For those who wrote about her before she was known to exist, Australia was in image a Utopia, a sort of Paradise. The reverse of conditions in Europe, this unknown continent of the Antipodes could be imagined free from corruptions and persecutions. The realities of the settlement shattered this image; but it continued to survive as a bitter parody of what might have been. A potential Eden had become an evil penitentiary. Mr Pounce of the civil list, one of the English establishment running the penal colony in Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life* (1874) gives all unconsciously such a parody of the utopian and providential hopes.}

*This island seems specially adapted by Providence for a convict settlement; for with an admirable climate, it carries little indigenous vegetation which will support human life … Poor Potherick used often to say that it seemed as if some Almighty Hand had planned the Penal Settlements round the coast, the country is so delightfully barren. (p. 311)*

It is by the use of such myths as basic images for his novel, that Clarke is able to offer so much more than an historical account of the convict settlement. His account and indictment of the system is masterly. But Clarke was not simply offering a naturalistic account of a particular situation at a particular historical time and in a particular geographical context. He was also presenting a vision of human life, a vision in part and ironically drawing on the old myth of the Antipodes. As Richard Brome put it in his play *The Antipodes* (1640)

> The people through the whole world of Antipodes,<br>  In outward feature, language, and religion,<br>  Resemble those to whom they are suppositive:<br>  They under Spain appear like Spaniards,<br>  Under France Frenchmen, under England English,<br>  To the exterior show; but in their manners,<br>  Their carriage, and condition of life,<br>  Extremely contrary.  

The Antipodes traditionally represented the other side of the social coin: and that is Clarke's material. His novel deals literally with the underworld; the world beneath Europe, the other side of the globe, the bottom of the map; and the world of criminals and prisoners (not necessarily synonymous), the underworld of society that England preferred not to know about and to dispose of. In his depiction of the penal colony Clarke offers a complete counter picture of English society in its systems of authority, oppression and brutalisation. The officers, the guards, the clergy, the innocent and the guilty prisoners, and the free settlers, comprise a full social range. But it is a society that is the reverse image of the official picture of early Victorian England: here the convicts are not conveniently shipped away, here the underworld is the dominant concern of the society. Here the systems of authority of England reveal themselves in explicit brutality. The particular circumstances of this underworld allow man's 'natural life' to emerge without any of the inhibiting restraints of European society. The Antipodes here represent not the ideal state that man, freed from European society, might aspire to, but its reverse, the brutality that, implicit in European society, he will quickly sink to if allowed. Although as the novel's title suggests Clarke is offering from the particular historical details a general account of human nature, it is as a recreation of the system, the transportation of convicts and their treatment in the penal settlements, that *His Natural Life* is initially striking. There is a prologue to the novel set in England presenting the cause of the hero's, Rufus Dawes's, transportation; there is an epilogue in which we see his dead body floating at sea. But the novel proper begins and ends with
Dawes as a convict suffering the system. And though some of the other convicts escape and their adventures provide a relief from the settlements, they are always recaptured and return to this prison world.

Clarke was at pains to suggest the authenticity of the appalling, unbelievable brutalities that are the material of his novel. A sensationalist manner might well have invalidated the serious indictment of the convict system. And in his Preface he stresses his seriousness for, although transportation had stopped altogether in 1868 in Australia, the French had just established the system in New Caledonia. (Devil's Island, indeed, was not closed until 1952.) In writing His Natural Life Clarke carefully examined documentary sources, visited the scenes of his story, and spoke to prisoners at Port Arthur. A note to the final chapter of the serial version of His Natural Life assured readers

> Mr. Clarke has prepared an appendix, which will be published when His Natural Life is issued in a volume from the press. This appendix will give incontestable authorities for all statements made in this work concerning convict discipline.

The appendix duly appeared, and further sources have since been recorded. Certainly to say that Clarke provided this sort of annotation does not necessarily acquit him of the charge of sensationalism. G. A. Wilkes, for instance, remarks that ‘The account of the brutalities of the convict system verges on the sensational’ noting that ‘as most of the episodes can be documented, it is only the aggregation of them that produces a melodramatic effect’. But it is important to note that these aggregated brutalities are not all suffered by Dawes. Clarke is careful not to give his main character an impossible or unreal load. The brutalities Dawes endures are intermingled with other atrocities perpetrated on other convicts, suffered by other victims: Kirkland flogged to death, cannibalism, child suicides. The aggregation of brutalities is not achieved by the impossible focus of them on to one man. This is one of the precautions that Clarke takes against melodramatic excesses. Another is the avoidance of sensationalism in the specific brutalities. In the description of the flogging to death of young Kirkland, Clarke supplies sufficient detail to nauseate:

