IN SEARCH OF STEELE RUDD
Author of the classic Dad & Dave stories
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University of Queensland Press
To my wife and children
in memory of my Dad

to my Mother

and my own brother Dave
I never designed in it to give any Man any secret Wound by my Concealment, but spoke in the Character of an old Man, a Philosopher, an Humorist, an Astrologer, and a Censor, to allure my Reader with the Variety of my Subjects, and insinuate, if I could, the Weight of Reason with the Agreeableness of Wit. The general purpose of the whole has been to recommend Truth, Innocence, Honour, and Virtue, as the chief Ornaments of Life; but I considered, that Severity of Manners was absolutely necessary to him who would censure others, and for that Reason, and that only, chose to talk in a Mask. … a Man would make but an indifferent Progress in attacking prevailing and fashionable Vices, which Mr. Bickerstaff has done with a Freedom of Spirit which would have lost both its Beauty and Efficacy, had it been pretended to by Mr. Steele.

Richard Steele, Conclusion to The Tatler, No. 271, 2 January 1710-11
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I told him who I was. "You are?" he said, his eyes twinkling. "I thought Steele Rudd was an old fellow!"

Arthur Hoey Davis, "How I met A.C. Rowlandson"

Steele Rudd was not at all the large, exuberant humorist I expected.

Vance Palmer, "Steele Rudd"

The question itself is very clear: do we need the poet's biography in order to understand his work, or do we not?

Boris Tomasevskij, "Literature and Biography"
In 1894 a young Brisbane public servant who dabbled in journalism sat down to devise a *nom de plume* for a rowing column he wrote for a local newspaper. Up until then he had written either anonymously or over variants of his real name, Arthur Hoey Davis, which had a grander ring to them and gave weight to some short reminiscences of pioneering life that were published in *Queensland Punch* and the *Worker*.

The by-line he chose for his rowing column was "Steele Rudd". It was intended as a joke, allegedly to hide his identity from "rowing men with dangerous looking muscles". "Steele" came from Sir Richard Steele, the austere eighteenth-century editor of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*; "Rudd" was shortened from a boat's rudder. An earlier idea was "Steele Rudder", a bold mixture of high art and pleasurable pastime, serious literature and popular journalism.

Arthur Davis also wrote more substantial stories and started to submit them to "the bushman's bible", the Sydney *Bulletin*. On 6 April 1895 that most famous of all Australian weeklies printed a story by "Steele Rudd" called "Starting the Selection":

It's twenty years ago now since we settled on the Creek. Twenty years! I remember well the day we came from Stanthorpe, on Jerome's dray — eight of us, and all the things — beds, tubs, a bucket, the two cedar chairs with pine bottoms and backs that Dad put in them, some pint-pots and old Crib. It was a scorching hot day, too — talk about thirst! At every creek we came to we drank till it stopped running.

Here in the first paragraph were most of the characteristics of Davis's style: simple, personal storytelling that was nostalgic and full of detail about a bush lifestyle — lively writing with sudden exclamations and the tone of wry mockery. No matter how horrible the event related, the writing undercut pity and terror. In the same story they thought they might be able to use their only horse, an old mare "shaped something like an alderman", to plough the four acres they had slowly cleared:

We found her one day in about 18 inches of mud, with both eyes picked out by the crows, and her hide bearing evidence that a feathery tribe had made a roost of her carcass. Plainly, there was no chance of breaking up the ground with her help.

In writing about women, though, Davis's sense of irony faltered. Partly it is the conventional attitude of a man of his time, who regarded them traditionally as bearers of more sensitive souls, but perhaps also there was a genuine glimpse of their marginalisation and powerlessness:
I often wonder how the women stood it the first few years; and I can remember how mother, when she was alone, used to sit on a log, where the lane is now, and cry for hours. Lonely! It was lonely.

For readers, the "I" in the story was a younger son in the family, Steele Rudd himself, a real person writing about a real family — his own. The Bulletin collected the first stories together as *On Our Selection!*, a hardcover book published in 1899, but it was in later paperback editions that the Steele Rudd phenomenon began to snowball.

The simplest measure of the popularity of "Steele Rudd" is found in the publishing data of the New South Wales Bookstall Company, by far the major producer of popular paperback editions of Australian novels and short stories until the 1950s. Steele Rudd contributed 21 books to its catalogue, more than any other author. Astonishingly, these 21 books were printed and reprinted 239 times, while the next most popular author, the comic poet Thomas E. Spencer, had 66 impressions. By 1940 *On Our Selection!* alone had sold an estimated quarter of a million copies.³

Australians found something in Steele Rudd stories which asked to be read aloud. In the bush, people gathered for *On Our Selection* evenings, and in schools he became an unofficial, though never official, institution. Vance Palmer, at Ipswich Grammar School in the same year *On Our Selection!* was first published, remembered that after evening meals the master on duty would read a chapter to the boarders.⁴ Nearly ninety years later, Don Anderson, reviewing Steele Rudd's *Collected Works*, recalled that "Kate's Wedding" was one of the few things that could keep "2G at a Sydney high school not only awake but quiet in the last period on Friday afternoon".⁵

The story is generic, told in many variants. It was nearly always a "hot Friday afternoon". Some people who were at Queensland primary schools in the 1930s and 1940s remember it as a grand ritual. The headmaster would call the whole school together, take them outside under a tree, and begin reading:

A sweltering summer's afternoon. A heat that curled and withered the very weeds.

"Dad and the Donovans", *On Our Selection!*

or:

Depth of winter! A cold morning at Shingle Hut. Everything coated with frost.

"Some Trouble with a Steer", *Our New Selection!"
Our selection adjoined a sheep-run on the Darling Downs, and boasted of few and scant improvements ...

"Before We Got the Deeds", On Our Selection!

Even a strict state school headmaster sometimes felt enough serious learning was enough and reached for "Steele Rudd". The teacher could be assured of appreciative and attentive listeners, and show he (usually it was a he) was a man of the people and had a sense of humour. Reading it aloud also made clear to the pupils that the speech of Davis's characters was lower class, and they would not be infected by the deliberate misspellings and wandering "aitches" in the text.

This success story bewildered those who were inclined to elevate other Australian writers of the nineties, particularly Henry Lawson, to high-art status. Steele Rudd, they felt, was of a lower order, particularly as Arthur Davis and his publishers had proceeded to capitalise on the success by producing story after story about the same Rudd family: Our New Selection!, Sandy's Selection, Back at Our Selection, Dad in Politics, From Selection to City, Stocking Our Selection, Grandpa's Selection, and The Rudd Family. By 1907, when only the first four of these books had appeared, the critic Alfred Buchanan was already crying out in furious despair:

Is there only one man in Australia whose books are worth purchasing? Has the city life, the business life, the artistic life, the ambitious life, the intense social and political life of civilised Australia nothing to say for itself? Must we reserve all our superlatives, all our limelight, and all our hard cash, for this writer who keeps telling us, with persistent and applauded iteration, about the shingle hut and the awful wire fence, and the frightfully monotonous prospect of ragged selector and sunburnt plain?

Years later Australian literati such as Nettie Palmer were astonished, and disconcerted, to find that when distinguished European professors professed their admiration for Australian literature, as did Gustav Hubener from Bonn University when he visited Australia in 1934, Steele Rudd, not Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, or Joseph Furphy, was the central figure: "He is definite about the importance of Steele Rudd — sees Dad as an immense creation of the folk-mind, as much a part of the country's legend as the Man from Snowy River."

Ironically, while German scholars living under Hitler were reading Dad Rudd as ein Mann aus dem Volk, supporters of socialist realism under Stalin were circulating On Our Selection! in Russian translation to the masses: Dad Rudd as the worker–hero. Perhaps they liked Dad's communalistic solution to that problem of how they were going to plough the four acres and plant their first corn crop:
“Run over and ask Mister Dwyer to lend me three hoes.”
Dave went; Dwyer lent the hoes; and the problem was solved. That was how we started.

Apparently translations of Davis’s work existed in various European and Asian languages although none were authorised and no royalties were paid. Nevertheless through such unofficial channels ideas about Australia and its literature were internationalised. When Madam Krugerskaya of Moscow University visited Brisbane in the 1950s, she told Queensland politician Alan Fletcher that she had “great knowledge” of Steele Rudd, and that “he was held in high esteem in the Russian community for having portrayed in his writings such fundamental, authentically human characters.”

Presumably carefully censored selections from Steele Rudd were translated. One doubts if Russian peasants or Madam Krugerskaya had read Dad Rudd’s views on socialism (“Be off with your d — socialism, and do something!”), or Dad’s speech in parliament after a Minister for Lands had declared that, under a new Land Reform Bill, village communities would live in enviable peace and harmony, with no differences or disputes ever arising among them:

“What I came here to say,” he roared, “I’ll SAY!” (Ministerial cries of “Chair!” and cheers from the Opposition.) “An’ I say that I once knew a minister who owned some land — it was near a place his brother had” — (merriment) — an’ the two of them dealt in horses, an’ so as the minister wouldn’t be takin’ and usin’ the wrong horses, the brother went an’ cut all the tails off his mob.” (Loud laughter.) “But what do you think that minister did?” (Dad paused amidst more laughter, mingled with appeals for “Order!”) “He went and cut the tails off his lot.” (Great hilarity, and useless appeals for “Order!” from the Speaker.) “It’s true!” Dad yelled … “And he’s sittin’ in this House at this moment!”

“A Steak in the Country”, Dad in Politics

As many commentators noted, the character of Dad — the Australian pioneer, a battler, stubborn and bad-tempered but endlessly optimistic — was the powerhouse behind the popular vision of the “selection” as the way to freedom and independence for the “ordinary man”. He would win back the vast acres appropriated by the bunyip-aristocratic “squatters” during the land grabs of the 1830s and 1840s, and establish a small family farm “selected” from their vast sheep and cattle runs. For the historian Manning Clark:

Dad was Australia’s Everyman — not a Prince Hamlet, or a Mr Pickwick, or a Sam Weller, or a Huckleberry Finn, or an Evgeny Onegin, or a Faust, but Dad Rudd, the man who slaved his guts out to win the status of a landowner, got dead drunk and was carried home from the local pub, and did his block, and shouted and raved, and sometimes bawled like a bull, but at other times was tender with man and beast. He did not know why the material reward was not commensurate with all their striving,
all their suffering; he did not whine, or blame others, or shake his fist at the “Architect of the Universe” and ask Him, “Why did you do this to me?” He did not cry out that he did not accept God’s world, and wanted to “hand Him back his ticket”. He had no metaphysical anguish: he was an Australian.10

Arthur Hoey Davis wanted to believe in the myth of the small farmers as the backbone of the nation — the Dad Rudds — and Steele Rudd was certainly read that way, but other realities occasionally broke through. The democratic reforms which had put Arthur Davis’s father on a 160 acre selection in 1875 are given the same ironic treatment in the very first story:

The day after we arrived Dad took mother and us out to see the paddock and the flat on the other side of the gully that he was going to fence for cultivation. ... It must have been fine land, the way Dad talked about it! ... And when Dave wanted to know why Dad didn’t take up a place on the plain, where there were no trees to grub and plenty of water, Dad would cough as if something was sticking in his throat, and then curse terribly about the squatters and political jobbery. He would soon cool down, though, and get hopeful again.

Here, in this first sketch of a quintessential small-farming family, is the first interchange between the characters of a father and a son who would later develop independently of, and at times in spite of, Arthur Hoey Davis; who would be only partly related even to the phenomenon of Steele Rudd, but who would become on radio and in film an equally remarkable popular success: “Dad and Dave”. By 1944, nine years after Davis’s death, the scholar Brian Elliott was writing:

The works of Arthur Hoey Davis should need no introduction to the Australian reading public; and indeed, a generation ago, there was no such need; but to-day an ironical fate is envious of his fame, and as his shadow spreads his real figure appears to be growing dimmer.11

Arthur Hoey Davis was soon forgotten, and is almost unknown today. Later, Steele Rudd too became an imprecise concept, a genre, a way of describing a broad field of outback humour, from dirty jokes to feature movies and the radio serial Dad and Dave. Few now remember even “Steele Rudd”, but “Dad and Dave” endure.

Anyone who studies Steele Rudd has, therefore, a broader and more elusive subject to pursue than the life of Arthur Hoey Davis. The activities that Davis did not initiate or control but which clustered around the name Steele Rudd are central to any account of the phenomenon, as are activities that occurred after Davis’s death, as plagiarists appropriated and reworked Steele Rudd and “Dad and Dave” through new entertainment industries, to satisfy new attitudes and beliefs. Each contribution, in turn, changes the legend, but also continues and becomes part of it.
In Search of the Farmer-Hero

The selector, then, might easily have been seen as the Promethean hero-victim of contemporary mythology (with the vultures of Drought and Dummyism plunging alternate beaks into his liver). Those, however, who know Australian writing — and Australian life — will already have smiled at so ingenuous an assumption. The Cockie simply will not do as an heroic figure.

A.A. Phillips, “The Democratic Theme”, The Australian Tradition

Much of what has been written about the Steele Rudd phenomenon has been couched in realistic and national terms — the quintessential Australian family, the struggles and “honest laughter” of the pioneers, the celebration of the local and the particular. The same has been true of others among the Australian chroniclers of bush life — Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, Joseph Furphy, Barbara Baynton. But their works were products of the imagination, whatever their sources or inspiration in real life events, and their writing drew on recognisable genres: pastoral, gothic, confessional diary. Consciously or unconsciously, Arthur Davis did the same.

The farmer-hero is one of the oldest stereotypes in Western literature, and the celebration of the simple pleasures of rural life, the genre known as the pastoral, is equally as ancient. Australians may have experienced and imagined their own bushies and townies and expressed a preference for one or other lifestyle, but they did not do so in neutral circumstances. The European invaders were aware, when they looked across the landscape, that their reactions were shaped by the past.

They noticed the differences and commented wryly on the deficiencies, but they also noticed the similarities. They were measuring the world of experience against a vision which they knew could be traced back to the classical ages of Greece and Italy. They felt they had to do so: it fitted the alien land into their philosophy, rendered it familiar in myth if not in reality, and suggested appropriate reactions.

From the beginning of the Western tradition of literature, two representations of rural life duelled in the world of the mind: the “bucolic”, from the Greek boukolos (“cowman”), and the “pastoral” from the Latin word for a shepherd. For classical scholars the words, when used to classify literature describing country life, are synonymous, with one being preferred over the other according to whether the classical text is in Greek or Latin. But by the nineteenth century the
words had come to have very different connotations in ordinary usage. Pastoral suggested a leisurely, stress-free environment: idle shepherd-philosophers playing pan-pipes and contemplating eternity while their sheep safely grazed. The natural elements were in harmony with humanity; the literary figure of pathetic fallacy was everywhere; “the sun shone, our hearts were at peace”.

Bucolic, however, suggested the harsher world of the farmers: common, hard-working, stoic, struggling with the unpredictability of nature, feet in cow-shit, anti-intellectual, suspicious of change. In their closeness to the source of basic human needs such as food and clothing, farmer characters were charged with “common sense”, potentially heroic. In their ignorance of other worlds and other ways they were potentially comic, even ridiculous.

These different ways of viewing the countryside were parts of the intellectual — and anti-intellectual — traditions which Europeans brought with them to Australia; basic beliefs which had become interwoven and opposed, withered by evident absurdity and reinvigorated by new visions and new forms of social organisation. By the end of the sixteenth century Europe began to take notice of the existence of other continents and other cultures which organised society differently. In France, Montaigne thought the newly discovered native communities of the Americas put his own society to shame in terms of purity, absence from want, and social harmony. Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* responded bluntly in 1651 that human life in nature was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”, and was in turn attacked by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

It was another critic of Hobbes, and a believer in simpler, more democratic forms of social organisation, John Locke, whose ideas reached most directly out into the world of ordinary human hopes and aspirations, and inspired reformers in the new worlds of America and, later, Australia. Envisaging the right of all people to life, liberty, and the pursuit of property, of no taxation without consent, Locke in his *Second Treatise of Government* (1689) declared that all who were “Industrious and Rational” had a right to own land, for labour created property: “As much Land as a Man Tills, Plants, Improves, Cultivates, and can use the Product of, so much is his Property.” There would never be a problem of overcrowding, for the “vacant places” of the new world would make it possible for every man to have his own, without prejudicing the rest of mankind. Indeed, it was philanthropic to do so, rather than let land lie fallow:

He who appropriates land to himself by his labour does not lessen but increase the common stock of mankind. ... For I ask whether in the wild woods and uncultivated wast of America left to Nature, without any improvements, tillage or husbandry, a thousand acres will yield the needy and wretched inhabitants as many conveniences of life as ten acres of equally fertile land does in Devonshire where they are well cultivated.
Locke was a gentle, modest man who argued for the right of women to end an unsatisfactory marriage, and for strict limits to the power of parents over children and of the state over its citizens, but he did not consider the possibility that there might be Aboriginal peoples whose lifestyle would have to be destroyed so that the vacant places could be turned into little English farms.

In the popular European imagination this vision became a dream of a future society of small independent yeoman farmers, where every man would smoke his pipe in peace under the apple boughs. It was a fantasy that would be reworked in a thousand texts. It appears most famously in Australian stories near the end of C.J. Dennis's Songs of A Sentimental Bloke (1915):

This ev'nin' I was sittin' wiv Doreen,
Peaceful an' 'appy wiv the day's work done,
Watchin', be'ind the orchard's bonzer green,
The flamin' wonder of the settin' sun

and was visually reinforced by the last images of Raymond Longford's celebrated 1919 film, as the Bloke, the motherless orphan risen from the city slums and gone bush to become a successful "berry farmer" with a wife and "son and heir", sits contentedly smoking his pipe on the verandah.

The possibility of such a vision becoming reality inspired bucolic puritans and radical Arcadians leading up to and throughout the reforming, experimenting, legislating nineteenth century. Quasi-democrats of all kinds had renewed their attacks on the self-importance and self-congratulation of European high society, insisting on the nobility of manual labour. In 1759 Voltaire ended Candide with an attack on the kind of fatalistic or pessimistic thinking which justified or allowed inequality and suffering. Like Dad Rudd, his hero demands that the philosophers put down their books, pick up a hoe, and get to work. At the start of the nineteenth century the Romantic poets rejected the industrial revolution, elevated the appreciation of nature to the status of a religion with the peasant as its priest, rediscovered Arcadia on a Grecian urn, and fought for democracy in the Greek War of Independence. Their poems, and Gray's Country Churchyard, Goldsmith's Deserted Village, and Longfellow's Village Blacksmith, were read by young Australians who had little Latin, less Greek, and no idea where the real Arcadia was or why Byron had died fighting for its liberation, but who were told again and again of the superiority of the shepherd on the hills and the evils of the soul-destroying city. Democracy and freedom became confused with dreams of escape from any kind of social organisation whatsoever; the vicissitudes of nature were better than the tyrannies of the factory and of parliament.

But at the same time other writers were reporting less sentimentally on experiments in living that today we recognise as the antecedents of the conservation movement. In the same decade of the 1840s when the squatters were carving
up Australia's Darling Downs for their separate Arcadias, Henry David Thoreau spent two years in the American woods west of Boston experimenting with self-sufficiency, challenging materialism, but also hearing in the distance the railway trains rumbling west to the future, and observing the small landholders in his neighbourhood, each farmer "crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and wood-lot".  

In Australia the legislators and reformers ignored such warnings about the potential misery of small landowners, preferring the visions of Locke and Voltaire, Wordsworth and John Stuart Mill, and began to make elegant and learned speeches in support of the 160 acre block, where "a man and his family" could live free of tyranny, meet their own needs, and contribute to national prosperity by selling their excess produce to the markets of the world. It is easy to be cynical and wise about such utopian delusions today, but for those who had experienced the horrors of the founding of European Australia with its chains, lash and gibbet, who had witnessed the concentration of financial power into new, even less scrupulous hands, and endured the chaos of early laissez-faire economics, this must have been a powerful vision.

The explorer Allan Cunningham "found" the Darling Downs in June 1827. The four tribes of Aboriginal people living in the area were soon to lose it in open warfare, assisted by disease, starvation, massacres and poisoning. Their story was ignored, the victors wrote the history. This was "the grandest discovery yet made in interior Australia" exulted the Historical Sketch of Queensland in 1886. It quoted Cunningham: "Grasses and herbiage" exhibited "an extraordinary luxuriance of growth", and went on in its own voice:

The soil was rich and black. There was abundant and convenient water. ... Cunningham, experienced in both coastal and inland exploration, appreciated the importance of his treasure-trove. He bestowed upon this lovely and fecund champaign the governor's name, and different portions of what, as the Darling Downs, were thenceforward for half a century to be celebrated as the most wealth-yielding tract in Australia.  

