

RESPONSES TO THE OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN FOLKLORE

(1) IN PURSUIT OF THE BUNYIP: AUSTRALIAN FOLKLORE COMES OF AGE, Seal, Graham and Gwenda Beed Davey, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1993, xvii, 381pp, ISBN 0 19 553057 8. RRP, \$49.95

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In a recent issue of this journal, I had the opportunity of giving an outsider's view of *Folklife: our living heritage*, the Report the Committee of Inquiry into Folklife in Australia, published in 1987. My enthusiastic reaction to the Report was tempered by a heartfelt concern that the farsighted and positive recommendations of the Inquiry might not be implemented. Some six years after the publication of the Report, the deafening silence emanating from both the political and the academic arena confirms the worst fears of all those who saw the Inquiry as a unique initiative to encourage the development of the study and the performance of Australian folklore and folklife. The Report itself remains virtually unknown outside Australia, despite its comprehensive overview of the wide-ranging subject, and its relevance as a model for stimulating similar initiatives elsewhere in the English-speaking world. This is all the more regrettable in that the opportunity for Australia to spearhead such developments appears to have been lost. However, to present this worst case scenario, no doubt deriving in part from my own discouraging experience of championing folklore/folklife studies in England, would be unduly pessimistic.

Fortunately, there is light at the end of the tunnel, and the light is not that of an incoming train! The Report certainly generated interest and raised the awareness of Australian folklore and folklife both nationally and internationally. The Australian Folk Trust, funded by the Australia Council, continues to play a major role in the promotion of the traditional heritage. Its status and importance are not to be underestimated: no such national co-ordinating and funding institution exists in England. Equally significant is the Trust's establishment in 1990 of the Australian Folklife Centre in Canberra, the sole example of implementing one of the major recommendations of the Report. Assuming the provision of appropriate financial support, the Centre has considerable potential for encouraging the achievement of other goals set out in summary form in the Report. To fulfil this role, however, it will need the co-operation of other institutions, organisations and individuals nationwide, acting as a focal point for many diverse and widely dispersed interests - no easy task.

Within Australia at least, then, there are grounds for some optimism in the promotion of these aspects of the national heritage. But what does the outside world know about this heritage? True, there are a number of informative publications, especially in recent years, including general and specialised studies, bibliographies and indexes. With the notable exception of Grabam Seal's, *The Hidden Culture: Folklore in Australian Society* (1989), however, an overview of the whole field is lacking. What is needed is a introductory handbook which can act as a basic reference work, not only for those inside the culture but also for anyone else wishing to learn about all the major aspects of Australia's traditional culture. Pathologically cynical about wishfulfilment, I

was therefore both surprised and delighted to hear about the publication of *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*.

When my copy arrived - handsomely bound in racing green with a section of the magnificent Westbury quilt emblazoned on the front cover and an intriguing collage of photographs on the back - I immediately sat down and read the Preface. Not only is this book an Australian 'first', it is a first for folklore studies anywhere in the world, and doubly welcome for that reason alone. The Preface makes clear that it is not the purpose of the *Companion* 'to provide even a representative sampling of the diversity of Australian folklore', but it

attempts to draw together the various threads of what is known' and 'tracks the history of the development of folklore studies in this country, identifying significant individuals, institutions, events and movements that have both shaped and been shaped by involvement - whether scholarly, performing, conserving, or simply consuming - with the broad field of Australian folklore.

Notwithstanding the caveats, this is a tall order by any standards, especially within 381 beautifully printed double-column pages.

Appetite whetted, I read on, and was more than impressed by the editors' brief Introduction (9 pages) which not only answers its subtitle's perennial question, 'What is Folklore?' very effectively, but also sets Australian tradition in its international context. The temptation of sample some of the entries in the main body of the work then became irresistible: there is something about an alphabetical encyclopaedic arrangement of entries, redolent of the old-style self-educators, that tempts exploration and soon becomes compulsive. Fortuitously, the first alphabetical entry is *Aborigine folklore in central Australia*, by Philip Batty, which sets the tone for the whole work in its accessible encapsulation of a wealth of information. A briefer piece on *Aboriginal folklore* follows, and this introduces a crucial additional dimension - in this case a balanced discussion of contentious issues of the definition and use of the term *folklore* with respect to both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations - the first of many sensitive and informed commentaries which bring the reader into close contact with the more fundamental social and cultural issues underlying many of the traditions discussed throughout the book.

