

Introduction to Katherine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929)

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When *Coonardoo* was published in 1929, Katharine Susannah Prichard added a preface to the novel which, in effect, justified it both as a work of the imagination, and of historical and social accuracy. 'Life in the north-west of Western Australia,' she wrote, 'is almost as little known in Australia as in England or America. It seems necessary to say, therefore, that the story was written in the country through which it moves. Facts, characters, incidents, have been collected, related and interwoven. That is all.'

Katharine Prichard took this unusual step of offering an explanation for a work of fiction because, when the novel had been serialised in the *Bulletin* during 1928, hundreds of letters were written in protest, and the publishers were anxious. The critic Nettie Palmer was quite right when she feared the response to *Coonardoo* would set back the chances for others who wanted to write seriously and imaginatively about the lives of white men and black women in outback Australia. In May 1929, after running the serial of *Coonardoo*, S. H. Prior of the *Bulletin* wrote to Vance Palmer to say they could no longer go ahead with the serial of his novel, *Men Are Human*. 'There is no chance, I suppose,' he wrote 'of your whitewashing the girl?'

Recognised as a novel that broke important ground, *Coonardoo* was published to critical acclaim as well as public outrage. Taking the latter more seriously than the former, Prior explained to Vance Palmer: 'Our experience with *Coonardoo* shows us that the Australian public will not stand stories based on a white man's relations with an Australian aborigine.' The problem, it would seem, was not so much that Katharine Susannah Prichard exposed the widespread exploitation of black women by white men, but that she wrote of the love, albeit unacknowledged and twisted in on itself, between a white man and an Aboriginal woman. No one denied that white men used black women for their own sexual gratification. Love, it would seem, was the real indecency.

Sixty years later, *Coonardoo* continues to make uncomfortable reading, and the challenge Katharine Prichard throws to white Australia – that we come to terms with Aboriginal Australia or perish – still comes in on target. Enough remains the same; much, one could say, is worse. But with the distance of sixty years, we can also see how much has changed. Writing about *Coonardoo* afflicts one, therefore, with a strange case of double vision. On the one hand there is the radical and

passionate view from 1926, and once again I raise my hat to Katharine Susannah Prichard. On the other hand there are the assumptions and procedures she accepted and we do not, the language she could use and we would not; and the lapses and silences that would not, and could not, have been heard then, but which startle us now.

Katharine Susannah Prichard was looking for a quiet spot to finish the manuscript of *Haxby's Circus* when, in 1926, she accepted an invitation to visit the Kimberleys. By her own admission, she arrived at Turee station with very little knowledge of life in the outback, and even less of Aboriginal culture. She had set out from Perth expecting peace to get on with other work, and arrived to find herself seduced by a huge red landscape and overwhelmed by the strange and mysterious presence of Aboriginal Australia.

It's terrifically hot [she wrote to Vance and Nettie Palmer on arrival], and the dust storms – suffocating. But I've been riding nearly every day, and am that colour of red mulga and hennaed with dust (make what you can of the verb, Nettie dear). Sometimes one of the gins rides with me, sometimes mine host, who is really a bit of the country, and sometimes Mick, a stockman who has lived here all his life...

And of course I'm envious with stories, delighted and quite mad with the beauty and tragedy of them. The only fly in the ointment that my hostess has aspirations of literary efforts ... and I'm afraid won't ever be able to do anything but the small and sentimental. I mean has no quality of language, capacity for imagery, or ability to see natural values. You know what I mean, weaving our psychology and sentimental morality over native legends. I've been trying to show her how to do them on their own merits – to see things as the blacks see them.

And the blacks are most interesting – fair haired – and I find them poetic and naive. Quite unlike all I've ever been told, or asked to believe about them. I'm doing some character studies. But feel 'to honour bound' not to touch the legends.

It is a small irony that a writer whose working practice was to choose a subject and then research it, should stumble across one of the most powerful sources for her writing. From her time at Turee station, she wrote *Coonardoo*, a play called *Brumby Innes*, which opened to a corroboree, and two of her best short stories, "Happiness" and "The Cooboo". It was as if Katharine Susannah Prichard found there, at the edge of the desert, on the fringe of white settlement, something that touched a nerve at the heart of white Australia.

Coonardoo is detailed in its account of station life, the daily routine, the stores, the kitchen, the stockyards, the mustering, the Aboriginal camp, the homestead verandah. Perhaps it is this accuracy of naturalistic detail, always a stamp of Katharine Prichard's work, that encouraged a shocked response to the novel. At the centre of it all is *Coonardoo*, and although her ultimate significance is less realistic than symbolic, her story is so dreadful, and thereby memorable, that it too invited a literal reading of exploited fact. As a frame for *Coonardoo's* own story, the use of black women by white men extends from the predatory Sam Geary who keeps mistresses in fine clothes, to the pearling luggers that travel the coast with 'black pearl' on board, women to be used until, diseased, they were discarded.