This is the language of pastoral, reconstituted as capitalist enterprise. Consistent with the same vision, the squatters, known as the "pure merinos", congratulated themselves on the arcadian paradise over which they ruled:

a fine set of men ... their word being their bond, their agreements seldom written, their servants well used, their animals cared for, and their homes open to the most ungrudging hospitality, and what can a country desire more in the founders of her early history?  

But the squatters were to enjoy fewer than thirty years of sheep-herding before that other vision — the small farmer under the apple bough — began to emerge as a fact and a political force to be reckoned with. The radical dimension to John Locke's argument, the right of all to the fruits of their labour measured in acres owned, was fought out over the "Garden of Queensland".

The world of the selectors from the 1870s onwards, which Arthur Davis observed with a somewhat cynical eye, had many supporters willing to incorporate it in the legend of the pioneers, and to represent their achievements as the birth of a new Arcadia; none more so than that other Darling Downs resident, the poet of federation, George Essex Evans:

The seed they sowed with weary hands  
Now bursts in bloom through all thy lands.  
Dark hills their glitt'ring secrets yield;  
And for the camps of wand'ring bands —  
The snowy flocks, the fertile field.  
Back, ever back new conquests press  
The Wilderness.21

Bards who promulgated the official line were anthologised. Later generations of Queensland schoolchildren would inevitably encounter Roderic Quinn's "The Australian" on the first page of text in their Grade Five Readers:

He swings his axe in the golden morn;  
The blade bites clean and free;  
The trees must fall ere the land be ploughed,  
And an axeman strong is he.  
....

But more than trees he brings to earth —  
Old wrongs that bind and thrall;  
And from his harvest shall be made  
The sweetest bread of all.

A young man in a young land, he  
Dreams noble dreams of youth;  
And, foremost in the van of years,  
He sows the seeds of truth.22

Arthur Hoey Davis could be as self-deluding and utopian as this, but his writing lacked such grand statements of the national vision. Neither Davis nor Steele Rudd proclaimed a higher calling or purpose for the nation-builders. They did not question it openly, but their representations lacked conviction. Davis peopled his pages with limited, selfish, opinionated individuals. Their land was not Arcadia; it was that earthier bucolic place: cowland. In fact it was for
agricultural crop growing rather than milk cattle that the selections had been established, but the cow became their profit-earner and their symbol; more prosaic, more comic. The selectors became “cow cockys”:

When first you took up the little grey homestead you counted on growing wheat and barley and maize, and leaving milk alone. Grain-growing was more dignified and manlier than strumming on Strawberry’s teats while she chewed her cud and beat time with her tail.

Green Grey Homestead

At the same time as Thoreau was entering voluntary exile from society outside Boston and warning that in both the new world and the old “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. … From the desperate city you go into the desperate country”, in Wales a young man called Thomas Davies was growing up among riots and other forms of protest against the effects of the industrial revolution: rent increases, land enclosures, and the eviction of tenant farmers. Land in Wales was being redistributed less equally. In 1847 he was convicted of a minor crime apparently unrelated to any such injustices and sent to New South Wales.

In the same years in Ireland, the great potato famine came on top of similar social upheavals. With the land in chaos, a fourteen-year-old girl in a workhouse in County Galway, Mary Green, was selected for emigration to the same colony. Within five years they had both arrived on the Darling Downs, where they married, raised a family including their eighth child, Arthur Hoey Davis, and relatively late in life began the attempt to fulfil the role of an independent small farming family. Their decision to “go on the land”, to take part in the war of the selector against the squatter, was made at least eighteen years after their marriage, and after they had watched from the position of contract labourers the successes and failures of many other landowners, large and small.

There is no way of knowing when or how Thomas and Mary Davies encountered the ideas which were preserved in philosophy but also circulated through society in more popular tracts, arguments and beliefs, and which were gathered up and fashioned into the Land Selection Acts of the Queensland Parliament. Indeed there is no certainty that they accepted the egalitarian visions of philosophers and politicians with more than grudging affirmation that what might happen to them on a selection couldn’t be worse than what they had already experienced.
Before Eden

This is of Lilith, by her Hebrew name
Lady of Night: she, in the delicate frame
that was of woman after, did unite
herself with Adam in unblest delight;
who, uncapacious of that dreadful love,
begat on her not majesty, as Jove,
but the worm-brood of terrors unconfest
that chose henceforth, as their avoided nest,
the mire-fed witherien thicket of the mind.
She, monsterward from that embrace declined,
could change her to Chimera and inspire
doubt of his garden-state ...

Christopher Brennan,
The Forest of Night (1913)

Land of my hope! Soon may this early blot
Amid thy growing honours be forgot
...
Nor may the outcast convict’s clanking chains
Deform thy wilds and stigmatise thy plains.

William Wentworth,
“Australasia” (1823)
The torturing vision

Lilith was Adam's first wife, deserted by him for Eve. She thereafter sought revenge by destroying all the earthly satisfactions he pursued, so that even love, war and religion become vain refuges from a torturing vision that Lilith keeps beyond reach.

G.A. Wilkes, "Introduction" to Christopher Brennan, Selected Poems

In most of his writing Arthur Davis imagined his parents as Adam and Eve, created whole, one, and free, going into the Australian bush to re-enter Eden. This utopian vision suited those who believed in progress and democracy, and who thought that whatever had happened before should be disregarded. But, as in the Jewish myth of Adam's first wife Lilith, there were things that had happened before which could sour everything that came after. The labours of night would bring no miracle blossoming, because a curse was on the dawn.1

It was only towards the end of his life that Davis tried to acknowledge in a novel that something had come before the selection; that the land the Rudd family arrived at in 1875 was not "virgin" bush, not a God-given Garden of Eden, but a product of another European vision, and before that again of another culture altogether. He dedicated The Romance of Runnibede (1927) to his parents, who had lived on the western Downs during the last years of the war between Aborigines and Europeans, who had witnessed the triumph of the squatters during the so-called golden years of 1855 to 1865, but who had sympathised with the growing opposition from worker, politician and selector which would eventually end the squatting domination of the garden of Queensland. The novel was Arthur Davis's attempt to come to terms with his own family's past, with Aboriginal Australia, and with the arrival of Europeans on the Darling Downs, but in part it proved beyond him.

Although it is set in the 1860s, The Romance of Runnibede avoids much of the complex nature of the early European history of the Downs, founded as it was on cheap convict, Indian, and Chinese labour, and divided by election riots, agitations for land reform, and property purchase frauds. "Nowhere", writes the historian Duncan Waterson, "were the squatters stronger, the storekeepers more hostile, and the selectors more significant".2 Davis had spent his adult life spinning yarns about the selectors, but he showed a strange reluctance to deal with this human conflict, this world before the Selection Acts of 1863 and 1868.
Runnibede could have been his chance to chronicle the ways in which the Rudd family emerged not from the wilderness, the unknown, but out of the struggles of ordinary workers, Dad Rudds, against the bunyip aristocrats. Instead his novel’s English-born, Eton-educated squatter was cast in the heroic mould; he “selected” a property, rather than squatted on it, though its size and location identify it as a squatting run, and that was how it was later described.

Even the novel’s iconography, its images and resonances, avoided the world of the “pure merino” squatters. It was not sheep but cattle (and horses for India) that “the Governor” put on the property, though it was wool for the mills in Yorkshire that drove the commercial vision of the first squatters; wool was overwhelmingly the dominant industry. In the 1860s there were a million and a half sheep on the Downs compared to 140,000 cattle — and soon afterwards the beef industry went into a twenty-year decline. But in spite of Arcadian pipe-playing shepherds and the realities of Darling Downs economics, cattle drovers had become in myth the “cream” of bushmen. In Australia sheep were associated with class divisions, unjust profits, and the mundane world of crutching, dipping, and slowly manoeuvring stupid animals; in that industry only the gun shearer was elevated into legend. Rearing, drafting and driving beef cattle was a more dangerous game conducted from the backs of fast and hardy horses, with little of the taint of exploitation attached to it. Davis described a long dangerous drive overlanding cattle to Maitland as the turning point in the financial success of Runnibede station.

Like his father, Davis was associated with the anti-squatter faction in Downs society and several times received less than charitable comment from the “organ of the black soil dukes”, the Darling Downs Gazette — to which he responded in kind. But in his stories he avoided dealing directly with the squatter-selector struggles, preferring the elemental struggle with nature. As usual, he imagined a family saga filled with “true life adventure” stories, about himself, his parents, or his friends, however dimly or inaccurately remembered. He located Runnibede station on the western Downs, where the class antagonisms allegedly were less bitter or at least less well remembered, but where the war between the Murri peoples and the European invaders was fierce. In this last matter he did not equivocate, trying to describe both sides of the conflict, recording white injustices against black, and arguing that Aboriginal people had a right to be consulted and compensated for what they had lost. This directness distinguishes the best of his writing, in which he can reduce a situation to its essence:

But squatters there were in the Never-Never Land who nursed bitter grudges against the black people. It was difficult for them to keep their guns silent whenever they came in contact with any of them; and in retaliation the tribes attacked the lonely shepherds, and at times a homestead, fired the grasses, and speared the stock. These deprivations
were reported to the police, and at long intervals after their occurrences a body of mounted “trackers” would scour the country in search of the accused ones, and the accusations were mostly made wholesale. When they came across a tribe, or the remnant of one, that “dropped their bundles and ran,” they judged them guilty, and would gallop rings round them, give any that looked dangerous a taste of shot, and head them all like cattle from that locality to some other corner in the Back of Beyond. Such official displays were called “Dispersals by the Police,” and thereby many a pretty bush daisy bloomed on the innocent blood of the wild blacks.

In parts of the novel Davis was a conventional white man of his time, viewing the Murri people as childlike, innocent, amusingly naked, “simple-minded” “children of Cain”, and exploiting them for episodes of exotic adventure and racist comedy. Elsewhere, he recognised that it was their land, described some of their customs and practices, recorded episodes of white treachery such as the poisoning of flour, the complexity and mutual mistrust of subsequent negotiations, and attempts to “civilise” the original inhabitants by music, religion and agriculture. Davis was an apologist for the white conquerors rather than a radical, blaming the violence on “cowardly” station owners and renegade black men, but this section of the book partly transcends those limitations, and must have been a courageous piece of writing in the 1920s.

In describing conflict between the Murris and the usurping squatters, Davis struggled with the complexity of the issues, but he was considerably less open about the struggles between one group of Europeans and others, preferring the uncomplicated genre of pastoral romance. About his own family background he chose to be silent. The parents in *The Romance of Runnibede* are British and well born. Both in real life and in the novel, Davis concealed the fact that his father was a transported Welsh convict, his mother an abandoned Irish girl. Proud as he was of their hard-working, self-made “Dad Rudd and Mother” status, by the end of his life he came to wish that they, and he, had classier origins. In his *Who’s Who* entry, Davis claimed his father was “an engineer, surveyor, selector, and bushman” who had come to Australia early enough to have been part of Sir Thomas Mitchell’s expedition to the Maranoa in 1846. Practical skills his father acquired as a ticket-of-leave convict assigned to assist a surveyor seem to be all there is to the engineer and surveyor labels, and the claim regarding Mitchell was an error — possibly an alibi for the years his father had spent in a British prison.

About his mother’s background Davis said and wrote little, and that only in hushed and saintly terms. The grandchildren believed she had “a fine upbringing” and came to Australia “as a companion and help” to her “close friend” Mrs Rutledge, the mother of distinguished Brisbane barrister, politician and judge, Sir Arthur Rutledge, QC MP. This too was a selective, up-class oversimplification of a tragic story.
The Welsh youth Thomas Davies and the Irish girl Mary Green, whatever their differences of culture and religion, shared one harsh reality. Both were rejected by homelands that wanted to get rid of them and sent to a distant British colony that did not want to receive them. In order to avoid ridicule and prejudice, both would find it necessary to deny parts of their own identities, to remake the image they presented to the world and to themselves. Whether they were able to wipe the torturing past from their nightmares is less certain.

**Denials of self**

I am one of those who believe that the history of bygone days should be reliable and true.

Thomas Davis, letter to the *Queenslander, 29 January 1898*

The Davis family's silence about Thomas Davies' youthful crimes needs to be seen in the context of its time; only relatively recently has the "convict stain" been replaced by an enthusiasm for trying to find First Fleet ancestors. Even in 1987, when Toowoomba historian Maurice French published his suspicions that Thomas Davis, selector and part-model for Dad Rudd, was also Thomas Davies, ticket-of-leave Welsh convict, there were those who felt this an unpardonable intrusion:

As a former Downs resident, now retired, I am writing to say that I think the article … on the supposition of Mr Maurice French that the father of A.H. Davis was a convict, is an abuse of trust. While it may be fashionable for some to claim convict ancestors, that is their decision, and is quite different from historians poking about in records and making their findings public.

This letter to the editor of the Toowoomba *Chronicle* went on to reprimand the paper ("so deeply rooted in the tissue of the Downs") for publishing "material of this nature."

Fortunately, at least some of the living generations of Davis descendants were intrigued rather than alarmed by the news. Some had already begun their own inquiries and the necessary evasions of Thomas and Mary Davis's generation and the small compassionate lies of the next began to unravel.

In May 1840 the transportation of convicts to Sydney had ceased and during
the next decade the practice slowed down throughout Australia. The "early blot" William Wentworth lamented in his famous poem "Australasia" (1823) was disappearing, and free settlers and emancipists began to construct new national visions. But in 1847 a revised system of punishment was instituted by Earl Grey, the Secretary of State for the Colonies. It would eliminate the need for Australian prisons of the kind that had been so barbaric and controversial, but allow transportation to begin again. Prisoners would spend the first part of their sentences in a British prison, being rehabilitated by learning new skills and labouring on public works projects. If this term was completed satisfactorily, they had the option of being shipped to Australia with the promise of a ticket of leave upon arrival, to serve the last part of their sentences as assigned workers. The catch was that, even after a conditional pardon had been granted, the ex-convict was not allowed to return to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. It was a one-way ticket of leave.

Transportation was renewed, and large crowds of allegedly respectable Australian citizens met to denounce this treachery by the government in London. The first ship, the *Hashemy*, arrived in June 1849. On board was a Devonshire convict, William Henry Groom, who would become Toowoomba's first mayor, for nearly forty years the representative for Drayton and Toowoomba in the Queensland Parliament, and the architect of the homestead clauses in the 1868 Lands Act. Addressing a crowd at Circular Quay the day the *Hashemy* dropped anchor nearby, the member for Sydney, Robert Lowe, described the prisoners as "picked and selected criminals", "the rubbish — the moral filth of Great Britain", "scholars in vice and iniquity". Speaking down from the top of an omnibus in pouring rain he reminded the five thousand listeners of his favourite theme: the squatters alone benefited from the supply of cheap convict labour. Without it, their dung-hill aristocracy — as Lowe's electoral secretary Henry Parkes later called them — could not survive the march of land reform and the rights of free men to property and prosperity.

It would be barely a year before such shouts of outrage stopped the shipping of convicts to New South Wales forever. The suppression of the past could begin again. For the few who in 1849 and 1850 had fallen through the briefly reopened trapdoor to the other side of the world, there were good reasons to conceal as quickly as possible the circumstances of their arrival.

The manipulation of Irish children like Mary Green was in some ways more subtle, in others more aggressively direct. Since 1842 some of the money from the sale of crown land in the colonies had been set aside to finance emigration of the poor from England, Scotland, and Ireland — but there had been few Irish migrants to the various outposts of the empire. Australian Catholics, including the philanthropist Caroline Chisholm, suspected anti-Popery and in particular
the agitations of John Dunmore Lang, the Presbyterian clergyman and rival immigration organiser. In London from 1846 to 1854, Chisholm addressed two House of Lords committees and wrote repeatedly to the Colonial Secretary, Earl Grey, outlining her version of the popular vision of an Australia settled by a class of small farmers. To correct the imbalance in the sexes and so prevent misery, disorder and "ungodly acts", the wives and children of emancipists should be sent to join them in Australia, while carefully selected single women, suitably chaperoned and located as domestic servants in geographical proximity to lonely shepherds, would spread "the associations and connections of family life" throughout the country.

Earl Grey was sympathetic to Caroline Chisholm's mission. At the same time his cousin, Sir George Grey, Home Secretary responsible for Irish affairs, was hearing with alarm of one hundred thousand children under the age of fifteen crowding into Irish workhouses following the disastrous failure of the potato crop in 1845 and subsequent years. In 1847 Earl Grey decided to forge a solution from the two problems. Irish Boards of Guardians were asked to provide lists of orphan girls for emigration to Australia. The first shipload reached Sydney aboard the Earl Grey in October 1848.

Australian society was little more receptive to these tragic refugees than it was to the convicts the following year. Some Irish foundlings had recently arrived on board another ship, the Sobraon, and with them scandalous tales of drunkenness, open fornication with the captain and crew, and a report of the death of one young woman from a failed abortion. When upon arrival the Earl Grey's surgeon in charge of the orphan girls immediately denounced some of his charges as foul-mouthed thieves, prostitutes, and beggars, many colonists saw this as yet another example of Britain dumping its refuse on them. Steps were taken to improve the selection procedures, but the damage was done. Within a year Australian authorities were formally requesting the suspension of the scheme.

For John Dunmore Lang, what was even worse was that the girls were Catholics. They would marry Protestant husbands and their children would be Catholics. At the time Lang was also in London, with the support of Lowe and Parkes, promoting his own scheme for emigrating "virtuous and industrious Protestants". He wrote an open letter to Earl Grey, accusing him of a plot to Romanise New South Wales, and foreseeing revolution and an Australian republic. By the middle of 1850 Grey had abandoned the Irish orphan girls scheme; another trapdoor had briefly opened and had quickly closed again to howls of bigoted fury. Like the last of the convicts, a fourteen-year-old Irish girl, Mary Green, with no relatives anywhere in Australia to turn to, had good reasons to omit the details of her arrival in Sydney and to keep her religious beliefs to herself.

Her future husband, Thomas Davies, was the second child of a shoemaker and
his wife who lived at The Trap, Abernant, a village just north of the coal mining town of Aberdare in south Wales. According to local legend, The Trap was an area of small cottages where a gin shop “trapped” coal miners and ironworkers on their way home from the pits and mills. This part of Glamorganshire was a tough district, where the industrial revolution had blackened and transformed the landscape beyond recognition. In Aberdare the glare from the Messrs Wayne’s Furnace lit up the streets by night. It was an area of rapidly increasing population and the centre of some of the most sustained and bloody radical protest. Rent increases had trebled during the Napoleonic wars, and at the same time some two hundred thousand acres of land were enclosed for the exclusive use of large freeholders. Traditional subsistence practices — such as access to wood, stone and slate for building, turf for fuel, and common grazing land for sheep, cows and pigs — were suddenly cut off. In retaliation dispossessed tenant farmers attacked landholders and officers of the law, broke into jails and locked up magistrates. Industrial unrest and agitation for electoral reform was equally strong. The area was not represented in the House of Commons and the hated member for the nearby rotten borough was opposing the 1832 Reform Bill. Properties and haystacks were burnt down.

The protests were not just local and particular. Aberdare itself was the centre of clandestine political meetings, and the works of Voltaire and Paine’s *Rights of Man* were secretely circulated. In 1831, with elections approaching and the Reform Bill under debate in the House of Lords, massive rioting broke out in the largest town in the region, Merthyr Tydfil, just five kilometres away from the Davies’ home. For the first five days of June there was a complete breakdown of traditional authority, and order was reimposed only with the help of the army, the reading of the Riot Act, and the hanging of one of the protesters, a young miner. There is no record of what part in all this the Davies family played, though later in life the father appears to have prospered and become a freeholder himself.

The family were probably not regular churchgoers, since on 3 April 1831, two months before the Merthyr Tydfil uprising, they took their first three children, Mary (born 1827), Thomas (born 1828), and a newborn, Richard, to the Abernant Church of England to be baptised as a job lot. This may have been a statement of allegiance to the forces of conservatism and godliness, or it may have been chance; most tradesmen in the area were sympathetic to the radical reformers.

