‘In the Land of Byamee’ European representations of Aboriginal mythology from K. Langloh Parker to Robert Lawlor


This paper concerns the history of popular European representations of Aboriginal religion often published under titles such as ‘Aboriginal mythology’, ‘Native folklore’ or, more recently, ‘Legends of the Dreamtime’. The most significant of the early popular writers on Aboriginal mythology was certainly K. Langloh Parker, and I will be investigating the ways in which her accounts have remained deeply influential, even in the work of contemporary New Age religionists, such as Robert Lawlor. I wish to argue that from these popular representations there has emerged a new post-colonial spirituality, which Oodgeroo has called the ‘New Dreaming’, and which expresses itself today in both Christian and post-Christian, New Age, formulations.
I would note that I am not dealing here with anthropological or ethnographic interpretations of Aboriginal religions, which have their own history. Rather I am concerned with broader, more popular responses to Aboriginal religions, not those intended for a specialised, highly educated or trained audience. This rules out most academic studies, but includes children’s literature, folklore collections, mass-reproduced art and other kinds of ephemeral literature. Much of this literature and art was produced for light entertainment and I have taken this as the main quality defining it ‘popular’ nature. Books of legends, and their illustrations, have been one of the most influential ways in which Europeans have formed their ideas about Aboriginal religion. I would note briefly the significance of a number of other media, including museum exhibitions, beginning in the 1950s, and the activities of museum associations and the very limited activity of ethnographers writing for a popular audience. One vital source which should be mentioned here is the photographic collection of Spencer Baldwin, now in the State Museum of Victoria, images from which feature in Baldwin and Spencer’s ethnographies of the Arrernte at around the turn of the century.

Not surprisingly, professionally trained ethnographers have been deeply dismissive of popular accounts of Aboriginal religion. Tony Swain’s critical bibliography provides a wonderful source for derogatory epithets for much of it. Keith C. McKeown’s, The Land of Byamee, the book which has provided me with the title for this paper, he declares:

A horrible book attempting to ‘restore’ to Wiradjuri and other myths a breath of life, but instead finally suffocating them.

Other items are ‘highly confused’, ‘heavily paraphrased and popularised’, ‘hardly ethnographically reliable’ or simply, ‘terrible’. Swain is just as dismissive of collections endorsed or written by Aboriginal authors or editors, such as David Unaipon, whose Native Legends, he declares to be ‘horribly fairy-tale like’.

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1 Tony Swain, Interpreting Aboriginal Religion. An Historical Account, Adelaide: AASR, 1985
3 Ibid., p.268
4 Citing comments from reports of accounts of religion in the South-East, items 0988, 0986, 0989
5 Ibid., item 1000, p.271
Swain’s acerbic judgements serve the purpose for which his bibliography was compiled, namely to aid European students undertaking research in the ethnography, history or other study of Aboriginal religions. For this, clear signposts are needed as to which books are best avoided because of their contamination by other non-scientific discourses. Swain only endorses popular Europeanised accounts if they are very early, have been compiled by Aboriginal authors or provide evidence of cultural transformation.\textsuperscript{6}

Armed with post-modern theory, debate is now raging over the issue of what now constitutes ‘Aboriginal’ identity, and hence ‘Aboriginal’ literature and, for that matter, religion. Scholars with a formal training in history or anthropology have been reluctant to accept the reconstitution of Aboriginality by individuals such as Sally Morgan, whose route to knowledge has been achieved by the discovery of family heritage and the very Europeanised accounts of Aboriginal culture they have long been at pains to discredit.\textsuperscript{7} Morgan has been seen as both disingenuous and a cultural vandal.

The popular notion of traditional Aboriginal society as ‘more spiritual’ than the west, and characterised by a relationship to the Land through a shared heritage of ‘Dreaming’ of ‘Dreamtime’ traditions has been a particular irritant to scholars and some Aborigines. The path by which the Dreaming came to dominate European thinking about Australian indigenous culture has been traced in a subtle and important article by Patrick Wolfe\textsuperscript{8} From its original coining in the ethnography of Frank Gillen among the Arrernte of Central Australia shortly before the turn of the century, to its current near universal endorsement by Aborigines throughout Australia in negotiations with Europeans, the Dreaming has swept all before it. Wolfe has argued that the main purpose served by the Dreaming complex was to empty the land for colonial purposes, relegating the Aborigines to a timeless mythological landscape unconnected with their ongoing dispossession, but there has been

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.  
increasing use of the complex by Aboriginal writers, serving their own political or neo-religious purposes.9

These current issues should alert us to the interpretive challenge of addressing the representation of Aboriginal religion in popular culture. This is highly contested ground. For the rest of the paper I mean to consider only popular accounts of Aboriginal mythology from the south east of Australia.

