

## **Barron Field in New South Wales: The Poetics of Terra Nullius**

By Thomas H. Ford and Justin Clemens

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Reviewed by Neil Ramsey

**M**Y COPY OF *BARRON FIELD IN NEW SOUTH WALES: THE POETICS OF TERRA NULLIUS* came adorned with a blue and white sticker from the Australian Booksellers Association, proclaiming the book as a ‘staff favourite’. Although a complex and demanding book, it is not hard to see its appeal for an Australian audience. Ford and Clemens offer a detailed analysis of the first collection of poetry published in Australia, Barron Field’s *First Fruits of Australian Poetry* (1819). Far from treating Field’s collection as a historical curiosity, the poetry serves as a launching pad for the authors’ wide-ranging and innovative discussion of the origins of colonial Australia and its fraught relationship with Australia’s Aboriginal people.

Investigating the poetics of *terra nullius*, the authors indulge a pun: for Barron Field in New South Wales we could read barren field in New South Wales. The concept of *terra nullius*, literally land belonging to no one, was a legal doctrine that allowed any land remaining uncultivated by human labour to be claimed by those who were able to put that land to productive use. The concept provided a resilient ethical defence of imperial projects—empire could appear as a service to humanity because it merely sought to improve land that had been neglected or left barren by others. Surprisingly, however, we learn here that Australia was never officially declared *terra nullius*. The term only entered legal discourse in the late nineteenth century and was never officially applied to Australia. This study argues, however, that it was through the work of Barron Field that the concept of *terra nullius* came to inform the Australian constitution. The concept specifically arises in the judgement in 1819 of a tax dispute between Field and the Governor of New South Wales, Lachlan Macquarie, in which Australia first came to be deemed ‘desert and uninhabited’.

If this was a pivotal moment in securing a conception of Australia as *terra nullius*, it was also a moment that demonstrated the curiously poetic nature of *terra nullius*. The declaration of the colony as ‘desert and uninhabited’ works as a

performative speech act rather than an act of historical description. It is poetic, because it is the language itself that brought into being the idea of Australia's emptiness, with all the resulting consequences and effects. Extrapolating even further, the authors observe that the term Australia was itself based on a performative fiction. Matthew Flinders popularised the name Australia after the legendary, fictional continent of the Southern Hemisphere, the '*terra australis incognita*' that was assumed to exist as a necessary balance or counterweight to the continents in the Northern Hemisphere. The nation, in other words, came into existence through acts of inscription, naming, myth-making, and writing. Field's poetry as much as his legal work enabled Australia to appear as terra nullius.

Helpfully, the book includes the complete text of the poems in Field's *First Fruits*. It is a short collection—only six poems on Australian themed topics (only two poems appeared in the first edition of 1819). The poems range from a lengthy work on flowers of Botany Bay to shorter pieces on kangaroos, commemorations of the landing of Captain Cook and Joseph Banks, and poems on other poets' correspondence, specifically that of James Montgomery and Lord Byron. By including the texts, Ford and Clemens invite us to undertake our own analysis of the poems and derive our own conclusions about their significance. While this is a generous sentiment, they do somewhat forestall independent analysis by repeatedly asserting that Field wrote bad poetry—even his contemporaries were contemptuous. But the poor quality of his poetry plays an integral role in the book's argument that there is something absent minded, jocular, or embarrassing in the colonisation of Australia. It is as if the colonisation of Australia happened by oversight, an accidental erasure of its past that is reflected in Field's poorly composed poetry and their rewriting of Australia's origins.

Despite his meagre talents, Field was influenced by one of England's most innovative poets of these years, William Wordsworth. Field corresponded with Wordsworth at some length and was a champion of Wordsworth's new approach to poetry—an approach that rejected the classical decorum and diction of the neo-classical eighteenth century. As the authors explain, one of the effects of this new approach was to radically revise the tradition of epideictic poetry, or poetry that commemorated specific events and people. The founding of the colony of New South Wales had clearly called for such a poetry of commemoration and the most notable early Australian poet to respond to this call was Michael Robinson. A former lawyer, Robinson wrote birthday odes for Royalty, a formalised and serious type of poetry that was published in the government's *Sydney Gazette* and for which Robinson received the first royalties paid to an Australian poet: two cows. It was a kind of poetry that Wordsworth rejected. Wordsworth instead pioneered the poetics of Romanticism, in which anybody or anything could serve equally as the subject of a poem and in which personal responses and emotions replaced formal or stately recognition of occasions.

It is this personal, intimate, and emotional form of poetry that Field wrote in his response to the founding of Australia. Not Captain Cook's landing, but Field's own visit to the spot where Cook landed, becomes the subject of his poetry. But the Wordsworthian theory of poetry that inspired Field could not easily take root in the Australian context. Wordsworth's aspiration was to give voice to the common language of ordinary people and so achieve the true expression of rural England. But for Field to give voice to the ordinary English living in Australia would have meant that he had to give voice not to rustic wanderers but to convicts. Australia appears for Field as something almost carnivalesque, a complex, confusing and misshapen world. An erasure of these Australian elements was necessary because they were too ridiculous even for Wordsworth's new poetics.

But what is also erased by Field is the horrendous violence and racism of the Australian imperial project. It was through Field that Australia appears as an uninhabited space and so, accordingly, a space that was not, nor could be, conquered. Field made it seem as if there was no one there to invade and conquer. But this erasure was a sleight of hand, a justification for legally imposing a colonial constitution that was no less violent. There is, indeed, a planetary scale to this violence. Australia lay at the far reaches of a British empire that covered the globe and which brought with it a universalising impulse to impose its religion, its laws, and its claims to security. But England was not endeared by the poetic qualities of its empire. Edward Quillinan, another admirer of Wordsworth's who eventually married his daughter Dora, met ridicule in the press in 1819 for having penned his poetry as a heavy dragoon. Poets who wrote epic accounts of British victory at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 met similar derision. There was at best an awkward, embarrassed silence about this violence.

There is a certain tragic fatefulness about these poetic origins of Australia—the authors concluding that Australia has lain under the shadow of Field's racist Romanticism for two centuries. One issue not considered at length is the fierce resistance that arose in response to colonisation. As the historian John Connor has documented in his study of the Frontier Wars, Australia was not conquered easily. The invasion was only possible because of a laboriously constructed network of ports, forts, roads, and depots, with military campaigns stretching over vast geographic areas and leading to several notable massacres. The colonisation may have been absent minded and the warfare sporadic, but those who resisted were surely approaching the matter with a keen seriousness and determination. It might also be noted that one feature of the legal structures that Field helped introduce to Australia was the capacity for subsequent change and development. The passage of the Native Title Act in 1993 is perhaps one example of these legal structures being turned around to work against the violent origins of Australian settlement.

Nonetheless, this is a fascinating book that offers a remarkable study of how the poetry of English Romanticism came to be translated to Australia. Poetry is treated by the authors as a form of knowledge, Field's *First Fruits* even operating, they propose, as a managerial handbook that exemplified how the colony was to be established and administered. But this management was above all about clearing the grounds for a new Australia—the poems were the first step in a determined effort to eradicate Aboriginal Australia.

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