

~~Chapter 1~~

1 CONVICT TO SETTLER

Marcus
Clarke

The first novel published of life in Australia had a convict theme.¹

In the next few years, numbers of novels with a colonial setting were appeared,

published. Most of these had a rural theme, and were intended

either to convey useful and encouraging information to the intending

migrant, to preach virtue, or to realise in Australia the romantic vision

of Sir Walter Scott.² However, the first which need concern us is Marcus

Clarke's His Natural Life.³

This novel is particularly interesting because of the way in which the material has reshaped the author's original style. The revised version of the novel is artistically superior because it has been pruned to the form

¹ Henry Savery, Quintus Servinton, Hobart Town, 1830-1. See Grahame Johnston, Annals of Australian Literature, Melbourne, 1970; p.6; E. Morris Miller and Frederick T. Macartney, Australian Literature, Sydney, revised and extended edition, 1956, p.420.

² H. M. Green, A History of Australian Literature, Sydney, 1961, pp.83-97, 200-36.

³ His Natural Life, Penguin Books edition, ed. S. Murray-Smith, Harmondsworth, 1970. First published, Melbourne, 1870-2. Abridged edition, Oxford World's Classics Series, entitled For the Term of His Natural Life, London, 1952. First published, Melbourne, 1874. For publishing history, see S. Murray-Smith, Introduction to Penguin Books edition, pp.13-14. All page references are to the Penguin Books edition unless otherwise indicated.

essential to ^{its} ~~the~~ most important theme, but the earlier version is more important for our purposes because it shows how this theme seized Clarke's imagination and completely altered the kind of book he was writing.

The original serial form of the novel commences in Dickensian style with a group of assorted characters assembling at a coaching inn. The inn itself, the "dashing young gentleman . . . Mr. Maurice Frere," ~~(p. 31)~~ the mysterious travellers and the unexpected message, Plain Joe Mogford the landlord and his seedy brother, all belong to the world of Dickensian grotesque, with an admixture of Charles Reade's adventure thrown in for seasoning. Nor is the resulting dish at all unappetising. Clarke sets the story going quickly, the characters are well observed and, at least in Frere's case, already have the deeper qualities on which the later development of the novel will depend, and the management of the dismay consequent on ^{the of Dawes} ~~arrest~~ and the steadily enveloping net of chance and circumstance, focuses our attention on both the main character and the main theme.

We may, however, be permitted to doubt how successfully Clarke would have managed the further development of his novel in this style. We need not be worried by the improbably elaborate coincidences of the plot, which are finally revealed in the last book and which Clarke presumably already had in mind, for these are themselves Dickensian in their nature. In Dickens' novels, however, the improbabilities of plot are forgotten as their central concerns shape themselves about the dominating images.

Clarke has his thematic imagery in this first book, but it does not involve the imagination of the reader (or, apparently, the writer,) in the way that ~~he~~^{one} is involved by the fogs and ruins and bright, sterile houses of Dickens' London. Certainly, Rosemary Lane and Blickses, where the landlord goes in search of his ne'er-do-well brother, has something in common with Tom-All-Along's in Bleak House, and Mr. Quaid the lawyer belongs in the company of Dickens' Jaggers, or the Vholes and Kenges who clustered around the High Court of Chancery. However, while Dickens' people and places come to stand for the essential characteristics of his society, Clarke's interest seems to be confined to their queerness and quaintness.

Mr. Quaid, for example, is in many ways a typical Dickensian lawyer. His furtive manner, his possession of secrets, even his interest in the law as a professional instrument, irrelevant to any question of justice, all link him with Dickens' lawyers (~~pp. 80-81~~). Quaid is Richard Devine's, or Rufus Dawes', last link with the hope of returning to the sane world of freedom, of escaping from being "bound to the wheel" (~~p. 82~~). Yet although he and Dawes between them present a most elegant case to the jury, Dawes is, against both the weight of evidence and the tendency of the whole chapter devoted to the trial, eventually convicted (~~p. 120~~). The conviction is quite arbitrary, brought about by the needs of the plot rather than the demands of the action, and so destroys any imagistic importance which might be attached to the wheel of fate and the workings of the legal system. Then, the final revelation that Quaid has defended

Dawes because of his belief in his guilt, not his innocence, comes as an indication of the singularity of Quaid's character rather than as any part of a consistent view of life ~~(p. 124)~~. At the end of this first book, therefore, our interest remains at the level of curiosity about character and action. The miscarriage of justice does not seize our attention as a theme, but merely as a precipitant of further events.

