OLD SONGS IN THE TIMELESS LAND:
Medievalism in Australian Literature 1840–1910

by

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Introduction

Warring Elements?
Medievalism and Australian Identity
in Nineteenth-Century Australian Literature

I
n the Fremantle Herald, 14 May 1881, the local poet ‘Gerontius’ defended his
column ‘Legends of the King’ against readers’ complaints about its regular
inclusion of medieval legends. The complaints, which we can only guess at
through Gerontius’s response to them, seem not to have been directed at the author’s
highly idiosyncratic reworking of these legends, but aimed deeper, pointing to a
troubling un-Australianness at the very heart of his literary endeavour. He was not,
we infer, seen to be producing Australian writing for Australian audiences. Gerontius
hit back at his critics by demanding why medievalism and a sense of Australian
modernity need be regarded as literary antagonists:

Cannot a man have a cool Australian tone in him and a ‘well chewed over’ relish [...] for
‘medieval brac a brac’ and ancient story? The answer is yours reader to make [...] we may
have occasion to show you that the two warring elements may exist peaceably together.1

Gerontius’s readers were not completely misguided in their perception that the
author’s dogged (and frequently long-winded) exploration of ‘old world notions’
sat somewhat at odds both with the up-to-date agenda of the news publication in
which it appeared, and with their own desire for a literature that reflected their
contemporary Australian environs. As opposed to, say, France, Germany, or the
British Isles, where modernity rubbed shoulders physically with the remnants of
the medieval past, a preoccupation with the Middle Ages can seem fundamentally
counter-intuitive in a collection of colonies whose European settlement commenced

at the High Enlightenment date of 1788. Indeed, Australian historians such as John Gascoigne have pointed persuasively to the formative role of Enlightenment ideals in the development of colonial (and modern) Australia’s political, intellectual, economic, and sectarian complexion. But the Enlightenment was not the only European cultural legacy to make a powerful impact on colonial Australia’s public life or to shape the self-perceptions of its settler society. Taking Gerontius’s lead, this book aims to show that far from being ‘warring elements’, for many writers in the Australian colonies, a deep cultural and personal attachment to the European Middle Ages coexisted with a determined identification with Australian modernity. A surprising number of writers reached to the Middle Ages for motifs, narrative models, myths, characters, and historical events to express a sense not just of the European past but also the Australian present and future. This is not to say that this literary coexistence was always, as Gerontius claimed, peaceable: indeed in many texts it was divided and strained, with medievalism struggling for air amidst the mélange of cultural allusions surrounding it — classical, oriental, Renaissance, and even, in some cases, indigenous Australian. In other cases Australian writers’ medievalism was laced with hostility or irony toward, and exasperation with, the Middle Ages. But even when the medieval period was being explicitly rejected as feudal, hidebound, and barbaric, or alternatively as absurdly romantic and effete, it nevertheless loomed large within the consciousness of those writers trying to understand their own, and Australia’s, place within the world at large.

To anyone familiar with the phenomenon of medievalism — the post-medieval imaginative recovery and recreation of the Middle Ages — the proposition of a particularly Australian return to the Middle Ages seems far from counter-intuitive or absurd. The fundamentally creative nature of medievalism means that the absence of the Middle Ages, far from being an obstacle to their transhistorical survival, is a condition that in fact guarantees their abiding presence in the modern cultural imaginary. In places such as Australia, where the archaeological and material traces of an in situ medieval past are necessarily absent, this absence, and the sense of historical discontinuity that accompanies it, are the conditions on which all medievalist practice is predicated.

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The opening stanza of a poem by ‘Veni’ published in the Sydney Morning Herald on 25 October 1882 captures beautifully how the absence of a local medieval past worked as a paradoxical incitement to dwell on this era. Written in response to the destruction by fire of the Garden Palace, the venue that had housed the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition, the poem also contains a meditation on the young colony’s lack of picturesque historical traces:

Ruins! Alas! We have been wont to say  
With half-regretful tone, that in the grace  
And glory of our country’s youthful day  
The mystic charm of ruins had no place —  
We lack’d the eerie magic of the Past.  
The moss-grown battlements, and chronic page —  
Did our presumptuous folly think to cast  
On form so fair, the rusty garb of age?

In talking about the colony’s bemoaned lack of ‘the mystic charm of ruins’ and ‘the eerie magic of the Past’, the writer cannot but call up these very things and imagine them into existence for his/her audience. The concluding lines of the stanza ‘Ah Fate, more keen than Time, has shewn us how / One hour sufficed to trace a wrinkle on her [Australia’s] brow!’ suggest that while Australia lacks authentic medieval presence, her recent acquaintance with Fate’s fiery misfortunes, which decimates human civilization with greater speed and savagery than slow-working time, has vaulted her toward a cultural maturity echoing that of more venerable, ruin-strewn societies. As I will go on to argue, these conditions of absence and distance, whether wistfully acknowledged (as in the above poem) or wilfully embraced, granted Australian medievalism throughout the colonial and early Federated period a significant interpretive freedom, paving the way for a wide-ranging and fertile engagement with a world that was, for many, in the strictest sense the product of memory and imagination.

