LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

A Natural Penitentiary: Tasmania's geographical imaginary in Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life*

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Abstract:
Literature has the capacity to co-create the geographies it describes, with long-term repercussions for a place's identity locally and internationally. This article investigates how Marcus Clarke's 1874 novel *For the Term of His Natural Life* has influenced and shaped the Australian island state of Tasmania's popular geographical imaginary. The significance of *HNL* has been explored across diverse disciplines, particularly in its relationship with gothic literary traditions and convict history. This article brings together past research into the novel's influence on renderings of Tasmania's landscape through the unifying concept of geographical imaginaries. The effects of omitting Indigenous Palawa peoples is returned to, elaborating on Tasmania's 'wilderness' imaginaries by analysing underlying relationships with orientalism and dystopian renderings of the landscape. Engaging with this influential colonial depiction of Tasmania reveals shared origins with contemporary imaginaries, builds on the state's ongoing project of reconciliation with its violent past, and asks new questions of the island's postcolonial identity.

Keywords: Geographical imaginaries; orientalism, Marcus Clarke; settler-colonialism; Tasmania; utopia.

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Introduction

> Popular images of Van Diemen's Land today largely reflect fiction, or more accurately, a single work of fiction. One nineteenth-century novel, *For the Term of His Natural Life*, has done more than any history book to shape perceptions of convict life. (Boyce 2023: 2)

Australia's island state of Tasmania 'has been kept jailed for too long' behind gothic cliches, writes Tasmanian author Richard Flanagan (2023: xvi), in his introduction to the second edition of James Boyce's acclaimed work on Tasmania's history *Van Diemen's Land* (2023). Through the work of such decolonising artists and historians, as well as pioneering advocacy work by the Palawa/Pakana peoples of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community (hereafter referred to as Palawa), Tasmania has been shown to be a significant case study for the effects of fiction on postcolonial reconciliation (Schramm 2022). This article contributes to this project by focusing on the influential 1874 novel *For the Term of His Natural Life* (2009) by Marcus Clarke (hereafter *HNL*), analysing its impact on renderings of Tasmania's landscape through the concept of geographical imaginaries.

Tasmania is the southernmost state of Australia and is separated from the rest of the country by the Bass Strait. It has a mountainous, rainforested west coast and a more agriculturally viable east coast. The British began colonising the east in 1803, but eventually entered the west, building the Macquarie Harbour penal station in 1822. Tasmania, then known as 'Van Diemen's Land,' received most Australia-bound convicts, particularly repeat offenders (Boyce 2023: 2). With the colony's growing population, violent acts regularly displaced Palawa peoples from their traditional hunting grounds, escalating into the 1820s-1832 Black War (Ryan 2012: ch. 5). Eventually Palawa peoples were deported to the Wybalenna internment camp on the Bass Strait islands, and later erroneously regarded as 'extinct.' This context is important for understanding subsequent efforts to contextualise, or ignore, parts of Tasmania's history, including in fiction. Today, imagining Tasmania's landscape as an untouched wilderness appeals to tourism and state identity (Pocock 2022), but as argued by Weaver-Hightower (2018), also expresses shame and silence.

The Tasmania narrated by Clarke is situated within this history, and with the novel's publishing success, has outlived its journalist-turned-novelist creator. *HNL* is perhaps the earliest example of literature set in Tasmania to gain lasting popularity. It was socially subversive for depicting sexual violence (Barlow 2007) and convict cannibalism, was admired by British Prime Minister Archibald Primrose (1884), has been translated into German, Dutch, Russian, Swedish, and Chinese (McLaren 1982), and has been described as 'the first great Australian novel' (Howarth 1954: 276). But this novel is a product of its time. Recognising *HNL*'s influence on Tasmania's geographical imaginary is significant for colonial reconciliation and involves drawing together the novel's effects on Palawa peoples, conceptions of wilderness, convict tourism, and what these have meant for the state.

HNL follows the character of Rufus Dawes, a man convicted of a crime he did not commit, who spends his life in three of Australia's major convict penal stations: Macquarie Harbour, Port Arthur, and Norfolk Island (see Figure 1). Believing he is protecting his

mother's honour, Dawes refuses to reveal his identity as the aristocrat Richard Devine, while being tormented by the inheritor of his father's estate, Lieutenant and later Captain Maurice Frere. Dawes' failing sense of humanity is assuaged by fleeting contact with the sympathetic young Sylvia who later marries Frere, and the self-hating Reverend North who, it is later revealed, also covets Sylvia and committed the crime Dawes was convicted of. As Weaver-Hightower (2018: 20) suggests, Dawes mirrors Clarke himself, who migrated to Australia as a teenager after his father's death and his financial ruin, and harboured misgivings about his failures in Australia, including as a rancher.

