The Literature Of Gippsland

Gippsland is a naturally self-contained region, cut off from surrounding areas by barriers of mountains, sea and forests. In the early days, people couldn't get through to Melbourne along today's Princes Highway route because of swamps and forests; Gippsland operated as a world of its own. Many Australian regions, like the Riverina or the Wimmera, have a single characteristic type of countryside. But Gippsland has a number of distinctive sub-regions:

(a) the rainy, foothill country of the small dairy-farms, largely in the south, with which the name Gippsland is usually associated,
(b) the mountains (the Australian Alps) to the north,
(c) the uninhabited forested slopes to the east,
(d) the central plain, like the Riverina or the Western District of Victoria, open sheep country, lightly timbered, with a network of rivers,
(e) the flat-land agriculture of the former Koo-see-rip swamp in the west,
(f) the Gippsland Lakes, and
(g) the brown-coal urban-industrial area of the Latrobe Valley, developed this century.

So Gippsland has most types of Australian environment and each sub-region has its own literature.

For reasons of simplicity, I shall concentrate here on the relations between three types: the mountains, the small dairy farm areas and the plain. These three elements have arranged themselves differently in Gippsland literature than in Australian literature as a whole. Australians moved into the fertile crescent (the coastal and range area stretching from mid-Queensland to Adelaide) in the first half of last century, and the small-farm selection movement kept this area in focus for much of the 19th century. Harpur and Kendall in poetry, and Marcus Clarke and Boldrewood in the novel, situate their writing in the mountains and forests. But later last century, a profound change of orientation occurred with
the failure of the small farms: Australians thereafter took their bodies to the cities but their imaginations to the plains and outback, and the experience of the fertile crescent was by and large forgotten, or at least suppressed, in many Australian families.

Gippsland was untypical, since the small farmers survived there (after an enormous struggle) and it has, by Australian standards, a dense small-holdings population existing for over a century now. The Harpur-Kendall type of poetry continued, and a substantial, though invisible, literature exists, including many small-farm novels. Traditions lost or muted in other parts of Australia have remained in Gippsland, and its literature shows how the three components could have arranged themselves differently (with a different chronology and different emphases) in the Australian mainstream.

Highland Scots Squatters and Aboriginals

Gippsland was settled by Gaelic-speaking highland Scots coming over the mountains from the Monaro to Omeo, and then down on to the central plain, from 1835 onwards. Two novels were written by one of the highland Scots founders. Angus McLean took up the Glenaladale station with his brother in 1846. In the preface of his novel *Harry Bloomfield, or The Adventures of an Early Australian Squatter* (1888), McLean tells us he wrote the novel during evenings in his early days in Gippsland, but published it some decades later.
Much of it appears to be a lightly fictionalised account of the 1840s, as certain passages are well-documented incidents in early Gippsland history. If so, it shows how literature can contribute to historical knowledge.

McLean's other extant novel is *Lindigo, the White Woman or The Highland Girl's Captivity Among Australian Blacks* (1866). Some snippets of conversation in this novel are in Scots Gaelic, which is rare in Australian literature. The story of a supposed lost white woman was a powerful legend in early Gippsland history. Settlers believed that women's clothing found in aboriginal camps was evidence of her existence. Expeditions were mounted to recapture her; local squatters, led by Angus McMillan, formed a 'Highland Brigade' and used the occasion to harrass the natives, to drive them from their feeding grounds and in some cases to murder them. Negotiations with the blacks failed to produce anyone.

The lost white woman of Gippsland story is one of many such legends around the Australian coast, including William Buckley of Port Phillip, Mrs. Fraser of Fraser Island and the original Bogong Jack story in *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*. These stories are cognate with the “child lost in the bush” motif in our literature, both betraying insecurity and fear of the unknown in a new country. The white woman story, as well as being a powerful myth in its own right, produced an extensive fictional literature. As well as an historical account in George Dundcrdale's *The Book of the Bush* (1898) and Angus McLean's novel, there is Henry Gyles Turner's 'The Captive of Gippsland' (1857), Russell's *The Heart*, Mary Gaunt's story 'The Lost White Women' in *The Ends of the Earth* (1915) and Fred Baxter's recent children's version *Snake for Supper* (1968).

The main aboriginal tribe of Gippsland was called the Kurnai. On the McLean's Glenaladale property, the explorer and anthropologist Dr. Alfred Howitt found a cave on the Mitchell River called The Den of Nargun, a location which appears frequently in the literature of Gippsland.

