

The Bushranger's Bible

*They combine the desperado and the gallant and feel that they have built up a superiority which defies the power of the government.**

Bathurst Times, 1862.

Crime is just: the pickpocket of the old world fingering the new.
Take the bush, its huge heart out hunting all night.

Morning's undergrowth counts the takings on a slow abacus
while a blade of fog sharpens on the grinding block of the daylight moon.

Or take first birdcall which lifts the axe from under the bedroll,
splits the tame dream open. Till the bushranger rises, yawns,

pisses hiss-yellow on a smouldering fire, then crouches at the creek's
edge, coaxing the bottom lip of his billy into the sulk of a drink.

Consider the gossiping Welsh of underwater pebbles.
The co-ordinates of sun, low and shiny through the trees

like a trap's new watch. The bushranger attends to its timekeeping
and to his horse, which twitches at the cold pearls of dew

on a cobweb; snorts white from its nostrils, those downy church-arches.
Auspicious omens are everywhere.

In the muscular gums, hand over shadow, climbing the pale high-wire
of sky. The air's wrinkled skin on scalded milk, that faint

eucalyptus-blue of remembered mercy. But mostly from
the high-climbed rock, that quivering on the horizon, where a pair

of tied wrists are held equidistant over the dying flame of dawn
till the rope gives in, the hands are free. For another half hour

they wear the first-degree burns of the righteous.

#

The Bible is a dressing for festering sores, the unbuttoning
of a storm-heavy coat for the disenchanted.

Covered in kangaroo skin and written in kangaroo blood,
it has the apocryphal blots and smears of a man in the grip

of a galloping love, riding the high horse of his own deathbed.

There are the usual dangling modifiers: possession, capture...
The intoxicating herb of suffrage running to seed. Europe's

faded flower, pressed flat under the weight of a hemisphere
(a tattered copy of Lord Byron in the back pocket,
broken at the spine).

Troopers swarm through the pages with their deputised stridency.
Cobbler governments construct special shoes

for the club foot of the law. The squattocracy squats
on the chamber pot of the treasury.

And as for the bolstering of bushrangers
who sometimes live in fear for their wives,

cornered-wasp testimonials camouflaged
in the noisy hive of bravado.

This, for instance, from *The Book of Cash*, Chapter Two,
verses six to twelve:

*Messrs Cash and Co beg to notify His Excellency
that a very respectable person named Mrs Cash is falsely*

*imprisoned in Hobart Town, and if said Mrs Cash is not released
forthwith we will, in the first instance, visit Government House*

*and beginning with Sir John, administer a wholesome lesson
in the shape of a sound flogging; after which we will pay*

the same currency to his followers.

#

The Book of Kelly gargles a liquorish bile.
The villain of envy, or so says Ned, turns

like an agile acrobat in the pommel-horse bowels of the traps.
They grind their teeth on pigeon bones of protocol,

conserve the poisons of their inkish blood
in the dusty little vials of charge books,

and hone the fine ardour of their cruelty
on trivial misdemeanours.

Here's the call by the authorities:

*Bushranging is not followed as a mere means of subsistence.
These lawless thugs find success a source of pleasure*

*and they are stimulated to novelty by actions of their desire
to make history.*

*The sympathy which they get from a section of the public,
builds up the vanity in which they indulge.*

And Ned's Jerilderie response:

*A parcel of ugly fatnecked wombat-headed
big-bellied magpie-legged narrow-hipped*

*knock-kneed sons of Irish Bailiffs
or English landlords which is better known*

as officers of Justice or Victorian Police.

#

The Book of Hall, Chapter Ten, is the earliest example
of a scratch-and-sniff text.

Bids you notice solidarity has a wonderful smell:
a salt-bush-mutton perfumed mingling

of psalms in the distance. How the road's throat tightens
with a gravelly nostalgia, and the tines of hunger lift

and turn the bones of the dead like forked straw.
Blessed are those who live

with the wondrous cure of the future, persist in civil
disobedience, aiding and abetting the downfall of the law.

On the last day, which may well be tea time, victory
will deliver its roast spuds, steaming, its hygienic muskets

in the ocean noise of wagon wheels over hardpacked dirt.

Evolution with an 'r' will climb on all fours out of the valley,
swigging on its moonful of stolen rum.

