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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Encountering Indigeneity: Xavier Herbert, 'Inky' Stephensen and the Problems of Settler Nationalism

**Dan Tout**

Faculty of Education and Arts, Federation University, Churchill Campus, PO Box 3191 Gippsland Mail Centre VIC 3841, Australia

**Corresponding author:** Dan Tout, Faculty of Education and Arts, Federation University, Churchill Campus, PO Box 3191 Gippsland Mail Centre VIC 3841, Australia; [d.tout@federation.edu.au](mailto:d.tout@federation.edu.au)

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### Abstract

The 1930s in Australia was a period marked by rising awareness of and attention to Australia's 'half-caste problem'. Released and promoted in tandem with the 1938 sesquicentenary of Australia's settler colonisation, Xavier Herbert's novel *Capricornia* appeared as a searing protest against the exclusion of so-called 'half-castes' from white Australia. The novel itself was published by the Publicist Publishing Company, platform for rationalist and businessman W.J. Miles and editor and polemicist P.R. 'Inky' Stephensen, both strict advocates of a racially pure white Australia. Yet together, Herbert and his patrons capitalised on the sesquicentenary, and the Day of Mourning protests they helped organise, to promote what they proclaimed the 'Great Australian Novel'. This article reads Herbert's racial understandings in relation to those of Stephensen, and reads both in relation to the prevailing circumstances of 1930s Australia, as well as the underlying dynamics of settler colonialism. Whereas Stephensen subscribed to the 'Aryan Aborigines' hypothesis and emphasised Australia's supposed racial purity, Herbert celebrated instead the potentiality of 'Euraustralian' hybridity. While these approaches are ostensibly at odds, this article argues instead that they share a common drive towards settler indigenisation and independence as their ultimate aims.

### Keywords

**settler colonialism; nationalism; indigenisation; race; literature**

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## Introduction

Richard White has labelled questions about what, whether and when the Australian nation *is* or *might be* 'a national obsession'.<sup>1</sup> In attempting to construct a national culture and identity, settler Australians, like settlers elsewhere, have invested in the establishment of a national literary tradition.<sup>2</sup> According to Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, the project of national literary-cultural construction has entailed:

establishing a distinctively Australian tradition, complete with a Great Australian Writer and a Great Australian Novel, whose manifest greatness would at last prove the colonists' right to belong, both to the metropolitan centre and in the territory that they had invaded and colonised, Australia itself.<sup>3</sup>

Writers and critics have at various historical moments argued over different dimensions of the search for belonging Hodge and Mishra identify—some emphasising Australia's British inheritance, others stressing the production of new, 'native' cultural forms. From a perspective emphasising the first aspect of Hodge and Mishra's dual search for belonging, in 1956 Alec Hope described 'the mythical Great Australian Novel' as the 'Bunyip of Australian literature'.<sup>4</sup> It is appropriate, however, that it was the critic, publisher and polemicist Percy Reginald 'Inky' Stephensen, also known as 'the Bunyip Critic', who, from an antithetical perspective, hailed Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (which he played a central role in editing and publishing) as an 'epoch-making Great Australian novel' upon its publication in 1938.<sup>5</sup> In this assessment Stephensen was not alone, and if ever a novel attempted to fulfil the second aspect of Hodge and Mishra's purpose—to 'prove the colonists' right to belong ... in the territory that they had invaded and colonised', albeit by castigating the colonists' with the history and the consequences of their own invasion—*Capricornia* was it.

The circumstances surrounding the novel's publication, as well as the broader settler nationalist projects of both Stephensen and Herbert, reveal more contradictions than they resolve. Published in 1938 by the Publicist Publishing Company to coincide with the first Aboriginal Day of Mourning protests against the sesquicentenary of Australian colonisation, *Capricornia* represented the highpoint of Stephensen's publishing career.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, the Publicist Publishing Company was then, and is still today, regarded as a vehicle for Stephensen's increasingly extreme variety of racially exclusive, isolationist nationalism.<sup>7</sup> Yet Herbert's novel appeared as a searing protest against the exclusion of so-called 'half-castes' from settler Australia, and as an anti-imperialist condemnation of Australia's settler-colonial foundations. Together, Herbert and his patrons capitalised on the sesquicentenary, and the Day of Mourning protests they helped organise, to promote what they proclaimed as 'the novel of the Spirit of the Land'.<sup>8</sup>

This article compares Herbert's racial understandings to those of Stephensen, and reads them both in relation to the prevailing circumstances of 1930s Australia. At a historical moment marked by ambivalence in Australia's relationship with metropolitan England, Stephensen and Herbert sought to establish settler Australians' national-cultural independence. In doing so, however, at a moment marked by the demise of the 'doomed race' ideal, they found themselves confronting the prospect of a persistent Indigenous presence within the settler nation they sought to claim. While Stephensen subscribed to the 'Aryan Aborigines' hypothesis and emphasised Australia's supposed racial purity, positing himself and the Australian national culture he sought to construct as inheritors of 'the mantle of belonging to the land',<sup>9</sup> Herbert celebrated the potentiality of 'Euraustralian' hybridity to overcome his own, and by extension his compatriots', illegitimate status as 'alien' and 'invader'.<sup>10</sup> These

approaches are ostensibly at odds, yet they share a drive towards settler indigenisation and independence as their common, overriding concerns.

