

Fiction Fields Of Australasia

Frederick Sinnett

Table of Contents

<u>Fiction Fields Of Australasia</u>	1
<u>Frederick Sinnett</u>	1

Fiction Fields Of Australasia

Frederick Sinnett

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

MAN can no more do without works of fiction than he can do without clothing, and, indeed, not so well; for, where climate is propitious, and manners simple, people often manage to loiter down the road of life without any of the "lendings" that Lear cast away from him; yet, nevertheless, with nothing between the blue heaven and their polished skins, they will gather in a circle round some dusky orator or vocalist, as his imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown, to the entertainment and elevation of his hearers. To amend our first proposition, then, works of fiction being more necessary, and universally disseminated, than clothing, they still resemble clothing in this, that they take different shapes and fashions in different ages. In the days of Chaucer

"First warbler, whose sweet breath
Preluded those melodious bursts that fill
The spacious times of great Elizabeth
With sounds that echo still"

didactic and descriptive poetry was almost the only recognized vehicle of fiction. Then came the bursts that Chaucer preluded; and in Shakspeare's days the dramatic form prevailed over all others. For some time afterwards every kind of feeling and thought found its expression in miscellaneous verse; and (though he was, of course, not the first novelist) Fielding, probably, set the fashion of that literary garment of the imagination, which has since been almost exclusively worn the novel. In the shape of novels, then, civilised man, at the present day, receives the greater part of the fictitious clothing necessary to cover the nakedness of his mind; and our present inquiry is into the feasibility of obtaining the material for this sort of manufacture from Australian soil. We are not, of course, questioning the practicability of writing novels in Australia. Thackeray might have begun "The Newcomes" in Kensington, and finished the book in Melbourne, as well as on the Continent. Our inquiry is into the feasibility of writing Australian novels; or, to use other words, into the suitability of Australian life and scenery for the novel writers' purpose and, secondly, into the right manner of their treatment.

A reference to the second topic almost forestalls the necessity of our stating the distinct conviction by which we are possessed, that genuine Australian novels are possible; and, as a corollary from their being possible, it follows, with apparent obviousness, that they are desirable, inasmuch as it is desirable that the production of things necessary or comfortable to humanity should be multiplied and increased.

First, however, we must deal with the possibility; for, it has been our lot to fall in with men, by no means altogether given over to stupidity, who deem, what Signor Raffaello calls, "this bullock-drivers' country" to present a field, not by any process whatsoever to be tilled and cultivated so as to produce novels, for some ages to come. The real reason, we take it, why our incredulous acquaintances arrived at the opinion they expressed, is, that such cultivation has not yet prospered to any remarkable extent; and that it is always difficult to believe in the possibility of anything of which there is no existing example and type. But, as this particular reason for disbelief is one which, while it has much actual weight over men's minds, is not often openly advanced, some more specific and respectable arguments were required, and, accordingly, were soon forthcoming.

In the first place, then, it is alleged against Australia that it is a new country, and, as Pitt said, when charged with juvenility, "this is an accusation which I can neither palliate nor deny." Unless we go into the Aboriginal market

Fiction Fields Of Australasia

for "associations," there is not a single local one, of a century old, to be obtained in Australia; and, setting apart Mr. Fawcner's pre-Adamite recollections of Colonel Collins, there is not an association in Victoria mellowed by so much as a poor score of years. It must be granted, then, that we are quite debarred from all the interest to be extracted from any kind of archeological accessories.

No storied windows, richly dight, cast a dim, religious light over any Australian premises. There are no ruins for that rare old plant, the ivy green, to creep over and make his dainty meal of. No Australian author can hope to extricate his hero or heroine, however pressing the emergency may be, by means of a spring panel and a subterranean passage, or such like relics of feudal barons, and refuges of modern novelists, and the offspring of their imagination. There may be plenty of dilapidated buildings, but not one, the dilapidation of which is sufficiently venerable by age, to tempt the wandering footsteps of the most arrant parvenu of a ghost that ever walked by night. It must be admitted that Mrs. Radcliffe's genius would be quite thrown away here; and we must reconcile ourselves to the conviction that the foundations of a second "Castle of Otranto" can hardly be laid in Australia during our time. Though the corporation may leave Collins-street quite dark enough for the purpose, it is much too dirty to permit any novelist (having a due regard to her sex) to ask the White Lady of Avenel, or a single one of her female connections, to pass that way.

Even if we survive these losses, the sins of youth continue to beset us. No one old enough for a hero can say,

"I remember, I remember the house where I was born,"

apropos of a Victorian dwelling. The antiquity of the United States quite puts us to shame; and it is darkly hinted that there is not so much as a "house with seven gables" between Portland and Cape Howe.

Mr. Horne, in his papers on dramatic art, observed very truly, that one does not go to the theatre (or the novel) for a fac simile of nature. If you want that you can see nature itself in the street or next door.

You go to get larger and more comprehensive views of nature than your own genius enables you to take for yourself, through the medium of art. In the volume of Shakspeare's plays, for example, is compacted more of nature than one man in a million perceives in a life's intercourse with the world.

Shakspeare, like all the kings of fiction, was a great condenser. We are not detained by him, except occasionally, and, for subsidiary artistic purposes, with mere gossip about the momentary affairs of the men and women brought upon the scene. A verbatim report of a common evening's conversation would fill a book, and the greater part of what would be reported would be quite uninteresting, uninformative, and unproductive to the purposes of art. The author of genius leaves no apparent gaps in the discourse; and brings about in the reader's mind a half-illusion that he is listening to a complete and unstrained dialogue; whereas, in fact, the speeches are so concise, and in such sequence, that we only have the essence of any possible conversation. Conversation is one of the essential processes of the writer of fiction, whatever form he may adopt otherwise the description of years of life would take years to read.