Thomas was the family name for the eldest surviving boy, and was shared by the son, his father and grandfather. When he was seven his mother died, apparently never recovering from the effects of delivering stillborn triplets, and the next year his father remarried. There are two clues to the eldest son’s attitude to his stepmother. When arrested and accused of having stolen clothing in his
Before Eden

possession, he claimed she had made the clothes for him, and later in his life he
gave her name, Gwenllian, to one of his children.

As the principal heir one might expect him to have been trained to take over
the family business, but he reportedly became a collier, or more probably an
apprentice blacksmith at the Aberdare forge. Possibly he quarrelled with his
father and left home; perhaps he had lost his job or been injured — his convict
record notes the loss of the top of the forefinger on his left hand. An old tattoo
“CE” has led to speculation about an early romantic entanglement, while the
journeying from pub to pub revealed at his trial may not have been just for cheap
lodging. Whatever the web of reasons, by September 1846 at the age of eighteen
he had left home and was reported by accusers and witnesses to be living “with a
pack on his back”, possibly as a “tramp”. His wanderings included Aberdare,
Merthyr Tydfil and Georgetown ten kilometres further on, and the only money
he had to pay for food, drink and accommodation came from goods he had stolen
and pawned.

On the 23 September he stayed at the New Inn in Aberdare. The next morning
the premises had apparently been broken into and a small quantity of clothing
stolen, but evidence by a Merthyr Tydfil pawnbroker that Thomas Davies had
deposited some of the items there in exchange for money confirmed an inside
job; a window had been left open as a false clue. A fortnight later he broke into
an Aberdare grocer’s shop, again stealing money and clothing, which was found
at his lodgings after he was arrested in Merthyr on 12 October. He allegedly
confessed almost immediately. At his trial in Swansea on 3 March 1847 he was
represented by both a barrister and a solicitor — evidence of the family’s at least
moderate wealth, and willingness to rally behind their prodigal son in his hour
of need — and character witnesses were called on his behalf. All was to no avail,
for he was sentenced to transportation for ten years, a savage judgment for two
petty offences even in its time. Perhaps it reflected indirectly the continuing
suppression of the smouldering rebellion which still sparked occasionally in
Glamorganshire.

For Mary Green, seven years younger, the political turmoil and economic chaos
in Tuam, County Galway, were much more directly catastrophic. In Ireland
resistance to rural change had become organised, coercive and murderous:
landlords and land jobbers were killed, and the general population intimidated
by threats and the swearing of secret oaths into supporting the Whiteboys and
the Molly Maguires in a desperate losing battle against industrialisation and the
privatisation of land. In Galway a system called “conacre” began to break down.
Landowners traditionally manured and tilled small areas of land which they
allowed conacre men — tradesmen, labourers, peasants — to use for subsistence
agriculture, in return for their labour at planting and harvest time. As the value
of land and commodity prices rose, large farm owners began to appropriate common land and conacre for their own use.

To combat the displacement and smooth the transition from a society of peasants to one of salaried industrial workers, workhouses were set up in 1838 throughout Ireland to feed and house paupers. Men, women, and children were separated, the standards of accommodation ranged from bad to appalling, and rations were limited to two meals a day. Not surprisingly the workhouses were hated and, until 1845, the poor avoided them except as a last resort. But in that year the potato crop began to be affected by the disease known as blight, and for the next four years the great potato famine devastated the countryside. Peasants defaulted on their rents and were evicted. Chaos followed, with typhus and cholera claiming more lives than starvation. By Christmas 1846 the workhouses were full of abandoned and orphaned children. Liberal-minded landowners hired ships and offered their tenants free or subsidised passages to the new world; less scrupulous ones had their properties cleared and the paupers shipped abroad whether they wanted to or not.

In the midst of this crime and tragedy, Earl Grey's Orphan Girls Emigration Scheme proceeded slowly and meticulously. A single officer, Lieutenant Henry, went around the Irish workhouses and personally selected 4,175 girls for emigration to Australia largely on the basis of their physical appearance. Unknown to him, a certain amount of preselection was going on, and some prostitutes, runaway wives, and girls with medical disorders were selected, particularly in the first two boatloads. All no doubt had valid reasons for leaving Ireland, and from a modern point of view as much right as anyone else, but they were not of "unblemished moral character and sound health" as the Poor Law commissioners defined the terms. Another criterion was that they were orphans, and there was some concern that, because Henry was not insisting on this, desperate parents were taking the opportunity to relieve themselves of at least one mouth to feed. Interestingly, a number of the "orphans" selected in Tuam had a parent still living, including Mary Green, whose mother was in the town.

It is not clear therefore if Mary was an abandoned child, or if she volunteered to leave her impoverished and widowed mother for a possibly better life in Australia; nor is it known how long she spent in the Tuam workhouse before Lieutenant Henry pointed at her. What did she, and the other children he chose, think and feel about this chance to exchange the almost unbearable for the almost unknown? In 1984 an Irish feminist historian claimed that the orphan girls had been sent unwillingly as "sex objects to the ‘New World’", that Australia was an unpopular destination, that they were sold into sexual slavery in Sydney, and that conditions there were so bad that riots broke out. However it appears that these assertions were based on a misreading of Anne Summers' study of female convicts
in Australia, Damned Whores and God's Police; what was true of female prisoners twenty years earlier had no bearing on this meticulously planned emigration scheme. The orphan girls were to be God's police, not the powerless and abandoned women of the convict era. Nor was Australia a hated or feared place. By the late 1840s Australia had begun to acquire a reputation in Britain as a land of opportunity, and, as Joseph Robins has documented in The Lost Children, things were so desperate in Ireland that in some areas even working girls were leaving their places of employment and entering the workhouses in the hope of being selected.

Personal lives often leave no trace of actions or attitudes across many years. So it is with Mary Green, known to history only through a few predictable and conventional male comments. Government records are a different matter. We know that in the middle of 1848 she was one of about 170 girls selected for emigration from the west counties, particularly Mayo, Leitrim, and Galway. Each was outfitted with six shifts, two flannel petticoats, six pairs of stockings, two gowns, two pairs of shoes, and a bible (Douay for Catholics) and prayerbook. These they stored, with what few other possessions they had, in a stout lockable wooden box made to specifications. They took the rocky road to Dublin accompanied by a "proper person", then a steamer to Plymouth, then on 4 November the barque Inchinnan for Sydney. Suspicion pursued them even here; because of complaints by English emigrants that Irish girls made unacceptable companions, the voyage was for Catholics only. Whatever the reasons, once in Australia Mary Green's religion was never mentioned; she was married in an Anglican church, and her husband would be the figure around whom the children clustered for Protestant bible readings.

It was not the behaviour of the orphan girls on the Inchinnan that caused comment, but the conduct of the surgeon-general and one of the chief officers. After the ship's arrival in Sydney on 13 February 1849, reports, editorials and letters concerning several scandalous court cases raged through the pages of the Sydney Morning Herald, incidentally providing information about conditions on the ship. The girls slept two to a bunk, and throughout the voyage worked at menial tasks such as cleaning the deck with salt. The doctor in charge, Wilson Ramsay, devised a novel — and in the Herald's opinion perverted — punishment for "refractory" girls. He dressed them in men's trousers, including one pair of his own, and made them stand on the poop deck where they were subject to ribald comments from the sailors.

The chief officer who assisted in this, Alexander Taylor, was also in charge of issuing food at mealtimes, when he played favourites among the girls, and giving them large or small helpings accordingly. Later Taylor and Ramsay quarrelled. Taylor had a particularly bad temper and the court cases concerned charges laid
against him for physical violence against two girls and another passenger. He was convicted of two counts of assault for kicking a girl while she lay on the ground and who had coughed blood for the rest of the voyage. The jury, having been assured that there had been “no lifting of clothes” in either attack, recommended leniency and he was fined £5 for each offence. Dr Ramsay, who appeared as a witness and who seems to have encouraged the plaintiffs to lay charges against Taylor, found himself being more roundly reviled by the judges and the press for his cross-dressing punishment than the defendant had been for his physical brutality. He was obliged to try to justify himself in several letters to the Herald, which continued to condemn him for disciplinary methods it suggested were “indecent” attempts to “unsex” the young women.

**In Australia**

Mary Green managed to avoid mention in any of the trial evidence or journalistic accounts, so perhaps she avoided both Mr Taylor’s boot and Dr Ramsay’s trousers. She was one of a group of twenty girls who were sent from the ship to the Hyde Parks Barracks and then to Parramatta for assignment to employers. Mary could both read and write, so her prospects as a house servant were considered good, and she was contracted to James Rutledge, a schoolteacher at Penrith, just west of Sydney. As a maid for his wife Lucy, one of her duties was to assist in looking after the couple’s young child, Arthur. Thirty-five years later she would remind Arthur Rutledge MP of this fact and ask his assistance in finding a public service job for Arthur, the son she claimed to have named after him.

Meanwhile Thomas Davies was completing in a British prison the first part of Earl Grey’s plan for his rehabilitation. In mid August 1849 he and 258 other male convicts were shipped to Sydney on the Adelaide from Weymouth via Hobart and Melbourne; the ship berthed on Christmas Eve. Once again there was public comment, although not as fierce as that which had accompanied the Hashemys arrival six months earlier. The People’s Advocate calculated that the anti-transportation petitions and despatches from the colonial governors would not have reached Earl Grey before the Adelaide left, and argued that they should wait for a reply before further action was taken.

On 30 December the first group of prisoners received their tickets of leave. Intriguingly the prisoner who had been convicted in England was Thomas Davies,
but the ticket-of-leave labourer who disembarked from the *Adelaide* was Thomas Davis. In Welsh-accented English there is no difference in the pronunciation of Davis and Davies, so the new identity may have begun as a simple clerical error. For the rest of his life the two names alternated. As Davis he received his ticket of leave; as Davies he found work and some years later was granted a conditional pardon. As Davis he applied for a selection; but when he was granted the deeds to it, the Lands Department queried the spelling of his name — for which he rebuked them, although his signature on interim correspondence seems to have an “e” in it.45 His obituary said Davis, but his headstone in Toowoomba Cemetery says Davies.

The switch appears to have been an imperfectly maintained attempt to remove the convict “blot”; there is also some suggestion that it didn’t work. According to a family descendant, Thomas Davi[e]s had a brother who came to live in Toowoomba and worked as a hawker, selling clothes props:

He used to travel up one street and down the next in a cart, drawn by a very poor horse. His cry of “Clothes Props” as he passed always led to a retinue of small boys. The conversation always went — “What do you feed the horse on.” Then “Clothes Props” from the relative. The sequel was always the same. A pack of small boys, chased with a whip by a very irate hawker, screaming “Your name is Davies not Davis”. My mother could have [given] us the answer, but small boys should only be seen.46

The story is puzzlingly illogical and incomplete: why did the brother also change his name? But some such bigotry of small-town life drove the secret further underground. Arthur Hoey Davis’s comment to his friend and biographer, Winifred Hamilton, about why the “e” had been dropped from his father’s name was: “No-one seems to know nor to care.”47 Presumably Arthur Davis did know and care.

Thomas Davis’s employer was James Charles Burnett, a brilliant young self-educated surveyor, who during the 1840s had charted areas from the Richmond River, near Grafton, north to the Wide Bay–Burnett region that bears his name. Davis must have had some qualifications to bargain with as his salary was forty-five shillings per month, whereas some other ticket-of-leave holders received only ten shillings.48 During 1850, when Thomas Davis began work, Burnett’s tasks included laying out parts of the villages of Drayton, Warwick and Dalby, and settling and marking disputed boundaries between Darling Downs squatting fiefdoms such as Felton, Clifton, Jimbour, Canning Downs, Jondaryan and Cecil Plains, as well as the duke’s domain itself, Arthur Hodgson’s Eton Vale.49 It must have been an exhausting year, and Burnett’s *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry refers to his “enthusiastic and almost reckless devotion to the trying duties of his profession”; he died in Brisbane at the age of thirty-nine.

In 1850–51 non-Aboriginal Australian society was changed abruptly by the
discovery of gold in New South Wales and Victoria; it also changed the way in which much of the rest of the world viewed the continent. These watershed years are one of the traditional markers in Australian history, a time when immigrant, predominantly white Australia began to grow rapidly, when it redistributed itself around the country, when it radically revised the previous boundaries to personal goals and national visions. Settlers, tradespeople and storekeepers, Chinese and other labourers, sailors from ships bringing would-be prospectors, publicans and entertainers, all set out for Bathurst, Ballarat or one of the other fields in the region, either to dig or to live off the miners' prosperity. So did ticket-of-leave convicts, breaking the conditions of their release, and risking re-imprisonment. It is almost impossible to think of this period now except through historical picture-book and television clichés, but its effect on Australian society is undeniable, and was just as profound for a less mythologised group: those who "stayed behind".

It would have been relatively easy for Thomas Davis to abscond and make his way south to the diggings along a stock route and perhaps if he had been longer in the country and known it better he might have done so. Or perhaps the experiences which had turned him into a model prisoner were too recent and bitter to allow him to chance their possible repetition. Others were leaving, the demand for labour was high and wages were set to rise in consequence. He stayed on the Darling Downs.

James Rutledge and family and at least one servant, Mary Green, were among the few groups of people moving away from the gold diggings rather than towards them. In 1851 they left Penrith and arrived at Drayton, then the largest village on the northern Downs, where Rutledge opened a school. Within a few months Thomas Davis and Mary Green had met and agreed to marry. Because she was only about seventeen she needed official permission to wed, and this was obtained from the squatter-magistrate of Eton Vale, Arthur Hodgson. Thomas was twenty-three but as a ticket-of-leave holder he also had to wait to have the agreement approved by the governor-general. On 19 January 1852 they were married by the first Church of England clergyman on the Downs, the legendary Benjamin Glennie, described by Arthur Davis in *Runnibede* as "the thinnest, leanest, and toughest man I ever remember, and he could walk like a world-beater". Although Presbyterian rather than Anglican he is probably the principal model for "the poor parson" in Davis's stories of that name. Covering an estimated five thousand kilometres a year on foot and horseback, Glennie ministered alone to the entire Downs from 1850 to 1860, and was still in Drayton in the mid 1870s when the Davis family went on a selection. In those same years most of the other dimensions of life on the Darling Downs would change dramatically.
Terra nullius

As the white man is to the Aboriginal, so is the tiller of the soil to the squatter.

Brisbane Courier, 15 December 1865

On 3 June 1992 the full court of the High Court of the Commonwealth of Australia handed down its decision in the case of Mabo v. Queensland [No. 2]. By a majority of six to one the court declared that the doctrine of terra nullius — which had legally dispossessed the Aboriginal peoples of Australia of their land by declaring Australia in 1788 to be "a territory belonging to no-one" — should no longer be followed.

As the leading judgment of Brennan J. outlined, the acquisition of sovereignty by European powers over "unoccupied" land, paradoxically "inhabited" by native peoples, was justified in two ways: by the concept of "higher" and "lower" races and by the supposedly civilised practice of agriculture, which improved on nature and alone justified private ownership of land. The first principle was expounded in 1919 by Lord Sumner, speaking for the Privy Council in In re Southern Rhodesia:

Some tribes are so low in the scale of social organisation that their usages and conceptions of rights and duties are not to be reconciled with the institutions or the legal ideas of civilised society. Such a gulf cannot be bridged. It would be idle to impute to such people some shadow of the rights known to our law and then to transmute them into the substance of transferable rights of property as we know them.

Even this odious justification for terra nullius was too mild a concept to explain the slaughter and dispersal of the native inhabitants of the Darling Downs. They were simply not recognised as people, let alone people with rights to land. Even if they had been, they would not have been allowed to stand in the way of the economic exploitation of rich and abundant grassland desired by a "higher", or greedier, civilisation. No European understood the system of Aboriginal land management by controlled firing of pasture, or would have defined it as agriculture if they had done so. They ignored the evidence of sophisticated religious belief, complex social structures, and even recognition of private property — bunya trees in some areas being owned by individual men and inherited by their sons. For more than a century such evidence of humanity would be denied, as
white Australia smugly waited for the Aboriginal peoples to become extinct and tried to pretend they had not been responsible for nearly making them so.

The squatters had moved beyond the boundaries of government control and police protection, and within a year of his arrival on the Downs in 1840 Patrick Leslie was telling his parents his only contact with the Aborigines was “with a gun or a sword”. Blacks were shot and poisoned, white shepherds speared in return. Aborigines reorganised their society into larger groups and appointed temporary leaders in order to carry out large-scale attacks on homesteads and travellers. They used fire to try to drive the squatters off the Downs near Clifton, and felled trees across the road and rolled stones down on to the drays bringing supplies up the mountain slope at One Tree Hill. Within a few years layer upon layer of desperation, deception and denial had complicated the struggle: whites were blaming blacks for their own crimes, and groups of detribalised Murris were betraying other Aborigines, guilty and innocent, to white vengeance. By 1848 Native Police were stationed on the Downs, the systematic shooting of blacks accelerated, and the war was lost and won.54

Thomas Davis and Mary Green arrived on the Darling Downs just after the ten-year war between the Murri people and the squatters had ended, and together they witnessed only occasional skirmishes as the Native Police completed their murderous business. Thomas had one lucky escape, being speared in the thigh while running the mail from Drayton to Surat in 1854, and in another anecdote Mary is supposed to have protected an injured Aboriginal youth from a local bullock driver on a killing rampage. By the time Arthur Davis was born, organised Murri society seems to have all but disappeared from the eastern Downs. By his own account the only tribal Aborigines Arthur saw in his entire life was when the family was on the road to Stanthorpe in 1872; when their dray became bogged a passing Murri group helped them to get it moving again.55

The author of *On Our Selection!* could write as if Aboriginal society had never existed. In one story Dad accidentally digs up the remains of a long-dead Aboriginal man, but when he realises what it is he throws the skull out the door and tips the bones on the dustheap. The incident sounds a rare, unpleasant note from an earlier time, and in another variant of the same story Davis changed it to a sheep’s skull, eliminating the echo altogether.56

The second concept underpinning *terra nullius*, less repugnant than the first but equally absurd, had emerged as a force in English common law and legislation in the late eighteenth century: “new territories could be claimed by occupation if the land were uncultivated, for Europeans had a right to bring lands into production if they were left uncultivated … by the indigenous inhabitants”.57 This would not have satisfied the editor of the Brisbane *Courier* in 1865. The
squatter, he argued in the editorial for 15 December that year, had made better 
use of the land than the “savage”, but not much:

... if the question be asked, “What improvement of the land is made by the squatter?”
The answer is very vague. What improvements can follow when, year after year, wool, 
tallow, and hides are taken from the soil, and nothing is done to replace them? The 
squatter ... says, and fain would have the world believe, that cabbages can't be grown 
in Queensland.

The squatter therefore was entitled only to a “comparatively brief tenure of the 
land”. He may have replaced kangaroos with sheep and bark huts with red cedar 
homesteads, but no plough had cut the soil. The land still “belonged” to no one. 
While this second condition for terra nullius had hardly been necessary to invoke 
in relation to the Aborigines, except perhaps as post factum legal justification to 
pretend that an invasion and a war had not happened, it occurred to land 
reformers in Queensland that it might be very useful in getting rid of the squatters.

Dr Henry Challinor, who rose to speak in the Queensland Legislative Assembly 
in 1867 during debate on the Crown Lands Sale Bill, would have agreed with the 
Courier’s editor. One of John Dunmore Lang’s virtuous Protestant immigrants, 
Challinor had served as surgeon-superintendent on the Fortitude, the first of 
Lang’s ships to arrive in Moreton Bay — in the same year, 1849, that brought 
Thomas Davis, Mary Green, and William Henry Groom to New South Wales. 
Like Groom, his fellow Queensland MLA, Challinor was a voice for the small 
selector in a squatter-dominated parliament. In his view “the person who merely 
depastures acclimatised stock upon the natural grasses has no greater claim to the 
soil than the Aboriginal who merely hunts thereon the wild animals indigenous 
to it”. He quoted John Stuart Mill who, following John Locke, had argued that 
private land ownership could only be justified if the proprietor had made 
significant improvements. In a nationalistic flourish Challinor took a swipe at 
squatters of the like of Arthur Hodgson who instead of becoming “attach[ed] to 
the soil” had taken their profits and gone home to England, and finally he 
brought God in on his side: “ ‘Be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the earth, and 
subdue it’ — and to subdue the land must certainly be to cultivate it.” Cultivation 
alone added sufficient value to land to justify an inherent claim to it, and that was 
the only claim the government of Queensland should recognise.

