

Investigating Arthur Upfield

Investigating Arthur Upfield:
A Centenary Collection of Critical Essays

Edited by

Kees de Hoog and Carol Hetherington

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-3452-1, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3452-0

This collection of critical essays on the works of Arthur Upfield was compiled and published to mark and celebrate the centenary of his arrival in Australia from England on 4 November 2011.



Arthur Upfield ca.1930

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PREFACE

Arthur William Upfield was born in England on 1 September 1890, and first arrived in Australia at Adelaide on 4 November 1911. Apart from serving with the Australian Imperial Force in Egypt, Gallipoli, England and France during the First World War, he lived and worked in Australia for the rest of his life. He passed away on 14 February 1964.

He created fictional Detective Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte (better known as Bony) of the Queensland Police Force who features in twenty-nine crime detection novels written over forty years from the 1920s to the 1960s. Upfield also wrote another eight published books, and more than two hundred and fifty published short stories and articles. From the early 1930s he was one of the few freelance writers in Australia to make a living from his writing. Initially his books were mainly published and sold in the United Kingdom and Australia, but he struck gold in 1943 when the Bony novels began to be published in the United States. He is now recognised as the first Australian professional writer of crime detection novels.

So far as we, the editors, are aware the centenary of Upfield's birth in 1990 was not marked or celebrated in any way, and we hope to atone for that omission by compiling and publishing this collection of critical essays on his works. They are substantial literary analyses, all written by academics or scholars, and not simply reviews of his books or articles for "glossies" designed to promote his books.

We found a few essays from the 1970s, and some more from the 1980s; the number more than doubled in the 1990s and increased again in the 2000s. Of the twenty-two articles selected, thirteen were written in Australia, eight are from the United States, and one is from the United Kingdom. Two from Australia are extracts from Ph.D. theses, and have not been published previously.

They are presented in chronological order of publication to give readers a sense of the evolution of criticism about Upfield's works. The first, an epitaph to Upfield by Pamela Ruskin written in 1964, is included to provide some background for readers not familiar with his works.

Cambridge Scholars Publishing guidelines for manuscripts required us to convert references and notes for most of the articles to comply with the *Chicago Manual of Style*, and to make some other formatting changes. Some contributors chose to revise their essays before they were reprinted,

and we added references to some of the earlier essays. Otherwise we corrected only typing and other obvious errors. To preserve the integrity of the articles, we did not standardise spelling or references.

We are indebted to the authors who wrote the articles in this collection. Without them, of course, this anthology would never have been conceived. Also, we are grateful for the permissions to republish the articles from the copyright owners and previous publishers.

The articles we initially considered for inclusion were identified from many sources that include *AustLit*¹ and bibliographies in various books and essays. Copies were obtained with the help of many sources, but in particular we acknowledge the National Library of Australia, the State Library of Western Australia, the State Library of Victoria, the University of Queensland Library, and the Reid Library at the University of Western Australia.

We thank Cambridge Scholars Publishing for publishing this book, and also the board of Bonaparte Holdings Pty Ltd, the manager of Arthur Upfield's estate, for endorsing this project.

Kees de Hoog

¹ *Austlit: The Australian Literature Resource*, <http://www.austlit.edu.au/>.

INTRODUCTION

In her obituary tribute to Arthur Upfield, the first essay in this collection, journalist Pamela Ruskin, Upfield's long-time friend and literary agent, poses the question as to "whether death will bring him the sort of recognition he always hoped would come to him in Australia". This book aims to provide an answer to her question: its intention is to present a selection of responses to Upfield's work that are serious and scholarly, originating both in Australia and overseas. The essays, apart from Ruskin's epitaph, date from 1974, a decade after Upfield's death, and the first Australian contributions are generally later than the American—an implicit comment on the differences between the literary and cultural environments within the two countries at the time.

The absence of serious critical attention to Upfield's work during his life-time, alluded to by Ruskin, is confirmed by the dates of the essays. Upfield was outspoken about his lack of recognition as a writer, which he attributed to the snobbery and pretension of a closed literary elite. There was bad blood between himself and the influential husband and wife duo of critic Nettie Palmer and writer Vance Palmer. Nettie Palmer reviewed Upfield's early novel *The Sands of Windee* dismissively and Upfield never forgave her. In a letter to his friend, fellow author J.K. Ewers, Upfield commented "one day I'll cut her throat".¹ Upfield did resort to violence in this regard but it was fictional. The Palmers are savagely lampooned in one of the Bony mysteries, *An Author Bites the Dust*, although here it is Vance Palmer (thinly disguised as Mervyn Blake) who is murdered by his wife.

Richard Nile ("Pulp Fiction" in this volume) rehearses the plot of this novel as a prelude to his examination of the role of the Palmers and others in their attempts to establish a "national aesthetic".² Nile's essay is one of the first to draw attention to the "tensions that exist between the makers of a national literature ... and popularisers such as Upfield who wrote novels

¹ Arthur Upfield, Letter to J.K. Ewers, 17 July 1934, Archive of Patricia Kotai-Ewers.