Yet to focus alone on absence, geographical distance and historical discontinuity would be disingenuous. For as a local cultural discourse, Australian medievalism emerged in part as a legacy of British colonialism, and as such also reflects the extent to which this nation has, its physical remoteness and avowed modernity notwithstanding, maintained a sense of proximity to, and continuity with, the medieval European heritage of its settler culture. Its literature, architecture, parliamentary rituals, and material and performance culture all attest to colonial

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4 This poem is also discussed in Andrew Montana, The Art Movement in Australia: Design, Taste and Society 1875–1900 (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah, 2000), p. 176.
Australia’s desire to situate itself within deep European and English tradition. This forceful, indeed often urgent, assertion of proximity to illustrious European tradition was motivated not only by a simple desire to overcome geographical isolation but, more murkily, by a denial of the shame of its origins as a British penal colony — and, more problematically still, by a wilful disavowal of the long aboriginal past that was treated with such disregard in the wake of British colonialism. It is for this reason that this book bears the title ‘Old Songs in the Timeless Land’: it is a key responsibility of any scholarship on medievalism within settler societies such as Australia to recognize the extent to which colonial evocations of continuity with European and English antique tradition were implicated in the refusal and displacement of local traditions that were as sophisticated, and even more ancient. Of course, the notion of pre-colonial and indigenous Australia as a ‘timeless land’ is, as many have noted, troubling in its misattribution of primitive, ahistorical changelessness to non-European cultures — a misattribution, moreover, that has mandated the imposition of European culture and *chronos* over indigenous ‘nature’ and its apparently limitless *eion*. This phrase (which Australian readers will recognize as quoting the title of Eleanor Dark’s 1941 novel of settlement, *The Timeless Land*), is not, then, evoked uncritically here. Rather, it is used as a reminder of the context of cultural and historical contestation in which Australian colonial medievalist writing was produced. The vast majority of the colonial texts examined in this book do not engage with the indigenous cultures and traditions they are serenely and often only half-consciously displacing, and as such this narrative of historical contestation does not figure overtly in much of the discussion to follow. But it is necessary to frame this relative silence within a prefatory acknowledgement that many of the practices of colonial Australian medievalism can be seen to reflect Australian historian Tom Griffiths’s assertion that ‘the Great Australian Silence’ on indigenous dispossession has been less a silence than a ‘white noise’ which has ‘[...] consisted of an obscuring and overlaying din of history-making’.

A prime instance of this gesture of historical displacement is the Mediaeval Court featured at the 1866 Melbourne Intercolonial Exhibition (Figure 1), which showcased the wares of local construction and decoration firms within the charming oddity of an ersatz ‘Old English’ cathedral interior.

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The Court’s quietly triumphant engagement with imperialist historicism was evident in the choice of a medieval aesthetic, which embodied a benign, ‘universal’ English Christian past that had apparently been transplanted effortlessly, and rightfully, in colonial soil. The Court epitomized what Peter Hoffenberg has called the ‘imperial nostalgia’ of nineteenth-century exhibition culture, its ‘cultural policy to create and preserve [...] historical fantasies’ in order to create ‘an historical Australia’ in this

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CASE VIA AN EVOCATION OF MODERN AUSTRALIA’S CONNECTION TO ENGLISH ANTIQUITY. Through its integrated recreation of ancient Christianity and Englishness, the Court also aimed to mark the triumph of this cultural heritage over the ‘primitive’ indigenous cultures of Australasia and the Pacific, which were represented at the Exhibition in a desultory and fragmented fashion. The scattering of aboriginal artefacts throughout several locales in the exhibition had the cumulative effect of representing indigenous culture as a dispersed and piecemeal culture, with its decontextualized artefacts approaching the status of bric-a-brac, in contrast with the Mediaeval Court, whose richly intact chamber reflected the intactness of the culture it embodied. Here, European antiquarianism and indigenous ethnology were competing discourses for understanding the colony’s past. In featuring and fêting the Mediaeval Court as it did, colonial Melbourne nominated unmistakably the cultural infancy that it believed would best fit its ideal image of metropolitan maturity.

It is the charged, complex dialectic of proximity and distance, continuity and rupture, and the ways it has shaped Australian medievalism, that will be the focus of much of this book. Focusing for the most part on literary and theatrical examples from Australia’s colonial era, with some discussion of the physical and material culture surrounding their production, this study aims to demonstrate that this dialectic has long been the distinguishing principle of Australian medievalism, encompassing even its most stylistically and ideologically divergent articulations. In a number of cases it has manifested itself through sophisticated, sustained, and self-consciously ‘Australian’ engagements with medieval characters, events, and motifs. As will be discussed in the final two chapters, however, it is equally, though more obliquely, detectible in what can be described as early Australia’s ‘throwaway’ medievalism: that is the more voluminous body of texts in which the presence of medievalist tropes is incidental, fleeting, and historically undiscriminating. While the study of the former category of texts is undeniably more exegetically satisfying, and yields more obviously rich material for cultural diagnosis, it is also possible to make a case for the importance of examining throwaway medievalism for what it can tell us about the dominant tastes and ideological concerns that have shaped popular Australian medievalism. Emphasizing the largely diffuse, promiscuous
quality of nineteenth-century medievalism is also important as a counter-narrative to the dominant story in which Eurocentric, magisterial Victorian medievalism held sway until its decline under high modernism, after which a fragmented or ironic postmodern reanimation of the Middle Ages took place. Instead, we see that in colonial Australia an ironic, parodic engagement began virtually simultaneously with the more reverent forms of medievalism.

