Raymond Madden

James Dawson’s Scrapbook:
advocacy and antipathy in colonial Western Victoria

James Dawson’s name looms large over the colonial history of western Victoria. A Scottish pastoralist and businessman, he lived in Victoria for 60 years from 1840 until his death aged 94, in 1900. In his time on his pastoral run at Kangatong (1844–1866) and as a resident of the Camperdown district (1870s–1900) he formed close and abiding relationships with local Aboriginal people, such that he was appointed a Local Guardian of Aborigines. He assisted his daughter Isabella in recording the customs and cultures of various dialect groups he came into contact with in western Victoria, and they published their research in 1881 under the title *The Australian Aborigines: the languages and customs of several tribes in the Western District of Victoria, Australia*. This work of amateur ethnography remains one of the more valuable insights into western Victorian Aboriginal life at the point of European contact, and the vocabulary lists for the Chaap wuurrong (‘broad lip’), Kauurn kopan noot (‘small lip’) and Peek wuurrong (‘kelp lip’) dialects are the most extensive records of these extinct tongues. *Australian Aborigines*, remains (along with the records of George Augustus Robinson), one of the most useful tools for reconstructing knowledge of the original cultures and customs of Aboriginal western Victoria.

In his time in Australia Dawson was nothing if not busy. He was a failed businessman (he set up a fat rendering plant at Port Fairy that was successful for a short period before going bust), a very successful pastoralist, an advocate for, and guardian of, Aboriginal people, a commissioner of important artworks, an animal rights spokesman (he abhorred the cruelty dealt out to sheep in shearing sheds), and an environmental preservationist. Dawson initially ‘took up’ land in the Yarra Valley in 1840, and after 4 years he moved onto better pastures at Kangatong in western Victoria (near present-day Hawkesdale). He later settled near Camperdown. Appalled at the treatment handed out to the local Aboriginal population, he pressed for the retention of a small amount of land for their use and enjoyment. He and his family formed their strongest friendships with the Aboriginal people who worked on his pastoral run or were close to hand in his time at Camperdown.

James and Isabella Dawson wrote to newspapers on various matters relating to Aboriginal people. In addition to his concern for the plight of the local Aborigines, Dawson was deeply concerned about the destruction of the natural environment. In Tower Hill, an extinct volcanic crater near present-day Koroi, he saw a particularly fine example of a natural feature that was on the brink of destruction; he foresaw a ruin brought on by land clearing and the draining of swamps that was occurring in the area.
immediately surrounding Tower Hill. This led him to commission Eugene Von Guerard to paint Tower Hill as it was in 1855. The artist produced a wonderful panoramic record which went into such fine detail that in later years it was referred to in order to rehabilitate the environment. Indeed one could use it to identify the particular species of trees which once clad the banks of Tower Hill. In sum, if there was a pressing political or moral issue alive at the time, one could almost be assured that Dawson would have something to say about it. It was thus till the end; Dawson's letter writing campaigns continued into his 90s.

II

I have written briefly elsewhere on the life of James Dawson, and noted, as per the brief background above, that he was a complex and contradictory character. In this article I will expand on this characterisation by focussing on some debates in which Dawson made his indomitable presence felt. Dawson kept a 'Scrapbook' (a microfilm and photocopy of the 'Scrapbook' are held in the State Library of Victoria, the original is held by Dawson's descendants who still live near Camperdown) which held his published newspaper letters and other material of interest to him. It is possible to read this 'Scrapbook' as a journal of his activism and advocacy over his years in Victoria. The writing and opinions of Dawson, as presented in the 'Scrapbook', deepen the sense of contradiction and complexity that surround him. The themes that I want to follow through from this 'Scrapbook' are, firstly, the extent to which Dawson sought to advocate for Aborigines by highlighting injustice and exploding myths and misinformation that were promulgated about Aboriginal people by his fellow colonists. Secondly, in Dawson's 'Scrapbook' he makes a series of viciously anti-Irish statements that are at such odds with the tolerance and enlightenment shown to Aboriginal people that it warrants some attention. Dawson had intimate contact in western Victoria with both Aborigines and immigrant Irish. The position of myth-buster and unbending advocate he took in relation to the Aboriginal people of western Victoria when contrasted with the abjection which he felt toward the Irish render problematic the description of Dawson as a man 'of a temper singularly intolerant of injustice'. Dawson's characterisations of Aboriginal people and the Irish peasantry could be cruelly described as Rousseauian and Hobbsian respectively, although as we will see, Dawson's vision does not exactly map on to a binary of noble and ignoble savagery. Nevertheless, one cannot but notice that Dawson saw Aborigines in their 'native' state and the Irish peasantry as complementary opposites; the best and the worst of the 'lower orders' of humanity.