For non-Australians in particular, these attitudinal insights are invaluable; they are interpretative in the best sense of the term. This entry also introduces the very helpful system of cross-references which assists the reader to locate other related articles and acts as a mini-thesaurus in bringing together the various entries which are in some way thematically linked. Inevitably, using the cross-references led me further and further into the welcoming and well-constructed labyrinth, and I soon became so absorbed that I abandoned my normal work schedule and devoted the rest of the day, and much of the next, to the pleasures of self-education. And there is certainly a great deal to learn from these pages, for insider and outsider alike. The easy, economical style is deceptive in that a vast amount of data is readily absorbed with little effort, aided by the lively nature of the writing and the fascinating variety of the material itself. Even the casual browser will find individual entries absorbing and will wish to read on, to learn not only about the

folklore and folklife of Australia but also to benefit from the well-informed articles on major and minor folklore genres which set the traditions in the international perspective of current practice and scholarship. It is to these substantial entries, contributed by scholars and writers eminent in their respective fields, that readers will increasingly turn as they become familiar with this volume. Some of these contributions are outstanding - classics in their own right - including several of those specifically attributed to the editors.

Looking first at language as a major genre, for example, we find an excellent overview under the general heading *Folk Speech* ('a collective term describing a wide variety of speech forms, most of which stand in an unofficial, informal, exclusive or non-respectable relationship to standard or respectable language') and an equally useful survey under *Folk speech: community languages*. The entry on *Koorie languages and folk speech* by Eve Fesl reveals that there were an estimated 230 distinct Aboriginal languages, with up to 600 dialects, in Australia before the British arrived. From 1988, the bicentennial year of colonisation, the label 'Aborigine' was discarded in favour of 'Korrie', meaning 'our people' when referring to these languages and dialects. It comes as a surprise, at least to the non-Australian reader, to discover that approximately 100 non-Aboriginal languages other than English are in daily use in Australia, and that over thirty languages other than English are examined in secondary schools. 'Ethnic and multilingual radio stations broadcast in over fifty languages', and words in various languages have developed grammatically and semantically to reflect their new environment. For some bilingual speakers, certain trigger words also tend to prompt a switch from one language to another, as in 'Ze zijn gedeltelijk waitress 'n and the others are staff' where a switch is triggered from Dutch to English. Bilingualism is of course a natural source of humour, especially through puns, ambiguity and mistranslation.

W.S. Ramson's seminal article on *Folk speech: English language* reveals the heterogeneous nature of the origins of the wordstock and the special development of words in a new geographical environment, characteristic of other regions where English has been transplanted and especially those such as New Zealand and Newfoundland, where, as in Australia, the early settlements were scattered round the coastal perimeter. Feeling very much like a 'new chum' (newly arrived convict) from the '(c)old country' or 'Old Dart' (England), I extended my limited vocabulary ('cobber', 'digger', 'dingo', 'jumbuck', 'tucker' etc.) to include such terms as 'bush experience', 'back blocks' (remote land etc.), 'battler' (dogged struggler), 'soak' (pool of rainwater - an adaptation of the British-English regional dialect word), 'bludger' (idler, loafer, etc. - as opposed to a 'battler'), 'larrikin' (dissident), and 'Billjim' (soldier, Australian equivalent of 'Tommy Atkins'), among many others.

This entry is complemented by J S Ryan's equally fascinating piece on *Names*, including indigenous naming practices, especially the generation of numerous distinctive appellations and nicknames, for both places and people. Mythical placenames such as '(the) Never Never (unsettled areas in northern Australia), 'Woop Woop' and 'Snake Gully' ('the home of the most rustic of folk'), 'Oodnagalabbi' and the more recent (1953-) 'Bullamakanka', and such rhyming catch phrases as 'Things are crook in Tallarook' and 'Got the arse at Bulli Pass' suggest that further investigation of local blason populaire would reveal other examples. This tradition clearly extends to designatory and derogatory personal names, as well as to the names of football clubs and

cricket grounds. Nicknames for politicians - 'pig iron Bob' (R.G. Menzies), 'Yellow cake Bob' and 'silver Bodgie' (R.J. Hawke) are complemented by a wealth of soubriquets applied to individuals, but which have only a restricted currency. More common are generics such as 'Blue(y)' (red-haired person), 'Chiller' (Charles), and forms with the suffix -o: 'Jimmo', 'Tommo', 'Johnno', 'Freddo', 'Sallo', 'Betto'. J.S. Ryan adds: 'More generally nicknaming has developed into a fascinating branch of linguistic and folkloric inventiveness, embellishing social history, embracing character assessment and assassination, combining physical description and achievement, and always employing humour and ingenuity.'

