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A ‘Tigress’ in the Paradise of Dissent: *Kooroona* critiques the foundational colonial story

Margaret Allen

Kooroona: a Tale of South Australia, a novel published in Britain in 1871 under the pseudonym of Iota¹, poses a challenge to the social imaginary of colonial South Australia as the ‘Paradise of Dissent’. It contests the key features of the foundational story of the South Australian colony and casts a new and critical light upon the dissenters, who had hitherto been accorded an important role in that foundational narrative. Much of the novel’s critique of colonial South Australia focuses upon the white settlers’ cruel treatment of the Indigenous peoples. In exploring *Kooroona*’s challenge to the colonial foundational story, this chapter examines the circumstances of the novel’s creation and the involvement of its author in struggles during the 1860s to improve the life chances of Aboriginal people who were faced by the onslaught of a violent settler community that was dominated by Methodist and other dissenters.

Unlike other Australian colonies, the colony of South Australia was founded in 1836 by free settlers, rather than convicts, and the ‘voluntary principle’

¹ This Iota should not be confused with the Irish-Australian novelist, Kathleen Mannington Caffyn, who used the pseudonym Iota from the 1890s.

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of religious affiliation was enshrined. Subsequently the notion of the South Australian colony as a 'Paradise of Dissent' was elaborated in representations of the colony by a number of South Australian writers, such as Matilda Evans and C.H. Spence, and public figures from before settlement; it was also later analysed in Douglas Pike in *Paradise of Dissent: South Australia, 1829-57* (see Pike). This notion represented South Australia as a place where dissenters — Methodists, Baptists and other Protestant non-conformists — could enjoy freedom and opportunity away from the social power and condescending attitudes of the powerful Anglican establishment which characterised early nineteenth-century Britain. In Britain, despite the repeal of some legislation that had privileged members of the Established Anglican Church in the 1820s and 1830s, 'Dissenters were still subject to many civil disadvantages and humiliations' (Hilliard and Hunt 195). In the South Australian colony, however, equality between Christian denominations was a crucial foundational principle, along with the 'voluntary principle'. Indeed, from 1850 the colony was 'the first colony in the British Empire to dissolve the last remaining vestiges of the traditional connection between church and state' (202).

Dissenters, many of whom were from the lower- and middling-classes, flocked to the young colony. Whilst the Anglican Church was always large in nineteenth-century South Australia, it did not flourish in the voluntary environment without state aid. However, the non-conformists did well and indeed Methodism was 'the most potent religious movement' in the colony in the nineteenth century (204). The influx of Cornish miners immigrating to work in the rich copper mines of Kapunda, Moonta and Burra added significantly to the numbers of Methodist adherents (205).

Without a state church and a privileged class of gentry and aristocrats, colonists from the middling and even lower ranks of British society prospered and some became leaders in business, politics and society (Richards 123). The liberal ideas that guided the colony's founders and the experience of the dissenters, who created their chapels with voluntary support from their congregations without the overweening power of an established church and upper-classes, encouraged the growth of democratic ideals. In 1856 manhood suffrage and the secret ballot made the colony one of the most democratic in the world. Such developments, and the pride of successful dissenters in the prosperity and social authority

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they had crafted in the young colony, fostered the foundational story of worthy settlers, unable to prosper in hierarchical and unjust British society, but coming into their own in religious, political, social and financial terms in this 'Paradise of Dissent' (see Curthoys).

Another foundational myth of the South Australian settlers was the belief that their colony 'was different in its treatment of Indigenous people' (Foster, Hosking and Nettelbeck 2). The founding documents of the colony argued that rather than 'an invasion of the rights of the Aborigines', the colony was to be settled by 'industrious and virtuous settlers' who 'would protect them from the pirates, squatters and runaway convicts who infested the coast' (Foster, Hosking and Nettelbeck 2). However, as Foster, Hosking and Nettelbeck note, the reality on the ground was that Aboriginal people were subject to violence and dispossession in South Australia just as frequently as they were in the other colonies across the continent. And, just as in the other Australian colonies, 'Violence by settlers against Aboriginal people often went unreported' (7). The comfortable belief that South Australia was different remained unchallenged until quite recently (see Rowley; Reynolds).

The 14 novels of the South Australian writer, Matilda Jane Evans (1827-1886), furnish exemplars of these foundational narratives. Published under the pseudonym Maud Jean Franc, Evans's novels are set in colonial South Australia and explore themes of interest, even of anxiety, to settler culture. Thus they discuss emigration and settlement and in particular whether it is possible to establish a worthy society and raise decent families in the new rude and crude colony. Settlers were concerned that the rising generation might be corrupted by the colonial environment. Emigration and settlement meant leaving a known and settled society for one in which one's fellow colonists came from all parts of Britain, and even from other countries. Settlement meant mixing with people from diverse and even unknown social backgrounds. All colonists sought to make good but the notion of a society founded upon acquisition and greed was troubling. Inherent to settlement was the dispossession and devastation of the Indigenous peoples which posed deep moral questions about the whole colonial venture. As will be discussed below, colonial novelists dealt with these issues in a variety of ways. However, usually questions about Indigenous ownership of land were strongly repressed.