The 'Scrapbook'

Dawson's 'Scrapbook' is a fascinating collection of clippings and assorted manuscript material dedicated to a number of themes, central among them are writings which
reflect an interest in Aboriginal issues. Many of the news clippings have Dawson identified by name as the author; while others are clearly his work under an alias ('The Australian' and 'Giff-Gaff' are two readily identifiable Dawson pseudonyms). The scrapbook also contains newspaper articles written by others that are of interest to Dawson. He has included his responses to some of these articles and others, in turn, are responses to Dawson's newspaper articles and published writing. Included in the 'Scrapbook' are two reviews of Dawson's book *Australian Aborigines* (1881). Both are favourable to the text and applaud its larger message of the fellow humanity of the Aborigines. However, the muted, scholarly tone of the advocacy for Aboriginal people as expressed in *Australian Aborigines*, is dispensed with in Dawson's letter writing; his opinions are blunt and occasionally confronting, shot through with the confidence of the Scottish enlightenment and the righteousness of Presbyterian piety.

*Horrible massacres*

The seriousness of Dawson's letter writing campaign is ably demonstrated by his letter of 1 February 1881, published in the *Sotsman*:

> As a local guardian of Victorian aborigines, and as one who has always taken a deep interest in their welfare, I have been solicited to assist in drawing the immediate attention of the British public to massacres of the Queensland natives; and also to point out that they are executed in the most cruel and barbarous manner by black troopers, mounted and armed in the most approved fashion, and commanded by white men commissioned and paid by the Queensland Government.

> Now, as I can hardly imagine that any Colonial Ministry would be permitted to wage a war of extermination against the aboriginal inhabitants on any part of Her Majesty's dominions without the sanction of Her Majesty's representatives, I am compelled to charge the Governor of Queensland with an unwarranted complicity in these wicked massacres of Her Majesty's subjects. But, this is not all; for I am compelled to accuse the Secretary of the Colonies of shameful and criminal neglect of his duty in knowingly permitting such cruel deeds; for there is no doubt that he is cognizant of them through the able and apparently endless articles he could not possibly avoid observing in the leading journals of Queensland, and also in other Australian colonies. ... [To have Her Majesty represented by a man [i.e. the Governor of Queensland] who coolly sits with folded arms while deliberate massacre of tribes of aboriginal men, women, and infants goes on, almost daily, not only tarnishes the lustre of the Crown, but brings disgrace on Her Majesty's reign.]

Dawson finishes this letter with a flourish, suggesting the 'brutal' Queensland government, 'to use a phrase applied by it to the persecuted aborigines, deserved to be dispersed.' This, in any time and place, is stern stuff. To publicly accuse a Colonial Governor and the Secretary of the Colonies of 'unwarranted complicity' and 'criminal neglect' in relation to massacres of Aboriginal people, and to do so in an international context, is to risk angering very powerful forces. Yet Dawson takes to this task in a
manner that shows his dedication to exposing injustice and maltreatment of Aboriginal people; this is a theme to which he returned regularly. The letter to the Scotsman showcases the very best of Dawson and marks him off as an extraordinary character for his time and social context; while he wasn’t on his own in decrying such atrocities, the vigour with which he prosecuted the matter in his letter writing is singular. In his *Australian Aborigines*, in somewhat more cautious tones, Dawson also mentioned massacres in western Victoria. He recorded details of killings on the western bank of Lake Bullen Merri and makes mention of suspected massacres of Aboriginal people in the dunes east of Port Fairy that were passed off by some as deaths from smallpox. Frontier violence was perhaps one of the most discomforting issues for pastoralists and Colonial authorities, one of the most taboo of subjects, and yet Dawson shone a light on this aspect of colonial Australia in a way that left no room for misunderstanding or deflection. In addition to the exposing of frontier violence, Dawson was also keen to interrogate the morality of pastoral wealth accumulation on the back of Aboriginal disenfranchisement.