The more sophisticated and developed texts, which will be discussed in Chapters 1 to 3, are most commonly novels and poetry collections from the later colonial period — that is, the final three decades of the nineteenth century — through to the years immediately following Federation. Despite their often complex and ideologically revealing engagement with the Middle Ages and with nineteenth-century practices of medievalism, these texts are only just beginning to be examined for their medievalist content. Although there is no shortage of high quality work on them by Australianists, it is the exception rather than the rule to find this work taking into account their medievalism, except very occasionally (and very briefly) under the rubric of colonial literature’s responses to European romanticism and Gothic literature. The last few years have, however, witnessed a growing tendency to treat medievalism in Australian literature and culture as a subject worth analysing in its own right. This shift began fairly unobtrusively about a decade ago with a small number of individual scholars, virtually all of them medievalists working in the discipline of English literature, producing isolated studies either of medievalism or of the development of medieval studies in Australia.8 Inspired in part by the increasing stream of recent work within medieval studies, particularly that which has analysed medievalism as an instrument of European nationalism, Australian scholars were nevertheless quick to discern that this work’s neglect of colonialism as the complement and obverse of European nationalism meant that medievalism’s complex intersection with colonial and postcolonial cultures was being overlooked.9 While one approach to Australian

8 The main figures in this regard have been Stephanie Trigg, Andrew Lynch, Louise D’Arcens, Jenna Mead (who produced the earliest work in this area), David Matthews, and Geraldine Barnes. For summaries of the development of academic studies of the Middle Ages in Australia, see Louise D’Arcens, ‘Europe in the Antipodes: Australian Medieval Studies’, in Studies in Medievalism X, Medievalism and the Academy II, ed. by David Metzger (Cambridge: Brewer, 1998), pp. 13–40; and Helen Fulton, ‘Medieval Studies in Australia’, AUMLA: Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association, 100 (2003), 1–12.

medievalism has been oriented toward correcting this bias by writing about the
important but occluded role of medievalism in Australian social, political, and
material culture, other work has additionally used the conceptual and ideological
framework offered by postcolonial studies to challenge explicitly the omission of
Australia from the received narratives of medievalism. Postcolonial theory,
particularly Homi K. Bhabha’s extrapolation of Sigmund Freud in his discussion
of the post/colonial uncanny (*unheimlich*), has proven especially valuable, as its
emphasis on the notion of repressed, estranged familiarity captures perfectly the
unexpected iterations of the medieval in the antipodean environment.10 Less
conspicuously theoretical, but equally valuable, has been the excellent body of work
produced on imperial culture and on white settler culture, which has provided a
nuanced vocabulary for elucidating the complex and divided cultural allegiances
reflected in the medievalism produced in societies such as colonial Australia.11

A rapid increase in momentum over the past few years has seen this formerly
solitary pursuit transformed into a collective concern, as scholars of Australian
medievalism have not only grown in their ranks but have also, more importantly,
begun to form a range of vital research collaborations. One especially significant
and valuable development was the publication in 2005 of the volume of essays
*Medievalism and the Gothic in Australian Culture*, edited by Stephanie Trigg. The
aim of that volume is, in Trigg’s words, to ‘re-examin[e] the various historical and
mythological deployments of the medieval and Gothic past across a range of social
cultural fields [...] in the Australian context’.12 Co-published through Brepols’s
*Making the Middle Ages* series and the University of Melbourne Press, this volume

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10 See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994),
especially pp. 136–37.

11 See, for instance, Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson, ‘Settler Colonies’, in *A Companion to
Johnston and Lawson articulate Australian settlers’ self-understanding as British yet not-British.
They argue that the settlers’ sense of alienation from their parent culture was shot through with
an internalized hegemonic notion of themselves as ‘second class’ or ‘feral’ English subjects. For
another useful discussion of the mixture of allegiance and resistance in settler subjects, see Stephen
Slemon, ‘Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World’, in *Contemporary

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It aims simultaneously to introduce Australian medievalism to the international field and to initiate Australian readers into the rich but under-recognized phenomenon of local medievalism. It is wide-ranging in its scope, spanning from colonial to twenty-first-century Australian culture, and examining the traces of the medieval, and the active evocation of the medieval, in Australian literature, architecture, popular culture, secular and religious communities, and political institutions and rituals. It is also significant for bringing together the work of medievalists and Australianists. That this broad survey volume is far from exhaustive in its coverage is less a shortcoming than a reflection of the relative infancy of research into this area, and an indication of the large-scale recovery project that lies ahead. This will be a two-fold project involving both exhuming neglected materials and looking at well-known elements of Australian culture with new eyes trained to detect their medievalist substratum. It is to this project that this book aims to make a contribution.

