Fabulating the Australian Desert: Australia’s Lost Race Romances, 1890-1908

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‘I suppose such a transformation would only be possible in a country of violent extremes like Australia - one day a desert, the next a sea’, said Hartley.[1]

For anyone reading Australia’s ‘lost race romances’ today, the out-and-out weirdness of their geography is likely to be the first thing that strikes them. Staging the discovery of a lost race in the middle of the desert, adventure-romance novels like The Lost Explorer (1890) and The Silver Queen (1908) describe a bizarrely incoherent Australian landscape, a cross between Virgil’s Eclogues and Indiana Jones. Arcadian fields jostle volcanoes and buried slaughter-chambers, eyeless fish spume from boiling underwater caverns, plashing waterfalls conceal bunyips and Yellow Queens both hideous and beautiful to the eye. What is even more bizarre is the way these works are framed as serious accounts of Australia’s historical geography. Works like The Secret of the Australian Desert (1895), for example, are accompanied by maps, ethnographic speculation, instances in the annals of Australian exploration, and references to their author’s superior knowledge of the country’s interior.

For the authors of the lost race romances, there was nothing offbeat about this seamless combination of the serious and fabulous. The whole point, rather, was that the Australian landscape could be thrown open to all the fanciful exuberance their imaginations could muster. Drawing on a triumphant sense of modernity, these writers relied on the now-bizarre assumption that Australia was in a position to remake itself into whatever it pleased. And deserts could be converted into oases, dull wilderneses into sites of sparkling modernity, a colonial outpost could become one of the world’s greatest powers. As in the utopian literature of their time, the society imagined in these works was inherently plastic, capable of being created in the image of a particular amalgam of longings or ideals. In the same vein, the Australian countryside was capable of fabulation - that is, of being made up - fabulously transformed through a combination of imagination, will and technological ability.

That adventure-romances like The Silver Queen were involved in the nationalist project just described is highlighted by their fabulation of the lost race itself. The lost race is indeed an astounding creation. In ancient times, its members forged a pseudo-Mayan civilisation in the heart of Australia: a civilisation once impressive in its accomplishments, but having fallen since, over the course of many centuries, into a sad decline. Living in a terrain of miraculous fertility, never before discovered by whites and distinct from the Aboriginal peoples of the continent, it defied conventional assumptions about Australia’s archaeological and geographical record. As such, the lost race operates in these novels as a means of emphasising the potential of the emerging nation - and at the same time to convince white Australians of the need to take active steps in its fabulation. On the one hand, the ancient accomplishments of the lost race point to the possibility of future glory in the country’s arid interior. On the other, its pathetic decline is a warning of what might happen to white Australia should its citizens fail to work for the re-creation of their desert interior.

In providing this reading of the lost race genre, I take issue with that of Robert Dixon in Writing the Colonial Adventure (1995). Dixon argues that the lost race works were essentially an expression of white Australian paranoia. Novels like An Australian Bush Track (1896) and The Golden Lake (1890), he says, displayed anxieties about Australia’s racial and cultural identity, concerned that it would fall prey to atavistic demise. [2] In so arguing, Dixon is reliant on a body of postcolonial work which focuses on the relationship between adventure-romance, imperialism and national identity, arguing that it reveals the Gothic anxiety of colonial and nationalist discourses. Certainly,
the business of making the Australian desert fabulous was an aggressively imperialist undertaking, loaded with specifically western associations between cultivation and civilisation, between fertility and the right use of land, which white Australians used to justify their claim to ownership over the continent. [3] Certainly, too, there are racial and cultural anxieties associated with this undertaking to be found in the lost race romances. Anyone interested in a complex reading of these works, however, must also seek to appreciate their optimistic belief in the miraculous, their resonances with the utopian genre, and the way in which they used the lost race as inspiration for their nationalist endeavour. Re-evaluating the lost race romances thus suggests the need to revisit many postcolonial readings of Australian texts in this period, with their persistent focus on fearfulness and uncertainty.