Now, in the old world, we are accustomed to this kind of conversation; to conversations not reported verbatim, but artistically. From Shakspeare downwards hundreds of authors have performed this service with admirable general fidelity; and have, at the same time, with artistic skill, concealed the evidences of their own labor as effectually as the sculptor does, in whose smooth and finished marble no mark of the chisel is to be discerned. This much, which is entirely due to the manner of the narrative, we have suffered ourselves to believe an attribute of the matter; and, because daily life, which is not much more prosaic on one part of the earth's surface than on another, has been, in the old world, so often and so admirably converted to the purposes of art, we fancy it to be peculiarly adapted to those purposes. Here we have not been accustomed to see nature through the medium of art, but directly; and though, to the eye of genius, "the earth and every common sight" possesses a "glory and a freshness," and needs no abridgement or coloring, yet to possess such powers of perception is the privilege only

Fiction Fields Of Australasia

of one among thousands. The great mass of mankind can only hope to catch glimpses of the glory of "every common sight," when genius holds it up for them in the right light. This genius has not yet done for Australian nature. Most of us have had more than enough of positive Australian dialogue, but we have never read an Australian dialogue artistically reported. We have heard squatter, and bullock-driver, and digger, talk, and we think it would be very uninteresting, no doubt; and a verbatim report of the conversation of Brown, Jones, and Robinson, in the old world, would be equally uninteresting, but we know by experience that genius can report it so as to be interesting yet to leave it the conversation of Brown, Jones, and Robinson still. The first genius that performs similar service in Australia will dissipate our incredulity, as to this matter, for ever.

It is not to be assumed that, if the life going on about us seem somewhat slow and tedious, the picture of it must be equally so; for the picture is microcosmic, and does not reproduce the life itself, but a compact and comprehensive likeness of it, that enables us to see, in a few minutes, and in true perspective, the scenes which, in actual existence, we plod through only in the course of years. It is, however, superfluous to deal theoretically with the objection, that fiction cannot properly deal with things close upon the foreground of our observation, because it is destroyed by experience. European novelists, during one period, thought that their works acquired an extra charm by dealing chiefly with distant times and places. Scott's genius invested distant times and places with such interest that people began to fancy such distance an essential of such interest. Dickens, on the contrary, by his genius, suddenly awoke London to a perception of the artistic uses that could be made of every-day London life; and men, in the constant habit of having their boots cleaned at Borough inns, were startled to find how the "boots" at a Borough inn might be a Sam Weller. Thackeray has, perhaps, gone still farther in selecting his characters from the precise time and circle of his readers. From his pages many old habitués of clubs first acquire a true understanding of club life, and the majority of his admirers are, perhaps, most delighted with seeing their own experiences reproduced to them by this master mind, with the exquisite and seemingly intuitive sense which belongs to him of the manner in which true art makes keenly pleasurable the contemplation of what, in its absolute shape, we tire of every day of our lives. The most successful and delightful novels of the present day are so invariably those which deal with immediately surrounding circumstances, both of time and place, that we shall not discuss farther the second objection we have noticed. A somewhat cognate objection that of the smallness of the community among which the scenes of Australian novels must at present be necessarily laid we shall deal with hereafter.

The first is that details of time and place are to the novel writer what costume is to the painter. Your hack artists, who, year after year, go "fossicking" for artistic nuggets in such rich but exhausted claims as the Vicar of Wakefield and Don Quixote, and who present the Royal Academy every May with their views of how Moses looked when he brought back the gross of green spectacles, and how Sancho twirled in the air when he was tossed in the blanket, or, when aiming at the truth historical, condemn Edward's wife to suck his wounds through all time, and Alfred to neglect everlasting cakes in a perpetual neatherd's cottage, are unable to construct a picture out of nature's own materials; they can only copy the microcosmic pictures of others. Some there be, even, who are more undisguisedly the painters of costume, and whose pictures merely stand in the place of a Belle Assemblée to a bygone generation. These are great in the peculiarities of armours and doublets, and tell us, with the nicest accuracy, how the barons and John dressed when he signed the great charter and nothing more. But the true artist, whether he work with brush or pen, deals with nature, and with human feelings and human passions; and the question of clothing is considered for the sake of accuracy and unity, and as an accident, not as an essential.

With respect to feelings and passions, then, which of them is there excluded from Australian soil? Certainly not that master passion which is the fiction writers' most Constant theme.

"All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
That ever move this mortal frame,
Are but the ministers of love,
And feed his sacred flame."

Fiction Fields Of Australasia

"Love rules the court, the camp, the grove," and Australians as effectually as dwellers in old countries; and all the joys and sorrows of that emotion which wise people, aged sixty and upwards, and other non-combatants in Cupid's warfare, laugh at and long for are present for the novelist to deal with, as he tells, in some new form, the oft-told tale of which mankind never tires. Nay, the very fact that numberless lovers are here separated from their loves, should suggest a thousand various stories and situations, peculiar, in their details, to the soil, and yet dealing with a cosmopolitan and universal interest.

Is the opposite feeling of hate banished from Australia? We could contentedly give up the possibility of Australian novels for the assurance that we resided in such a utopia. Alas! that such a perfect reality cannot be obtained by the sacrifice of so much novelists' capital.

Is avarice extinct among us? Most emphatically, No! And with the presence of avarice, we have that of all the schemes, and plots, and wiles with which the avaricious man ministers to his fault. The rapid turns and changes of this place give, indeed, peculiarly free scope for developing the romance of money-making; and it is not to be overlooked that the desire to make money has good as well as bad phases. Novelists would not have been true to their vocation of giving "a picture in little" of the world as it really is, if they did not, at the present time, cause the plots of their stories very often to turn upon pecuniary failures and successes. Money means command over almost all external things and resources, and is left out of Consideration only by those old romancists whose knightly heroes were comfortably provided with whatever their authors thought good for them without the vulgar and mundane necessity of what we call "making money" a slow and unromantic process, quite incompatible with their gallant and adventurous lives. Novel heroes now no longer have their occasions supplied out of treasure chambers bursting open to a potent "open sesame." We deal with money in a more business-like way. We fight for it in the chancery court as plaintiff in the great case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce we lose it in the Bundelcund bank uncle John muddles away the property of Mr.

