As Laurie Hergenhan noted in the introduction to the 1993 edition of *Unnatural Lives*, his original aim ‘was basically an historicist one: to explore changes and continuities of representation and how these in turn were shaped by changes in society and literary production’ (Hergenhan xii). I want to examine some of the major adaptations of Marcus Clarke's novel from a similar historicist perspective, focussing on changes in the representation of the novel’s characters, themes and plot over the hundred year period. Some of these reflect changes in society, especially changes in attitudes to the convict system, to women, to sexuality and the body. Some reflect the different opportunities offered by different modes of production: nineteenth-century stage melodrama, early twentieth-century silent film, the television mini-series and comic strip of the 1980s. Some of these changes are quite the opposite of what one might have expected, with the earlier versions often being franker than the later ones.

*His Natural Life* first appeared before the public in monthly serialised episodes in the Melbourne popular fiction magazine *Australian Journal* between 1870 and 1872. For most of this time it was the leading item and so each episode featured a woodcut illustration of scenes and characters from the novel. Although this much longer serial version of the novel has been reprinted several times, the original illustrations have not been reproduced. While as crude as most cheap magazine illustrations of this period, they are interesting both for what is depicted and what is not. Apart from the illustration for December 1870, which depicts a foppish Rev. Meekin lecturing a convict — presumably Rufus Dawes — who is breaking stones, there is no attempt to depict convicts at work, let alone being punished. The illustrations for the episodes of June and July 1870, dealing with the plotting of the mutiny and the convict breakout on board the *Malabar*, show some appropriately brutish convicts, one of whom is presumably Gabbett. With this exception there is no attempt to stereotype the characters as either good or bad through the depiction of their physical features. Maurice Frere, for example, is shown in the illustration for August 1870 as a good-looking young man. One has to wait for the 1982 TV mini-series to again find a handsome Maurice. Stage melodrama relied heavily on visual cues — through physiognomy, make-up and costume — to alert audiences to a character's nature, and early films and comic strips followed suit.

Apart from the TV series, all adaptations of *His Natural Life* discussed here are adaptations of the shorter, 1874, version of the novel. All, however, apart from the comic book, contrive a happy ending more in the spirit of the 1870-72 serial if not its substance. In neither version did Clarke contemplate anything more than a spiritual union of Dawes and Sylvia (originally Dora). He anticipated a stage version of the novel with some dismay, knowing that stage melodrama usually required a happy ending in which the hero and heroine became one in flesh as well as spirit. Many of the difficulties with any adaptation arise from the need to make concrete and specific things that in the original novel are abstract and general. Embodying characters raises particular difficulties for the representation of the type of idealised love Clarke depicts between Dawes and Sylvia. Given the disparity in their ages it is possible in the novel to see this love in terms of a parent/child or, at least, brother/sister relationship. It is much less possible to do this in a visual representation, even if Sylvia is not heavily sexualised. Ironically the 1986 version comic strip, the only one to retain the 1874 ending where Dawes and Sylvia drown in each other's arms, precedes this by a panel depicting Sylvia in a very revealing, and very non-1870s, body-clinging negligee. In the 1927 film Sylvia's nightgown is much more historically correct and she even has the good sense to put on her dressing gown when first woken by buckets of water coming into her cabin. But, in this version, she is going to be allowed to survive. The *Australian Journal* version of this scene (October 1871) shows Dora even more sensibly —
and perhaps more historically accurately — still in her day dress. Clarke, of course, did not have to worry about what Sylvia was wearing when the ship went down — and certainly does not bother to tell us.

Ian McLaren’s Marcus Clarke bibliography lists ten different stage adaptations of the novel, performed mainly in Australia, but also in England and the USA, between 1886 and 1917 (McLaren 272-75). Earlier in his bibliography, he also lists ‘FOR THE TERM OF HIS NATURAL LIFE — DRAMA 1886’, nothing:

Published in August 1886 in an edition of 50 copies, at one shilling a copy. Entered for copyright at British Museum on 17 November 1886. This is not an acting edition, but a precis of the original Robertson first edition, supposed to be adapted by Hamilton Mackinnon and Marian Clarke, and undertaken solely for the purpose of protecting copyright. (27)

But by August 1886 two different adaptations of the novel were already playing in Australia. George Leitch’s His Natural Life had been premiered at the Theatre Royal, Brisbane, on 26 April 1886 and subsequently played in Adelaide and Melbourne before opening at the Theatre Royal, Sydney, on 14 August 1886. Unfortunately for Leitch, another version of His Natural Life had been given to Sydney audiences in June 1886. This, written by Thomas Walker for Alfred Dampier’s company, was to prove the most successful of the stage adaptations, being regularly revived by Dampier until 1901.