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Evans's novels articulate the foundational myths of South Australia through their plot denouements, which involve the central characters becoming worthy settlers by adapting themselves to their new colonial environment. The novels represent the colony as a worthy place where those who have been thrust out of their homes in England due to social injustice or perhaps some legal fraud can find their reward and redemption (Curthoys; Allen 'Homely Stories'). For the Baptist Evans, Methodists, Baptists and other dissenters are central to South Australian life. Evans was a settler and hers are novels of settlement. In *No Longer a Child*, published in 1882, she writes of seeking to inspire pride, even a colonial 'nationalist spirit' among her local readers:

The fact is, we South Australians are not half proud enough of our country, with its rapidly growing buildings, its wealth of minerals, developed or undeveloped, its thousand-and-one improvements, and its immense capabilities. We do not make as much capital of its wealth as we should. We allow ourselves to be too easily crushed by the idle comparisons of the 'newly arrived' ... Sometimes we need to stir up the languid blood of our youth, something to inspire them with a love for the land of their birth. (71-2)

Kooroona: Mrs Mary Meredith

Kooroona stands as a challenge to settler tales such as these. In *Kooroona*, that which is seen as central to the foundational narratives of South Australia's history, to the powerful story that has been rendered a 'truth', is cast under a harsh light and strongly criticised. *Kooroona* has scarcely been discussed in the small field of literary scholarship focusing upon colonial South Australia. One of the few critics to examine the novel, Paul de Pasquale, describes it as a 'High Church novel' that is 'determinedly anti-South Australian in every way and, in particular, deplores in the most revolting manner the prevalence of dissenters in the colony' (157-8). He notes that the author, Iota, was a Mrs Meredith, described in a colonial newspaper of 1882 as 'a lady formerly well known here as taking a deep interest in religious matters and the welfare of the aborigines, and who left the colony some two or three years ago for England' (qtd in de Pasquale, 157).² The further exploration of her life in colonial South Australia in this chapter

2 Here de Pasquale quotes from the *Areas Express*, 7 October 1882, 2.

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deepens the analysis of the novel as a critique of the colony and its foundational narratives.

The author was in fact Mrs Mary A. Meredith (c. 1818-1897), whose husband, John, was the first surgeon to the Moonta Mines on Yorke Peninsula. The novel draws upon her experience of life in South Australia between about 1858-1869, and especially on Yorke Peninsula during the period 1863-1868. Mary and John Meredith came to the colony in 1858 with John's brother, E.W. Meredith, and his family (*South Australian Register*, 11 November 1858, 2).³ It seems that their first years in the colony were spent in Burra and then the Mitcham district, before they proceeded to Moonta on the Yorke Peninsula. The couple were charitable and public-spirited Anglicans. Mary Meredith was active in fundraising for the Anglican Church in both Mitcham and Moonta and laid the foundation stone for All Saints in Moonta (*South Australian Register*, 9 August 1862, 1 and 24 September 1864, 1).

As this chapter will discuss, she agitated for the establishment of a mission for Aboriginal people on Yorke Peninsula. Her husband supported her in that work, and he also served as a Justice of the Peace and was involved in a number of other campaigns: he raised funds for Lancashire workers during the American Civil War in 1862 (*South Australian Register*, 9 October 1862, 1); he was the president of the Moonta Institute (*South Australian Register*, 24 May 1864, 1); he was a Trustee of All Saints Church in Moonta (*South Australian Register*, 31 July 1865, 2); and he sought to organise a clean water supply for Moonta (*South Australian Register*, 30 September 1864, 3). As the surgeon of the Miners' and Tradesmens' Club in Burra (*South Australian Register*, 29 June 1860, 3), and later in a similar position in Moonta, another copper mining township, he seems often to have been associated with schemes to assist working men.

Kooroona is set against the background of South Australia in the 1860s, and it features pastoral ventures and, in particular, mining ventures. In the novel we read of sharp characters salting mines, floating mining companies such as the aptly named 'Bunkumgorum Mining Venture' (127) and then selling out at the appropriate moment, so that inevitably the 'new chum' loses his money.

3 Edward William Meredith was in business as a wine and spirit merchant and was a Church Warden at St Matthew's Kensington. He left the colony in 1879, and died in 1886 at Wharton Court, Herefordshire (*South Australian Register*, 23 January 1886, 7).

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The novel discusses contemporary controversies such as the state of the South Australian legal system, the abolition of the Grand Jury system and particularly the sacking of Justice Boothby (257). The narrator trenchantly criticises the treatment of the Indigenous inhabitants by the South Australian people, the government and, in particular, the dissenters.

Like so many colonial novels, *Kooroona* tells the story of a family cast out of Britain by some injustice or misfortune, which comes to the colony with the hope of recuperating its fortunes there. The Vernon family, headed by the gentle widow Mrs Vernon, includes her children Harry, Isabelle and Edith. Having lost the family fortune, her late husband has had to sell their ancestral manor, the Hermitage. Fortunately, it is bought by a wealthy old friend, Sir John Carleton, who undertakes to sell it back to the young Harry Vernon, when he has made his fortune in Australia. This sets up a potential scenario that will enable the family to return to their ancestral home. As the plot turns, however, their return to England is facilitated by the romance and subsequent marriage between young Isabelle Vernon and Arthur Percy, a 'true' Englishman and 'an aristocrat in the true sense of the word' (166) who befriends the Vernon family in the colony (404-11). He is, in fact, the heir of Sir John Carleton and thus the family is able to return to the Hermitage and their rightful place in English society.