It is only when Clarke becomes fully engrossed with the System of conviction^{is} that the book starts to take the shape which was preserved in For the Term of his Natural Life. This change starts from the very beginning of Book Two, where the convict ship carrying both Rufus Dawes and his cousin, Maurice Frere, is becalmed ~~(p. 126)~~. At the opening of the novel, Clarke, following Dickens, ^{all} ~~has seen~~ humanity as things and material things as living beings. He talks of the way "the tide of humanity, bearing on its bosom such waifs and strays of parcels, bundles, great-coats, and comforters, as had been spared from the general drift on the side-walk, was surging into the wide doorway, clamorous for supper and bed" ~~(p. 31)~~. A moment later he describes how the "gateway swallowed up the flotsam and jetsam brought by each high night tide." The gate is the active force, and humanity, represented by its possessions, just so many particles of inanimate matter constituting a blind tide. The people who are then introduced during the book are just so much additional decoration. Although Rufus Dawes, as the person who enlists our sympathy, and Maurice Frere, destined to be the villain, both acquire hints of a fuller personality, neither comes fully to life during this part of the narrative.

Our attention is concentrated on the movement of events in which human beings suffer rather than act, and are therefore little more than puppets.

Once we come to the prison ship there is a marked change. The physical properties now provide a venue for purposive human action. The ship is motionless, the people move (pp. 126-8). A young man (Frere) stretches himself, a convict stands, morosely staring at the sea, while his companions "cast many a leer of silent contempt at the solitary figure." When action occurs, it is not fate bringing events, but Frere exercising his authority and Dawes his human feeling (pp. 129, 133). These three acts, slight as they are but arising from the character of those concerned, lead to the central action of this book. Frere singles out Dawes to accompany him on the row to the Malabar, and this infliction accelerates Dawes' fever. As a result, he hears of the plot and is able to save the ship, but the fever is blamed for his confession, he is judged to be one of the plotters, and consequently sentenced to Macquarie Harbor on his arrival in Van Dieman's Land (p. 228). The result is the destruction of his hopes of working his way to a pardon and his deeper enmeshment in the System. However, the shipboard incidents also lay the base for his ultimately redeeming attachment to Dora (Sylvia in the later version).

Although this chain of events can be traced back directly to Dawes' original apprehension for murder, the progression is now quite different from that of the first book. Then, it was circumstance which conspired to prove his guilt. Now, it is the unimaginative callousness of the system embodied in Maurice Frere. It is important to recognise that at this stage *stage*

Frere's character is not so very different from Dawes'. Their similarity is underlined by their relationship, although of course Frere is ignorant of this and Dawes gives no signs of knowledge until much later, when Frere reveals himself while they are marooned together at Macquarie Harbor^u. It is chance which sets them on different paths, but it is the System which makes each man what he eventually becomes. The essential quality of the System is not just its brutality, but the barrier it sets up between men so that mutual comprehension is impossible. Frere ~~and Dingo~~^{is} are quite incapable of understanding that Dawes could be anything but a "lazy skulking hound" (p. 133), and therefore can interpret his conduct only in the worst possible way. There is therefore no hope of escape or alleviation^x, the convict inevitably becomes degraded and the officer brutalized^z. Once the first premise has been accepted, the System operates with horrifying logic.