William Henry Groom’s contribution to the same debate was more prosaic. As 
a shopkeeper, auctioneer, and hotel owner, Groom knew less about Locke and 
Mill and the philosophical underpinning to land reform, but he knew more about 
land values, rail freight charges, the machinations of squatters and the limits to 
legal justice for the poor man and the ex-convict. His ticket of leave had taken 
him to the New South Wales goldfields, where he had been unjustly accused of 
stealing and been acquitted. Pushing his luck, he had sued his accusers for libel,
lost, and found himself back on a road gang. He left Bathurst in disgust as soon as he could and went to Drayton, where in 1856 he started his first store. The Davis family were probably customers and friends, and Arthur Davis would correspond with Groom’s son, Sir Littleton Groom, at a later time. As Drayton declined and its “suburb” of Toowoomba expanded, Groom moved his investments into the new town, became its first mayor, and from 1862 to 1901 was the member for Drayton and Toowoomba in the Legislative Assembly.

Like Doctor Challinor he was never a cabinet minister, never a powerbroker with a support base of loyal fellow parliamentarians, but he could lance the self-congratulatory puffery of the squatters as they pretended to support land reform and he could propose an amendment or two. The squatters wanted to strengthen their own uncertain legal position by “peacocking”: they were prepared to give up some land — preferably marginal land — in exchange for freehold title to the rest — preferably the best. Their challenge was to devise legislation that did not look quite so nakedly self-serving. Groom wanted to make sure that would-be small farmers, given this opportunity to own land, would obtain reasonable property at a price they could afford without selling their independence to the banks and without being bound about by conditions and restrictions that would drive them into bankruptcy and despair.

Speaking on 10 October 1867 during debate on the Crown Lands Sale Bill, Groom sarcastically observed that, while there had been a deal of talk about rewarding the Australian pioneers, honourable members seemed to be referring to only one kind of pioneer, the pastoralist. He compared the nominal rents which the pioneer squatters had paid for land on which they lived in “princely splendour” with the price small agriculturalists were now being asked to pay for ploughing their fields. Groom looked to the United States and suggested incorporating some of the clauses of their Homestead Act into the Queensland legislation. Most importantly he was insistent that agriculture on the Downs should be made economically viable. He attacked the cost of freighting produce to the coast on the newly opened railway, remarking that it was cheaper in Brisbane to ship corn from New South Wales than to rail it from Toowoomba.

Only in one part of his speech did Groom reveal a romantic longing for the old ways of Devon: he proposed setting aside common land where any settler might turn out his cattle and sheep without the fear of them being impounded by the squatter. In every other respect the member for Drayton and Toowoomba was a sober and hard-headed economic realist, and he has generally been credited with ensuring that the Crown Lands Act, finally guillotined through both Houses in February 1868, was, for the small landowner, the most favourable legislation in the colonies. Agricultural land would be available for three shillings and ninepence an acre, pastoral country for two shillings and sixpence an acre, payable
as interest-free rent over five years, provided the purchaser lived on the land, and either fenced it for stock, or cleared and cultivated one-tenth of it.

The acting governor, opening the next session of the Assembly in August, declared proudly on behalf of the government that “A large area of land has been thrown open to selection”, including “no less than 500,000 acres of the choicest portion of the Darling Downs”. Groom however was not disposed to claim a victory when as yet none had been won. In his speech in reply he noted sourly: “It was true that a considerable portion of land was thrown open for selection, but much of it was totally useless for agricultural settlement, and indeed was scarcely equal to second-class pastoral land.” The squatters were exchanging poor soil for freehold title to better, and if forced to give away good property, were arranging dummy purchasers, with the squatters’ cheques in their pockets, to buy back the best land.

Nevertheless, by the time the Commissioner for Lands had worked his way around the pastoral leases, negotiating the surrender of acreage for selection purchase, there was land available in all districts. In 1874 a special correspondent for the Brisbane Courier undertook an examination of the selection scheme on the northern Downs. In a long series of articles he exposed the dummying and inequitable distribution of good and poor land, but also reported on the success of selection agriculture in several districts, particularly around Allora, south of Drayton. Thomas and Mary Davis by this time had twenty years’ experience of the central and northern Downs from Pilton to Jimbour and out to the Maranoa. They must have had considerable local knowledge of where, if anywhere, good soil, adequate rainfall and permanent water were to be found in the pockets of farmland prized from the reluctant grasp of Arthur Hodgson and his ilk. The railway was pushing past Toowoomba on routes to Dalby and Warwick and anywhere within seventeen kilometres of either line was considered viable for getting crops and cattle to markets.

**Before the Selection**

In the twenty-three years between their marriage in 1852 and when they took up a selection, we know little about Thomas and Mary Davis’s lives apart from official records and a few family anecdotes. Thomas found employment with the Commissioner for Crown Lands at Surat on the western Downs, a remote area where
Mary was one of the few white women. "Mrs Davis witnessed some stirring scenes in those days," said her obituary. Before the birth in May 1855 of their first child, William, they had moved back to Drayton to a shingle-roofed hut in Darling Street.

It is usually claimed that Thomas set up a blacksmith's shop nearby, but it is rather more likely, initially at least, that he went to work for an already-established Drayton blacksmith, Peter Flanagan. Like Thomas Davis, Flanagan was an ex-convict; like Mary he was Irish, and they had all met and become friends by 1852 when Flanagan and his wife Anne were the witnesses at Thomas and Mary's wedding. According to Thomas Davis himself, Flanagan had come from New South Wales with Hodgson when that squatter established Eton Vale in September 1840, but later left the station and started the first smithy at Drayton. Thomas probably started work there in 1855, since he was not granted a conditional pardon until February 1856, after their move back to Drayton, and was required to be in the service of some recognised employer at least until that date. In the mid 1860s Flanagan retired to Warwick, and it was perhaps only then that Thomas took over the Drayton premises as his own.65

Thomas and Mary Davis's movements can be sketched most reliably by the details of their children's births. Their first two children were born at Darling Street, and one or possibly two were born at Jimbour station north of Dalby in 1859–60, presumably during a period as resident blacksmith on that run. They were back in Drayton for children five to nine, the eighth being Arthur in 1868. Although biographical notes usually state the literal truth that he was one of thirteen children, this is misleading. Three girls died in infancy in the 1870s, and the second son, John, died of typhoid, while the older sons probably left home at about the age of twelve. Not surprisingly the siblings Arthur associated with and remembered were those closest to him in age: Richard (the fifth child, born 1863), Edward (born 1865, and often the model for "Dave Rudd" in the stories), Margaret (born 1866, and supposedly "Sarah" or "Sal"), and Robert (born 1870, possibly "Joe"). Although the Rudd family grew and shrank according to the necessities of each story, it is usually about this same size, with only one resident daughter. Only Thomas and Mary knew the full Davis family.

The earliest surviving photographs of Thomas and Mary were taken around 1860. In one they are with two of their children; this photograph has arresting similarities to a studio shot of Arthur and "Tean" Davis and three of their children taken forty years later.66 In each an austere, unsmiling woman stares seriously out to the camera, and each man gazes vacantly and uncertainly to one side. Arthur Davis may not have married his mother, but there is a strong physical resemblance between the two wives, and both Davis and his father appear in these old photographs as soft-faced, haunted dreamers.
On 28 March 1870 Thomas Davis applied for a 160 acre block on the eastern edge of the Darling Downs, between Hodgson and Ramsay's Eton Vale and H.B. Fritz's Pilton station. It was only the cheaper pastoral land at 2/6 an acre; their savings were apparently not equal to the better three-and-ninepenny agricultural land which the Allora selectors were enthusiastically taking up as fast as they could get it. Thomas and Mary paid the first year's rent of £4, as well as a survey fee of £5.16.0d, and were able to find £4 for each of the next four years.

Land made available under the Selection Acts was relatively cheap, but came with conditions attached: the selector had to live on the land and fence and cultivate one-tenth of it. For nearly the full five years it took Thomas and Mary to pay for their selection, they apparently did not fulfil any of these conditions. Circumstances beyond their control partly explain the delay. It was during these years that their lives were tragically disrupted by the deaths of the three infant girls. Further, their decision to leave Drayton for Stanthorpe for a year during the tin-mining rush of 1872–73 probably reflected the relocation of most of the blacksmith's customers rather than an impulsive desire to abandon the part-purchased selection and seek instant wealth on Quart Pot Creek. Nevertheless even after returning from Stanthorpe they procrastinated and did not move on to the selection for another two years. Thomas Davis, it seems, was as reluctant to become a cockatoo farmer as his son would prove to be forty years later.
You may take up a selection with the hope of growing rich, 
Building castles in the air and rosy paradises, which 
Explode like rifle powder before the lighted match, 
Long ere you’ve cleared an acre, or the humpy’s under thatch. 
Ah! tis easy, very easy, to say “settle on the land;” 
And to prophesy big fortunes for the strong and willing hand; 
It’s another thing entirely, though, for any kind of hand 
To take up a selection, and plough gold out of the land.

Arthur Hoey Davis, “Going on the Land”

Australian history is almost always picturesque; indeed it is so 
curious and strange, that it is itself the chiepest novelty the country 
has to offer, and so it pushes the other novelties into second and 
third place. It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful 
lies ... but they are all true, they all happened.

Mark Twain, *Following the Equator*
True stories or beautiful lies?

When I visited the place in 1930 it gave me a shock: so unlike the country and the “Selection” of which I had heard so much. ... I was sorry I had seen the place. It took the bloom off all those hours he had spent making me visualise the place as he had known it.

Winifred Hamilton, “Steele Rudd, His Life and Letters”

Much of what has been written about Arthur Hoey Davis, and about the world of the selectors that he documented, has been taken straight from stories he wrote about incidents he claimed were based on his childhood. While it is true that the experiences of his youth during the ten years from 1875 gave him material that he worked and reworked through stories, plays and films for the rest of his life, accounts of Davis’s life have exaggerated their supposed autobiographical nature, switching unconsciously between documentary evidence about Arthur Hoey Davis and the mythical biographical legend of Steele Rudd, the “interpreter of life on the land”. Like most readers of Steele Rudd, his biographers felt a powerful urge to imagine Steele Rudd as the real-life author and to believe that what he described was true.

This blurring of the fictional and the biographical has been to some extent unavoidable, since so little is known about Davis’s life. His personal papers were dispersed and mostly lost later in his life and after his death, and parts of the family history were conveniently forgotten. But the suppression of the differences between the verifiable if prosaic facts and the wish-fulfilling reconstruction of them in narrative is a clue to the “Steele Rudd” phenomenon. From one of Davis’s earliest works, the poem “Going on the Land”,¹ to the last issue of his magazine in 1930, he offered cautionary tales and direct editorial comment about the difference between life on the land as it was imagined by political reformers and city-based dreamers, and as he had experienced it.

He himself seems to have been puzzled initially by the distance between his own intentions as a writer and the ways in which readers were evidently interpreting the pseudonymous writer Steele Rudd. He told Vance Palmer “he meant to rub in to townspeople how hard life on the land was”, not stressing “the pathetic note”, but “to take things as they came in a stoical, good-tempered way”. However, he too became implicated in the business of inventing Steele Rudd not just as a pseudonym but as an imagined real person. Except in a few early stories, Davis did not demolish the pastoral myth as fiercely as he might have done, given his
own experiences, if Australian society had not immediately welcomed him as its chief dream maker, the weaver of fantasies of superhuman resilience, innocence and independence. According to Vance Palmer, Davis told him in Brisbane in 1905 that he disliked writing comedy: “If I let myself go I’d be gloomier than Lawson at his worst.” But he never did. The difficulty was in striking that sturdy, resilient, comic note.

We took it in turns to watch the barley. Dan and the two girls watched the first half of the night, and Dad, Dave and I the second. Dad always slept in his clothes, and he used to think some nights that the others came in before time.

“Before We Got the Deeds”, On Our Selection!

The alleged photographic truth of his reportage was of course an important factor in both the literary and the popular success of Steele Rudd. Everyone — from Davis himself, to the Bulletin which promoted his first volumes, to commentators and critics — was anxious to assert the authenticity of his utterances, and so had a vested interest in collapsing Arthur Hoey Davis, the real author of stories based on farmers living on the Darling Downs, into Steele Rudd, the fly-on-the-wall observer of the Rudd fantasy family. “Allowing for embroidery”, Davis claimed in Life magazine in 1904, the incidents and places he had described in On Our Selection! were “for the most part true”:

It was a slabbed house, with shingled roof, and space enough for two rooms; but the partition wasn’t up. The floor was earth; but Dad had a mixture of sand and fresh cow-dung, with which he used to keep it level. About once every month he would put it on; and everyone had to keep outside that day till it was dry. There were no locks on the doors: pegs were put in to keep them fast at night; and the slabs were not very close together, for we could easily see through them anybody coming on horseback. Joe and I used to play at counting the stars through the cracks in the roof.

“Starting the Selection”, On Our Selection!

Some anecdotes were based on his own life, and some on friends and relatives, but some are stories he heard over the fence, and some doubtless are unsourced fantasy. The point is that all were shaped by the preferences and distortions of memory, the personality of the author, his unresolved neuroses, his understanding of the comic, dramatic and tragic genres, the readers and audiences he imagined, and the conventions of the literary and dramatic forms in which he chose to narrate them. There are many obvious differences between the way events occurred, as suggested by sources from the time, and the way they are represented in On Our Selection! and its many successors. There are also strong similarities, but without trying to destroy either the realistic or the imaginative power of Davis’s storytelling, it is the differences which are the pointers to his personality.
and, given the extraordinary popularity of the Rudd family, to what large numbers of Australians wanted to read about.

It is unlikely, for example, that there ever was a shingle hut on the Davis selection, homestead lease number 359, Toowoomba district, section 71, county Aubigny, parish of Halden — at least until a local youth built it for the Australian Bicentennial celebrations in 1988. By the time Thomas Davis heard in December 1870 that his application for a selection had been successful, the railway line had been built past the site and was within walking distance of Warwick, and large quantities of galvanised iron roofing, guttering, spouts and tanks were already being unloaded at the various stations and sidings west of his property. According to another old colonist, Thomas Hall, the only wood in the area suitable for splitting as roof shingles was a hardwood which discoloured and tainted the water collected for drinking, and when the railway arrived the use of shingles quickly died out. This was four or five years before Thomas Davis built his selection home.

There is direct evidence to add to this general circumstance: a Crown Lands' bailiff inspected the Davises' farm in 1877, only two years after they went to live on it, and submitted to his superiors a detailed report of what he found there. The family were living in a two-room hut with slab walls — and an iron roof. The Shingle Hut of the Rudd family, it seems, was an imaginary place. It was partly Arthur's birthplace in Darling Street Drayton, partly the farm cottage, but more importantly for his imagination and for his readers', it was a fantasy untainted by the industrial revolution, hewed from nature with Herculean self-sufficiency and no more assistance from culture than an axe. It was not now, it was then — a place of ultimate simplicity, a place of innocence. It was only in the later stories, when the Rudd family were on their way to being reduced to bucolic simpletons, that they and their neighbours had to confront not just railways and galvanised iron but newspapers, telephones, motor cars and the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

Another, even earlier, episode in Arthur Davis's life where the fictional stories have been allowed to stand in place of the documented facts is the story of the family's move to the Stanthorpe tin-mines in 1872 and their return to take up the selection. Here Arthur began the blurring of fact and fiction. In 1913, in *Copy! The Annual Shriek of the Australian Journalists' Association*, he published as a first instalment of “Steele Rudd's Autobiography” his memories of the journey to Stanthorpe. Five or six years later he marginally rewrote this as fiction — but added the names of his eldest brothers William and John — in the opening of his 1921 novel *We Kaytons*. The father is taken with “gold fever” and drags his reluctant, whining family on a “dreary”, two hundred mile journey to the diggings, only to give up after three months of unsuccessful prospecting.
The entire episode occupies only the first page and a half of the novel, and why Davis did not make it more consequential, and less downbeat, remains puzzling.

In part the answer is mythical: the journey to Stanthorpe was into society, while Davis's bush stories are about a retreat from that society; at times an attempt to forget its very existence. The Darling Downs in the 1870s were already a long way from wilderness: Toowoomba had railway workshops, Griffiths Bros. foundry and Perkins brewery, Warwick a brickworks and steam-driven flour mill, and both had lemonade factories; and Stanthorpe was a lively, colourful, easy-money tin-mining settlement entertained by “singing and dancing girls” at its Theatre Royal. Such country towns, with their industrial and urban progress, had no place in Davis's preferred imagined world.

For some reason the Stanthorpe venture did not work out. In all the “autobiographical” accounts it involved transferring Thomas Davis’s smithy's shop to Stanthorpe rather than direct participation in the tin-mining rush, but they were back at Darling Street by December 1873, when the second baby daughter died. The next year another sickly infant, Gwenlian, was born there. She in turn died in Drayton on 28 July 1875 and was buried in Toowoomba the next day, the Reverend Benjamin Glennie officiating at the service, as he had for all the Davis births, deaths and marriages since 1852. It was shortly after this gloomy event that finally they moved to their selection at East Greenmount, twenty kilometres south of Drayton. Eric Davis gives the date as 24 September 1875, but it may have been a month or so earlier, judging from the records for the newly opened Emu Creek State School, where Arthur and five of his brothers and sisters were enrolled.

There was another, less positive reason for the move: Drayton was a dying town. The first major centre on the northern Downs, it had proved itself a democracy town, implacably opposed to the rule of the squatters. One was shouted down and burnt in effigy, and as early as 1856 Drayton people had spearheaded a successful move to adopt the lesser of two evils by electing a Northern Rivers squatter as their parliamentary representative rather than a local one. According to Thomas Davis, the local squatters' influence was great, their revenge thorough, and their enmity bitter: “There was one squatter that I knew used to make it his boast that he cleared the working expenses of his station out of the impounding fees of the Drayton people's cattle.” Toowoomba, just six kilometres away, was the new town, the money town, and preferred by the squatters; by the mid 1860s it had replaced Drayton in importance.

Even the route of the southern railway worked hard to bypass Drayton, heading improbably north-east from Toowoomba before branching off the Dalby line and passing to the west of the declining township. The squatters had assisted the iron rails of progress by generously donating land for track and stations and sidings in
locations that were of most benefit to their economic and political interests. By 1874 a passerby noted that in Drayton “municipal government has come to an end, no rates have been collected for more than a year, contractors have been left unpaid, and the streets are much in want of repair”. During the next years Drayton lost its town charter and was run as a Commonage Trust.

By 1870, when they applied to purchase the selection, Thomas Davis’s smithy business in Drayton almost certainly was suffering from this general decline in population and commerce. In contrast, the Greenmount / Emu Creek selection was in a new growth area where other selectors were moving in large numbers. Perhaps they procrastinated for five years because they were rather old for radical new beginnings: Thomas was forty-seven and Mary forty when they made the move.

**On the selection**

It was a real scorcher. A soft, sweltering summer’s day. The air quivered; the heat drove the fowls under the dray and sent the old dog to sleep upon the floor inside the house. The iron on the skillion creaked and sweated — so did Dad and Dave down the paddock, grubbing — grubbing in 130 degrees of sunshine. They were clearing a new piece of land — a heavily-timbered box flat. They had been at it a fortnight, and if any music was in the ring of the axe or the rattle of the pick when commencing, there was none now.

“The Summer Old Bob Died”, On Our Selection!

For nearly five years Thomas Davis did not fulfil the primary requirement of the land-selection regulations under the 1868 Act: that he live on his selection. In the “Kate’s Wedding” story the young selector Sandy Taylor passes each evening “going to his selection, where he used to sleep at night (fulfilling conditions)”. Perhaps some real-life tokenism of this kind occasionally occurred, although between the Stanthorpe interlude and his blacksmith’s trade, Thomas Davis could not have stayed at Yalcalbah, as he named the selection, very often. Furthermore, whatever occasional tinkering he had done to it since 1870, Thomas almost
certainly had not yet begun making the substantial improvements by way of fencing and clearing the land which were another condition of purchase.

Arthur claimed that Dad Rudd was based on three real-life selectors, his father being one, and certainly the character’s basic traits alter from story to story. In “When the Wolf Was at the Door” he is passionately attached to his independent farmer status:

When mother was sick and Dad’s time was mostly taken up nursing her; when there was nothing, scarcely, in the house; when, in fact, the wolf was at the very door; — Dan came home with a pocket full of money and swag full of greasy clothes. How Dad shook him by the hand and welcomed him back! And how Dan talked of “tallies,” “belly-wool,” and “ringers,” and implored Dad, over and over again, to go shearing, or rolling up, or branding — anything rather than work and starve on the selection. That’s fifteen years ago, and Dad is still on the farm.