This conventional plot device notwithstanding, *Kooroona* challenges the foundational myths of colonial South Australia in a variety of ways, most notably through its depiction of religion, of the relationship between money and the colonial social order, and of the treatment of the Indigenous people. A comparison of *Kooroona* with the novels of Matilda Evans brings *Kooroona's* challenges to the foundational story of colonial South Australia into sharp focus. *Kooroona*, for example, articulates some decided opinions about religion. It is written from a High Anglican position⁴, and not only is it highly critical

4 It is interesting to note that Mary Meredith published in 1883 a work entitled *Theotokos, the example for women* (London: Kegan Paul and Co., 1882). The work sought to 'contribute something towards directing profitably the thoughts of members of the Church of England to the position which God has assigned to the Blessed Virgin Mary in the economy of grace' (*South Australian Register*, 11 July 1883, 5). The British Library catalogue also lists a book by M.A. Meredith, which may also be by Mary Meredith, entitled *Thoughts of the months: their beauties and lessons* (Bath, 1852). This book was revised by Archdeacon George Denison, a High Church clergyman.

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of the dissenters, who were a very important element in colonial society, but it also portrays the Established Church as being in a degraded state in the South Australian colony. As the character Arthur Percy declares:

The clergy of South Australia, speaking of them as a body, are not churchmen ... as I understand the meaning of the word ... There are some honourable exceptions, but the majority consists of men who ought to join the dissenters, and who would join them, or, at any rate, give up their office in the Church, if they were true honest men. (282)

But it is the Dissenters, rather than this debased Anglican clergy, who are depicted as unseemly, alien and the source of disorder within the colony. When the aristocratic Arthur Percy decides to visit a Primitive Methodist Chapel, he observes an 'Elocutionary Treat' telling the story of Joseph and his brothers. The narrator states that Arthur had known of dissenters in England, but that as far as he knew

[h]e had never spoken to a dissenter until he landed in Australia. There he found schism in the ascendant, the protestant element widely diffused, very pretentious, very aspiring. He could not walk out in Adelaide, on Sunday, without being in danger of being run over by some man in black clothes and a white choker, on his way to a conventicle of some kind, where he was going to teach others what he did not know himself. (159-60)

Percival is shocked to find dissenters everywhere, even in positions of some status and authority. His own notion of worship is, we are told, restrained and dignified: 'Besides being thoroughly English in everything, he was though he made little profession or outward shew of his belief, an intelligent member of the Church' (160). Arthur goes to the chapel, reluctantly, to know 'to what lengths these professing bibliolators would travesty the sacred volume' (160). Initially amused by 'the absurd burlesque', he becomes disgusted by 'the irreverent scene [and] the wretched buffoonery' and leaves — 'It was his first and last visit to a dissenting meeting-house' (162). His restrained and unemotional masculinity and religiosity are depicted as being appropriate for a true English gentleman, and stand in strong contrast to what is seen as the noisy, ignorant and emotional colonial dissenter version. The narrative voice exclaims: 'Poor Arthur! He was certainly out of his element in Australia' (160).

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The Cornish, who were an important ethnic group in the copper mining districts of South Australia, are represented as almost savage and Other, and their Methodism is represented as a show of unseemly and trivial business. Captain Treloar, a Cornish mining captain, is denigrated as being 'a constant attendant at class-meetings, tea-fights, love-feasts, and revivals' (126). Meredith represents the Church of England as the true church, if somewhat under siege from the rising tide of distasteful dissent (see Hilliard and Hunt 203).

The contrast with the positive depiction of Dissenters in the novels of Matilda Evans is striking. Indeed, most of Evans's central characters are chapelgoers. For example, Marian, the heroine of Evans's first novel, *Marian, or the Light of Someone's Home*, is a non-conformist. Marian defends Methodists when an upper-class character denigrates them as 'Ranters', describing them as 'simple, earnest people' (147). When she attends the Wesleyan chapel, she approves the minister's style, praising it as gentlemanly, in refutation of the association with Anglicanism and high social class that comes through so strongly in *Kooroona*. The preacher, we are told, was not fiery: 'He did not thunder out his message to his audience ... but he carried their hearts with him by his deep rich voice, his persuasive tones, his affectionate exhortations' (169).