The myths of the Kurnai have been recorded by anthropologists like Howitt, Brough Smith and Massola. Mary Grant Bruce's book *The Stone Axe of Burkaumukk* (1922) retells aboriginal legends, which goes against her Eurocentric reputation. Tarlton Rayment included aboriginal material in his books. In one of his poems 'The Lament of Bukkan-Munjie' an aboriginal mourns the loss of his homelands in exactly the same way exiled Celts lament the loss of their ancestral lands in 18th century Irish literature and in Sorley Maclean's 'Hallaig' or 'The Woods of Raasay':

In the Land of my Tribe there is silence -
not songs,
And the heart of poor Mun-jii how sadly
it longs
For the Emu, the Euro, its long flying leap
Down the hill, where the brothers of Buk-kan
now sleep.
For the sheep of the whitemen now swarm
like bees
O'er the land, and the graves, of our brown
Birrahlees.
But now, black is the forest; the gullies are
bare,
And the scents of the wattles are gone, who
knows where?

Rayment here anticipates the parallel between highland Scots and aboriginal displacement which is one of the main themes of Don Watson's *Caledonia Australis* (1984).

**Bushrangers of the High Plains**

Henry Kingsley's *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn* (1859), Rolf Boldrewood's *Nevermore* (1892) and the legends of Bogong Jack all relate to misty stories of early bushmen and cattle duffers on the high plains around Omeo. We need first to look at the actual historical background to these works. Last century escaped and ex-convicts from Van Diemen's Land sailed across Bass Strait and landed on the Gippsland coast; these landings are recorded in Dunderdale's *Book of the Bush*, in Geoffrey Hamlyn and in Katharine Susannah Prichard's first novel *The Pioneers* (1915) set around the Port Albert area, where Prichard lived as a governess in 1904. The convicts made their way through Maffra and the gold-mining area of Dargo on to Omeo, another large gold-mining area by the 1850s and 1860s. There many became involved in horse-stealing rackets across the mountains to Beechworth, the Murray and the Riverina.

Three historical events are related to this. Firstly, Bogong Jack, an Omeo butcher named Jack Payne (or Paynter or Fainter), led such a gang, associated with Thomas Toke. Bogong Jack's hideaways were near Mt. Fainter and Limestone Creek, Toke's on the Gibbo Creek, both in the mountains north of Omeo. Secondly, a celebrated 19th century case, the Tichborne Affair, involved a Wagga Wagga butcher named Castro, who claimed to be the missing heir to the Tichborne title and estates (the heir was thought to have disappeared on the Australian goldfields). Castro turned out to be one Arthur Orton, an ex-convict from Hobart, who had worked his way up through Maffra and Omeo to the Riverina in the 1850s. Thirdly, in 1859, Cornelius Green, an Omeo gold-buyer, was murdered by bushrangers when escorting a consignment of gold. Bogong Jack and Toke were known associates of the murderers. After these incidents Toke and Bogong Jack retired to their huts in the mountain fastnesses to the north as things were getting a bit hot.

This recurring pattern of events — ex-convict gangs, bushrangers and duffing, and ex-patriate Englishmen seeking to return to their English titles — also occurs in the two novels of Kingsley and Boldrewood, the last thirds of which are set in the mountains of north-eastern Victoria in the Omeo area. (The
Australian scenes in Kingsley's *The Hillyars and the Burton*s (1865) also take place in eastern Victoria.) A large part of Kingsley's time in Australia (1853 to 1858) was spent on Western District properties. He briefly passed through the Monaro and East Gippsland on his return from Sydney to Melbourne in the last months of 1855. Evidence of his location in Gippsland can be tentatively constructed from J.S. Mellick's recent biography *The Passing Guest* (1983), from Kingsley's paintings and the internal evidence of the novels, and from later memoirs. This material all points to the Snowy River area called Combermere County last century.

The last part of *Geoffrey Hamlyn* fits in with the bushranging and cattle-duffing pattern mentioned previously. A bushranging outbreak occurs, and after a pitched battle with police, the leader of the gang, escaped convict George Hawker from Van Diemen's Land, attempts to flee into the mountains. Hawker heads for the Murray gates:

> His plans were well laid. Across the mountain, north of Lake Omeo, not far from the mighty cleft in which the infant Murray spends his youth, were two huts, erected years before by some settler, and abandoned. They had been used by a gang of bushrangers, who had been attacked by the police, and dispersed. Nevertheless, they had been since inhabited by the men we know of, who landed in the boat from Van Diemen's Land, in consequence of Hawker himself having found a pass through the ranges, open for nine months in the year. So that, when the police were searching Gipp's Land for these men, they, with the exception of two or three, were snugly ensconced on the other water-shed, waiting till the storm should blow over. (Ch.XLIII)

This is the area where Toke and Bogong Jack had their huts. *Geoffrey Hamlyn* is loosely based on some local knowledge of events which Kingsley must have picked up in the district, and fits into the general pattern of historical events.