**Fabulous volcanoes and 'faithful records'**

There are at least nine lost race romances set in Australia and published between 1890 and 1908, perhaps the best known of which are George Firth Scott's *The Last Lemurian* (1898), Rosa Praed's *Fugitive Anne* (1902), and Ernest Favenc's *The Secret of the Australian Desert*. The basic elements of these novels can be found in Favenc's novel, published five years before the end of the nineteenth century. [4] In it, a group of explorers travel into the desert in search of a combination of gold, adventure and Ludwig Leichhardt. After some travail, they discover an unknown race located in a fine-looking country commanding vast gold reserves. The members of this race are distinct from the Aborigines around them, and constitute the degraded remnants of an ancient civilisation once occupying the Australian interior. By the end of the novel, this unknown race is destroyed by an erupting volcano, and the explorers are left to inherit their wealth of gold.

![The Last Lemurian: A Westralian Romance](image)

In keeping with the heterogeneity of the lost race genre, works like *The Secret of the Australian Desert* combined the bizarre features of prominent British adventure-romances with explicitly Australian historical-geographical material. They were part of the explosion of adventure-romance published in Britain in the fin-de-siecle period, the most popular of which were written from outposts of Empire: Rudyard Kipling in India, Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific, Rider Haggard in South Africa. As Roslynn Haynes and Dixon have both noted, Favenc's novel contains obvious echoes of Haggard's enormously successful romances, *She* (1885) and *King Solomon's Mines* (1887). [5] (Peter Pierce also tells us that Rosa Praed knew Haggard and was highly conversant with his novels, making the link between *She* and her *Fugitive Anne* even more direct). [6] Like the other Australian novels, *The Secret of the Australian Desert* features elements drawn directly from Haggard's work: a search for a lost explorer, the promise of fabulous treasure, cannibal feasts, desert shoot-em-ups, and the idea of the lost race itself. At the same time, however, Favenc peppered his narrative with maps and references to the expeditions of Leichhardt. As an historian and journalist, he had written extensively about Australian explorers like Leichhardt and Sir George Grey by the time *The Secret of the Australian Desert* was published. [7] He was also an explorer.
In his own right, having conducted numerous expeditions in northern Australia in the late 1870s and 1880s.

In marketing his adventure-romances, Favenc played on his reputation for intimate knowledge of Australia. [8] In his preface to *The Secret of the Australian Desert*, he tells us that the book's "descriptions of the physical features of the country are faithful records from personal experience". [9] This is an astonishing claim, given the patently fabulous nature of some features he describes. A similar assertion appears in the preface to Alexander MacDonald's *The Lost Explorers* (1906). Presenting himself as one of those who had personally "forced a painful path over Central Australia's arid sands", MacDonald tells us that "the last few chapters of the book are based on an explorer's natural deductions". [10] In the same vein, British reviews of these novels vaunted their veracity and knowledge of Australian conditions. The *North Devon Chronicle* praised William Sylvester Walker's *The Silver Queen* as "true to Nature", for example, whilst the *Northern Whig* admired the "ample evidence of the author's accurate knowledge of the country he writes about" to be found within the work. [11]

Like Favenc, George Firth Scott was both an historian of Australian exploration and an adventure-romance novelist. His novel *The Last Lemurian* was one of the most offbeat of the Australian lost race novels, including pygmies, a bunyip-monster, an occult Yellow Queen and a reincarnation sub-plot lifted straight from *She*. In Firth Scott's work, the narrator Dick Halwood discovers the remains of the fabled Lemuria (a civilisation said to have preceded Atlantis) somewhere in the Australian desert. Lemuria was once a place of magnificent palaces, populated by "a race which was on a higher plane of civilisation and culture than our own". [12] It had since, however, fallen into stunning decline. Lemuria's equivalent in John David Hennessey's *An Australian Bush Track* is 'Zoo-Zoo land', a fabulous region somewhere in northern Queensland. The Zoo-Zoans, Hennessey tells us, are the "remnant of a great nation which came there from some part of the mainland of Asia". Once, they had been "builders and cunning artificers and agriculturalists, but now most of these arts had been lost". [13]
Imperial Gothic & Australian paranoia