Clarke was born and educated in England and lived in the Australian state of Victoria. Nevertheless, Clarke was one of the earliest writers in Tasmania's literary canon and has helped shape the Tasmanian Gothic literary genre (Davidson 1989; Mead 2016), fascinating and disturbing readers while etching an enduring, if imperfect, map for tracing Tasmania's geography and convict history. Clarke writes a generation after convict transportation ceased and Van Diemen's Land had renamed itself Tasmania to gain distance from the past (Boyce 2023: 1) – a time when former convicts ('old hands') were beginning to pass away. The original serial version of the novel began in the *Australian Journal* several weeks after Clarke returned to Melbourne from a brief trip to Tasmania in 1870, having been commissioned to write a series of articles on its convict past. In his later foreword Clarke justified his novel as a critique of the convict system. Nevertheless, this justification may also stem from critiques of the novel's serial version by those familiar with its locations, who accused Clarke of exaggerating the violence of Port Arthur compared to other prisons of its day (Haynes 2006: 59). Analysing Clarke's influence on Tasmania's geographical imaginary begins with recognising its role in cementing how the island's convict history would be remembered, and the failure of 'Tasmania' to escape these (Van) demons.

Some audiences may have first encountered Tasmania through *HNL*. Others may have learnt about it through artists influenced by Clarke, or later stage, film, and television adaptations of the novel. The full extent of *HNL*'s impacts on Tasmania are difficult to quantify but have been considered before (i.e. Barlow 2007; Haynes 2006; Hergenhan 1969; Howarth 1954; McCann 2004; Weaver-Hightower 2018; Wilding 1997). Herbert (2002: 22) quotes Tasmanian-born and Victoria-based journalist Martin Flanagan, saying 'Tasmania was colonised twice – first by England, then by Victoria. *For the Term of His Natural Life* was possibly the most powerful tool in the second colonisation.'

This article seeks to unify and build upon these analyses of *HNL*'s impacts on Tasmania by examining the novel's geographical imaginary. This approach includes situating *HNL*'s geographical imaginary within its historical context by referencing historians such as James Boyce's *Van Diemen's Land* (2023), Henry Reynold's *A History of Tasmania* (2011), Lyndall Ryan's *Tasmanian Aborigines* (2012), and Alison Alexander's *Duck and Green Peas! For Ever!* (2018), as well as work by literary scholars such as Rebecca Weaver-Hightower's *Frontier Fictions* (2018) and Rosalynn Haynes' *Tasmanian Visions* (2006).

Edward Said's (2019) critique of orientalism is helpful for engaging with implications of how Tasmania is depicted. Orientalism and Tasmania's gothic literary tradition are overlapping intellectual, literary, and colonial traditions that are cultural and geographic, self-

supporting and often essentialist, and at times supersede the subject matter they represent. Similar work has been done with Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra's term 'Aboriginalism' (1991), where the discursive subjects are Indigenous Australians. However, as discussed, the concept of geographical imaginaries is the main analytical tool used for unifying insights into the influence of Clarke and *HNL*. The related concept of imaginative geographies, as originally formulated by Said (Driver 2005), has also been informative because of its significance for postcolonial scholarship. Through this analytic, Clarke is not only re-situated in colonial histories of genocide and gothic literary traditions, but new comparisons can be made with utopian and dystopian views of Tasmania's landscape.

Figure 1: Map of Van Diemen's Land by John Dower, 1837. Public domain, accessed via Wikimedia Commons. Annotated to emphasise major convict penal settlements across time, the settlements of Hobart and Launceston, and the Wybalenna internment camp (not mentioned in *HNL*).

Geographical Imaginaries of Van Diemen's Land

I use the term 'geographical imaginaries' to refer to discrete examples of geographical imagination, for example Tasmania's popular geographical imaginary and Clarke's geographical imaginary of Van Diemen's Land. Through this usage, I define geographical imaginaries as real and imagined practices, social structures, and understandings of settings and landscapes that, when examined, allow a prying open of assumptions, stereotypes, and expectations within space and place, including relationships with power (Gieseking 2017). Geographical imaginaries are a central concept in this article not because I discuss an 'imaginary' work of fiction, but because of the concept's help in identifying how texts like *HNL* can co-produce geographies between agents and situations otherwise separated in space and time (i.e. Hones 2008). I similarly draw from the related concept of 'imaginative geographies' as first formulated by Said for its concern for colonialism and the power implications in how landscapes and places are narrated (Driver 2005: 239).

Before analysing the effects of *HNL* on Tasmania's geographical imaginary (and subsequently Tasmania itself) it is worth establishing some of the imaginaries Clarke mobilises about Van Diemen's Land. *HNL*'s geographical imaginary is a composite of different physical, social, and historical conditions. Clarke was influenced by his short visit to Port Arthur as a journalist and his research in the Melbourne library (Haynes 2006: 58), his moral convictions about the convict system (Colmer 1983), the distraught state of his emotions and personal affairs when writing (Hergenhan 1969), artistic trends and inspirations from Romantic and Dickensian traditions (McCann 2004), and presumably by the perceived demands of his intended audience and the feedback received over the course of the novel's iterations. As will be argued, these conditions and Clarke's social background as a British settler together inform the resulting legacy of Tasmania's image as distant, untouched, and devoid of history other than convict suffering, in turn justifying colonial settlement.