The tragedy of *Coonardoo*, who ends up as a discarded *black pearl*, is not, at any rate not simply, that she is misused sexually; rather it is that her love for Hugh, and his for her, can never be acknowledged, other than with secrecy and shame,

in the tiny space where his world and hers intersect. The result of this denial is spiritual death for them both. What shocked the readers in 1929, I suspect, was not so much the portrayal of the degradation of Aboriginal women, shocking as that is, and obvious as it was for a focus of outrage, but the possibility of love between Hugh and Coonardoo. It is this denied possibility that makes the other cruder forms of abuse so disturbing, because it tells us something about the failure of love, in which we are all complicit, rather than merely detailing the forms of brutality.

The point about Hugh is that he is a decent man. That is the indictment Katharine Prichard makes of him. In the 1920s a decent man believed miscegenation was morally wrong, and that the Aborigines, a dying race, should be treated fairly and with kindness. Because of his decency, this decency, Hugh denied his own feelings, and his own sexuality, and ignored, or failed to recognise Coonardoo's. Unable to acknowledge what has passed between them, he hurts his legitimate white wife and himself; he brings terrible misery to Coonardoo, and, ultimately, the destruction of the Aboriginal community on his station. He stands condemned not as a brute, but in the weakness and blindness of his own repressed obedience to unquestioned moral standards. That is a much harder indictment for a decent white Australian audience to bear. They could be shocked by the men who rape and abuse, for they were not them; or so they told themselves. Hugh was an average Australian man, better than average, a decent man like his decent readers, themselves no strangers to the failures of love.

When *Coonardoo* was published in the late 1920s, the Aboriginal situation in the north-west had been in the metropolitan news through two widely publicised incidents. In 1926 a group of Aborigines had been massacred by police at Onmalmeri in the Kimberleys as retaliation for the murder of a single white man. The outcry from the cities resulted in a Royal Commission. Then, in 1928, there was another reprisal massacre, the Coniston killings, this time some distance north-west of Alice Springs.

Coonardoo was published, then, at a time when white Australia was beginning to debate the responsibilities of government towards the Aborigines. The mood in metropolitan Australia was one of indignation at brutalities occurring on what was understood to be the peripheries of their society. So rather than assume Katharine Prichard's audience would be shocked by further revelations of brutality, one could argue that white Australia was prepared for it, even expecting it. But her readers were not prepared for a novel, ostensibly set on the edge of the desert, on the fringes of white Australia, that brought the problem right into its suburban heart. The crisis between black and white could not be attributed to isolated incidents on the outskirts, for it took sustenance from the decent respectability of middle-class Australia. Coonardoo's symbolic significance as the land itself, 'the well in the shadow', reinforced the challenge Katharine Susannah Prichard made through this novel that if white Australia, symbolically represented by Hugh, could not give Aboriginal Australia the respect of love, then both black and white were doomed to moral and cultural impoverishment.

In the foreword to the 1929 edition of *Coonardoo*, Katharine Susannah Prichard evokes the authority of anthropology to support her view of Aboriginal culture. She writes:

Based on the Australian Aboriginal says, 'Anthropological relationship connects the Australian ... with the Veddahs and Dravidians of India and with the fossil men of Europe, from whom the Caucasian element has sprung.' They are only a few generations removed, after all, Coonardoo and Andromache. 'In other words, the Australian aboriginal stands somewhere

near the bottom rung of the great evolutionary ladder we have ascended.'

From the vantage point of 1990, one registers shock at a view of evolution that is, now, thoroughly discredited. Katharine Prichard is not to be criticised for this. She was writing of her time as every writer must, and indeed in the context of twenties opinion, she was pointing out not the distance between white and black, but the continuity, as she put it, between Coonardoo and Andromache, between Aboriginal Australia and our own mythology. However, from a contemporary point of view, it is perhaps the unconscious assumptions about this mysterious black Australia, given to us through the limits of a white imagination, that tell us most about attitudes to race, then and now.

In her letter from Turee station, it is clear that Katharine Prichard, unlike her hostess, could see at once the possibility of writing about the north-west through the perspective of the blacks. There had been little enough attempt to do so in existing Australian fiction. E. L. Grant Watson, a biologist who had worked in the Kimberleys with Daisy Bates and Radcliffe Brown before the First World War, made a fictional approach to the subject in a story called 'Out There', which was received with some interest by the readers of the *English Review*, but which did not attract public attention. In *The Man Hamilton*, Vance Palmer's hero takes a half-caste 'wife', but her point of view is well and truly subsidiary to the hero's. *Coonardoo* was effectively the first Australian novel to take an Aboriginal woman as its acknowledged subject. This, in itself, must have added to the sense of shock with which it was greeted. Approaching *Coonardoo*, however, from a contemporary perspective in which Black critics call white writers on their evasions, and in which Black writing is developing its own, very different terms, it is worth looking again to see just how far it was possible – and impossible – for Katharine Susannah Prichard to take an Aboriginal point of view.

