and pigs were popular targets for theft.

Indigenous memory confirms Emily's reference to the attacks made on their people by both settlers and the Native Police force. This period, beginning in the late 1860s, is remembered as the time of 'no good', when hundreds of Kurtjar men, women and children were killed by Europeans. Sometimes, the Native Police massacred whole camps. Gilbert's 'The Massacre at Wamakee' provides a graphic account of white men's killing of Aboriginal men and children. Some of the women were abducted by the men, only to be killed when signs of pregnancy became obvious. Any children who might have been born from these liaisons were killed at birth. Evidence of violent Aboriginal deaths, noted in Roberts' *Frontier Justice*, confirms Indigenous reports that the Gulf Country was a wild and dangerous place for Aborigines well into the twentieth century. Gilbert succinctly summarised: 'We were unhappy because the white people were bad'.<sup>53</sup>

Gilbert described those white landholders, who handed out flour and sugar to make damper, as 'good'.<sup>54</sup> The Cowsls, however, would not have qualified, either in location or generosity. Emily was essentially a townswoman, venturing only occasionally outside the town's confined limits where, as she explained, she felt that she was likely to be at the mercy of threatening Aborigines. She had no direct contact with the Kurtjar, considering them as outsiders that disturbed the local peace, albeit at times amusingly.

## Conclusion

Like Eliza Davies, Emily Cowl presented her exciting experiences at the frontier about 40 years after the events. While Davies engaged her readers with

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52 Bynoe 1992: 2, 26; Melba Casey and Rolly Gilbert, 'Kurtjar Stories', School of Australian Linguistics, Darwin Institute of Technology, 1986: 66.

53 Bynoe 1992: 2, 24; Gilbert, 'The Massacre at Wamakee', 'Living with the White Man', in Casey and Gilbert 1986: 77–80, 91; Roberts 2005: 1–2, 232–233, 258, *passim*.

54 Casey and Gilbert 1986: 64–65.

melodramatic language and exaggerated images of a 'different' type of humanity, Emily entertained her audience with humorous anecdotes, and with a story replicating a currently popular genre of frontier adventure tales. One enduring literary trope included in both texts (imitating the archetypal Eliza Fraser story) was 'providential escape'. Emily's suspenseful race against death was depicted, like Davies' miraculous salvation, as a lucky escape from fearsome Aborigines.

Although Emily Cowl assumed racial difference and highlighted a dangerous black-white frontier, her humorous accounts showed Aboriginal people as non-violent individuals. The ambivalent picture presents to the reader the disquieting image of settler violence aimed against frivolous and essentially harmless escapades, emanating from Indigenous high spirits and sense of fun. While Emily's own sense of humour could identify with the fun, she nevertheless compromised her tone in deference to the perceived expectations of her audience, and possibly her conservative publisher. To make her experiences palatable to her audience, Emily has deemed it wise to serve them on the imperial salver of British superiority. The representation of Aboriginal people therefore vacillates between vivid examples of Indigenous risk-taking, ingenuity and sense of the ridiculous to stereotypical interpretations of their dangerous, savage habits, worthy of the white man's retribution.

Because Emily was a town resident, who had refused any contact with Aborigines—she had declined to employ Indigenous domestic help—she was unable to bridge the gap to interracial understanding that characterised the writing of the three pastoral women, whose work is investigated in the following chapters. Emotionally distant as well as physically separated from the Kurtjar, she failed to accept them as people. By way of contrast, Jane Bardsley, a Normanton woman who lived on Midlothian station, north-east of Normanton, after her marriage to Thomas Atherton in 1895, interacted with the Indigenous women on whom she relied for help in household tasks—a shared endeavour which developed into a friendly female relationship.<sup>55</sup> Excluded from Emily's day-to-day experiences, the Aborigines were seen essentially as unwelcome intruders, who frequently encroached on what Emily perceived to be her own territory within the confines of Normanton. Having been insulated and isolated from the Kurtjar, she fostered an empathy with her audience and failed to identify with the Kurtjars' plight.

The appeal of Emily's presentation, however, depended on the power of her exciting stories, which she was determined to portray. In spite of her attempts to impose a contrary interpretation, Emily's selected episodes provide insights into the relaxed attitude of the Kurtjar towards the white settlers in the

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55 John Atherton Young (ed.), *Jane Bardsley's Outback Letterbook Across The Years, 1896–1936*, Angus & Robertson Publishers, North Ryde, NSW, 1987.

Normanton region during the 1870s. Although expelled from their land and already experiencing the nutritional privations that were later to debilitate the race, Emily's chosen examples depict the Kurtjars' non-violent actions and reactions in the face of colonisation. At least some of the Kurtjar could exhibit the hilarity of ridiculing British customs.

In spite of the clear vision of easygoing, carefree Aborigines, the strength of the colonial discourse of dangerous Aborigines prevailed in Emily's story. As if to quash any misunderstanding in her contradictory presentation, she included a reference to her own encouragement to exact retribution against the 'troublesome' Aborigines. Implicit in Emily's depiction, however, is Aboriginal authority, vibrant despite the settlers' attempts to control Indigenous actions with retributive violence against apparently innocuous behaviour.

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