Similar events occur in Boldrewood's *Nevermore* (1892). Boldrewood, like Kingsley, had lived on a Western District squating property. He knew Kingsley, persuaded him to take up writing seriously and admired his work to such an extent that he was said to know *Geoffrey Hamlyn* off by heart. The structure of *Nevermore* parallels *Geoffrey Hamlyn* very closely. After failing as a Western District squatter, Boldrewood may have been a magistrate on the Omeo Goldfields in the mid 1860s; he certainly became conversant with local stories. Boldrewood began writing at this period. In his later novel *Nevermore* he combined all the folk-stories of the mountains into one story: the Tichborne case, the Cornelius Green murder and the Kelly gang (the Lawless brothers and sister Kate) are all to the forefront.

The interesting thing about Kingsley and Boldrewood, with their strong affinities with the Western District, is that both turned imaginatively to the mountain country to locate their fictions in, even though they were in the area for a comparatively short time. In mid and later 19th century Australia, the
forests and mountains were the focus of interest, adventure and excitement. Their legends were romantic and their scenery picturesque. The plains country and outback couldn’t compete at that stage. The film of ‘The Man From Snowy River’ (with Clancy upstaged) and the current high profile of the cattlemen of the high plains may signal a return to the earlier emphasis.

The Untouched Forests

The untouched forests and mountains of Gippsland gave rise to poetry in the Harpur-Kendall tradition, mainly by five women poets all born in the 1860s: Grace ‘Jennings’ Carmichael of Orbost, Mary Fullerton of Glenmaggie, Marie Pitt of Bairnsdale, Nellie Clerk of Mirboo North and Marion Miller Knowles of Wood’s Point and the Black Spur. Much of it is poetry of the understories: ferny glades, sparkling mountain streams, wood sprites and water nymphs. The following stanzas, from ‘Jennings’ Carmichael’s ‘A Bush Noontide, and Thoughts’ are representative of the poetry of the tall trees, in which the poet’s personality is introduced into the relationship:

Dear faithful trees, I find you steadfast still,
In spite of time and change!
With musing eyes I roam the rock-strewn hill,
And look out towards the range.
Soft sun-sped arrows pierce the forest thro’.
In long, clear lanes of light,
They melt and mingle in a mist of blue,
Where shadow steals in sight.

The land is full of mellow noontide tones,
And Summer sleep profound;
The lizards bask upon the warm, grey stones;
There’s neither stir nor sound
In all the great bush-garden where I stand.
A white-winged moth floats near,
Roused from the fern by my forgetful hand,
And yet too wild for fear.

Each soaring eucalyptus, lifted high,
The wandering wind receives;
I watch the great boughs drawn against the sky,
Laden with trembling leaves.
A soft, harmonious music, full and rare,
Murmurs the boughs along -
The voice of Nature’s God is solemn there,
In that deep undersong.
The miniature world of the forest's lower level produces a wayward, fanciful semi-Celtic religion of nature; the tall, majestic trees above are heroic and enduring, like cathedrals or temples of God. These represent the Victorian age's two contrasting views of religion. In the poems there is an Arnoldian agnostic/religious meditation, mixed in with pre-Raphaelite wispiness, romantic love, evolutionary sentiments and a vague wondering about fate. The forests act as a regulator of the emotions. Sometimes nature is in harmony with the poet's joyous moods (usually the rippling water and bird calls of the lower stories), sometimes nature (the great trees) is a consolation for the melancholy of the poet, sometimes the relationship is contrary: "The bright beauty of the afternoon struck a sadness through me" wrote Mary Fullerton in *Bark House Days*. Happiness and sadness, and shadow and shine flicker through all the poetry.
A prominent feature of both Gippsland poetry and prose is the existence of a secret, private place — a bower or fairy dell or glade — where the author ruminates during the day, where lovers meet, where rest and dreams come easily and undisturbed. This is noticeable in all the poets. In the novel *Providence Ponds* the Den of Nargun becomes “a favoured refuge when any perplexities visit” the heroine. In Mrs. Forrester’s *Myrtle* (1891), the Lubra Bower, formerly an aboriginal mia-mia, becomes a trysting spot for lovers, as does a soft, shady dell hollowed out of a thicket in John Ewers’ *Fire on the Wind* (1935):

The track wound among a confusion of white hazel, bracken and the sweet-scented musk, with clematis twining sinuous arms about them all and making them one. Soft doe-ferns grew amid the riot, their feathery fronds spreading to a width of ten feet from one side to the other . . . From the nook no sky was visible. On both sides and behind them was a tangled riot of green. Before, across the track, a slightly thinner lacework showed glimpses of the creek between the branches . . . For the moment it seemed they were in a sound-proof chamber, so silent it was.