² Richard Nile, "Pulp Fiction: Popular Culture and Literary Reputation", 144 in this volume.

as a commercial enterprise;³ it contextualises the deliberate eschewing of popular culture by the literary establishment in 1930s and 1940s Australia. This was not personal; it was neither specifically directed at nor confined to Upfield and indeed it was to continue into the 1970s as attempts to establish a national critical culture, and later the study of Australian literature in universities, gained momentum. Stephen Knight in his pioneering work on Australian crime fiction has also commented on the “exclusion of popular culture from the academy”. He points to the “academic and critical treatment of the genre” in Australia, observing that “Local literary historians have not made crime fiction, being a popular form, part of their literary history”.⁴

We hope that this selection sheds some light on the extent and nature of critical responses to Upfield over time, demonstrates the type of recognition he has received and highlights the way in which different preoccupations and critical trends have dealt with his work. Upfield’s fictional detective, the mixed-race Detective Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte, is the principal focus of all the essays. Yet while Bony is always centre stage, the types of critical enquiry vary across time and place. The representation of race and nation preoccupies the Australian critics until quite recently when a new interest in critical reception, readership and publishing history emerges in Australian studies; American popular culture and postcolonial scholars, on the other hand, engage more with the novels as fiction, exploring themes more traditionally the province of literary criticism.

The first Australian essays in this selection approach Upfield not from a literary but from anthropological or sociological standpoints, focusing on his depiction of Aboriginal culture and the attitudes expressed in his work. Heather Parish’s 1974 essay discusses prevalent and changing Australian racial attitudes as expressed in Upfield’s works; it was published not in a literary journal but in *Issue: South Australian Journal of Social, Political and Cultural Comment*. Similarly, Basil Sansom’s semi-playful address to a gathering of academic anthropologists in 1980 was published in *Anthropology News*. However, even from the 1980s, when popular and genre fiction begin to attract academic attention, most Australian writing about Upfield reflects a preoccupation with historical and racial issues. Kay Torney’s essay “Terra Nullius: Bony in the Deathspace” (1996) concentrates on those novels which portray Aboriginal life, culture and characters and provide material for discussion of genocide, child-stealing

³ Nile, “Pulp Fiction”, 140.

⁴ Stephen Knight, “The Case of the Missing Genre: In Search of Australian Crime Fiction,” *Southerly* 48.3 (1988): 241.

and “cultural vandalism”; the novels are read primarily as documents of cultural and historical interest. Two other essays presented here have a similar focus—Tamsin Donaldson, in 1991, and more recently Russell West, in 2003, each compare Indigenous author Sally Morgan’s *My Place* with Upfield novels as examples of Indigenous detection. Considered together their essays work off each other in interesting ways: the novels they discuss are different, *The Barrakee Mystery* and *Bony and the Black Virgin* respectively, and these are read against different temporal backgrounds, but both essays are concerned with “the capacity of an Indigenous investigator to read Australian history for traces of crimes hidden by the passage of time”.⁵ West gives more emphasis to fictional conventions and narrative techniques, but both essays essentially read the novels as foils for the social, national and racial issues they expose. Race and nation are also key concerns in Glen Ross’s contribution; he examines the Bony series as narratives of nation, particularly the way in which the character of Bony enables Upfield to mediate the gulf in the national psyche between black and white cultures. However, in his consideration of Bony as a cross-cultural mediator Ross moves closer to an assessment of the novels as products of the detective genre, noting that “in the end, however, Bony was simply a textual device used to help sell books, and Upfield’s correspondence reveals a readiness to transform the character into whatever the reading public might desire”.⁶

While a painful coming-to-terms with an exploitative colonial past has dominated the work of Australian scholars and critics, all eight of the twenty-two essays in this volume which originate from America focus more on Upfield’s achievements as a practitioner of the craft of fiction within a particular, well-defined fictional genre and in comparison to similar authors in other literatures. America was much earlier than Australia in recognising popular and genre fiction, including crime fiction, as legitimate subjects for serious discussion and study: two of the earliest of the essays here, John Cawelti’s “Murder in the Outback” (1977) and Ray Browne’s “The Frontier Heroism of Arthur Upfield” (1986), are both by established scholars of popular literature. The themes addressed in the American essays include many that are traditional in literary studies: the concept of the frontier (Browne), themes of time and nostalgia (Coe), and the portrayal of women (Howe). They also look forward to the widespread and strong interest in Upfield as an early creator of a popular fictional convention—the “ethnic detective”—a favourite subject of study for both

⁵ Russell West, “Sally Morgan’s *My Place* as Australian Indigenous Detective Narrative,” 177 in this volume.