Caxton, senior; and hero Pisistratus has even to find his way out to this very country of Australia to retrieve the family fortunes. Novel heroes must not expect, in these days, to lead lives of perfect freedom from pecuniary difficulties and embarrassments, any more than other people. They enjoy, as it is, an unfair advantage in the certainty they have of making fortunes in the long run. To judge, however, by the spirit that authors have recently been evincing, there is no security for the poor fellows being left in possession of even this advantage much longer.

A novelist, indeed, can invest more people with the desire to make money than he can even bring the passion of love to bear upon;— for, with respect to money-makers, the means and ends are alike infinitely various, and susceptible of being adapted to every possible age and character. Ralph Nickleby, and his nephew Nicholas, had, in common, the wish to make money, but the wish in the one was associated with all that was base, and mean, and sordid, in the other with the best and noblest hopes and desires. There is no source of interest connected with money-making of which the Australian novelist cannot avail himself. The means and the motives are at his own command, and he can make us watch the process with every feeling, from that of perfect sympathy to perfect scorn, according to the genius and skill with which those means and motives are conceived and portrayed.

At the same time, he can make his tale thoroughly Australian. The events may be true and natural to this place, while impossible for any other. We need not labor to shew that the same truth holds good of the feelings and passions. We have here "the same organs, dimensions, senses;" as the good folks in Europe. "If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you prick us, do we not bleed?" Human nature being the same, the true requisites of the novelist are to be found in one place as well as in another. Australia offers fresh scenery, fresh costumes, and fresh machinery, new as to its details great advantages, to those that know how to use them and, for the rest, presents a field neither better nor worse than most others, in which people love, and hate, and hope, and fear, and strive, and are disappointed, and succeed, and plot, and scheme, and work out their destinies, and obey the good and evil impulses of their infinitely various natures.

Fiction Fields Of Australasia

One word as to scenery. Many worthy people thought railways would put an end to romance in England. The new police act, it was conceived by others, would be equally destructive to the raw material of novels. The romance of robbery, some imagined, ended when robbers ceased to wear gold-laced coats and jack boots, and to do their business on horse-back. The genius of fiction, however, can accommodate herself to greater changes than these, and remains just as fresh and as blooming under circumstances that make people, unacquainted with the invulnerable hardiness of her constitution, predict her immediate decline and death. For our part we hold that there is comparatively little in the circumstance, and almost all in the genius that handles it; but those who believe in mounted robbers, and mourn over the introduction of railways, should feel that in Australia the novelists' golden age is revived. When Waverley travelled up from London, to visit his northern cousins, the Osbaldistones, he went on horseback, and took a fortnight over the journey that is the way we manage here to this very day. There was a great deal of "sticking-up" then, and there; and there is here, and now. Sir William of Deloraine had to swim the stream that it would have spoiled a magnificent description for him to have crossed by a cast-iron bridge, as he would do in the reign of Victoria; but in the colony which bears her name, the Central Road-Board cannot be accused of having destroyed the romance of the water-courses. How, in the name of gas-pipes and rural police, is a traveller to be lost and benighted in England now a-days. Here he can be placed in that unpleasant but interesting predicament, without violating, in the least, the laws of perfect probability. Look at a railway map of England, and see where

"Now spurs the lated traveller apace
To gain the timely inn. "

He has no control over the iron-horse that whirls him along, and when he gets to the terminus he gains the timely inn in a Hansom cab. Here the description applies with precise accuracy. In short, the natural and external circumstances of Australia partake much more of what we used to call romance than those of England, but we refuse to claim any advantage on this score, and content ourselves with reasserting that those who know how to deal with it can extract almost as much out of one set of circumstances as out of another, wherever the human heart throbs and human society exists.

We explain the absence of any really first-class Australian novels simply by a reference to the mathematical doctrine of probabilities. It is only once in many years that there steps forth from among the many millions of the British people a novelist able to break up new ground, and describe phases and conditions of life undescribed before. The great mass of those that load the circulating library shelves

"Remodel models rather than the life."

They only sing the same old song over again, "with variations." Like most painters, they fancy that they are imitating nature when they are only imitating pictures of nature previously painted. Just as hack orators can only quote from quotations, so hack novelists can only deal with such scenes and characters as have been put upon the stage before. Give them a set of circumstances, for the mode of handling which, for novelistic purposes, they have no precedent, and they know not what to make of it.

Show them an actual living man, some type of whom is not to be found in already existing novels, and they can make no use of the material at all. They pass him as they pass thousands of good human materials every day without recognising their worth. When the real genius has once laid hold of the new material, however, and shown them how to mould him to the purposes of art, they can "remodel the model" ad infinitum, so much easier is it to steal out of books than to accept the gifts of nature.

Well, then, we argue, if only now and then out of the population of all England there arises a novelist capable of breaking up fresh ground, it is not to be wondered at that no such man has yet risen here.

Geniuses are like tortoiseshell tom-cats not impossible, only rare. Every ten years one is born unto great Britain,

Fiction Fields Of Australasia

but probably none exists in Australia, and a reason precisely analagous to this makes it improbable that we have at present among us any one capable of doing justice to Australian materials of fiction. There are not cats enough in Australia to entitle us to a tortoiseshell tom yet, according to the doctrine of averages.

We have to confess that we labor under the same disadvantages as afflict the hacks and copyists, and we cannot, therefore, point out how the great untouched Australian quarry is to be rightly worked.