For Clarke's characters, nostalgia for Britain is a common refrain that characterises their associations with Van Diemen's Land's geography, both making sense of the unknown and highlighting their isolation. These comparisons and contrasts were common in the colony and a technique of settler-colonial projection (Weaver-Hightower 2018: 91), justifying colonisation by positioning the landscape as tailored to colonial purposes or by laying claim to the landscape through emphasising European labour and suffering. As will be discussed, reoccurring references to Port Arthur as a 'natural penitentiary' (Clarke 2009: 294; 323; 343) exemplifies the former technique while the martyrdom of Dawes to the isolated landscape, and its physical and psychological effects on his fellow convicts and gaolers (Haynes 2006: 52), exemplifies the latter. Thus, *HNL*'s geographical imaginary of Van Diemen's Land and its subsequent effects on later imaginaries of the island are socially and historically situated.

As Said (2019) highlights, the conceptual splitting of the world into the central civilisation of Europe and the exotic, static, backwardness of elsewhere has had significant and ongoing impacts on colonial societies. This 'othering' distinguishes between 'civilised' and 'uncivilised' peoples, often in artistic 'before and after' depictions showing the positive effects of civilisation on them (Driver 2005: 239). With the absence of Palawa peoples in the novel,

the landscape of Van Diemen's Land fills in for an uncivilised other. Clarke was writing a generation after the events of *HNL* and as such, like similar settler-colonial literature, audiences could compare and justify the effects of colonisation through the victimhood of early colonisers, and their descendants' hard-earned rewards (Weaver-Hightower 2018). This hardship, and the battle against moral corruption, are central themes of the novel, as shown by Clarke's (2009: 52) description of Dawes' transportation to Van Diemen's Land:

> It is impossible to convey, in words, any idea of the hideous phantasmagoria of shifting limbs and faces which moved through the evil-smelling twilight of this terrible prison-house. Callot might have drawn it, Dante might have suggested it, but a minute attempt to describe its horrors would but disgust. There are depths in humanity which one cannot explore, as there are mephitic caverns into which one dare not penetrate. (Clarke 2009: 52)

This suggestive passage describes the corruption of the prison ship and reads essentially as though they were sailing into Hades itself. Jacques Callot's *The Great Miseries of War* (1633) and Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (1321) both evoke dystopian themes. Indeed, European utopian literature is often closely related with colonialism. Not only have colonies represented utopian dreams for many settlers but, as Sargent (2010: 50) explains, 'collectively more literary utopias have been written and more intentional communities have been established in colonies than in the countries from which they originated.' Sargent (1999: 163) even lists Clarke as one of Australia's significant utopian authors for his work *The Future Australian Race*. *HNL* has been examined for its romantic and gothic themes, as well as themes of social Darwinism (Haynes 2006: 52). Analysing *HNL*'s geographical imaginary reveals shared traits within these themes, including utopianism, or dystopianism, connected through an orientalising depiction of the landscape.

Said (2019: 43) lists utopianism as a mode of thought ingrained within orientalism, giving More's 1516 book *Utopia* as an example of popular orientalism (2019: 118). Indeed, both Clarke and More produced social critiques set on islands 'discovered' by Europeans that depend on forced labour. Work by historian Alexander (2018: 3) exemplifies how Tasmania and the island of Utopia have regularly been compared. Much of Said's work discusses how colonial discourses project European desires onto landscapes and peoples, while neglecting their unique features and humanity. Indeed, the premise of *HNL* and the 'Orient' both depend on what Said (2019: 5) characterises as the near and far, rational and emotional, and human and exotic other. I am not arguing that orientalism extends to Tasmania so much as that Clarke's use of its literary tropes, such as Romanticism and social Darwinism, also includes a negative utopianism. By using Weaver-Hightower's analysis of settler fiction (2018) and Said's critique of orientalism (2019), the effects of dystopia in *HNL* are expanded on, revealing competing fascinations with Tasmania's geographical landscape and suppression of the ability to know the landscape on its own terms.

McCann (2004: 187) describes *HNL* as a deliberate pastiche of nineteenth-century textual forms, drawing its colonial readership into the sensibilities of metropolitan literary

culture through its reminiscence of Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, and Charles Dickens, among others. The effects of *HNL* on Tasmania's geographical imaginary are similarly hinted at in European literature. Jonathon Swift's 1726 novel *Gulliver's Travels* (2011) predates *HNL* and uses Tasmania as a reference point for the fantastical island of Lilliput (Alexander 2018: 6). While Tasmania is depicted as distant in this usage, by the time of H.G. Wells' 1898 novel *The War of the Worlds* (2009) Tasmania has also gained the connotations of an old world's encounter with the new, genocide, social guilt, and the struggle with nature, with Wells equating his Martian invasion with colonisation and the 'extermination' of Palawa peoples. While not directly attributable to *HNL*'s appearance in the interceding years, these connotations help show the solidifying of particular geographical imaginaries which can be analysed in relation to colonial guilt (Weaver-Hightower 2018).