Colonial Gothics and the Challenge of Locating Australian Medievalism

While to nineteenth-century English and European eyes the Australian landscape cannot have borne the signs of a medieval past, this did not prevent its inhabitants or visitors from medievalizing it. One of the most concrete and conspicuous means of achieving this was, as historians such as Brian Andrew have documented, architectural. The colonial civic centres, especially Sydney and Melbourne, were transformed from the middle decades of the nineteenth century by the construction of a number of impressive and ambitious buildings in the then-fashionable Gothic Revival style. The continuing visual dominance of these landmark structures, with their evocations of premodern grandeur, ritual, and piety, prompts Trigg to argue that ‘Australia conceives the historical past primarily under the sign of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic’. Just two of the most famous examples in Sydney are the main building of the University of Sydney, designed in the 1850s by Sir Edmund Blacket, and St Mary’s Catholic Cathedral, designed in the 1860s by William Wilkinson Wardell, Australia’s foremost disciple of the English architectural revivalist Augustus Welby Pugin. Among Melbourne’s best-known (and, today, best-loved) Gothic Revival buildings is the English,

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13 See Brian Andrew, *Australian Gothic: The Gothic Revival in Australian Architecture from the 1840s to the 1950s* (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah, 2001).

Scottish, and Australian (ES&A) Bank, also designed in Venetian Gothic style by William Wardell and built between 1883 and 1887. Nor was this limited to urban centres: among the more striking rural examples was what historian Michael Sharland has called the ‘fowl castle’, an eccentric Gothic tower-shaped dovecote, which is one of two battlemented towers built at mid-century by the landholder Joseph Archer on his properties in the Tasmanian Midlands. Most famous, perhaps, and entirely singular in the Australian context, was the monastic township of New Norcia, located on the Victoria Plains north of Perth in Western Australia, which grew up around the isolated aboriginal mission that had been founded in 1846 by displaced Spanish Benedictines. Although its distinctive and eclectic blend of Gothic Revival, Spanish Mission, and Italian Renaissance-influenced buildings was to come some decades after the initial settlement, the foundational act of naming it after Benedict’s birthplace is a clear evocation of the ancient monastic tradition of which it continues today to be a living artefact.

And yet the name New Norcia is more complex than this, for it is suggestive of continuity but also of rupture, implying that the establishment of this community was also the foundational moment of a new tradition belonging to the red soil of the New World. It is true that as a Spanish and Catholic settlement, New Norcia was somewhat anomalous within Australia’s dominant British Protestant translatio imperii; nevertheless, its historical ambiguity was typical, underlining the extent to which medievalizing the land- and streetscapes of colonial Australia was an undertaking fraught with ambivalence. On the one hand these buildings, especially

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15 See Sarah Randles, ‘Rebuilding the Middle Ages: Medievalism in Australian Architecture’, in Medievalism and the Gothic in Australian Culture, ed. by Trigg, pp. 147–69. For a more comprehensive discussion of Australia’s Gothic Revival Architecture, see Andrew, Australian Gothic. For a more theoretically sophisticated analysis of Gothic style and imperial and post/colonial ideologies, see the essays in Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre, ed. by Andrew Smith and William Hughes (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

16 Sharland’s description, from his Stones of a Century (1957), is quoted by Jenna Mead in ‘Medievalism and Memory Work: Archer’s Folly and the Gothic Revival Pile’, in Medievalism and the Gothic in Australian Culture, ed. by Trigg, pp. 99–118 (pp. 105–06).

17 The history and recent developments of New Norcia are outlined in a number of publications, one of which is A Place Like No Other: The Living Tradition of New Norcia, ed. by David Hutchison (South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre, 1995). See the settlement’s website <http://www.newnorcia.wa.edu.au/> for information about its history and its current activities. A more recent foundation, the Cistercian abbey of Tarrawarra in Yarra Glen, East of Melbourne, is discussed by Megan Cassidy-Welch in “A Place of Horror and Vast Solitude”: Medieval Monasticism and the Australian Landscape’, in Medievalism and the Gothic in Australian Culture, ed. by Trigg, pp. 189–204.
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the earlier ones, were highly visible assertions of the colonies’ links with the imperial centre — Archer’s towers, for instance, functioned, in Jenna Mead’s apt phrase, as ‘a synecdoche for Englishness’ — and as evocations of a venerable past surviving into the present. This pursuit of cultural continuity is epitomized in Edmund Blacket’s statement that ‘[i]t is impossible for an Englishman to think of an University without thinking of Mediaeval Architecture’, a conviction that underpinned his Gothic Revival design for the University of Sydney. On the other hand, they embodied the proud beginnings of a distinct local settler culture. First of all, they came to differ from their English and European counterparts, both medieval and medievalist, at a material level, in that they were partly built from local raw products such as Pyrmont sandstone and Australian blackwood, mingled local motifs among the traditional symbolism of their heraldic carvings and stained glass windows, and altered their dimensions to accommodate the greater heat and harsher light of the antipodean environs. Secondly, and more importantly, they made tangible the prosperous colonies’ aspirations to challenge the primacy of their imperial parent culture, and to shed some of its ideological baggage. While the design of University of Sydney’s main buildings might have purposely evoked the great medieval English universities, the notable absence of religious iconography on their windows and stonework reflects the colonists’ determination to avoid the sectarian divisions that plagued the British university system. Similarly, as Sarah Randles perceptively notes, the Neo-Gothic grandeur of St Mary’s cathedral, like the Melbourne Mediaeval Court discussed earlier, ‘evoked the sense of an unbroken religious tradition’ between Old and New Worlds, but also advertised a different sectarian complexion for the colony, ‘help[ing] to give Catholicism a position in the mainstream of Australian society very different from that which it had occupied in Britain’.