We have noticed four characteristics of the poetry of the Gippsland forests: it takes the form of a vague metaphysical reverie, it is written by women, it often occurs around midday and it contains a secret place or bower. How can we put all these together and explain them? I realized a possible answer when a member of a pioneering Gippsland family told me that both his mother and grandmother would go down after lunch to the bush near the house (selections were closely surrounded by forests on most sides) to spend some time by themselves among the ferns and small streams. It was a time for relaxing and reflecting, the one break from incessant pioneering toil. This is an unusual rhythm of the day — it was largely determined by farming activities, and it is found in Gippsland literature.

Normally the day is divided into working during sunlight hours, eating in the evening, and relaxing, thinking and enjoying things at night. The Gippsland pattern was quite different. You woke in the morning and had to milk the cows — no nonsense about roseate dawns. At evening you milked again so there was no relaxation then. In these southern latitudes, the sun went down quite early, nights were dark and cold, the forests were weird and scary at night, so you went to bed early: life closed down with the day. There were no balmy nights admiring the stars or yarning around the campfire, as in the literature of the outback. Lunch was the great meal and midday and early afternoon the climax of the day, the time for talk, visitors, working things out, stillness, or taking a walk. (This rhythm continues today). Kingsley says in *Geoffrey Hamlyn*: “My brother, let us breakfast in Scotland, lunch in Australia, and dine in France, till our lives’ end”, and his squatters have elaborate, convivial lunches.
and relaxed afternoons on the verandah drinking pale ale or claret and water. This was the high point of the day. Visiting the forest eventually led to the more elaborate recreational customs.

Picturesque Gippsland

A tradition of picnics, excursions and other forms of outdoor recreation developed around the lakes. Just as Melbourne and Sydney gentry went for day trips and Sunday drives in the cool Dandenongs or Blue Mountains, and took boat trips to Queenscliff, Sorrento, Pitt Water and the Hawkesbury, so the squatting gentry of the Gippsland plain developed rail, coach and boat trips around the lakes, as well as holidays at Metung. The beauty of the natural surroundings in Gippsland's mountains and lakes attracted six groups of artists: the resident poets and later novelists, plus visiting writers, painters, photographers and naturalists. The literary visitors included Trollope (1872), Garnet Walch (1880), 'The Vagabond' (Stanley James) (1886), 'The Gumsucker' (Nathan Spielvogel) (1913) and E.J. Brady (1918 and 1926). Painters included Von Guerard and Chevalier and artists who illustrated books, like C.H. Turner in Walch's Victoria in 1880. The photographer Nicholas Caire came to Gippsland. Naturalists like Baldwin Spencer, Donald MacDonald of The Argus and R.H. Croll walked through and wrote about the environment.

The visiting writers and artists all went to the same places — mountains, lakes, fern glades and East Gippsland — so that we can match the writers with the illustrators. Before the opening of the artificial entrance in 1889 the Gippsland Lakes were an idyllic, even exotic, location. The banks were richly clothed in vegetation, as we see in the lithograph 'The Gippsland Lakes — General View from Jemmy's Point' (1878). 'The Vagabond' wrote of the same scene:

Above us there are wooded bluffs, the scalloped outlines of the shores are beautiful in form, the rippling waters reflect dancing shadows — it is the Middle Harbour of Sydney in miniature, or a branch of Pittwater, or one of the backwaters of the Hawkesbury.