## A story of two Australias?

The standard story of Australian national cultural development has been structured around the conflict between the ‘two arch-opponents’ of Australian cultural and political life: ‘the Anglo-Australian loyalists and the radical Australian nationalists’,<sup>11</sup> the latter ‘creative, original and truly Australian’, the former ‘sterile, derivative and suburban’.<sup>12</sup> In this story of ‘two Australias’, Britain plays the part of ‘the mother country’, while ‘Australia is the child who reaches maturity, flexes its muscles and engages in several other pleasing metaphors’.<sup>13</sup> Various periodisations of this narrative are possible, but most feature the 1890s as a moment of adolescence—whether one of youthful exuberance, full of promise, or one marked by arrogance and immaturity—followed by a ‘coming of age’ in the post-war period. Such narratives typically frame the 1930s as a period of stalled development.

There have, of course, been dissenters from the nationalist imperative, and various nomenclatures have been used to describe the opposing critical traditions: ‘localists and universalists’, ‘democratic populists and Anglophile elitists’, ‘nationalists and internationalists’—even “Abos” and “Pommies”, as A.A. Phillips once suggested.<sup>14</sup> Yet even those who have most vociferously denied the need for, and the value of, a national literary tradition have, in so doing, defined themselves in relation to it, and have typically bought into the same notions of national maturity that have been central to such debates since their inception. For writers such as Alec Hope, for example, national maturity remained a necessity, even if only as one more step along the path towards the re-integration of Australian into world literature.<sup>15</sup> Even John Docker’s arch-metaphysicist Vincent Buckley was concerned with ‘the maturity of Australian life’, and saw in the tradition of ‘Brennan and the Brennanites’ and their attempt to ‘fuse the two traditions’ of nationalism and vitalist romanticism ‘our best hope of maturity’.<sup>16</sup>

H.M. Green described the ‘development of Australian literature’ as entailing two related but independent aspects: ‘the gradual growth of the native at the expense of the overseas element and their fusion into something new; and the gradual attainment of absolute value’.<sup>17</sup> For those occupying the localist/nationalist positions within the oppositions just outlined, the focus remained on the first of Green’s progressions; for those belonging to the universalist/internationalist positions, the focus was on the second. C. Hartley Grattan, along with others including Vance and Nettie Palmer, sought to stake out a middle-ground position that emphasised Australian cultural independence *and* sought to claim a sense of national ‘maturity’ and sophistication. For Grattan, the long ‘nineties’ was Australia’s ‘most seminal period’, but its uncritical celebration was to be avoided. Instead, he counted himself among a third group, beyond the binary oppositions outlined above: ‘those who are sure that there is an Australian tradition of good work if only it can be discriminated from the rubbish and *faux bon* stuff in which it is now embedded’.<sup>18</sup>

Yet these narratives of national maturation—nationalist and universalist alike—tend to conceal the nature and the complexity of the environment the national literary culture was supposed to be acclimatising to, and becoming expressive of. As J.J. Healy has outlined, ‘an authentic consciousness trying to grasp the *distinctive* characteristics of European society in Australia would, sooner or later, find itself face to face with the Aborigine and the land’.<sup>19</sup> Phillips’ suggested terminology is telling: he is not referring to a conflict, cultural or otherwise, between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and cultures on the one hand and

'Pommies' on the other. He is, rather, positioning settler nationalists as 'Abos', implying for them a sense of indigeneity that undermines the position of actual Indigenous people. This is not merely a historical, or a presentist, concern. As Alan Lawson contends, in seeking settler independence from the metropole, settler nationalisms routinely function as a 'strategic disavowal of the colonizing act',<sup>20</sup> and conceal settlers' dual position as both coloniser and colonised. Universalist settler claims to metropolitan inheritance and European continuity have a similarly effacing effect vis-à-vis the Indigenous peoples whose lands they seek to usurp.

## The triangular system of settler-colonial relations

Standard narratives of Australian national-cultural development thus neglect the complexities of the settler-colonial situation. In contradistinction to franchise or dependent colonialism, settler colonialism is characterised by the establishment of a permanent, albeit dynamic, triangular system of relationships comprising settler, metropolitan and indigenous agencies.<sup>21</sup> While settler relationships operate in multiple and dynamic ways, and there are other agencies involved, as Lorenzo Veracini has outlined, this system of relations produces 'conflicting tendencies' for 'the settler collective: one striving for indigenisation and national autonomy, the other aiming at neo-European replication and the establishment of a "civilised" pattern of life'.<sup>22</sup>

In Terry Goldie's convincing account, indigenisation is defined as the process 'through which the "settler" population attempts to become as though indigenous, as though "born" of the land'.<sup>23</sup> Yet in attempting to undertake a process of indigenisation and to distinguish their own indigeneity from their European cultural inheritance, settler nationalists inevitably confront the contradiction deriving from the necessity of maintaining the colonial authority and sovereign capacity they derive from this very inheritance. As a consequence, they continually confront what Patrick Wolfe has described as 'the problem of the fragment': that is, 'how to be British for the purpose of expropriating Australians and Australian for the purpose of independence from Britain?'<sup>24</sup>

There are a variety of possible responses to this predicament. With regard to the settler-metropole relation, responses vary from the rejectionist extremes of anti-colonial nationalism, epitomised by *The Bulletin* of the 1890s, to the conservative Anglocentrism represented in the 1930s and 1940s by the likes of G.H. Cowling and J.I.M. Stewart, professors of English at the universities of Melbourne and Adelaide respectively. With regard to the relation involving settler and indigene, possible responses range from disavowal of either the sovereignty or significance of Indigenous peoples on the one hand, to a radical mode of indigenist appropriation on the other. These are the dual strategies Goldie has termed '*penetration ... and appropriation*',<sup>25</sup> both of which aim towards settler indigenisation and allow for imagining an unmediated encounter between the settler and the land. The penetrationist tradition is similarly exemplified by *The Bulletin*, in which '[e]ach reference ... to the white Australian as "native" or "indigenous" is a comment on indigenization, regardless of the absence of Aborigines in those references'.<sup>26</sup> The appropriationist approach is most easily identifiable in the explicit indigenism of Margaret Preston and the Jindyworobaks.<sup>27</sup>