Scripts for both versions survive in the Mitchell Library, allowing an unusual insight into audience taste and providing a salutary caution against making too many assumptions of influence on the basis of often scanty evidence. If these scripts were not extant, one might have been tempted to take the Bentley precis as the model for how the novel might have been presented to an 1886 theatre audience. The precis is divided into a prologue and four acts, with the prologue opening in England in 1827 and the remainder set in Van Diemen’s Land from 1833-1843. The action follows that of the novel fairly closely, though leaving out scenes that would seemingly have been the more difficult to stage. So the prologue closes with Richard Devine’s capture and taking on of the identity of Rufus Dawes. Act 1 opens with Sylvia, Mrs Vickers and Maurice Frere marooned at Hell’s Gates where they are joined by Rufus Dawes — all the Malabar and earlier Macquarie Harbour episodes are omitted. Act 2 opens in Hobart five years later; Acts 3 and 4 take place at Port Arthur, a further five years on. Again the main technique is one of omission — episodes involving Sylvia, North, Dawes and Frere are reproduced fairly faithfully but the blowhole episode, Rex’s impersonation of Richard Devine and the final storm scene are omitted. So are any traces of what would seem to twentieth-century eyes the most controversial and taboo material — the cannibal episodes, North’s alcoholism and loss of faith, Kirkland’s rape by Gabbett. A happy ending is achieved by what, again by twentieth-century standards, are the impossible coincidences of melodrama. North brings Sylvia to Dawes’ prison cell, after having told her Dawes’ story. This, one assumes, has been sufficient for her to recover her memory: ‘Amid tears Sylvia confesses her love for Dawes, and her hatred for her husband now she knows all’ (Clarke 13). Meanwhile Sarah Purfoy has smuggled in a gun for Rex, concealed in a bible. He uses it to kill Frere and then confesses to the murder of Lord Bellasis. After North has duly confessed to the robbery:

Major Vickers is now satisfied, and passes Sylvia to Dawes — united to be parted only by death; and North falls on his knees exclaiming, ‘I’ve saved him — I’ve saved him!’ (Curtain)

(14)

The two surviving scripts of the actual 1886 productions are, however, remarkably different both from each other and from the precis. One of several versions of the Leitch adaptation, now in the Leitch papers in the Mitchell Library, does end with a similar gesture on the part of North:

Forgive me, this tardy atonement cannot undo the past, but it can give you freedom, love, happiness! Bring hither the chains that have maimed his innocent hands, and place them here on mine!

(Creeps toward Rup.) Curtain.

Leitch added a note:

Feeling an objection to end the piece with such gloomy surroundings, I arranged another short act to follow this. The Scene same as Act 1 Sc.1 (or Gardens attached to the Old Home)
wherein occurred the Scene now used in Act 5, Sc.1 ... But we found the end of the fifth act so strong that we made the finale there.

Apart from this fifth act, however, Leitch's adaptation is remarkable for how little of the convict experience of the novel is presented on stage. His hero is ennobled and in love with Sylvia almost from the start — which may explain why his name is changed to the more genteel 'Rupert Dawes'. Leitch also avoids two of the major difficulties for any adaptation of *His Natural Life*, especially for the stage — the twenty years covered and the resulting change in Sylvia from child to woman — by compressing the time span into three years, with Sylvia already an adult on board the *Malabar*. The role of Rev. Meekin — played by Leitch himself — is considerably expanded to provide much of the comic business. He is present from the first scene at Sir Richard Devine's house in Hampstead where he wears a lady's boa and muff to protect him from the cold weather. The cross-dressing motif continues in Act 3 where Meekin is also marooned with the lovers, Mrs Vickers and Frere: 'He has on Dawes' convict trousers, ragged shirt, some large palm leaves round his neck, seaweed round his waist. Stick with some shorter leaves fastened to it which he uses as a parasol.' Leitch also makes an effective use of costume here to suggest Clarke's point about natural authority: Dawes wears Dr Pine's clothes and Frere has on Dawes' convict jacket and cap.