Yet there are a few churchgoing characters who are treated in a sympathetic fashion in Evans's fiction. Thus in *Golden Gifts* the Wallace siblings, thrust out of England by a downturn in their family's fortunes, show their worth in adapting to a simpler and humbler life running a smallholding in the Adelaide Hills. But the Established Church is generally represented as being rather 'aristocratic' and unsuited to the colony, and good colonists are generally chapelgoers, whose religion is represented as being more honest and sincere. For example, in Evans's novel *Into the Light*, Bessie Bruce has a nominal adherence to Anglicanism. However, it is the Fosters, a humble but worthy couple, who, through reading the Bible and the psalms, bring her to Christ. Bessie becomes a chapelgoer while the locals desert the Anglican Church and the clergyman returns to England. This is something of a trope in Evans's novels: upper-class characters, often Anglicans, are likely to show their unworthiness by returning to England. Thus in *Into the Light*, Nina Templeton trifles with Bessie's brother Sid, then throws him over to marry into a wealthy, aristocratic family and returns to Scotland to live on her

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husband's estate. Evans repeatedly has the dissenters stay in the colony to build a good society for their descendants.

By way of contrast, at the end of *Kooroona*, as noted above, the Anglican Vernon family returns to England resuming their place in the social order, since, as one character declares, 'everything in South Australia is repugnant, invalid and illegal' (257). They are happy to leave behind a colony where life is grubby: merely 'a scramble after money, place and power' (280). Like many colonial texts, *Kooroona* displays an anxiety about what is seen as the colonial obsession with money — the besetting colonial sin. In Evans's novels, however, the masculinity of the self-made colonial man, the man who has pulled himself up by his bootstraps, is to be admired. The character of Bennet Ralston in *The Master of Ralston*, for example, perfectly embodies the colonial ideal of the man who seizes his chances. Ralston seeks to make his fortune within the capitalist economy by whatever means are available to him. The fact that he is always looking out for opportunities to make money is commended by the narrative voice:

He had no particular system, excepting the very common one, patent to all — that of taking the chances that fell in his way and making the most of them. And there could be no doubt at all that it was this last clause — the 'making the most of them' — that was the real secret of his success — He never suffered any favourable season to go by unimproved; he took up the opportunities for bargains as they came to him; he always had his eyes open, his senses alert, and his muscles in full play. That was all the account he could have given of his prosperity. (9, emphasis in original)

In *Kooroona*, however, only inherited wealth is depicted as being worthy, and the colony is represented as base because of the ubiquitous concern of its inhabitants with self-advancement. As one character notes, 'In the first place every man, with a few rare exceptions, comes to Australia to improve his position in life by acquiring money; that is the object, and, as a rule, he is indifferent as to the means by which he attains his object' (317). Another comments that 'Expediency is the motto in everything' (385).

According to *Kooroona*, such a place is unlikely to prove suitable for the bringing up of children. Mrs Graham, a most respectable woman who has lived in the colony for some years, expresses the view that '[t]he boys here are no sooner

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out of the nursery than they begin to smoke, and express their opinion on every subject, using slang phrases, [and] speak of their fathers as “the governor” (43). Mrs Vernon evinces a similar concern, and is very glad that, with the help of the Grahams, she can take her young family to live on the station, Kooroona, where ‘we are likely to live in the Bush, far away from these fast young people’ (43). Whilst Evans also explores these concerns, in her texts the colony is ultimately shown to be a good place to settle to bring up a family; thus it is possible to be colonial *and* worthy. In Meredith’s work the social order of the colony is almost irrevocably corrupted and polluted.

Meredith extols the virtues of a hierarchical social order and of social deference. For instance, Graham, who has lived in the colony for a number of years, is highly scornful about the local parliamentarians who are represented as not valuing the traditional wisdom of England. In a classic statement of Burkean conservative ideology, Graham declares that

the united and progressive wisdom of centuries, must surely be sounder and deeper than the raw and undigested theories of men who have lived behind a counter and until the wealth they have acquired in their various occupations, enables them to leave the shop for the House of Assembly. (56)

This valuing of old social hierarchies contrasts with foundational narratives which applaud the fact that the decent and lowly can make their way and be rewarded with comfort and even honour in the colonial environment. The colony offers an egalitarianism for white settlers: it is their Eden. In such foundational narratives, Britain’s social hierarchies, valued in *Kooroona*, are represented as promoting social injustice.

But what is really striking in *Kooroona* is Meredith’s representation of the Indigenous peoples. This contrasts markedly with Evans’s work, in which there is virtually no discussion of the Indigenous peoples — neither of their dispossession nor of the harsh relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in South Australia. Such an omission is, I argue, strategic and crucial to the creation of foundational narratives and the legitimization of settlement. I have noted elsewhere that Evans’s works represent

a colony in which ‘white’ European settlement is assumed and not contested. In depicting a colonial landscape void of Aboriginal people, these texts are implicated in the ideological work of settling the Europeans into the

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South Australian colony ... By continually representing South Australia as *terra nullius*, a smiling agricultural landscape where those who have been cast out of Britain by economic troubles or by its harsh class system, may rightfully come into their own, these texts advance the colonial venture. (Allen, 'Homely stories' 114-5)

Indeed, there is only one passage in Evans's 14 novels in which Aboriginal people are discussed. It seems likely that Evans included this passage in her 1867 novel, *Golden Gifts*, after a reviewer of an earlier novel commented, 'She should put a blacky or two in her next work, and describe them as they really are' (*South Australian Register*, 17 September 1866, 2). In *Golden Gifts*, Evans represents Aboriginal people as intruders in the colonial social order, as ugly, alien, marginal and as thieves and greedy beggars, likely to place great economic demands on the settlers. One character questions the humanity of the Aboriginal people, referring to the contemporary debate about the unity of human species (see Gardner): 'And then to think that these beings are really of one blood with us! Does it not seem strange? They have souls; and yet how near they seem to approach the lowest order of animals' (61). Another briefly wonders 'whether there is really any effort done to do them good?' but the responsibility 'for doing good' is seen as belonging to some unspecified others (61). This topic is not pursued and this brief encounter ends with the settlers withdrawing into their home to enjoy a comfortable normative domesticity whereas the 'weird' Aboriginal people gather around a campfire for a 'corrobory' (62): the Aboriginal people are Other and are contained as a marginalised spectacle in the text.