In the following section 'Clarke's Van Diemen's Land' I explain how *HNL*'s significance for understanding Tasmania's geographical imaginary comes particularly from its influence on imaginaries and depictions of history. I then analyse the novel's role in narrativising Australia's identity through emphasising victimhood in convict transportation in 'Clarke's Aims.' In 'Clarke's Consequences' I focus on ongoing impacts from *HNL* today, including in tourism and the Tasmanian Gothic genre. Finally, in 'Omission of Palawa Peoples' I highlight the particularly significant implications for Palawa peoples, reconciliation, and imaginaries of 'wilderness.'

Clarke's Van Diemen's Land

Situating Clarke in his settler-colonial context reveals how five geographic features appear to have stood out to him, and how these features have been emphasised and reinterpreted from a colonial-serving perspective. These colonial imaginaries help form a legacy for how Tasmania's physical and cultural geography has subsequently been popularly imagined. These key features are distance, islandness, wilderness, Romanticism and the Tasmanian Gothic, and the absence of precolonial history.

To begin, Van Diemen's Land is portrayed as distant – a prerequisite feeling for gothic terror (Haynes 2006: 219). The island's characterisations are generally limited to a haunting nostalgia for somewhere far away and an emphasising of wilderness and ocean. Turbulent seas and the convict-named 'Hell's Gates' channel to access Macquarie Harbour are repeated and accentuated, the latter being referred to in at least four different chapters. As Clarke (2009: 98) writes about the penal settlement of Macquarie Harbour, the 'little town was set, as it were, in defiance of Nature, at the very extreme of civilisation.' In the period 1827–1846, when *HNL* is set, and to a lesser extent in 1870–1872 ,when Clarke first published instalments of his story in The Australian Journal, Tasmania was on the frontier of the British Empire. Tasmania is not only described as distant but made distant through this rendering, with tourism and news articles continuing to use similar language to characterise Tasmania today (Burton 2025). This, despite the premise of Tasmania's inaccessibility having since changed.

Clarke heightens the isolation of Tasmania by evoking an island-based European literary canon that his readers would be familiar with, including the struggle to return home in

Homer's *Odyssey* (750 BCE) and the survivalist exploits of Defoe's (1719) *Robinson Crusoe*. Characters directly reference the latter (Clarke 2009: 112, 122, 123). But this island isolation also brings reprieve. In the chapter 'The Coracle' (Clarke 2009: 170–175), Frere, Sylvia, and Sylvia's mother Mrs Vickers are marooned at Hell's Gates by a convict mutiny. Dawes finds them after returning from his own failed escape attempt and constructs a small boat from goat skin and seaweed to find rescuers. Separated from the convict system, power relations are rebalanced to their more natural and moral levels. Dawes' moral superiority is shown through his selflessness, hard work, and struggles against the uncivilised landscape, making him a greater asset than his gaoler and later tormentor Frere, and resulting in a bond of sympathy with the unobtainable Sylvia. McCann (2004: 186) explains how *HNL* juxtaposes the convict system's tyranny with the 'utopian absence of violence' in the untouched wilderness, reflecting the utopianism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, similarly present in Robinson Crusoe's adventure. Baldacchino (2012: 56) describes the latter as 'the enactment of a male and heroic paean to colonialism,' explaining how heroic encounters with untouched wilderness paint islands as places of self-discovery and authenticity, laying foundations for island tourism through this imagery.

The nature and wilderness of Clarke's Van Diemen's Land can be momentarily appealing to its characters, but are complicated by the gothic descriptions of more hostile features within the landscape. These features similarly emphasise isolation and island geography, while using emotive language like 'loveliest,' 'frowning,' 'bleak,' 'cheerless,' 'dreary,' 'terrors,' and 'grim.' As Clarke (2009: 95-96) writes:

> The climate of Van Diemen's Land is one of the loveliest in the world. Launceston is warm, sheltered, and moist; and Hobart Town, protected by Bruny Island and its archipelago of D'Entrecasteaux Channel and Storm Bay from the violence of the southern breakers, preserves the mean temperature of Smyrna[1]; whilst the district between these two towns spreads in a succession of beautiful valleys, through which glide clear and sparkling streams. But on the western coast, from the steeple-rocks of Cape Grim to the scrub-encircled barrenness of Sandy Cape, and the frowning entrance to Macquarie Harbour, the nature of the country entirely changes. Along that iron-bound shore, from Pyramid Island and the forest-backed solitude of Rocky Point, to the great Ram Head, and the straggling harbour of Port Davey, all is bleak and cheerless. Upon that dreary beach the rollers of the southern sea complete their circuit of the globe, and the storm that has devastated the Cape, and united in its eastern course with the icy blasts which sweep northward from the unknown terrors of the southern pole, crashes unchecked upon the Huon pine forests, and lashes with rain the grim front of Mount Direction.

Clarke continues this awe-inspiring, Romantic passage by describing Hell's Gates, the convict settlement of Macquarie Harbour, and the rocks in the harbour named after the vessels they have sunk. The attention to detail implies high accuracy, reflecting Clarke's style of blurring

journalism and fiction. The Tasmanian Gothic genre develops on the menacing and ethereal aspects of this Romanticism, and *HNL* is regarded as one of its earliest examples (Davidson 1989; Mead 2016). Similarly, the drama of Tasmania's battle with the elements continues today in tourism advertising and survival reality television such as *Alone Australia* (Burton 2025).