A more moderate penetrationism is also evident in either the neglect or passing and dismissive acknowledgements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and cultures offered by 'middle-ground' critics such as H.M. Green and C. Hartley Grattan.<sup>28</sup> For Grattan, who was prepared to support the 'fundamental truth' of Stephensen's nationalist position that 'any culture of moment in Australia must be deeply rooted in the Australian earth',<sup>29</sup> this earth was presumed available for easy usurpation. Grattan elsewhere praised what he described as

'sympathetic' views 'of the aboriginal in Australian literature'.<sup>30</sup> Yet contrary to Stephensen's position, elaborated below, he nevertheless held that at the moment of settler-colonial invasion Australia contained 'no indigenous civilization from which white men could draw much usable wisdom'.<sup>31</sup>

These dynamics and the tensions they produce for settler nationalists and settler universalists alike intersect in a variety of ways, reflecting the complexities of the triangular relations of settler colonialism. And so, for example, when in the late 1930s Rex Ingamells founded the Jindyworobaks and advocated the appropriation of what he conceived as a remnant indigeneity as a strategy of settler indigenisation, the anti-Australianist Alec Hope and the radical-nationalist A.A. Phillips found common cause in attacking him and his appropriationist program on the grounds of a perceived lack of value in the Indigenous cultures from which the Jindyworobaks sought to borrow.<sup>32</sup>

## The demise of the 'doomed race' ideal

The dynamics outlined above are not impervious to changing historical circumstances. While at times exclusive emphasis on the settler-metropole relation may be maintained, at other historical moments the disavowal or denial of the settler-indigene aspect of the settler situation common to the nationalist and universalist traditions alike is either undermined or rendered untenable by changing circumstances. The nationalist surge of the 1890s, for example, was underwritten by social evolutionism and the 'doomed race' ideal, which imagined an imminent future in which triadic relations would be resolved into dyadic ones. This enabled settler nationalists on the eve of federation to focus their attentions on claiming national cultural, even political, independence from the metropole. Relatedly, the penetrationist approach that characterised both the universalism and radical-nationalism of the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s was facilitated by a policy of forced assimilation that envisaged a similar resolution of relations, albeit by different means.

The 1930s, on the other hand, was a period marked by the demise of the doomed race ideal. In 1918, the Commonwealth Year Book declared that 'the natives ... are rapidly dying out',<sup>33</sup> but by 1924 it was noted that 'the aboriginal births now exceed the deaths at many places'.<sup>34</sup> The national population figures for 'full-bloods' remained reasonably consistent throughout the 1920s and 1930s, but while this stabilisation was seen as problematic it was the 'half-caste menace' that proved of most concern. According to Russell McGregor, from a population of under 10,000 before World War I and 11,579 in 1921, the loosely defined 'half-caste' population exploded from 15,468 in 1927 to almost 24,000 by the time of the 1937 conference on Aboriginal welfare.<sup>35</sup>

At the conference, Western Australian Commissioner of Native Affairs A.O. Neville and Chief Protector in the Northern Territory Cecil Cook outlined their absorptionist solutions to the 'half-caste problem'.<sup>36</sup> A.O. Neville famously declared:

the native population is increasing. What is to be the limit? Are we going to have a population of 1,000,000 blacks in the Commonwealth, or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there ever were any aborigines in Australia?<sup>37</sup>

For Cecil Cook, 'three alternatives' presented themselves: the 'repugnant' possibility of 'a policy of *laissez faire*'; a 'system of protection which will produce an aboriginal population ... likely to swamp the white'; or 'a policy under which the aboriginal will be absorbed into the

white population'. Cook expressed his preference for the third option, since 'unless the black population is speedily absorbed into the white, the process will soon be reversed, and in 50 years, or a little later, the white population of the Northern Territory will be absorbed into the black'.<sup>38</sup> The conference concluded that 'the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth'.<sup>39</sup>

This demographic transition brought settlers face to face with what Hodge and Mishra term 'the intractable conditions of [Australia's] foundation event',<sup>40</sup> since the notion that the demise of the Aboriginal 'race' was inevitable and that the only task remaining was to smooth the 'dying pillow' was irrevocably undermined. Of most relevance to the work of Xavier Herbert, this transition also brought to the fore what Miles Franklin described as 'the aboriginal skeleton in the colonisation cupboard': white Australian men's predilection for so-called 'black velvet', and the progeny that resulted.<sup>41</sup> As Patrick Wolfe has argued, it was due to 'settler-colonial society's inability to moderate the sexual bombardment that non-Aboriginal men were visiting upon Aboriginal women everywhere [that] the so-called "half-caste menace" was threatening to explode uncontrollably'.<sup>42</sup>

It is no coincidence, as Ellen Smith has observed, that it was in this period that 'Australian cultural nationalism [became] explicitly invested in the Aboriginal figure, Aboriginal culture, and an Aboriginal past as aesthetic and cultural resources in the construction of a unique national identity'.<sup>43</sup> At this historical juncture, settler nationalists found themselves confronting the prospect of a persistent Indigenous presence within the settler nation, and were forced to negotiate the triangular relations of settler colonialism rather than the dyadic ones of colonialism proper.