1. Early ethnographies

Who is Baiamai - and why has he come to hold such a central role in popular books about Aboriginal mythology? The short answer is that Baiamai is the All-Father associated with the Wiradjuri-speaking people of south-eastern Australia.10 Accounts of Baiamai were collected by missionaries and European explorers from the 1830s. The ethnographer, R.H. Mathews included legends about Baiamai in his folklore collections for the wider public published in the 1890s.11 Matthews was happy to note that his versions of the stories were not only ‘representative’, but had also been shortened and bowdlerised for publication:

I have omitted many portions of the stories as told to me by the Natives, owing in some cases to their obscene character, and in others for want of space.12

The processes of selectivity, always evident even in scholarly practice where they are at least liable to be admitted, are invariably exaggerated in writing for a more popular audience. For this part of Australia, the processes of selectivity, bowdlerisation and


12 Ibid.
omission must be added to the omissions inevitable in the collection of mythology at a time of violent colonial upheaval, and the omissions and limitations which accompany any translation of an item of local, indigenous culture, into an item of European culture. There are no complete myth cycles surviving from the south east, and only text versions of the more complete cycles, such as that of Ngurunderi. This is despite knowing that other All Fathers, such as Baiamai, were closely associated with dance and initiation rituals. Very little survives relating to special women’s beliefs, and only initiation rituals were recorded with any thoroughness, in the main by Mathews. Even gross elements of eastern Australia mythology, such as the significance of the All Fathers, or Eaglehawk and Crow, are essentially mysterious because of the poor quality of the sources, and the selection principals which determined the fashion of their recording while active beliefs remained to be recorded. The salutary comments made by Annette Hamilton when comparing the published sources of Australian myths with what her own field work was revealing in relation to central Australia is relevant to the entire body of extant information about Aboriginal religion in south eastern Australia:

I have recently been working with women’s myth cycles in Central Australia which have revealed the extraordinary wealth of detail involved in proceeding via myth and song from one site to the next along the track of mythical ancestresses. Twenty separate incidents (or more) may be sung between two adjacent sites and this is only between two sites out of a possible fifty along a single track in a single linguistic zone. There are similar quantities of material from along the tracks in adjacent linguistic zones - and this refers to just one major myth cycle out of perhaps twenty in a single local region. Following a mythic track is a truly humbling experience. 13

There can be little doubt that there was a similar wealth of detail relating to south eastern mythologies. The popular European accounts of Aboriginal mythology from this part of Australia can thus be seen as open to the widest imaginative speculation, almost to the extent that it should be seen as a European nativist response in its own right rather than an interpretation, however simplified, of an original culture.

13 Annette Hamilton, 'Knowledge and Misrecognition: Mythology and Gender in Aboriginal Australia', in *Myths of Matriarchy Reconsidered*, ed. by Deborah Gewertz, Oceania Monograph 33, 1988, p.61.
2. ‘The Land of Byamee’

i The Lady Writer/Artist Tradition

Matthews’s brief foray into popular writing was soon displaced by that of K. Langloh Parker, whose collections have dominated popular accounts of Aboriginal mythology for much of this century. Although Mary Anne Fitzgerald published one of the earliest collections of Aboriginal legends for a popular audience, based on stories told to her as a child by Bungaree, they did not achieve a wide popularity.14

Unfortunately, Parker’s own papers and correspondence have not survived, with the exception of a small number of minor literary manuscripts and letters.15 Parker married in 1875 and moved to Bangate station on the Narran River near the NSW/Queensland border in 1879. She lived there for the next twenty years, collecting the native folklore which earned her a literary and scholarly reputation. The Parkers were forced off the land in the 1890s and Langloh Parker died in Sydney in 1903. Parker then married Percival Randolph Stow in 1905 after which she lived an active life as an Adelaide society organiser and philanthropist, with causes ranging from the Victoria League to the Red Cross.16

A profile of Parker in the Lone Hand published in 1912 attributed her interest in folklore studies to the influence of her father, who used to read tales of ancient mythology to her:

As a child her father read to her the legends of older nations, and the love of racial traditions so aroused led to a subsequent study of Greek and a determination to investigate the folklore of the Australian aborigines.17

In her own autobiographical reminiscences, Parker also attributed her interest in native folklore to her childhood experiences. She was saved from drowning in the Darling on her

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14 Mary Anne Fitzgerald, King Bungaree's Pyalla and Stories Illustrative of Manners and Customs that Prevailed Among Australian Aborigines, 1891
15 Stow Papers, ML MS 2911, Mitchell Library, Sydney. A single folder holds four short manuscripts: 1. Wheels Within Wheels, inc. 'Well Teddy Bear this is delightful'; 2. One of the Prince's Partners, inc. 'I was [illeg.] at our little shack in the Hills'; 3. The Propitiation of Gnumpa Winnatta', inc. 'Gnumpa Winnatta is the Good Spirit of the Ulalyinya tribe in Western Queensland'. A note adds: 'Sent to me by my brother George Field, Sandringham, W. Queensland'; 4. Birrahgnooloo, the bride of Byanee. inc.: 'When Byanee was travelling about the country he came to a tribe across the Barwon'.
16 Marcie Muir, ADB.
17 Ann Cornstalk, 'Representative Women in Australia - K. Langloh Parer (Mrs Stow)', The Lone Hand, 2 Dec.1912, p.xxxvi

Land of Byamee, p.6
father’s station by an unnamed Aboriginal girl in an incident in which two of her sisters were drowned.18

Parker published her first collections of traditional stories with the support of the anthropologist, Andrew Lang. Lang provided an introduction to both *Australian Legendary Tales* and *More Australian Legendary Tales*, which were published in 1896 and 1898, and a brother, Dr Lang of Corowa, was the source of the illustrations by ‘an untaught Australian native’, actually Tommy McRae.19 Lang probably helped Parker with publication which was by David Nutt, who also published the Journal *Folk-lore*. Despite these scholarly connections, Parker’s stories are not infantile renditions of Aboriginal mythology, or Parker’s own literary inventions. Originally intended for children, Parker had used her literary gifts, such as they were, to render the stories in a form agreeable to other, English-speaking children.