The contrast with *Kooroona* is marked. Meredith generally writes from a humanitarian position (see Reynolds) and at times positions Aboriginal people as Australian and as the hosts and owners of the land. Early in the novel the narrator comments, 'as a rule the white man need not fear to meet with the native Australian in his own wilds. He will give him a seat by his wood fire, and the shelter of his wurley [bough shelter], and he will be his guide through the forest, unless the white man has previously injured him or one of his tribe' (106). The white man need fear the 'native Australian' only if he has harmed him: 'If he have done that, he must pay the penalty; for the black man will have his revenge as well as the white man, unless fear or some other motive restrain him' (106). Here, faith in Christianity rather than skin colour is the determinant

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of morality: 'Revenge is a virtue among the savages. It always was and always will be, for the mere fact that it is natural to fallen man. The colour of the skin makes no difference. It is only Christians in *deed* who return good for evil' (106, emphasis in original).

A telling incident occurs in *Kooroona* when the Vernon family is first travelling to the station and gets lost in the bush. They come across a party of Aboriginal people, including the couple, Wahreep and Koonid, who help them by bringing water to them. The children of this group have a friendly exchange with Mrs Vernon and her daughters: 'Not a word did the little natives understand, though they seemed to know instinctively that kindness was intended, returned the smiles that greeted them with interest, and laughed heartily as they received a gentle pat on the cheek or shoulder' (116-7). The passage is somewhat patronising, but the narrator refutes contemporary notions about Aboriginal intelligence, stating, 'These poor Australians, whose capacities for learning are so much underrated, are wonderfully quick of comprehension, and remember accurately everything once seen or heard' (117).

However, Meredith's representation of Indigenous people can be ambivalent, and is at times framed within discourses of scientific racism, with references such as those to 'thick hideous lips' (114). Other familiar tropes of colonial discourses appear, such as infantilising the Indigenous people and likening them to animals. The small girls, Caudeto and Muhnard, are described as follows: 'Those two little animals are like kittens' (185).

Inherent in the colonial gaze is the study of peoples and their customs and their classification in racial hierarchies. Thus, the reader is assured that 'Revolting as are many of their habits and customs, Mrs. Vernon and her family felt a deep interest in them' (190-1). The narrator describes the customs and beliefs of the Indigenous peoples. She notes they had 'no permanent habitations; they wander from place to place' (188). At their destination, they set up wurleys and cook on open fires. She recounts the notion of Indigenous people being outside of history: 'They have no written language ... they take no notice of time. No memento remains of past generations; not a trace exists of those who century after century have been born, lived, and died on this vast island' (188). In relation to their beliefs, 'They believe in the existence of good and of a Bad spirit' (188-9). Their 'customs and legends' derive from ancient times (189). She

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writes of deities and heroes: Wyungare, Nurundere and Nepple (189). It is not known if she gained this information from discussion with Indigenous peoples, but as Nurundere is well-known as relating to the Njarrindjeri peoples of Lower River Murray, it is likely that some of it came from her reading.

Meredith describes Wanganneen [*sic*], a 'northern savage', in terms of the 'noble savage'. A 'man, born and reared on the wilds of Australia', he 'was one of nature's gentlemen ... the untaught Australian had God's own patent of nobility' (219).⁵ It is interesting to note that Indigenous characters in this work have names — apparently Indigenous names; thus the reader meets Wahreep, Koonid, Menulta, Caudeto, Muhnard and Wanganneen. This is in contrast to Evans's work in which Indigenous people are merely a homogenous, nameless group of natives, and also to Catherine Helen Spence's novel *Clara Morison* in which we briefly meet 'Black Mary' (Spence 130, 165). In *Kooroona*, Indigenous ownership of the land is acknowledged and Mrs Vernon is aware that she is 'a stranger in a black man's land' (118).

Whereas Evans wrote about Aboriginal people briefly in order to represent them as weird and savage, they are key to Meredith's motivation for writing *Kooroona*. In *Kooroona*, the Aboriginal people are shown as suffering under the bad treatment of the settlers and the colonial government, whose actions were driving them into rebellion rather than 'trying to raise them in the scale of humanity by drawing forth and encouraging the good that is in them' (218). An awareness of the injustices visited upon the Indigenous population is articulated via the consciousness of Mrs Vernon, who knows that 'the so-called Christian Government of South Australia ignored, as far as possible, the existence of the native inhabitants, regarding them and treating them as a degraded race, doomed to die out before the white man' (118).