Clarke's contribution to the Tasmanian Gothic genre comes in part from his merging of the sublime with the macabre. As the character Sylvia states: 'Oh, how strangely must the world have been civilised, that this most lovely corner of it must needs be set apart as a place of banishment for the monsters that civilisation had brought forth and bred!' (Clarke 2009: 254). Van Diemen's Land's geography appealed, or was presented to appeal, to European aesthetics of landscape art and the ideal of picturesque, distant environments (Hore 2017: 49). As Reynolds (2011: 35) puts it, generations educated in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century 'had been prepared in Europe to find Tasmania beautiful.' Clarke also emphasises how barren and empty this picturesque setting is. Dawes' failed escape attempt in the featureless surrounds of Macquarie Harbour is one example, but the most dramatic is the cannibal Gabbett's escape from Port Arthur. Sensational in its time, *HNL* brought greater attention to this modified version of the real cannibal Alexander Pearce, who escaped with seven other convicts in 1822 and was the only survivor. The story has subsequently been retold in novels, films, documentaries, podcasts, and songs, and is given apocryphally as the origin for the name of Tasmania's Pieman River (The Age 2009). Tasmania's geographical imaginary is defined and rewritten through these stories, much like how Clarke reimagined the geographical location of Pearce's escape, as discussed in the following section.

Like many of his settler-colonial contemporaries, Clarke told the story of Van Diemen's Land as though it were empty and devoid of history. Palawa peoples are not mentioned in the 445-page novel. One potential exception is a fleeting reference to how 'sudden tempests affright the natives of the coast' (2009: 96), but since the passage is describing topography, storms, and Huon pine forests, Clarke is likely referring to flora. This is despite the novel's setting overlapping with the Black War from the 1820s to 1832 (Ryan 2012: ch. 5). No character, be they convict or officer, mentions raids by Palawa peoples that were discussed frantically at the time (Reynolds 2011: 53), nor the massacres of Palawa peoples, nor the 1830 Black Line military campaign, even though the latter was participated in by 10 percent of the colony's male population (Ryan 2012: 134). *HNL* is an early progenitor of popular imaginaries of Tasmania and its history, and Palawa peoples have been left out of its pages.

These five geographical features demonstrate how *HNL* co-creates a narrative of Tasmania that is deeply colonial, dramatising its environment under the pretence of accuracy. Tasmania's geography is depicted as distant and rugged, yet knowable through its appeal to familiar tropes such as the distant island, the battle with the elements, and the untouched wilderness. These five features are both utopian and isolating, separating characters like Dawes from the rest of the world. By reading Clarke through Said's work on orientalism (2019: 8), we may ask who *HNL*'s geographical imaginary serves. Doing so helps reveal how a British settler in Victoria helped co-create popular imaginaries of Tasmania while excluding the imaginaries, and the presence, of others.

Clarke's Aims

While *HNL* is historical fiction, it was published within the lifetime of many former convicts in Tasmania. This temporal proximity helps situate the text as a unique social and cultural commentary on Tasmania's penal system. As an expansion of Clarke's journalistic work on the history of Port Arthur, the novel encourages readings of *HNL* as informed commentary (Haynes 2006: 52). Clarke even includes appendices listing references he used for each chapter. The novel is thus not presented as fantasy but a realistic, if dramatised, account of the era. In Clarke's time, Tasmania was a subject of less literary interest than today, and few popular writers other than Mark Twain and Anthony Trollope had visited (Clarke and Johnston 2016: 6). With the popular success of the novel Clarke was not only marked as the author of the first great Australian story (Howarth 1954), but as bringing Australia's story to parlours and bookshelves beyond its shores. Clarke turned Australia's cultural cringe into the setting for Australia's own Victorian era novel, like an antipodean *Oliver Twist* (Primrose 1884) or an inverted *Great Expectations* (Smith 2009: 15). Indeed, Clarke's biographer McCann (2004: 187) regards placing 'a colonial readership in proximity to a metropolitan literary culture' to be one of Clarke's key aims.

To contextualise this aim, Clarke was English, well-educated, and resided in middle class Melbourne as a writer (Weaver-Hightower 2018: 20). He had visited Tasmania only fleetingly as a journalist in 1870 and conflates different parts of its geography. For example, the cannibal Gabbett is based on the real Alexander Pearce, but the escape was moved over 200 kilometres from the Macquarie Harbour penal settlement to the later penal settlement of Port Arthur on the east coast (see figure 1). As Boyce (2023: 2) writes, this change means Gabbett should instead be 'journeying through one of the most hospitable and benign environments for human habitation anywhere in Australia,' precluding his party's desperate situation. While Clarke is at liberty to service the needs of his plot, it remains that this plot depends on the image of Tasmania as a place of impenetrable, indeed interchangeable, wilderness. This image is part of a project to civilise Australia and its literature by encouraging a history of Romantic national victimhood. But the image lives beyond this context, hampering the premise of social justice that projecting victimhood was based on.