In many other stories, beginning with “Before We Got the Deeds”, Dad himself spends much of the time “up the country earning a few pounds”. This Dad seems to be closer to Thomas Davis, who went on working for neighbouring squatters and farmers as a blacksmith, and perhaps also as a surveyor’s assistant, for the rest of his working life. In particular it seems likely that Thomas contracted to forge horseshoes for Pilton, the old squatting property from which selection number 359 had been excised, and used a smithy at the station homestead.

When the English novelist Anthony Trollope visited the region in 1871 he noted that lack of capital, transport costs and the distance from markets had already shaken the yeoman’s dream of independence. The notion that from agriculture alone, a small farm could support a family year-round and generate significant excess wealth was unrealistic, but it is a fantasy Davis plays with in the first stories. It is a kind of economic and climatic Russian roulette, in which the Rudd family repeatedly stake their all on a single planting of corn or wheat (“Our First Harvest”, “When the Wolf Was at the Door”, “A Splendid Year for Corn”, “We Embark in the Bear Industry”). The first three times they are disappointed by the weather or the markets; the last time they strike it lucky:

And that season, when everyone else’s wheat was red with rust — when Anderson and Moloney cut theirs for hay — when Johnson put a firestick in his — ours was good to see. It ripened; and the rain kept off, and we reaped 200 bags. Salvation!

This was the “turning-point in the history of our selection”, so the next story begins. The idea combines the moral virtue of a deserved reward for hard work with the luck of a lottery.

In fact no small farmer could have gambled on a single source of income and survived: diversity was essential. Agriculture was quickly supplemented by mixed farming — dairy cows, vegetables, beef cattle, horses, pigs, and chooks. The Davis
family did so, and (later) so did the Rudds. In addition small landowners and their children hired themselves out to neighbouring farmers, large and small, at busy times of the year. Dad Rudd and some of his children also do this in *On Our Selection!* Joe spends a few days chasing cockatoos out of a neighbour’s wheat, and Dave and the narrator go as rouseabouts during the shearing, but these are minor diversions, small efforts and small money, marginal to the central vision of independence. The ploughed field remains the source of prosperity, if luck, rain and market prices allow.

Thomas Davis seems to have had no illusions about the nobility or viability of selection agriculture and preferred his blacksmith’s trade to cocky-farming; perhaps Mary Davis had urged him to take up the selection in the first place. In the middle of 1875 they and their family were caught in a contractual dilemma. Unless they lived on their farm and improved it, they would lose both land and the £27.16.0d it had cost them in yearly payments and survey fees. The move from Drayton must have been precipitated at least partly by a last-minute decision to make the effort; and the desperate struggle to effect the improvements quickly was motivated not only by “Dad … calculating and telling us how much the crop would fetch if the ground could only be got ready in time to put it in”, but also by the fear that a Crown Lands commissioner or his representative would arrive unannounced to inspect progress:

> We toiled and toiled clearing those four acres, where the haystacks are now standing, till every tree and sapling that grew there was down. We thought then that the worst was over; but how little we knew of clearing land! … With our combined male and female forces and the aid of a sapling lever we rolled the thundering big logs together in the face of Hell’s own fires; and when there were no logs to roll it was tramp, tramp, the day through, gathering armfuls of sticks, while the clothes clung to our backs with a muddy perspiration.

> “Starting the Selection”

The urgency was justifiable, but they were lucky it was two years before a bailiff arrived on the selection, apparently without warning. They were less lucky in that his mission was to repossess the land on behalf of the Crown Lands Department. What had triggered official interest in selection 359 was not possible inadequacies in the terms of occupation, but the fact that Thomas Davis had failed to comply with the requirement that he must apply within seven years for an official certificate confirming his fulfilment of the conditions of purchase, or else forfeit the property. Presented with an eviction notice, Thomas immediately began a desperate war by correspondence, first to prevent his selection being taken away from him, and second to get the deeds of ownership. The struggle lasted eighteen months.
During this period the land was in the grip of severe drought. It must have been a time of near despair. In the middle of 1877 the Davises lost their twenty-year-old son John to typhoid fever, and then came the eviction order. Were their two years of effort and sweat, not to mention the investment of almost all the money they possessed now to come to naught? As Anthony Trollope had noted: "Terms for land are not hard. Land is cheap because the struggle to make it useful is severe."  

Arthur came closest to describing this crisis in "Dad's 'Fortune'," where Dad Rudd covetously eyes a "tract of government land ... at the back" of their farm, and shares with Dave his fantasy that he might apply to purchase it in one of his children's names, and fence and run cattle on it:

"That'd suit me down to the ground, ridin' about after cattle," Dave said.  
"Yes, get our seven and eight pounds, maybe nine or ten pounds a-piece. And could ever we do that pottering about on this place?" Dad leaned over further and pressed Dave's knee with his hand.

"Mind you!" (in a very confidential tone) "I'm not at all satisfied the way we're dragging along here. It's utter nonsense, and, to speak the truth" (lowering his voice again) "I've been sick of the whole damn thing long ago."

A minute or two passed.

"It wouldn't matter," Dad continued, "if there was no way of doing better; but there is."

It is a dream that sustains Dad Rudd for almost two years, until a bailiff arrives with a writ the local storekeeper has issued against him for non-payment of his account and takes away all his cattle and horses. This is the last downbeat story before the successful corn crop that saves their fortunes. It has a precise relationship to the problems of the Davis family, and the quiet honesty about the father's feelings and fears encourages the belief that here, at least, Arthur Davis was writing, as he claimed, about incidents that were "for the most part" true. The obvious difference is that it was not debt that brought the bailiff to the Davises' door, but the failure to negotiate the complexities of government regulations.

For the Davises, their chief hope lay in the bailiff's report to his superiors. He had expected to find the selection abandoned; indeed, even in the most favourable areas for agriculture one property in six was forfeited before the end of the leasing period and by the end of the century half the selection families were no longer on their land. In this case, however, the bailiff was able to report positively that the Davis farm was enclosed by four wires and a top-rail fence, and was subdivided into two paddocks. Fourteen acres were under wheat and corn, and cattle were grazing on the rest. The two years of blisters and sweat had had visible results.

Thomas Davis, probably aware that the cultivation of one-tenth of the total land area of 160 acres was the minimum required under the regulations, revised
In 1874 Steele Rudd's bailiff's 14-acre estimate up to 16 and sent a pleading letter direct to the Minister for Lands, claiming ignorance of the seven-year rule:

I thought that so long as I had my improvements made it did not matter when I applied for my certificate. ... It is my home and that of my wife and 8 children, and all I possess is invested in it. ... I respectfully lay before you that should the selection be forfeited it would be my ruin and that of my family.16

In December the Land Commissioner advised the Minister: "There is no doubt of the bona fides of the selection, and it is a case where I am of the opinion the law could with advantage be relaxed."

Probably Thomas Davis was genuinely unaware of the rule, but it also likely that his ignorance resulted from a conscious decision, as a late starter in meeting the lease-purchase conditions, to have no contact with the Lands Department, so that they would forget to inspect his selection until he had substantial improvements to show. In that he was successful. The silence, the loneliness, the isolation of the Yalcalbah selection, and the primitive, under-equipped struggle against nature which so impressed itself on Thomas Davis's eighth child, was not just a physical fact, it was a political choice. For two crucial years the family had shut out much of the world and engaged in hard, unremitting, virtually unassisted manual labour. A Brisbane Courier correspondent who toured the selection areas at this time noted that things were not much altered "since the old squatting days ... with the exception that a great deal of money has been expended on wire fences, and one man now does the work that formerly employed a dozen shepherds and hutkeepers".17 If Arthur Hoey Davis sometimes let the horror and harshness of rural drudgery show through the cracks in Steele Rudd's humorous facade, it was these years that gave him reason to do so.

The family's next dealings with the Lands Department were more protracted; they confirm Thomas's lack of knowledge of official procedures, his lack of faith in government employees, and his belief that the only way to get things done was to engage in political lobbying. Having won the battle to retain his farm, in March 1878 he asked for the deeds to his selection. The Torrens Title system had just been introduced in Queensland, and the deeds — the certificate of title to land — was a valuable document which a landholder could use as security for a bank loan. Again Thomas wrote direct to the Minister for Lands in Brisbane, but had still not obtained from the local lands commissioner the certificate confirming his completion of the terms of his selection purchase. He was told that this was a prerequisite, and there was a three month delay before it was issued in June. Then for some reason Thomas was away for much of the second half of the year — possibly working as a contract labourer to offset the effects of the drought. He also needed to raise money for the deed and assurance fee that was the last barrier
to outright freehold ownership. Eventually, on 25 October 1878, Mary Davis, acting as his agent, wrote off, enclosing the required fee of £1.10.10d.

Nothing happened, and Thomas followed this up on 5 December with an urgent, complaining letter to the Under-Secretary; he had been a “heavy sufferer through the late bad seasons”, and wanted to “raise a little money on [the deeds] in order to further improve my farm”. He was told the matter would take a month to process. Unfortunately, in his agitation, he had forgotten to maintain his new identity, and signed himself “Davies”. The deeds were granted, but then annotated: “Deed stopped. Name wrong. Mr Huntley to selector for correct name”.

Thomas was unaware of this, and waited until 9 January 1879 before writing his next urgent letter: “My farming operations are at a stand still for want of means, having lost nearly all my cattle and crops during the late bad seasons. I am therefore unable without my deeds to carry on.” Ten days later Thomas was asked about the spelling of his name, and hastened to assure the Under-Secretary that “the e being in it is an error”.

Another month went past, and he was still without his deeds. He had always signed himself “Your Obedient Servant”, but the ex-convict was now a respectable tradesman and landholder, and evidently on good terms with the pro-selector Minister for Lands, John Douglas, who had been the member for the eastern Downs ten years earlier. He wrote, agitated and angry, direct to Douglas: “I am well aware that Government officials generally are quite indifferent to the wants and struggles of any but themselves and their friends. Their pay is sure, hence their carelessness and indifference.” He asked the Minister to intervene personally — “believing sir you are not like your subordinates, caring not how others live so long as their own is in security”. The Lands Department officials protested that it was the confusion over the incorrect signature that had caused the delay, the Minister directed them to let Davis have his deeds “forthwith”, and the correspondence ceases.

This is surely the time when the wolf was at the door, but it was capital as well as rain that the Davis farm needed, and the “pathetic note” is much more in evidence than the “stoic, good-tempered way” of the Rudd family. In “Before We Got the Deeds”, getting the deeds is a symbol of independence and prosperity, and it is not clear why the story ends with the downbeat “Now Dad regularly curses the deeds every mail-day, and wishes to Heaven he had never got them”. In the play In Australia, when the father gets his deeds he and his wife fervently declare they will never use them to make themselves slaves to a mortgage and the banks, but this is of course exactly what Thomas Davis did, and the equipment and stock he bought probably had as much to do with his farm’s long-term survival as one lucky wheat harvest.

Another lesson in harsh reality his son Arthur probably learnt at this time but
never wrote about was the power of political influence. The Rudd family makes its way through self-help and self-reliance, but Thomas Davis went to the Minister. Similarly, Arthur’s own career in the public service rose and fell through political influence; throughout his adult life he regularly lobbied politicians either on his own behalf or for friends.

The real Australia

The vicissitudes of life “On Our Selection” are in a general way typical of what has happened, or is happening, in many a pioneers’ district of Australia. ... The author is so simple, so natural, that few people will realise at first how very rare is the talent which he exhibits. The concluding chapter, “One Christmas”, for example, may challenge comparison with Dickens’s “Christmas Carol” for fun, and swing, and spirits. It is far less elaborate of course — far less rhetorical; but to Australians, at least, it is more real and convincing.

A.G. Stephens, Bulletin, 16 December 1899

When J.F. Archibald and A.G. Stephens of the Sydney Bulletin first read Steele Rudd, they imagined a third Australian literary nationalist to place beside Henry Lawson and “Banjo” Paterson in what would become the “Legend of the Nineties”, that flowering of talent and achievement, expressed particularly in humorous realism, which was founded on common responses to Australian life; an essence that supposedly defined the Australian nation against Britain and, to a lesser extent, America. This conception coloured responses to Arthur Hoey Davis; and it was central to the imagined author, Steele Rudd.

In On Our Selection! and later stories, the most striking effect for today’s readers is the differences between the world Davis represents and that of other Australian writers of his time. He is, for example, totally uninterested in mateship, or indeed of any close relationship between males. Such a way of confronting the world does not exist in Davis’s family-based society. The closest he comes is the father–son relationship, but there is nothing like the egalitarian community of defeat that characterises Henry Lawson’s mateship. Nor are Davis’s relationships supportive: Dad and his eldest son Dan are alternately admiring and antagonistic; Dad is
domineering towards Dave and Joe; and the fathers in other stories are no better. Old Davidson uses his sibling in *Me an'th'Son* as an innocent foil to his knowing self-revelations. Fathers can even reject their prodigal sons callously and coldly when they come home after a twenty-year absence:

“No — ah have no son o’ that name,” the parent answered indifferendy. “There wer’ one whaht went away agen mah will when ah sed to ’im: ‘See here, lad, if yow goes mahnd now there us ends. Yow’l be no laanger a son o’ mine’.”

And calmly turning away he rejoined the “squire” of Ropedale, and walked off.

“AFTER TWENTY YEARS”

If for Arthur Davis mateship was unknown, nor was he in any way interested in an Australian identity based on shared attitudes or cultural commonalities. His characters have varied, mostly northern European origins — particularly Scottish, Irish, German and Scandinavian — and the differences in their ethnic backgrounds is emphasised by speech dialect and the ghetto-like sub-communities in which they cluster. Aboriginal and Asian Australians are rare in the stories, but probably not more so than they were in the world he experienced. If he had encountered them he might well have written about them, albeit in ways that drew attention to their perceived cultural and linguistic differences; he had little conception of a singular Australian identity. By the force of personality and a certain amount of rewriting the actor Bert Bailey made Dad Rudd a national icon, but he was nothing like the Man from Snowy River, or Clancy of the Overflow, or Joe Wilson and his mates.

It is not surprising therefore that Steele Rudd, in spite of his popularity, never fitted easily into the orthodox great tradition of Australian national utterance that was anthologised, valorised, criticised. But if a hundred readers, theatre audience members and filmgoers experienced Steele Rudd for each person who read Henry Lawson (and by about 1950 this was a conservative estimate), the weight placed on mateship as a determining factor in Australian life, and assertions about a dominant or singular national ideology, might be challenged as inadequate. Steele Rudd’s world was no more adequate a representation of Australian gender, race, or cultural diversity than that offered by the literary-intellectual tradition, but it was a much more popular one.

The subjects of the selection stories, to the extent they were autobiographical, were a highly selected and partial account of the Davis family during their ten years at Yalcalbah. For someone who claimed to have an excellent memory and who witnessed the death of three baby sisters and an older brother, Arthur Davis was curiously silent about death or illness within the Rudd family. Death is reserved for animals or minor characters whose demise is pathetic rather than
tragic, such as the neighbouring selector “old Bob”, or the anonymous man in the bearskin cap, or old Uncle.

Other subjects which he avoided in his selection stories are sexuality and birth. Apart from a few scenes of gawky adolescent courtship, sexual relationships are incidental or simply ignored. The most remarkable example of this reticence, and perhaps part of its cause (if one dares to read something of the author from the narrator) is one of his most famous stories, “The Night We Watched for Wallabies”. It begins with Davis’s usual climate and location setting and exclamations:

It had been a bleak July day, and as night came on a bitter westerly howled through the trees. Cold! wasn’t it cold!

There is a visitor staying with the Rudds at Shingle Hut, a neighbour Mrs Brown, and none of the male children — Dave, Joe, or the narrator — has any idea why. Neither their mother nor father will answer their questions. That evening Dad suddenly decides that he and the boys should spend the night out in the wheat paddock, lighting fires to keep wallabies out of the crop. In spite of their protests, they are ordered out into the bitter night:

We mooched around from fire to fire, hour after hour, and when we wearied of heaving fire-sticks at the enemy we sat on our heels and cursed the wind, and the winter, and the night-birds alternately. It was a lonely, wretched occupation.

Suddenly the daughter, Sal, appears and summons Dad home; the boys are left to see out the night, shivering, exhausted, and now worried by the fact that “something’s up”:

We stared, nervously, into the night, and listened for Dad’s return, but heard only the wind and the mopoke.

At dawn he appeared again, with a broad smile on his face, and told us that mother had got another baby — a fine little chap. Then we knew why Mrs. Brown had been staying at our place.

The story is supposedly based on the birth of Thomas and Mary Davis’s last child, Harry, in 1879, and certainly Dad’s anxiety and relief at the birth has biographical resonances. At the time of Harry’s birth Arthur was ten, his closest brothers sixteen, fourteen, and eight. The failure of the three Rudd boys — Dave, Joe, and the narrator — to notice their mother’s pregnancy, their ignorance of Mrs Brown’s profession of midwife, and their confused inability to work out what is happening back at Shingle Hut the night they watch for wallabies is not transferable to real life and in particular not to the Davis household — not on a farm surrounded by fecundity, even in the Victorian age.

Norman Lindsay met Davis when he came to Sydney around the turn of the
century and noticed about him a deep sexual puritanism. His younger brother was much less inhibited:

"Joe", as I'll call him, made himself quite at home with us, going round the room to examine some nude studies I had tacked up, with such comments as "gee, I'll bet that one's a bit of hot stuff. Wouldn't mind taking a toss from her on a moonlight night."

Steele's frowns and abrupt head-shakes at him to shut up and behave himself in our august company were ignored. Lionel was there also, and Lionel had a guitar; and, Joe's eyes lighting on it, he said, "What about a bit of a sing-song? Gimme a tune and I'll sing you one."

Lionel vamped up a tune and Joe let go his song. And here synonyms utterly fail me, to hint at the bawdy theme of that song. It was about all the girls' names Joe aspired to have amorous doings with, and each girl was particularised by a special allure which rhymed with her name. Mary and Lucy and Annie were some of the names allotted to them, and I leave it to you to find the physiological equivalents which they rhyme with ...

Steele's brow was black with rage.21

Lindsay's memoir has more of the language of the 1960s, when he wrote it, and more of his own emphasis on the bawdy than those of the Davis brothers in the 1900s, but the memory of Arthur Davis as a deeply inhibited, embarrassed and disapproving curate in Bohemia is consistent with other accounts. Winifred Hamilton, who came to know Davis in his late middle age, thought he still knew little of women outside his own family, and described him as sexually "prudish". In Arthur Davis's attempt through his stories' narrators to retreat back into pre-pubescent innocence we can discern a problem in the maturation process, a powerful Peter Pan impulse, a refusal to negotiate the rite of passage from childhood to adolescence. Like the childish humour of defeat, the silence and evasions on matters of sex, birth and death suggest an unwillingness to grow up.

For the boys in the Rudd family this becomes a lifelong problem. The daughters are marginal on the selection and they move more easily into adulthood: Kate marries, Norah becomes a teacher. The only regular daughter character, Sal / Sarah, is frustrated by Dad's hatred for her comic beau, Billy Bearup, but we are told nothing about the long-term effects on her personality; in each story she bounces back, apparently unconcerned. It is the sons who are all deeply damaged by adolescence. The eldest son Dan quarrels with and escapes from his father's control, but becomes sexually irresponsible and a lazy no-hoper as a result. Dave and Joe stay on the farm and become forty-year-old children. The losing struggle against the father is both endless and hopeless.

An episode which illustrates this defeatism is "Dave Becomes Discontented", a chapter in the second volume about the Rudd family, Our New Selection!:

Zeal was what Dad wanted on our new selection. He told us so often. He liked to see
people zealous — people who took pleasure and pride in working — for him. We could never work too hard or too long for Dad.

In this story Dad finds Dave resting in the shade after lunch, waiting for the horses to finish feeding, and berates him because he hasn't started the ploughing. A furious argument ensues. Dave, complaining that he is paid only a “few miserable shillings” each Christmas for his work, leaves home and takes a job on a neighbouring property. Dad finds running the farm without Dave’s assistance even more difficult than before, and offers the hand of apology:

“This is no place for you, man” — (a pause) — “no place at all!”