⁶ Glen Ross, “Bony as Grotesque”, 121 in this volume.

anthropologists and literary critics in the crime fiction and postcolonial studies areas: James Pierson's essay is a case in point, as are Murray S. Martin's, Marilyn Rye's and Margaret Lewis's.

Returning to the Australian contributions, the final three essays in the volume can usefully be grouped together and to some extent share Richard's Nile's earlier focus on the political economy of literature: readership, reception and reputation, and publishing history. John and Marie Ramsland offer a re-assessment of Upfield's works for their "historicity of a disappearing culture";⁷ my own "In Their Different Ways, Classics" is a plea for their recognition as fine examples of their literary genre. However both these contributions, together with "Bony at Home and Abroad", are also concerned with readership and marketing in both North America and, in translation, in Europe, particularly contemporary France.

Bony has been the key to Upfield's success. An unlikely, even audacious creation in the social climate of 1929, he has continued to exercise an imaginative hold over generations of readers: speculation about the basis for his name and character, both in real life and literature, is seemingly endless. Three pieces in this selection focus particularly on him. Travis Lindsey's thesis chapter "The Genesis of Bony" looks behind some of the popular myths surrounding Upfield's creation, paying careful attention to archival material and possible literary antecedents. The other two, in contrast to the mostly academic discussions in this volume, are responses to Bony from creative writers. One is non-fiction, a personal acknowledgement by American writer Tony Hillerman of Bony as the source of inspiration for his own highly-regarded fiction featuring part-Navajo detectives Joe Leaphorn and Jimmy Chee. The second is a short story, one of a series of several by Australian author Mudrooroo, featuring another fictional Indigenous policeman, Detective Inspector Watson Holmes Jackamara of the Black Cockatoo Dreaming—at once a recognition and a criticism of Upfield's character. Numerous themes and concerns expressed throughout the other pieces in this volume—questions of authority, legitimacy, cultural appropriation—come into play here in contrasting these two pieces. Tony Hillerman, like Upfield, is a non-indigenous creator of an indigenous character; Mudrooroo is a writer who claimed Indigenous heritage but whose own claims of indigeneity have been called into question.

For an author commonly regarded as under-recognised, Upfield has received a surprisingly large amount of attention in academic circles. This

⁷ John Ramsland and Marie Ramsland, "Re-assessing Arthur W. Upfield's Napoleon Bonaparte Detective Fiction," 222 in this volume.

selection of twenty-two essays from the many published in the forty years since Upfield's death is a testimony to the interest his work continues to provoke from a wide range of view points and across several countries. It was not possible to include some essays written in French and German. And although we have been unable to include anything by Stephen Knight because the broad thematic style of his work does not lend itself to the format of the present collection, we would like to pay tribute to the importance of his contribution to the field. Knight was the first literary academic in Australia to comment on Arthur Upfield's work. His 1988 essay on crime fiction, "The Case of the Missing Genre", revealed a "vigorous area of literary culture" ignored by scholars and literary historians. This work and its sequel, *Continent of Mystery* (1997), paved the way for further discussions of mystery writers by making them academically respectable.

There has never been any question about Arthur Upfield's popularity as a writer; his acclaim is widespread and remarkably long-lived; he still has a significant readership world-wide, as several of the articles here show. Detective Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte will almost certainly retain a permanent place in the gallery of famous fictional detectives. In 1963, Upfield was quoted as asking "What is my place in Australian literature?" and answering "I haven't one. I'm not literary".⁸

But concepts of the literary vary and change across time and place. We hope this volume, published a century after his arrival in Australia, demonstrates that Upfield can be considered "a literary man", with a place not only in the international annals of crime fiction but also in the literary and cultural history of the country he came to love so passionately.

Carol Hetherington
The University of Queensland

⁸ "He Won't be a Literary Man", *Readers Review: For Members of the Readers Book Club* 10.12 (October 1963): 1.

ARTHUR UPFIELD: AN EPITAPH

PAMELA RUSKIN

“To be a success in Australia, you must work somewhere else; for Australians are constitutionally unable to appreciate their own creative workers unless they are living abroad or dead. At present, I’m not interested in the former condition and I’m not really in a hurry to achieve the latter one.”

Australia’s ace mystery writer, Arthur Upfield, wrote that in a letter to me, six years ago. Now he has fulfilled the latter condition too, dying alone at his home in Bowral of a heart disease that had wrecked his health for the last four or five years.¹ It remains to be seen whether death will bring him the sort of recognition he always hoped would come to him in Australia.

During his last years, Upfield did, in fact, acquire a great measure of the fame he had battled for so hard and so long. Consistently good reviews welcomed most of his new books, but, in contrast to the superlatives that were lavished on his work in America and Western Germany, and even in Great Britain, the more restrained praise offered by Australian reviewers, interlaced with a due appraisal of his limitations, seemed to him rather half-hearted. He resented very much the attitude that because he wrote mystery stories, he wasn’t to be considered a serious writer.