Only as we roam about the motley streets, or ride through the silent bush, we have just sense enough to feel that, when the capable eye comes to look upon them, all these rude amorphous materials may be arranged in form of the highest and most artistic beauty. The recorders are tuneless only because there is no one who knows how to play upon them; in the right hands they will "discourse most eloquent music."

But if we have not the genius to say how the quarry is to be worked – if we had, we should work it instead of talking about it we are able to see certain peculiar defects in the attempts that have hitherto been made at Australian novel writing, and one or two of these we will here point out.

In the first place we may remark that most Australian stories are too Australian. and, instead of human life, we have only local "manners and customs ", pourtrayed in them. The dramatis personae are not people with characters and passions, but lay figures, so constructed, and placed in such attitudes, as to display the costumes of the place and period. The few Australian novels which have been written are too apt to be books of travels in disguise. The authors are but voyagers, sailing under the false colors of novelists, and you might as well call the illustrations to Cook's voyages (depicting "natives of Nootka sound," "war dance among the Sandwich Islanders," pictures, as such works novels.

They have their uses, doubtless, and are not to be despised, but they are, at best, works of simple instruction as to matters of fact, rather than works of art. If we were asked what was the first requisite of a novel, we should say human character. The second human character. The third human character. Even plot and incident comes afterwards, and the mere question of costume and local coloring after plot and incident. In most Australian stories the order is reversed, and Australian customs are pre–dominant. We must be careful not to be misunderstood here, or we might be supposed to say, what would be contrary to the whole tenor of our writing, and to imply that beau ideal Australian novels would only differ in trivial and minor things from any other novels. Let us, then, illustrate what we mean by an example, and let us take the exquisite scene (from the Antiquary) in old Mucklebackit's cottage.

That scene could have been laid no where else but in the dwelling of a fisherman upon the Scottish coast. No where else could the characters and incidents have developed themselves in that form. Grief for a son's loss is, indeed, not an emotion confined to one time and place; and such grief Scott could have brought before us in palace or hovel, as he pleased; but the novelist has to shew us the same human feelings and passions working under various circumstances and modified by them. Now, in the scene we speak of, all local circumstances all local coloring sound and striking as they are, are subordinated to this purpose. Everything else is merely accessory to the display of human character and passion; but human characters and passions are affected and changed by such accessory circumstances; and, thus, while the relative importance of the elements of fiction remains unaltered, the change in the lesser implies change in the greater, and the combined whole is new, and full of new interest. We have not space to extract the scene here, but, if the reader take sufficient interest in this kind of speculation, let him open the Antiquary and read the description again, and, perhaps, he will apprehend us better. If not, he will not regret reading it again for its own sake.

Now, in the kind of novel we want to see written, but do not expect to read for some time, we want to see a picture of universal human life and passion, but represented as modified by Australian externals.

Fiction Fields Of Australasia

The description of all these externals must then be truthful and complete, but subordinated to the larger purposes of fiction.

In further illustration of the defect we allude to let us consider what a London story would be, if written in the spirit, and after the fashion, of most Australian Stories. The dramatis personae would walk the stage merely to illustrate, in their acts, the habits and peculiarities of London. The work would be a sort of amalgam of "The Great Metropolis," "The Book of Trades," "The Strangers' Guide to London," and "The Police Reports!" We should learn how different classes of people spend the twenty-four hours how they live, and what they live upon. We should learn the manner in which policemen arrange their beats, and the system according to which cab fares are regulated. We should learn that there are butchers in Whitechapel, and noblemen in Mayfair. We should learn how London dairymen water their milk, and London bakers get up in the small hours to knead their dough with their heels, but we should have no true novel, or work of art or genius. We should have a picture, not of human life, as modified by London externals, but of some London externals alone.

We had intended, in this paper, to have reviewed some of the best Australian stories that have yet been published, but these general remarks have extended to such a length that we must postpone the fulfilment of this intention until next month. In the mean time we content ourselves with the concluding remark, that real genius is ever able to draw its inspiration from the rills that run at its own feet, and without travelling to Helicon that everywhere nature has new beauties and truths for the eye and mind that know how to perceive and grasp them and that, when we complain of her sterility, we should rather humbly confess our own. The fault is ours, if, in this fresh and vast country, peopled with men of all characters, and degrees, and nations, in which all human feeling, and emotions are astir, in which the pulse of existence beats with almost feverish speed, we regard the whole scene as tame and prosaic, and able to furnish the materials for no books but ledgers. What should we have made of such far more barren places as have given up hidden treasures, and been made bright and beautiful for all generations, at the touch of such genius as his, for example,

"Who trod in glory and in joy,
Following his plough along the mountain side?"

The month before last we cast a few rapid glances over these large and fertile, but almost untrodden, plains which stretch around us, in all directions, farther than the eye can reach, and to which even imagination can assign no definite bounds. This month we propose to examine some small patches that have already been cleared, and fenced, and cultivated, and to collect a few specimens of the fruit that they have yielded.

Decidedly the best Australian novel that we have met with is "Clara Morison," the work (as we learn from the preface, written by some friend in England, where the book was published) of a young lady who, for many years, has resided in South Australia, in which colony the story is laid. Considered entirely apart from its Australian scenery and coloring, Clara Morison would be a book deserving careful criticism and much praise. It stands, we think, quite alone among all Australian stories yet published, in that it is free from the defect of being a book of travels in disguise. It is not written exclusively for distant readers, and as a means of giving lazy people an idea of what they call "life in Australia." It is not a work of mere description, but a work of art. The novel is no more Australian than results from the fact that the author, having been long resident in Australia, having a gift for novel writing and writing about what she knew best, unavoidably wrote an Australian novel. But the wish to illustrate local peculiarities has had very small sway over the mind of the author of Clara Morison. She has merely illustrated Australian life insensibly in the process of illustrating human life. Paul de Kock describes Parisian life because he writes novels and is a Parisian. Dickens describes London life because he writes novels and is a Londoner. The local coloring in each case is the accident the portrayal of human life and interest being the essential. In the same way the Australianism of Clara Morison is not obtruded. The story is thoroughly Australian, but at the same time is not a deliberate attempt to describe the peculiar "manners and customs" of the Australians. The points of resemblance are more numerous than the points of difference between the inhabitants of various countries, and it is therefore destructive to the completeness of any picture of human life to give great and obvious