Gippsland lent itself perfectly to the picturesque mode. Writers and artists did not feel it an alien or unusual place; they immediately felt themselves at home among its hills, fern valleys and inland waters. We also get just a hint, in literature and painting, of the earlier vogue of the sublime. An interesting example comes from the poetry of Allan McLean, the nephew of the novelist Angus McLean of Glenaladale. Allan McLean became by turns a stock and station agent at Maffra, member of the Victorian parliament, Premier of Victoria in 1900, and Deputy Prime Minister of Australia in the Federal Reid-McLean government of 1904-5. In 1888 he published at Sale a book of verse called Rural Poems. The main poem called 'Two Glimpses of Nature', was inspired by the Gippsland mountains. It is written in Augustan couplets, and in style and sentiment it is a throw-back to a hundred years before, the late
18th century in England, mixed in with romantic reflections on time. We can quote a passage describing the end of the world:

Air ceased to palpitate, and earth to quake;  
The sea grew torpid as a stagnant lake.  
There bloom’d no living plant on vale or hill;  
The trees stood darkly calm and deadly still;  
The laws of nature lost their vital force;  
Fair streams were palsied in their onward course,  
And stretch’d as motionless o’er sterile plains,  
As frozen currents in a dead man’s veins.  
There stir’d upon the earth nor pulse nor breath;  
The world was wrapp’d in universal death.

Vivian Smith has called this style colonial neo-classicism.

The Central Plain and Mary Grant Bruce

The painters, photographers, poets and novelists of the 19th century were not interested in the central plain of Gippsland. The one prominent writer from the plain was Mary Grant Bruce, born at Sale in 1878 and brought up in Traralgon. The Bruces were related to the Gippsland squating gentry and Mary visited her Whittakers uncles on the ‘Fernhill’ and ‘Heyfield’ properties, but her father was affected by the 1890s depression, and the family was financially and socially in moderate decline.

Mary Grant Bruce is famous for her 15 Billabong books. They take place on a large Riverina-type property on open plains, where everything goes right in the end, and most characters are upright, sunny and optimistic. But Mary Grant Bruce wrote another 23 books, about 8 of which are about Gippsland. In particular Glen Eyre (1912), Robin (1926), Anderson’s Jo (1927) and Golden Fiddles (1928) are about poor struggling farms in the hill country, where things keep going wrong, where deaths occur, and where lack of money, failure and frustration eat away at people. Some are more adult than the Billabong books. How can we explain these two different types of novels?

The Gippsland novels seem to be a slightly transposed description of her own family situation in Gippsland. Like Mary Grant Bruce herself, the characters find constant worry about money debilitating and they want to get out of Gippsland. In the novels, the father is always a worried, tense man who cannot express himself or lead the family. Mary Grant Bruce visited her relatives, out of whose circle her own family was slipping, at the ‘Fernhill’ and ‘Heyfield’ properties, and for holidays at Metung. She began writing on these visits. These properties presented to her what she wished for, a life where money was no worry, where things didn’t go wrong, and where the father was a natural leader. The ‘Heyfield’ Whittakers moved to the Riverina eventually, Mary visited this area, which may account for the Riverina atmosphere of the Billabong series.

The element of wish-fulfilment comes out clearly in her novel Golden Fiddles (1928), which is constructed around the three alternatives of Gippsland hillfarm,
Melbourne and a plains property. The Balfour family, struggling on a Gippsland farm at Tupurra, inherit a fortune and move to Melbourne, where they are like fish out of water; they waste their money and live frivolously. The family (like the author) doesn't like the city, but they don't want to return to fern-cutting and cows, so they take the inevitable step:

But if we bought a station somewhere — in the Western District, perhaps; not too far away, for Elsa would have to come to Melbourne for her music-lessons. But that could be managed. I have been dreaming of it all. Not to be buried, as we were at Tupurra — somewhere with nice people near, and plenty of fun, but occupation for us all, too.

Mary Grant Bruce reversed the attitude of Kingsley and Boldrewood. They came from the Western District squatter group, yet their minds turned imaginatively to the mountains and forests of Gippsland. Mary Grant Bruce came from Gippsland, yet she turned away from it to the large squatting properties of the Western District and the Riverina. Over this half a century the Australian imagination had undergone a major change. Even earlier Palmer and Prichard are located in the fertile crescent (The Pioneers, Working Bullocks, The Passage, Daybreak) but they gradually move to the outback plains.

Mary Fullerton was raised on her father's selection block at Glenmaggie. She wrote the classic Bark House Days about her childhood there, as well as novels and poetry about the area. Glenmaggie is in a valley of the Macalister River, through which the ex-gold diggers poured down to the hill-farms and to the adjacent plain, so she was in a wonderful position to compare the different styles of life of these different locations.