A number of factors indicate this. In the first place, Nutt published Parker’s tales in the series: ‘Fairy Tales of the British Empire’ and which came in various flavours such as English, Celtic, Indian and Scandinavian, all extensively illustrated, and Oscar Wilde’s *Happy Prince* collection. Parker’s introduction to *Aboriginal Legendary Tales* is addressed explicitly to children:

> I can only hope that the white children will be as ready to listen to these stories, as were, and indeed are, the little piccaninnies, and thus the sale of this booklet be such as to enable me to add frocks and tobacco when I give their Christmas dinner, as is my yearly custom, to the remnant of the Noongahburrahs.20

Finally, there is Lang’s introduction, which describes Parker’s first collection as consisting, for the main, of camp-fire stories and *Kinder Märchen*, though of a rather inferior variety since they lacked the ‘ingenious dramatic turns of our own Märchen. Where there are no distinctions of wealth and rank, there can be no *Cinderella* and no *Puss in Boots.*’ Lang also

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18 This from ADB - but see *My Bush Book*. Published posthumously in 1982.
19 Of these drawings, Lang noted: ‘The designs are from the skethc-book of an untaught Austrlian native; they were given to me some years ago by my brother, Dr Lang of Corowa. The artist has a good deal of spirit; his trees are not ill done, his emus and kangaroos are better than his men and lubras. Using ink, a pointed stick, and paper, the artist shows an unwonted freedom of executing. Nothing like this occurs in Australian scratches with a sharp stone on hard wook. Probably no other member of his dying race ever illustrated a book.’, Parker, *Australian Legendary Tales*, p.xvi; For McRae see *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*
made a comparison of Parker’s work with Kipling’s *Jungle Book*, then at the height of its popularity. In press notices, the *Sydney Morning Herald* claimed another influence:

Mrs Parker has striven, and not unsuccessfully, to do for Australian folk-lore what Longfellow did in ‘Haïawatha’ for the North American tribes.²¹

This bewildering invocation of literary comparisons ranging from Ovid to Grimm all served to provide a mode of interpretation for Europeans to ‘read’ Parker’s Aboriginal legends. It might be argued that indigenous culture was, to all intents and purposes, unknowable to a popular audience without such aid.

The figure of Byamee, as Parker calls him, is an important but not overwhelming figure in these tales. But the introduction by Lang placed particular focus on this figure. By 1905, when Parker published *The Euahlayi Tribe*, Spencer and Gillen’s influential ethnography of the Arrernte had initiated the long dominance of the term ‘Dreaming’ in relation to Aboriginal mythology. Parker made a connection between Byamee and the Dreaming:

Byamee, in the first place, is to the Euahlayi what the ‘Alcheringa’ or ‘Dream time’ is to the Arunta... our tribe give, as the final answer to any question about the origin of customs, ‘Because Byamee say so’.²²

This connection between the Alcheringa or Dreamtime of central Australia and the All Fathers, particularly Byamee, of south-eastern Australia, was a key component of the Land of Byamee complex.

After she left Bangate station, Parker does not seem to have remained in contact with the Euahlayi people. The Foreword to her final collection of legends, *Woggheeguy* was published in Adelaide in a fine art edition by F.W. Preece, with elegant line drawings by the artist Nora Heysen.²³ Parker gave as her motivation for publishing a sense that the public might be interested in these “passing people” (quotations in the original) and her belief that her sources no longer existed: ‘my old story-tellers and their tribes are, I believe, almost extinct - probably the only proofs that they ever existed will bet their weapons and legends,

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²¹ K.Langloh Parker, *More Australian Legendary Tales*, London: David Nutt,
²² *The Euahlayi Tribe*, pp.4-9
²³ *Woggheeguy. Australian Aboriginal Legends*, Collected by Catherine Stow (K. Langloh Parker) Illustrated by Nora Heysen, Adelaide: F.W. Preece & Sons, 1930

Land of Byamee, p.8
which are both increasingly difficult to collect.’ As in all her work, Parker stressed that she was an amateur, who regarded her privileged access as something fortuitous and not to be compared with the work of real professionals:

I need hardly explain that I had no scientific education, nor preparation for research, beyond desultory reading about primitive peoples and an intense interest in the genesis of races and their original mentality. Full of that interest, I seized the time and opportunity of over twenty years’ residence in juxtaposition to some of the finest aboriginal tribes in Australia to study them on the spot in an amateur way.

Parker’s insistence on her amateur status probably needs to be understood in the context of the Victorian doctrine of the lady. It is notable that so many of these popular collections were written and illustration by women, and take the form of children’s literature. I would stress that the ‘originality’ of the tales did not vary in subsequent collections, merely their pretensions to originality.

Perhaps the greatest distinction of Parker’s first collection is the unusual care she took to name her main informants, and to stress the location and cultural context in which her stories were collected. She dedicated her first collection to Peter Hippi, and the second to the ‘Euahlayi-speaking people in grateful recognition of their ever-willing assistance in my folk-lore quest.’ Although Swain comments on her literary intrusiveness, she includes one tale in the original language (but without, unfortunately an interlinear translation as would be standard practice today) and claims to have taken considerable care to verify her interpretations. Some indication of her usual practice comes from a letter included in a copy of MALT in Mitchell library, written by Parker to H.C. Russell:

The drought is still so bad here that most of the Blacks have dispersed - so I cannot get at them for all I want to know.