The message within *Kooroona* is that the misguided treatment of the Aboriginal people is linked to the settlers' abandonment of true religion: Anglicanism. The narrator advises us that Mrs Vernon considers

⁵ Meredith misspells the Wanganeen family name. This is now an important Indigenous family in South Australia. In the late 1860s, Meredith may have known or known of James Wanganeen, who was then at the Anglican-run Poonindie mission. Lydon and Braithwaite sketch the Anglican humanitarian network with which Meredith must have been associated. See also Kartinyeri, *Wanganeen*.

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[t]hat those who have not learnt to govern themselves are unfit to govern others, and she was not surprised, therefore, that those who had separated themselves from the Church — the teacher appointed by God; those who had cast aside all restraint, who acknowledged no rule in religion or politics, who, self-wise, made their own creed, and tried to make laws to suit their own ideas of right and justice — should commence their reign of misrule by disobeying their Queen, and get into a labyrinth of discord and confusion. (218-19)

Once Mrs Vernon meets Wahreep, Koonid and their relatives *en route* to Kooroona, she knows that they have ‘given to her in her need the best they had’ (118), and she feels that it is her duty to do something for them although she does not know what. Although here there is a sense of reciprocity, Mrs Vernon is also positioned as a superior person, as one who can help the Aboriginal people.

In the novel, Mrs Vernon and her family have to battle the prejudice of the settlers, who will not give Aboriginal people work. When the Northern tribes come down, the mounted troopers, fearing trouble, come onto the Vernon property, Kooroona, to protect the Vernon family. Harry Vernon sees the police as the cause of much racial strife:

I wish the fellows would keep at a distance: they have been making free use of their revolvers lately. I don't suppose it will ever be known how many they have killed. Wahreep has heard somehow that the blacks are infuriated with them, and are determined to have their revenge. Old Duncan has been told by a shepherd, that in the last skirmish, as soon as the natives rushed forward and threw their boomerangs, the revolvers were fired, and many fell. They were carried off into the scrub, whether dead or alive he did not know. If they find the police here we shall never be secure again. (202)

Although the trooper assures Harry that he need not fear the Northern Aborigines, for ‘a few shots will soon frighten them’ (202), Harry sends the troopers packing. With regard to the Aboriginal people, Harry declares:

Be kind to them and trust them, and they will repay it in the only way they can — by honesty and gratitude. To rob them of their land, and of the very means of existence and then shoot them like wild dogs for carrying off a few sheep, is a disgrace to humanity’. (203)

The Vernons treat the Aboriginal people somewhat like faithful retainers. De Pasquale writes of their ‘oily condescension’ (159), which emphasises the almost

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feudal relationship the Vernons establish with them. For instance, when the Aboriginal people have a corroboree, the Vernons supply them with provisions: 'Harry did not go empty handed. A cart followed him. Sheep, roasted whole, an abundant supply of plain substantial cake, which Isabelle and Edith had been helping Mrs. Brown to make, with tea and sugar' (221).

Meredith draws contemporary politics into her novel. Harry and his sister Isabelle have a long discussion on the position of the Aboriginal people around Lake Hope, and on the expanding northern frontier of white settlement. Harry reads out a letter in the press critical of the settlers' and government's behaviour (212-14). This letter is taken almost word for word from a letter, entitled 'Christians and Aborigines in the North', written by another Anglican, John Bristow Hughes, to the *South Australian Register* in February 1866 (Hughes 3). Harry's comment sheets home the government's failures to the dissenters:

What especially disgusts me ... is that the men who manage the affairs of the colony and expend public money, are all methodist preachers of some kind ... you constantly see their names in the papers as speakers at meetings and tea-fights, where they profess to feel the deepest interest in every conceivable good deed that man ever has done or can do under the sun; their love for everybody is unbounded. (215)

According to Harry, after these men have slept off the flow of hot tea and 'heart rending oratory' at 'a methodist tea-fight', they 'get up the next morning to assist in some little arrangement for robbing the natives of a further portion of their territory' (215).

When a white man is found murdered on Kooroona station, Mrs Vernon's vow to assist the Aboriginal people is really called upon. The local magistrate charges Wahreep and he is taken hundreds of miles to Adelaide, along with his wife Koonid and other Aboriginal witnesses. They are 'hand-cuffed and chained together' (243) and then locked up for three months pending the trial. Harry Vernon hopes that an Aboriginal man who can clear Wahreep will come forward, but he cannot be found. Harry goes to Adelaide to visit the prisoner and witnesses, and discovers some of the difficulties for Aboriginal people mixed up with the law. Whilst staying at the York Hotel he has a long discussion with Jones, another guest, who shares his jaundiced view of the colony. They discuss the way the courts deal with Aboriginal defendants, as well as the 1860 Select

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Committee of the Legislative Council, which had dealt with 'the utility of trying native prisoners in the Supreme Court' (249-58). Jones advises him to avoid colonial lawyers and to 'leave your black friend in the hands of the judge' (256).