This logic provides the driving force in the four books which constitute the revised version of the novel. In the first, Dawes' consciousness of his innocence isolates him from his fellow prisoners on the Malabar, and the survival of his better instincts, demonstrated in his fetching the ball for Dora and his later betrayal of the mutiny, merely marks him out for worse punishment. In the second, despair drives him to the point of suicide, but the instinct to survive brings him back from the brink and restores him, for a time, to free membership of a human society, albeit of only four. In rescuing the castaways, Dawes' humanity is restored, only to be cruelly torn away from him by fate and

by the unalterable rules of the system, which mean that Frere is believed and Dawes' attempts to tell the truth merely become, for the System, proof of his greater guilt. In the third book, therefore, we find him at Port Arthur, where his suffering is the greater because of his ~~memory~~ ^{memory} of brief freedom and regard and ~~because~~ of his consciousness of his innocence and betrayal. Again, however, his humane feelings bring on him worse punishment when he refuses to continue the flogging of Kirkland. This episode furthers his degradation, for his own flogging, which follows his refusal to continue flogging the other, eventually breaks ~~Dawes~~ ^{Dawes} down and destroys the shreds of self-respect which he has derived from his ability to endure. It does, however, bring him closer to redemption by linking his fate with that of the Reverend Mr. North, whose dereliction of duty has partly at least brought about Dawes' flogging and Kirkland's death. In the final book the theme of redemption, which has been analysed ^z elsewhere by L.T. Hergenhan,⁴ is given more prominence, but the cruel logic of the system becomes even more extensive in its effects as we see it destroying not only the convicts, but North, Dora, and even Frere himself, whose wife and child it takes away in the same episode which frees Dawes.

The final section of the novel, which tells of John Rex's escape and impersonation of Dawes, and of Dawes' gradual return to wealth, social station and self-respect as a storekeeper ~~on~~ Ballarat and ~~putative~~ ^{supposed}

⁴'The Redemptive Theme in His Natural Life, ' in Australian Literary Studies, Vol. II, No. 1, 1965, pp. 32-49.

2 father of Dorcas, the child of Frere and Dora, lacks this theme of human
 bondage and, as a result, lacks the imaginative power of the earlier part.
 It is quite interesting as a social document, attesting to the legend of
 easy wealth through gold, the mateship of the diggers, and the uncertainty
 underlying the whole ^{of gold-fields} life, but the main interest has reverted from events
 embodying a theme to events included for their own sake and to bring the
 story to a successful conclusion. The characters of Rex and Sarah
 Purfoy and Rufus Dawes remain recogni^zable, but we learn little more
 about them. Sarah Purfoy's vengeance on Frere is thematically appropriate
 in its conception, but Clarke's novelistic withholding of the full details of
 the plot until the climax of the action robs this climax of its potential
 power as another manifestation of the evil system. Frere's death at the
 hands of his son becomes no more than a convenient way of finishing the
 plot, while Dawes' return to Europe might as well belong to another work.
 It is not the image of the diamond in the charcoal which sums up the novel,
 but the images of lash and gallows, suicide and cannibalism, the only
 credible ^{means of} escapes the System left to its victims. If the North episode is
 to be given its due weight, the only hope the novel offers is that of
 redemption through suffering. The possibility of the best human qualities
 surviving ^{by} of their own strength is explicitly destroyed when Dawes is
 flogged and Kirkland is betrayed and killed at Port Arthur (pp 463-9).

This does not mean, however, that each person is corrupted in
 the same way by the System. As Hergenhan has pointed out, ⁵ Gabbett and

Dawes and Vetch and Rex become what their characters, under the influence of the system, determine; ~~But~~ it is the particular quality of evil in each person which is brought out by his experience under the system. Thus while Dawes, and North, are brought to despair by the frustration of every good instinct (pp. 481-2, 669), John Rex's amorality eventually produces a mental breakdown (p. 896), Gabbett's brute nature reduces him to the status of an animal (pp. 558-9), and Frere ^Hhis natural courage and military and administrative ability become mere instruments of tyranny (pp. 505, 802-3, 596-7) and his wife's love destroyed ^H(pp. 606, 658), is, in the original version, eventually struck down by the system of which he has become a creature (p. 600).