Early Gippsland literature is noticeable for women writers who have much in common with each other. Marie Pitt, Mary Fullerton, Marion Miller Knowles, Mary Gaunt, Nellie Clerk and 'Jennings' Carmichael were born in the 1860s, and Mary Grant Bruce a decade later. They were all strong-willed, with intellectual grasp and drive, and felt society did not allow a place for their interests. Except for Marion Miller knowles, they were incipient feminists, and supported women's emancipation and independence in the early decades of this century. Mary Grant Bruce helped found the Women's Writers' Club and the Fellowship of Gippsland Women. Marie Pitt was a radical socialist like Louis Esson. Mary Gaunt, a novelist of the mountains, was in the first group of women to sign the matriculation roll at the University of Melbourne in 1881; she became an intrepid traveller and travel-writer after her husband's death. 'Jennings' Carmichael is credited with being the first Victorian-born woman poet. Mary Fullerton joined Katharine Susannah Prichard in supporting Vida Goldstein's campaigns through the Women's Political Association, and was later a friend of Miles Franklin. Coming from educated, respectable British-Australian backgrounds, these Gippsland women writers were in temperament similar to Katharine Susannah Prichard, Miles Franklin and Henry Handel Richardson.
Cutting Down the Forests

Two opposing themes run through the literature of cutting down the forests: firstly the grandeur of the trees and secondly the incessant toil of the pioneers in cutting them down. Both were heroic entities and they were in competition with each other, though this was realized only later. The second theme comes first in time, in works by Pitt, Fullerton and Clerk, and in The Land of the Lyrebird (1920). The sweet music of the axe ringing through the glades awakened the land from its slumber. As a small clearing was made, the selectors saw a larger patch of blue sky and felt less imprisoned:

You have watched our homesteads rise,
    Shining-eyed Geranium,
Felt the falling forest's sighs,
    Blessed each widening glimpse of skies,
Heard the first flock's bleating cries,
    And traced all growth of beauty.

This led to an effort to develop English-style gardens and paddocks, as evidence of civilization and progress.

The realization that cutting down the forests may have been a tragedy comes more slowly. In Knowles’ ‘Laid Low’ and Sladen’s ‘To a Fallen Gum-Tree on Mt. Baw-Baw’, trees are described as majestic monarchs. Sladen reverses the image of a land awaked from slumber; in his view the thousands of years of history which these trees have witnessed is lost with their going. The magic faery-world of the understories has gone, as Pitt laments in ‘Doherty’s Corner’:

There’s no bush to-day at Doherty’s Corner,
    Only strange green hills and the glint of a far bay;
Time has come like a thief and stolen the wonder
    And magic of Yesterday.

There are no fairies now at Doherty’s Corner,
    Where dusky spider-orchids and wild white daisies grew;
Time that stilled the heart of the singing forest
    Has stolen her fairies too.

Henderson’s hill is green at Doherty’s Corner,
    But no fairy trips in the dawn or the dusk thereon,
Perhaps they died when the old black log and the bracken
    And the box bushes were gone.

The struggle to cut down the trees was an heroic battle, into which the selectors endlessly threw themselves. They put their heads down so resolutely,
that when one day thirty years later they looked up (and so did their neighbours) it was all gone. Thinking only of their own block, they thought it would always be surrounded with verges of forest on the boundaries. Now after the turn of the century, they were shocked to find practically the whole of the unique mountain ash forest of South Gippsland gone.

The selectors themselves are usually silent about all this, but one, W. Johnstone, understood after decades of back-breaking work that two heroic forces were contending here, and that the selectors’ gain had a corresponding loss. He put it into a poem ‘Retrospect’, rare not only as an actual male selector’s poem, but rare in that it sees both sides:

When I first came to Gippsland, no seer could foretell,
That the light-tapping axe rang the forest’s deathknell;
It spread like an ocean, and rolled like a tide
Whenever King Storm on the tree-tops did ride.

From the ridge to the gully no break could be found,
And the keenest observer could not see the ground;
But the axes and fire great havoc have played
With grim forest-giant and lovely fern-glade.

Ever gone are the gumtrees that covered the hills,
Ever gone are the tree ferns that sheltered the rills,
And gone are the dells where I oft loved to roam
And bring in wild flowers to garland my home.

Never more shall I see the green forest again
Wave free in the sunshine, droop sullen in rain;
No more shall I sway to each altering whim
The laughing, the tearful, the wanton, the prim.

Never more shall I list to the lyre bird’s song
That boldly he trolled forth, so clear, and so strong,
Or listen, mazed, as he mocked every bird,
And mimicked to life every sound that he heard.

Never more shall I wander, awe-struck and subdued,
While the shades of deep night on the forest did brood,
And feel, when along those great aisles I have trod,
I worshipped alone in a temple of God.

But away with these fancies. ’Tis better today
Where the forest encumbered, the children now play
In meadows bespangled with flowers whose hue
Is brighter than those that the pioneers knew.
Where the forest delighted, perchance, two or three,
The present rich meadows fill hundreds with glee.
Our wives and our children, our homes and our farms
Are dearer and better than Nature’s wild charms.