Dave gazed in silence at his boots.

“If there’s en euthin’ y’ want, say s’, lad!” Dad went on, knowing when he had an advantage. “Here,” dragging his hand out of his pocket with a jerk, “here's a fi-pun' note for y’ now! ... An' goodness on'y knows if ever y' want t' go t' town, or enerwhere, yer can always take a day, or two days, or a week for that matter — can't yer?”

“Yairs ... I suppose s’.”

“Well, come ’long?”

Dave came. And two days later Dad called him a useless dog.

This pattern of struggle and defeat recurs again and again in the Rudd family stories. The child / hero has his or her day but is defeated in the end. Authority is mocked but society remains the same. Ultimately, the conservatives, the patriarchs, win. But although the pattern has international comic appeal, there is a difference with the Rudd family, and an earlier section of the same story alerts the reader to it:

Dad began to think, and discussed the situation with mother.

“Well, you know,” said Mother, quietly, “the boys is men now, and I suppose they think as it's time they had something to themsdves.”

It is something of a shock to realise that in this story, Dave is a full-grown man.

These are stories both for children and for the child in the adult. They trigger emotional memories not just of childhood but of those moments when the adult has a childlike response — and, hearing the voice of the parent, cannot escape. They are about the adolescent fear of failure to achieve the rite of passage, to escape from the family of origin, to grow up, to assert control; but they also echo adult experience of powerlessness, of being childlike in the face of a higher authority. The unpredictability and uncontrollability of drought, fire, flood, human authority, mechanical environment, and market prices is like the irrationality of the patriarchal father: life-giver, helper, protector, and tyrant. Dad Rudd is a tyrant father to his children who are lifelong slaves to his vision, but a child in the grip
of physical, economic and political forces he cannot predict or at times even comprehend. He is both free and not free, powerful and powerless.

Like the selection schemes themselves which offered freedom from wage slavery but failed to consider the economic viability of small family farms and their need for labour and capital, Dad's status is that of an independent man of means, but where the means are few. His children in turn are free to grow up and marry, but not free to determine their work or its conditions or its rewards. Not surprisingly, the Rudd family was anathema to those who believed in education, progress, and social mobility, and began to lose appeal after the Second World War as economic independence for the young and for both sexes made the world of rigid patriarchal entrapment less recognisable.

It is usually claimed that Steele Rudd's humour is the laughter of the optimist, the never-say-die, things-will-be-better-tomorrow spirit of the Australian pioneers. Comedy, we are told, is a "hopeful, optimistic" genre. This claim was echoed in the debate which staggered on for decades, from pub discussions to high literary commentary, about the relative worth of Steele Rudd and Henry Lawson:

Lawson has shown us the hard and gloomy side of selection life, the constant heart-breaking struggle against drought and fire, bad harvests and bad prices and debt and illness, the struggle aggravated by poor food, isolation and ignorance and lack of stock and equipment. All these things form the constant background to Steele Rudd's stories, but the tone is quite different from anything in Lawson. It is the tone of rich and constant comedy.

Yet it hard to think of a major Steele Rudd narrative, as story, which is anything other than downbeat. Perhaps the exception is the fourth of the selection series, "When the Wolf Was at the Door". It is one of only a few of Davis's stories which occasionally found their way into anthologies, perhaps for that reason. It begins at a low point for the family, symbolised by Joe pulling the wings off flies. High-culture critics like to point out the allusion to King Lear:

As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' Gods;  
They kill us for their sport. (IV, 1, 36-37)

The narrative spirals downwards through fire and drought to the point of despair, when the *deus ex machina* arrives in the form of the eldest son Dan, who brings home "a pocket full of money" from shearing.

But even when Davis lightened his subject matter in an endless succession of later stories featuring the same and other similar farming families, most are comedies of defeat. Indeed, both his dramatic effects and his style of humour are based on pessimism. Any success is hubris — we know a fall is coming. They sell their corn, and the storekeeper says now they only owe him three pounds; or, just...
when Dad obtains the deeds to the farm, their horse dies, and he has to walk to town. At times Davis piles defeat on defeat. In “Dad and Carey”, a cunning and unscrupulous neighbour tricks Dad out of the deeds to a forfeited selection. He is so upset he misses his train home, and when he eventually arrives Dave tells him his rival has impounded the cattle Dad has optimistically put on the property. The story even seems to be aware of its own sense of comic timing:

“They’ve got it all right,” Dad groaned at last. Then Dave’s opportunity came.

“Yairs,” he said; “an’ they’ve got all our cattle — pounded every one o’ them, an’ ten shillings a head damages on them!”

Sarah rushed out, so did Bill and Barty; but Dave and Joe held Dad down and saved the furniture.

Anything that can go wrong, will. Because of the way he wrote comedy, Davis is one of the most pessimistic authors in Australian literature.

Steele Rudd however wasn’t read that way. Until the 1950s the stories were particularly popular among unskilled workers suspicious of change and rural communities resisting the lure of the city. Unusually in Australian literature (and book literature generally), more men than women read Steele Rudd. The stories echoed their sense of personal dignity offset by their lack of social status, provided the spirit to endure and humour to rise above their hardships, and affirmed the value of their work. But they offered little hope of escape, and it was only by appropriating Davis’s material and reshaping it to reinforce their own desires that people could change his stories of stoic endurance into assertions of hope and fantasies of escape.

Dave’s defeat became Dave’s stupidity; we aren’t as stupid as Dave. Dad’s struggles became Dad’s triumphant transformation into the successful small businessman who never loses the common touch. He may fail time and time again, but in each successive story his material means seem to be slowly improving, so he must be winning. His lack of sophistication can be mocked, but his luminance as hero remains undimmed; to those who enjoyed the stories sophistication itself was a joke, and civilisation too. Readers laughed at Dad, but they also sympathised with him. His philosophy of hard work and self help, his mistrust of banks, overdrafts, loan schemes, inventions, middle men and above all governments — these were Davis’s readers’ values and attitudes. In their fantasy lives they could share his freedom and his contempt, no matter how dependent they were in real life on the webs of industrial civilisation and large-scale social organisation.

For the Rudd children as young adults, the world of dances, music, weddings and fun is within grasp. It is part of the female domain, led by a mother who teaches them to dance, with Dave as her most enthusiastic pupil, but Dad Rudd throws the concertina out the door any time he finds someone playing it instead
of working. Dad objects to Dave using the farm horses to ride over to see his girlfriend in the evenings; the father is both physically dangerous and morally puritan, and also the chief representative of a larger determinism: the repressive materialistic economy of effort, the unpredictable bad temper of malicious nature. One wonders at a world that could produce stories such as those about Dad's trip to Brisbane, where the children glimpse freedom:

According to Dad himself, the farm would suffer if he went away for a month; there would be no one to look after it, no one to manage.

According to us there would be no one to look on while the cows were being milked; no one to stand in the paddock all day while the hay was being raked and carted and stacked; no one to fuss round and be a nuisance to Dave while he sold a draft of fats to a butcher, or drove a profitable deal with the pig-buyers; no one to yell boisterously for the whereabouts of any of us when we chanced to be concealed from view for a moment or two by a dray, or a hay-stack, or something; no one to annoy the men who worked hardest, and incite them to strike and seek employment elsewhere; no one to molest Regan's bull when it came round our way; no one to take the gun down when little Billy Bearup came to see Sarah; no one to sool the dogs on to travelling stock and challenge the big dusty drovers to get down and be obliterated, and no one to aggravate Dave and Joe to blasphemy and rebellion.

Yes; we would miss Dad when he went away. Still, we encouraged him to go. We were not selfish. We said it would be a pleasant change for him. We said nothing of the pleasure it would be to ourselves.

Eventually Dad does leave, pausing even as the buggy moves off to yell back orders. After two stories about his city adventures, Dad meets a friend in Brisbane who mentions that the "boys" on the farm have recently organised a race meeting, and are planning to hold a ball the next evening. Dragging Mother behind him, the enraged father hurries home, ignores the evidence of ordered, productive work — ploughed fields, newly stacked lucerne — and bursts in on the dance, physically attacking and evicting the guests, who leave in disorder:

Sarah and Dave and Joe, bareheaded, stood in the yard and stared silently after them. The last one passed out and the gate closed. Voices and hoof-beats died away. The neighs of a horse and the "whoop, whoop" of a night-bird came from the iron-bark ridge.

"Robbed — ruined!" from the house.
The clock struck two.
"Ruinin' me! ruinin' me!" from the house again.
"Mo-poke, mo-poke," from out the gully on the reserve.
The clock struck three.
The moon ceased to shine, and Dad to shout. Sarah dried her eyes and stole quietly to her room.
"Ah, well!" Dave said, "let it rip," and he and Joe turned to the barn and camped with the men.

Dave withdraws into sullen silence, while Joe's weapon is carnival inversion. While Dad was away “Joe pulled on an old faded smoking-cap of Dad's that lay on the parlour table, and declared himself king”, but he is always a mock-monarch in fear of being uncrowned and publicly humiliated, the conservative clown who recognises and obeys the old authority, however irrational or deranged.

The ultimate glimpse of terror of the patriarch is the “Cranky Jack” story, where Dad's mentally disturbed farmhand sees himself in a mirror for the first time, emits an “unearthly howl” at what he thinks is his father, and runs panic-stricken “from tree to tree … and that evening at sundown, when Joe was bringing the cows home, Jack was still flying from “his father”:

Dad kept Jack confined in the barn several days, and if anyone approached the door or cracks he would ask:

"Is me father there yet?"

"Your father's dead and buried long ago, man," Dad used to tell him.

"Yes," he would say, “but he's alive again. The missus keeps him in there” — indicating the house

... But one day Jack did get out, and, while Mother and Sal were ironing, came to the door with the axe on his shoulder.

They dropped the irons, and shrank into a corner and cowed piteously — too scared even to cry out.

He took no notice of them, but, moving stealthily on tip-toes, approached the bedroom door and peeped in. He paused just a moment to grip the axe with both hands. Then with a howl and a bound he entered the room and shattered the looking-glass into fragments.

He bent down and looked closely at the pieces.

"He's dead now," he said calmly, and walked out. Then he went to work at the post-holes again, just as though nothing had happened.

The story is one of Davis's most acclaimed pieces of writing, but the undescribed background of events which must have caused Jack's mental distress, terror and revenge, are the most extreme, nightmarish example of the extraordinary obsession with fathers and sons that would work its way through Australian popular narrative for the next sixty years.

This is the bigoted, cruel and killjoy world that the Bulletin, in one of its glowing reviews of Steele Rudd's volumes of stories, declared was “the real thing … and the real Australia”. But there was one aberrant case in the Davis household and in the Rudd's patriarchal prison: Arthur Davis/Steele Rudd himself, who, rather than being trapped in eternal infancy, is thrown unwillingly
out of his family into a city job. At about the age of sixteen Arthur Davis’s imaginative world froze, remaining fixated on a small area of the Darling Downs where time stood still, where selections were always being started from nothing, where the same character types recurred again and again with different names, where the same stories were recycled in new guises in new family sagas.

**Around the selection**

If you take a detailed (1 centimetre = 1 kilometre) National Topographic Map of the area south of Toowoomba, and fold it in three each way, one section alone is still large enough to display the entire area that provided Arthur Davis with the real and imaginary settings for most of the stories and all the plays he would write during his lifetime. The eastern edge is the Great Dividing Range, the western boundary is the railway running south to Warwick through the small settlements of Cambooya, West Greenmount, Nobby and Clifton. Though occasionally other places are mentioned, for the most part two small watercourses, Emu Creek and Budgee Creek, two hills, Mount Sibley and Mount Saddletop, and two squatting properties, Pilton and Eton Vale, are the limits to his naming of this world. Nowhere is more than fifteen kilometres north or south, or five kilometres east or west of Shingle Hut.

It is the area Arthur began to explore from the time he went to school, to the age of sixteen, when he left for the city. All the people on whom his major characters were supposedly based lived here, as did his future wife. It was a familiar, comfortable world which as an adolescent he began to master imaginatively. Its particular values, both noble and bigoted, he initially accepted without question, and he never quite broke free of them. Although his own background was Welsh and Irish, the dominant social group was of Scottish free-settlers whose Presbyterian values permeated the district and found their way into Steele Rudd.

On the opposite side of the road that ran from the Emu Creek school past Yalcalbah was Greenmount, the property which gave the district its name and which had been taken up by one of its dominant personalities, Donald Mackintosh. It was he who persuaded Ramsay of Eton Vale to donate land for the school and he who badgered the Board of Education to build it. Not surprisingly it was located next to his property. William Henry Groom came down from Toowoomba for the opening, but it was Mackintosh who was elected the first school chairman.
and who shared the applause with Groom. Not above election rigging to eliminate a disliked squatter candidate, Mackintosh was one of the figures Davis drew on for Dad Rudd, particularly the *Dad in Politics* stories; Mackintosh was for a time the blunt and outspoken member for Cambooya.

Behind the school and running west towards the railway siding were two selections and a general store whose owners, the McIntyres, later figured significantly in Davis's life. They were an extended family of Scottish tenant-farmers from Stockendroin, on the northern tip of Loch Lomond, who had emigrated in 1862 rather than pay the savage increases in rents which, as in Wales and Ireland, were emptying the countryside of the landless and the poor. After some years as a sheep overseer on Chinchilla station the patriarch of this group, Peter McIntyre, took up an eight hundred-acre selection "Benvorlick" with his sons Dan and Colin, while his daughter Agnes and her husband John McPhee selected the neighbouring property. McIntyre, like Donald Mackintosh, served as a source for story characters, most obviously as a principal model for Duncan McClure, the ebullient hero–farmer of *The Poor Parson* stories.

Late in 1874 Peter McIntyre's eldest daughter, Violet Brodie, rejoined this Scottish–Australian enclave after her husband, overseer for a firm of merchants at Ipswich, was killed in an riding accident. In 1876 the moderately wealthy widow bought a hotel at the railway siding and converted it into Brodie's General Store which she ran, as well as raising seven children; her namesake daughter, Violet Christina ("Tean"), would marry Arthur Davis eighteen years later. The Brodies were a family of devout ecumenical Presbyterians, run, in spite of the mother's business acumen and control, on strict gender roles: the boys went to Brisbane to learn accountancy and management so that they could take over the expanding business and the daughters were "trained for domesticity." Arthur Davis's view of women, at least until his marriage ended and he met Winifred Hamilton, would be as narrow as his wife's mother's, and as contradictory.

Arthur was seven when he began attending the new Emu Creek State School. In fiction and biography he chose to describe himself as a quintessential bush kid, more interested in riding horses and being initiated into the male lore of the shearing shed and the cattle muster than with the world of literature and the arts. This is in part what his readers wanted to believe: that Steele Rudd was no scholar. There are hints of another boy who did not fit as easily into this rough, prosaic, narrow sub-culture; hints which literary scholars have seized on as evidence of a sensitive poetic soul desperate to escape from the drudgery of his upbringing. It is an attractive strategy for the invention of Arthur Hoey Davis the literary artist, but his own writings do not support such an interpretation of his early life.

School is an institution about which he has no strong feelings. He barely mentions it in his early stories, where the few teacher-characters are effete,
conventional caricatures “from the city” with names such as Miss Ribbone and Philip Wood-Smyth. Many years later, when he had his children’s school experiences to add to his own memories, he did write some stories with a schoolyard setting. In the first chapter of The Memoirs of Corporal Keeley the hero is a school bully who gets his comeuppance; in On Emu Creek, which is certainly closer to autobiography and gives an accurate account of the establishment of the Emu Creek School, the focus is on the teacher’s attempts to impose order and discipline when some of the newly enrolled students are in their late teens.

In “School Goes On Merrily” the teacher is astonished by the effrontery of two older students who leave the classroom and return with their hats on. Assuming a rebellion, he angrily demands an explanation, and they tell him that they are leaving school to get married, having conducted a courtship in spite of the strict segregation of the sexes in classroom and schoolyard. The “big, human-hearted master” suddenly sees them not as students but as “man and woman”, and warmly farewells them, musing to himself on their “dark, troubled road” ahead. (Davis’s own troubles with his own marriage in 1918 surely inform that observation.) He met Tean Brodie at Emu Creek School, where they were classmates, but unlike the students in the story, they did not marry until fourteen years after they left school.

This and several other school stories in On Emu Creek are among the best of his late works, partly because the Steele Rudd carnivalesque is absent. He documents without the extremes of horror or farce the students’ scramble for pegs on the hat racks, the stealing and sharing of lunches, the alliances and challenges of the schoolyard. There is equal sympathy for the teacher who has to work amidst the distractions of goannas on the verandah, and who leads a nature study trip to Mt Sibley only to get lost after being casually abandoned by his pupils; their knowledge of the countryside and its flora, fauna, hidey holes and the quick way home is far greater than his.

When in 1897 the Bulletin’s A.G. Stephens asked Davis for a photograph and some autobiographical details for the newspaper’s publicity department, he replied:

I was at school to about the age of 12. Don’t know if I was very bright, when there, but remember the s-master telling me I was the smartest boy in the class; also remember being the only one in the class for a good while and have a suspicion it was then he told me.31

The predictable self-effacing conclusion is of course untrue, as a glance at the enrolments at Emu Creek School in the 1870s confirms.32 The “smartest boy” however is plausible; there must have been something to suggest to his mother that alone of all her children he might suit the office better than the overflow:
I heard mother say, as I climbed into the saddle: “I would like to have kept him at his books a little longer, to see if we could make something more of him than we have of the others, but — ” I spurred my charger into action lest mother should change her mind and call me back again. Ah, yes! Mother had great hopes of me then. But it wasn't her fault. She couldn't help it. All mothers do see promises of great things in some member or other of their families; and I happened to be that unfortunate one in our family. But it made no difference to the others. My early genius never created jealousy in any of them.

“Boy on a Station”, From Selection to City

In this collection the storytelling “I” is given the name “Steele Rudd” for the first time in the stories, and Davis claimed the volume, first published in 1909, to be his autobiography. Most of the sketches, in spite of the title, From Selection to City, concern childhood experiences on or around the selection: a wedding, his pet dog, a tame magpie, robbing a bee's nest, a visit from a clergyman, and his first part-time job helping a nearby selector. Most vividly described is his holiday job as a tar boy on Pilton station. This is a male ritual of initiation, and recognised as such:

The bell rang ... and we all hurried to the woolshed. And as we entered the massive old wooden rookery I felt strange and nervous. Great things I was sure would be expected of me, and I began to lose confidence in myself. The fumes of tar and turps, and lamp black, and sweet oil, and dead wool, mingled with the smell and breath of a thousand sheep, just off the run, pervaded the whole place.

After several hours of frantic tarring and sweeping up, and being abused by the shearers for slowness and incompetence, “We knocked off”:

“Well,” Dave said, coming from his place in the woolroom, after we had swept the board, “how do yer like it?”

“Oh, it's orright,” I answered, forcing back a lump that was in my throat big enough to strangle a camel. “I think I'll (another lump) like it.”

It was Arthur Davis's brother Edward — Ned — who like Dave Rudd was “good natured, quiet, and easy-going”, who had taken him shearing and helped him to succeed in a man's world. Arthur passed the initiation ceremony, and the tar-boy interlude was followed by the offer of a permanent job.

For the next four and a half years, his self-image was moulded by life on and around Pilton station. A century later the critic Dorothy Green, anxious to insist that Arthur Hoey Davis was a serious artist, alienated from the hardship of his manual labourer's lot and the author of classic short stories describing the tough rural life, grasped at a quotation from Winifred Hamilton's biography:

The boy was haunted with an awful dread when cutting burr in Summer on the
scorching plains, hammering at the “damned burr” all day and there were snakes, “Will I ever get out of this”, he thought, “will there ever be work in the shade, or am I doomed to work in the Sun with flies and burr for ever?”

Like Vance Palmer, Dorothy Green was anxious to save Davis from himself, to remake him in her own image, to reinterpret his stories as tragic, cautionary tales of suffering, high art. Winifred Hamilton herself had invited this interpretation by placing the above quotation immediately before her description of Davis’s move to Brisbane in 1885. She too was anxious to make him an outsider, by maximising his sensitive, analytical, artistic distance from that thirty kilometres by ten. But she had already quoted Davis’s own assessment of those four and a half years, which made her supposition untenable:

Though there were times when I worked in the shearing shed[,] in drafting yards, and cut burr, and patched up fences, and gathered dead wool, my life during those years was mostly spent in the saddle. All day long, and often into the night I rode, rode, rode! Rarely could I ride slow — I might walk a horse for a hundred yards or so but not much further; it seemed so grandfatherish, and such a waste of time! It was go! go! go!