The evil of the System is not, however, exhausted by the way it destroys the good and brings out the worst in each of its victims. Its greatest horror is the power it gives to evil over good, exemplified in the way Maurice Frere, particularly in the fourth book, uses his power over Dawes' to break the convict's spirit ^{He does this} in order to quiet his own guilty conscience for his betrayal of Dawes after the escape from Hell's Gates. The insanity reaches its height when Frere is able to use his knowledge of his own guilt to incite Dawes to the brink of murder by taunting him with their common memory of the past (p. 600).

~~It is important to note that~~ It is not merely the cruelty of the System which is Clarke's concern, but its monstrous injustice. We might agree with Major Vickery that villains like Rex and Gabbett and their fellows must

2 be kept quiet with lash and irons and dumb-cells and marooning, and ~~that~~
 their "natural ferocity" be "kept in check by ... superior intelligence"
 (pp. 249, 494-5), and we might even understand the inevitable loss of
 humanity in people like Vickery and Pine who are called on to administer
 the System (pp. 250-251),⁵ but nothing can excuse putting absolute power
 in the hands of the kind of man Frere has become by the time he is
 governor of Norfolk Island. The fact⁵ of his rule cut through all possible
 rationalisations^z to the crucial absence of any ethical substance in the
 authority he exercises. Yet the final revelation of the System's nature
 has been prepared for by each earlier glimpse we have been given of
 Frere's personal and professional character. Unlike Dawes, he had
 been a party, unwitting but not blameless, to the mutiny on the
Malabar (pp. 208-9). Even when he depends on Dawes for his return to
 civilisation, he plans to betray him, and this betrayal enables ~~him~~^{Frere} to
 marry Dora (pp. 326, 395). His value as an officer, and his knowledge
 of convict ways, rests on his treachery (pp. 371-2). His very courage is
 used to terrorise^z the prisoners, relying^{as it does} on the authority given to him by
 his position to destroy the last remnants of a man's spirit, as
 when he provokes Kavanagh to kill him and then taunts him for his failure
 of nerve (p. 505). His pretensions to the externals of morality are destroyed
 by his guilty relationships with convict women and ^{by} his desertion of his son
^{one of} by them (p. 379), a desertion which opens him to Sarah Purfoy's blackmail

But compare His Natural Life, pp. 257-8 and p. 474.

2 and eventually gives her the instrument of her revenge. This is accomplished when he is murdered by his own son, whom she has taught to hate Frere while keeping him in ignorance that Frere is his true father (p.887). Frere's true motive force is revealed early, when he gloats over the satisfaction he finds in "keeping the scoundrels in order." "I like to see the fellows' eyes glint at you as you walk past 'em. 'Gad, they'd tear me to pieces if they dared, some of them!" and he laughed grimly, as though the hate he inspired was a thing to be proud of," (p.251). In this utter blindness to the human significance of what he is doing Frere reveals the ethical vacuum at the heart of the System. This fact means, as even Meekin recognizes (p.426), that the System can promote only those very qualities it is ostensibly constituted to reform. It is significant that Meekin's observation is prompted by Frere's confession, reiterated elsewhere, that his whole system of administration is based on the promotion and reward of the worst characteristics of the men in his charge (pp.426, 597).

The world created by Frere's methods is summed up in North's diary, describing discipline on Norfolk Island.

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 K They must do their duty. If they are indulgent to the prisoners, they know I shall flog 'em. If they do what I tell 'em, they'll make themselves so hated that they'd have their own father up to the triangles to save themselves being sent back to the ranks.

✓ You treat them then like slave keepers of a wild beast den. They must flog the animals to avoid being flogged themselves. ✓

single quotes
 inside
 double

" Ay, " said he, with his coarse laugh, " and having once flogged 'em, they'd do anything rather than be put in the cage, don't ye see. "

It is horrible to think of this logic being used by a man who has a wife and child, and friends and enemies. It is the logic that the Keeper of the Tormented would use, I should think.

One good thing he has done. He has settled the 'ration' question ... Nevertheless, the monstrous method of espionage and brutality by far outbalances this act of justice. The worst villains are made constables. Perfidy is rewarded ... (p. 397)

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 ← The utter absence of any moral basis except brute force creates a world where all values are perverted and the human is reduced to the animal.