The only sustained exploration of Australia’s lost race romances is in Robert Dixon’s *Writing the Colonial Adventure*, a work which draws heavily on literary postcolonialism – particularly the work of Homi K. Bhabha. Early critics of colonial discourses tended to assume, Dixon says, that they “function[ed] without producing resistance, and without undermining their own authority”. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), however, Bhabha emphasised the subversive potentiality of colonial discourse. Colonial texts, he said, were involved in “the production of hybridisation” rather than the formation of a coherent discourse justifying British rule. Whenever such texts offered ‘authoritative proof’ of Anglo-Saxon superiority, they produced a range of hybrid meanings which undercut their message and made a mockery of their arrogant assumptions.

In *Writing the Colonial Adventure*, Dixon draws on Bhabha’s work to explain the bizarre heterogeneity of the lost race romances. The genre is interesting, he says, in that it provides very literal examples of colonial hybridity. The pages of these novels are full of hybrids: bunyips with human heads; marine-monsters with female breasts; half-castes, ‘native whites’ and cross-dressers aplenty. The lost race itself is a hybrid entity. Invariably described as half-caste or ‘semi-civilised’, this race is neither white nor black, neither civilised nor savage. At the same time, it is also “alarmingly close to the new concept of the Australian nation” emerging at the turn of the century. Like the remnant members of the lost race, white Australia was “caught between a lost origin and an undefined future” at the eve of federation. It was involved in the process of attenuating its ties to Britain, but was uncertain of what to put in their place. The hybrid Maluans thus not only blurred the boundaries used to demarcate the Australian self, they also functioned as its “unspeakable, unthinkable, destiny”. Their racial and cultural decline played on fears that a loss of Englishness might lead to a like fate for Australian society.

In arguing that the lost race was an emanation of Australian anxieties, Dixon relies on psychoanalytic techniques. He uses the work of Gail Ching-Liow Low, for example to explore “the psycho-sexual mechanisms through which discourses on race and nation” work on individual characters in the novels. Low talks about the paranoia generated by male fantasies of physical inviolability - a notion which features prominently in Dixon’s analysis. The lost race, he says, was an expression of male paranoia based on a “fear of the loss of boundaries, of being invaded, of becoming hybrid”. The idea of losing the barriers used to define the colonial self and of thus being open to penetration by the other (Woman, Aboriginal, Asian) underscored the lost race romances, ensuring their status as paranoid texts.

Psychoanalytic readings abound in postcolonial criticism of late Victorian literature. Bhabha’s work is perhaps the most obvious example of this; closer to home, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra approach Australian literature as instances of Freud’s ‘royal road to the unconscious’. Even in works not necessarily dependent on psychoanalytic ideas, an emphasis on the anxiety and paranoia of turn-of-the-century popular fiction remains. Stephen Arata approaches this literature as ‘the fiction of loss’, whilst H L Malchow talks about its “powerful and obsessively reiterated evocation of terror, disgust and alienation”. In *Rule of Darkness* (1988), Patrick Brantlinger argues that “the British found it increasingly difficult to think of themselves as inevitably progressive” by the late Victorian era. Consequently, their popular fiction - particularly that which he describes as ‘imperial Gothic’ - was dominated by visions of decline and fall.