Yet, above all, Upfield was an honest man; a craftsman who knew his own faults as a writer, admitted them freely and strove hard to correct them. He was human enough to dislike attention being drawn to them in print.

Arthur Upfield’s success rested on one main plank. He created a detective whom Anthony Boucher, crime editor of the *New York Times*, called the most original fictional detective of the last twenty years.² He

¹ Ed.: Upfield died on 14 February 1964.

² Anthony Boucher, “Review of *The Bushman Who Came Back*,” *New York Times*, 23 June 1957, section 7: 18.

was the suave, urbane half-aboriginal Detective Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte who combined in himself the sensitivity and almost mystic intuition of his aboriginal mother, with the sophistication and educated intelligence of his white father.

It was Upfield's constant delight that his readers all over the world reacted to "Bony" much as a wider reading public had reacted to Sherlock Holmes, and thought of him as a real person. He received hundreds of letters addressed to "Bony", and even newspapermen, much to his amusement, would question him closely to find out more about this blue-eyed, courteous sleuth who bucked authority, never lost a case, and treated women as though they were all princesses.

Bonaparte was, as Upfield told me very often, a real person. He was based on the half-caste son of a station owner, on whose property in the Darling Downs the young Arthur worked. This man was, like Bony, university-trained and wholly civilised, yet he too felt the call of his mother's tribe, and possessed many of its skills. Bony is thus four-fifths fact and only one-fifth fiction.

Whatever the balance, Bony was the kingpin in the structure of Arthur's success. He knew it and was never tempted to write a book in any other form, although he did write four romantic novels in his early days, before Bony was conceived.

What sort of a man was Arthur Upfield?

He was a tough, irascible, wiry man. He had slate-coloured eyes, a thin trap of a mouth and ears like jug handles. He spoke almost through clenched teeth and was thus the despair of radio interviewers. His truculence hid a good deal of shyness. He knew Australia as few know it to-day. His Australia was not the Australia of big cities, which he believed were pretty much the same everywhere and which he loathed anyway. He loved the outback; the hot thirsty plains baking under the sun, the endless quiet of the bush night, the roistering companionship of the small country pub, where weeks of hard-earned wages went down the hatch in one glorious bender, ending in oblivion and a headache.

To meet, he was as dinkum an Aussie as you'd find anywhere; yet he was an Englishman. According to his own account, he was the black sheep of a yeoman Sussex family. He felt smothered by the prospect of the respectable white collar life that awaited him there, and utterly refused to settle down. Armed only with an overweening passion for Dickens and H.G. Wells, implanted in him by a solicitor uncle, and a fierce independence, Upfield was shipped off to Australia with his family's relieved blessing and some letters of introduction which he disdained to use. Immediately he fell hopelessly in love with the outback. "I clung to it

till my teeth fell out," he said later.

As the years passed, Upfield's knowledge of Australia grew. He worked a mule team and was a boundary rider on a camel station in Western Australia. He dug opals at Coober Pedy, carried his swag on a bicycle without pedals all over Queensland and New South Wales, picked grapes, sheared sheep and took a job as a shearers' cook while, encouraged by the owner's wife, he wrote his first book, *The House of Cain*.

In those days, every swaggie and station hand knew and loved the poems of Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson and Adam Lindsay Gordon, and would recite and talk about their favourites round the camp fire at night. This, Upfield was to say very often, was the true voice of Australia, and it showed a pride in the writers who belonged to Australia which is less evident to-day.

After serving in the Australian Imperial Force for more than four years of World War I, Arthur was more than ever in love with his adopted country. It was about this time that he started writing, but his first novel wasn't published until 1928. Just before Christmas, 1963, his thirty-second novel was on the bookstalls. In those thirty-five years, Upfield worked and travelled, and battered his way to success. He wrote about Australia for *World Wide Magazine*. He was a contributor to *Walkabout* from the first issue which came out in November, 1934, at a time when Ernestine Hill, Bill Harney, Donald Thompson and Ion Idriess were also writing for it. Even before this, he had become a "special" writer for the Melbourne *Herald* and even wrote a racing serial for it, aided by the paper's racing staff.

If in his youth he was hard-drinking, hard-swearing and truculent, in his advanced years he mellowed considerably. Underneath his prickly exterior, he was a shy, affectionate and kindly man, who never forgot a kindness and never knew how to hold a grudge. He said of himself: "I'm like a summer fire. I flare up quickly but I never persist with hard feeling." He had a wry, dead-pan sense of humour. Typical of this was a comment in one of the last letters I had from him: "I never use bad language. I only use Australian words!" He could always laugh at himself, uneasily signing autographs in a city store or submitting to radio and T.V. questions with forthright but agonised candour.