Nor is this world limited to the prison settlements. In the last part of the book, John Rex escapes to England, taking the manner and values of the gaol with him. The consequence of his escape is to destroy the comfort and civility of the family whose head he impersonates, but this comfort is itself based on exploitation and corruption by the ship-builder who originally established the family fortune.⁶ The connection between the morality of society in general and that of its outlaws is made explicit by Frere himself, when he remarks that "It don't pay a fence to steal, any more than it pays a banker to break, unless he goes in for a very heavy sum." (p. 425). Frere goes on to point out that it is only the

⁷This element of the plot is kept in both versions of the novel. See His Natural Life, pp. 51-3; For the Term of His Natural Life, pp. 5-6

fact that convicts do not have a higher morality than the world at large that enables them to be kept in check. The generalisation^z of the convict system to the whole colony is envisaged by Dora, when she imagines the whole of Tasmania

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but one smouldering volcano of revolt and murder - the whole convict population but one incarnated conspiracy, engendered and bound together by the hideous Freemasonry of crime and suffering! Terrible to think of, - yet not impossible.

Oh, how strangely must the world have been civilised, that this most lovely corner of it must needs be set apart as a place of banishment for the monsters that civilisation had brought forth and bred! (p. 439)

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The hideousness of the danger is not alleviated by the thought that it is averted only by the failure of the System's victims to be loyal even to each other, and the unnaturalness of the System is only emphasised^z by its contrast with the natural beauty of the environment. It is not merely the System which is condemned, but mankind itself.

Even the free colony of Victoria, where Dawes finds refuge and a kind of happiness in the last books of the novel, is not untainted by convictism and its corollaries. Maurice Frere has power and station there, both at Eureka and at Pentridge, and in both places we see him employing his familiar methods. At Eureka, he contemptuously employs Jerry Mogford as a spy, treating him as something less than an animal in the process (pp. 777-8, 788-4). His presence shakes Dawes' security, inhibits him from returning to Ballarat to save Arthur, and, finally, just

misses precipitating disaster for Dawes because Frere is too intent on chasing the rebels (pp. 770, 795, 811). When we see him at Pentridge, he is still practising the same arts on Dick Purfoy, ignorant of the fact that this young man is in fact his own son (pp. 880-2). Purfoy's fate is determined throughout not by his own actions but by Frere's authority. Frere arrests him in Sydney in the first place for horse-stealing, a crime actually committed by Jerry Mogford, and his usual brow-beating manner and assumption that the other is beneath contempt prevents the boy's account being listened to or leniency being shown (p. 621). Then, when Purfoy is captured at Eureka and Frere recognises him as a Sydney-sider, Frere gratuitously inflicts a further term of imprisonment on him (p. 880). As this only further arouses the boy's defiance, Frere determines to break his spirit, much as he had previously set about breaking Dawes on Norfolk Island, and so provokes the attack which leads to his own death (p. 884).

But it is Rufus Dawes, now known as Tom Crosbie, who represents the real significance of convictism in the free colony. He is the respectable citizen over whom, unknown to his fellows, hangs the constant threat of being returned to prison or worse. This makes his own character morose and withdrawn, so that although he is well-regarded he is unsociable, both on Ballarat and later in Melbourne. Although others have no suspicion of his past, what is true of him could be true of any number of them. It is this which gives point to the unthinking cruelty of Arthur Devine's irrevocable condemnation of all who have ever been convicts, and to Dawes'

, or Crosbie's, impassioned reply:

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" You are right, young man . . . The society of the good and pure would justly refuse to be contaminated by the presence of such a man. He is a leper, from whom all healthy beings shrink with disgust. For him remains no love of sister, wife, or child. He is alone in the world - a being apart and accursed . . ." (p. 754)

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The previous conversation has just made it clear that there are any number of such men on Ballarat.

It is only, however, on a relatively few occasions in ^{the} ~~this~~ last part of the book that Clarke deals so explicitly with this theme. For most of the time he is more concerned with moving his plot along to effect the discomfiture of John Rex and the restoration of Rufus Dawes to his rightful position as Richard Devine. There is little to match the images of horror which characterise ^{the} ~~the~~ section of his novel which deals directly with the System. This horror is focussed in the image of the System itself, which is seen as a remorseless trap inexorably crushing everyone who comes within its grasp.