> The white back was instantly striped with six crimson bars. Kirkland stifled a cry. It seemed to him that he had been cut in half …

The third blow sounded as though it had been struck upon a piece of raw beef, and the crimson turned purple …

After the tenth stroke

> The lad's back, swollen into a hump now presented the appearance of a ripe peach which a wilful child had scored with a pin. Dawes, turning away from his bloody handiwork, drew the cats through his fingers twice. They were beginning to get clogged a little. (pp. 364—5)

But Clarke does not enumerate each stroke, nor does he offer any further description until the fifty-sixth. He establishes the beginning and the end of the flogging nauseatingly enough. But after the fifty-sixth stroke he offers no more: ‘His back was like a bloody sponge, while, in the interval between the lashes, the swollen flesh twitchedlike that of a new-killed bullock’ (p. 366). After this, Clarke spares us further detail and lets Kirkland die unnoticed. He diverts attention to Dawes who has been doing the flogging: the system in the penal camps was to make one convict flog another — a refinement in tortures, a planned demoralisation. Dawes, having refused to flog Kirkland any more, is flogged himself: and the emphasis here is not on the physical but on the mental torture. We can take that much more readily.

I won't attempt here to enumerate the variety or the extent of the tortures the British penal system imposed. The prison camps are fully established, and to add to the horrors, an addition emphasising the hopelessness yet avoiding the numbing monotony that a mere succession of floggings would produce on the reader, Clarke shows how the alternatives to imprisonment are worse than prison. For the bush provided no sustenance for escapees. The fate of one group who attempt to escape is described with frightful authenticity:

> On the seventh day, Bodenham says his feet are so bad he can't walk, and Greenhill, with a greedy look at the berries, bids him stay behind. Being in a very weak condition he takes his companion at his word, and drops off about noon the next day. Gabbett, discovering this
defection, however, goes back, and in an hour or so appears, driving the wretched creature before him with blows, as a sheep is driven to the shambles. Greenhill remonstrates at another mouth being thus forced upon the party, but the giant silences him with a hideous glance. Jemmy Vetch remembers that Greenhill accompanied Gabbett once before, and feels uncomfortable. He gives hint of his suspicions to Sanders, but Sanders only laughs. It is horribly evident that there is an understanding among the three. (p. 459)

The horror is established by the unmentioned, unmentionable fore-bodings of Jemmy Vetch. By implication we know what to expect. Earlier in the novel the partially dismembered body of someone who escaped with Gabbett has been seen though it provoked no explicit remark. The unspoken exerts its pregnant force. And the urgency, the immediacy, are built up by Clarke's use of the present tense. We read on, hoping for a past tense that will declare the whole episode finished and distanced. But no past tense is allowed until the decision to kill is reached.

Said Greenhill, in the course of a dismal conversation, ‘I am so weak that I could eat a piece of a man.’

On the tenth day Bodenham refuses to stir, and the others, being scarce able to drag along their limbs, sit on the ground about him. Greenhill, eyeing the prostrate man, said, slowly, ‘I have seen the same done before, boys, and it tasted like pork.’ (p. 460)

And here Greenhill’s ‘said’ and his seemingly hyperbolic, casual statement mark the end of the suspense. Again the effect is gained by the avoidance of explicitness, by avoiding naming the horror contemplated and soon performed. The only explicit mention of eating human flesh seems a casual comment in a description of hunger; like ‘I could eat a horse’. When the plan is finally proposed, the action is not named, but skirted round with ‘the same’ and ‘it’. I have used the phrase ‘frightful authenticity’ deliberately. For Clarke has drawn here, as his notes tell, from the ‘Deposition of Alexander Pierce and official statements of trial and execution of Pierce and Cox for murder and cannibalism’ (p. 607). Pierce stated in his deposition: ‘Bob Greenhill was the first who introduced it, and said he had seen the like done before, and that it eat much like a little pork.’ The horror comes from hearing the way men spoke of this, from an explicitly direct transcription of the real language of men, the genuine avoidance of naming the horror. Clarke's only significant alteration is to insert the vocative ‘boys’, which by suggesting both an innocent youthfulness and by the appeal of ‘we’re all in this together’, an appeal to a brotherhood of men to eat a brother, subtly emphasises the horror of the situation. To select from this chapter is to offer only a part of its power, and to lose the cumulative suspense, the awful, inevitable following through of the cannibalism of the party, one by one:

Sanders, seeing them approach, knew his end was come, and submitted, crying, ‘Give me half an hour to pray for myself.’ They consent and the bewildered wretch knelt down and folded his hands like a child. His big, stupid face worked with emotion. His great cracked lips moved in desperate agony. He wagged his head from side to side, in pitiful confusion of his brutalized senses. ‘I can't think o’ the words, Jem!’