Another very effective use of stagecraft is apparent in the climactic scene where Sylvia recovers her memory. As in the novel, she has written 'Good Mr Dawes' in the sand during the island scene. In Act 5, at Port Arthur, Dawes is being tortured on the stretcher. Frere, attempting to increase the torment, writes 'Good Mr Dawes' on the stones with a smoking brand. This is a classic villain's overreaching gesture, since when Sylvia sees the words all becomes clear to her.

While the only reference to cannibalism occurs in Act 2 in a brief comic episode with the convicts — Crow refers to 'old Gabby' as having 'cooked and eaten his pal' — Leitch's adaptation is the only one I have seen which attempts to deal with the novel's homosexual content. In one version of Act 4, Scene 3, Kirkland complains to North of what has happened to him in the long dormitory and Gabbett, as in the novel, calls Kirkland 'Miss Nancy'. Subsequently Meekin is locked in the dormitory by mistake and, it is revealed, almost suffers Kirkland's fate: he is, of course, saved by Dawes. Since Adrian Kiernander's research suggests that Leitch was himself homosexual, his inclusion of this material is less surprising though still remarkable for its period as well as something attempted by no other adaptation of the novel (Kiernander 64).

While Leitch's version of the novel was dramatically superior, as recognised by contemporary reviewers, it was Dampier's which attracted contemporary audiences. Leitch may have offered an ennobled Dawes and a finely comic Meekin but Dampier offered more broadly comical convicts and a cannibal on the rampage. As the *Bulletin* noted sarcastically on 12 June 1886, 'Gabbett … is of a cannibalistic turn, and it would add greatly to the success of the drama if he would eat his victims close to the footlights, but perhaps such an assignment would thin out the company too fast' (5). Like the Bentley precis, the Dampier version omits all the *Malabar* episodes, opening Act 1 at Sarah Island with the comical convict gang and a much more broadly comic Meekin. As in the Leitch version, he is one of the marooned party who are, subsequently, joined by the convicts when their ship is wrecked. Gabbett gets very hungry, chases Meekin with an axe and eventually kills Mrs Vickers. It is this, in the Dampier version, which causes Sylvia to lose her memory. Seeing Gabbett again at the end of the play allows her to recover it. Gabbett also conveniently kills Frere though the Dampier finale does not fling Sylvia and Dawes into each other's arms in the way that most other adaptations do.

To a modern reader this comical treatment of cannibalism is very hard to take, though it was clearly one of the main things that gave Dampier's version the popular edge on Leitch's. The comical treatment of the convicts — and their much greater prominence in Dampier's version — also makes one pause before concluding that Australians at this period wished to forget their convict heritage. One other significant feature of Dampier's version is the relative lack of prominence given to Rufus Dawes, the ostensible hero of the novel. One reason for this is that Dampier himself played the Rev. North. Just as the Rev. Meekin's role was considerably expanded in Leitch's version, so North is much more prominent in Dampier's version than in any other adaptation of the novel. North is allocated most of the end-of-act curtain speeches, is allowed to knock down the villain and is even given a soliloquy in which to lament his addiction to brandy. All the more recent adaptations play down North's drinking problem, while in Leitch's version North has cancer of the stomach and drinks brandy for medical purposes only.
In the treatment of two of the apparently most controversial areas of the novel then, the rape of Kirkland and North's alcoholism, the 1886 stage adaptations are much more faithful to the novel than subsequent twentieth-century ones. The 1927 silent film does, of course, include Gabbett's cannibal chase of the Crow through the bush, one of its most graphic episodes. In keeping with the development of the early film industry in Australia and its heavy reliance on stage melodrama for its stories, silent film versions of *His Natural Life* were made in 1908 and 1911. The pioneer director Raymond Longford was keen to make another and had already written a script when Union-Australasia decided to bring in the Americans. The American director Norman Dawn was entrusted with the film and American actors engaged for most leading parts. It appears that Dawn did not use a shooting script but filmed with a copy of the novel beside him (Tulloch 323). The result was a film which appears to remain very faithful to the novel but is extremely hard to follow for anyone who has not read it. This is not made any easier by the decision to use the same actor (George Fisher) as both Dawes and Rex, presumably to make Rex's impersonation of Richard Devine more plausible. In addition, Dawn decided to employ a child actor as Sylvia only in the *Malabar* scenes, with Eva Novak given the role from the Macquarie Harbour period onwards. This has the effect of considerably sexualising her relationship with Dawes on the island, even more perhaps than in Leitch's version, where Sylvia is an adult throughout.