In the wake of the novel's adaptations and references in other media, we must notice what has been left out of *HNL*. The book begins with a single-page preface warning against prisoners being 'herded together in places remote from the wholesome influence of public opinion,' and 'submitted to a discipline which must necessarily depend for its just administration upon the personal character and temper of their gaolers' (Clarke 2009: 19). Clarke's depiction of real people and events contributes to the poignancy of this message, which is still relevant today. But depicting Van Diemen's Land as a convict dystopia overlooks examples of relative freedom and healthier lifestyles for many convicts compared to the poverty of Britain, and ignores the social variation among convicts as well (Boyce 2023). For Palawa peoples, it is not only colonial violence and conflict that is overlooked, nor the myth of their 'extinction' that is allowed. What is also overlooked is the adoption of some of the Palawa peoples' traditional knowledge and bush craft in the early colonial period, and its

unique influence and social ramifications for colonists (Boyce 2023; Reynolds 2011). In *HNL* cultural influences on Tasmania are essentially solely English, leaving little room to envision its diverse origins or imagine it through different cultural points of view, perhaps except for basic class divisions.

Defining Van Diemen's Land through its British convict heritage is of course understandable for a work of fiction using this setting. But as will be discussed more in 'Clarke's Consequences,' by portraying Van Diemen's Land as an amalgamation of general penal cruelty and corruption, Clarke's message about the convict system is imprinted onto the landscape. Again referring to Van Diemen's Land as a 'natural penitentiary,' Clarke (2009: 294) expresses the thoughts of the real Lieutenant Governor of the colony, Arthur:

> With these advantages of nature and art, the prison was held to be the most secure in the world… The worthy disciplinarian probably took as a personal compliment the polite forethought of the Almighty in thus considerately providing for the carrying out of the celebrated [rule book] 'Regulations for Convict Discipline.'

In *HNL*, the agency of convicts is limited to attempts at escape and suicide (Clarke 2009: 120). Chapter 65 is based on reports of convicts agreeing to murder one another to receive death sentences, and three children commit suicide by jumping from cliffs (Clarke 2009: 297, 299), despite these cases of child suicide having no basis in reality (Haynes 2006: 59). Boyce (2023: 9) pushes back on how the penal system is presented in *HNL*, arguing that while penal surveillance was influential in Van Diemen's Land, 'it did not determine its form.' By reproducing only the most gothic or dystopian events, Tasmanian society is truncated to the deadly prison. Settlers are only wives and daughters of officers. Female convicts are rare, and usually serve as one-line examples of corruption, for example officer's mistresses (Clarke 2009: 100). Assigned convicts – working for settlers rather than in prisons – are only shown through the character of John Rex, who is secretly a prison escapee, despite assigned servants composing over half the convict population during the period of *HNL* (Boyce 2023: 169-170). Readers may not even realise that convicts could serve their time and exit the penal system.

Clarke frames convict transportation as a system that separates criminals from the rest of humanity, entrenches criminality, distances them from their rights, and makes them reliant on their gaolers. Tasmanian historians like Reynolds (2011) continue to return to these themes today. The implication that Van Diemen's Land was devoid of humanity, however, is double-edged. It is compelling, though tragic, that Clarke (2009: 19) says in his preface his stance against the convict system is not only for 'Englishmen' but also the treatment of 'Indian-men' in places like Port Blair and France's New Caledonia prison. Tasmania's own Palawa peoples are not mentioned in the novel, and their co-creation of many recognisable geographic features of Tasmania are not discussed. As examined in 'Omission of Palawa Peoples,' the legacy of this silence is still felt today (Ryan 2012: Part XI).

Clarke's Consequences

As Herbert (2002: 21-22) explains, Tasmania remains a focal point for gothic and convict fiction, provoking backlash and controversy among some of the local literary community for narrow and circular depictions of the state by outsiders. Reflecting on a fiery panel with Tasmanian writer Richard Flanagan and New South Wales writer Frank Moorhouse, Herbert quotes Moorhouse's statement that 'Richard is a regionalist who has trouble accepting the fact that Tasmania is a gothic imaginative site which is any fiction writer's property and probably began with Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life*' (Clarke 2009: 22). Suffice to say, citing the consequences of *HNL* for Tasmania is not new. But engaging with its expression in geographical imaginaries can develop these debates.

The depictions of Tasmania aimed at tourists have long impacted local discourses about Tasmania's heritage, including the way particular landscapes, objects, sites, and places are engaged with (Smith in Clarke and Brozek 2021: 512). Clarke did not create Tasmania's lucrative convict tourism industry, but he has done much to define its parameters, sites of interest, and stories. Distance, cannibalism, suicide, wilderness, sexual violence, and corruption, all have become motifs in how convict sites are imagined. Haynes (2006: 61) identifies how Clarke shaped the influential convict history book *The Fatal Shore* (Hughes 1986), for example with his account of Hell's Gates in Macquarie Harbour: 'Geology had conspired with Lt-Governor Arthur to give the prisoners of the crown a moral fright as their ships hauled in.' Were the significance of these imaginaries in doubt, *HNL* is one of the few works of fiction available in the Port Arthur Historic Site gift shop.