‘Pah,’ snarled the cripple, swinging the axe, ‘we can't starve here all night.’

Four days had passed, and the two survivors of this awful journey sat watching each other. (p. 463)

I pointed in the previous quotation to Clarke's addition of the word ‘boys' to the authentic statement from the deposition, and suggested this was deliberately suggesting a youthful innocence. Describing brutal, now cannibal, convicts, the comment may have sounded absurd. Yet in this last quotation, Clarke insists on Sanders’ being a ‘bewildered wretch’, praying by folding his hands ‘like a child’, he emphasises his ‘big, stupid face’ and in characterising his murderer, chooses to refer to him as ‘the cripple’. What Clarke is doing is emphasising the moral innocence of these depraved creatures: he insists, often enough for any Victorian readers, on their being depraved. But he stresses here, in his most hideous chapter, in describing one of the most bestial episodes in his novel, the childishness, the stupidity, the ignorance of his characters. These men, his language suggests, are more victims than anything else, and they are slaughtered like dumb beasts: ‘as
a sheep is driven to the shambles’. The emphasis is not on their moral culpability, but on their ignorance, on their simplicity, on their suffering — Vetch born a cripple — and on what they have suffered in society. Sanders is ‘in pitiful confusion of his brutalised senses’: brutalised, not brutal — his depravity is not innate but imposed upon him, by society, by the penal system. The horrors Clarke describes are the horrors of man's natural life — the accidents of birth, the forces of society. These are not the volitional evils of the free-choosing mind.

Passing by such episodes as the two twelve-year-old children in the special children's penitentiary who jump to death over a cliff rather than live, I will move on to mention only one further example of the system. Again, Clarke draws on factual sources, and again he deals with the episode with a restraint that adds an inexorable force to it. It is the final expression of the hell of the convict settlement, the search for the only possible escape. It involves Dawes and two other convicts, Bland, and Blind Mooney ‘who had arrived in Sydney fifty-seven years before, in the year 1789, and when he was transported he was fourteen years old’. (Clarke makes no explicit comment on the year’s being also the year of the French revolution. He leaves it as one of his unemphasised ironies. Liberty, Equality and Fraternity were a long way from Sydney.)

The scheme of escape hit upon by the convict intellect was simply this. Three men being together, lots were drawn to determine whom should be murdered. The drawer of the longest straw was the ‘lucky’ man. He was killed. The drawer of the next longest straw was the murderer. He was hanged. The unlucky one was the witness. He had, of course, an excellent chance of being hung also, but his doom was not so certain, and he therefore looked upon himself as unfortunate. (p. 539)

Again the restraint, the detached manner of narration, makes the horror more telling. Clarke uses a similar detachment of manner in his scrupulousness about the precise months and years, and about geographical accuracy. This both emphasises the documentary aspect of the book, and underlines the horror. Book I ends on a newspaper cutting purporting to be ‘extracted from the Hobart Town Courier of the 12th November 1827’; indeed the whole chapter consists of this one brief paragraph (p. 104). It is entitled, objectively, ‘A Newspaper Paragraph’, and the opening chapter of the next book is called, with similar, unemotional, dispassionate factual objectivity, ‘The Topography of Van Diemen's Land’ (p. 105). But the human aspects of punishment and suffering suppressed by these seemingly objective historical and geographical chapter headings, are drawn attention to all the more forcefully by that very suppression. For the contents of those chapters are facts that cannot be divorced from any humane or emotional response. The newspaper paragraph tells how the innocent Dawes has (with three others) been sentenced to death, and then reprieved to a sentence of six years’ penal servitude; and the topography of Van Diemen's Land is the topography of the ‘natural penitentiary’.

Clarke's recording of the atrocities of a not far distant past, turning court records and royal commissions into imaginative fiction, was a major achievement. But I want to turn now from the socio-historical to the personal, to the story of Rufus Dawes, the novel's protagonist, and to the wider implications of the title. The novel opens with a sensational tableau. Lady Devine has just revealed that her son is not the child of Sir Richard Devine but the product of her adultery with Lord Bellasis and Wotton. Whereupon Sir Richard turns the young Richard Devine (whom he has been arraigning, anyway, for dissipation) out of the house. That night Richard having encountered Sir Richard striding past him wild-eyed on Hampstead Heath immediately comes upon the body of Lord Bellasis, his real father. He has just identified Lord Bellasis by examining his wallet when he is apprehended and taken to the police. Believing Sir Richard killed Bellasis, Richard says nothing lest his mother's adultery should be made public. He assumes a false name (Rufus Dawes) and is transported for theft: for Lord Bellasis's wallet had been emptied. Sir Richard dies of a stroke almost immediately on arriving home. Lady Devine never suspects that Dawes is in fact her son. She is led to believe Richard set sail for India on a ship that is later destroyed by fire.