Other aspects of traditional communication, including graffiti and non-verbal forms, have shorter entries, and language also features in such major articles as those on *Humour* and *Children's folklore*. This latter genre, as one would expect, provides one of the most important major articles. The work of Gwenda Beed Davey (who writes this entry), June Factor, Wendy Lowenstein, Dorothy Howard and the late Ian Turner, among others, is well known internationally, and is of course also attested to by The Australian Children's Folklore Collection at the University of Melbourne, currently managed by one of its co-founders, June Factor. The *Children's folklore* article includes examples of traditional sayings, put-offs (though this term is not mentioned) and other verbal social controls, and rightly suggests that this neglected field is a potentially fruitful one for further investigation. Other linguistic forms such as proverbs, and riddles, for example, are conspicuously under-represented in the volume as a whole, although there are a few examples scattered through various entries, including proverbial usage under the *Folklore about children* section of *Children's folklore*. Gwenda Beed Davey also contributes a first-rate six page article on *Nursery rhymes* - a tradition still alive and well in Australia. Considerable care is again taken to set this material in its wider English-language context, and many crucial questions are raised about the use, function and transmission of such rhymes, and the development of the repertoire over time. The writer notes, for example, that 'Kookaburra' - word and music written in the 1920s by Miss Marion Sinclair - is so popular as to claim at least the putative status of a 'traditional' rhyme:

Kookaburra sits in an old gum tree,
Merry merry King of the bush is he;
Laugh, kookaburra, laugh, kookaburra,
Gay your life must be.

One of the most extensive (fourteen pages) and certainly among the most fascinating contributions to the volume as a whole is Hazel S. Hall's brilliant analysis of *Musical and poetic characteristics of children's folklore*. She investigates intonation, vocal and choral characteristics, tonal repetition, rhythms, melodic motifs, tonal clusters, rhetorical devices and thematic material in childlore and exemplifies these features in fifteen sample transcriptions. So much of what I struggle inadequately to say on these subjects is set out here that I would willingly have bought the book for this article alone. As it is, I have only my own ignorance to blame for knowing so little of this writer's work, and can now look forward to reading more of it, guided by the extensive references which conclude the entry.

The narrative tradition is very fully represented in the *Companion*. The joint article by J.S. Ryan and Graham Seal on *Folktales* ranges from certain aspects of

Aboriginal lore (but importantly excluding the secret-sacred myths which have their own religious significance) to non-Aboriginal stories, including wonder tales. In the folktale category, for example, it is interesting to note that Joseph Jacobs in 1890 published versions of 'Jack and the Beanstalk' and 'Henny-Penny', heard in his Australian childhood. The Aarne-Thompson Type Index, and Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* are used to classify the stories, which are seen to encompass the full range of motifs identified in European folktales. Perhaps it would have been more appropriate to use the cover term *folk narrative* for this article, since it gives an overview of all traditional stories, including tall tales and legends. The discussion continues, however, in the cross-referenced entries on *Legends*, *Modern Legends*, *Narrative literature and folklore*, *Folk heroes and heroines*, *Sporting Folklore*, *Occupational folklore*, *Children's folklore*, and *Folk belief*. Here the alphabetical format not only allows the reader to identify each sub-genre and related topic area, but also demonstrates the pervasiveness of narrative in many diverse aspects of the cultural tradition.