Convict 'dark' tourism is economically and culturally significant for the state (Clarke and Brozek 2021), with almost half of tourists reporting visiting a historic site or attraction during their stay in Tasmania (Tasmanian Visitor Survey 2024). While *HNL* is not solely responsible for popularising convict tourism, Reynolds (2011: 248) notes how from the late-nineteenth century sensation-seeking mainland visitors pursued Tasmania's relics of the convict past with excitement because of their familiarity with the novel, upending local elite's plans to have this past forgotten (White 2016). The development of this unexpected convict tourism industry has had lasting effects on Tasmania's geographical imaginary. For example, after the Port Arthur penitentiary closed in 1877, attempts to build a free settlement called Carnarvon on the site were muddled by advertising material that continued to use its older name with its macabre connotations, with authorities eventually acquiescing in 1927 and the name formally being returned to Port Arthur (Haynes 2006: 67). In this way, tourism sites in Tasmania came to embody not just particular associations with place, but particular associations in time (White 2016).

This gothic imaginary has since been capitalised on in contemporary tourism sites and events like the Museum of Old and New Art 'MONA' and Dark MOFO, in conjunction with the Tasmanian Gothic genre in literature, art and media. As discussed, *HNL* has been fundamental in developing the Tasmanian Gothic genre (Davidson 1989; Mead 2016), characterising Tasmania's landscape and history through the uncanny, mysterious, and traumatic. MONA (the largest privately funded museum in the Southern Hemisphere),

alongside its annual winter festival Dark MOFO, attracts publicity and tourism through theatre of the macabre, dark, and outrageous (Clarke and Brozek 2021: 512). MONA elaborates on the dark tourist aesthetic of Tasmania and follows the tradition of exploiting Tasmania's gothic frisson. Both feature gothic installations about Tasmania, including an exhibition about *HNL* that emphasises distance through a focus on exile and oppression (Tasmania Times 2022). Being dependent on narratives of the gothic in Tasmania (Franklin 2019), these contemporary cultural sites can be interpreted as in dialogue with longer gothic and macabre traditions established in *HNL*. These sites would perhaps be quite different had the novel not been written.

Omission of Palawa Peoples

HNL cultivates a foundational mythos of suffering and toil, placing Tasmania at the heart of Australia's origin story. Indeed, Dawes is almost Christ-like in how he bears his suffering for the dignity of his mother in Great Britain, and in resisting the satisfaction of corrupted gaolers such as Frere (Howarth 1954: 274). This mythos helps legitimise settler-colonial claims to the land by presenting colonisers as victims of the English establishment more than perpetrators (Weaver-Hightower 2018: 20). But this narrative encounters what Hodge and Mishra (1991: 26) call the 'Aboriginal problem': in other words, how to discursively construct and manage Indigenous Australian peoples in a way which does not interfere with colonisation's legitimacy.

HNL's geographical imaginary of Van Diemen's Land is necessarily influenced by the colonial period in which it was written. By not acknowledging Palawa peoples, *HNL* perpetuates what was by then the well-established argument of terra nullius. Terra nullius, or 'empty land,' refers to a reframed Roman legal principle used to justify the colonisation of peoples and lands not incorporated into a system of governance familiar to European powers (Ryan 2012: 44–45). As part of this colonial context, Weaver-Hightower (2018: 23) similarly analyses the absence of Palawa peoples as a response to feelings of guilt on the part of Clarke who was himself a migrant, would have had knowledge about the violent events of colonisation as a journalist, and would likely have had first-hand interactions with Indigenous Australians in Victoria when attempting a career as a rancher.

While perhaps more recognised than it was a generation ago, Palawa man and scholar Greg Lehman (2013: 205) explains how the story of the Black War against Palawa peoples in Tasmania is still often spoken of in hushed tones and avoided in the state's tourist brand. Lehman and historians like Reynolds (2011: 38) and Ryan (2012: 44) have highlighted the harm of terra nullius for Palawa peoples, and how Tasmania's wild, exotic, and distant image is highly contextual. *HNL* has been an introduction to Tasmania for many people and has played a role in its historical tourism, likely encouraging the view that there are no Indigenous peoples in Tasmania or, as erroneously perpetuated by H.G. Wells in his foreword to *The War of the Worlds* (2009), that they were all eradicated. Indeed, following the death of the Palawa woman Truganini shortly after *HNL* was published, the mantra that there were no more Tasmanian Indigenous peoples became treated as common fact (Clarke and Brozek 2021:

512), stifling not only recognition of the descendants of surviving Palawa peoples, but social provisions, land rights, and the upholding of entitlements and agreements for ongoing generations (Ryan 2012).