The way in which the self-generating energy of the System comes to dominate the novel can be seen in the episode of Kirkland's flogging (Book 4, Chapters 13-15). The episode itself is horrible enough, with its detailed description of the flogging, from tying Kirkland up, through the first marks of the lash and the victim's early agony until unconsciousness brings a momentary relief, to his revival under the influence of a bucket

of water and then his death. But it is not so much the physical cruelty on which Clarke concentrates his attention, though he certainly does not gloss over ^{it} ~~this~~, but rather the callous logic of the system which inflicts this cruelty.

The whole flogging is a piece of gratuitous cruelty which has only been made worse by North's attempts to assist the victim. The chain of circumstances which generates it starts with Kir^kland's sentence, which we are told is possibly the result of error. This puts him into the power of Captain Burgess, whose butler he becomes, but ^{Kirkland} ~~he~~ retains enough sensitivity, as the son of Methodist parents, to be visibly shocked by Burgess' blasphemy. As a consequence he is removed to the chain gang and the even worse suffering of a night in the long dormitory with the worst of the convicts. The following day he attempts to commit suicide, but his first attempt is stopped by Gabbett, who, "smirking his lips" in a reference to homosexuality (p. 453),⁷ refers to him as Miss Nancy. His second attempt, by bolting for the sea, is stopped by North, and Kirkland thus finds himself sentenced to fifty lashes for attempting to bolt.

When he hears the sentence, North attempts to intervene, but succeeds only in having it doubled. The impervious logic of the System is revealed when ^{North} ~~he~~ attempts to enlist the support of Macklewain, the doctor (p. 459). Far from being sympathetic when told that the boy has

⁸The reference to smirking, but not the remark, is omitted from the revised edition - For the Term of his Natural Life, p. 351.

attempted suicide, Macklewain sees this as just another cause for punishment. Told of the agony and shame he has suffered to bring him to a suicidal state, the doctor comments that the flogging will give him some relief by giving him a spell in hospital. North then urges the true reason for the trouble, the infamous state of the dormitories. Macklewain replies:

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 "If the boy has anything to complain of, why don't he complain? We can't do anything without evidence."

"Complain! Would his life be safe if he did? Besides, he's not the sort of creature to complain. He'd rather kill himself than say anything about the matter."

"That's all nonsense," said Macklewain. "We can't flog a whole dormitory on suspicion. I can't help it. The boy's made his bed and he must lie on it." (p. 459)

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 This is essentially the same answer which North received from the commandant, Burgess, when he made his original plea, which he receives from him again when he intercedes against ~~the~~^{the} sentence, and which he eventually receives from Vicker^s, now Superintendent^e of convicts, when he lodges an official complaint after the boy's death. After this final effort, Clarke adds the comment, "authority - however well-meaning in private life - has in its official capacity a natural dislike to those dissatisfied persons who insist in pushing enquiries to extremities." (p. 474)

In the reception given to North's efforts we have the cause of the System's inhumanity. On the one hand, its officers take refuge in legalisms to avoid recognising^z the truth before them, and so they are able to escape

any need to accept responsibility. On the other, the rules are such that once a person is embroiled he must lie on the bed he is assumed to have made. Whatever he does, he is necessarily wrong, and can claim no consideration.