'A plea for the Aborigines'

Dawson was a pastoralist, and as a consequence, a usurper of Aboriginal lands. While he brought his pastoral stations as going entities, rather than setting them up from scratch, he was nevertheless close enough to the pastoral frontier to have an intimate understanding of its impact on Aboriginal life. Yet he was also a lifelong champion of attempts to get land reserved for Aboriginal people. Furthermore, he didn’t miss an opportunity to point out to his fellow colonists the great injustice wrought upon Aboriginal people when they were removed from their lands. In the *Camperdown Chronicle* in a letter titled 'A Plea for the Aborigines', Dawson had the following to say about the distribution of the deceased estate of a rich and successful pastoralist:

> Sir - I read in the Chronicle of to-day that the late John Thompson, of Keilambete, by his will left one hundred and twenty two thousand pounds sterling, to be distributed according to it. This amount of money was made chiefly at Keilambete by his occupation of country the legitimate property of the Aborigines, who were disinherited by him without the slightest compensation, except an occasional 'bite and buffet.' It is truly pitiful that owners of such large sums of money, chiefly derived from such a source, do not remember in their old age the condition and half-starved state of the existing Aborigines, who occasionally complain to me of 'too much sing-sing' and 'rubber,' and 'too little coylla,' at Fremlingham Aboriginal Station. - Yours etc.

> JAMES DAWSON
> Local Guardian of Aborigines.
> Camperdown, 23rd April, 1896.

Again, Dawson is not mincing his words. Reminding pastoralists of the 'disinherited' status of the 'legitimate' property owners of the area, and using phrases
such as 'compensation', can not have encouraged Dawson to many of his fellow old colonists. There is something timeless about this letter. It is as if Dawson was channeling a future discourse of Aboriginal rights. Indeed such phraseology would not be seen regularly in Aboriginal Victoria again until after the 1970s and the stirring of land justice movements with campaigns to return Lake Tyers, Framlingham and Lake Condah to the descendants of the original owners. Dawson's drive to expose those who would forget that their success was founded on the misfortunes of Aboriginal people also figures in the following section of a biographical entry:

In the 1880s Dawson collected money from the settlers around Camperdown for a monument to the last local Aborigines; it stands in the Camperdown cemetery. An acquaintance later recalled that, when some settlers refused to contribute, Dawson rushed to Melbourne with an account he had written of the early ill treatment of the Aboriginals. He demanded that the Argus editor, Frederick Haddon, publish this attack on the settlers but was refused: 'Dawson however insisted and, when Haddon ordered him out of the room, old Jimmy Dawson went for him with his umbrella.'

One could see this as the actions of a cranky old man and this anecdote could potentially serve to diminish Dawson. However, I find this sort of direct action taken by Dawson as further evidence of a singular commitment to justice. In the way Dawson figured in debates on massacres and the displacement of Aboriginal people, in the way he shone a light on colonial complicity in murders and pastoral amnesia in relation to the original owners of the country, we can see the stern and moral Presbyterian Scot in full flight. Dawson's philosophical convictions on justice were clearly informed by his religiosity. But Dawson was also a man of scientific bent, and liked nothing better than to meld his scientific curiosity with his advocacy for Aboriginal people to expose ignorance and misinformation about Aboriginal culture and society. One of the avenues through which Dawson explored this interest was by advancing a 'myth-busting' argument on theories of the origins of the Aboriginal 'mounds' or 'Blackfellows' ovens' that dotted the plains of western Victoria. Dawson dedicated a chapter to this topic in *Australian Aborigines*, but pursued the matter further in his 'scrapbook' where he kept detailed drawings of excavations of the mounds (Fig. 1).