By rendering places like Tasmania as necessarily distant, mythical, and strangely empty, Colonial gothic can be read as an orientalising genre (Van Toorn 1992: 90). In other words, Van Diemen's Land's geographical imaginary in *HNL* uses a similar practice of othering and suppressing to that critiqued by Said. As with the utopian elements of the novel discussed earlier, depictions of Tasmania as Romantic, empty, untouched, and essentially pure in its hostility to humanity, preclude recognising the landscape's diversity, the diverse Palawa peoples, and the two's strong interrelationships. Tyner (2012) gives historical examples of how utopian geographical imaginaries have been used to enact and justify genocide. The orientalism in *HNL*, which is related to utopianism, is similarly premised as much on the erasure of people and space as imagining something new. Even with *HNL*'s themes of distant oppression, abandonment, and dystopia, the Black War and displacement to the Wybalenna internment camp are erased, despite Palawa transportation exhibiting these central themes more intensely than *HNL* itself (i.e. Ryan 2012: ch. 14). But it is Clarke's narrative that has been published in five languages and is still in print 150 years later (McLaren 1982), not the place identities known to Palawa peoples, nor even the narratives many Tasmanian settlers told about themselves as free men (White 2016).

Investigating the legacy of *HNL* requires acknowledging the humanitarian ambitions of its author. But these ambitions are highly contextual. Clarke does not, or was not able, to challenge the British colonial project. Indeed, he participates in this project by using the terra nullius discourse that legitimised colonial claims to the land. Ramifications for these colonial claims continue today in Tasmania and Australia more broadly, including political debates such as the recent Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum and movements to change the date of Australia Day or 'Invasion Day' (Kennedy 2023). Indigenous characters are still underrepresented in fiction, including in Tasmania, and changing these representations is a necessary component of responding to these political debates (Schramm 2022).

The omission of Palawa peoples renders Tasmania as a wilderness. As Pocock et al. (2022: 1031) summarise: 'The creation of a "wilderness" in Tasmania fulfils a utopian imaginary of a returning to nature, a place undisturbed by the modern world and devoid of its daily stresses.' This image of Tasmania's unspoilt beauty has contributed to the state's influential conservation movement, including having one of the world's first green political parties, but simultaneously downplays Palawa peoples' presence in the landscape (Pocock et al. 2022: 1030–1031). *HNL* is not specifically an environmentalist novel, but contemporary discourses about Tasmania as a green Eden trace their heritage to the same orientalism and utopian elements present in Clarke's Van Diemen's Land (Alexander 2018: 170–180). From its role in the Tasmanian Gothic genre and its ramifications for Palawa peoples and 'wilderness,' the effects of Clarke's depictions of Tasmania are widespread, and emblematic of continuing postcolonial challenges for the state today.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I asked how *HNL* has influenced and shaped the Australian island state of Tasmania's popular geographical imaginary. To answer, features of Tasmania's postcolonial identity are reflected and magnified through the novel. These features range from the more direct, such as encouraging the convict tourism industry and helping promote the continued use of place names associated with the era like Port Arthur, to the indirect, such as downplaying the existence of Palawa peoples and encouraging the mystique of Tasmania's 'wilderness.' In other words, a book purposed with drawing attention to Tasmania's past convict conditions through a basically fictionalised setting of Tasmania has, over time, also helped constitute Tasmania.

Clarke combines colonial imaginaries, identity building and genuine social critique in his account of convict transportation in Van Diemen's Land. *HNL* has humanitarian elements, drawing attention to the cruelties made possible within this system and the exotic, distant landscape, including sexual violence, suicide, cannibalism, and the corruption of both convicts and gaolers. But this depiction of the land as an empty wilderness, along with the novel's many adaptations and cultural impacts, popularises an image of Tasmania from a highly contextual vantage point. The absence of Palawa peoples in Tasmania's popular imaginary has for generations been a particularly significant burden for reconciliation and land rights. This non-recognition has persisted until relatively recently despite the fact that experiences of Palawa peoples, such as those within the Wybalenna detention camp, demonstrate distant oppression, abandonment, and dystopia more intensely than *HNL*.

Clarke's narrative of injustice and struggle fits then contemporary trends of colonial nation building in Australia (Hodge and Mishra 1991: 26). The novel blends fiction and journalistic extracts, essentially deliberately presenting itself as accurate and based in truth, encouraging learning about Van Diemen's Land through the text (Flanagan 2023; Herbert 2002). Indeed, the novel is still commonly available in sites like Port Arthur's gift shop. However, *HNL* focuses on the most gruesome convict history, changes or creates events, and alters or simplifies geographical conditions, for example in Gabbett's escape from Port Arthur. While defining and implementing accuracy in fiction is a Pandora's box, the novel's popularity and the way Clarke's preface and appendices frame *HNL* as both historical record and narrative, means these differences can have real effects.

Why return to a colonial text that does not engage with the existence of Palawa peoples? Are there no newer, more progressive representations of Tasmania? It is exactly because of colonialism's legacies that Clarke remains relevant to Australia's island state, and other postcolonial societies. It is exactly because of *HNL*'s role in shaping Tasmania's geographical imaginary into that of the natural penitentiary that Clarke must be returned to. To recognise how the distant, the wild, and the utopian impacts perceptions of Tasmania, to see this in genres like Tasmanian Gothic, and to engage with and use this discourse carefully, we must know their influences. By witnessing how stories can co-create place, we can strive towards popularising more inclusive stories that promote presence, rather than absence.

Note

[1] An Ancient Greek city located at a strategic point on the coast of the Aegean Sea, now the Turkish city of İzmir.

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