These aspects of the System, dramatised in North's attempts to bend it, are made brutally apparent during the actual flogging. (pp. 464-9). Kirkland's attempt to spare Dawes' feelings is reported to Burgess as a plea to "cut light," and so starts to irritate Burgess to the state where he will break Dawes in compensation for being cheated of Kirkland. The first blow of the cat seems to Kirkland to cut him in half, but draws from Burgess a roar of protest that Dawes is not laying it on properly. The commandant becomes calm only when Kirkland's back has "swollen into a hump, [and] now presented the appearance of a ripe peach which a wilful child has scored with a pin," and when Kirkland, after his yells have died to mere moans, and his back is "like a bloody sponge, while, in the intervals between the lashes, the swollen flesh twitched like a newly-killed bullock," collapses, the "experienced" doctor is quick to order him thrown off, and the commandant equally quick to diagnose the faint as a sham and have him revived with a bucket. The whole scene is punctuated with Warder Troke's impassive counting, and the only people to react in any human fashion to what is happening are North and Dawes. North's anguish is increased by his guilt at having overslept, due to his indulgence in brandy, while Dawes' insubordination leads to his being flogged in his turn until Burgess breaks his spirit. Artistically, the brutality of the

scene is subordinated to its purpose as an illustration of the power of the System, which is embodied in its uncomprehending agents, while it breaks those who are not prepared to be entirely brutalised^z by it.

Just as Kirkland's flogging and death appear more terrible because of the victim's innocence, so the fate of Rufus Dawes is the worse because he is guiltless of the crime for which he has been sentenced, and has accepted his fate rather than betray another.^q Yet essentially Dawes' initial guilt or innocence is irrelevant to the central theme of the novel, which is what the System does to its victims. The increasing punishments with which he is inflicted, from being struck down on the ship by the then Lieutenant Frere to his last punishment on the stretcher, are symbols of the way his spirit is increasingly cramped and confined by each successive act of the generous side of his nature. The double chains with which he is loaded are the symbol of the burden of the System on his free spirit. Moreover, the System finds its answer within his own nature, for he is no romantic hero, but becomes increasingly surly and misanthropic with the continuous thwarting of his hopes.

Against the world of the convicts, a human society which destroys anything fine in humanity, is set the redemptive theme which we have already noted, but this too is strangely perverse in its operation. In the original version Dawes achieves his spiritual freedom by devoting his life

⁹ Dawes' self-^{sacrifice}immolation is more convincingly explained in the revised version but is present in both accounts.

step. daug. her,
his daughter
Dora
to Dorcas, and eventually resolving to sacrifice himself ^{for} to her, but
this section of the novel lacks the conviction of the part which Clarke
retained in the final version. In this, ^{latter version} Dawes' liberation is achieved
through the deaths of North and Dora (now Sylvia). ¹⁰⁹ Yet North
redeems Dawes only because the System has brought him to despair
and actual suicide. His despair certainly enables him to establish a
human contact with Dawes, as well as giving the convict the opportunity
for literal escape and union with Dora, and in this is probably the
justification for his life. Yet, like the lives of Dawes and Dora, North's
life is justified only in ^{his} its death. At least in the final version of the
novel, there appears to be no hope on this earth.

It is significant that the System itself produces nothing to balance
the evil it does. In folklore, the solidarity of the convicts and their
unity against their oppressors provides ^{the concept of mateship, a} some gleams of light in an other-
wise black picture. From this community of the despairing arises the
kind of sardonic humor ^u that can be found in ballads like "Botany Bay" and
"A Convict's Tour of Hell" ¹⁰ ¹¹ Clarke's references to mateship are uniformly

¹⁰ In His Natural Life, Dawes, with Dorcas, daughter of Frere and Dora, is rescued from the storm and escapes to Melbourne, where he starts life again under the name of Tom Crosbie. (Book Five, Chapters 18 and 19, pp. 679-690, Book Six, Chapter 3, pp. 699-708.) In For the Term of his Natural Life, Dawes and Sylvia die together in the storm just after Sylvia has recalled the truth about their past relationships (pp. 599-602).