As a writer, Katharine Prichard relied heavily on naturalistic detail, even in this, her most symbolic novel. But naturalistic detail was less available to her for Coonardoo than it was for any of her white characters. While she knew the life of the homestead verandah and could imagine it in all its moods, she did not know, and could not know the intricate and intimate experiences of Aboriginal life. We see Coonardoo almost entirely in her role with the white world, at the house, managing the keys to the store, mustering, riding, pitching camp. When the story is told through her point of view, it is the whites she sees, with only a glance to her own people. Her story is billed as the novel's story, and so it is, but it is her story as it bore on the life of the station, and the lives of its white owners. It is Hugh's story that is given resonance through Coonardoo, not the other way round.

The character of Coonardoo, *the well in the shadow*, the dark brooding presence of the land itself, of nature, and therefore of desire, gives meaning not only to Hugh but also to the white women on the station. It is here, displaced onto the white, that we can see unspoken assumptions about black femininity at work. There is Hugh's mother, Mumae; there is his wife, Mollie, and his daughter, Phyllis. Coonardoo spans them all.

Mumae is a figure we recognise from Mrs Aeneus Gunn, the good matriarch who rules kindly and firmly, raising Coonardoo for her part in the future, just as she raises Hugh for his. Hugh tells Mollie:

Mother handled them extraordinarily well. It's the iron hand in the velvet glove does the trick, she used to say. Was very strict about some things. Respected them and their ideas. Made 'em respect hers. If they wanted the things she had to give, she made them do what she wanted, obey her,

wash, and not take anything without asking. They're naturally honest... fair dealers.

But Mumae's rule is a rule of the past. It's the rule of parent to child. And while Hugh might long for a return to that maternal certainty, Molly cannot re-create it. Hugh and Coonardoo are no longer children, and they must face what Mumae's rule denied; their own sexuality. There are hints that Mumae was once a young woman, and a little wild, but now she's a widow, and old. She is sexless herself, and while she tries to understand 'her' Aborigines' attitude to sex, 'to find in it something impersonal, universal, or a religious mysticism', she is, in all honesty, repelled. She is dependent on their knowledge of the land, and she romanticises this as natural and therefore primitive. But she rejects the sexual dimension which the novel attributes to that same notion of primitive, and close to nature. The initiation ceremonies and the corroborees trouble Mumae, leaving her vaguely dissatisfied, a dark shadow cast over her wholesome image of the station she liked to think she could control, even after death.

Frightened by his strong connection to Coonardoo, and through her to the land, Hugh marries Mollie, a woman who had proven domestic credentials, to save him from the fate of Sam Geary and his fancy black mistresses, or worse, of going bush himself. Hugh marries Mollie in Geraldton and brings her back to Wyaliba. When he steps out of the buggy he sees the child in Coonardoo's arms and knows it is his own. The child is accepted on the station as Warieda's, by Aboriginal custom the son of Coonardoo's husband. No one suspects otherwise, and Hugh keeps the guilty secret to himself. Denial accompanies his life with Mollie from the moment she arrives on the verandah. Later, at the end of the novel, long after Mollie has left 'the hard arid plains' she loathed, Phyllis realises her father took her mother 'like most men take a gin'. She could see too late that his unacknowledged love for Coonardoo was a fantasy which would turn in on itself and destroy them both.

Of the three white women, Phyllis is the only one with a sexuality worth mentioning, although there is something perfunctory about the way Katharine Prichard wrote it. Phyllis, determined to stay on the land she, too, grew up to love, falls for an ill-educated white stockman from Geary's station. That was a hard enough choice for her father – and for the readers. In 1929 the possibility of love between a black man and a white woman was, literally, unthinkable.

Mumae, Mollie and then Phyllis are each served, and complemented, by Coonardoo. She is there, meshed into the relationship of each with Hugh, and with the place itself. Coonardoo alone in the novel is granted a full and desiring sexuality; and Katharine Susannah Prichard writes vividly of Coonardoo as a sexual being. There she is, as a young girl showing off to the young men on her way past the homestead. There she is, denied access to Hugh, living out the pain of his refusal at the other end of the verandah. There she is, with full breasts and a child in her arms. There she is, caught in her own, wretched ambivalence as Geary makes his advances.

Seeing Coonardoo in this way, again one experiences double vision. How daring of Katharine Prichard to write a fully sexual Aboriginal woman and name a novel for her in the 1920s. But there is another, contemporary view. Gayatri Spivak has shown the way in which the black woman in European literature is made to carry all that is hidden and denied in white woman; her sexuality, her madness, her suffering. All that cannot be acknowledged in white femininity is given to the black. What a burden Coonardoo must bear, taking the full impact not only of love that is denied, but its obverse, the crude desires of men; and taking also the shadow

of the sexual repression white culture imposes on its own women.

Katharine Susannah Prichard made the challenge to her readers of 1929 that until white Australia could accept black Australia in love, in a symbolic sexual union that ratified their sharing of the land, both would be doomed. The unspoken challenge this novel makes to readers of the 1990s might be that there is no accommodation to be made between black and white in this country while the repressed fears and longings of the whites have to be borne by the black; for then there is everything for each of us to fear.