The Prologue does not augur well for a naturalistic novel. It does, however, serve to get Dawes (as he is henceforth known) transported, and so is valuable at the level of a donnée. But even here it introduces problems by insisting on Dawes's innocence. This, more than the succession of punishments meted out to him later, mitigates against his possessing any typicality or representativeness. No doubt there were many innocent people convicted and transported: that is not the issue. What creates the problems for the twentieth century reader is Dawes's initial attitude. The hideous and brutal conditions on board the transport ship
predispose us to react against the authorities responsible for such conditions. Consequently we encounter some difficulty when Dawes tells the ship’s doctor of a mutiny that he has overheard being planned. This seems a falsification of what a convict on a ship like that would do. The novel seems to lose authenticity as a convict novel by having as its protagonist a ‘goody’ — and this relates to the initial donnée that Dawes is innocent of any crime. Distinguished from the other convicts by his innocence, reporting the planned mutiny to the authorities, Dawes seems the weak product of bourgeois sentimentalism.

But to make such a judgment is to replace a Victorian sentimentalism with its twentieth century equivalent, an over-readiness to assume immediate sympathy with the imprisoned and guilty. It is important for Clarke’s scheme that he should draw the Victorian reading public gently towards a position of sympathy with the convicts — not plunge them immediately into a sympathy that would be forcibly resisted and rejected. It is also important that Dawes should be innocent and on the side of authority at the beginning; after all, he has been brought up a member of the English ruling class who established the transportation system and who mete out the justice. It is the purpose of Clarke’s narrative to show the breakdown of Dawes’s class loyalties; to show the breakdown in his belief in the worth of honesty, innocence, goodness in the context of the system. He becomes in the end distinguishable from the other convicts only in being more hardened, more unregenerate. The system is calculated not to produce any reformation, not to develop the good or socially useful or any other worthwhile characteristics of its convicts: Dawes’s nature is composed initially of altruism, self-sacrifice — his shielding of his mother’s name stresses this. But by herding together all manner of criminals, all that is produced is an increase in criminality, cruelty, bestiality, hostility to all social values. Dawes begins as innocent, and as a model of certain sorts of honour: he ends up in his attitudes (though not his actions) one of the most hardened of the criminals, someone in whom any traces of his earlier sensitivity, any past support for the authorities, any social instinct has been utterly extinguished. And this is, Clarke emphases, a result of the system. On board ship ‘the more guilty boasted of their superiority in vice; the petty criminals swore that their guilt was blacker than it appeared’ (p. 17). The innocent and guilty alike are immersed in deeper depravity. Captain Vickers, the officer in charge of the Tasmanian penal settlement (a fine portrait of a man coping with his office by going by the rule book, by simply carrying out orders and so hoping to block out any moral qualms) later remarks: “But imagine an innocent man condemned to this place!” “I can’t”, said Frere, with a laugh. “Innocent man, be hanged! They’re all innocent, if you’d believe their own stories.”’ (p. 130). And with an obvious juxtapository irony, they go on to discuss Dawes. It is an important exchange, not only in its obvious but in its subtler ironies. Frere’s careless oath ‘Innocent men, be hanged’ is full of bitter, ambiguous significance: for the innocent are hanged; the oath is appropriately from the brutal Frere also an imperative. And when Frere goes on to say ‘They’re all innocent, if you’d believe their own stories’, he unconsciously voices what Clarke establishes as a truth in the novel. In the context of those dreadful punishments, and of the guilt of their judges and warders, of the society condemning them and of the Freres running the system, the convicts are all innocent.

The mutiny is quelled, and its ringleaders name Dawes as one of them. On arrival in Hobart he is sentenced to six years’ penal servitude, and three attempts are made on his life for exposing the mutiny; defending himself leads to his being put in chains for brawling. After unsuccessful attempts at escape he is condemned to solitary imprisonment on an isolated rock in the harbour. In despair he jumps, weighted by his chains, into the sea.

But at this stage his will is not utterly destroyed; with the later suicide pact he reaches his lowest point. Here, the shock of the water provokes an immediate reflex to survive and he swims. On the deserted shore he later comes across Mrs Vickers and her daughter Sylvia, Lieutenant Frere, and two others; the penal settlement has been closed down and on the last ship to leave there has been a successful mutiny. The convicts have put ashore this party. And now, after his attempted suicide, Dawes makes a determined effort to save the group. He swam not by any primary volitional decision but by an instinctive reaction, counter to his will, when he struck the water. But now his will is revived by the child, Sylvia, and he regains some social spirit, he begins to co-operate with and help others.