It is into this historical-cultural context that this article situates Xavier Herbert's notions of hybridity and indigeneity, and it does so in relation to his erstwhile supporter and editor, and subsequent adversary, the publisher and polemicist P.R. Stephensen. In attempting to negotiate the complex circumstances just outlined, Stephensen apparently subscribed to the 'Aryan Aborigines' hypothesis as a means of claiming a 'deep history'<sup>44</sup> on the Australian continent of 'a million years, or more'.<sup>45</sup> In an inversion of both Stephensen's temporal as well as the absorptionists' biological narratives, Herbert celebrated instead the potentiality of what he termed 'Euraustralian' hybridity to attain settler indigeneity through miscegenation. While these approaches are ostensibly at odds, it is the suggestion here that they share settler indigenisation and independence as their ultimate aims.

The following discussion employs two encounters typical of settler imaginaries to illustrate the differences between the approaches towards the 'problem of the fragment' Stephensen and Herbert adopted, but also to tie them both together within a broader, precedent tradition of what Moran has termed indigenising settler nationalism.<sup>46</sup>

## Encounter no. I: The passing of the mantle

Settler (male) encounters Aboriginal (male) in a moment of recognition as the Aboriginal dies and the settler flourishes. In that moment the Aboriginal passes the mantle of belonging to the land (autochthony) to the settler. A new relationship is established as the settler inherits the world of the Aboriginal ... The White man knows that he belongs to the future, and that the Aboriginal man belongs to the past. The dynamic between them is an act of conferral ... Treating whole groups of people as if they were generations, the relationship is linear: the ancient autochthon passes away and the settler takes his place as the new (and superior) indigene.<sup>47</sup>

Herbert's contemporary 'Inky' Stephensen was an influential figure in the Australian literary and cultural scene in the 1930s. As publisher, editor and political polemicist he consistently advocated the development of what he termed 'indigenous Australian culture' (by which he meant an independent settler one) until his internment from 1942 to the end of World War II on suspicion of collaboration with the Japanese undermined his influence for ever after.<sup>48</sup> In 1936, in the midst of what has been interpreted as his political transformation, he produced one of the most influential essays in the development of Australian nationalism: *The Foundations of Culture in Australia: An Essay Towards National Self-Respect*.<sup>49</sup>

In this three-part essay, produced under the increasing influence of rationalist and businessman W.J. Miles, Stephensen squarely acknowledged, and wrote against, the ambivalence of the period in which he was writing.<sup>50</sup> Stephensen described Australia as 'no longer a colony pure and simple, nor yet ... a Nation fully-fledged. We are something betwixt and between a colony and a nation, something vaguely called a "Dominion"'.<sup>51</sup> Stephensen sought, like many others before and since, to construct for Australia a 'mature national culture'.<sup>52</sup> He wrote against the 'larrikin' tradition in Australian literature, and determined the *Bulletin* to have had a 'dubious effect on Australian literature, and on culture in Australia'.<sup>53</sup> Instead, he sought 'a more civilized and enfranchised intellectual atmosphere', and the development of an *indigenous* (settler) national culture in touch with its European inheritance.<sup>54</sup>

Over the course of his essay, Stephensen laid out his argument that an original, 'indigenous' (settler) Australian culture would emerge through the interplay between 'Race and Place' under 'unique' Australian conditions.<sup>55</sup> For Stephensen, 'Race and Place' formed the 'two permanent elements in a culture, and Place ... is even more important than Race'.<sup>56</sup> This turn away from more typical notions of Australian nationality in terms of either British race patriotism, or Hancock's famous 'independent Australian Britons', is reflected in Stephensen's adaptation of Hancock's metaphor for national maturation.<sup>57</sup> For Hancock, such a process entailed 'a transplanting of stocks and the sending down of roots in a new soil'.<sup>58</sup> In Stephensen's original revisioning, however, Australian culture is conceptualised as a 'native plant', while British culture is the 'imported phosphates' the plant 'cannot do without'.<sup>59</sup> While the coherence of Stephensen's metaphor begins to unravel on closer examination—why, for example, if the plant is native, is it not Indigenous?—it responds to the dual settler desire for indigenisation and Europeanisation in new and important ways. In place of transplanted British stock attempting to penetrate a foreign soil to put down national cultural roots, here an 'indigenous' settler culture emerges from the land itself, while its imported cultural inheritance remains available as fertiliser for the purposes of national cultural development.

And yet in the context in which he was writing, in turning inwards towards the *genius loci*, the 'Spirit of the Place',<sup>60</sup> as the site of emergence for an indigenous settler national culture, Stephensen was compelled to address himself towards settler Australia's Indigenous antecedents. In two brief mentions, Stephensen suggested that 'Culture in Australia' would begin 'not from the Aborigines, who have been suppressed and exterminated, but from British culture'.<sup>61</sup> Yet he also proposed the 'advisability' of adopting a form of 'Initiation Corroboree' from 'our admirable predecessors in sovereignty over the territory of Australia Felix' as a means of instantiating Australian 'national lore', without which there could 'no national centre: no nation'.<sup>62</sup> Here, Indigenous Australians are relegated to the past in a familiar form of what Johannes Fabian calls the 'denial of coevalness', while their legitimate national belonging is rendered available to now-sovereign settlers for the purposes of indigenisation.<sup>63</sup>

One possible explanation for the apparent paradox of Stephensen's native/non-native gumtree, and a potential (if implausible) strategy for superseding his confrontation with

an antecedent Indigenous authority, might be located in his apparent subscription to one of the multiple variants of the so-called Aryan Aborigine, or Dark Caucasian, hypotheses. These theories of Aboriginal–Caucasian race-relatedness were developed at the University of Adelaide by Herbert Basedow and others, but also by the German anthropologist Carl Täuber, who in 1932 proposed that human life had originated in Australia.<sup>64</sup> In 1941, Stephensen wrote to Rex Ingamells that Indigenous Australians were '[o]ur spiritual (perhaps our physical) ancestors, (for the Aborigines are the oldest Aryans on earth)'.<sup>65</sup> Stephensen elaborated this position in his unpublished novel, appropriately entitled *The Settlers*, which bears more than a passing resemblance to Herbert's *Capricornia*, in subject matter if not in style, and certainly not success. In it, one of the characters Dr Morpeth declares, 'Life began here in Australia ... the Garden of Eden was here. The Tree of Life grew here':

