
Darwin and Representations of the Japanese 'Other' in Australian Writing

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1 Introduction

Darwin has a unique place in Australian colonial history. While other colonies started excluding non-European settlers in the latter half of the 19th century, the settlement in the Northern Territory still needed people and continued to invite non-European workers. In 1874, 187 indentured Chinese coolies arrived in Port Darwin. In 1877, in an effort to increase the workforce in the Settlement, the colonial government of South Australia, to which the Settlement was annexed (1863-1911), sent a letter to the Japanese Meiji government via Reverend Wilton Hack, inviting prospective immigrants, an overture that the Japanese government ultimately declined.¹⁾ Despite the formal rejection, in 1883, 37 Japanese labourers came to work for the Australasian Pearl company.

The pearling industry was exempted from the Immigration Restriction Act of 1902, and Asian labour continued to flow into Darwin. Although the Japanese comprised a much smaller minority group than the Aboriginals and the Chinese, their presence was needed by the pearling industry, and they played a significant part in making Darwin more ethnically diverse than any other major city in Australia at the time. In 1911, when Palmerston was renamed Darwin, the Chinese formed the largest ethnic group. Out of a total of 1387 inhabitants, the Chinese population of 442 outnumbered the 374 Europeans. The 77 Japanese, recorded as crew members of the pearling fleets, constituted the largest group of Asian fleet members.²⁾ Other ethnic groups at the time included: 52 Filipinos, 49 Timorese, 21 Malays, 7 Javanese, 4 Siamese, 5 Singhalese and 5 South Sea Islanders.

Literary works set in Darwin, especially those written in the years before the Pacific War, reflect this cosmopolitan atmosphere and provide very different poly-ethnic pictures to other works dealing with mainstream culture and society. As the title of Noreen Jones's book suggests, Australia became 'Number 2 Home' for many Japanese who came and stayed. Despite some racial conflicts between the Japanese population and the Europeans, and other ethnic groups, the Japanese were

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not vague 'others', who remained in the background. They were an essential part of the community.

With the outbreak of the Pacific War, Japan became Australia's enemy. Darwin became its victim and was destroyed by Japanese aerial bombardment. During the war, Darwin was occupied by the Australian armed forces. Most civilians, including Aboriginals and Chinese, were evacuated to the south, while the remaining Japanese were interned or deported. One of the outcomes of this event was the creation of a strong image of the Japanese as enemy-aliens.

This article looks at how Japanese people are represented in Australian literary works, with special emphasis on Darwin. Although stories involving Japanese people were not a major part of mainstream Australian literary works of the time, there exist some works set in Darwin, in which Japanese characters play an important role. This article discusses examples of such stories from the years before and after the Pacific War, and examines how the representations of Japanese people in these works reflect colonial history and the attitude of Australian people at the time.

2 Works from the Pre-War Period

Certain stereotypical images of Japan and the Japanese people, held by the majority of people in Australian society during the pre-war years, appeared in many literary works of the time. One such image is that of a masculine enemy-invader. Another is the seemingly contradictory image of a Madam Butterfly-like feminine figure. Fear of the possible southward movement of Japan towards Australia led politicians and journalists to issue warnings to the Australian people.³⁾

At the beginning of the 20th century, these warnings were often in the form of invasion scare stories and could be found in contemporary articles and literary works. Examples include "The Commonwealth Crisis" by C. H. Kirmess, which was serialised in the *Lone Hand* from 1908-1909, and a short story, "The Day the Big Shells Came", by Arthur Adams, published in the *Bulletin* in 1909.

The feminine image of Japan, similar to John Long's *Madame Butterfly* (1889), was used by such authors as Carlton Dawe and A. G. Hales. In their stories, Japanese women were often described as victims of a Western double standard, but at the same time such women received no sympathy from their authors.⁴⁾

Writings on Darwin, as well as other pearling towns such as Broome and Thursday Island, offered something different from these typical images of the Japanese held by mainstream society, by depicting the Japanese as members of the community. One of the early literary pieces in which Japanese people appear in this context is A. B. Paterson's poem "The Pearl Diver" (1902). It describes how a diver called Kanzo Makame, who "was king of his lugger, master and diver in one,/ Diving

wherever it pleased him, taking instruction from none,/ Hither and thither he wandered, steering by stars", eventually became the victim of a plot by another diver and lay dead under the sea, "helmeted, ghastly and swollen". Exotic as it is, this is one of the first Australian literary pieces to have not just a pearl diver as the hero of a story, but a Japanese person as well.