This wonderfully clear poem has all the main themes: the sound of the axe, the dells and bowers, the forests as temples of God, its regulation of human emotions, the neat English scenery after clearing, the idyll of man replacing nature. But more important is the break and change of attitude in the last two stanzas. Although the poet ends up affirming the meadow’s superiority, these lines are weaker and less convincing, and many people would agree that the real force of the poetry lies in the opening six stanzas about what is gone.

Another who sees both heroic aspects in her poetry is Nellie Clerk, a selector’s daughter from Mirboo North. She is the only person who has expressed in verse the whole history of a Gippsland selection block from coming to clearance. In two poems, ‘My Gippsland Home’ and ‘To My First Garden Flower’, published in 1887 in *Songs from the Gippsland Forest*, she blends, in a more intricate way than Johnstone, the contending beauties of forest and garden:

Far to west and to north, great clearings stretch forth,
Herds and flocks and fat pastures revealing;
’Twixt dead trees that stand grey and gaunt o’er the land
With bare arms to heaven appealing.

There, axes and fire have wrought my desire,
Before them the matted scrub sweeping;
But armies of these ghostly eucalypt trees
For years their sad guard will be keeping.

In her poetry Clerk attempts to assuage and reconcile the clash between two great forces waging battle in the South Gippsland hills.

**Small Farm Literature**

Gippsland was the home of the selector, usually a dairyman on a small farm. Contrary to popular opinion, there is an extensive literature about the small farmers. Whereas writing about the untouched forests and cutting down the forests is usually in verse, small farm literature consists almost exclusively of novels, and the battle is not against the tall trees, but against bracken, mud, cows and economics. These novels come later, mainly between 1910 and 1940. They are sometimes written by Gippslanders after they have left (e.g. Mary Grant Bruce, Mary Fullerton, Marion Miller Knowles), and sometimes by popular inter-war novelists like Bernard Cronin, John Ewers, John Morgan
Walsh, Leonard Mann and W.S. Walker ("Cooee"). After 1900 Australians settled down in the cities, but many writers (like Prichard, Palmer and E.J. Brady) kept up the 19th century habit of wandering around Australia, writing about places Australians had left or had never lived in. The most interesting and representative works on the Gippsland family farm are Mary Grant Bruce's *Glen Eyre* (1912), Mary Fullerton's *The People of the Timber Belt* (1925), Bernard Cronin's *Bracken* (1931), John Ewers' *Fire on the Wind* (1935) and Louis Esson's short play *Dead Timber*.

A temperamental difference separates people who select plains country from those who like hill country. Some people feel at home on flat, open country where you can unwind, relax and spread yourself out. Independence consists in not being constrained, in the freedom of endless horizons. This feeling has often been expressed in Australian literature. But there is another form of independence: you can go to ground on your farm, its hills and foliage concealing you from outside. You can look out on the world, but it can't look in at you. It's like the highland Scots in their mountain eyries looking down on advancing enemies. It is a desire to be private and enclosed, and is connected with the bower or secret place mentioned previously. The whole farm can be such a refuge from the world. Escaping back to one's haunts is another way of getting away from it all,different to the escape provided on the plains.

Slessor makes the contrast in the opening of 'South Country':

After the whey-faced anonymity
Of river-gums and scribbly-gums and bush,
After the rubbing and the hit of brush,
You come to the South Country

As if the argument of trees were done,
The doubts and quarrelling, the plots and pains,
All ended by these clear and gliding planes
Like an abrupt solution.

The plains are clear and open, but the bush brushes and impedes, and this rubs off on the characters in the small-farm novels who are a quarrelling, contentious lot, tense, unhappy, wound-up, compulsive in their actions, driven by passions and frustrations that they cannot put a name to. They blow hot and cold, all cooped up on the farm with no outlet. Isolation adds to the pressure.

Unlike the relaxation of the plains, the dominant notes here are struggle and tension. People are battling for survival with no improvement in sight (with no end in sight, either), but unlike Dad and Dave they don't sit back and laugh and make a joke of it — they keep at it even more earnestly, taking it out in the endless task of cutting down the bracken. The bracken in turn, by endlessly regrowing, takes it out on them.
Increasing this restrictive atmosphere is the close-knit family structure. These are all family novels, often sagas over three generations, people with cousins, clans, relatives, etc., and with fights over wills and other dynastic concerns. They are not novels about individuals. The family is physically stationary and stable, but all is volatile emotionally: the temperature is high and the atmosphere foetid. Fathers and grandfathers dominate. A pervasive Calvinist atmosphere, imbued through hard work and having the Bible read at table during meal-breaks, keeps the family under control. Domestic tragedies in these inturned families produce a depressing, downward spiral against a background of equally depressing farm conditions. It is no surprise to learn that the desire to get away from the constricting world of the small dairy farm looms large in these novels.