*Houses* or *Ovens*

Dawson was keen to stress two things about these mounds. He contended they were not, as was speculated by others, primarily the remains of Aboriginal ovens, built up over years as ashes accumulated on the sites. And even though many contained human remains, they were not primarily Aboriginal burial grounds, as suggested by some other commentators he accuses being 'tinged with druidical notions.' Rather, Dawson argued on the basis of first hand accounts of the local Aboriginal people, and his own excavations, that the mounds were the collapsed remains of permanent houses which succumbed from time to time to bushfires. These houses, according to Dawson, were
always rebuilt on the same site, thereby building up into discernable mounds over many generations. Some selected quotes from a letter Dawson had published in the Australasian on 21 March 1868, under the alias 'Giff-Gaff', demonstrate the vigour with which Dawson pursued what he saw as the gross inaccuracies held by his fellow colonists about the habitations of the Aboriginal population:

Sir, - Under this heading ['Blackfellows Ovens']. . . . of the 7th inst., there is a long and, I think, unsatisfactorily conjectural letter signed 'M.', which I beg space to take notice of as briefly as possible. 'M.' raises and demolishes in a thorough penny-a-liner style the supposed origin and uses of these mounds . . . . and as he appears to have derived his knowledge . . . principally from the white side, you, Sir, can have little objection to permit me to place in opposition that of the black one.

After telling the editor of the Australasian what's good for him, Dawson goes on to spell out that at this time he and his daughter had a 'very close intimacy of upwards of 25 years with the aboriginals' and mentions his daughter's ability to 'understand and freely converse in the language of the tribes of the western districts'. Having established an unrivalled position of ethnographic authority, Dawson points out that the residences were formed with a frame of stout limbs, tall enough for a person to stand upright in, and that this dome-shaped frame was clad in grass and covered over with turf, 'like slates on a roof'. He is at pains to demonstrate that these were strong and comfortable abodes, not ramshackle lean-tos. He goes on to say:

I have drawn from the blacks the conclusion that the mounds in question are the débris of old residences which served as the winter home of individual families, and which from their great size in many instances must have been occupied for innumerable generations. . . . In these the natives spent their winters, and when summer arrived and their annual wanderings commenced, the family mansion was abandoned and shut up for a season . . . . Occasionally, however, during their absence bush fire swept the face of the country, and often with it all traces of the homes of the blacks . . . . [but] . . . new minis soon sprang up as before, to be again burnt down. Thus, in course of myriads of generations, have these mounds been added to and formed by sprinklings of ashes and burnt turf, if the blacks are to be believed, and I am more inclined to pin my faith to their tale then to the coat-tail of white men tinged with druidical notions . . . . I must continue to adhere to their and my own opinion, that they are the débris of old permanent minis, and more especially on opening many of them, I never discovered anything to induce me to alter my belief.

Yours, &c., Giff-Gaff.

As Dawson points out, he had pursued this matter further than a letter writing campaign, going so far as to excavate a number of these mounds to lay bare the story of the mounds as an archaeological fact (Fig. 1). In Dawson's ethnographic and archaeological examination of the origin and stratigraphy of these Aboriginal mounds we see another of his key concerns expressed. Dawson wanted to show his fellow colonials that Aboriginal people had more than law, customs, dignity, wisdom and
morals (some of the key themes pursued in *Australian Aborigines*); he wanted to also remind his fellow settlers of the deep antiquity of Aboriginal occupation of the area. His use of phrases like ‘innumerable generations’ and ‘myriads of generations’ feed into a recurring theme of his about original owners of the land and white usurpers. Dawson's reminders about the ancient and permanent physical structures of the Aboriginal presence in western Victoria serve to deepen the sense of disenfranchisement and to disabuse anybody of notions of Aboriginal people as landless nomads or people without property.

A fellow colonist could perhaps have accused Dawson of a being hypocritical and falsely indignant about ‘land theft’, but his statements on Aboriginal sovereignty are made in such a way as to portray a palpable sense of regret about the lot of dispossessed Aborigines. This genuine regret one reads in Dawson's letters deepens the contradiction and complexities of his relationship to the Aboriginal people of western Victoria. Dawson's pastoral activities had ceased by 1866 and his writing on Aborigines generally stem from after this time, yet one can, generously, read Dawson as an advocate for a form of territorial coexistence between pastoralists and Aboriginal owners. Dawson's knowledge, however, of the expansionist nature of the pastoral project and his belief that Aborigines would succumb to Europeans and their diseases (he describes them as ‘fast passing away’) presumably mean that in advocating for justice for Aboriginal people, and in attempting to dispel ignorant notions, he was engaged in acts of palliative care and salvage anthropology.
Dawson wished to record for posterity what he appreciated about Aboriginal culture, and to argue against ignorance, cruelty and misinformation being promulgated about his endangered 'sable friends.' Yet, Dawson was more than a crude social evolutionist, more than a mere soother of pillows for a dying race. Humanity was not 'equal' or similarly 'advanced' in his eyes, but unlike many of his fellow pastoralists he did not see Australian Aboriginal people on the bottom rung of some human ladder. He didn't obsess over technological ratings of progress, but was instead impressed by the intellect, character and mental acuity of Aboriginal people he was close to. While Dawson saw Aboriginal people as belonging to a 'lower' order, he was very clear about their mental state being more advanced than white folk of the lower classes. In *Australian Aborigines* for example he writes:

*I found my previous good opinion of the natives fell far short of their merits. Their general information and knowledge of several distinct dialects...gratified as well as surprised me, and naturally suggested a comparison between them and the lower classes of the white man. Indeed, it is very questionable if even those who belong to what is called the middle class, notwithstanding their advantages of education, know as much...as the aborigines do of their laws and of natural objects.***

Dawson's understanding of Aboriginal peoples is not neatly analogous to the image of the 'noble savage.' While Dawson did see Aboriginal people 'in their native state' as noble, and while a certain romanticism is evident in his writing, his appreciation of Aboriginal intellect, governance and morality was not something we would associate with the notions of 'savagery' extant at the time. Dawson's evolutionism and schemas of more or less advanced peoples were complicated by a relativity born of his amateur ethnographic experience with Aboriginal people. In what could be seen in today's terms as a call for an emic or 'insider' perspective and a caution against ethnocentrism, Dawson writes:

*[I]n censuring [Aboriginal] customs and practices which we may regard as repugnant to our notions and usages, we should bear in mind that these may appear right and virtuous from the stand-point of the aborigines, and that they have received the sanction of use and wont for many ages. If our habits, manners, and morals were investigated and commented upon by an intelligent black, what would be his verdict on them?***

It is tempting to see in Dawson the waning of evolutionist thought and the stirrings of a relativist approach to understanding fellow humans. Dawson certainly respected that Aboriginal culture and society had its own internal logic and value systems, and was ready to acknowledge that their behaviour made perfect sense from the Aboriginal point of view. In this way Dawson and his daughter were apprised of a sympathetic ethnographic point of view rather than seeing them as brute forces of nature or ignoble savages, like the less sympathetic and more common European representations. Yet, if we are to acknowledge any relativity in Dawson, it is at most...
partial, as he was still in large part an evolutionist who saw that Aboriginal lifeways were doomed in the face of, if not a superior force, a more ruthless mercantile force that was settler-colonial pastoralism. Just because Dawson didn't see Aboriginal people as brutes, it is not to say he wasn't of the opinion there were humans who were brutish. I want to suggest that on Dawson's ladder of human advancement the lowest rung appears to have been reserved for that most inferior, irrational, superstitious and indolent race, the Irish.

III

The Irish Question

The portrait of Dawson presented so far shows him as a man who, on principle, was prepared to stand up to the attitudes of his peers in relation to Aboriginal people, and was prepared, along with his daughter, to put time, money and effort into recording and publishing what he saw as the proof of the fellow humanity of Aboriginal people. Dawson ran an argument for fellow humanity that wasn't sidetracked by materialist concerns, or crude lineal arguments about technological progress. Instead he focused on shared social, intellectual and psychological states. While the tensions between his early colonial agenda (land, pastoralism, money) and his subsequent social reform agenda with respect to Aboriginal people are at one level evidence of contradiction and/or a 'road to Damascus' conversion, there is a sense that they are perhaps axiomatic, characteristics we would expect to find in any colonialist who experienced a sense of fellow humanity across the Australian frontier. Nevertheless, not many other colonists sympathetic to Aboriginal issues were prepared to argue so forcefully for this point of view, and in doing so Dawson must be acknowledged as a heroic character in the annals of Aboriginal and European colonial relations. In coming to Australia and building intimate relations over decades with Aboriginal people Dawson appears to have been blessed with experiences that challenged, surprised and remade him. His previous good opinion of Aboriginal people deepened into a genuine respect and admiration for them.