This is the Oldest Continent. There used to be a land-bridge from here to Asia. Man evolved here from tree-marsupials which had evolved into monkeys and apes ... The Aryan race began in Australia. Australia is the original home of the white man. In coming to this land we are returning home. Australia is home to the white man. Marvellous things will happen as a result of this homecoming.<sup>66</sup>

Morpeth articulates precisely the kind of circularity Stephensen's indigenising settler nationalism requires: 'The Australian Aborigine ... is the same blood as us! You and I, [he tells the Vicar, another of the novel's protagonists], are Australian aborigines of a million years ago; gone white in the cold latitudes.'<sup>67</sup>

The prevailing interpretation of Stephensen's extreme variety of isolationist nationalism has held that it was little more than an antipodean variety of European fascism.<sup>68</sup> From such a perspective, his system of racial classification can be straightforwardly attributed to the fact that 'Nazi racial doctrine classed Australian Aborigines as Aryan, as they were certainly not Jewish'.<sup>69</sup> However, this is to neglect the purpose race-relatedness theory served within Stephensen's broader project of settler indigenisation. For Stephensen, as Smith has argued, 'the theory of Caucasian roots ... offered a way for white Australians to claim an Aboriginal genealogy'.<sup>70</sup> Stephensen's native plant was, it turns out, native after all, just a new and superior variety 'gone white in the cold latitudes'. Yet even though for Stephensen it was the native (settler) plant rather than the 'phosphates' of British culture that 'concerns us most', he was nevertheless prepared to admit the central role of 'English culture ... in building up our own indigenous culture'.<sup>71</sup> In an exemplary if original settler-colonial manoeuvre, Stephensen's apparent acceptance of race-relatedness theory served to enable a claim to settler Australia's inheritance of *both* British civilisation and Indigeneity. In his conceptualisation, settlers were both indigenous and European, and at the same time neither.

Stephensen's was a sophisticated, if ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to articulate the possibility of simultaneous neo-European replication and settler indigenisation, and represented a unique response to the 'problem of the fragment'. In a series of creative, if not entirely consistent, temporal manoeuvres, Stephensen positioned Indigenous Australians as in the present but of the past, condemned the British for their violent colonisation, and postponed the advent of the Australian nation until such time as the 'stains' of both convicts and colonisation had been washed away. So, in the same essay, Stephensen could refer to Indigenous Australians as 'suppressed and exterminated', condemn *British* colonisation for that violent process of suppression and extermination, praise Aboriginal people as 'our admirable predecessors in sovereignty', and still conclude with his future hopes for 'A New Britannia in

Another World!', for Australia to stand as the guardian of 'white civilisation, of white culture, of white traditions upon this earth'.<sup>72</sup> Stephensen's settlers *are* Rose's 'new (and superior)' indigenes, who clearly belong to the future while their Indigenous antecedents belong to the past.

Miles Franklin has described *The Foundations of Culture in Australia* as 'more assiduously consulted than acknowledged', a circumstance that no doubt owes much to Stephensen's increasingly extreme expressions of isolationist nationalism, anti-Semitism and sympathy for forces opposed to the British Empire, including Germany and Japan, and his consequent internment.<sup>73</sup> Stephensen's essay did not escape the attention of Xavier Herbert, however. Like Stephensen, Herbert's underlying aim was settler indigenisation, and it was he who took the 'continuing desire' Phillip Mead identifies 'in the white Australian imaginary ... for a species of cultural-racial syncretism' in a new and in some ways even more radical direction.<sup>74</sup>

In 1936, Herbert wrote in characteristically zealous fashion to Stephensen, exclaiming:

My Dear Inky,

A moment ago I concluded your book *Foundations of Culture*. What can I say about it? .... How your inspired message made me feel! ... I dream of being made a patrol officer, so that I may go right home to the old people and become one of them. But I've not forgotten 'the True Commonwealth'. I still tear up such *Sydney Morning Herald*s as I find, and bare my teeth at Pommies.

Yes—and I'm working to found a gigantic organisation called the Euraustralian League, comprised of so-called half-castes and quarter-castes, and of any whitefellas ... [who believe] that the culture of the land will grow like gum trees from the soil. These Euraustralians—or yeller-fellers as the transplanted Pommies call them—are a great race. There are something like 20,000 already ...

We are not Australians, Inky. Only those lucky people are. They are I should say the most vigorous race of people on the earth. I love them, and envy them their nationality. Curse the fates that arranged that I should be born a colonial Pommy! Will you work with me to organise this Euraustralian race so it will rise up and up and increase and multiply and eventually sweep the Pommies back into the sea?

PS. Some day I shall write 'True Commonwealth', a vast tale of the rise of the Euraustralians and the birth of the happiest nation on the earth and some day I shall father a Euraustralian so as to truly root myself in this dear earth and so as to legitimise my bastard whitefella genius.<sup>75</sup>

Which brings us to our second encounter, or rather set of encounters.