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24 Ibid., p.vii
25 Ibid., p.viii
26 Ibid. Preface: ‘In particular I should like to mention my indebtedness to Peter Hippi, king of the Noongahburrahs; and to Hippitha Mātaḥ; Barahgurrie and Beemunny’. The book is dedicated to Peter Hippi, ‘in grateful recognition of his long and faithful service to myself and my husband, which has extended, with few intervals, over a period of twenty years’.
27 K. Langloh Parker to H.C. Russell, 5 April 1899. This letter inside a copy of Parker's *More Aboriginal Legendary Tales* in Mitchell library.
It would be anachronistic to portray Parker as a latter-day activist for black cultural integrity. She clearly participated in the colonisation of the land of the Euahlayi tribe whose stories she appropriated. Revealing in this respect is an incident recounted in her second collection. In the course of describing the importance of taking every opportunity to collect stories from the natives she notes an incident when she learnt of a traditional belief by way of ‘a very fine healthy specimen of a young native woman’ who was engaged at the time in scrubbing her verandahs.28 This second collection differs somewhat from the first in that the stories came from a wider variety of sources than the first. *Australian Legendary Tales* was confined to ‘the legends of the Narran tribe, known among themselves as the Noongahburrah’s’.29 The popularity of this book, encouraged Europeans to correspond with Parker. For the second collection, Parker expanded her field of inquiry, noting that she had opportunities of ‘knowing well’ members of nine tribes and had moreover been sent scraps of other legends by various friends and correspondents. The second collection also differed from the first in that it was more serious in nature. Whereas, Parker notes, the first series were all ‘such legends as are told to the black piccaninnies’, the second touched on sacred subjects which were ‘taboo’ to the young.30

After her marriage to Stow, Parker took less interest in ethnographic studies which she no longer had the opportunity to pursue. She contributed to journals such as *The Lone Hand* and *The Bulletin* and tried her hand at the bush stories which had been popularised by Ethel Turner, Mary Grant Bruce and others.31 She did publish two more folklore collections, mostly from material she had not included in her earlier publications but which she had collected during her time at Bangate station. *The Walkabouts of Wur-Run-Nah* is much more infantile in presentation than the legendary tales.32 Illustrated with child-like drawings by Marion Hart, it depicts the legendary world of the Australian aborigines as a world of

29 Parker, *Australian Legendary Tales*, p.x
30 Ibid., p.xv
31 *My best boy and my boy-in-law; and Bobbity, a bush baby*. Sydney: W.Dymock, 1901; Besides articles noted in ADB, see the story ’One of the Prince's Partners' in Stow Papers, ML MSS 2911, item 2. 'To recover my faith in human nature I fly to my beloved gum trees . . . I renew my strength by contact with Mother Earth.'
32 *The Walkabouts of Wur-Run-Nah*, compiled by C. Stow from the published and unpublished legends collected by K. Langloh Parker, Adelaide: Hassell, 1918

Land of Byamee, p.10
magical transformations when, ‘In the ‘Dark Backward’ were made the ‘Blackfellow’s Fairy Tales’:

Then all Nature was related. The Beasts, the Birds, the Fish, the Insects, the Trees, the Bushes, everything was claimed as kin by man, and very strange were some of the things that happened.33

The arrogation of ethnographic purpose continues in Parker’s final published collection of Aboriginal legends, *Woggheeguy*.34 *Woggheeguy* was published thirty years after Parker left Bangate station and it represents a new stage in the European transformation of Aboriginal mythology. In her introduction, Parker takes the literary step of placing her original informants within the fairy-tale world of her literary mythology. Whereas her first collection made it clear that the stories were translations of the children’s stories of a living culture, which had a sophisticated adult mythology to which neither the author or her audience was invited, *Woggheeguy* abandons these barriers. Having, it seems, lost all contact with her original informants, Parker relegates them to the land of her literary renditions:

Realizing, too, that the aboriginals are so quickly disappearing - my old story-tellers and their tribes are, I believe, almost extinct - probably the only proofs that they ever existed will be their weapons and legends, which are both increasingly difficult to collect.35

The illustrations, by Nora Heysen, daughter of Hans Heysen whose work she collected, were commissioned by Parker herself. They add an elegant, jazz age feel to this book which adds to the sense of cultural displacement, of repeated dismemberment and regurgitation evident in the text.

By the 1930s, the Aboriginal people of south east Australia were certainly undergoing harsh times, but they were very much alive. As late as the early 1970s Janet Mathews conducted extensive recording sessions at Lightning Ridge with Fred Reece, a Ualarai speaker who had been born on Bangate Station, the son of a Muruwari woman and the Langloh Parkers’ bookkeeper, and Arthur Dodd, also a Ualarai speaker.36 Both Dodd and Reece knew

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33 Ibid., p.1
34 *Woggheeguy Australian Aboriginal Legends*. Collected by Catherine Stow (K.Langloh Parker), Illustrated by Nora Heysen, Adelaide: F.W. Preece & Sons, 1930.
35 Ibid., p.vii
36 *The Opal that Turned into Fire and other stories form the Wangkumara*, compiled by Janet Mathews, ed. by Isobel White, Broome, WA: Magabala Books, 1994, pp.144-45
versions of the story of the creation of Narran Lake, which features in Aboriginal Legendary Tales and other Baiamai legends. Why therefore did Parker make the assertion, quickly to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, that the tribes and their legends which she had known had disappeared? The best explanation is that which sees the emergence of the ‘Dreamtime’ perplex as one of the final stage of colonisation.