He was always rather cagey about his age. In a letter written in the late '50s he refers to an article in which I had said he was in his late sixties. "Hardly the late sixties," he wrote, "not yet!" But as *Who's Who* and other reference books give his birth date as 1888, he was every bit of that. He was sixty when he led a five-thousand-mile expedition through the

Kimberleys, in 1948,³ for the Australian Geographic Society.⁴

Although his books were being published, early success eluded his grasp, and the bitterness of those first years of failure stayed with him always. When success did come, it came from abroad. America had just entered the Second World War, and thousands of G.I.s were packed off to Australia. There was a tremendous surge of interest in the country “down-under”, about which few Americans knew anything at all.

Upfield’s agent offered his work to Doubleday and Company, and they snapped up six titles overnight. Mothers, sisters, aunts and cousins of G.I.’s eagerly welcomed Upfield and Bony, and he achieved best-seller status within a very short time. Americans at home saw Australia through Upfield’s eyes, and felt they knew the sort of towns where their boys were stationed.

It has been said that Arthur Upfield’s descriptive writing is so vivid and alive that it gives a truer picture of Australia and Australians than does that of many of our more literary writers. Although he was a crime writer, his plots were generally weak, but his descriptions of the outback and the odd characters with whom he peopled it were superb. Maybe it was the Australia of yesterday, without the great sprawling cities and the vast population growth caused by post-war migration, but it was the Australia he knew.

It is no coincidence that critics all over the world acclaimed his backgrounds, with their sprinkling of bush lore, aboriginal customs and marvellous revelation of what he liked to call “the book of the bush”. For example, his story of a lake, Lake Victoria in fact, which he told in *Death of a Lake*, and of animals and birds desperately trying to get to the last of the water, while dead bodies pile up in their thousands, is masterly. As almost every critic remarked, “The lake is the real hero of this novel”. Upfield really saw this lake dry up, when he was working for a Mr. James Hole on a property above Wilcannia, and he never forgot the horror of it. When the book was published, Mr. Hole, to whom it was dedicated, was able to state unequivocally that nothing Upfield wrote about it was exaggerated.

His story of Broome and the death throes of the pearling industry was another outstanding success both here and in the States. It was *The Widows of Broome*, and the first of his books to appear under the

³ Ed.: It had been generally accepted that Upfield was born on 1 September 1888. A check of the records in England made about 25 years after his death revealed he was born in 1890, so he was 57 during the Kimberley expedition.

⁴ See “Australian Geographical Society Tour to the North-West (Division) of Western Australia,” *Walkabout* 30.5 (October 1948): 29.

Heinemann colophon, after his break with Angus and Robertson. It told readers of a colourful corner of Australia, quite different and virtually unknown to them. This of course was the essential ingredient of Upfield's popularity. Almost every "Bony" adventure took readers to a new part of Australia, where Upfield had lived and worked during some part of his rolling stone existence.

By 1953, the elusive fruits of successful authorship were coming to him, and he was able to say that he was one of a meagre four or five Australian authors living wholly from the proceeds of his books. For this he gave credit to the United States, and he was and still is, as far as I know, the only foreigner to be admitted as a full member of the Mystery Writers' Guild of America. Late in 1962, he showed me proudly a set of cuff-links bearing the M.W.G. insignia, which had just been sent to him as a tribute to his contribution as a mystery writer. He was truly touched by this and he told me again of his ambition to be able to accept their invitation to the annual banquet of the Guild. He was never able to do so.

In the 1950s, the rest of the world interested in Australia became interested in Upfield. Western Germany published almost every title of his, first in hard covers and then in paperbacks and in serial form. Italy, Denmark, Finland, Holland, Argentina, Mexico and even Japan sought translation rights and published many titles. He was almost embarrassed when he received letters from learned German professors who wished to discuss with him details of aboriginal lore and to learn from him more of its *mystique*. Anyway his health was not, at this time, good enough to embark on so serious a correspondence.

About 10 years ago, several of his books were turned into a series of radio plays under the title, *Man of Two Tribes*. Two well-known Australians were concerned in this. One was actor Frank Thring, somewhat miscast as "Bony", and Morris West, then head of the radio production firm that produced the series, who was to become an even more successful author than Upfield.

Upfield used the Kimberleys as the background for another successful novel, *Cake in the Hatbox*. In the last few years he lived in Airey's Inlet, then Bermagui and finally Bowral. All these locations he incorporated into books. His new-found prosperity didn't affect his way of life greatly, for his tastes remained simple. But one extravagance did give him considerable pleasure. Around 1952, when he was living at Airey's Inlet, he bought himself a second-hand but shiningly beautiful Daimler, which he kept in immaculate condition. He didn't drive it a great deal, but when he had to make a trip to Melbourne, he would dress himself up in his best suit and an old-fashioned grey homburg and set off, sitting behind the wheel as

proudly as any teenager with his first “bomb”. He would park it at a garage on the outskirts of the city and continue the rest of the way in a taxi. He wouldn’t risk his precious car in the “traffic inferno”. After his first serious heart attack, he sold the Daimler rather sadly.