The impulse to medievalize the Australian landscape continued into the literature which is the focus of this book. Here too the Gothic proved to be a serviceable literary idiom for those attempting to render the forbidding and, to European eyes, perverse grandeur and desolation of the Australian natural scene. Unlike ecclesiastical architecture, in literature the Gothic was not the only, or even the dominant, medievalist representation favoured by Australians; as the chapters of this book show, chivalric and heroic images of the past also loomed large within

19 Quoted in Randles, ‘Rebuilding the Middle Ages’, p. 155.
20 Randles, ‘Rebuilding the Middle Ages’, p. 153.
the colonial medievalist imaginary, along with the nostalgic notions of preindustrial medieval harmony popularized by John Ruskin, William Morris, and the aesthetic movement that emerged in their wake. But it deserves an honourable mention here for methodological reasons, as it throws into relief the complexities involved in identifying certain forms of medievalism in Australian literature. As the unruly opposite of the resplendent architecture that bore the same name, the Australian literary Gothic described the local natural scene in terms that strongly aligned this landscape with the gloomy medieval architectural spaces of Gothic fiction; but it did so without making direct mention of the Middle Ages. This period was, rather, evoked obliquely as a literary construction, via a series of tropes and adjectives associated with modern fantasies of dark and brutal premodernity. But it is vital that this indirect mode of allusion does not lead us to disqualify these texts as examples of medievalism. For, as will be discussed later into this chapter and throughout the book, the heavily mediated relationship to the medieval past in these and other works is a distinguishing feature of Australian medievalism — and, indeed, of medievalism itself.

One of the best-known literary articulations of the Gothic landscape in nineteenth-century Australia, by Marcus Clarke, demonstrates this well. Clarke does not Gothicize this landscape by dotting it nostalgically with baronial ruins or deserted churches; rather, he ingeniously presents it as a haunting (and haunted) but aesthetically generative space in which the Australian poet can learn to sing, using the land’s sublime Gothic vocabulary: ‘whispered to by the myriad tongues of the wilderness, [the poet] learns the language of the barren and the uncouth; he can read the hieroglyphics of haggard gum trees [...] [t]he phantasmagoria of that wild dreamland called the Bush interprets itself’. This Gothicizing of the landscape was, moreover, not limited to literature: it is strongly evident in paintings such as Eugene von Guérard’s *South End of Tasman’s Island* (1867), in which the image of the fluted, Jurassic South East coast of Tasmania is painted to resemble the imposing ruin of a medieval castle or cathedral and the towering pipes of a great ecclesiastical organ. The fact that the rock formations on this coast have attracted such names as Cathedral Rock, while other cliffs in the Tasmanian interior are called the Organ Pipes, suggests that von Guérard was not alone in reading the Tasmanian landscape through a Gothic architectural vocabulary.

Late nineteenth-century writers also reached for familiar Gothic tropes when contemplating the violence at the heart of Australia’s colonial history, from the

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enforced banishment and institutional brutality endured by convicts in the years of penal settlement to the cruelty and degradation meted out by white settlers to the dispossessed indigenous Australians. Again Marcus Clarke figures, with his representation of the barbarity of Australia’s then recently defunct convict system in his ‘realist’ historical romance *His Natural Life* (serialized 1870–71; book publication 1874), which is ranked among the most important Australian novels of the nineteenth century. With its accounts of convicts descending into savagery, murder, and even cannibalism, Clarke’s gruesome account of penal servitude in the colony of Van Diemen’s Land (now Tasmania) confronts us with a purgatorial world of tortured souls alienated from their humanity. Clarke’s recourse to these Gothic images presents convictism as, to use David Matthews’s incisive phrase, ‘Australia’s own equivalent to castellated culture’ — that is, a ghastly punitive past that echoes the Gothicized medieval past, and within whose contours lurk the spectral presences of the abused and their tormentors. Matthews’s notion of equivalence is corroborated by Henry Kingsley’s eponymous narrator in the 1859 novel *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn*, who says that the horrors of ‘penal servitude for life’ in Van Diemen’s Land convey to modern Australians the ‘idea of what it used to be in old times’. Kingsley’s allusions to convict life also evoke bleak images of violence, lunacy, and cannibalism — the latter strongly indicating (as with Clarke’s novel) the influence of the notorious case of Alexander Pearce, the Irish convict who in 1822 confessed to cannibalizing fellow escapees while on the run from the Macquarie Harbour penal settlement. Elsewhere, as is exemplified by J. M. Marsh’s poem ‘At Sandy Crossing’, the primeval horror of the land colludes with the nightmarish isolation of frontier life, leading to madness, alcoholism, moral decay, and a cycle of violent retribution between settlers and aborigines. Marsh’s bleak image of a deserted outback station reads like a veritable sampler of Gothic commonplaces. To quote from the second stanza only:

Swift the filing years have flitted o’er the stage of hoary time
Since the house of ‘Sandy Crossing’ flourished in its baleful prime
... Now the prowling fearsome dingo howls his monody of woe,
And the hooting mopehawk answers when the moon is very low —


Like to sprites of evil omen o’er the forest harpy’s lair
For the blood of many victims ever cries for vengeance there.\textsuperscript{25}

Again, there is no direct evocation of the Middle Ages as a historical period or even as a source of ancient legends. But the ubiquitous Gothic evocation of medieval barbarity, decay, and gloom haunts the poem’s image of this colonial scene, lurking unmistakably at one remove, recognizable yet mutated by its contact with a new, non-European society.