Parker’s work has many faults as ethnography, but it was of considerable value in supplanting the racist assumptions of an earlier era. Nationalism was the main inspiration behind the cheap compilations written by C. W. Peck’s Australian Legends. Peck claimed that the main source for the legends in this book was ‘Old Mr Murdoch’, who lived near Taralga. Murdoch’s son Alex, Peck tells us, ‘got them from the old man, and Alex. kept them to himself for a very long time.’

No one in Burragarorang knew more than Alex. Murdoch of the stories of the natives, and few were better able to control the remnant of the tribe who had learnt much cunning and vice from the white men. The vice of the white and the cunning of the white added to the bush craft of the black made a fearful compound, and for many years that compound was all that was seen of the last of the aborigines.

This clumsy racism is cobbled together with some primitive natural history to serve as a vehicle for a book about the state emblem of NSW, the waratah. The most coherent legend is an unlikely sentimental love story about a woman of the Burragarorang Tribe, called ‘Krubi’ the waratah. If there are any shreds of original folklore in this compilation, they have been buried too deeply to be recognisable.

A major rival to Parker emerged in the 1920s in the person of David Unaipon (1872-1967), the protégé of the Adelaide Aborigines’ Friends’ Association. Unaipon is remembered today as the first Aborigine to publish a book in Australia. Unaipon’s Native Legends was published in Adelaide in 1932 and is a mere fifteen pages long. Unaipon’s major work is not this pamphlet but his extended account of Narrinyeri and other Aboriginal myths and beliefs which was never published under his own name. The two volume manuscript,

37 Original recordings in AIATSIS, Canberra.
38 C.W. Peck, Australian Legends Tales Handed down from the Remotest Times by the Autochthonous inhabitants of our land, Sydney: Stafford & Co., 1925
39 Ibid., p.56
consisting of 30 chapters, was appropriated by W. Ramsay Smith for his *Myths and Legends of the Australian Aboriginals*. Smith’s work includes an eclectic bundle of information gathered at random, with little indication of either their sources or their original cultural context. The illustrations include sixteen colour plates by Alice Woodward somewhat in the style of children’s illustrator Arthur Rackham, as well as line drawings and photographs of objects in the British Museum and elsewhere and photographs from Spencer and Gillen’s *Arunta*. As an example of the kind of shoddy practice it was determined to discredit, the first issue of *Oceania* carried a disparaging review of Smith’s work, probably by Radcliffe-Brown.

The manuscript version of Unaipon’s book in Mitchell seems to have been edited for publication by Smith. Its marginal comments and alterations are highly illuminating for the light they shine on Smith’s questionable relationship to this work. Unaipon was intensely proud of his Aboriginal heritage and his position as the most literate and scholarly man of his race. His original preface, omitted by Smith reads:

> My race - the aborigines of Australia - has a vast tradition of legends, myths and folklore stories. These, which they delight in telling to the younger members of the tribe, have been handed down orally for thousands of years. In fact, all tribal laws and customs are, first of all, told to the children of the tribe in the form of stories, just as the white Australian mother first instructs her children with nursery stories. Of course the mother and the old men, in telling these stories, drag them out to a great length, putting in every detail, with much gesture and acting, but in writing them down for our white friends I have used the simplest forms of expression, in order that neither the meaning nor the “atmosphere” may be lost.

> As a full-blooded member of my race I think I may claim to be the first - but I hope, not the last - to produce an enduring record of our customs, beliefs and imaginings.

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40 Ibid.
41 David Unaipon, Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines, 1924-25, Mitchell Library, MS A1929
42 *Oceania*, vol.1, p.373. Referred to by Hiatt, *Australian Aboriginal Mythology*, p.18, n.4
43 Unaipon, Legendary Tales, f.1. Compare Smith, *Myths and Legends*, p.17: ‘The aboriginals of Australia have a vast number of legends, myths and folklore stories. They take great delight in telling stories to the younger members of the tribe. These stories and traditions have been handed down orally for thousands of years. In fact, a knowledge of the tribal laws and customs is first of all made
This dignified and scholarly stance did not suit Smith. who was attached to the idea that all Aboriginal people were sources of primitive belief. His own Preface notes that he was not attempting any ‘scientific exposition, general description, abstract, or epitome of Australian aboriginal mythology’, but had made ‘a collection of narratives as told by pure-blooded aboriginals of various tribes who have been conversant with the subject from childhood’.44 Because Smith’s object was the display of the primitive, Unaipon’s assertion of the dignity of his race, and the introduction which made note of the extent of his European education did not make the final cut.45

In their original form, Unaipon’s legends bear considerable similarity to Parker’s Legendary Tales. and it is probably significant that they were Adelaide contemporaries. Sometimes derided for the evident influence of Christian teaching, Unaipon can be seen to have negotiated a refined path between the two cultures he now straddled. Although he does not use the term Dreaming, his invocation of a Great Spirit and a son of the Great Spirit, his stress on the moral value of tribal law and the assertion that Aboriginal people lived in ‘balance with Nature’ are clear precursors of later Aboriginal theologies.46 Unaipon’s picture of tribal society as a benevolent and morally superior order is also evident in the novel by Tarlton Rayment, published in 1933 and dedicated to “Unaipon, Trusted and Wise Man of the Narrinyerri.47

Smith’s collection does not seem to have had the same enduring influence as Parker and this seems to be due to its limited academic endorsement. But it was the source for a number of long-running ‘Aboriginal’ legends, in particular the practice of ‘pointing the bone’.48