## Encounter/s no. II: Confronting an alien face in the mirror

[A]n authentic consciousness trying to grasp the distinctive characteristics of European society in Australia would, sooner or later, find itself face to face with the Aborigine and the land.<sup>76</sup>

If the white Australian tries to find his Aboriginal face in the mirror, he may come to see his own face as the face of the oppressor.<sup>77</sup>

For Stephensen, place was primary and a racial equivalence between Aboriginality and Aryanism opened him up to the utility of Aboriginality for the purpose of settler indigenisation, but Herbert was far more biologically oriented, and racially constrained. As Smith suggests:

for Herbert the symbolic recourses [sic] of place are inadequate and the figure of the 'Euraustralian' allows him to imagine a national blood-line. Herbert's model of national identity is biological, a matter of parentage. The Euraustralian represents for Herbert a national genealogy born of the soil and transmitted by blood, and a counter to the 'transplanted pommie,' the colonial heritage that Herbert regrettably identifies as his own.<sup>78</sup>

If Stephensen usurped an already suppressed and exterminated indigeneity through an imagined racial inheritance—a passing of the mantle of belonging—based on the interplay between 'race and place', Herbert proposed a radical project of racial hybridity that not only reversed the temporal trajectory of Stephensen's transfer, but inverted the racial understandings on which it was based. Herbert was clearly aware of the demographic transition outlined above, since he says as much in his letter to Stephensen. His response was a miscegenist one. Contrary to prevailing absorptionist ideas and ideals—themselves comprising a (not wholly consistent) set of responses to 'the spectre of a "rising tide of colour"'<sup>79</sup> threatening to overwhelm white Australia—Herbert's desire was to become 'one of them', or at least to 'legitimise' his claim to indigeneity through (illegitimate) reproduction. For Stephensen, the future of the Indigenous population was as biological and spiritual ancestor to the new (and superior) indigenised settler. For Herbert, it was the other way around, and the future of the settler nation would be an indigenous one only by virtue of 'breeding in' indigeneity through miscegenation.<sup>80</sup>

Herbert's position was also a misogynist one, since it assumed the settler father would pass on and reciprocally receive an essence of indigeneity through the very act of procreation with an Aboriginal woman, who represents nothing more than a vessel for the absorption and transmogrification of settler illegitimacy into hybrid indigeneity.<sup>81</sup> This misogyny played out in Herbert's novels where, as Smith points out, '[a]lmost all the Aboriginal women die ... and all the Aboriginal mothers die'. Here Smith draws our attention to the correspondences between Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* and Herbert's novels, but also between Herbert's novels and the endless representations and reiterations of what Tim Rowse calls the 'Dying Native fantasy', so consistently central to settler imaginings of indigenous (settler) futures.<sup>82</sup>

Fiona Probyn-Rapsey concludes that Herbert's "'son of the soil" nationalism' was not so far from the 'state-sanctioned future vision of a White Nation' advocated by the absorptionists, since 'both placed Aboriginal people at the source of white belonging'.<sup>83</sup> Yet whereas the absorptionist position leads towards settler acclimation through biological absorption, Herbert's nationalist teleology leads on the contrary towards settler indigenisation through miscegenation. Even if the absorptionist program at times supported 'remarkably progressive' social policies for Indigenous people themselves, it ultimately envisaged a white settler nation (albeit one better acclimatised by virtue of the very process of absorption).<sup>84</sup> Herbert, on the other hand, like Stephensen, envisaged an *indigenous* settler nation. Russell McGregor concludes that for the absorptionists 'the problem was that half-castes were not white'.<sup>85</sup> For Herbert the problem was that white Australians were not (yet) Indigenous.

## Proximity and confrontation

Herbert's position is simultaneously aligned with and distinct from Stephensen's imagining of an originary emergence—of a new, indigenous settler emerging through the interaction between 'race and place'. One possible explanation for the differences between these similarly indigenising settler nationalist positions relates to Herbert's relative proximity to, and knowledge of, the rising population of mixed descent, as well as his particular position along the settler–metropole divide. Herbert advocated what we might unsavourily term 'indigenisation through insemination' because in his search for 'Australia Felix, the site of the true Commonwealth', the itinerant Herbert found himself more directly and consistently confronted by the reality of his own status as 'alien', as 'an invader', than did the urban-dwelling 'man of letters' Stephensen.<sup>86</sup>

Stephensen and Herbert were contemporaries, both born in the year of Australian federation, and both grew up in relatively isolated parts of Australia, Stephensen in Queensland and Herbert in north-west Western Australia. They both developed an early love of the bush and a sense of affinity with the Australian environment that provided the background for much of their creative output. The two first met in Sydney in 1933, shortly after they had both returned from England, where they had similarly experienced the dual sense of alienation from home (in Australia) and home (in 'the mother country') that was the lot of so many Australian authors and intellectuals at the time and after. Both Stephensen and Herbert responded by (re)dedicating themselves to the cause of Australian cultural nationalism despite expressing equally ambivalent sentiments about Australia as the country they loved populated by people they despised.

Yet there were important distinctions between these two figures, in terms of their class backgrounds and positions, and the forms and degrees of cultural capital they possessed. Stephensen, for example, was much more in touch with European culture and felt more at home in England than had Herbert during his brief stint in London. As Munro points out, while 'Stephensen was mixing in London literary society and enjoying long vacations in Paris, Herbert was navvying in the Northern Territory on the north-south railway line, mustering cattle, hunting crocodiles, or working as a diver on a pearling lugger'.<sup>87</sup> These distinctions continued in Australia, where Stephensen felt at home in Sydney and Herbert avoided the city as far as possible:

Stephensen was a thoroughly metropolitan type; a flamboyant talker, drinker and polemicist. Though Herbert could be as talkative as Stephensen, cities threw him off balance, and he preferred the life of a wandering bushman and recluse. It was the landscape and people of the north which sustained his creative spirit and powered his narrative genius.<sup>88</sup>

Partly because of their different backgrounds, personalities and social statuses, Herbert's anti-colonialism was even stronger than Stephensen's, as was the alienation he felt on his arrival in London, and his return to Australia. As Herbert's biographer Frances de Groen suggests, 'his experience of failure and alienation in London precipitated a severe emotional crisis'.<sup>89</sup> In some ways, this 'crisis' made Herbert's negotiation of the tension between settler and metropole more straightforward than it was for Stephensen, yet it also complicated his negotiation of the settler–indigene dialectic, since he had more at stake in its resolution. This was further complicated by his first-hand knowledge of Australia in general, and the Indigenous populations of the north in particular.