\textit{The Colonial Medievalist Trace: Structure and Rationale of this Study}

The dialectic of historical fidelity and imaginative departure outlined in this introduction is not unique to Australia, but is, rather, reflective of medievalism as an intellectual and cultural practice in general, whether Old or New World. Studies of Victorian England, for instance, frequently remind us that the recuperative and creative impulses of Victorian medievalism emerged out of the perception that industrialization and mass urbanization — in short, modernity — had alienated the English from their own history and left them, in the words of Richard Schoch, ‘dememorialized in their own time’.\textsuperscript{26} But if we think of medievalism as flourishing in this gap of dememorialization, oscillating between departure from and return to the medieval past, then Australian medievalism, which responds to a double dispossession from European history across time and space, can arguably be seen to be one of the most potent and complex expressions — indeed, even a quintessential example — of medievalist practice.\textsuperscript{27}

Thinking about Australian medievalism as quintessential medievalism is useful because it enables us to understand Australian appropriations of the Middle Ages without resorting to pejorative notions of them as derivative of British forms, which are then erroneously elevated to the status of models, despite themselves


\textsuperscript{27} A comparable claim about the ‘exemplary’ nature of Australian medievalism is made by Trigg, although she is evaluating the particular phenomenon of medieval revival: ‘there can be no pretence of medieval survival […] In this regard, Australian medievalism is actually exemplary. Unable to mask the very real differences between the medieval and the modern through an implied physical continuity, it foregrounds the acts of recuperation that I argue condition and structure all [acts of revival].’ \textit{Medievalism and the Gothic in Australian Culture}, ed. by Trigg, p. xvi.
being appropriations. If we accept the idea that British and Australian medievalist texts are all part of the continuum of representations of the medieval past, the fact that a number of the British texts were prior to the Australian ones does not place them in a more ‘originary’ position vis-à-vis the Middle Ages. Many of the examples that will be discussed in this book were responding to British (and in some cases, American) medievalism, but we should not thus be led to dismiss them as merely simulacral. For this reason, this book is not a reception study, but orient towards how Australian writers developed a body of medievalist literature that was responsive to, and formative of, the cultural landscape of colonial and early Federal Australia. Naturally such an account would be incomplete without offering appropriate consideration of the antipodean reception of the major British and American medievalist works; but if our understanding of medievalism as an international phenomenon is to be advanced, reception should not be featured at the expense of exploring the many fascinating and highly varied ways in which literary medievalism came to be localized and vernacularized.

In taking this approach, this book argues that it is Australian texts which expose most nakedly something fundamental to medievalism itself: that its appropriative logic is one in which the Middle Ages can be understood not simply as an originary historical moment to be represented or reanimated but, rather, borrowing a term from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, as a trace that is differentially interpreted across time and space, enduring yet also changing across the medievalist representations we study. The notion of the trace as it is elaborated by Derrida is complex and undergoes different iterations throughout his work, but one of the clearest articulations can be found in the statement that ‘[t]he trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself’. In this sense of the trace, the Middle Ages are thus not immediately and straightforwardly present in the Australian texts discussed here: the Norman conquest and chivalric culture, for instance, become sites for a whole array of differing socio-historical fantasies. But neither do the various mediations of this event render it completely absent, as though it were only its representations. And yet medievalism is a hermeneutic rather than a forensic practice; for while it acknowledges the historical existence of the medieval period, it does not seek to reconstruct and thereby recover the original ‘presence’ of the Middle Ages. In order

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Introduction

not to fall into relativistic platitude, we need to acknowledge that the modern (and colonial) traces we study gesture back beyond themselves; but they do not point to a pure origin but to a complex, internally divided origin, to which we cannot have unmediated access and of which we cannot take full possession through historical knowledge. As the very different texts in this book demonstrate in their own individual ways, it is in its very adaptation of medieval traces to local conditions that Australian medievalism best expresses not only the colonial condition but the medievalist condition as well.

The chosen timeframe of 1840–1910 warrants some explanation; after all, literary and theatrical medievalism in Australia preceded and postdated this period. Some of the colonies’ very earliest convict ballads, for instance, written soon after arrival in 1788, evoked Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in their purgatorial visions of penal servitude, while the journals of early explorers and naturalists clearly scrutinized the ‘new’ vistas and peoples before them through the lens of Old World civilizations, as well as with a ‘quasi-medieval mindset’ influenced by premodern travel writing, as Geraldine Barnes and Adrian Mitchell have said of William Dampier’s *A Voyage to New Holland* (1703/09). This body of early scientific and non-fictional writings is not treated within this study, which focuses on later fictional representations; but these texts were formative of both international and local views of natural and human existence in the colonies, and as such merit future study of their distinctive uptake of medievalism. Furthermore, medievalism also thrived in Australia beyond 1910, with the horrors of the Great War inspiring, as Andrew Lynch has expertly shown, the densely allusive medievalist war poetry of writers such as Christopher Brennan. Later forms of Australian medievalism have also been taken up in Trigg’s *Medievalism and the Gothic in Australian Culture*, and without doubt much work is still to be done on the mass of twentieth- and twenty-first-century iterations. But what marks out the seventy-year period nominated in this study is not only the sheer concentration of medievalist work produced at this time (which coincides with the international high point in medievalist literature, art, and architecture), but, more interestingly, the way it returned so strikingly to the Middle Ages as a means of engaging with the particularities of colonial life. Despite its dizzying aesthetic and ideological diversity, and its engagement with