Keith C. McKeown’s, The Land of Byamee, was intended to continue the author’s successful series on Australian wildlife and borrowed for its legends from Parker and

\[\text{known to the children of the tribe through the medium of stories. The mothers or the elders of the tribe tell the stories with a great deal of gesture.}^{\text{44}}\]
\[\text{Smith, Myths and Legends, p.7}\]
\[\text{Unaipon, Legendary Tales, p.1. A typewritten note has been crossed out. It reads: 'The writer of this article is a full-blooded Aboriginal who was born in South Australia. Educate among white people, Mr Unaipon became a brilliant scholar. He reads Greed and Latin, is a splendid speaker, and a fine pianist. He is also the inventor of several interesting mechanical appliances.'}^{\text{45}}\]
\[\text{Ibid., ch.3, p.2; See Smith,}\]
\[\text{Tarlton Rayment, The Prince of the Totem: a Simple Black Tale for Clevery White Children, 1933}\]
\[\text{Smith, Myths of the Australian Aboriginals, p.187 and illustration p.188.}\]
Smith. He claimed to have ‘taken a keen interest in the natives’ and ‘lost no opportunity of gathering such scattered fragments of their lore as remain to us’, but there are no indications that any field work has informed this collection.49 The Land of Byamee came with a flattering introduction by Mary Gilmore:

Because of what he has collected and the manner in which it is presented I regard The Land of Byamee as one of the most important books ever written on the aborigines. For here is a folk-lore, and in that folk-lore the people themselves are given. Other writers have gathered the bones, but Mr McKeown has so clothed the bones that the tribe’s camp-fire leaps, and as I have said, the long-gone speak.50

The notion that the south-eastern tribes had disappeared was actively fostered by McKeown and other popular writers in the 1930s. This is particularly regrettable, because a few inquiries would have located many informants who could have provided other accounts of indigenous beliefs. The Land of Byamee is cast resolutely in the imaginary past and bears no relationship to the contemporary peoples whose folk-lore McKeown appropriated:

Sunset has come to the Australian aborigines. Yeradha, the clear yellow and pearl-grey sunrise, faded long years ago; now Yhi sets amid threatening thunder clouds. The long night is upon them.

To-day the spears and boomerangs, made with all the loving skill of the true craftsman, are broken or decayed. The sacred places are defiled; the churinga have gone from their secret stores, and are scattered and destroyed by the uninitiated, save for those few preserved in our museums; but the time has long since passed when a detailed and exact interpretation might have been obtained of the symbols and markings that decorated them.51

McKeown laments the passing of ‘these simple, laughter-loving people’, a people who are not to be confused with ‘those unfortunate outcasts, the half castes.’ Ending the book, on a high point of nostalgic pomposity, he invokes the name of Byamee:

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49 Ibid., p.xii
51 Ibid., p.227
May those who have gone find in Bullimah the happiness that left their camps and hunting grounds with the coming of the white. And may Byamee, the Great One, remember their cry:

“We were faithful on earth, faithful to the laws you left us.”

I have made chief reference so far only to published texts which provided a representation of Aboriginal mythology. The major breakthrough toward a more enlightened and sophisticated appreciation of Aboriginal religion, came through images. Parker remains significant, but her work undergoes a series of interpretive transformations which allow for a revivification of popular understanding of Aboriginal religious mentalities away from the colonial repression of the Dreamtime perplex and the Land of Byamee.

Before the second world war, Aboriginal art was regarded as ethnographic practice, if it was given the credit of existing at all. Critical opinion about artists who expressed an interest in Aboriginal style were greeted with the same scorn as that which was thrust at the Jindworobaks. One of the first to challenge these assumptions was the artist Margaret Preston. She undertook extensive travel as far as North Queensland in 1927 and to Darwin and back in 1947, at the age of 72. Donations by Preston initiated the Aboriginal art collection of the Art Gallery of NSW in the 1940s. A Bulletin critic writing in 1949 commented on her advocacy of Aboriginal art:

She is allowing the aboriginals - a people, as she admits herself, too limited in sensibility and technical capacity to have attempted to paint the wildflowers - to debilitate her talent. . . what is really required is the opposite process - the enrichment of primitive art by the infinitely greater technical and spiritual resources of the civilised artist.

In the 1950s there was a renewed interest in Aboriginal religion evidenced by the publication of a number of new collections of Aboriginal legends, many written, as before for children, and edited and/or illustrated by European women. The most important of

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52 Ibid., p.229
these works was the new compilation of Parker’s stories. Edited by Henrietta Drake-Brockman the new *Aboriginal Legendary Tales* drew together items from both Parker’s ethnographic and popular corpus. It included a glossary of Aboriginal words, a lengthy scholarly appendix and some remarkable illustrations by Elizabeth Durack. The reviewer for the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted: ‘Of all the many collections, large and small, that have been made of Australian Aboriginal legends, this is probably the most satisfying for adults and children alike.’\textsuperscript{56} It was an immediate success, going on to win the 1954 Children’s Book Council award for the best children’s book, reprinted nine times by 1973 and translated into Russian in 1965. Viking Press published it in the US in 1966, a new edition with illustrations by R. Backhaus-Smith was produced by Bodley Head in 1978 and it has been mined for numerous anthologies, which I have not had the time to trace. I would say with some confidence that this confirms Parker’s collection of south-eastern legends as the single most important source for popular notions of Aboriginal religion.