prominence to mere local peculiarities. If any of us, who have lived in this country for some years, pass in review our memories of what we have done, undergone, and witnessed, we shall find that, only occasionally not every day and all day long have we been encountering either persons or circumstances strikingly and distinctively Australian. Such persons and circumstances are, indeed, sufficiently numerous to give a description of life in Australia a special character, but the specialities should no more be obtruded than in a picture of Australian scenery, where the artist has to paint the outlines of cloud, and hill, and plain, and wood, and water, and to obey the laws of perspective, which hold good equally all over the world. It is by a judicious regard to tints by a few artistic touches about the foliage and so forth, that the distinctive Australianism of the landscape is conveyed. If Australian characteristics are too abundant – if blackfellows, kangaroos, emus, stringy barks, gums, and wattles, and any quantity of other things illustrative of the ethnology, zoology, and botany, of the country are crowded together, a greater amount of detailed information may be conveyed upon a given number of square inches of canvass than would otherwise be possible, but the picture loses character proportionately as a work of art.

We remember to have seen, many years ago, a print of "organic remains restored," in which earth, air, and water were crowded with all kinds of flying dragons, and slimy monsters, and antediluvian nondescripts, with necks as long as their names. "The world must have been very full of life in those days," was the reflection of our ingenuous youth; for we mistook the artist's design, which was not to shew how the earth looked before the flood, but what kind of creatures then lived. He treated the subject with an eye to science, not art. Had he wanted to make a good picture of the antediluvian world, he would have foregone to crowd it with creatures, and perhaps one long neck upreared from the waters of some vast and desolate swamp, and a few enormous tree ferns, would have sufficed to convey to the mind a vivid conception of what sort of a place this globe would have been to live upon in those times. Some stories written deliberately to illustrate national habits remind us, by the unnatural crowding together of local peculiarities, of that engraving of organic remains restored.

We have dwelt at such length upon this matter, because the fault we point out is one into which the writers of Australian fictions, for many years to come are peculiarly likely to fall, and because it would be fatal to the claims of any story to rank in that higher class of literature, for the possible cultivation of which upon Australian soil we have been contending. From the fault in question Clara Morison is almost entirely exempt. The writer took too vital an interest in the fictitious personages she had created, in the development of their characters, in the furtherance of their fate, and in their mutual relations, to let the grand aims of fiction be subordinated to the desire of working up Australian peculiarities for the information of distant readers.

Clara Morison, indeed, deals with a time and place so peculiar that it was only necessary for the author to put her people down then and there, and to let them play their parts easily and naturally among the circumstances by which they were surrounded, to ensure the result being a thoroughly and unmistakeably (but not obtrusively) Australian novel.

South Australia, at the time when the Victorian gold fields "broke out," as the common phrase runs, presented a most remarkable social aspect, well deserving to be recorded, and which has, we think, been put properly upon record only in the pages of Clara Morison. There is something very strange, and strangely alarming too, about the spectacle of a whole population packing up and going away. The men ran from South Australia in 1851 as the sand runs through an hour-glass, and the spectator, watching the rate at which they poured out, regarded absolute emptiness as a necessary consequence immediately to be expected. So far as the men were concerned, indeed, this result almost ensued, and in the midst of that sudden and tremendous social change very few people remained cool enough to feel secure that the ebbing tide would ever flow again. A man who owns fifty thousand pounds worth of land upon the Toorak road fancies he is rich for the rest of his life, and may he ever so think; but if he suddenly found the colony emptying heard nothing on any side but a panic-stricken cry of ruin! ruin! ruin! to all who remained saw his friends, his clerks, his workmen, everybody hurrying off as from a plague-stricken place found that he could not sell for two-pence what he thought to be worth a pound and the whole social structure, which he had accustomed himself to think immutable, breaking up like a wrecked ship among rocks and breakers, he would think himself surrounded by circumstances note worthy, to say the least of them.

Clara Morison is a young orphan lady, shipped out from the land o' cakes by an eminently respectable uncle, who thinks she may do very well in Adelaide, and is still more definitely persuaded that he can do very well without the cost of her maintenance in the modern Athens. So, with a letter of introduction, a Scotch blessing, and a ten pound note, he ships her off, to sink or swim, with a languid hope that she may swim rather than sink, but considerably preferring that she should sink at a distance than continue swimming longer in the Scottish waters. The description of the voyage out is not one of the best parts of the book, for poor Clara falls into very vulgar company, and the writer of the account seems to have been a little infected by the nature of the scenes and people described. This small episode in the story is, indeed, so far tinged with vulgarity that Mrs. Trollope (in some of her most refined moods) might almost have written it. There is one good point to be noticed in it, however. The few people introduced to us upon the waters are genuine people, with distinct outlines, though themselves common-place and vulgar; we forget them (thankfully) so soon as they are out of sight, but, during the few minutes for which we have to endure them, Mr. Renton, Mr. Macnab, and Miss Waterstone are as distinct and disagreeable as they would be in real life. But one can read contentedly for four minutes of people that it would be horrible torture to be bored with for four months.

The episodic character of this part of the book is, we think, in some respects, a distinct (though, perhaps, accidental) merit. Hundreds of our readers have experienced how, for ninety days or so, the world contracts within the wooden walls that hem us in during the "passage out," and how, when Australian life fairly begins, those whom we have lived with and quarrelled, and thought so much about, and hated with such preposterous ardour, and who have for a few months so filled the foreground of our stage, pass utterly out of sight. Even in this unprepossessing portion of "Clara Morison" we have indications of the writer's affluence in "characters." The book is crowded with people, but even the supernumeraries, who appear upon the stage and pass off again in the course of the play, possess distinct individualities.