The article on *Legends* includes numerous names and references redolent of the indigenous culture, though one might well question that the genre is best defined, according to the *OED*, as 'an unauthentic or non-historical story, especially one handed down by tradition from early times and popularly regarded as historical'. While this might apply to certain legends, notably those of long standing which have often achieved printed status, it is less true of the contemporary or modern legend, the oral transmission of which aims at plausibility and which may well be grounded in reality, however obliquely, Gwenda Beed Davey's succinct entry under *Modern Legends* also underlines this point when she says, 'Folklorists today are less willing than formerly to reject out of hand any suggestion that a particular legend may have originated in a true event.' Her discussion introduces the genre in its international context, but notes that few Australian examples have so far been identified, though Amanda Bishop's story, 'The Gucci Kangaroo' seems to fit the pattern. However, my colleague Brian Donaghey, a Bananalander exiled in Sheffield for many years, first drew attention as long ago as 1978 to a version of the 'pet chow' legend by James Brunton Stephens (1835-1902), who was known as 'the Queensland poet'. The discovery led to the fruitful search for early examples of this and other 'modern' legends, especially as manifested in literature. Incidentally, no entry for Stephens is to be found in the *Companion*. A cross-reference to *Folk poetry* might have been expected at some point in the entries on narrative, and perhaps also to *Humour, folk*, which itself has a cross-reference to *Modern legends* and to *Bawdry* - a not infrequent characteristic of many stories in every culture, including Australian, as the entry shows. Graham Seal's article on traditional humour is a model of compression which every folklorist should read and emulate. Among other things, it demonstrates that humour is a vital element of traditional culture which scholars neglect at their peril.

All those with an interest in the interface between the oral tradition and literature will relish the groundbreaking article by Joan Newman under the heading *Narrative literature and folklore*. Taking the work of Ong, Barthes and Elizabeth Fine as her starting point, she argues forcefully and convincingly for the recognition of the importance of folklore in literature and notes that 'Folklore is a rich plundering ground for the creative writer', adding that 'folkloric practices and expression pervade nearly all contemporary narratives. It is frequently those small incidents and expressions which give rise to feelings of recognition on the part of the reader.'

Enthusiasts involved in the (largely urban, middle class?) revival of storytelling in England will be interested to know that this is not a new idea. The entry on *Storytelling guilds of Australia* reveals that the guilds began in Melbourne in 1978 and have since expanded to five of the Territories. As in England, they aim to promote storytelling in the community, and also produce a newsletter and directory.

In a somewhat different sphere, discussion of the socio-political aspects of culture reflected in certain narrative genres is developed in Michael Roe's challenging and excellently referenced piece on *The Australian Legend*, which plunges full tilt into the debate originally generated by Russel Ward's famous book with that title, published in 1958. As a historian (see the entry under his name), Russel Ward offered an analysis of the mystique of Australian national identity but he drew on a wide range of sources, including popular literature, song and anecdote. His thesis has been strongly challenged from several different perspectives, not least from the standpoint of urbanisation. Michael Roe concludes that *The Australian Legend* 'remains a vital and vitalizing element in Australian historiography', but that 'The argument must continue.'

Traditional music and dance receive considerable attention in the volume, though drama is singularly absent, despite occasional correspondence I have received which suggests that such 'dramatic actions' as 'The Derby Ram' are still remembered, if not performed, in Australia; the song of that name, and its attendant 'ritual' are, however, discussed in the entry on *Folk song*. It was from such hints and small beginnings that Herbert Halpert and I were able to track down the remnants of English and Irish traditional drama in Newfoundland. It is indeed unlikely that similar traditions were not carried to the antipodes: is this perhaps a case of seek and ye shall find ...?

Quite apart from the article on the musical aspects of childlore already commented on, the *Companion* includes an extensive and thought-provoking entry by Jill Stubington on the debate concerning *Folk music in Australia*. The debate centres on the use and definition of the term 'folk music', with traditionalists and revivalists occupying rival camps. The writer argues for a holistic view of the musical life of the folk clubs, which includes the collecting of material for publication and performance. She notes that recordings 'can encourage transmission by the same oral means which the folklorists have used as a defining feature of folk music', but that they are 'the means by which music has become a commodity', allowing 'the development of a 'music industry', depersonalized and exploitive, the antithesis of folk music club values.'