The swagman who pushed a bike across the dusty tracks of the outback became a much-sought-after author—or storyteller, as he preferred it. But he was a rebel to the last. Like “Bony”, he hated authority and never bowed to a boss. He thought writers should belong to a union to prevent their being exploited. Like “Bony”, he put women on a pedestal and treated them with old-fashioned courtesy. When he met one that didn’t belong on that pedestal, he merely said she was an exception. He was a religious man, but a nonconformist in his beliefs.

When time has blurred to-day’s picture of Australian writing, will Upfield survive? His style was often bad and his plots were slow. He despised the literary graces and what he termed the “pretentiousness of the literary snobs”. He wrote for the “ordinary people of Australia”, and the ordinary people will still read his books for many years. In Upfield’s work they will find the empty, undeveloped land which bred the tough, hard-living outback men and women he admired so much and wrote about so well.

Now Detective-Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte has solved his last case and laid away his kurdaitcha boots for ever. He has, I think, joined the immortals of detective fiction. Arthur Upfield would have asked no more of posterity.

First Published in *Walkabout* 31.5 (1 May 1964): 33-38. Every reasonable effort was made to trace the copyright and publishing rights owner(s) of this article without success; they are invited to contact the publisher. The references were added by the editors.

BONY AND THE COLOUR QUESTION

HEATHER PAISH

Arthur Upfield came to Australia from England in 1911, when he was twenty-three.¹ In the eighteen years between his arrival and the publication of the first of his Napoleon Bonaparte books he worked as boundary rider, cattle drover, opal gouger, dog fence patroller and manager of a camel station. He also came to have a wide knowledge of the Australian outback and the Australian Aboriginal.

His books are interesting for their good detective yarns, and also for the reflection of attitudes to Aboriginals in the years between 1929 and the last book, published in 1966 two years after his death.

I've noted which attitudes changed during this period and in which direction, and which ones survived that quarter century unaltered. The light-hearted approach to tribal rioting seen in *The Sands of Windee* (1931) could not be written today: "Stop 'em? Why, I wouldn't 'ave stopped 'em for a hundred quid! It's the best bleedin' dog-fight I seen for years."² Nor even the following from *Bony Buys a Woman* (1957):

"Been hell and low water down the abos' camp. Best riot come ever. You oughta see some of 'em. Rex is dragging an ear over his shoulder. Sarah's lost half her teeth somewhere. Meena got hanks of her hair pulled out ... Bodies lying all over the joint when me and the boss and Arnold got there. Crikey! If only I had a movie camera. Been thinking a long time of getting one."³

Less in fashion now is the belief which Upfield seems to share that the actual blackness of the skin is both an inborn cause of inferiority in the white man's world and superiority in the black man's skills. In *The Barrakee Mystery* (1929), Bony speaks about Ralph Thornton:

¹ It had been generally accepted that Upfield was born on 1 September 1888. A check of the records in England made about 25 years after his death revealed he was born in 1890, so he was 21 when he arrived in Australia on 4 November 1911.

² Arthur Upfield, *The Sands of Windee* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1958), 104.

³ Arthur Upfield, *Bony Buys a Woman* (London: Heinemann, 1957), 114.

“Like many half-caste children—even like myself—the baby was white of skin. For years the black strain in his blood was held in abeyance by his upbringing and education ... I watched the growing change in the lad ... I saw the growing love of colour in his clothes, I noted how quickly his college accent dropped from him. ... the young man picked up the art of tracking with remarkable ease. ... Even during the few months I have been at Barrakee, I have seen Ralph’s skin slowly darkening ...”⁴

Speaking about Bony himself in *The Sands of Windee* Upfield says:

He had been born with white man’s blood in him and, as is sometimes the case, a skin as white as his father’s. From an early age he had felt his superiority over the little boys at the mission station, most of whom were black, or that dark putty colour there is no mistaking.⁵

At the age of eighteen Bony fell in love with a white girl, and then “[w]ith the inevitability of fate his long dead black mother claimed him from the grave, claimed him and held him ... the black strain in him ... the colour mark” physically crept up from his legs to cover him completely. He gave up his girl and his projected career as a doctor and took to the bush, where he married a half caste like himself. “Yet always he was acutely aware of his inferiority to the full-blood white man”: this despite his becoming a detective-inspector with a record of infallibility.⁶ This is a view that Upfield for all his liberal feelings could not shake off, for even as late as *The Mystery of Swordfish Reef* (1939) Bony’s anger is described in terms of his mother’s blood taking charge of him, making him one with her and her people. “Bony’s face became jet black in colour.”⁷

In *The Sands of Windee* are other widely accepted myths about mixed-blood Aborigines:

His mother had given him the spirit of nomadism, the eye sight of her race, the passion for hunting; from his father he had inherited in overwhelming measure the white man’s calm and comprehensive reasoning ...⁸

Or again when Bony’s wife Marie says of their eldest son Charles, who’s about to start university: “like you and me and all of us the bush will get

⁴ Arthur Upfield, *The Barrakee Mystery* (London: Heinemann, 1965), 300-302.