When Wahreep's trial begins he appears almost powerless: 'There he stood, one of a degraded race, alone, despised, to be judged by men who had taken possession of his land, and who knew no more of his language than he did of their laws' (301). However, both Harry Vernon and his genteel sister, Edith, take the witness stand and speak for Wahreep at the trial. But curiously, in a work that maintains the common humanity of settler and indigene, it is some scientific evidence about 'race' which enables Wahreep's acquittal. Harry arranges for a German medical practitioner to appear as an expert witness. His testimony sees Wahreep acquitted and released. He testifies that the hair on Wahreep's spear belongs to an Aboriginal person, stating:

I have examined the hair by the aid of a powerful microscope, and have clearly detected the difference that distinguished the hair of different races of men. The hair could not have grown upon the head of a European, and is different from the hair of a white man, as is that of the negro or of the red Indian. (306-7)

While Wahreep and Koonid are able to return to their country at Kooroona station, the Vernon family does not go back there. Their eyes are set firmly upon England. In a neat twist of the plot, Arthur Percy, whom they have befriended, is revealed as the nephew and heir of Sir John Carleton. He falls in love and becomes engaged to Isabelle Vernon and the family is able to resume their ancestral seat, the Hermitage. Edith expresses the family's regrets:

There is one thing we shall regret whenever we leave Australia, and that is, not having been able to do more for the aborigines, We have thought about it and talked the matter over [and basically no good will come] until Government recognises its responsibility, and that Harry says will never be ... [but] if the colonists were different, they would be able to make the Government do more for the natives. (418-19)

While Evans's novels can be seen as novels of settlement, which affirm foundational narratives, *Kooroona* is a novel of sojourn. The colony is a place where one might recoup one's fortune, but not a suitable place to raise one's children. In this novel, the colony is found to be polluted and immoral but the morality of recouping one's fortune on Indigenous land is not questioned.

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The autobiographical elements of this novel seem evident since Mary Meredith did take up the situation of the Indigenous people on Yorke Peninsula in 1866. She began a letter to the *South Australian Register*, signed over her own name, in January 1866, with the following words:

It is difficult to understand how any one who has had opportunities of observing the social and moral degradation of the native inhabitants of this country can really believe that he is not failing in a positive duty when, while enriching himself with the produce of the land, or with mineral wealth, he leaves the original possessor untaught and uncared for. (Meredith, 'A Native Mission' 2)

She asserted that the local Aboriginal people trusted her family, 'because we have been kind to them; they believe us, because what we tell them we will do we do' (2). She referred to the authoritative Aboriginal leader, King Tom, 'a fine old man — full six feet in height; he is intelligent and speaks English very tolerably' (2).⁶ She reported that the Aboriginal people would support the establishment of a school for their children whom they had agreed to leave there. Indeed, King Tom's child had 'been at our house many times, on one occasion for part of a week'.⁷ Clearly she had been discussing this matter with Aboriginal people for at least a year, but presented her ladylike reticence as holding her back from going public as 'a natural disinclination to take any but a private part in the matter' (2). She commented that it is 'painful to reflect that for more than a year they have been looking for their teacher, while I have been waiting and hoping that others would do that which now it seems I should have tried to commence myself' (2).

Her appeal gained some support from the leader writer in the *South Australia Register*, but clearly there were concerns about a woman making such a public, critical statement of the social order. The following day the leader read:

We honour her [Mrs. Meredith] for her courage as well as her kindness in doing violence to her gentle nature by coming forth publicly on behalf of the poor natives. There are some women who are very enthusiastic for savages at a distance while they neglect those at their very doors ... But Mrs. Meredith is not a Mrs. Jellaby, mad about her pet natives at Bhorrioboola Gha, while she neglects those who have immediate and pressing claims

6 King Tom 'was widely recognized as a Narungga leader' (Krichauff 130, 139-168).

7 It is interesting to note that in the novel Edith Vernon teaches the children, Caudeto and Muhnard, to read in the family home (184-5).

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upon her sympathies and assistance. She boldly and yet modestly states the case of the aborigines who have come under her notice, and speaks in the name of humanity and of religion that they should be better cared for than they are now. (*South Australian Register*, 11 January 1866, 2)

Mary Meredith was one of the concerned Christians in the district who formed a Missionary Association and invited two Moravian missionaries to come from Adelaide in February 1866 to discuss the needs of the local Aboriginal people (Edwards 4; Wilson 4-5; Krichauff 139). Pastor Kuehn stayed and 'commenced a school with twenty children attending, conducted services, provided medical care and distributed rations provided by the government for the fifty Aborigines at Kadina' (Edwards 4). However, Meredith became increasingly frustrated by the failure of the government to provide further assistance. In a letter to the Protector of Aborigines in June 1866 she claimed that for five months they had had a missionary to teach the natives and described herself as 'the originator of the movement' for a mission on Yorke Peninsula (GRG 52/1/1866/59). She reported that they had been waiting five months for the government to grant land for a mission house.

The Merediths were strongly associated with the campaign for the mission and Mary Meredith wrote more letters to the press on the matter (*South Australian Register*, 21 May and 20 July 1866 and 12 September 1867). She was very critical of the colonial government and in some of these letters she quoted the replies she had received from government officials. The Yorke Peninsula Aboriginal Mission, later known as Port Pearce, was founded in 1868 and Mary Meredith and her husband were on the committee.