By the time he visited London, against the ‘awful background’ of which he produced the first draft of *Capricornia*, Herbert had already travelled extensively throughout the Northern Territory, where he witnessed first-hand the impoverishment and abuse experienced by the local Aboriginal population.<sup>90</sup> He later reflected on his departure from Sydney to the North on Australia Day 1935: ‘I went to commune with the Spirit of the Land, but found something much more urgent to give my attention to—the unutterable misery of its custodians’.<sup>91</sup> As Healy has observed: ‘The Aborigines were a natural part of the world Herbert wrote about, so it cannot be said that Herbert discovered them in the way ... [his] contemporaries in “settled” Australia had to.’<sup>92</sup>

While some have read into Herbert’s background, especially his illegitimacy, a confessional psychology underpinning his oeuvre,<sup>93</sup> Sean Monahan has convincingly argued that what Herbert called the ‘deep purpose’ of his novels was that of ‘presenting a view of the Australian ethos’, and that his ‘real subject ... is neither Aborigines nor metaphysics, but Australia’.<sup>94</sup> This subject was hardly unique, but his approach to it certainly was. Monahan’s summary of *Capricornia* expresses this succinctly: ‘Aboriginals and whites make a country called Australia.’<sup>95</sup>

Herbert’s original nationalist equation seems to have been informed by his background and positioning in relation to both metropolitan England and Indigenous Australia, which produced in him a level of sensitivity to his, and other settler Australians’, status as both ‘native and alien’ unusual among his contemporaries.<sup>96</sup> According to de Groen, Herbert possessed an early and consistent awareness of ‘the ambivalence of his own situation as both coloniser and colonised’.<sup>97</sup> His continual confrontation with his dual sense of alienation—from England and from the Australia with which he identified—seems to have compelled him towards an indigenising project that, by virtue of his knowledge of and interest in Aboriginal Australia, could not have been founded on the kinds of disavowal and displacement characteristic of Stephensen’s position.

In a letter to Arthur Dibley, Herbert admitted:

I’ve come to envy these half-castes their heritage, so much so that, for all my love of the soil & all my pride in being born of it, I must confess that I’m simply an invader & that there is no hope of my ever being able to claim the right to live in this land unless I infuse my very blood into the Aboriginal race.<sup>98</sup>

This is a confirmation of Herbert’s experience of precisely the encounters J.J. Healy and Tony Birch describe. Herbert did look for his Aboriginal face in the mirror—and sometimes found it, telling Dibley ‘I have a blackfella’s mind’ and ‘I can see things blackfella fashion’.<sup>99</sup> Yet he was consistently reminded of his ambivalent status as both ‘native and alien’ by virtue of his own reflection, and his direct encounters with those more ‘Australian’ than himself.<sup>100</sup> He could not, as an ‘authentic consciousness’, imagine himself in contact with the ‘Spirit of the Land’ he had set out from Sydney in search of, and which Stephensen so easily emphasised, without recognising that it belonged to someone else.

In an original response, Herbert reversed the temporal trajectory of Stephensen’s transfer and inverted the biological understandings on which it was based. Contrary to the ‘passing of the mantle’ Stephensen imagined, whereby the mantle of belonging—of indigeneity—would pass from the ancient indigene to the superior, civilised settler, in Herbert’s imaginings, the settler would do the passing too. For Herbert, the population of mixed descent would genetically inherit (and pass backwards to its male progenitors) both indigeneity *and* civilisation. This represents another unique response to a common settler conundrum, yet while

Herbert's and Stephensen's positions differed in important respects, settler indigenisation and independence remained their equally overriding concerns. In this they were not innocent, and their shared project of settler indigenisation had significant implications for the symbolic place of Indigenous Australians within the settler nation they were attempting to construct.

## The politics of settler indigenisation

The focus of both Stephensen's and Herbert's brands of settler cultural nationalism remained squarely on imagining indigenous national futures for settler Australia/ns, and they both exhibited a tendency to instrumentalise Aboriginality as a means towards that end. In this, they conformed to other narratives of settler indigenisation, which have as a prerequisite the destruction, or at least disavowal, of the empirical indigene 'within civilisation'.<sup>101</sup> And yet, as Tim Rowse has argued, settler indigenism 'has also sometimes included sensitivity to the grievances and wishes of actual Indigenous people'.<sup>102</sup> This was clearly the case for both Stephensen and Herbert. While Stephensen's position involved an imaginative transfer of sovereignty and national belonging and entailed the displacement of Indigenous peoples for the purpose of replacing them, he was not unaware of or insensitive to the plight of Indigenous people themselves. Nor was Herbert, who attempted to negotiate his anti-imperialist indigenising imperative alongside his concern for the experiences of actual Aboriginal people. As Stephensen's biographer Craig Munro remarks, Stephensen and Herbert 'shared a fascination for the Aborigines and a sense of outrage at their mistreatment and degradation'.<sup>103</sup> As a result of the biographical circumstances outlined above, however, Herbert's engagement with 'the Aboriginal cause' was 'less theoretical' than Stephensen's, and it was his commitment that helped convert Stephensen's sympathy into practical support for the Aboriginal rights movement in the late 1930s.<sup>104</sup>