¹¹ Russell Ward (ed.) The Penguin Book of Australian Ballads, pp. 24 and 38.

sombre. ~~It~~ ←

(The first appears when Frere is asking about Gabbett's attempted escape from Macquarie Harbour. ("How many mates had he?" asked Maurice ... as though a "mate" was something a convict was born with - like a mole, for instance (p. 256)). Not only is the concept devalued by Frere's tone of voice, and by the fact that he uses the answer as a way of determining Gabbett's punishment, but it subsequently transpires^s that Gabbett's whole purpose in taking mates on his escape is to use their bodies for his food. The second reference is equally ironic, for it is used by Rex of Dawes when he is finding it impossible to establish any relationship with him, and is juxtaposed with another reference to Gabbett's escape plans and with the reflection that the common distrust among the convicts prevents any discussion of such projects (p. 448). The word is genuinely used at Norfolk Island when the blind Mooney is encouraging Bland to perform for him a last act of charity, but the particular act is that of killing him to free him from the System (p. 637). The last use of the term is on the lips of Dick Purfoy when, after murdering his father, he calls out["] "That's enough, mates! ... We don't want anyone else["] (p. 884). In each of these examples, then, the word is merely another indication of the way the System perverts even the most elementary of human values, that of fellowship, by leaving it only treacherous and bloodthirsty possibilities.

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¹² These usages have been noted by T. Inglis Moore in 'The Meaning of Mateship', C.B. Christesen, On Native Grounds, pp. 223-31.

Within the bounds of the original version of His Natural Life, Clarke included a sketch of the whole of colonial society. We see both Sydney and Hobart under the convict régime, and learn how people like Frere and Vicker^S~~y~~, and Sarah Purfoy, prosper. During Dick Purfoy's youth we have a picture of a grazing property. The life on the station itself is brutal, and the bushmen Dick meets during his escape to Sydney are little better (pp. 609-622). In the closing books we see life both on the gold^Kfields and in gold^Krush Melbourne, but this life too is characteri^Zzed by violence, by the abuse of authority (p. 721), by tyrants like Frere and by former convicts - Dawes, Jerry Mogford, Dick Purfoy - still potentially subject to their authority. The only Melbourne society we see is that of the hotels - very different from the Dickensian inn of the first book - where people like John Rex and Sarah Purfoy pursue their devious projects.

In short, once Clarke's imagination ^{comes} ~~came~~ to work on its Australian theme, the shape and tone of his novel is changed from the grotesque and adventurous to the sombre and pessimistic. The Rufus Dawes who confidently embarks on a new life in the first book finds, once caught in the System, that all his hopes and aspirations are blighted and that his only hope of redemption can come through the destruction of others. Although the book has moments of natural beauty, these serve only as a contrast with man's inhumanity. More typically, as when Dawes escapes from Macquarie Harbour or when Dick Purfoy escapes from his home, the bush is hostile or indifferent, offering brief freedom to the outcast, but ~~only~~ a freedom which

is deceptive because it leads ^{only} to starvation and cannibalism (pp 277-82, 609-10). Dawes, like Gabbett, is only too happy eventually to escape from the bush even to prison again, while the plans that Dick Purfoy makes in the "solitudes" where "lay all he had known of peace and rest" (p. 610) lead him on to gaol and the gallows.

It is irrelevant to our purpose whether Clarke saw his work as a complete account of life in Australia or whether he was deliberately confining himself to an exploration of the nature of the convict system, just as it is irrelevant to ask whether the picture is historically accurate.¹³ The important fact is that it is the convict element of Australian life which evokes this major work of the imagination, whose gloom stands in such contrast to the conventional Australian legend of resilience, hum^uor and optimism. The book is related to the folk tradition in its hostility to authority, but it betrays no confidence that authority will eventually be destroyed or changed. On the contrary, it suggests that the authority of the most brutal is an almost irresistible force. In his analysis of the logic and operations of amoral authority, Clarke presages

¹³ See L. L. Robson, 'The Historical Basis of For the Term of His Natural Life, ' Australian Literary Studies, Vol. I, No. 2, 1963, 104-19, for a discussion of Clarke's historical accuracy. Robson concludes that there are historical analogues for Clarke's episodes, although his account selects the worst examples rather than the typical. Dawes' life is probably darker than any single history.

such modern authors as Orwell and Solzhenitsyn, but he discovers none of the latter's optimism about the indestructibility of the human spirit, nor even Orwell's hope for human brotherhood. Yet ~~has~~ the same negative qualities which give Clarke's work its imaginative power which ~~inform~~ ^{that give shape to} the most important fictional accounts of the Australian experience over the succeeding generations.