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John O'Leary. *Savage Songs and Wild Romances: Settler Poetry and the Indigene, 1830-1880*. Cross/Cultures 318. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011. ISBN (hb): 978-90-420-3399-3. €45, US\$61

STRIKE HIM WITH THE BLOOD OF CIRCUMCISION!
 STRIKE HIM WITH THE TUFT OF EAGLE FEATHERS!
 STRIKE HIM WITH THE GIRDLE, THE *paltando*!
 STRIKE HIM WITH THE *manga*, THE *kundando*!

- 1 So wrote Australian William Cawthorne in his 1848 work *The Legend of Kuperree; or the Red Kangaroo*, a retelling with extensive embellishments of an Aboriginal myth from South Australia that Cawthorne had heard from a German missionary. The work is eclectic and not exactly scholarly in a modern sense; the lines quoted are from a spell for hunting dingoes Cawthorne had recorded some years earlier and attached – for literary effect one supposes – to the Port Lincoln Dreamtime legend.
- 2 There is nothing odder than the body of poetry Cawthorne's work belongs to – extensive both in volume and in geographical spread – written by settler poets about their indigenous others. From the early empire until worryingly recently, authors in North America, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand have attempted to engage with the material they found around them in a manner that, as far as they understood, represented the literature that existed prior to their arrival and at the same time fitted the standards and aspirations of Victorian poetics.
- 3 Their intentions were, as John O'Leary demonstrates, various. Some believed themselves to be quasi-translators, conveying with as much accuracy as their art could accomplish the songs, chants and mythologies of their adopted home. Some acted as

proto-ethnographers, tabulating the oral literary possessions of the cultures whose material and social structures were beginning to be the object of the study which became anthropology. Some had a more immediate focus, ventriloquising the utterances of an often fancifully conceived and dramatically conveyed indigene to articulate a specific wrong or further a particular political cause.

- 4 This verse is hedged around with ideology. Eighteenth-century notions of the noble savage still have force as do Enlightenment distaste for civilisation. An assumption that the originators of this material are on the point of extinction is a given, and a handy settler pretext for the appropriation of not just literary and cultural material but the land that sustained it. Darwinian racial hierarchies intrude in the latter part of the period, while the anti-slavery activity of authors such as Thomas Pringle mean that the rhetoric of this movement carries over into the post-emancipation literature after 1833. As Victorians, these authors see sentimentality not as a weakness but as a validating force within their texts – crying mothers, lost children abound. But, also as Victorians, these authors see themselves as part of Thomas Richards' imperial archive with a responsibility to the scholarly record.
- 5 How should a modern reader or critic approach this material? Few of these authors register on any global notion of the nineteenth-century canon, though some – Pringle and Domett, for example – are of interest to local national literatures. Many of the authors and works that *Savage Songs* discusses are unknown, published once often by obscure colonial presses, not reprinted and read little since (hence the usefulness of O'Leary's appendixes). The positions that their poetry seems to represent could be more easily subjected to a severe postcolonial critique than any nuanced appreciation of what such earnest scholarly and sympathetic figures as the Schoolcrafts, Lydia Sigourney, George Rusden or Eliza Dunlop were trying to achieve, but this would be pat and reductive.
- 6 O'Leary is cautious about the way he approaches his material. He notes its implicit and explicit racism; he makes no claims for literary standing; he is perhaps overly apologetic. The very fact that there was such a huge body of material of this kind justifies its inclusion in any consideration of the literature of Empire. We do not need to reprove the past. We need to pay attention to it. If the pre-contact indigene is now difficult to access, these texts, hedged though they are with the obstacles of translation, framing ideologies and perspectives, encoded in poetic registers that bear no relation to their original form, and moreover to us now expressed in unfashionably Victorian diction, are a way of drilling back.

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