There are good reasons, of course, why the work mentioned thus far is concerned with the black underside of colonial discourse. Applying psychoanalytic techniques to the colonisers is a way of turning the tables on them, making them the object of pseudo-scientific inquiry rather than the colonised peoples they objectified. Looking at the ways in which they revealed unconscious homo-erotic desires and fetishistic perversions is a way of belittling them - sniggering at them, so to speak, behind their backs. (Witness Dixon’s enjoyment in exposing the sublimated passions of the protagonists in *The Lost Explorers*. The latter’s efforts to tunnel into the lost race’s stronghold, he says, can be seen as the penetration of its “secret passage”). It is also a relief to think that colonial discourse’s triumphant racism was not all as it seemed; that even when the white colonists felt themselves most confident they were expressing subliminal fears.
In his most recent work, *Prothetic Gods* (2001), Dixon acknowledges that literary postcolonialism (or at least that typical of the 1990s) pays insufficient heed of empirical research. In his desire to turn the tables on the colonisers, for example, Bhabha ignored the uncomfortable business of close historical analysis. His essays in *The Location of Culture* have "become notorious for their high level of theoretical abstraction and generalisation, their abstruse psychoanalytic accounts of the formation of colonial subjectivities and their correspondingly meagre historical evidence". [25] Greater attention to historiographical debate about the era in which the lost civilisation works were written would also have been valuable in *Writing the Colonial Adventure*. According to Daly, for example, the rhetoric of imperial decay apparent in many works produced in *fin-de-siecle* Britain cannot be taken at face value. Whilst many writers professed a fear of a possible end to the Empire - Kipling and Haggard among them - Britain was not in fact in a period of decline at the turn of the twentieth century. Between 1880 and 1914, Daly argues, "the British empire grew dramatically,... while at home state power was also undergoing a phase of expansion". [26]

The idea that British romance was the expression of prevailing anxieties is thus by no means uncontroversial, and needs more careful analysis. The same applies to the notion that the Australian lost race romances were overwhelmingly an expression of paranoia about a loss of colonial identity. The creation of a distinctly Australian identity in the era of federation was in fact a cause for much jubilation across the country - a sentiment reflected in Favenc's *The History of Australian Exploration From 1788 to 1888* (1888) and Scott's *The Romance of Australian Exploring* (1899). As I also argue in the following, a nationalist discourse of modernity was emerging in this period, investing utopian promise in its plans for the modernisation of the Australian interior. Incontrovertibly, the lost race romances participated in this discourse and its attendant sense of promise. This is not to say that these works did not also reveal the dark edge of the nationalist endeavour: the destructiveness implicit in their plans for ecological transformation, their condemnation of its Aboriginal occupants, and their outright annihilation of the imagined lost race. It is, however, to problematise their characterisation as the literature of paranoia, based as it is on a simplistic understanding of the period and a dismissal of the jubilant sense of hope apparent in the works themselves.

**Popular modernism, fabulous modernity & nationalist persuasion**

Daly argues that late Victorian adventure-romance was a form of "popular modernism": a literature that brought modernist values and tastes to the turn-of-the-century British bourgeoisie. The cultural work of romances like *King Solomon's Mines*, he says, was to acclimatisate the middle classes in Britain to certain "modernising processes": the rise of professionalism, the emergence of consumer culture, and the search for new global markets. [27] It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a class analysis of the Australian adventure-romances. I suggest, however, that they operated in a similar way to those described by Daly. (Indeed, as both Dixon and Fiona Giles observe, the Australian romances would more appropriately be described as 'Anglo-Australian' anyway, published in Britain and read by Australian and British audiences alike). [28] These novels, in other words, worked to encourage their (middle-class) readership to embrace images of a modernised Australian interior: one criss-crossed by irrigation pipes and railways, characterised by the latest agricultural techniques, forming the site of thriving new towns and industrial enterprise. Such images were part of a nation-building exercise which welded a desire for Australian greatness to a notion of the triumphant achievements of modernisation. Through such achievements, it was suggested, the Australian nation and landscape could be *fabulated*: made up into the stuff of future fable, and transformed into the image of a fabulous modernity.

Adventure-romance was an apt vehicle for this portrayal of Australia. As a form, it seeks the maximum opportunities for wonder in the space available, combining supernatural *denouements* with marvellously-cut rubies, mind-boggling panoramas with spine-tingling sensations, offbeat event with still more offbeat event. Unpredictability is the order of the day in novels like *The Silver Queen* or *Fugitive Anne*. The reader of these works is supposed to be consistently amazed by the marvellous twists and inversions of their plot. Poor heroines are suddenly revealed to be rich heiresses (as in the case of Fugitive Anne); a dead lover (as in *The Last Lemurian*) turns out to be reincarnated as the daughter of one's friend. Anything might happen in an adventure-romance. So too, the lost race romances suggested, might anything happen in the wilds of the Australia.