29 Geraldine Barnes and Adrian Mitchell, “‘Passing through Customs’: William Dampier’s Medieval Baggage”, in *Medievalism and the Gothic in Australian Culture*, ed. by Trigg, pp. 131–45 (p. 145).

international trends, the literary medievalism produced between 1840 and 1910 shared a powerfully local orientation that reflects an increased momentum in the local quest to understand Australia’s emerging society, and thus merits inclusion in a single study. The decision to stray into the first decade of the twentieth century does not reflect an uncritical subscription to the ‘long nineteenth century’ thesis of cultural history: after all, in Australia 1901 did mark the beginning of a new political and cultural epoch with the transition from colonialism to Federal nationhood, and this is reflected in some of its literary medievalism. But given the magnitude of this political transfiguration at the century’s cusp, and its potential to alter Australia’s cultural and geopolitical relationship with Britain and Europe, there is a surprising level of thematic, stylistic, and ideological continuity between much of the Australian medievalism of the nineteenth century and that of the early twentieth, and it is this continuity that is acknowledged here.

This book does not attempt to organize its material into an evolutionary narrative that tracks the development of ‘stages’ of creative medievalism in Australia, for to do so would straighten unduly the meandering and often recursive paths it traced through the literature and theatre of colonial and newly federated Australia. There are some identifiable strains, such as the predilection for satirizing colonial politics via the discourses of medieval chivalry, discussed in Chapter Four, or the use of Viking and Anglo-Saxonist tropes to describe the British colonization of Australia, discussed in Chapter 1; but these cannot readily be called stages because their appearance, though frequent, is piecemeal and discontinuous, with instances scattered across several decades. Nor is there any attempt to categorize the ‘types’ of medievalism found within Australian works, although there is some identification of shared themes, styles, and forms when these can be seen genuinely to emerge. The unbridled eclecticism of the literary medievalism of this period means that it resists tidy taxonomizing: in some cases, a single text can be seen to skate vertiginously across heroic, Gothic, and feudal portrayals of the Middle Ages in the space of a few lines, while elsewhere we find the unembarrassed introduction of the vocabulary and \textit{dramatis personae} of faëry folklore into representations of the Australian bush. The inclusion of such examples in this study discloses the avowedly anti-purist approach it embraces. Rather than setting out to isolate the medievalism found in Australian literature, in (vain) pursuit of the most unadulterated instances, this book is more concerned with emphasizing this medievalism’s distinctive, even definitive, multi-valency — its capacity to combine with an array of separate seemingly incongruous discourses in the service of offering aesthetic and ideological commentary on colonial modernity. Finally, this book’s definition of medievalism also encompasses texts, images, and material objects that
others might describe as ‘anti-medievalist’. ‘Medievalist’ is not taken here only to signify unproblematic nostalgic longing for medieval social, cultural, and aesthetic forms, or simple ideological partisanship (whether progressive or conservative) with medieval forms of political and social organization. Rather, insofar as Australian cultural practices can be seen to engage actively with the Middle Ages in a way that is not only inflected by the modern and the colonial, but indeed is aimed at interpreting or even ‘creating’ the modern and the colonial, even those iterations that are anti-medievalist in sentiment fall under the investigative rubric of medievalism.

The chapters that follow range across a myriad of medievalist representations, with the aim of bringing to light the breadth and richness of Australia’s fictive engagement with the medieval in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first three chapters take the form of more intensive studies of selected canonical Australian works and authors, reconsidered through their relationship to the history of medievalist literature, in which they are anything but canonical. With the exception of Adam Lindsay Gordon, these writers have never before been discussed as medievalists, and none of them has ever been included in any of the many accounts written on nineteenth-century medievalism. Chapters 4 and 5 turn their attention to the almost viral phenomena of medievalist poetry and plays that emerged in the contexts of the periodical press and the colonial theatre. The distinction between these two sections is not a hard-and-fast one; with the possible exceptions of Joseph Furphy’s novels and some of Adam Lindsay Gordon’s poems, most of the texts examined were directed at a wide readership, including the novels, many of which were serialized in the popular press before being published as volumes. Taken together, these chapters present us with a society in which medievalism, far from being a submerged or minor cultural interest, or the jealous preserve of exalted Laureates and learned antiquarian scholars, was a vibrant and very public phenomenon, surviving and even thriving in the mainstream of the literary and theatrical marketplaces.

Chapter 1, ‘Life on the Murrumbidgee: Anglo-Saxonism in the Work of Rolf Boldrewood and Joseph Furphy’, explores the transmission, via these authors’ work, of international Anglo-Saxonist discourses on race, labour, and national destiny to the Australian colonial environment. While Boldrewood’s work is contextualized within the colonial fetishizing of ancient bloodlines and pedigrees, Furphy’s very singular (and hostile) engagement with Anglo-Saxonism is read as a sympathetic response to Mark Twain’s rejection of the race- and class-fetishes of Southern American medievalism. Through a comparative analysis of Boldrewood’s adaptation of Anglo-Saxonist racial typologies to settler Australia and Furphy’s resistance to Anglo-Saxon England as a founding myth for Australia’s independent
nationhood, the chapter explores the ideological elasticity of this medievalist discourse in late colonial and newly Federated Australia.