While in the case of Aboriginal people familiarity bred respect, Dawson had other familiarities that bred contempt. Dawson's intimate contact with Irish immigrants in Victoria did nothing to create a sense of relativity or respect, rather he seemed to see in the Irish in Australia proof that a degraded people at home make for a degraded people abroad. Dawson's attitude to the Irish was by no means inconsistent with many of his English and Scottish peers. If Dawson was different from his peers on Aboriginal issues he was of a man on Irish issues. For example Dawson had in his 'Scrapbook' a full-page cartoon from the London Punch of 22 December, 1883 (Fig. 3). Punch was notoriously anti-Irish in this era, publishing a series of cartoons that represented the Irish as vampires, Frankensteinian monsters and simian savages. The cartoon that Dawson kept in his 'Scrapbook' relates to the contentious issue of the Irish Land League and the
politics of Charles Stewart Parnell. Parnell was a complex, divisive figure. As a Protestant landlord heading an Irish nationalist movement he was roundly criticised from the UK; presumably he was seen as the worst sort of traitor to England. In December 1883 when Parnell was presented with the enormous sum of £40,000 collected from his Irish supporters, Punch responded with 'The Crowning of the O'Caliban'. The figure of 'Paddy O'Caliban' was used several times by Punch, and can be seen as a part of a broader discourse of 'Paddy' bashing:

There is nothing new about the derogatory stereotyping of the Irish. In the 1880s, the Norman propagandist Gerald of Wales was already branding them a barbarous, filthy and irresponsible people who 'think that the greatest pleasure is not to work'. During the 19th century, Punch was known for its caricatures of the Irishman as Paddy O'Caliban, a simian brute with bended knees and a shillelagh, barely civilised and prone to emotional violence. The music-hall image of the reckless, stupid, priest-ridden, drunken, combative and ceaselessly talkative Irishman has persisted since."

The cartoon has a sardonic caption quoting from a speech of Parnell, contrasting his words about the Land League being a movement of 'moderation' and 'utter absence of crime' with the image of a powder keg full of anarchy, rebellion and murder upon which the O'Caliban is crowned by Parnell in return for the £40,000, Dawson, showing no such grasp of sardonic humour, and perhaps worried the meaning might be lost on others, takes to the cartoon with his fountain pen and captions it with the phrase, 'Mr Parnell M.P. is presented by Paddy with forty thousand pounds sterling for advocating anarchy, rebellion & murder' (Fig. 4).

Witches in 1894

The discourse of the 'stupid, priest-ridden' Irish is also brought up by another of Dawson's 'Scrapbook' entries. In Ireland in 1894 there was a case of murder that gripped peoples' attention, even as far away as western Victoria. Bridget Cleary was burned to
Figure 3 'Crowning the O'Caliban', Punch (London), 22 December, 1883.

Figure 4 Dawson's caption under copy of the above cartoon pasted into his scrapbook [p. 25].
death by her husband Michael because, as he explained it, he thought that the 'fairies' had taken her away and left a 'changeling' in her place. "The burning of Bridget Cleary was often referred to as a case of 'witch burning', indeed the 'last' case of witch burning, Michael Cleary and nine relations were subsequently tried, and Dawson has passed a short report on the outcome of the trial in his scrap book (Fig. 2). Above and below the report Dawson has written 'Witches in 1894' and 'Where were the Papist Priests when this took place? I D! This little snippet adds to an emerging picture of the Irish as reckless, rebellious, irrational and Catholically superstitions, all things an enlightened man of scientific curiosity and a staunch Presbyterian found repugnant.

Land reform

Now, one might overlook Dawson's captioning of the 'O'Caliban' cartoon as no more than a bit of light hearted Paddy bashing, typical of the times, and by no means indicative of a deeper pathology towards the Irish. And one might see his commentary on the Bridget Cleary case as nothing more than a rational response to a disturbing event. Except that there is more in Dawson's 'Scrapbook' on the Irish. The main thrust of Dawson's Irish 'problem' revolves around the prospect of land reform, not just in Ireland, but more pressingly in the colony of Victoria. On 14 July 1883 Dawson wrote, in his usual blunt manner, under the alias 'Australian' to Scotland's Oban Times wishing to be heard on the subject of Irish land reform:

Sir, – Notwithstanding that in your last issue you expressed a general 'sickness' of all Irish affairs, perhaps you will kindly allow me space for a few remarks on the Irish land question. Some time in December last the Earl of Derby in his Manchester speech referred to a proposed creation of Irish peasant proprietary on a large scale, by means of State money, to be repaid in instalments, and then very wisely demanded to know 'what assurance could be had that the payment would be punctually made?' Now Sir, as a Scotchman of upwards of forty years' residence in the colony of Victoria, Australia, and during that long period having come constantly into contact with the Irish, I feel entitled to reply 'no assurance whatever!' My colonial experiences teach me that as a race the Irish are incapable of progression beyond policeman and potato growers. ... I can safely declare that for the many hundreds of prosperous English and Scotch squatters I do not know half-a-dozen Irish."

Dawson goes on to detail his disdain for the Australian Irish politician, Charles Gavan Duffy and his Victorian Land Reform Act of 1862, which he saw as 'mischievously and cunningly constructed' to displace 'energetic' English and Scottish squatters and nothing more than a 'monstrous credit system':

[The (Australian Irish) selectors have been agitating through their paid members of Parliament for a remission their arrears to the Government, and for the granting of titles that they may sell their farms to the squatters or money-lenders, and return to their best friend the pick and shovel. Surely if the Irishmen as a class cannot succeed as farmers in such a fine country as Australia ..., what guarantee has the
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Earl of Derby that the payments for land by the Irish in Ireland would be punctually made. I repeat none whatever. - I am, &c.

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There is an obvious irony here; the energetic and hard working English and Scottish settlers, who Dawson willingly castigate over their amnesia towards the usurpation of Aboriginal landowners, were themselves, according to Dawson, threatened with usurpation by feckless potato growers, policemen and friends of the pick and shovel; reflexivity is not something of which we can accuse Dawson. He was not, however, ignorant of the plight of the post-famine Irish. He went to the trouble to put in his 'Scrapbook' a news article (source unknown) in which a correspondent relayed the 'frightful condition of the Irish peasantry'. The article details how a village in County Mayo had forty-two single room cabins which housed forty-six families, and claims that cattle and pigs were also kept in most cabins. Sewage ran in open drains placed through the middle of the floors, and 'stagnant pools containing all sorts of offensive matter lie in front of the cabins'. The article goes on to report cabins littered with manure and organic matter, the stench being 'overpowering'. In a small single roomed cabin the correspondent noted that a mother and two children, besides being typhoid victims, were sharing the room with 'three cows, and number of chickens, three cats, and a large dog'. The correspondent asked another woman who lived in a cabin that housed seven people why she didn't clean out the 'fully 8in[ches] of manure' [sic] lining the floor of the cabin. She, in a fashion mercilessly parodied in Irish jokes, said she couldn't clean it out as she would then have no manure. In the context of the other articles that Dawson has in his 'Scrapbook' on the Irish question, there is little doubt that this particular one is not included on the basis of his sympathy with those concerned, rather one gets the distinct sense that here is an article designed to drive home an utterly unsympathetic picture of the Irish as an uncivilised people so bereft of common sense, rationality and drive that they couldn't even be bothered to clean the manure out of their own cabins.

IV

Dawson was able to exhort his readers of Australian Aborigines to put aside 'censuring customs and practices which we may regard as repugnant to our notions and usages' on the basis that they 'should bear in mind that these may appear right and virtuous from the stand-point of the aborigines'. However, no such exhortation to relativity is to be found in his commentary on Irish matters. That Dawson can have been such an outstanding champion of Aboriginal justice issues, at a time when this would not have been a comfortable position to assume, and yet at the same time be so determinedly ethnocentric about the Irish marks him off as a curious character.

There are, however, a couple of points that need to be considered which might
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lessen the sense of contradiction that attends to Dawson. His writings on Aborigines and the Irish question both stem from post 1866 after he was forced out of pastoralism by mounting debts. It was the Irishman Duffy's Victorian Land Reform Act of 1862 that ultimately drove Dawson out of pastoralism and forced him to sell off his beloved Kangatong. To rub salt into the wound Kangatong was sold to the Baird brothers who came from Ireland.38 Furthermore, Dawson's relations with Aboriginal people were conducted with him in a relative position of power, yet his relations with the Irish of western Victoria would see him in a position of reduced influence as the Land Reform Act began to change the balance of power in Victoria towards the smaller land holders. One might simply say that in advocating for Aboriginal people and showing antipathy for Irish settlers, Dawson is operating on two distinct levels; as a moral relativist in the first instance and as an intensely personal subject of injustice in the second. Furthermore, Dawson's advocacy in Aboriginal matters was very public, yet his antipathy towards the Irish was less direct and consisted of a small letter writing campaign. This begs the question: do these two sides to Dawson bear comparison?