⁵ Upfield, *The Sands of Windee*, 227.

⁶ Upfield, *The Sands of Windee*, 227.

⁷ Arthur Upfield, *The Mystery of Swordfish Reef* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1939), 204.

⁸ Upfield, *The Sands of Windee*, 1-2.

him in the end. It's in our blood and can't be resisted.”⁹

This particular attitude was easier to hold when Upfield was writing because most Aboriginals were living in country towns and locations. The strong movement to the cities had not begun. Despite Bony's intelligence and competence in the white man's world there is also strong disapproval from all sorts of characters, of any sort of marriage or sexual relationship between black and white. Black must marry black, white white and half-caste half-caste. Although Upfield says there are regional differences in attitude to this (mixed marriages being more accepted in North Queensland and the Northern Territory than in western New South Wales “the home of the blue blood squattocracy”), he himself seems to come down strongly on the side of disapproval. In *The Barrakee Mystery*, the love of Ralph Thornton for the Aboriginal girl Nellie Wanting is regarded with sincere horror by his squatter relatives:

The very last thing Dugdale had expected of young Thornton was that he should have forgotten his colour. ... The thought, so dreadful to him, was that the boy's lips, which had touched Nellie Wanting's mouth, would likely enough be pressed to those of Kate Flinders, the loveliest and purest girl in Australia, before that day was wholly done. ...

“Cannot you see for yourself that the terrible part of the affair is that Nellie Wanting is black?”¹⁰

The material evidence suggests that Upfield does not share the squatters' prejudices but in *The Will of the Tribe* (1962) it is likely that he shared Bony's feelings about Tessa who hurried away from a western education to her tribal lover:

Bony thrilled, knowing that Tessa had surrendered to the elfin call of her people, and had put from her the slowly built influences of white assimilation, even as she had discarded her white women's clothes.¹¹

If the above attitudes have been modified to some degree by the passage of time, there are others that have continued relatively unchanged—paternalism for example. There is the paternalism of the charity-givers: “Mrs. Cotton wouldn't have any old rags in her room. Soon as anything got raggety, off it went to the blacks' camp.”¹² There is the paternalism of the adoption system, *The Bone Is Pointed* (1938):

⁹ Upfield, *The Sands of Windee*, 79.

¹⁰ Upfield, *The Barrakee Mystery*, 171-172.

¹¹ Arthur Upfield, *The Will of the Tribe* (London: Heinemann, 1962), 215.

¹² Arthur Upfield, *The Widows of Broome* (London: Heinemann, 1967), 97.

Jimmy Partner was a splendid product of “beginning on them young”. He was a living example, showing to what degree of civilisation an Australian Aboriginal can reach if given the opportunity. He sat before this table upright and mentally alert. He ate with no less politeness than did the woman who had reared him that he might be companion to her own child ... He spoke better than many a white hand ... He was the crown of achievement set upon the heads of Mary Gordon and her dead husband.¹³

But within a few hundred words of these observations, Upfield has Jimmy Partner speaking in the same obsequious pidgin as the boys who had spent their whole lives in the camp. “Things is getting dry Johnny Boss ... [h]e come along half hour ago to say that big feller black-feller p’liceman come to Opal Town.”¹⁴ In 1938 at least Upfield only half believed his own words about the possibilities of Aboriginal equality. It is clear however that Upfield does not share the paternalism of the academic Professor of Anthropology in *Murder Must Wait* (1953). He and his wife, who introduces herself as Mrs. Marlo-Jones, Dip.Ed., treat Bony as some non-human member of a fascinating species. “Good heavens! Where did you get it?” he says of Bony to his wife.¹⁵ Bony observes later:

“Thought I was a new flower I believe. Wanted me to stay for a billy of tea and a slice of brownie ... her idea of a smoko tea suitable for a half caste ... Guess to what I owe my self-respect, the facility with which I thumb my nose at superior people.”¹⁶

Aborigines still experience these attitudes, perhaps not in such a crude form, in Europeans who treat them as objects of research.

The picture of the Law’s attitude is of that familiar confusion of discrimination, over zealousness in some things and winking at others. In many areas particularly in the outback these attitudes persist. In *Winds of Evil* (1937) a police sergeant is trying to find a murderer. On seeing Bony for the first time he says: “Hey you! Come here! ... I don’t stand no nonsense from nigs and half castes. You’re a likely looking bird to have done this last crime.”¹⁷ In *The Sands of Windee* a policeman states his policy as “I never interfere with ‘em unless they go a-murdering”.¹⁸ And later in the same book Bony talks about that still-vexed question of tribal

¹³ Arthur Upfield, *The Bone Is Pointed* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1966), 71.