On arriving in Adelaide, Clara finds that her consignee has lost his wife, and he surmises that the respectable Mr. Morison, of Edinburgh, had heard of this bereavement, and had exported Clara expressly to supply the place of the late Mrs. Campbell. Fortunately for Clara's peace of mind, she remains ignorant of this conjecture, and betakes herself to a boarding house while looking for (of course, alas! poor women!) a governess's situation. In the boarding house Clara and ourselves make the acquaintance of many persons, including the hero one Mr. Reginald an up-country squatter, who begins talking modern literature, and displaying a highly cultivated mind with a promptitude and pertinacity frightful to contemplate. Clara, however, regarded Mr. Reginald in a more favorable light than we did on first making his acquaintance, insomuch that an hour's vigorous and sustained battery of references to Carlyle, Thackeray, Dickens, Scott, Byron, and others, made a breach in her heart which never closes again till the end of the book, when the ordinary cure for love, matrimony, is administered with, we trust, satisfactory results. There is a great deal to be gone through in the mean time, however, for Mr. Reginald is under engagement to Miss Julia Marston, in England; a discovery which poor Clara makes coincidentally with this other, that Mr. Reginald habitually buttons up in his waistcoat all that would make life worth having. Mr. Reginald's sufferings are also acute; for his passion for the absent Julia has subsided a good deal in the course of many years' colonial residence, which she obstinately refuses to share, insisting (without any considerations founded on the price of wool and "the disease called scab in sheep") upon his coming home and living en grand Seigneur. Still, he adheres to his contract until Julia bestows upon him what is sometimes the greatest favor which it is in the power of woman to confer upon man by jilting him.

Though Mr. Reginald's affections may alone be worth living for, something more substantial is necessary to live on while they are being got ready, and Clara begins the weary task of many lives the search for suitable work, and finds none. She is not possessed of any considerable store of young lady's accomplishments, and the more sterling kinds of knowledge are in this age and generation lamentably unsaleable when packed up in petticoats. She had not, indeed, entirely neglected "the first duty of woman that of being pretty," but, as a countervailing disadvantage, she possessed earnest convictions, depth of feeling, and powers of observation and reflection; qualities more or less incompatible with the prevailing English and Turkish ideas of perfect womanhood. Partly on this account, probably, Clara failed to get a governess's situation, and, the ten pound manifestation of Scotch

Fiction Fields Of Australasia

avuncular generosity being exhausted, she was compelled to go to Service as maid-of-all-work to one Mrs. Bantam, a harmless and common-place lady, who, during some months' intercourse, fails to perceive anything remarkable about her domestic. Poetical justice towards Mrs. Bantam is partially satisfied, however, inasmuch as she is victimised by a horrible and strong-minded Miss Withering (a consignment from home, like Clara), who knows the art of sticking-up people and robbing them of hospitality. To eject this lady from the premises is an object which Mrs. Bantam only accomplishes by the exercise of much domestic scheming and diplomacy. Among other visitors to Mrs. Bantam's are Miss Minnie Hodges, a bright, pleasant, colonial young lady, with a great deal of South Australian patriotism, and who fights fierce battles with Miss Withering and Mr. Reginald, who is very discreet, and endures being waited on by the object of his affections with perfect philosophy, and without betraying anybody.

It is not till after the gold discoveries, and in the midst of the consequent social convulsions, that Clara falls in with some cousins Miss Elliotts, whose brothers have gone off to dig, and with whom she remains some time. The domestic pictures in this part of the book are very pleasant indeed. The three cousins are all young ladies with characters, and (the British and Turkish theory to the contrary notwithstanding) are very likeable persons, well described, and natural, without being common place.

Female writers, like the author of Clara Morison, have an advantage in not being afflicted by the necessity, under which most male writers seem to labor, of making all their agreeable feminine characters fit to be fallen in love with by anybody at a moment's notice, like the fascinating young ladies in Mr. Leech's social sketches. It is while Clara remains with the Elliotts that the narrative becomes most characteristically Australian. For, attached to the central thread of story that we have referred to with perhaps a somewhat too disrespectful mirthfulness, there are numberless little fibres leading in all directions, and by aid of these, while following the main story, we almost insensibly imbibe conceptions of the state of society which was peculiar to the time and place.

Clara does not permanently remain with the Elliotts, however, for she has an unorthodox aversion to dependent inutility, and she and her cousins are all sinfully poor together, and, moreover, the fraternal digging remains inadequately rewarded. So she goes into the bush as a companion to Mrs. Beaufort, a lady in failing health, who but we cannot stop to introduce to our readers one in a dozen of the people Clara encounters. Suffice it that poor Mrs. Beaufort's most mistaken idol worship, and the execrable idol whom she believes in, are alike well described, and that there is a great deal of true pathos about the closing scenes of her life.

We had intended to make some extracts from the pages of Clara Morison, but various considerations, of which that relating to space is the chief, induce us to refrain. Moreover, justice would scarcely be done to the book if it were judged by a few isolated passages. The author has not much of that humorous faculty which produces quaint fancies, descriptions, and forms of expression; nor has she such command over "the sacred source of sympathetic tears" as enables the master spirits of fiction to touch the heart by a few exquisite lines. But we believe that most readers who turn to the book itself, provided they can overcome some disagreeable impressions produced in the earlier pages, and the description of the voyage, and by the abruptness of Mr. Reginald's literary love making

"Was ever woman in such humor wooed
Was ever woman in such humor won?"

will be inclined to read it to the end. The personages are not mere wooden figures pulled about by perceptible wires, but, with few exceptions, are full of life and truth. The circumstances which control their fates are sustained and seem to follow one another like the events of real life in natural sequence.