What I find interesting is that both positions are born out of close contact and as such the two sides of Dawson are generated out of intensely personal, intersubjective exchanges. Despite the fact his discussions of Aboriginal people were often couched in an objective tone, Dawson's attachment to Aborigines as fellow humans, and as a cause for advocacy, produced a personal, subjective quest that was perhaps driven by feelings of guilt he had about the pastoral project. Dawson's amateur ethnographic experiences, his close intimacy with Aboriginal people, made him into a man who stood out in time, whose views we can look back on and say, 'there was a decent man.' In saying this we can also point to the transformative power of the ethnographic encounter, a phenomenon that would become a methodological cornerstone for anthropology in the 20th century. Yet Dawson had the same levels of intimacy with the Australian Irish as he did with Aboriginal people; this experience produced no remaking of attitude, no calls for relativity or claims to look at the Irish from their perspective. What was possibly an enmity he brought from the old country was only deepened by his Austral-Irish 'ethnographic' experience.

In Dawson's somewhat relativist, but predominantly evolutionist view the lower 'classes' of humanity in colonial western Victoria consisted of an oppositional pair of character types. Aboriginal people, in their 'native state,' were not the savages; they were intelligent, kept sturdy and clean abodes, had impeccable morals and were worthy of protection, empathy and advocacy. Despite this abundance of good character they were nevertheless seen as fast fading from the landscape. Indeed, Dawson's writing about the original inhabitants of western Victoria often slips into an elegiac tone. The Australian Irish peasantry, on the other hand, were reckless, rebellious, lazy, unintelligent and irrational. Despite being drawn to Australia in a bid to escape the chaotic post-famine
conditions in Ireland, they deserved no sympathy, and were, despite their abundance of poor character, a rising threat to the energetic and hard working Scots and English of the pastoral plains. Dawson opposes Aboriginal people and the Irish in terms of regret and threat, attraction and repulsion, as complementary opposites; the best and the worst of the lower classes of humanity.

The point of this article has not been to wantonly or destructively 'unpack' the image of Dawson, nor is it an attempt to discredit him through some cheap historiography. I am drawn to Dawson as I unashamedly consider him to be a colonial hero, all the more interesting for his obvious contradictions (in these times of late modernity it is expected that all heroes will be partial and flawed). Having worked in the Aboriginal land justice arena in Victoria for well over a decade (a complex and uncertain practical and policy terrain that has delivered mixed results to traditional owners), to hear the authoritarian voice of Dawson echoing over the ages, putting forth with unflinching confidence what is right and what is wrong, is to be left impressed and a tad envious of his moral and intellectual rigour; one wishes that matters were still so uncomplicated. However, as a descendant of western Victorian potato farmers who were successful, hard working and redeemed from the ravages of the famine by changes like Duffy’s Land Reform Act, I also find Dawson’s ‘Scrapbook’ challenging.

Having laid aside my best friends the pick and shovel to make a career out of anthropology, I have come to see ethnography as more than a way to produce certain forms of anthropological knowledge and authority. It is also a powerful educational experience that can challenge and remake our attitudes towards others, causing us to find common ground and better ways to understand each other. That this was true too for the amateur ethnographer Dawson with respect to Aboriginal people is heartening to look back on. That the opposite obtains in relation to Dawson and the Australian Irish is fascinating: ‘Blackfellas’ and ‘Paddys’ occupied good and evil sides of the stage in a morality play that Dawson enthusiastically enjoined. An examination of Dawson’s ‘Scrapbook’ and his experiences in business and landholding goes some way to resolving the sense of contradiction one can get from an examination of his relationships to the Aborigines and the Irish. Yet the partial reach of his social and cultural relativity (applying to Aboriginal people, but not to the Irish), the way he was ahead of his time on Aboriginal issues and determinedly of his time in relation to the Irish peasantry reinforce the portrait of him as a complex character.