However, the Merediths were soon engaged in controversy with other members of the mission committee. John Meredith was moved to defend his wife against a member of the mission committee at Wallaroo, who was telling what he saw as an 'amusing anecdote' about Mary Meredith putting the natives through a 'catechistic drill' in order to gain a meal. John Meredith wrote: 'I shall take this opportunity of expressing my regret, that anyone connected with the mission should, even if he believed it, circulate a low story, calculated to bring ridicule upon one who takes such a warm interest in the success of the mission' (J. Meredith 1). It is possible that this incident led to their quitting the colony at short notice and may account for some of the rancorous tone of the novel.

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Only a fortnight after John Meredith's letter in support of his wife, the sale by public auction of the Meredith house on Ryan Street, Moonta, was notified, for they were leaving the colony (*Wallaroo Times*, 28 October 1868, 1). They appear not to have had any children living and died within two months of each other in 1897 in Cheltenham, England (*South Australian Register*, 17 August 1897, 3 and 30 October 1897, 4).

Reception of *Kooroona*

It is not known how widely *Kooroona* was read and discussed in South Australia in the 1870s, although it is known to have been sold in Adelaide bookshops. Clearly some of the characters in the novel were closely modelled upon people Meredith knew in South Australia and some of the discussion of the text centred upon that. A reviewer in the *Observer* found that 'the least pardonable fault of the work' was that

some of the caricatures are avowedly intended for personal sketches. We do not pretend to recognise the individuals thus lampooned, but it is easy to see that the portraits, if professedly from life, are unfairly taken. Every human foible is exaggerated and emphasized, while better qualities of worthy and useful colonists are carefully kept out of view. (Anonymous 15)

In relation to the novel's discussion of Indigenous issues, the reviewer merely noted, 'A vivid picture is drawn of the farcical proceedings before a Court, the laws and often the language of which are equally unknown to the prisoner and the witnesses' (15); and that 'The book abounds with denunciations of the conduct of the white men towards the natives' (15) without any further discussion of the contentious issues raised. The novel was too troubling to the settlers and its challenge was firmly repressed. Certainly this reviewer felt the need to respond in terms of a foundational narrative: 'That we have amongst us persons who have risen from the ranks — wealthy men whose fathers were poor — is a fact which we proclaim with pride rather than confess with shame' (15).

Evidently this novel aroused some controversy in Adelaide. Indeed, two readers felt moved to furnish their own reviews of the work to the *South Australian Register* in 1872. The newspaper published extracts from both reviews. One declared that, while some claimed that characters were easily identified, there was 'no spite in the book' ('Kooroona' 24 May). For those who found the

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work too critical of South Australia, this reviewer commented, 'Let them know that their society is not perfect, nor all-wise, nor all-benevolent — let them think that sickness is known in South Australia as well as elsewhere, and needs at time the wholesome and bitter draught of the kindly physician'. The other attacked the author, clearly knowing her identity, referring to her as 'Mrs. M.', and showing the dangers of presenting 'alternative readings that contested aspects of the dominant colonial discourse' (Grimshaw and Evans 81). This reviewer was vicious:

The countenance of Mrs. M. had treachery written upon it. A bold, thick, unladylike nose; near, furtive eyes; a hanging mouth, and dowdy dress, were quite sufficient to send their owner to Coventry. There was nothing to attract men, everything to repulse women, and with no social ties to make her human, Mrs. M. became a sad tigress. ('Kooroona' 17 May)

The comment on social ties seems to refer to the fact that she had no children.

In conclusion, this anti-foundational narrative contests the main features of the South Australian foundational narrative. It allows for a critical view of relationships between the settlers and Indigenous peoples: a view that foundational narratives cannot allow. Foundational settler narratives, such as those by Matilda Evans, ignore Indigenous peoples and their prior ownership of the land that the settlers have taken. They fail to acknowledge settler violence against Indigenous peoples. To do so would be incompatible with the foundational narrative, which represents the settlers as worthy and the colony as their promised land.

Although knowledge of *Kooroona* disappeared from literary memory in South Australia, a trace remained and surfaced years later. Another South Australian writer, Catherine Martin (1847-1937), used the name Kooroona for a young woman of Aboriginal descent in her novel, *The Silent Sea* (1892), published under the pseudonym of Mrs Alick MacLeod. Possibly Catherine Martin learnt of this book from her husband Fred, who had lived in Moonta from 1873-77 (Allen, 'Fred Martin' 100). *The Silent Sea* makes some criticism of the settler project, with some of its action taking place in the outback area of South Australia, described as 'regions red with black men's blood and stained with white men's crimes' (vol. 2, 49-50). Kooroona, the daughter of a Mr White and Jeanie, a woman of Aboriginal descent, has to flee with her mother to avoid being separated by the heartless White. Jeanie has a difficult life '[w]ith her

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timid eyes and shy, kindly ways, cut off from her own people, avoided by others, her health ruined, meek and submissive always to this tyrant, who talked of her more heartlessly than he would of one of his sheep or cattle' (vol. 1, 133-4). By the 1890s, when the settlers had taken over a considerable portion of the Indigenous lands of South Australia, it was possible to challenge the settler myth, albeit in this muted manner.

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