"Wonder upon wonder", as one of the heroes of *The Golden Lake* exclaims. "What relics might we not discover in a month’s earnest search among these hills [?]. What a strange
tale we should have to tell to the quidnuncs of the world ["]. [29] With this logic, it was an eminent possibility that a desert might be transformed into a future oasis, and that the whole country might one day be the sight of political greatness and wealth.

The transformation of the interior was indeed the subject of avid nationalist debate in the period covered by this paper. This debate first reached a fervent pitch in Victoria during the 1880s when Alfred Deakin began promoting the irrigation cause. As head of Victoria's Royal Commission on Water Supply in 1884-85, Deakin argued that irrigation would bring the "triumphal march of progress" to the arid interior. With the discovery of artesian waters and the first experiments of irrigation, he said, the Australian country was being re-made: "out of the heart of once-withered wastes have burst flowing rills", with verdant channels replacing former "stretches of aridity". [30]

For his belief in the potential of Australia's inland wildernesses, Deakin was hailed as a John the Baptist of the Interior. In South Australia, the parliamentarian David Gordon styled himself along similar lines. Gordon was a firm believer that modern science and willpower could transform the arid interior into an oasis. Evidently, he equated Australia with the grand 'desert civilisations' of antiquity, particularly Egypt and Persia. The Murray River, he said, was the 'Nile of Australia', and irrigation would make of the interior what it had of Babylon at the height of its power. [31] In Conquering the Desert (1907), he predicted that as soon as Australia turned to irrigation its deserts would "blossom as the rose". Once a railway was added, he said, people would leave the cities en masse, and the "vast and silent plains of Central Australia" would be no more. [32]

Gordon was joined in this vision of a fabulous modernity by an amalgam of nationalists and entrepreneurs: the would-be developer Benjamin Brady; and the multitudinous contributors to the journal Australia To-day. In the 1880s, Dods proposed the construction of the 'Grand Victorian North-Western Irrigation, Traffic, and Motive-Power Canal', through which he promised to convert Victoria's mallee country "to an earthly paradise made independent of drought and hot winds for evermore". [33] In the 1900s, Brady was paid by government agencies to sing the praises of the interior as a site for population and enterprise. An "enthusiastic advocate of irrigation", Brady promised that one day the "endless plains" of the Centre would "echo the paeans of labour and industry". [34] At such a time, the desert would overflow with "marvellous tilth", and Australia would truly be a utopia for the entrepreneurial and free. [35]

It is ironic that whilst nationalists like Brady hymned the victorious achievements of science, they were at the same time involved in an assault on the conscientious observations of the country made by the scientific community. By the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a wide body of opinion from geographers, geologists and biologists alike, which cast doubt on irrigation's potential to achieve the miracles regularly attributed to it. It was thus imperative for nationalist writers to persuade their readership of their fabulous vision for the country. When Gordon announced that Australia's 'dead lands' could be redeemed as oases, for example, he noted that there would be some that would scoff at his sanguinity. "What optimism!" is the protest of the matter-of-fact person who lives in the past and delights in gloomy forebodings", he said in Conquering the Desert. "Of course it is - optimism of the most pronounced kind; but then, the future of Australia belongs to the optimists". [36]

The need to persuade Australians of the power of patriotic optimism underlies the function of the lost race in novels like The Lost Explorer. As Van Ikin says, the figure of a once-grand civilisation in the interior endowed the Australia imagined in these works with a "mythical history" more worthy of its stature than that of scattered nomads. [37] Unlike the Aboriginal peoples depicted in the lost race romances, who appear to have lived perpetually in a timeless state of savagery, the lost race belongs to time and history, and is thus relevant to white Australians. The figure of the lost race is accordingly caught up with the nationalists' inability to value Aboriginal history and culture, serving as a compensation for their perception of the latter as unaccomplished and hopelessly primitive. In Fugitive Anne, for example, Hansen marvels at the fact that "he had found here in the unexplored heart of Australia - that continent which was declared to have had no previous inhabitants but the degraded aborigines - ruins which proclaimed the fact of a civilisation linked with, and perhaps as great as, the prehistoric civilisation of Central America". [38] Immediately he senses that his discovery will revolutionise the current state of anthropological and archaeological knowledge, and impliedly with it the world's estimation of Australia at large.