The private story adjusts itself properly and easily to the public history of the time. The production of this work was no mere mechanical operation; still less was the tale a toy in the hands of the writer. Her whole soul must have been given to it with conscientious earnestness, and she must have had her reward in the enrichment of her world with a group of personages, whom, though the offspring of her own imagination, she undoubtedly and

devoutly "believed in" herself, as in a reality.

A tale of a very different kind is "Martin Beck, or the Australian Settler," by A. Harris. Mr. Harris, long before the publication of Martin Beck, was very favorably known as the author of a little book upon Australia, called "Settlers and Convicts," which appeared about ten years ago in Knight's series of weekly volumes. Mr. Harris was, however, certainly more at home in dealing with fact than with fiction, and Martin Beck, though full of very graphic descriptions of bush life and operations, possesses comparatively little merit as a novel. The story mainly concerns the fortunes of a Lieutenant Bracton and his family, settlers on the Murrumbidgee, and takes its name from their American negro overseer, who is an admirable Crichton as to skill in all kinds of bush work, but, unfortunately, addicted to cattle stealing and vengeance, both which propensities he indulges to such an extent as to compel him to fly and take to bushranging. At length he gets shot by the son of his old employer, and the redundant personages being killed out of the way the Bracton affairs prosperous and divers young couples joined together in holy matrimony the story is brought to an orthodox conclusion. The book is full of incident and adventure adventures with wild bullocks, adventures with wild blacks, adventures with bushrangers, adventures on land, and adventures on water.

There are many good descriptions of cattle mustering, and cattle branding, and stockyard making; and the way flocks get scabbed, and drays bogged, and how cattle and sheep are stolen both by black and white practitioners. The story, in fact, is a vehicle for such descriptions; and, though Mr.

Harris has perceived the obligation that rests upon the novel writer to delineate characters and to introduce the love-making element into his composition, we do not think he has been very successful in these respects. The heroines are, no doubt, very angelic beings; for, Mr. Harris, who knows them much better than we do, assures us of the fact: and we have already learned, in many hundred novels, what a blessing it is to an old gentleman to have two beautiful girls in his family, both charming and pure minded, but one calm and the other lively. Between the characters of amiable young ladies this is the stock distinction recognised among legions of novelists. We must not overlook, either, Rachel, the wonderful young Jewess, daughter to an old Israelite storekeeper on the Murrumbidgee, where she has learned to talk about the wrongs of her people, after the style of Rebecca, daughter of Isaac of York, and where she has expanded into such marvellous loveliness that for it this pen can write no word adequately expressive. Mary Kable also demands our admiration, particularly as she is a "daughter of the soil;" and it is delightful to know that she, too, was the sunshine of the house she dwelt in. The young men to marry all these young women are Willoughby Bracton, gentleman and whaler; Reuben Kable, cornstalk, and brother to Mary; Mr. Henley, police magistrate; and Charles Bracton, a young medical practitioner, who emigrates just in time to whip up the beautiful Jewess, she having been, it seems, a Christian at heart all along, and no theological difficulties therefore intervening.

It is perfectly delightful to find that, in so small a circle, not merely has the adjustment in the number of the sexes been so complete, but that the matrimonial requirements as to age, disposition, of every body are all supplied to a nicety, and nothing over. The dialogue of the book, except perhaps some of the conversations between Martin Beck and his cattle-stealing accomplices, is very undramatic. The merit altogether lies in the vivid description given of the externals of Australian bush life. One drawback to the book arises from the fact that it was written after many years' absence from the scenes described. It treats entirely of Australia before the flood, and, being in effect a book of information, loses much of its value by describing things as they were many years ago rather than as they are now. It is not without value, however, as a graphic record of how things were managed some years ago in New South Wales, when convictism was rife, and the assignment system in full operation.

Rowcroft's "Tales of the Colonies," a description of life in Van Diemen's Land many years ago, certainly long bore the palm among Australian stories. Though avowedly designed to give intending emigrants information which is now in a great measure out of date and though many artistic considerations have been sacrificed to that design, it is a very vigorously written book, full of life and adventure, with many interesting scenes, bold sketches of character, and dashes of humor, about it. Perhaps it received rather more attention than it

Fiction Fields Of Australasia

deserved when it first made its appearance a dozen years ago, for at that time bushrangers and wild Australian cattle were alike unfamiliar to the reading world of London. The prevailing ignorance of affairs at this side of the globe was startlingly great at the other, considering that thence came the ukases of Downing street; and Mr. Rowcroft's clever book took people by surprise. Society was agitated to find that Van Dieman's Land was really an inhabited island, most people having previously only considered it "a place on the map." Used-up readers discovered a new emotion as they read bush stories, colored up to the highest tints compatible with truth, and other people found other sources of interest in the "Tales of the Colonies." Though we cannot read accounts of cattle branding, and that kind of thing, year after year, in successive works, with any great degree of interest, the field which Mr. Rowcroft opened up was so entirely new, and he performed the duties of a describer of external things so well, that it would have been unreasonable to complain much because his book did not possess the dramatic merits of a first-class fiction. Mr.

Rowcroft's enterprise in breaking up new ground was duly rewarded. His book had gone through six large editions in 1850, and we know not how many more have been published since.