Far East Gippsland

Far East Gippsland is a wedge of forested country between Victoria and N.S.W. which has never been inhabited except marginally along the Princes Highway and down some of the rivers. It was settled first by people moving down the south coast of N.S.W. in the wake of Ben Boyd and the Imlay brothers. Early accounts of journeys through it were recorded by 'The Vagabond' (1886), Baldwin Spencer (1890), R.H. Croll (1911) and 'The Gumsucker' (1913). Croajingalong is a separate region with a feel of its own.

The distinctive feature of its literature is vagabondage; its main figures are always on the tramp. So it has something in common with outback literature; it's not like the stationary, family-centred novels of the small farms. The heroes of Frank Fox's Beneath an Ardent Sun, Frederick Howard's The Emigrant, Eve Langley's novels and Chester Eagle's Hail and Farewell wander picarequely through basically unsettled country, occasionally coming to towns. Eagle's characters are restless mountain men, throwbacks to the 19th century mateship type, drinking themselves to death and having car accidents in high style; so do the timber workers and fishermen of the area. It's still a male frontier area (Steve and Blue in The Pea Pickers dress as men).

East Gippsland is the place where you get away from civilization and luxuriate in the clean, healthy air and green forests, camping and swimming on the long beaches. Most of East Gippsland's literature is written by outsiders searching for an untouched paradise. E.J. Brady wrote of Mallacoota:

No coarse hand of progress will ever tear from Mallacoota and its surroundings the mystic beauty that still clings to it like an enchanted veil, showing under the soft transparency of sky and air a loveliness amongst the rarest in picturesque Australia.

A related theme is the contrast between the exceedingly beautiful countryside and the hard struggle for a livelihood of the people who inhabit it, with perhaps the feeling that human intrusion spoils it. Gippsland is a world of its own, and for Gippslanders, East Gippsland functions to their own outback — a place with an image of an endless free, roving life without restraints, remote and different enough to be larger than life.
E.J. Brady, the *Bulletin* balladist, went to Mallacoota in 1909 in pursuit of the nationalists' dream of a perfect Australia. He lived there, with some extended absences on journalistic and literary assignments, till his death in 1952. He had intended it to be a writers' colony; this didn't eventuate, but Henry Lawson, Louis Esson and Katharine Susannah Prichard were among the writers who stayed there with him, Esson in particular producing plays, short stories and poems relating to his time there.

The coastal forest poetry of the Harpur and Kendall type included views to the coast. Water can play a similar role to the forests in this kind of literature -it is a mystic, romantic, ever-changing element with the same power to enchant and to overpower. Though not as dominant as the trees, water in all its forms — lakes, sea, straits, inlets, swamps, rivers, shores, streams, ocean, estuaries, floods — recurs in Gippsland literature. Brady was a balladist of the sea. One kind of water literature depicts the difficulty of small coastal steamers and fishermen crossing the bar at inlets like Mallacoota, Bemm River, the Snowy at Marlo and Lakes Entrance. This is an heroic and dangerous business, partly like outback feats (e.g. mustering) and partly like natural disasters (e.g. floods and fire) in Australian literature. Lawson, Brady, Esson (the play *Shipwreck*), Mrs. Hilda Kerr of Orbost, Nathan Spielvogel, Marie Pitt, Mary Grant Bruce and the contemporary writer Frank Kellaway have all written works on the 'crossing the bar' theme.

A final feature of Gippsland literature is its explicitly anti-city bias. In much Australian literature this theme is there by implication, but Gippsland writers have the habit of trumpeting it quite boldly throughout their works. Mary Grant Bruce is representative in this regard. The argument is that city life is stale, slick and unnatual — men are untrue to their masculinity — but life in the green hills and bracing air of Gippsland is healthy, invigorating and refreshing, and restores a man to himself. In the poetry of the forests, the theme is present but muted: life is better here and we hope the ways of the city never intrude:

> forgetting 'mid the quiet hills the city's ceaseless whirl

But in the small-farm novels (hard work, fresh air and sound sleep) and in the far east picaresque mode (camping and swimming in the sanctuary of nature) the contrasting and inferior state of the cities is a constant refrain.