Whilst Dixon and others have seen the lost race as a reflection of colonial anxiety about
time and a loss of British culture, it appears here as a source of nationalist inspiration. Its own miraculous appearance in the Australian interior highlighted the possibility of other miracles occurring there - along with the possibility that the scientific 'pessimists' could get at least some things wrong. These possibilities are reinforced by the appearance of the lost race's territory as a microcosm of nationalist dreams for the interior. In The Lost Explorer, for example, Malua comprises a valley with a "noble expanse of water in the centre, dotted with boats and with birds of brightest plumage", whilst Lemuria is a "haven" of "luxuriant verdure". In An Australian Bush Track, Zoo-Zoo land is "a fairly grassed country... perfectly alive with minerals". In William Sylvester Walker's The Silver Queen, too, a cave occupied by the lost race opens onto a "wonderful, secluded valley", variously described by the characters as "Utopia" and a "lonesome paradise".

As I indicated earlier, the possibility that the British Empire was diminishing is expressed in widespread literature of the fin-de-siècle period. According to Daly, this rhetoric of imperial decline often served a strategic purpose. The fear of decline expressed in works like She, he says, was aimed at winning readers over to the cause of nationalism and modernity. The important thing to note about this rhetoric, he says, is that it strengthened rather than enfeebled the British state. It cannot necessarily be used as evidence that Britain was in decline, or that a widespread anxiety about this decline was felt by the British population. In a similar vein, David Walker has argued that the Australian 'invasion romances' of this period - sensational adventure-novels in which Australia is overrun by Asian hordes - served a strategic purpose. The invasion narrative, he says, was a device used by nationalists to provoke racist paranoia about the possibility of Asian control of Australia for polemic ends. If Australians could be persuaded that they were in danger, they would be quick to support the eugenic social policies, tighter immigration measures, and more money for defence sought by the nationalist lobby (an attempt at persuasion which sounds all-too-familiar in our political context today).

The lost race serves a similarly persuasive purpose in novels like The Silver Queen. The fact that the lost race deteriorates into savagery operates in these works as a 'wake up call' to readers unconvinced by the country's fabulous potential. White Australians needed to be optimistic, the lost race romances suggested, and they needed to marry this optimism with practical attempts to transform the interior. If they neglected to do so, the threat of the degeneration of their society was very real. There were two potential futures facing white Australians: one of utopian promise, and the other of pathetic decline. It was up to the readers of these novels to decide which one it would be. As Walker said in his preface to The Silver Queen, Australians needed to "stand shoulder to shoulder to prevent the pauperising influences now experienced everywhere in the Empire of land, country, and reform". Holding out the possibility of racial and cultural decline was one way to persuade them to band together in this way. Rather than focusing on the lost race as an embodiment of a white Australian identity crisis, I have thus highlighted the ways in which it served as a motivating figure, both positive and negative, for the creation of a bright Australian future.

The fertile utopia

That the nationalists' plans for the interior were utopian in inflexion is apparent in much of their rhetoric. In Voices of the Desert (1895), for example, Favenc wrote a poem about the Australian landscape which he entitled "Ideal of the Future": "The time draws near when the low bare hills / Will echo the songs of a thousand rills", he wrote, predicting in Deakin-esque language the transformation of deserts through water engineering. Utopian language was also deployed in Australia To-day, in which one contributor imagined "an Australia radiating... with the beneficial influence of its political institutions, the enterprise and integrity of its leaders, the vastness of its mercantile fleets, [and] the magnanimity of its international policy". In this vision, Sydney and Melbourne had becoming revered modern metropolises, Australia's "desert and waste places were now the principal agricultural feeders of the world". [47]