Pilton he claimed as a “second home” which “teemed with excitement, hope and romance”, and he still remembered it that way in his last work, *Green Grey Homestead*:

The old station was more like a rising township now than a squatter’s headquarters. It had a row of shingle-roofed huts, spacious stables, a carpenter’s shop, butcher’s shop, store, and blacksmith’s forge, where the best horse-shoeing was done for fifty miles around. The “big house” of English architecture, built of red cedar from the ranges, stood in the centre of a glorious garden where grapes, peaches, apricots, oranges, lemons and even bunya pines grew in profusion. (Ch.13)

This arcadian vision was not one which a few unpleasant days’ weeding could destroy.

The other autobiographical fragment which seekers after Arthur Hoey Davis’s literary-intellectual soul have seized on is an incident when he was working on Pilton as a shepherd. Tired of riding and jumping his horse while the rams he was guarding grazed peacefully, he started reading *Henry Dunbar*, one of Mary Braddon’s popular sensation novels. Absorbed in its lurid criminality, he allowed the rams to wander off among the ewes, necessitating a complete muster of the sheep and probably causing an early lambing. As a consequence he lost his job, but it was not the beginning of a wedge between rural drudgery and the world of the imagination. It was a temporary setback on his journey towards acceptance by the society he knew and believed in, and three months later he was re-employed, and delighted to be so.
In the 1880s the older Davis children started to marry and a new generation of selectors' and storekeepers' families began, without crossing class lines or indeed venturing beyond a few immediate neighbours. Arthur's eldest brother William married Sarah Collard at Allora in 1880, and eight years later Ned married her sister Caroline at Pilton. In 1885 another of his brothers, Richard, married Agnes Brodie, whose younger sister, Tean, later married Arthur. Following convention, Thomas and Mary Davis hosted their daughters' wedding celebrations. In 1880 Jane, their eldest daughter, married Robert Glaseby, a horsebreaker who started to teach Arthur his trade and further enhanced his sense of important craft knowledge and mastery over his environment. The wedding was at Greenmount, but possibly not on the Davis property. The inspiration for "Kate's Wedding" in On Our Selection! and the whole Sandy's Selection volume was the marriage the next year of their second daughter Mary to William "Sandy" Burton.

The story of Kate Rudd's wedding to Sandy Taylor is the happiest episode in On Our Selection! It opens with "Our selection was a great place for dancing", and includes Dave practising in the top paddock "th' fust set" for a ball to be held at Anderson's:

He threw the wankers down and looked around. For a moment or two he stood erect, then he bowed gracefully to the saplings on his right, then to the stumps and trees on his left, and humming a tune, ambled across a small patch of ground that was bare and black, and pranced back again. He opened his arms and, clasping some beautiful imaginary form in them, swung round and round like a windmill. Then he paused for breath, embraced his partner again, and "galloped" up and down. And young Johnson, who had been watching him in wonder from behind a fence, bolted for our place.

Instinctively Davis knows that comedy requires an onlooker. Here young Johnson runs off to report to Mrs Rudd that Dave is "mad".

The story continues with humorously downbeat wedding preparations: Dave and Joe burning a cow that has inconveniently died in front of the house, and the clergyman arriving while Dad is mixing cow-dung cement to harden the dirt floor of the hut for dancing. "The cove shook hands with [Mother], but he didn't with Dad." The marriage ceremony scene is one of Davis's memorable studies in detail, the guests who "sat on their heels in a row and waited in the shade of the wire fence", and the brilliant description of the couple's clothing:

Mrs. McDoolan led Kate out of the back-room; then Sandy rose from the fireplace and stood beside her. Everyone thought Kate looked very nice — and orange blossoms! You'd think she was an orange-tree with a new bed-curtain thrown over it. Sandy looked well, too, in his snake-belt and new tweeds; but he seemed uncomfortable when the pin that Dave put in the back of his collar came out.

In one detail this is close to the newspaper account of Arthur Davis's own
marriage at which Tean Brodie wore “a soft white corded silk with long train, and the skirt and bodice draped with lace, caught with orange blossoms”. 40

*Sandy’s Selection* is Arthur Davis’s fantasy of a different path his own life might have taken. Condemned to write about being master of his own pastoral destiny rather than live it, he listened to and experienced vicariously the struggles, setbacks and triumphs of his brothers and sisters and their spouses, particularly at this time Sandy Burton, the husband of his sister Mary. Although most of his stories are written from the child’s point of view, it is a child who wants to grow up to be Dad Rudd or Sandy Taylor, the free selectors.
The readers cried: "Author! author!" — but they were actually calling for the slender youth in a cloak, with a lyre in his hands and an enigmatic expression on his face. ... If the author wanted to hide, then he had to send forth an invented narrator.

Boris Tomasevskij, "Literature and Biography"

The writings and utterances of any subject contain more secrets than we have hitherto allowed. A life-myth is hidden within every poet's work.

Leon Edel, "Biography and the Science of Man"

We that are very old, are better able to remember Things which befell us in our distant Youth, than the Passages of later Days.

Richard Steele, The Tatler, 6 June 1710
In Arthur Davis's own factual accounts of his adolescence, and in the "autobiographical" stories where Steele Rudd is the central character, the most extraordinary absence is any mention of a father. It is to his mother that Steele Rudd proudly brings his first cheque after the shearing, and it is his mother whom selectors and station managers approach to see if she will allow them to employ her boy on their properties.

In life too it was Arthur Davis's mother whose actions determined the direction of his life, and it seems inescapable that at least some of the helplessness and resentment of the Rudd family sons against their father's tyranny is their author's displaced anger against his powerful and controlling mother. As he remembered it, Mary Davis did not consult him about her plan to make him a city gentleman, and she did not prepare him for it. He was in the middle of his initiation into bush masculinity which, for all its crudities and bigotries, its cruelty to animals and its aggression against nature, its philistine contempt for the impractical, and its prurient fascination with the sinful city, was the only role model he had ever known.

Mary Davis must have watched with interest the career of Arthur Rutledge, the preacher, lawyer and politician she had minded as a baby. In October 1883 Rutledge was elected at the top of the poll for the Queensland seat of Kennedy, and was appointed attorney-general by Samuel Griffith shortly afterwards. Probably she decided to send Rutledge a letter of congratulation and then later asked a favour: she had a son, whom she said she had named after him, who had been thought very bright at school, and who might be suitable for the civil service of the state of Queensland. Could he advise her of the correct procedure for making an application? Arthur Rutledge must have known exactly what was being asked of him, and he graciously agreed to assist. Arthur Davis wryly witnessed again the way things were done in Queensland, but this time it was being done to him. In May 1885 his mother took him to Brisbane for an interview with the minister.

The relevant Rudd story is "My First Day in a Government Office" (in From Selection to City), but in 1906, when he wrote it, Davis neglects to mention that, to the extent that this was autobiography, it was his mother who had determined his destiny. In fact he could not bring himself to allocate cause and effect at all. It is simply "a matter of chance" that "a letter arrived from an old friend of the family who was now a Cabinet Minister", which causes great exultation in the Rudd household:
“Steele is to go to the city to be a clerk in an office,” mother told everyone in the district, and many who were not in it. ... And how I rose in the minds of the little community! I went up like shares in a gold mine. A clerk, a swell, a gentleman, a toff sitting in an office all day with tweed clothes and a white shirt on, and, of course, drawing large pay. Talk about luck and being born with a silver spoon in your mouth! ... It never occurred to them or me, either, that offices down in the city were teeming with white-skinned, hollow-cheeked, nervous, poor devils in tweed suits and white shirts, who scarcely got any pay at all — helpless poor beggars, creeping through life along the slough of fear and grovel and servility — men to whom the “service” offered no prospects, while it robbed them of all independence and manhood.

The image of male castration is probably unconscious, but apt. As Davis saw it, his mother’s machinations unmanned him, made him a child again. Then she abandoned him in a city he had never seen, with skills he could not use, and inadequacies which made him an object of derision: a bushie. Perhaps Mary Davis, who when two years younger than he had come halfway round the world for her family’s and her country’s good, thought he should be able to cope. A psychological reading of his stories, and his own life-long obsession with this moment, would suggest that he didn’t. Arthur Davis would spend much of the rest of his life writing as if he were still a child in his family of origin.

His mother’s presence on the journey to Brisbane is not mentioned either. “I was taken to the city”, Steele Rudd reports passively, and it is only at the end of his meeting with “the Cabinet Minister” that it becomes apparent that he is with a companion, when the minister says to an unidentified third party: “Yes, I’ll be able to find him a post as messenger in one of the offices here, and his salary will be fifty-two pounds a year.” His companion then disappears, he is left alone to negotiate his own boarding-house accommodation, and at work is sent on his first errand to South Brisbane, which is as unknown a map to him as the Shingle Hut area is to the departmental clerks. The story concludes with a telling emblematic image of him in this unfamiliar landscape: made to collect some imported South Sea Island spears for his head of department’s private collection, he walks from Kangaroo Point back to his city office waving the unwieldy weapons in the faces of pedestrians, an object of terror for some and derision for others, half dangerous savage, half miserable child. “And that was my first day in an office.”

Davis tried twice more in his life to describe what he remembered as his one crucial, life-transforming moment. Again, as in so many of his reworkings of autobiographical material, his life circumstances at the time of composition determines the choice of character types, incidents, point of view, and overall mood. Between 1908 and 1917 he was living back on the Downs as a gentleman-farmer and author, having temporarily reconciled the competing calls of Sydney.
and the bush. Everything had worked out for the best, and so the *In Australia* play has the stock agent, Skinney McGahn, approve of his mother’s intervention with full, forgiving comic licence. In McGahn’s description of how his mother discovered a diary he kept as a shearer, Davis gives us a comic autobiographical variation on his own mother’s determination to make her academically brightest son a public servant rather than a farmhand:

When I jogged back to the little briga low home after cuttin’ out me last shed, and throws the tongs on the table, me old mother starts emptyn’ th’ washin’ outer me swag and lights sudden on me notebook, chockablock full o’ figurin’ and me own writins showin’ me tallies and what sheep was docked off o’ me and the names o’ friendly blokes I lent a quid to and noo songs I heard sung and took a likin’ for and a lot o’ quick sharp word pictures I wrote o’ types who took me fancy at the sheds and all of it wrote close enough to smother and not a single item ticked off or carried forward. Well the old lady she turns them pages over back’ards and for’ards and squints long and sideways into ’em like a hen standin’ off somethin’ she come sudden upon behind th’ barn and is suspicioned about it being dead or alive, while all the while I’m watching her through the corks danglin’ to me hat. “Goodness bless me Skinney”, she sez, “whatever can this be?” “That’s me diary” I answers and reachin’ for it I reads it all out from the dawn to sunset of it to her and the old man while both of ’em sits huddled together on the sofa like a pair o’ moultn’ old cockatoos waitin’ for th’ mornin’ sun. Bein’ all me own composin’ I give it the correct emperses an’ pauses an’ intonatin’ and droppin’ a tear or two into me voice when I gets to the touchin’ parts. An’ when I cuts out and looks up, “Be’old”, as the sky pilot says, the old lady’s two eyes is swimmin’ in pride and affection for me, and flickerin’ about like a couple o’ sweet potatoes boilin’ over in a pot. “Skinney”, she sez, “it wasn’t into a dirty, greasy, smelly old shearin’ shed he ought to have sent you” — handin’ the old man a badly injured look — “But with the brains you have — wherever you got them from — it was to an office or to a big store you should have gone and it isn’t too late for yer yet I can see.” “What do you think o’ me for a ‘ide and taller merchant?” I sez, feelin’ for what was at the back o’ the old man’s head. “What! When yer can shear yer eight score a day?!” And the old block leaves the sofa as if he just found a bull ant had got under his shirt. “Don’t you mind him and his eight dirty score a day”, sez the old woman firmlike, “take your mother’s advice for once Skinney and mind what I’m tellin’ you.” I minded the old lady and so I’m here.

Skinney McGahn, however, has ambitions no higher than a successful career as a commission agent and seller of ploughs, able to make enough cash to purchase “a little hardwood home at the township”. He doesn’t have to leave the Darling Downs.

In 1929, his marriage ended in tragedy, his family dispersed, poor business investments collapsing around him, his writings no longer profitable or favoured by publishers, living alone in poverty in Sydney, Arthur Davis turned for the last
time to the moment that had determined his life. Winifred Hamilton persuaded him to undertake a series of public talks, entitled “How I Wrote On Our Selection”, as a money-making venture. His notes for the speeches, typewritten by Hamilton, are with her biography manuscript. The mistrust and hatred of women and everything inscribed as female, which is there explicitly in a few of the stories and implicitly in many others, is suddenly let out in raging misogyny:

For strange as it may seem I had been taken out of sheep-yards and cattle-yards of Southern Queensland and dumped into an office in the Supreme Court at Brisbane, quite regardless of qualifications and aptitude for the job — something in the same way that politicians reach office, but differing greatly in the rate of pay, and in the fact that my feelings were not so carefully consulted.

... and, as is often the case where there’s a turn in the tide of a man’s affairs a woman is sure to be at the bottom of it. But in my case the good woman was my ambitious mother. What put the intrigue into her head I don’t know. What power, or spirit, it is that puts a multitude of queer things into the heads of women no one knows! Women themselves don’t know. Perhaps ’tis just as well — for them. This lack of knowledge of themselves is their great incentive — the Something that spurs them along and keeps them going so fast in social and other queer undertakings that they haven’t time to worry over the fact that they are women. ...

Dad wasn’t of the stuff that dreams are made of. He was no Shakespeare and his sympathy where boys were concerned, was a hard quantity to invoke. Dad had once been a youth himself; and besides he wasn’t a woman.

And, in order that one at least of a family of thirteen, shouldn’t remain for ever among the gum trees, and grow up an ever-lasting bushman, I was enticed and lured to the city to run messages, and lick stamps and wear starched collars and learn to bow and to bend to my superiors, and to lift my hat to ladies, and to look like a gentleman. ... Every morning as I placed my hand on the office door-knob to enter among the swells inside, I paused to wonder if it wouldn’t be wiser to turn and bolt back to the Bush! But a feeling of loyalty to the wishes of the Mater always decided the matter; and I became a martyr to City life with its artificiality, its dull routine swank and selfish hustling.

The language of this outburst combines the reverence due to the virgin mother and the contempt for the “enticing and luring” whore, with the purity of the bush and the corruption of the city. He was sixty years old when he wrote and spoke this tirade in 1929, but it is the voice of a newly disappointed child. The anger and misery and bitterness were expressed more openly forty-four years after the event, thirty-six years after the death of the woman who triggered it, than ever before.

From his first city job in 1885 to his death in 1935, Arthur Davis would never seem to know exactly who he was. He declared that he “never holidayed anywhere but on the Downs”, yet chose when circumstances allowed to live in Sydney.
When he went back to the Downs to live, he named his house there "Potts Point". His attitude to women oscillated moodily and his relationships with the first two partners in his life were both difficult. Many events which he controlled to varying degrees also shaped his destiny, but his analysis of the key determinants of his character and career was psycho-autobiographically linked to this crucial moment. As melodramatically oversimplified as this may be, it helps to explain why his stories are almost without exception set in the past, why they often involve journeys back into nature from civilisation, and why nearly all are written from the child's point of view.

Questions of Identity

In the central years of his life the distinctions between Arthur Hoey Davis's behaviour, his identity, and the figure his readers imagined, become bewilderingly complex. The circumstances of his life and his self-image were shifting and contradictory. From office boy he moved to senior public servant, professional writer, editor and man of letters, only to abandon all this to try to become a selector again, or at least a country gentleman and author. In his life, or his description of it, he was both powerless and powerful: miserable clerk and jovial sportsman, menial shorthand secretary and successful creative writer, sexual innocent and loving and masterful husband, upright father and tipsy bohemian, hapless bushie and city sophisticate, county squire and literary recluse. He wrote about sturdy independence while advancing through political favouritism and fell with the fall of his political patron while bitterly proclaiming the independent injustice of his mistreatment. He insisted that his children learn "correct" pronunciation while celebrating the stumbling, inarticulate slang of the Rudd family. He succeeded as a writer and lost his money on agriculture, while proclaiming the virtues of agriculture and the marginality of the imagination, of symbols, concepts, words.

For most of that time he would not only create a personal Arthur Davis life-myth, a belief in his essential identity and in successive or simultaneous career identities, but he would also hide behind the biographical legend of a fictional author whose life supposedly paralleled his own, but whose mythical existence was liberated from the complexities of a real life. Steele Rudd believed in things Arthur knew were impossible dreams and lived in a world of ideal realities rather
than the more mundane and particular kind known at Brisbane, Sydney and Emu Creek. For information about Arthur Davis, there is often only the witness of Steele Rudd.

Davis wrote nothing else of substance either as fact or fiction about his first four-and-a-half years in Brisbane. He supposedly taught himself to write fluently by transcribing in entirety the Bible and Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* — a dubiously generic story, part of the self-made man legend — but he must have quickly acquired clerical and administrative competence, since on his twenty-first birthday he was transferred from the Office of the Curator of Intestate Estates to the Sheriff's Office of the Queensland Supreme Court. His salary more than doubled to £125 per year; he became a career public servant. He increased his earning capacity further by learning shorthand and several times during the next few years he received moderate salary increases. His mother proudly came to visit, he proudly bought her new gloves and showed her the town.

Arthur Davis made all the right moves for a respectable and comfortable middle-class existence. He prudently invested in land, putting down a deposit on two blocks at Sherwood which he would later use as collateral for the purchase of the small house at Clayfield he brought his bride home to at the end of 1894. He went back to Emu Creek for holidays and roamed around flirting with several neighbours' daughters; he was indeed a clerk, a swell, a would-be gentleman, a good catch, if (as Lily White in the *On Our Selection* play put it) a girl didn't mind leaving home and mother for a good husband. A girl would also have to adapt to life in the city, which is where Arthur Davis had decided to spend his life. Steele Rudd did not yet exist.

In those same years Brisbane had experienced a land boom and grown to a city of nearly one hundred thousand people; the rail connection to Sydney was completed; Her Majesty's Imperial Opera House had opened and international stars of opera, and stage were beginning regular visits. Davis went as often as he could afford. He saw the grand old comedian J.L. Toole and he shared the sexual and romantic fantasies of the gallery boys for the celebrated *ingenue* May Pollard of the Lilliputian Opera Company. He made friends among other ex-Downs youths also working or studying in Brisbane; he joined the Brisbane Rowing Club and happily splashed his way up and down the river; he co-founded a Shorthand Writers' Association.

But it was thirty years before he came to write about any of these adventures, and when he did he represented Steele Rudd as a lonely miserable clerk, a quixotic subversive protecting decent farming folk from city ways, and in particular from debt collectors and lawyers.
Although there may well have been profound psychological reasons for Arthur Davis to look back repeatedly to the old bush homestead for inspiration for the bulk of his literary and dramatic opus, there were also, as his writing career developed, good economic ones. *The Miserable Clerk*, which was based on his life in the Sheriff’s Office between 1889 and 1903, was his only book of stories to feature city characters and to be set entirely in the city — and it was the only volume to be rejected by his then-usual publishers. When he finally persuaded a firm of printers to take it on in 1926, it was so poorly publicised that it failed to sell well enough to cover costs. Its existence appears to have been subsequently forgotten. It was not mentioned in any of the negotiations by which the New South Wales Bookstall Company acquired almost all of Davis’s copyrights, or during their sale of these in turn to Angus and Robertson in 1951.

Perhaps it did not accord with the legend of Steele Rudd, who in the public mind had never left the bush and could not, therefore, write convincingly about the public service in Brisbane. Or perhaps this was just the preconception of the publishers, and in particular of the manuscript assessor who in 1924 “did not hesitate to reject” it for the Bookstall Company’s popular paperback series, although all their ferry-terminal and railway-station bookstands would have been well supplied with Steele Rudd’s best-selling titles. It may have been as much an economic prison as a psychological one which kept Steele Rudd locked up on his father’s small farm in the past tense, and the rejection of the first volume he had attempted of city stories was a powerful disincentive at the very time when Davis was at last experimenting with other subjects and other points of view.