*Rufus Dawes was no longer the brutalized wretch who had plunged into the dark waters of the bay to escape a life he loathed, and had alternately cursed and wept in the solitudes of the forests. He was an active member of society — a society of four — and he began to regain an air of independence and authority. This change has been wrought by the influence of little
Sylvia. Recovered from the weakness consequent upon this terrible journey, Rufus Dawes had experienced for the first time in six years the soothing power of kindness. He had now an object to live for beyond himself. He was of use to somebody, and had he died, he would have been regretted. (pp. 196-7)

In Clarke's notation, such a voluntary social participation is one of the positive values of human life; it is in contrast with the norms of the penal settlements, where there is either enforced participation in an activity, the result of force and brutality; or there is the perverted co-operation of the cannibalism episode; or there is the destruction of the human social spirit, the transforming of it into despair, hatred, uselessness, isolation. Dawes now responds to this new situation by building a coracle to escape from the deserted settlement before starvation overcomes them all. The details of the construction make a marvellous section in the Robinson Crusoe tradition. But against the naturalistic authenticity that establishes the resourcefulness and resilience of the human spirit, are set the equally naturalistic reminders of the realities of the penal system. ‘Tell me’, Dawes asks little Sylvia, laughingly, the coracle in progress,

‘what will you do for me if I bring you and mamma safe home again?’ ‘Give you a free pardon,’ says Sylvia, ‘and papa shall make you his servant.’

Frere burst out laughing at this reply, and Dawes, with a choking sensation in his throat, put the child upon the ground, and walked away. (p. 214)

It is one of the most poignant moments in the novel, the sudden switch from the prospect of escape, from joy and excitement, to this awful, unthinking dashing of the mood. ‘This was in truth all he could hope for.’ Yet despite this, Dawes retains his will to live and his will to save others.

But this regeneration of Dawes, so powerfully and so practically established by his building the coracle, serves only to emphasise his further, subsequent destruction. For when after days at sea a passing ship sights the coracle, Frere, jealous of Sylvia's admiration of Dawes, and contemptuous and envious of the convict, snatches Sylvia from Dawes's arms, and says that he, Frere, built the coracle and saved them all from Dawes's murderous designs. Mrs Vickers dies from exposure on that arduous journey, Sylvia loses her memory from the trauma of the voyage. Frere is believed. Dawes is sent as a prisoner for life to the Hobart penal settlement. ‘“Of what use to society,” asked the Gazette, quite pathetically, “has this scoundrel been during the last eleven years?” And everybody agreed that he had been of no use whatever.’ (p. 279).

Dawes is later transferred from Hobart to Norfolk Island, the worst of all settlements, where he runs a mafia-like organisation called the Ring. Frere marries Sylvia, and becomes commander of Norfolk Island. A new chaplain, North, an alcoholic, arrives at Norfolk Island and falls in love with Sylvia, whom he plans to take away from Frere whom she has come to hate. John Rex, the ringleader of the mutiny, having been recaptured in England, escapes again and returns to England where he assumes the identity of Richard Devine (Dawes) and because of a striking physical resemblance succeeds in taking over Devine's inheritance. But Rex's mistress whom he abandoned after she had planned his escape, discovers that he is in England, finds him and takes him back to Australia with her, under threat of exposing him as an escaped convict. In the course of these various events, certain remarkable coincidences emerge.

Richard Devine (Dawes) we know from the beginning was the illegitimate son of Lord Bellasis. Maurice Frere, the persecutor of Dawes throughout his imprisonment, is Richard Devine's cousin, and Sir Richard, upon the revelation of Richard's illegitimacy, planned to change his will in favour of Frere, but died of a stroke before doing so. North, the chaplain, was the young parson Lord Bellasis was waiting to meet when he was murdered. North later explains to Dawes when he discovers (as Frere never does) that Dawes is Devine: ‘I was to meet Lord Bellasis … to pay the money and receive the bills. When I saw him fall, I galloped up, but instead of pursuing his murderer I rifled his pocket-book of my forgeries.’ (p. 589). North, in debt for gambling, had given Bellasis two forged bills of exchange. Lionel Crofton who was with Bellasis just before the murder was John Rex under an assumed name — ringleader of the mutinies and, along with Frere, Dawes's other black angel. And John Rex was none other than another illegitimate son of Lord Bellasis: hence his resemblance to Dawes — they are half-brothers. And Rex/Crofton was the murderer of Bellasis. The crime for which Dawes was transported — robbery (and suspicion of murder) — was the
Viewed realistically, these coincidences are absurd: and many critics have commented adversely on the novel as a result of them. And since the historical portrayal of the convict system is done with such a careful and insistent documentary realism, the temptation to read the novel as wholly naturalistic is great.