Cross-references take the reader to entries on *Country music [in Australia]*, *Folk song*, and *Musical instruments*. The first of these by Monika Allan, documents the development of the genre in the second half of this century, noting the strong ties with its American roots but adding that its largely acoustic performance tradition has been 'grafted on to the Australian experience in the form of the bush ballad'. The very substantial country music movement, celebrated annually at the Tamworth Festival, is nevertheless 'generally ignored by the mainstream media', and in recent years country music and folk music have become distanced from each other. The major article on *Folk Song* by Edgar Waters, however, amply illustrates the wealth of material in a singing tradition derived primarily from British and Ireland, and augmented by ballads on Australian subjects, notably in the nineteenth century. These latter include songs about

bushrangers such as Jack Donohoe, ballads produced by bush workers, among whom there was a tradition of recitation as well as singing. Everyone will also be enlightened about the history and provenance of 'Waltzing Matilda' by reading Graham Seal's separate entry on the song. Systematic field recording began only in the 1950s, pioneered by John Meredith and others. Aboriginal songs in English have also been recorded, mainly in the 1980s. A cross-reference leads to Philip Butters' article on *Broadside ballads* - again an admirable encapsulation which locates the Australian tradition in its international context. Many British and Irish ballads were localised, and most of the broadsides composed in Australia differ significantly from those typical of the British Isles. On a related theme, which links ballad with narrative and history, Keith McKenry writes most informatively on *Folk poetry and recitation*. Although 'many Australians find rhyming verse an accessible and satisfying medium of self-expression', such writers are not normally granted the status of 'folk poets'. We are brought into contact here with the names and writings of such bush poets as A.B. ('Banjo') Patterson and Henry Lawson (both of whom merit individual entries elsewhere in the volume), and also the verse sketches of C.J. Dennis, entitled 'The Sentimental Bloke'. Poetry of the two world wars is then discussed, and the piece ends with a perceptive account of recitation in Australian popular culture. Incidentally, a particular strength of the volume as a whole is its awareness of the interface between traditional and popular culture and of the operation and function of folklore in contemporary life. Central to this discussion is Graeme Smith's summary analysis under *Popular culture and folklore* - one of the finest pieces in the book. The theme is taken up in such entries as *Folk commerce*, *Reprographic folklore*, *Sporting folklore*, *Folk and popular art*, *Graffiti*, *Chain letters*, *Modern Legends*, *Occupational folklore*, *Radio and television programmes*, and *Women and folklore* - the latter perhaps not extensive enough to take full account of the central role of women in culture and in the transmission of tradition.

Returning for a moment to music and dance, it is interesting to have an Australian perspective on the work of A.L. Lloyd, which suggests that the significance of his research and collecting in Australia is controversial. On the more practical side, however, perhaps the most extensive and absorbing article in the *Companion* is that on *Musical instruments* by Peter Ellis, which extends to some fifteen pages. Following an introductory overview, he considers stringed instruments, the whistle and flute group, free-reed instruments ('squeezebox' and mouth organ), and percussion. Details of the variety of instruments and the skills required to play them make fascinating reading. In the bush, such home-made instruments as the kerosene-tin dulcimer, bow harp, saucepan banjo and wall fiddle were popular. As for *Dance*, Shirley Andrews traces its history from the ancient Aboriginal culture, through social dancing and the dance tradition in the bush to the revival in the mid-twentieth century. She also contributes a separate entry on *Bush dance* - something of a misnomer, she notes, since it originated in the cities during the 1950s revival. Helen O'Shea re-emphasises the overwhelming popularity of dances as a social recreation in *Country halls*, which were themselves the focal point of rural community life, as was also true of similar halls and 'lodges' in Newfoundland.

Material culture, arts and crafts are well represented in the volume. Of particular interest are Frank Campbell's detailed and well-illustrated account of vernacular architecture in *The Australian house*, Margaret Rolfe's discussion of *Patchwork quilts* (also illustrated) and Gwenda Beed Davey's graphic snapshot of *Foodways* - 'as Australian as Vegemite!'. These insights into traditional life are a stepping stone to penetrating

more deeply into the culture and learning about such characters as *Crooked Mick*, *Dad and Dave*, *Fisher's Ghost*, *Frank the Poet*, and of course *Ned Kelly* (the definitive account, by Graham Seal). The true cognoscente will then wish to become familiar with *Leaf playing*, the *Tantanoola Tiger*, *Two-Up*, and *Wagga rugs*. Biographical information on the leading figures in Australian folklore studies, past and present, is there for the taking, along with details of the major archives, repositories, and societies concerned with the subject. In addition to the numerous references in the main body of the work, a useful bibliographical guide is included as an appendix. A generous number of excellent photographs and other illustrations add a vibrant visual dimension to the volume.