Chapter 2, “Backwards and Forwards in the Strangest Way”: Medievalism, Modernity, and the “Australian Girl” in Novels by Australian Women, looks at the paradoxical presence of medievalism in a number of novels written by Australian women in the late nineteenth century, in particular novels by Catherine Martin, Miles Franklin, Ada Cambridge, Rosa Praed, and ‘Tasma’ (Jessie Couvreur). Its focus is on what can be called these writers’ ‘meta-medievalism’, that is, their often deeply critical explorations of their fellow Australians’ imbibing of popular fantasies of the Middle Ages. In particular, it examines how these writers expose the pretensions and hypocrisies underpinning both the colonial fascination with medieval pedigrees and the colonial uptake of the late nineteenth-century Aestheticist craze for medieval beauty and preindustrial artisan culture. The chapter shows how their narratives of women’s lives in rural and metropolitan Australia offer insightful, nuanced, yet mordant critiques of the impact of contemporary medievalism on the formation of tastes, social distinctions, and gender roles in the colonies.

Chapter 3, ‘Bush Idylls and Galloping Romances: Medievalism in the Poetry of Adam Lindsay Gordon’, is the book’s only single-author study. Offering a number of close readings of Gordon’s medievalist poems, the chapter argues for his development of both a distinctive Gothic idiom and a painfully unredemptive medievalist existentialism that links these poems to his more famous representations of life in the Australian bush. This discussion of Gordon’s work is framed within an analysis of his posthumous status and the complex legacy that has led to him being anointed as Australia’s quintessential medievalist poet. His work and legacy are, furthermore, examined in the context of the late nineteenth-century desire to identify an originary Australian bard, a quest that, the chapter argues, should be understood as equivalent to, and influenced by, the European and British philological quest for originary ‘medieval’ poesy.

Chapter 4, ‘The Drivel of our Fathers: Medievalism in Popular Australian Poetry’, moves away from the more rarefied example of Gordon’s verse to examine the large but scattered body of medievalist verse produced both in published volumes and, especially, in the daily and periodical press. While some of this verse was sophisticated and well versed in the canons of nineteenth-century medievalism, as is the case with the poems produced by Fidelia Hill and Ada Cambridge, much of it was not only determinedly populist and disposable but also extremely cursory in its medievalism, ransacking the popular imaginary indiscriminately for tropes and terms that signified instantaneously and superficially as ‘medieval’. This body of more historically promiscuous verse includes works by a range of better-known
poets such as Henry Lawson, Victor Daley, and E. J. Brady, but also many verses produced by a host of obscure and anonymous poets. The chapter argues that it is, in fact, the very promiscuity of this poetry that makes it a highly valuable resource for understanding both how medievalism was brought into the service of current-affairs commentary and how perceptions of the Middle Ages were disseminated through the popular print culture of colonial Australia. This chapter also considers medievalist representations in the political cartoons that frequently accompanied this popular verse, and looks at how these cartoons played on a general ‘knowing’ perception of the Middle Ages to lampoon the foibles of prominent figures in colonial public life.

Finally, Chapter 5, ‘The Round Table and Other Furniture: Medievalism on the Colonial Australian Stage’, continues to look at the more ephemeral populist representations by examining medievalism in nineteenth-century Australian theatre. It differs from the previous chapter insofar as it does offer a survey of the impact of international medievalist trends on the Australian stage; but alongside this survey, a strong emphasis is placed on locally authored medievalist drama, in particular the melodramatic plays of Edward Geoghegan, Conrad Knowles, and others, and the historical burlesques written by William Mower Akhurst and Marcus Clarke. Emphasis is also placed on the vital creative input of local scenic artists, who were instrumental in creating theatrical medievalism’s distinctive, and highly praised, antiquarian aesthetic. Arguing for theatre’s unique physical immediacy as a mode of medievalist representation, this chapter also seeks to dismantle the ‘realist/escapist’ paradigm that has conventionally regarded theatre with non-contemporary and non-local themes as disengaged from the Australian scene; it does this by examining a number of Australian medievalist plays that used their historically and geographically distant settings to comment on matters of intimate, even uncomfortable, proximity to the lives of their colonial audiences.

As a work directed at a mixed audience of medievalists and Australianists, this book aims to avoid framing its discussions too exclusively within discipline-specific debates and to avoid over-using terminology that is exclusive to theoretical work on medievalism, colonialism, postcolonialism, and textual dissemination. But it would be disingenuous to suggest it does not owe a deep debt to theorists in all these fields. As such, theoretical and disciplinary concepts and terms, particularly those which have passed into more generalized academic and non-academic usage, are evoked frequently, though sometimes obliquely, and theoretical work is discussed when necessary. In general, however, the aim throughout has been to theorize on the relationship between medievalism and colonialism through discussion of the texts themselves; for without their keen witness to the nuances of medievalist Australia, this study would not have been possible.