During the 1890s, strong concerns about Japanese ownership of pearling boats were raised, and acts of law were passed to protect the Australian advantage in the pearling industry in the Northern Territory and other colonies.⁵⁾ The fear and suspicion of the Japanese held by Australians of the time is reflected in Randolph Bedford's serialised novel in the *Lone Hand* (1911). Bedford was a journalist with a strong political agenda. In his episodes, although Japanese workers are given names and faces, they are described as a group with scarcely any reference to individual differences. The Japanese are always villains, and the stories provide 'poetic justice' by ensuring that the villains are ultimately punished. Such stories may reflect mainstream conceptions of the Japanese at a time when few people in the south had actually ever met, let alone seen them.⁶⁾

Later, however, in his short stories set in the north, Xavier Herbert used the Japanese as vivid characters associated with the local landscape. During the late 1920s and 1930s, Herbert established friendships within the Japanese community in Darwin, and this influence is reflected in his stories. It was still early in his writing career, and some of the stories were written under pseudonyms. They are centred on the adventure filled lives of pearling masters, divers and shell-openers. Despite the contemporary atmosphere of distrustfulness of the Japanese among the general Australian population, Herbert wrote sympathetically about the Japanese pearlers, which perhaps provided the base for his later novels *Capricornia* (1938) and *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975). His short stories, including "Living Dangerously", "Sounding Brass", "Sailor Bring Joy" and "Miss Tanaka", were published in several journals in the early 1930s.⁷⁾

Herbert's stories are unique in that their Japanese characters are variously good and bad, young and old, male and female. They have their own names, faces and voices, and are probably based on people the author had come across during his own experiences. Herbert includes some typical villain-type Japanese characters and exotic young half-Japanese women; however, he gives personalities to them and thus avoids simple ethnic stereotyping. In his stories, a hierarchy of people exists, determined by ethnicity or by law. While good Japanese divers were financially better-off than other Japanese workers such as tenders (who helped the divers by holding their lifelines) and other ethnic groups, they were also subjugated by the European masters of the pearling boats. And yet Herbert's stories reveal that within this social structure, people still lived according to the reality of their context. That

is, regardless of whether they were Australian, Japanese or members of other ethnic groups, people in the pearling industry had to be strong, good at reading the waves and winds and mastering boats, and had to have the type of personality that could win the confidence of others, thus giving a very different picture of relationships among these different groups of people than those observed in Australian society in general.

Among Herbert's stories, "Miss Tanaka" (1933) is significant in two ways. First, it is perhaps one of the very few Australian stories that deal exclusively with the Japanese. Second, it is comical. As I have written elsewhere, words such as 'humourous' and 'comical' are seldom applicable to Japanese characters as they are described in Australian literature. The Japanese are portrayed as serious, polite, quiet, sullen, incomprehensible, mysterious or fierce, but not very funny, witty, merry or humorous.⁸⁾ In Herbert's story, Miss Kitso Tanaka, the niece of a storekeeper named Tanaka in Port Darwin, is the only young 'pure-blooded' Japanese female in the community. Two deadly rivals, scrambling to win her favour, follow the instructions of her uncle in order to become her future husband. The willowy girl, always looking down, presumably because of her natural shyness, turns out to be Tanaka's young son in disguise. Through this ploy, Tanaka is able to successfully con the suitors into parting with all their money. The characters' dialogues in their pidgin English and the description of Japanese lifestyle, from wooing a bride to the wearing of traditional garments, present a different scenario to that found in conventional short stories of the time. Darwin and its unique social structure gave Herbert an opportunity to present a different view from that of mainstream authors in interpreting the 'other', and to write original stories in this poly-ethnic society.

3 Works after the War

During the Pacific War, Darwin was attacked by the Japanese military, constantly bombed from February 1942 to November 1943, and subsequently destroyed. Not until six months after the Japanese surrender (August 1945) were civilians permitted to return to the town (February 1946). After the war, apart from personal memoirs describing negative experiences or other memories relating to the Japanese enemy and their destruction of the town, there is little mention of Japanese people in contemporary literary works. It was Xavier Herbert who again wrote about the memories of the Japanese bombing and evacuation of Darwin in a very original way.

Herbert's story "Day of Shame" (1963) describes the bombing and evacuation of Darwin through the eyes of the main character, a woman called Old Josie, who kept a small settlement (Twenty Mile Lagoons) after her husband died. When the exodus

from Darwin passes in front of her settlement, she shows her disgust and disappointment with the cowardice of other people by yelling at them and refusing to obey the military order to evacuate. This was the 'day of Australia's shame' for Josie, who maintains that Australians should be fighting to protect their own soil, after fighting so many battles for the Empire. In response to her complaints, one of the military officers says it is the "blackfellows' country" (231) and that their country is down south. But Josie regards the south as "transplantations of their British origins, out of which long since had been burned and ploughed and built upon the true Terra Australis". (233) Her settlement is eventually attacked and destroyed, and Old Josie is killed. Several days later, it is looted by two Australian provosts, a sergeant and a corporal, who tear Josie's wedding photo, steal the silver frame and other possessions, and set fire to the place. Thus Josie is violated twice.