In the "Tales of the Colonies" Mr. Rowcroft alternately assumes and ignores dramatic responsibilities just as circumstances render expedient. If it becomes convenient to explain or to argue out of the mouth of one of the personages of the story, that personage's powers of oratory rise with the occasion in a most marvellous way, and he speaks off half a page or a page of well constructed sentences with an accuracy and fluency that the best debater of "the ninety" might envy, and which his previous manifestations of conversational power by no means led us to expect. It would not be fair to apply the laws of dramatic criticism very rigorously to a work which, though in the novel form, purports to have for its chief object the supply of a kind of emigrants' hand-book now, of course, much injured as a practical guide by the changes years have made. A book setting forth such modest pretensions disarms censure, and compels gratitude for the performance of so much more than the preface promises. It is a very much better novel than the avowed scheme of its construction would have justified us in expecting, and it is only because its own merit has forced for it an entrance into a rank of literature to which it does not altogether properly belong, that we allude to its dramatic imperfections. Some of the characters, however, are really good. Crab, for instance, though a bit of a caricature, is an excellently sustained personification of inveterate grumbling, and he is, moreover, the type of a class by no means uncommon in this part of the world men who are continually fattening on the fruits they as continually condemn.

Mr. Rowcroft has written another story, whereof the scene is partly laid in these colonies: "The Emigrant in search of a Colony;" but in this, even more than in his previous work, the dramatic purpose is subordinated to the design of giving specific information upon all sorts of subjects interesting to emigrants.

The hero who, by the way, is in such constant danger of being hanged (now by Lynch law administrators in the slave States, then by pirates at sea, and anon on board a British man of war on suspicion of piracy) that in the end he must have lost all confidence in the powers of hemp is sent "scuttling" over the world to give information about the different emigration fields to his readers, and to try and clear up for his own satisfaction the mysterious circumstances of his parentage. On one occasion when he is going to be hanged we forget what for that time a clergyman turns up full of valuable recollections, and but we will not spoil the interest of possible readers by saying what happens. As a story the book is full of exaggeration and absurdity. For example, near the beginning we have a scene, in the house of Captain Sullivan, intended to illustrate the miseries of keeping up appearances on small means in England, and the tax collectors keep dropping in as fast as they can knock, exactly as they would under similar circumstances in a broad farce at the Adelphi.

However, let us not grumble at the book. It is something to get the medicine of fact in an agreeable medium, and although a high-art confectioner may scorn the notion of degrading jelly into the mere vehicle of calomel powders, yet utilitarian philosophy has much to say in support of that subordination of the beautiful to the useful. Moreover, the jelly in which Mr. Rowcroft gives us the medicine above alluded to, though much better than that ordinarily used for such purposes, is hardly good enough to be consumed as a luxury upon its own merits, and is

therefore appropriately bestowed where it is.

Some very good Australian sketches have appeared occasionally in the Household Words, and we particularly recommend for perusal two papers entitled, respectively, "The Old Squatter" and "The New Squatter."

In the remote antiquity of sixteen or eighteen years ago, long Tom Scott, the "Old Squatter," came over from Van Dieman's Land, and pushed up into the interior, fighting manfully against difficulties and dangers, and leading a hard, rough life for many years; a true rugged pioneer of civilization. Little thought Long Tom Scott that a worse enemy than blacks or drought, or scab itself the "New Squatter," destined eventually to take possession of all Tom's territory and flocks and herds, to reap all the harvest of Tom's sowings, to gather all the fair fruit that Tom's toil and perseverance had caused to grow – was standing "douce" and snug in a white apron behind a grocer's counter in Glasgow, even at the time when Tom first pushed up into the interior. Yet so it was; for some years previously little Davy McLeod, ragged callant, out of pure mischief, spattered some dirty water over a decent ballie body, and the ballie, having first caught and cuffed the little vagabond, benevolently tells him that some better employment than dirtying honest people's clothes shall be found for him. So Davy becomes supernumerary boy in the ballie's shop, and works himself up to the dignity of the white apron of the regularly constituted assistant; and he has quiet specs of his own, and does all things prudently, and, finally, with a snug little capital, comes out to Melbourne, and goes cautiously into business, and gradually increases it, and becomes a capitalist, and makes advances (douce good-natured man) to divers of his customers, and gradually draws many persons into his net. Of course, commercial crises overtake the colony, and Davy has to bewail his awfu' losses; but somehow or another, when the storm has blown over, it always turns out that during the panic more property has been sacrificed to him than by him, and so douce Davy swells into a colonial magnate. He is now "The New Squatter;" for many stations and flocks have fallen into his hands in satisfaction of long arrears of debt the douce honest man knowing well how to put the screw on at the right time, when a debt paid in kind will be paid twice over at least and one fine day he takes it into his head that a trip into the bush would do him good, and also give him an opportunity for the first time of seeing his nibbling flocks and his "cattle upon a thousand hills." Of course, it need not be told that poor Tom Scott's run has been one of douce Davy's peaceable and easy conquests. On that run the old and new squatter casually meet the ruined man, gaunt and grisly with toiling and fighting for years to break in the wilderness for the other's enjoyment douce Davy, sleek and fat, and filled with the comfortable sense of large possessions. Tom gives Davy a piece of his mind, accompanied with such vigorous gesticulation as make that amiable gentlemen shiver down to the tips of his toes, and then strides away into the bush, and we know him no more. As for douce Davy, we presume he returns to Melbourne to urge his claims to compensation as a much-wronged "pioneer of civilization."

These capital sketches are evidently the work of two hands. The stories have been written in Australia by some one, knowing the place well, but not brilliant as a writer, and some very first class writer, probably Dickens himself, has breathed into them the breath of genius. In some places phrases occur that could not have been written by any one who had ever been in Australia, but which are wonderfully conducive to literary effect, and in others we can perceive unmistakable traces of local knowledge. The polishing process is, however, so skilfully performed, and the general effect is so good, that it is only by close observation that we are enabled here and there to detect the tool marks.

We might easily lengthen out this paper by references to other Australian stories that have appeared in various fugitive shapes, but we content ourselves with having briefly called attention to a few of the best products of these fiction fields that have yet been published. We believe it is found among farmers generally that nothing stimulates agriculture more than the exhibition of good specimens of agricultural produce, and we hope like benefit may be produced by like means with respect to cultivation of a less material kind.