Much of the appeal of the new edition lies in Elizabeth Durack’s illustrations which made use of a range of Aboriginal styles, from the x-ray art of Arnhem land, to images based on the ethnographic photographs of Spencer and Gillen. Elizabeth Durack had already made use of her local knowledge of Kimberley rock art and ethnographic records of designs from elsewhere in Australia to paint the remarkable ceiling of the UWA Chapter Hall. For the new edition of *Australian Legendary Tales* Durack drew on the techniques she was taught by Jubbul, ‘a survivor of a north Australian tribe of the Ord River’. Durack was conscious of the distance between Jubbul’s north-western bark painting traditions and the literary sources for Parker’s legends in the south-west, but she affirmed: ‘although geographically far removed from the makers of these legends he was of the same race, and thought and reasoned in the same way.’ The artist has told me that she can not recall the specific sources now, some forty years later, but she does remember looking at ‘those early anthropologists’. The striking rituals depicted in Spencer and Gillen also figure as originating ideas for other powerful work by Durack from the early 1950s, such as the Cord to Altcheringa series in the collection of the University of Western Australia and the series, The Legend of the

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Black Swan, 1956, which is based on a Parker legend. Durack was well aware that her work was not acceptable to anthropologists and of course, it can be regarded as both white appropriation and aesthetic and intellectual stew - but it needs to be assessed in relation to other attempts to popularise Aboriginal mythology and art.

ii The Lone Ranger and Tonto

Using the same basic sources as the Lady Artists, a series of male editors created very different types of books. Since Aboriginal authenticity was of commercial importance, they adopted the post which I will refer to as the Lone Ranger and Tonto. Besides Roland Robinson, other Lone Rangers who employed this method include Alan Marshall, Charles Mountford, Aldo Massola, Ainslie Roberts, Jean Ellis.

Alan Marshall claims to have gathered his stories directly from Arnhem Land during a nine months’ stay during 1945-6, at a time when the area was ‘trackless and unexplored’. Two Aboriginal trackers, including an Oenpelli man called Marawana, served as translators. Stories of Eaglehawk and Crow, The Whowie, Thorkook and the bullroarer, indicate an eastern Australian origin for most if not all the stories, probably from R.H. Mathews. To complete the nonsense, Marshall claims that because the story ‘The origin of the bull-roarer’ describes a sacred object not to be seen by women (this is in Mathews), the Aboriginal artist Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr was not permitted to draw the accompanying illustration for this story.

Other claims to authenticity seem equally dubious. Aldo Massola claimed to have spent over ten years collecting stories for his compilation, *Bunjil’s Cave*, the Victorian equivalent to the Land of Byamee. He tells us that he was especially keen to consult the old women who are the traditional repositories of mythology ‘in any group of primitive people’. Very little of this is evident in the published collections. Men are not the only lone rangers. Jean Ellis claims in her book, *From the Dreamtime*, that she has had ‘many

57 ALT, p.121
years of contact with Aboriginal people’ during which time she has encouraged them to tell her their traditional legends. ‘Many stories in this book are unique to her collection and she has authenticated the source.’

Parker’s dancing brolga makes a guest appearance, complete with authentic aboriginal illustration by Aboriginal artist, Biggibilla. The whole Dreamtime New Age perplex is evident:

For the Aboriginal people of Australia the Dreamtime is the beginning of the world but it is also yesterday, today and forever. From the Dreamtime comes a rich and wonderful lore which tells of the creation of earth, sun, moon and stars, why the animals look the way they do, how the Great Ancestor Spirits loved and looked after their people.’

By and large, collections which indicate their derivation from Parker and Smith, such as the cheap paperbacks published by A.W. Reed since 1965, seem preferable to such claims.

By far the most outstanding financial success has been achieved by Ainslie Roberts, a New Age fantasy illustrator who makes use of Aboriginal themes. The first of the Dreamtime series appeared in 1965 as a collaboration with Charles P. Mountford. By 1989 this had been reprinted nineteen times, there were a total of twelve volumes in the series which had achieved over a million sales. These volumes are mostly vehicles for the fantasy art of Ainslie Roberts. Their success lay in their universalisation of Aboriginal myth as the mystical essence of all religion:

The belief that people of all nations share the same mystical life is not new and has been explored exhaustively. And, despite the cold logic of science, mythical and mystical beliefs have an abiding appeal and spiritual comfort for much of mankind. The fascination of Aboriginal mythology is that these “Stone Age” men preserved a complex spiritual culture in which the Dreamtime myths, an integral part of this culture, may without any great stretch of the imagination be associated with the mystical life of people in other parts of the world. From this, one may play with the corollary that

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60 Ibid.,
62 Ibid, jacket blurb.
Aboriginal mythology derives not only from the Dreamtime of the Aborigines, but from the Dreamtime of the human race as a whole.\textsuperscript{63}

3. **New Dreamtime**

   \textit{i. New Age}

The illustrations of Ainslie Roberts bring us into the 1970s and the final transformation of the Land of Byamee, this time by Aboriginal theologians and writers, and New Agers, such as Robert Lawlor. I have argued that many of the essential elements of this new spirituality lay in seed in popular European texts written by Parker and Smith/Unaipon. The form of these writings, popular from the 1970s, conform to what Linda Woodhead has called ‘post-Christian spirituality.’\textsuperscript{64} Reaching a high point of influence in the 1970s, these groups argued that native peoples such as the American Indians and Australian Aborigines were a more spiritual people than western Christians. In fact, the west had become utterly corruptible and contemptible by its repeated acts of environmental violence, sexism, materialism and lack of moral and spiritual values. They therefore advocated the utilisation of the sacred religious symbols and religious practices of less degraded peoples.