The utopian resonances of the lost world in *The Silver Queen* are reinforced by the proximity of the lost civilisation motif to the utopian genre. An explorer's discovery of an unknown civilisation is, after all, a standard feature of the utopian novel. As far back as the sixteenth century, discoveries of such utopian and/or fantastic societies had been described in the interior of *Terra Australis*, usually by sailors from European ships marooned on its shores. The link between the lost civilisation novels and these earlier utopian fictions was foregrounded in Favenc's *Marooned on Australia: Being the Narration by Diedrich Buys of his Discoveries and Exploits in Terra Australis Incognita About the Year 1630* (1896). In this work, a sailor shipwrecked on the West Australian coast comes across a lost civilisation inhabited by a race distinct from the Aborigines around it. Like most residents in utopian civilisations, these people live simply amidst arcadian plenty, are possessed of youthful beauty, and know nothing of crime.\[48\]

The period in which the lost civilisation novels were written witnessed a modest renaissance in Australian utopian writing. Between 1890 and 1901 in particular, a number of utopian novels described the transformation of the Australian landscape and society alike. In *A New Arcadia* (1894) and *The Melbourne Riots* (1892), the Victorian countryside sprouts vines, pomegranates and figs, bounteously feeding the nation's homeless and downtrodden.\[49\] In *A Woman on Mars* (1901), Australia is made into a place of "spacious parks and luxuriant gardens", quickly becoming "the wonder of the civilised world".\[50\] In Samuel Albert Rosa's *The Coming Terror* (1890), a more explicit link is forged between the lost civilisation motif, the utopian tradition, and the greening of the Australian interior. Rosa's work depicts a group of explorers discovering a lost civilisation in the middle of the desert, the members of which dress in flowing robes and participate in utopian institutions.\[51\] As in *The Lost Explorer* and *The Secret of the Australian Desert*, the inhabitants of this civilisation are linked to Leichhardt. They also live in a veritable "New Garden of Eden", the existence of which, Rosa tells us, disproves the notion of central Australia as "an immense wilderness of sand".\[52\] To further disprove this notion, the Australian government in the novel sets about transforming the interior. It orders "the construction of artesian wells" from which water can be conveyed to any lands which need it, and by which means the whole continent will soon become like Eden.\[53\]

As in Rosa's novel, the lost race romances held up a vision of Australia as a place of utopian plasticity. In *An Australian Bush Track*, one of the protagonists forms the 'Central Australian Desert Tunnel Gold and Diamond Mining Company' for the purpose of mining the lost civilisation's land and running a railway across it. His expectations of this Company are similar to those of Dods' in his plans for the modernisation of the Victorian interior, or of Gordon's in *Conquering the Desert*. The Company, he says, has the
potential to "revolutionise Australia", and make its inhabitants "jolly old millionaires". \[54\]

In *The Lost Explorers*, one of the protagonists predicts that "a country o' forests and rivers" will be discovered before long in 'Never Never Land'. \[55\] A character in *The Silver Queen* is even more ambitious. "I believe all Australia has a buried treasure storage of some sort underground", he says. Research and exploration continues, will set about "utterly revolutionising old ideas of Australia's waterless distances"; turning its "supposed deserts ... into places for dwellings, granaries, gardens and storehouses for the benefit of generations yet unborn". \[56\]

Of course, nationalist dreams of the modernisation of the interior never realised the utopian grandeur or fabulous wealth described in the lost race romances. A century down the track, we now see the travesty of these dreams in desertification, soil salinisation and erosion, and the deterioration of river systems. We are also aware of the patent racism (not to mention gender bias) implicit in colonial and nationalist discourses, in particular their refusal to value Aboriginal peoples. The very idea of populating and transforming the desert was of course based on a refusal to acknowledge the prior rights of its Aboriginal occupants, just as the fact that they had failed to make the deserts blossom themselves operates as an implicit justification for their dispossession of the land. The desire to criticise the imperial endeavour, however, should not result in a distortion of texts like *The Secret of the Australian Desert*. It is one thing to say that such texts expressed anxieties about racial issues; it is another to read them solely as expressions of that anxiety. To so reduce the lost race romances is to ignore the fact that they were also uncomfortably jubilant, naively utopian, and misguided optimistic about the potentialities of the Australian interior and the promise of modernity itself.