But the coincidences have a role other than of providing sensational revelations and of providing some structural neatness to what might have been a rambling narrative. The familial connections of the characters offer a basis for a reading of the novel at a different level from the historical naturalistic. The blood relationship of Dawes and Rex allows for some important paralleling of their lives. Their similarities are pointed by their both assuming false names for important parts of their lives — though with an important difference. Rex operates pseudonymously (as Skinner, as Crofton) when he is free, but is imprisoned under his own name; whereas Dawes assumes his false name for captivity, surrendering his real name upon arrest. (Though it is not, of course, a name that is really his, since he is not a Devine.) But the important parallel between Rex and Dawes is their physical resemblance, their being half-brothers, both illegitimate sons of Bellasis. Clarke pairs these half-brothers throughout his novel as alter egos. Rex is the guilty equivalent of Dawes. He is the professional criminal, the half-brother who committed the crime which resulted in Dawes's imprisonment. Rex, with his mutinies, his escapes, features largely in the novel. His will to escape is the converse of Dawes's behaviour: while Rex escapes from Norfolk Island, Dawes joins in the suicide pact, the murder lottery. It was Rex's mutiny plan that Dawes revealed at the beginning of the novel. These are the contrasts — but there are also similarities: Rex's life in London under Devine's name is the sort of dissipated life Dawes/Devine had led before, and which had caused the initial confrontation with his 'father' that had provoked the revelation of his illegitimacy. Stressing the identity of these two figures, half-brothers, Clarke has built into his novel these two striking alternatives. The objection I raised earlier to having the novel's protagonist an innocent figure, is met by having the undoubtedly guilty alter ego of Rex balancing Dawes throughout. These are the alternatives of 'his natural life', the two possibilities for the same person.

They are not the only possibilities. The other figure whose career parallels Dawes's throughout, whose life offers an alternative to the same set of events and locations, is Maurice Frere, the brutal lieutenant who finally becomes commander of Norfolk Island. Again there is a familial connection: Dawes and Frere are cousins. It is not — because of Dawes's illegitimacy — a blood relationship, but a social one. But the lack of blood connection is balanced for the novel's metaphorical pattern by that significant name, Frere, brother. And the name also expresses the nature of this alternative — it is pronounced 'freer'. He is the free alternative to the captive Dawes.

Frere is the most brutal of the officers:

*the coarse red-faced Frere, who was noted for his fondness for low society, and overbearing, almost brutal demeanour. No one denied, however, that Captain Frere was a valuable officer. It was said that, in consequence of his tastes, he knew more about the tricks of convicts than any man on the island. It was said, even, that he was wont to disguise himself, and mix with the pass-holders and convict servants, in order to learn their signs and mysteries. When in charge at Bridgewater it had been his delight to rate the chain-gangs in their own hideous jargon, and to astound a new comer by his knowledge of his previous history. The convict population hated and cringed to him, for, with his brutality and violence, he mingled a ferocious good humour, that resulted sometimes in tacit permission to go without the letter of the law. Yet, as the convicts themselves said, 'a man was never safe with the Captain;' for, after drinking and joking with them, as the Sir Oracle of some public-house whose hostess he delighted to honour, he would disappear through a side door just as the constables burst in at the back, and show himself as remorseless, in his next morning's sentence of the captured, as if he had never entered a tap-room in all his life. (pp. 255-6)*

Frere is presented not simply as a hypocrite, or a liar, or a sadist, or an authoritarian punishing in others those corruptions he loves himself. These are all components of his personality; but the particular strength of his portrayal is in the indication of his closeness to the convicts. He is tied to them by similar tastes — he has had, significantly, a liaison with Rex's mistress — and he is tied to them in the brutal exercise of his
authority. Without a Dawes to persecute, Frere would be lost. He has no other interests, his horizons are bounded by the convict world in which he lives, he is as much a prisoner as the prisoners. And, in a terrible way, the prisoners are dependent on him and admire the authority he wields. When one of the convicts seizes the pistol from Frere's belt: ‘Kavanagh did not fire. At the instant when his hand was on the pistol, he looked up and met the magnetic glance of Frere's imperious eyes.’ And Kavanagh ‘thrust the weapon, cocked as it was’ back into Frere's belt.

Frere slowly drew one hand from his pocket, took the cocked pistol and levelled it at his recent assailant. ‘That's the best chance you'll ever get, Jack,’ said he.

Kavanagh fell on his knees. ‘For God's sake, Captain Frere!’

Frere looked down on the trembling wretch, and then uncocked the pistol with a laugh of feroceous contempt. ‘Get up, you dog,’ he said. ‘It takes a better man than you to best me. Bring him up in the morning, Hawkins, and we'll give him five and twenty.’