It is perhaps when one comes to look at aspects of custom and belief that, as might be expected, there seems to be less range and variety than the British Isles, especially when considering traditions transplanted from 'the old country'. The entry on *Customs and Folk belief* are useful starting points, augmented by the article on *Festivals* and such photographs as that of a well-dressing at Balga on p.305. It soon becomes clear, however, that in the case of calendar customs, for example, this is an area of tradition where the many different ethnic cultures of Australia really come into their own. An overview of these multicultural aspects is presented in J. Zubrzycki's article on *Ethnic folk heritage*, and the reader is then referred to individual contributions on Chinese, German and Greek-Australian folklore. The photographs on pages 207-210 illustrate several of the calendar customs practised by various ethnic groups - along with a picture of an Anzac Day procession, which augments Graham Seal's interesting piece on *Wartime Folklore*.

In the Preface, the editors suggest that few other countries need a work of this kind. I strongly disagree. Australia has led the way, and other cultures should undoubtedly follow. Why not a *Companion* to New Zealand or Canadian folklore and, dare one say it, standards for others to emulate. Of course, those from within the culture will have their own views, and perhaps reservations, about this or that aspect of the publication, and particularly about what should or should not be included. A few sharp-eyed readers may spot the very occasional minor error (Hugh Anderson becomes related to Hans Christian (p.354), and the q.v. to Red Rooster Press in his biographical entry leads to an empty coop - but things like that happen to reviews editors!). For the outsider, however, this volume is highly educative - a mine of elegantly expressed information in admirably encapsulated form. Like the *Overland* magazine, its motto could well be 'Temper democratic, bias Australian'.

It is a daunting and ultimately impossible task to capture all the shifting facets of cultural tradition at one point in time. Like the bunyip, it is elusive and changes its form and function as the culture moves on, reshaping itself to adapt to new circumstances and needs. As J.S. Ryan describes it in his fascinating vignette, the bunyip has come to be 'used figuratively to refer to anything chimerical or well-nigh impossible of attainment'. The editors of this *Companion*, if not capturing the mythical creature, have pursued it magnificently: everyone with an interest in folklore will find this volume indispensable.

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The folklore and traditional heritage of a culture are an essential part of its history - a part which is created and transmitted by the people - by individual men.

women and children: it is *their* history. When Frank the Poet asked, 'Must a man be remembered at all?', Henry the Forger responded on behalf of us all:

'That goes without saying', replied Harry. 'Tis a poor soul indeed who leaves no signature on history when he departs ... a symbol to keep his name in the minds of men, as long as the caprice of Fate decrees.

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Bill Wannan

When the word 'folklore' is mentioned my mind travels back to the last years of what was once called the Great War, and to the five or so years which immediately followed it. Australia was then living in the afterglow of the frontier period. The bullock and horse teams, the paddle-steamers, the folk medicines, the 'recitation nights' in the Mechanics Hall, were still there, though headed for oblivion.

There was a great deal wrong with the rural communities of which my own, in Gippsland, was a typical example. The blacksmith, the shearer, the farrier, the parson, the doctor, the house-builder and so on, were respected citizens. The Aborigines, the wandering tinkers and Gypsies, the Chinese laundrymen and market-gardeners, the itinerant hawkers, the circus troupes, ('Catholic dogs / jump like frogs / in a pool of water' -- and the same for 'Proddy dogs'), republican sentiments, the rights and wrongs of the Russian Revolution, stirred violent passions. The one thing that brought all these sections together in a tenuous unity was a shared folklore and a sense of pride in their Australian nationality.

Those were years of widespread community discussion and debate, before television and video arrived to shatter and re-make the bases and structures of our social mores. Public education was expanding, and so were the forerunners of the Workers' Educational Association movement. A vast amount of the literature and periodical writing of the day was concerned with social issues. I remember weeping over a short sketch in one of my father's books, (I have it with me still), called 'Stinker', by Joice M. Nankivell. It told of a little aboriginal boy, taken from his mother, who was