¹⁴ Upfield, *The Bone Is Pointed*, 68, 72.

¹⁵ Arthur Upfield, *Murder Must Wait* (London: Heinemann, 1953), 14.

¹⁶ Upfield, *Murder Must Wait*, 26-27.

¹⁷ Arthur Upfield, *Winds of Evil* (London: Hamilton, 1939), 76-77.

¹⁸ Upfield, *The Sands of Windee*, 63.

killings: “The details of tribal battles are lost in the excitement ... which is extreme, and, since it was not deliberately planned murder, the law passed it over.”¹⁹ In *The Widows of Broome* (1950) a full blood dies from sniffing petrol fumes. The local policeman says:

“Should be made a flogging matter for a native to be found drunk on booze or anything else. The old days and the old ways were good. I’d flog more and imprison less.”²⁰

The Final Solution

Upfield examines several of the alternative “solutions” but seems to hope as Daisy Bates did, that the Aboriginal race would simply disappear from existence and in that way solve the “problem”. In *The Bone Is Pointed* Bony goes to an isolated property which is the tribal land of the Kalchut tribe. The first white settlers, the Gordons, had drawn up a charter with the chief (Upfield speaks of chiefs and headmen as if they were African tribes) of the tribe in the late nineteenth century, a charter in which both groups pledged non-interference with the other. But by 1938 this had been eroded by various events and pressures. A white shepherd, for instance, had raped a lubra and been killed by the tribe, the Aboriginals themselves had rejected some of the old ways by wearing clothes and working on other stations, and the Gordons, despite their good intentions did not avoid paternalism. They banked and doled out the money earned by the tribe, and said things like: “some of their customs, of course, we Gordons have had to frown upon, gradually getting them prohibited.”²¹

In *Murder Must Wait* Bony visits a mission settlement, an extremely enlightened one even by today’s standards, with stores, a school, hospital, church and streets of houses; and Aboriginals in status jobs (nurse, watch maker, teacher, storekeeper) while the council of “headmen” decide internal discipline. The white Reverend Superintendent makes the important decisions. He rules that no children can go on walkabout during term time, that no white men can come on to the settlement without his permission, and that adults are to attend church twice on Sundays. The underlying condescension of it all shows in these words:

“I roused the headmen from their indifference to exert again their old influence and power ... of course, under my general supervision. Thus the

¹⁹ Upfield, *The Sands of Windee*, 111.

²⁰ Upfield, *The Widows of Broome*, 184.

²¹ Upfield, *The Bone Is Pointed*, 118.

people were brought under the kind of discipline they understand, and they became keenly interested in the *least obnoxious* of the corroborees and the folk dancing.”²²

Bony is at first impressed by the settlement but later reflects:

Could that ambition (to give back to the Aborigine his traditions and self-respect) be realised by encouraging the old practices only as far as approved by white law and when the white influence had brought the black fellow to a condition of spiritual chaos?²³

In *Bushranger of the Skies* (1940) a half caste called Rex McPherson gives a preview of the Black Power approach:

“I am going to force the whites to respect me. ... I am going to make them acknowledge me as an equal. A dirty half caste, eh? Well I’m going to prove to the world that a half caste is as clever as any white man. ... I am going to get McPherson station and add all this open country to it. After that I’ll join the Illprinka to the Wantella people. I’ll train the bucks to be soldiers. I’ll arm them with rifles. And then if the government sends police or soldiers against me I’ll engage in a war. ... And even if I lose in the end I’ll go down in history as the man who avenged the Aborigines.”²⁴

Rex was no more successful in creating a unified Aboriginal movement than de-tribalised Aboriginal leaders are today. Significantly he was killed by a full blood who saw the old ways as the only ways, and Rex as “the dangerous fire”.

Upfield also considers the policy that has come to form the basis of the current Australian government approach: that of money and bureaucracy. In *Murder Must Wait* Bony reflects on Frederick Wilmot, a surly lazy part-Aboriginal filled with “subdued anger”.²⁵ “Too much money, and too much spoiling by government and societies interested in Aboriginal welfare produced too many Frederick Wilmots.”²⁶ However, in *Bony and the Black Virgin* (1959) Bony sees the gulf between the new expectations and their realisation:

Tonto [an educated full-blood] was just the average young Aborigine in

²² Upfield, *Murder Must Wait*, 134. Emphasis added.

²³ Upfield, *Murder Must Wait*, 165.

²⁴ Arthur Upfield, *Bushranger of the Skies* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1963), 220.

²⁵ Upfield, *Murder Must Wait*, 66.

²⁶ Upfield, *Murder Must Wait*, 67.