As he went out — so great is the admiration for power — the poor devils in the yard cheered him. (p. 406)

Frere and the convicts are attached to each other by this frightful bondage, this cruel brotherhood. Clarke emphasises that this is not a one-sided attachment. Frere is bound by his sadism and authoritarianism to his victims; the convicts are bound to him by their admiration for power, by the servility of their defeated wills. There is a foreshadowing here of the theory that the inmates of the Nazi concentration camps though far outnumbering their guards had a complicity in their own destruction by accepting the guards’ fragile authority.

On the societal level Clarke is pointing to a bond and to a similarity between Frere and his ilk, and the convicts. This is significantly imaged in a fight between Frere and Gabbett that ends the first mutiny. It is emphasised that they are equally matched and Frere wins only because a chance lurch of the ship off-balances Gabbett. Their parity of strength, of physical violence is given an additional meaning when Gabbett later practises cannibalism. But Clarke is also suggesting in the Dawes-Frere relationship the two psychological oppositions of man's natural life — the persecutory and the suffering. Even Dawes, the most hardened of the convicts by the novel's end, cannot strike Frere. North records an incident in his diary in which Frere entered the goal yard:

I saw a dozen pair of eyes flash hatred, but the bull-dog courage of the man overawed them here, as, I am told, it had done in Sydney. It would have been easy to kill him then and there, and his death, I am told, is sworn among them; but no one raised a finger. The only man who moved was Rufus Dawes, and he checked himself instantly. Frere, with a recklessness of which I did not think him capable, stepped up to this terror of the prison, and ran his hands lightly down his sides, as is the custom with constables when 'searching' a man. Dawes — who is of a fierce temper turned crimson at this bravado, and, I thought, would have struck him, but he did not. (pp. 507-8)

Dawes is inevitably set in the role of victim to Frere's persecutions. Similarly with Dawes and Rex, Clarke contrasts moral innocence with moral culpability, the will to survive with the drift towards suicide. Dawes, Rex and Frere are all in one way or another 'brothers' — they amongst them embody three different aspects of man's natural life.

But all three ways end similarly. None of these three possibilities is a possibility of freedom. At the end of the novel Dawes leaves Norfolk Island on the ship on which North was planning to go away with Sylvia. It is not a positive move towards freedom — his concern is not to escape (his will for that has been broken) but to save Sylvia from North. The ship is destroyed in a cyclone, and both Sylvia and Dawes die. Frere, wifeless, remains bound to his convict charges on Norfolk Island. Rex is brought back to Australia by his mistress and remains her prisoner. North suicides. No one escapes. Each 'natural life' leads to the same blankness. It is a novel of the most powerful, most hopeless despair.
The coincidences are not the mere trappings of sensation and convenience. Rather, they offer the mechanism, they allow a familial metaphor, for an exploration of the irresolvable aspects of human society, of the human psyche. A modern novelist might have presented these contradictory elements within the same individual — Devine's altruistic sacrifice, Rex's murder, Frere's brutal exercise of authority, Rex's indomitable will, Dawes's despair, Frere's callous possessiveness of Sylvia, Dawes's hopeless love. Freud has offered the mechanics for doing so. Clarke, writing in 1872, used the traditional materials of the nineteenth century novel. He split these human characteristics amongst his cast of characters, gaining in fullness what he lost in complexity. And the complexity is there if we follow through the lives of Rex, Dawes and Frere as interrelated figures. Certainly Dawes is the obvious hero of the novel, the good protagonist. But the novel's title is undefined in its pronoun: His Natural Life. It could apply equally to Frere and to Rex as well as to Dawes, and my argument is that it applies to them all, for all are aspects of one human figure, of one figure representative of man's natural life.

And the relationship of the familial connections to the events of the Prologue offers a meaning beyond that of simple sensationalism. Both Rex and Dawes are involved in this initial incident of the killing of the father. Rex kills Bellasis, his father who is also Dawes's father, and Dawes's assumed father is killed with the shock of Bellasis's death. Dawes, who has every motive to kill his supposed father (his anger, to protect his mother, to preserve his inheritance) does not do so: but his supposed father nonetheless dies — as if the wish were sufficient — and Dawes is punished because he is suspected of robbing and killing his real father. Rex performs the Oedipal act; but his half-brother Dawes (whose protection of his mother is neatly Oedipal), though keeping his hands clean of bloodshed, is punished and treated as if he had in fact killed his father. The separation of motives, attitudes and responsibilities is similar to Dostoyevsky's treatment of the theme in The Brothers Karamazov.