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The "crucial episode" of *The Last Lemurian*, Dixon tells us, occurs when Halwood is on route to Australia and falls prey to a panic attack. "A fear came upon me", Halwood says, a fear which was part of a horror and a terror of absolute negation and personal eradication... A feeling of being and yet not being; a sense of existence without all of those tokens which give security and reality to existence. \[57\]

As Dixon sees it, this moment is an expression of the fear that "lies at the heart of the text": the "fear of the loss of boundaries, of being invaded, of becoming hybrid". \[58\] If it is *The Last Lemurian*’s crucial episode, however, it is curious that Halwood’s 'terror of absolute negation' is but a momentary sensation, quickly replaced by a feeling of tranquillity. "The terror passed as it had come", Halwood tells us, "and after it came the sense of peace, of calm unruffled peace, which nothing could disturb or injure". \[59\]

As I see it, the Australian lost race romances can be reduced neither to an expression of unruffled confidence about the colonial endeavour, nor to one of abject paranoia. A similar process takes place in the lost race genre at large. The Australian novels are instead best understood in the context of a nationalist discourse aimed at transforming Australia into a realm of the fabulous. There was no limit to the potential of the country, they argued, provided Australians seize the challenge of fabulating the interior through a combination of optimism, determination, technological prowess and imaginative verve. The fact that the novels resonated with utopian literature reinforced this idea. The utopian genre is committed, after all, to the idea of social plasticity; to the idea that society can be re-made at will. This notion of social and environmental plasticity was admixed with ancient splendour in the lost race romances to suggest a kind of fabulous modernity to which the country could aspire. More than emanations of racial and cultural anxiety - more than incoherently offbeat creations - these works were thus part of a project to 'fabulate' the nation: to make it up, and to consecrate it for future greatness.


[4] The lost race romances covered in this paper are James Francis Hogan's *The Lost Explorer* (1890), W Carlton Dawe's *The Golden Lake* (1891), Ernest Favenc's *The Secret of the Australian Desert* (1896) and *Marooned on Australia* (1896), John David Hennessey's *An Australian Bush Track* (1896), George Firth Scott's *The Last Lemurian* (1898), Rosa Praed's *Fugitive Anne* (1902), Alexander MacDonald's *The Lost Explorers* (1906) and William Sylvester Walker's *The Silver Queen* (1908). I note that in his *Writing the Colonial Adventure* (1995), Robert Dixon incorrectly refers to two other novels as lost race romances: Alexander MacDonald's *The Invisible Island* (1910) and Ernest Favenc's *The Last Six: Tales
of the Austral Tropics (1893) (in fact a collection of short stories). He also refers to a children's novel, Oliphant Smeaton's Treasure Cave of the Blue Mountains (1898), which will not be considered here. See Dixon, p 63.


[16] Dixon, pp 63-64.


[23] Dixon, p 75.


[28] Dixon, p 75.


[34] Dixon, p 75.

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This Early Australian Science Fiction anthology is a collection of 13 tales considered to be among the most influential Australian works in the lost world genre. They are the works most referred to by researchers and academics when they evaluate Australian colonial science fiction. Some have been made available for Kindle for the very first time and are exclusive to ROH Press. Australian Deserts make up a big part of what is known as "the Australian Outback". You might have heard the term "the Outback Desert of Australia". That name is misleading in two ways. First, it sounds as if there was one big desert in Australia, the Outback Desert. Hmm, not exactly true, there is no desert called Outback Desert, as you can see on the Australian desert map below. (Desert Sizes And Location). And, it sounds as if the entire Outback in Australia is desert Well, that's not exactly true either. Read more about this in my article What is the Australian