Dealing first with the European New Age literature. The most sophisticated work in this genre is Lawlor’s \textit{Voices of the First Day. Awakening in the Aboriginal Dreamtime},\textsuperscript{65} This is a finely illustrated book, with profits returning to the Denooch Aboriginal Healing Centre and other charities. Illustrations from the Baldwin Spencer Photographic Collection of the Museum of Victoria etc. Yet Parker dominates the textual readings, making up half a dozen of the introductory stories. The extensive reading provide the most scholarly version of the Land of Byamee to date. Road Cameron’s \textit{Alcheringa} makes an easier target. A Catholic priest, this book is illustrated by Aboriginal artists such as Rosina of Wadeye and is full of post-Christian assumptions about east meeting west in the Dreamtime never-never land. Complete with churingas, mantras, mandorlas, wandjinas, rainbows and rainbow snakes -


\textsuperscript{64} Linda Woodhead, Post Christian Spiritualities', \textit{Religion}, vol.23, 1993, pp.167-81

the total New Age smorgasbord. In this guise, Cameron’s venture in faith recalls nineteenth century universalist religions, such as the Baha’i, or the Theosophical family.

Aboriginal authors have responded to the New Age in a number of creative ways. A story told by Kath Walker can provide the appropriate setting:

In the new Dreamtime there lived a woman, an Aborigine, who longed for her lost tribe, and for the stories that had belonged to her people; for she could remember only the happenings of her own Dreamtime. But the old Dreamtime had stolen the stories and hidden them. The woman knew that she must search for the old stories - and through them she might find her old tribe again.

Before she set off, she looked for her yam-stick and dilly-bag, but Time had stolen these, too. She found a sugar-bag that the ants had left and which Time had forgot.

One day, as she searched, the woman came upon the ashes of a fire her own tribe had kindled long ago. Tears came to her eyes, for she yearned for her tribe, and felt lonely. She sat down by the ashes and ran her fingers through the remains of the fire that had once glowed there. And as she looked at the ashes, she called to Biami the Good Spirit to help her find her tribe . .

And this is the story of how Oodgeroo found her way back into the old Dreamtime. Now she is happy, because she can always talk with the tribes whenever she want to. Time has lost his power over her because Biami has made it so.

It is probably no coincidence that the last reprints of the Drake-Brockman edition of Australian Legendary Tales ended at about the same time as Kath Walker, Oodgeroo emerged as a successful writer for a popular readership. Oodgeroo, by an act of will, reasserted the tribal memories of her people. It is now perhaps so very surprising that what she discovered was the Land of Byamee, or ‘Baimi’ as she calls it, ‘one of the wisest men
whom the Rainbow Serpent created at the beginning of time.’\(^{69}\) Parker’s touch is also visible in the collection attributed to Gulpilil. *Gulpilil’s stories of the Dreamtime* includes Parker’s brolga, emu and wild turkey and the story of the birth of the butterflies from Ramsay Smith.\(^{70}\)

The most prolific of Aboriginal writers, Mudrooroo, also maintains the Land of Byamee in all its panoply. His latest book, *Aboriginal Mythology* is a handy A- Z guide to New Age aboriginality. His entry on David Unaipon describes him as an important historical figure who attempted a synthesis of Aboriginal and Christian beliefs. More mysteriously, Mudrooroo gives Unaipon credit for initiating ‘the modern Aboriginal cult of Baiame’.\(^{71}\) Since Unaipon is unequivocal in his devotion to a Great Spirit, only sometimes referring to Nurrunteri, this seems rather unlikely. Mudrooroo has long employed a wide spiritual palette for his work, drawing on elements of eastern and western spirituality to create a foil to western materialism. Mudrooroo’s own recent admission that he can not claim Aboriginality in his family background adds poignancy to the debate.

In the south east of Australia there has been a cultural catastrophe - the loss of the indigenous culture of the Aboriginal people. As Oodgeroo stated, the Old Dreamtime has been stolen. Can it be recovered? As an empirical historian, I would have to answer: ‘No’. However, I view with great interest and hope the efforts of Aboriginal theologians such a Djinijini Gondarra and George Rosendale to build a new religious identity for Aboriginal people based on an appreciation of their traditional and European Christian inheritances. I have argued in this paper that the Land of Byamee was largely a European concoction, based on the slenderest of traditional bases and serving imperial colonial purposes. The legends collected by Mrs K. Langloh Parker have been on a long journey since they were first published at the turn of this century. I have tried to show the way in which popularisation of Aboriginal mythology repeatedly failed to return to the field, where, until at least the 1970s there were many informants who could have provided enlightenment about their traditional beliefs. It concerns me that so impoverished a sources should have become the basis for the new Dreamtime - but perhaps this is the way of all religious

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\(^{69}\) Ibid., p.46
\(^{70}\) *Gulpilil’s stories of the Dreamtime*, compiled by Hugh Rule and Stuart Goodma, Sydney: Collins, 1979
movements. It is rarely edifying to enquire into origins. Historians, however, find themselves compulsively attracted to such moments. If I might be spared a prediction, it is that the Land of Byamee, as a set of beliefs about Aboriginal religion is now indestructible.