The psychological interest here can also be directed outwards to a social significance. The initial parricide is the cause of Dawes's transportation, of leaving the old country and going to the settlement. And I would suggest that this initial symbolic action can be related to the trauma of the colonial experience. Brian Elliott in a lecture on Clarke has seen Dawes's love for Sylvia, the child brought up in the colony, away from England, as the central image of the novel. In Dawes's rejection by and of the old world and his clinging to and protecting this fragile infant despite every hindrance, Elliott sees an image of the colonial experience. But Sylvia, though a regenerative image and inspiration for Dawes, is an inspiration all for nothing. She can provide no fulfilment for Dawes, any more than Australia did for Clarke. He went to Australia when his father died, leaving him at sixteen without the inheritance he had expected. He died there, bankrupt for the second time, aged thirty-five. Much of his experience of the colony was of frustration, sickness, financial anxiety, misery. The killing of the father at the beginning of His Natural Life is an event bringing on misery for all the main characters of the novel. Once the societal taboos and values of the old world are broken away from, then the ‘natural life’ breaks out unchecked. The brutality of Frere, the homosexual rape and flogging to death of Kirkland, Gabbett's cannibalism — is this man's natural life? There seems no fulfilment; the hopeless expiation of North produces only suicide, Dawes's protection of his mother's name produces a life time's imprisonment. Clarke takes a hopeless view of the colonial experience, of the conversion of the antipodean paradise into a natural penitentiary. The settlement is blighted by the guilt of the initial Oedipal killing. The characters are all guilt ridden — North's remorse and hopeless expiation of his failure to speak at the trial, Frere's guilt at his lie about the coracle and his fear Sylvia will remember one day. And though Dawes has nothing to be guilty of, his motivation, to protect his mother's guilt, is related: is it an expiation by proxy of her guilt, an expiation for wanting his father's or supposed father's death, a sexual trauma at the realisation of his illegitimacy? Sylvia, of course, is notably innocent and guilt free: but fearful every time she encounters Dawes, fearful of something she cannot remember. Guilt becomes a major theme for the novel's mood, relatable to the initial Oedipal killing, and appropriate for the story of a colonisation founded on the convict system.

1 See Werner P. Friederich, Australia in Western Imaginative Prose Writings 1600—1960 (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1967), Chapters 1—3.

2 The novel first appeared as a serial, His Natural Life in The Australian Journal from March 1870 to June 1872. Clarke then revised it considerably, deleting Devine/Dawes's adventures before transportation and his adventures after escaping from Norfolk Island. This book version, published in 1874, is the version I am discussing. The serial version
has been published in full in the Penguin English Library, edited by Stephen Murray-Smith (1970) and a discussion of its differences from the book version can be found in his introduction and in Joan Poole's 'Maurice Frere's Wife: Marcus Clarke's Revision of His Natural Life', Australian Literary Studies, IV, 4 (October 1970), pp. 383—94. The longer title of the novel was not used until 1885, in the first posthumous editions of the novel issued in Australia and England; the reason and authority for this change to For The Term of His Natural Life are not known. All quotations are from the World's Classics edition of the novel, For the Term of His Natural Life, with an introduction by L. H. Allen (London, Oxford University Press, 1952).

3 Compare Watkin Tench, A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay … (London, J. Debrett, 1789), p. 138. ‘If only a receptacle for convicts be intended, this place [Sydney Cove] stands unequalled from the situation, extent, and nature of the country. When viewed in a commercial light, I fear its insignificance will appear very striking.’


5 William Golding's Lord of the Flies offers in its inversion of R. M. Ballantyne's The Coral Island a similar anti-utopian rewriting of a perfectibility myth.


7 Australian Journal (June 1872), p. 1558. I owe this reference to Mrs Joan Poole.


9 L. L. Robson in 'The Historical Basis of For the Term of His Natural Life', Australian Literary Studies I, 2 (December 1963), pp 104—21, argues that Dawes's experiences were untypical: ‘No more than approximately fifteen per cent of prisoners were ever sent to a penal settlement, and most convicts were not flogged. Usually men secured a ticket of leave within three years and this enabled them to work for themselves provided they reported regularly to the police.’ It does not at all follow, of course, as some Australian commentators have implied, that because His Natural Life deals with someone treated as a hardened offender rather than with the typical, that it is a false account of the system. A system that can perpetrate these atrocities on only one man is an evil system, and far more than one man suffered under the system.


11 See for instance Cecil Hadgraft, Australian Literature (London, Heinemann, 1960), p. 47. Lest this reference should seem misleading, I would like here to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Cecil Hadgraft for first persuading me to read His Natural Life which he so rightly assured me was one of the great nineteenth century novels.

12 Brian Elliott, 'Marcus Clarke', Commonwealth Literary Fund Lecture, 22 September 1952, Canberra, Canberra University College.

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