The Japanese bombers are described as "the destructive wasps that had flown out of Asia", (231) for which, Josie says, Australians have waited for fifty years (228). The Japanese enemy are not described as fully developed individuals, but rather serve as a backdrop for the main plot. It is mainstream Australia that Herbert targets in this story, perhaps typical of his major themes since *Capricornia* and *Poor Fellow My Country*, in which he criticises Australia's Anglo-oriented colonisation and the way in which it has slighted the north, and advocates the idea of making Australia a "country of creoles".

A recent example of the story of the Japanese attack on Darwin is Alan Tucker's juvenile novel, *The Bombing of Darwin: The Diary of Tom Taylor* (2002). The story traces, in the form of a boy's diary, the protagonist's move to Darwin because of his father's harbour construction job, experience of life in the north, life through the air-raids, and eventually the evacuation of the town.

In terms of war, like Herbert's story, this novel also criticises the authorities for their self-centredness and poor preparation against the attack, although the tone is less hostile. (The protagonist's father is of Irish origin and passes-off negative comments to the higher-ranking officials from time to time.) Tucker's novel places more emphasis on the solidarity of the ordinary people, including minorities, at this time of national crisis. Class distinctions and a racial hierarchy are present; however, as seen in the episode in which Tom befriends a Chinese boy who becomes his best mate, the general atmosphere of racial harmony is emphasised.

After the start of the war, the Australian government immediately placed the Japanese population under confinement. The boy and his mother arrive in Darwin to join the father in November 1941, a year before the outbreak of the Pacific War (8 December 1942), and therefore it is possible that the boy would never have seen any Japanese during the period of time he was there. However, it is still interesting that

the Japanese residents who are interned, an important part of the community up until the war, are hardly mentioned in the story. As in Herbert's short story, the Japanese, who represent the enemy, are not only vaguely described, but are almost totally ignored in the story.

Tucker's novel offers a picture of colonial life in the north as one filled with surprises and adventures, with family ties being the key to overcoming difficulties. It reaches its climax when the bombing starts. The boy's mother, who is a pacifist, is killed when the post office is destroyed, and so he begins his lone adventure of evacuation to the south. The story also deals with cross-cultural issues and emphasises the importance of tolerance towards other races, primarily the Chinese and Aboriginals. By setting the story in Darwin, the novelist allows readers to share the town's multicultural values. At the same time, readers learn about the war time experiences of Darwin: how it became the victim of the war, and how the people of the town had to struggle hard to survive to the present day.

The book was awarded the New South Wales Premier's Young People's History Prize and has been recommended reading for this age group. By using Darwin as the historical backdrop, this book combines national memories of the war and pseudo-experiences, to make war experiences available to young readers who had no experience of such events. Its omission of the neighbour-turned-enemy, the Japanese, may have been intended to avoid raising the spectre of fear in the context of race relations in the story.

4 Conclusion

Despite the poly-ethnic start of its society, Darwin seems to have inspired fewer stories that make use of its uniquely multicultural background than might have been expected. Especially in the post-war stories, the Japanese characters are not fully developed or described but serve merely as a part of the background to the stories, similar to the images that characterised the pre-war invasion scare novels. As Regina Ganter puts it, after the Pacific War, "just as the north was finally turning white, ... the south of the continent embarked on its long journey towards becoming multi-cultural",⁹⁾ a description which equally seems to apply to the content of novels and stories set in Darwin.

In talking about the recent popularity of the dawn service at Gallipoli, historian Mark McKenna cites the comment of a young Australian who declared that the war was not about the Empire but instead it was about 'them'.¹⁰⁾ This comment seems to indicate that Australians need to have their own national narratives. Novels such as Tucker's may contribute to creating these national stories and seem to be written to fit into the present social atmosphere. The history of Darwin and the north, where

the 'other' was also a part of 'us', contains more varied narratives. In the case of the Japanese in Darwin, the stories can include labourers and their families in pre-White Australia days, an imagined foe, the real enemy, the interned people during the war, the attacker, deportees, etc. By examining how colonial eyes have looked at the 'other', including the Japanese, we will be able to add a further, and perhaps more complete dimension to the history of Australia and its society, thus creating more inclusive national stories. In addition to those it has already given, Darwin may be able to offer many more stories to Australia's social and cultural make up.