#

In *The Book of Thunderbolt*, Chapter Five,
verses twelve to fifteen, there's the tale of a bushranger

down Rylstone way, with the card-holding hand of a preacher
whose sermons hit home like wrecking-ball punches, like he fights,

handcuffed, and always wins. With great knuckles
he embroiders ruinous angels on his own winding cloth

to save the pristine linens of those who listen.
And don't they prick up their ears at this needling,

chew on the dangling cotton-threads in his eyes.
Don't they love the slow mending of this incremental Jesus.

Some days, he says, a bushranger will feel like a man
with white hair, weeping for redemption,

some days like a predator: the taste on his tongue, an ash
facsimile of each enemy staked to the pyre of his heart.

Tells his own story of Mad Dan Morgan,
on a pilgrimage to find the honest bath in Ezekial,

how he imagined it in some vast field of god's deliverance,
gilt-porcelain in the shape of a generous coffin.

There would be a tablet of soap the size
of a stone commandment to deal with the friendly fire

of vermin in his beard. A single curious cow peering through
the reckitts-blue-white rim of its eyes.

And Confession to sink into

like the long deep bruise of a woman,
holy water's acid bubbling to the brim.

#

The Book of Gardiner, clear as the face of a radiant illness,
spells out in some detail the bushranger's code.

No intentional mistreatment of women or horses
(after use, return both to their owners, unscathed).

No robbing of children, or clergy, or poor folk.
No kicking of dogs or Henry Parkes' inlaws,

aka: the Police Force, unless in the way.

And as for newspapers which are wont to defame
the nobility and honour of the gentleman thief,

in the first instance a polite letter will suffice:
see template below:

*To Whoever it May concern. Having seen last month
wherein it said I took the boots off a man's feet*

*and on another occasion, the last few shillings from a beggar,
let it be known I never did no undertaking so mean, low or petty in my life.*

And in the second, if the first is ignored, a cheerful letter
of misspelled obscenities (sic) to the Commissioner's wife,

composed whilst sitting on an ant-bite rock, the pure gentian violet
veins of afternoon deepening the shadows.

Optional extra: before sending, use as wrapping paper
around the testicles of a calf.

#

Here is a warning from *The Book of Pearce*.

The secret emissaries of the convict cannibal are latent
in the smell of a bushranger's unwashed

genitals, heavy as a piece of human flesh carried
in the pocket of his pornographic dreams.

When a man has been alone and hungry too long,
a catastrophe of cockatoos will gather in the branches,

sharpen their beaks to feast on the soft *kuru* of his brain.

PS: Never trust a companion who carries an axe.

#

In the Constabulary at Braidwood there are three life lessons:
Lock, Key and Noose.

The names listed in black ink are persons of interest
for all the above.

(Death's shoehorn enjoys, particularly,
bushrangers who appear too big for their boots).

The reward dead-or-alive is five gallons of rum,
more if you're Ned, posted like a blank cheque in your own letterbox.

But crime's a contagious tendency
and the least of it. It's the straightjacket

of the too-tight armour of the ordinary

that makes a person break out.

The first cloven hoof stepping above and beyond
into the pure air at the edge of the cliff,

not the dark unimaginative stampede
of the herd that follows.

It is freedom must be paid for. That inexplicable,
inescapable Sarah Island in the head.

It's not dying young that a bushranger fears,
knowing the here and now was all there ever was

for him. That it's easier for a bee to thread itself
through the eye of a crucifix orchid

than for a rogue to hammer his square peg
into the round hole of heaven.

It's living on in the wrong shape,
that seems unlikely.

The contracting walls of age
closing in. How could a man who has lived under

stars poking through the bullet holes of the sky, wear the roof
of the everyday as anything but a barrage of arrows?

How could he convalesce from highwayman's disease,
with the slow, calm venom of a pipe

by the cleaver-meets-knucklebone cracks
of a fire. Make a tottering daily inspection

for coddling moth in a orchard's splintery apple trees.
Watch a dawn the colour of cider

to drown the burning of a beautiful thirst.

And if defiance is only a habit of the young,
feeding on hardship, fired with lust, then why

does the heretical fizz in the blood continue
as dangerous as a dry-land case of the bends?

Who would, in the end,
choose to wear a safety harness while perched

on that last supple scaffold of twilight?

With only a bird's wing hooked
on the barbs of the breath.

The obligatory woman – wife, mother or sister,
long suffering sweetheart, wailing like

a bush curlew, fit to curdle the sky.

Neck tight, in the final pardon of the knot.

The trap door opening below
on that familiar transgressive world

with its sudden frothing tilt of the old days,

the horizon bouncing with a gang of raked suns.