Changing attitudes to the convict system are seen in the much clearer presentation of Dawes as the long-suffering convict victim and the almost complete absence of any comic material. One scene where Meekin is tossed into a trough of water survives in part — the incomplete state of the film is particularly frustrating at this point. Compared to the melodramas, there is a much greater concentration on presenting the horrors of the convict system, with some nicely ironic cross-cutting between the officers feasting on plenty and Dawes starving on Grummet Rock. Although Gabbett is depicted as a monster, Maurice Frere is the real villain and, as in Dampier's melodrama, Gabbett is given the task of killing Frere at the end. Here, too, Dawn engages in some interesting cross-cutting between the convicts' escape and the ship being buffeted by the storm which adds tension and atmosphere to both. Frere perishes but Sylvia and Dawes are safe together on a raft as 'The End' appears on the screen.

If the 1927 film was, apart from those final scenes, one of the most faithful of all attempts to adapt Clarke's novel, the 1982 mini-series was one of the least. While retaining more emphasis on the horrors of the convict system than the 1886 stage versions, Patricia Payne and Wilton Schiller present a sanitised version of the novel appropriate to an early evening, 'family' timeslot. So there are virtually no references to homosexuality or cannibalism. Their Gabbett is neither a brute nor a monster, but quite a normal-looking human being. Their Kirkland is a beautiful young man rather than a child as in the Dampier and Dawn versions, but one needs to have read the novel to realise the significance of this. And though their North is played by Anthony Perkins — and consequently looks far more tortured than any of the convicts — his alcoholism and lack of faith receives little attention. As Rufus Dawes, Colin Friels appears to be eternally resilient in the true melodrama hero — or cartoon — fashion. At the end he is a little greyer at the temples, but otherwise physically unaffected by his twenty years of suffering. In contrast even the original 1870-72 *Australian Journal* illustrations show Dawes as considerably changed by his time as a convict.

Like the Leitch version, the television series essentially rewrote *His Natural Life* as a love story. But whereas Leitch had the sense to compress the time frame of the action to three years, the TV adaptation lengthens it by taking in some of the Victorian goldfields material from the original serial. For those who know both versions of the novel, the result is a fascinating if totally unconvincing amalgam of both. Both Sylvia and Dawes are allowed to survive the storm and land safely in Sydney. There, just when he thinks he is safe, Sylvia runs into Dawes in the street; for no apparent reason, she then recovers her memory and so does not give 'Good Mr Dawes' away.

After various adventures at the gold-diggings and the death of Frere, Dawes is able to return to England and reclaim his identity as Richard Devine. This version ends with him going off to court Sylvia as though all that had happened in Australia had merely been a bad dream. It would seem that, by 1982, the convict system had been sufficiently mythologised within Australian popular culture to be able to be used merely as the exotic background for a love story. No doubt many of those who viewed the mini-series had also paid a visit to Old Sydney Town and watched the mock floggings.
In Peter Foster's 1986 comic strip adaptation of *His Natural Life* it is interesting to note an attempt to convey the horrors of the convict past through a more recent instance of man's brutality to man: the Holocaust. The prison warder Troke, for example, ‘cruel and harsh; now chief constable of the island’, is depicted in a manner usually associated with visual representations of German SS officers (Foster 40). Although he does not actually wear a monocle, he is given a droopy right eyelid which makes it look as though he does. The use of physical deformity to portray evil is even more worrying in the case of Gabbett, who combines a hare-lip with otherwise strongly negroid and ape-like features. Cannibalism is, however, confined to a textual reference to ‘the maddened Gabbett, having survived by cannibalism, proudly presents to his startled captors the grisly remains of his mates’ (39). The accompanying small panel keeps ‘the grisly remains’ well out of frame. Likewise, assuming the comic version has been aimed at a child audience, it is not surprising to find no reference to Kirkland's rape and very little to North's alcoholism.

This most recent of the many adaptations of the novel, then, needs to draw on readers' emotional response to the Holocaust for its presentation of the convicts as innocent, suffering victims. A desire to play down the brutalities of the convicts themselves clearly lies behind the decreased emphasis on cannibalism in more recent adaptations, though the younger audiences aimed at are also a factor. For nineteenth-century audiences, convicts were invariably members of the lower, and less deserving, classes and therefore fair game for as much comic business as actors and adaptators could wring out of them. From the type of twentieth-century perspective which refracts the convict system through more recent images of the gulags and the concentration camps, as in Robert Hughes' *The Fatal Shore* (1987), this may almost seem as much an abomination as cannibalism itself. But is what happens at Old Sydney Town greatly different?

WORKS CITED