In the lead up to *Capricornia's* publication, Stephensen became involved with the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA) led by William Ferguson and Jack Patten, for whom he helped plan the Day of Mourning protest against Australia's sesquicentenary celebrations on Australia Day 1938.<sup>105</sup> Stephensen and the Publicist Publishing Company deliberately scheduled publication of Herbert's novel to coincide with the Day of Mourning and made good use of the protests in promoting it, Stephensen explicitly linking the novel to 'the Aboriginal Question'. As a result, Stephensen's motivations for supporting these protests in particular, and the early Aboriginal rights movement more generally, have been called into question on the suspicion he may have only offered his support as a means of promoting Herbert's novel, in the success of which he was deeply invested.<sup>106</sup>

However, while commercial concerns would hardly have dissuaded him from supporting the APA and the cause of Aboriginal citizenship, it is also the case that Stephensen 'expressed sympathy with the Aborigines' both before and beyond the promotion of Herbert's novel.<sup>107</sup> Perhaps more importantly, the critiques offered by Herbert's novel and the Aboriginal rights movement in general were entirely (if implausibly) consistent with the ethical distinction Stephensen had already drawn between the destructive effects of *British* colonisation on the one hand and 'a specifically white "Australian decency" on the other'.<sup>108</sup> By applying the same set of temporal manoeuvres utilised in *The Foundations of Culture* and outlined above, Stephensen was able to make 'an interest in Aboriginal rights part of a specifically anti-British nationalist agenda'.<sup>109</sup>

It should also be acknowledged that the political positions adopted by Stephensen and Herbert broadly aligned with the activities and aspirations of Aboriginal activists of the time,

including those of the APA, even if their underlying imperatives and intentions bore very different implications for all agencies involved. The cultural contradictions these political alignments produced were most evident in Herbert's 'dream', which he outlined in a letter to Dibley in 1936:

Do you know what I've been dreaming of doing? Why, no less than dreaming of teaching the Aboriginal race to accept citizenship & win a place in the Nation, & honourable place, so that they may cross with the invaders & enrich the new Nation with their blood.<sup>110</sup>

To this end, Herbert helped to found the 'Euraustralian League' with Valentine McGinness (described by Herbert as 'a great Australian', and 'the truest Australian I have ever met', and the inspiration for the character of Norman Shillingsworth in *Capricornia*).<sup>111</sup> However, Herbert subsequently admitted to Dibley that he had been 'dodging the issue' and that even having founded the organisation it was 'mainly ambition to be elected that is causing me to take such an interest in the Euraustralians'.<sup>112</sup> He also expressed his disappointment that attendees of the organisation's first meeting were 'the worst type', but nevertheless noted his gratification that they had seemed impressed by his performance.<sup>113</sup>

We might read into his 'dodging' of 'the issue' and his disillusionment with the reality of the Euraustralian League a disjuncture between Herbert's underlying desire for personal and national legitimacy—which, given his background and the context in which he lived and worked, was necessarily reliant on Indigenous Australians as an indigenising resource—and his stated aspiration to work with actual Indigenous people in order that they might 'accept citizenship & win a place in the Nation'.<sup>114</sup> Even in his original statement of this ambition, the citizenship and national inclusion ostensibly offered to Indigenous people is subordinate to the purpose of settler indigenisation such a process would, in Herbert's view, make possible. Herbert's comments therefore suggest that, like Stephensen, his 'deep purpose' remained the indigenisation of the settler nation and, by extension, himself.

## Conclusion

Throughout the course of Australian literary-cultural history, many if not most articulations of settler nationalism have neglected the complexity of the settler-colonial system of relationships this article has emphasised as significant, if not insuperable. Yet such attempts do not simply supersede the circumstances of their own production by virtue of their failure or refusal to acknowledge them. The competing positions of anti-imperial nationalism and empire loyalism, of the radical-nationalist and universalist traditions, are typically addressed towards the tension between settler and metropole, while attempting to obscure from view the settler-indigene dialectic that incessantly unsettles them. Even the 'middle-ground' positions of the likes of C. Hartley Grattan and H.M. Green focus on and account for only one aspect of the settler situation. Indeed, the entire narrative structure of 'two Australias', in which settler and metropolitan agencies proceed dialectically towards an inevitable moment of cultural synthesis and national maturation—whether for the purposes of national independence or re-integration—operates precisely in the way Alan Lawson suggests: as a 'strategic disavowal of the colonising act'.

On the contrary, confronted by the circumstances of their own, and Australia's, reality, 'Inky' Stephensen and Xavier Herbert addressed themselves towards the 'neglected strand' of Australian nationalism<sup>115</sup>—what this article has characterised as the identificatory dialectic

between settler and indigene—in ways that attempted to grapple with settlers’ ambiguous and ambivalent situatedness as simultaneously coloniser and colonised. While their responses were problematic, in racial and, especially for Herbert, sexual terms, and their proposed solutions neither comprehensive nor entirely convincing, it is nevertheless one of the distinguishing characteristics of these settler nationalists’ approaches that they recognised and acknowledged the full complexity of the settler situation, and attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to negotiate its complex terrain.

## About the author

Dan Tout is a lecturer in history and sociology at Federation University, a PhD candidate at Swinburne University of Technology and an editor of, and managing editor for, *Arena Journal*. His research focuses on Australian settler colonialism and cultural nationalism.

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