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Notes

- 1 Kay Kilgariff, "A Sociological History, Japanese Pioneers of Northern Australia", pp. 4-5.
- 2 Regina Ganter, *Mixed Relations*, p. 123.
- 3 See my "Representations of Japan and Japanese People in Australian Literature", Chs. 1 and 2.
- 4 Their works include: Carlton Dawe, *Yellow and White*. Boston: Roberts Bros., London: John Lane, 1895; *Kakemonos: Tales of the Far East*. London and New York: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1897; *A Bride of Japan*. London: Hutchinson, 1898; *Rose and Chrysanthemum*, Boston: Knight and Millet, 1900; A.G. Hales, *Little Blue Pigeon: A Story of Japan*. London: Hutchinson, 1905.
- 5 Henry Frei, *Japanese Southward Advance and Australia*, pp. 74-75.
- 6 Bedford was a frequent contributor of the *Lone Hand* and the *Clarion*, who as "a militant Australian nationalist", advocated "republicanism, White-Australia, vigilance against the Japanese, a parochial form of socialism, and a military alliance with the United States of America". *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v.7: 1891-1939, 1979, p. 242.
- 7 "Living Dangerously", first published in the *Wide World*, London, 1931; "Sounding Brass", first published in the *Australian Journal*, 1933; "Sailor Bring Joy", first published in the *Australian Journal*, 1933; "Miss Tanaka", first published in the *Australian Journal*, 1933.
- 8 The recent film *Japanese Story* (2003) still seems to give this typical 'serious' and 'humourless' presentation of the Japanese, whereas *Bondai Tsunami*. (2004) portrayed the Japanese as more varied characters.
- 9 Ganter, *Mixed Relations*, p. 236.
- 10 Cited in David Day's "Making Sense of Australian History", p. 11.

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Chronological chart of Darwin and Northern Territory

- 1863 Settlement in Northern Territory (NT) formally annexed to South Australia (SA) from New South Wales
- 1874 First indentured Chinese coolies arrive in Port Darwin : 187 from Ship "Vida"
- 1876 First recorded Japanese diver arrives in Torres Strait
- 1877 Colonial government of SA sends a letter to the Japanese Meiji government via Reverend Wilton Hack inviting prospective immigrants (declined)
- 1883 37 Japanese arrive at Port Darwin for the Australasian Pearl Company
- 1884 Rush into pearling at Port Darwin (Palmerston : 517 Whites ; 3725 Chinese ; 20 Malays)
- 1888 Chinese Immigration Restriction Act passed
- 1890 First marriage from the Japanese community in the Thursday Island Catholic Church (Nakagawa Jaruiji and Shimi)
- 1892 Less than 100 Japanese on Thursday Island
- 1893 Nearly 500 Japanese on Thursday Island
- 1894 More than 700 Japanese on Thursday Island (exceeding whites)
- 1895 SA government ceases issuing licenses to Asians in the pearling industry fearing a rush of Japanese-owned luggers from Thursday Island to Palmerston
- 1909 First Chinese name recorded on NT electoral role
- 1911 NT passed from SA to the Commonwealth of Australia
Palmerston renamed Darwin (total population 1387 ; 442 Chinese, 374 Europeans, 305 Aborigines)
- 1916 Race riot between Australians and "foreigners" in Darwin
- 1918 "Darwin Rebellion" - civil unrest, demanding an inquiry into the NT administration and the removal of the administrator J.A. Gilruth
- 1932 5 Japanese members of a pearling lugger crew and 2 other white men murdered in separate incidents in Caledon Bay
- 1936 Kaiwo Maru, the Japanese Dept of Education Merchant Marine Officer Cadet training ship, visits Darwin and welcomed
- 1942 (2. 19.) First bombing raid on Darwin
Estimated 243 killed including 49 civilians. 8 tons of bombs dropped further raid same day. All cash and securities removed from banks that evening
- 1943 (Nov.) Last Japanese bombing on Darwin
- 1946 (2. 28.) Civilians permitted to return to Darwin
- 1948 (Feb.) Pearling operations recommence
- 1960s Shelling industry collapses
- 1966 Harry Chan becomes the first Chinese mayor in Darwin

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- 1974 Cyclone Tracy 66 known dead
First fully elected NT Legislative Assembly meet
- 1977 Ayers Rock - Mt. Olga area is proclaimed a national park - renamed Uluru National Park
(Returned to the Aboriginals in 1985)
- 1978 NT self government starts
- 2004 Railway from Alice Springs to Adelaide opened

References for the chronological chart :

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