*The Miserable Clerk* disappeared without trace for nearly fifty years, until University of Queensland Press reissued it in a facsimile edition and then incorporated it in the *Collected Works*. The astute critic Cecil Hadgraft, reading these stories probably for the first time for his foreword to that collection, was surprised and impressed: “In *The Miserable Clerk* … are four stories that are amongst his most mature … It may seem rather odd that a writer who is thought to be essentially a creator of bush types should be such a good depicter of city life.” *The Miserable Clerk*, Hadgraft suggested, “could well vary the verdict of many critics on Rudd’s standing”. This was no doubt one of the reasons Davis wrote them, but by the time Hadgraft noticed their merit it was too late. Steele Rudd had been consigned to the margins of Australian literature — a “failed artist”, who in critical estimation had been reduced to scribbling hillbilly rubbish.

As with all of Davis’s writings, there are several ways to read *The Miserable Clerk*
in relation to the life of its author. We should not reject entirely the naive assumption that it is factual autobiography. Hadgraft drew attention, for example, to the detailed explanations of the workings of the Brisbane Supreme Court, which he suggested gave the narratives value as “historical documents”:

Solicitors and their clerks frequently passed in and out the sheriff’s office; but they mostly passed themselves in on a writ of Fieri Facias, or a writ of Possessiononium, or a writ of Capias ad respondendum, or some other hifalutin’ document, which was usually accompanied by a lodgment fee of 2/6, or 5/6, or a guinea, or whatever the charge was according to regulations. And, when in charge of the office, mounted upon a high three-legged stool at a dull wooden desk, it was the clerk’s duty to receive these writs and fees, and on the strength of them to write out warrants on Fi. fa. addressed to the bailiffs concerned, commanding them in the name of the King and the sheriff, and everybody concerned, to take and make of the goods, chattels, moneys, banknotes, tenements, and hereditaments, and other property of Bill Smith or Jack Brown or Somebody, the sum of five hundred pounds (perhaps six hundred) together with interest thereon, at the modest rate of 8 per cent, and solicitor’s costs amounting perhaps to a couple of hundred pounds, with also interest at the same low rate, besides poundage, officers’ fees, and all other incidental expenses, amounting in all to, perhaps, eight or nine hundred pounds; and whereof the bailiff was finally commanded to “hereof fail not.”

*The Miserable Clerk* is particularly rich in such descriptive details, from explanations as to how the jury ballot functioned (and how it could be rigged and evaded), to the workings of the gallows at Boggo Road Jail.

At times attitudes and struggles too are clearly fact-based, and have echoes in other evidence. The narrator’s rise from miserable clerk to under-sheriff, the second most senior position in the office, is presented as the triumph of an Australian-born employee over the faded and eccentric English gentlemen who traditionally held senior positions in the civil service, and Davis himself in a letter to his father at the time of his promotion to under-sheriff made just this point; it was time to give the “natives” a go. Other moments as well are probably close to the literal truth, such as the real-life cartoonist Arthur Hingston, in the midst of solemn court proceedings (Mr Justice Real presiding), handing up to the new under-sheriff a caricature with the caption, “Dad Real and Dave Rudd try their first case”, or J.F. Archibald of the *Bulletin* writing his congratulations: “I hope you will never have to hang more than six on any one morning”.

In Chapter 15, the clerk witnesses the hanging of a man and a woman. Queensland had abolished capital punishment two years previously in 1922 — the first state to do so — and Davis may have been prompted by this to put together a composite account of several public executions he had witnessed twenty years earlier. It is certainly as fine a piece of realistic writing as he ever attempted,
and the only time he narrated a death scene without being farcical, nasty or sentimental.

Davis prepares for it in the previous story where the public hangman explains to the miserable clerk that:

"The length of rope to give persons is all a matter of weights and measures, and what [the sheriff] is most anxious about" — here he paused to turn a suspicious eye to the open door — "is that Mrs. What's-her-name, weighing only about seven stone, might still be alive and kicking after the drop, and that I couldn't swing on her legs, as I sometimes do with a man when he isn't quite dead —"

Here Davis can't resist a touch of slapstick; the clerk falls over in horror and bumps his head on the leg of a table before shouting the hangman out of the room. But the event itself is utterly spare:

Presently two clergymen with bared heads, accompanied by a warden, crossed the "square" and involuntarily more than one pair of lips muttered, as though answering for themselves a question they had not deigned to ask, "That's where the condemned prisoners are."

Then, more unexpected than anything, and following a slight commotion at the entrance gate, two empty coffins were carried in and conveyed across. "My God! Look at that!" and a visiting Labor member of parliament, finding he hadn't the nerve he thought he had, turned his tanned and hardened face to the skylights.

... Then, from the other side of the square, where the condemned cells were, began a procession ... a procession setting out for Eternity without music, without banners, but with pale, uncertain faces, with subdued voices, and with prayer books. The clergy came first, leading as a kindly light, next, between two warders, the condemned man, calm, pale, courageous; behind him in a grey gown, accompanied by two "ministering angels," comforters of her own sex, walked the frail wretched woman, lightly veiled, and with firmer steps than any. They passed to the stairs, up the steps of which perhaps half a hundred before them had staggered to their end. And as they mounted them, step by step, the voices of the clergy in prayer for the salvation of their souls intoned and rang above the gloom. They reached the scaffold without revealing signs of any emotion, and side by side the doomed pair stood on the trap-door. Then the hidden figure of the executioner glided from his place of concealment. He was disguised in goggles and hideous black beard. Ned Kelly in his armour on the grey dawn of his capture could not have been more eerie or terrifying. With trembling hands he began adjusting the nooses loosely round the necks of the victims. A huge policeman amongst the spectators fell in a faint on the flagstones, and was carried away. The droning voice of the clergy never ceased. The executioner completed the nooses. Asked if they had anything to say before meeting their Maker, the condemned made no answer. The knees of the executioner shook and knocked together as he drew the white caps over their faces, tightened the loops, and bound their arms to their sides. He stepped away, placed both hands on the lever that worked the trap-door, then pausing, glanced down
at the Sheriff for the final instruction. The Sheriff took a handkerchief from his pocket. The lever was pulled, the trap fell with a bang that echoed over the gaol — and there before the eyes of the spectators, their feet within a foot of the floor, hung a man and a woman! The man never moved, but the woman — Ah, well! On with the dance of civilisation, let the spirit of Christians and the will of the law be unconfined.

In a little over a thousand words Davis offers an account as horrifying as George Orwell’s famous essay on the same subject, and implicitly as devastating an indictment of capital punishment. Nevertheless the effect is one of imaginative style as well as documentary realism: the last woman hanged in Queensland had been executed long before Davis was a visitor to Boggo Road.

The second way of reading the semi-connected episodes in *The Miserable Clerk* is as work coloured by Davis’s personal and professional circumstances in the early 1920s. Perhaps they contain clues to the writer who was within months of a personal crisis involving at least a partial nervous collapse. As a public servant Davis had been promoted regularly — in 1894, 1896, 1898, 1899, and 1902 — yet chose to write only about a year when the miserable clerk is passed over, and consequently feels “a hundred times more miserable”. The repeated use of this lugubrious word “miserable”, so at variance with his “Rudd” comic persona — and in the title hardly an aid to book sales — may have something to do with his state of mind while writing, although in the same year he wrote the article “Fun on the Brisbane”, about the same clerk’s not-so-miserable leisure activities in the same decade. The mood swings in his prose are dramatic; and there was something similar in his life.

*The Miserable Clerk* is a carefully crafted novella. The point of view is not the clerk’s, but a fly-on-the-wall “writer”, and, conventional as this may be, the greater distance helps Davis to control his material. A range of eccentrics, such as faded and “dilapidated” barristers, people the remembered and imagined world of the court and he uses a simplified scheme of regular characters which places the under-sheriff directly above the clerk, and below him the hangman, whose intrusions are both blackly humorous and a reminder of the institutional violence on which the legal system ultimately relies.

Davis frequently inverts the language of law and crime. When the clerk has to disturb his sleeping boss each afternoon, the “sheriff would start like an escaped prisoner surprised in bed by the law”. He describes how the failure to observe exactly the regulations under the Jury Act would sometimes mean that “those truly tried and faithfully convicted would be robbed of their fine, or life-sentence, or their right to be properly hanged”. There is very little farce, but a sardonic restrained wit is pervasive, as in his listing of the attempts of many to evade jury service and of the cumbersome bureaucratic remedies: “If a juror died, however, before the sittings commenced, he was rarely fined for not attending”. There are
also inspired and resonant images such as his description of the face of a prisoner being “as punctured and scarred as the disc of a rifle target”.

There are of course things Davis does not talk about as well as ways in which he gives emphasis to his chosen incidents which takes them away from the real-life events on which they were based. The miserable clerk rises on his merits and in spite of his cynical indifference, whereas Arthur Davis was made under-sheriff by his own ambitious opportunism and the direct intervention again of Sir Arthur Rutledge. When Thomas Davis wrote to congratulate Rutledge on his knighthood, which occurred at about the same time, Rutledge in reply mentioned that “With reference to Arthur’s promotion”, he “felt only too pleased to be in a position to secure it for him.” It was a fairly outrageous piece of political favouritism. Davis himself told his father “at my age it certainly is a big jump”, and family legend has it that the only persons to congratulate him were his wife and his mother-in-law. Even Rutledge only got the appointment approved by having the salary considerably reduced. Davis at the time accepted that as fair, but in the book the miserable clerk is outraged by the slight and there is no implied resentment from his workmates.

The clerk is a subversive figure, contemptuous of his world. He cruelly sends two confused Chinese men blundering into a court in session to disrupt proceedings, and sentimentally helps an evicted mother regain possession of her home by sending a false message to lure away the bailiff’s man who has been left guarding the house. He is even more direct in protecting an old bush selector from the same fate on Christmas Eve, conspiring to ensure the bailiff misses the last train to “Ironbark Gully”. Steele Rudd and Arthur Davis unite in glee at being able to condemn the city for its indifference to the struggles of a typical pioneer (or a struggling writer) in his “humble selection home”, and contrast self-reliance and simplicity with civilised extravagance. The clerk asks the bailiff:

“Have you enough unexecuted warrants to keep you going till Christmas Day?”
“More than enough.”
“Then you won’t be in again till when?”
“Till 4 o’clock on Christmas Eve”.

And he wasn’t. ... And on Christmas Eve, instead of housing a stranger and a bum, and moping round their selection with heavy, aching hearts, the M’Smiths forgathered beneath the roof of the old home, scented and adorned with gum boughs and apple-tree blossoms, and with light hearts charged their glasses with their own-made brew, called “A Merry Christmas” to the passing few, and laughed and danced the whole day through, while down in the city the plaintiff, and the plaintiff’s solicitors, and the judges and the sheriff, charged their glasses with champagne, and emptied them, and charged them again, and emptied them again, and didn’t care a tinker’s damn whether the bailiff was in possession of old James M’Smith’s home, or whether he wasn’t.
Finally what informs the sardonic tone of the novella, and the miserable clerk's studied indifference to his career, is the knowledge which Arthur Davis had, and which the character of the miserable clerk could not have had, that eighteen months later Davis would fall as suddenly as he had risen.

_Husband, Father, and Son-in-Law_

All happy families are alike but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion.

_Tolstoy, Anna Karenina_

In 1893 Mary Davis died. She had slipped slowly into a six-month coma that ended on 8 September. The Toowoomba _Chronicle_ gave only a hint in its obituary of the strong, determined woman she must have been, preferring the nostalgic, "Our old colonists are fast disappearing from amongst us", followed by: "Few of her delicate frame could have as resolutely overcome the danger, and difficulties attendant on a life in a remote and uncivilised part of the country, surrounded at that time by fierce and hostile savages."

Her husband Thomas's grief was deep and long, and seems to have renewed and strengthened his Christianity. Arthur, ill with influenza at the time, could not attend the funeral, and Thomas wrote to him soon after:

I am very glad that you are all right again. And I trust God will keep you so. Bodily Arthur, I am quite well but mentally I am far from myself, losing her whom I have lived with for 43 years is a heavy blow to me I assure you. We have often suffered together but generally brought on by my own actions. Her high standard of morality and strong mind I can never forget. She was dear and near to me — as life itself her loss to me is incomparable and can never be replaced while life lasts.

The complex feelings Arthur had about his mother were resolved on the surface at least in favour of dearly beloved reverence. One of the most enduring anecdotes about Davis is his objection to the tendency of commentators and appropriators to turn the Mother of the stories into Mum. One variant of the legend even has him shouting angrily at the radio playing the _Dad and Dave_ serial: "It is Mother! Mother!" — forgetting that Davis died two years before the serial first went to
But his expressed belief in mothers, unlike fathers, as figures to whom respect was always due is accurate enough.

The first surviving letters between Arthur and his father were written after Mary Davis’s death. Arthur’s consoling comments are platitudinous, but they began a regular communication that shows shared political sympathies and interests. Mary Davis did not live to hear of Steele Rudd’s literary success — she died four days after his first unsigned story appeared in *Queensland Punch* — but Thomas watched with pride and delight as his son became famous, and enjoyed the fact that in the popular imagination he himself was Dad Rudd. As his financial circumstances improved, Arthur began to look after his father; when he was made under-sheriff he arranged to pay £1 a month to Brodie’s store to enable his father to purchase food.

At the end of 1894, Arthur Hoey Davis went home to Greenmount for Christmas and on Boxing Day married Violet Christina Brodie in a Presbyterian ceremony at her mother’s home. They moved into a modest cottage at 19 Alma Road, Clayfield and had three children in short succession: Arthur Lindsay (“Lin”), Vincent Gower, and Violet Mary. Their last child, Eric Drayton Davis, was born nearly a decade later. Eric Davis wrote a biography of his father, *The Life and Times of Steele Rudd* (1976), but his personal memories begin in the 1910s. For earlier periods he relied on family gossip and a few scribbled notes made by Lin, which emphasise domestic harmony and good times. It is impossible to gauge how accurate any of this is, and Eric’s account is understandably coloured as well by his own fantasy of what a marriage should be like, and the hope that it had not always been as full of stress and conflict as when he experienced it.

Certainly from Arthur’s point of view his marriage seems to have been an orthodox Victorian arrangement almost to the point of caricature. Tean rose and made him an egg-flip which he drank in bed, after which he pottered around the garden tending his roses while she prepared breakfast. She tended to the children while he shaved and dressed; she sent him off to the nearby train station at 8 a.m. in clothes she made, washed and ironed, and with a baked custard in his Gladstone bag for lunch. He finished work at 4 p.m. and was home in time to indulge in his new sporting passion, polo. Tean minded the house, and raised the children, bothering him only occasionally to assert his patriarchy by disciplining his sons with a razor strop. He softened this harsh paternal image by helping with the washing up, and genially joining in a game of backyard cricket; and still he had plenty of time to organise the leasing and levelling of ground for the Ascot Polo Club he had founded, to feed, groom and ride his polo ponies, and to write.

Unfortunately, there is not, in any known collection of the Davis family’s letters, documents, or memorabilia, a single word written by Tean Davis. Even a surviving letter to one of her girlfriends, “Tot” Neale, is by Arthur: “Tean
commissions me to say that she won't have time to write by Xmas, but shares with me the love that's in every line of this letter and agrees with me in all I've said to you." Tean remains a figure remembered only by others, silenced by reticence and by her tragic fate. It is only through speculation therefore, and reading through the impressions of others, that we can sketch some of the possible lives, and life-myths, which she might have experienced and made.

She undertook in her relationship with Arthur the important but usually ignored activities of running a household, providing her husband with the excess time and energy to pursue his own enthusiasms, only some of which she shared. She had been brought up to believe that this was woman's role, and as far as we know she accepted it without conscious question. Nevertheless she also handled most of the family finances, and the children, looking back, believed she was a much tougher business negotiator than their father.

This contradiction echoed her mother's. The widowed Mrs Brodie had prospered in her Greenmount store, which must inevitably have involved developing the business acumen and steel in the soul necessary to resist on occasion the pleas for credit from struggling selectors, but had educated her sons for succession and her daughters for marriage. Brodie's store had opened branches in other towns in the area, and Tean's youngest brother Malcolm became exceedingly wealthy. This gave the Brodies considerable clout in Downs politics, and Downs and ex-Downs politicians ran Queensland. Arthur Davis married into a much more affluent and influential family than his own.

Both marriage partners were almost certainly virgins and there is no suggestion of infidelity by either party during the marriage. In a curious glimpse of Arthur's sexual prudishness, Winifred Hamilton recounts an argument he had in 1907 with Beaumont Smith, his collaborator on the play of On Our Selection. Smith wanted to base the story on a daughter, Kate Rudd, who would go to the city and return with an illegitimate child. Davis rejected this, not because as a plot it had whiskers on it, but because for any decent bush girl to succumb to a city seducer was for Davis unthinkable, and her father's attitude would be uncompromising: "He'd break her neck."11

Nevertheless their relationship, at least from 1904 onwards, was not happy. Puritans are not necessarily any easier to live with than libertines, and perhaps particularly one with such deep and unresolved ambivalence towards women as Arthur, or one with such a limited view of life's possibilities as Tean. Arthur's repressed anger against his mother and deep moral inhibitions, sexual and otherwise, are possible causes of known effects: he was often moody, bad-tempered, stubborn, and unforgiving of enemies, and his wife bore the consequences of those unresolved emotions. But Tean Davis was no perfect fantasy wife either, probably for traumatic reasons similar to his.
She was five when her father died suddenly, and the family quickly moved from Ipswich to Greenmount. Psychiatrists have identified the loss of a parent in childhood as the major factor in patients with pathological anxiety. The ordinary uncertainties of maturation are intensified by separation trauma; subsequent moments of stress and change, like changing homes, or starting school, produce exaggerated reactions, which start a pattern that can extend into adulthood. Some children, most perhaps, cope, and it is impossible to make assertions about Tean's personality; there are also organic causes which have similar effects. Nevertheless there is ample evidence from early on and later in Tean's life of some psychological dimension to her health problems. Her silence, her absence from social occasions that Arthur attended, her continuing very close relationship with and dependence on her mother, her apparent panic when separated briefly from Arthur, their furious arguments about changes in lifestyle and finance, all suggest someone ill-equipped to cope with the economic uncertainties of her husband's desire for a writing career, and his flirtations with the bohemian lifestyle.

Tean was the youngest daughter, and so in Scottish tradition responsible for the care of her mother in her old age. About three years into Tean's marriage, Mrs Brodie passed on the Greenmount store to her sons and came to live with her city daughter and son-in-law. It was the old music hall joke, "and her mother came too", but not quite the initial disaster it might have seemed, and indeed the children in their memoirs were keen to assert it was a harmonious and happy arrangement. Mrs Brodie certainly tried to act with sensitivity and generosity. She bought the larger house which backed on to 19 Alma Road and faced Sandgate Road, and had it extended to give her a semi-detached flat. She passed ownership of this new property to Tean, while Arthur retained his small house as an investment, and stabled his ponies in a shed there. Tensions did not reach explosion point for about a decade.

For Tean Davis, whatever the stresses of young parenthood, her situation in the early years of her marriage must have seemed to her one of unbelievable good luck. She had married a schoolmate from a similar background who was a minor government clerk on a modest but secure income, and who whatever his faults and limitations was hardworking, honest, faithful, and one who shared with her a love of books and music. Within a year a Cinderella fantasy started to come true: her man became as well a successful and famous writer, whose publications began to supplement the family income, and in whose reflected importance she could shine. She had successfully given birth to three healthy children, two boys and a girl; she had a German-speaking maid to help with the domestic chores; and after 1898 she had her mother living with her for companionship. They had friends in common, on the Downs if not in Brisbane, in particular her sister Agnes who had married Arthur's brother Richard. This happy sibling pairing meant they
could all enjoy holidaying together, and they did so on several occasions. And then Arthur’s public service career leapt ahead. She was whirled into a better life on the arm of an increasingly important lover who could afford to take her to Her Majesty’s Theatre to see plays and operettas. On such occasions, politicians and other dignitaries, knowing Arthur’s writing, would stop to speak to them.

Civil Servant and Author

The years between his marriage and the end of 1903 were also heady for Arthur Hoey Davis. He had begun to write in the early 1890s, apparently out of enthusiasm rather than hope of financial gain. “For years contributed casually to various local weeklies, and it didn’t cost me anything — nor them either”. He claimed that he had contracted “‘Australian book’ fever in a dangerous form”:

I bought or borrowed any scraps of literature that came in my way, containing anything of station or selection life, travellers, stockmen, sundowners or shearers, and devoured them in bed at the boarding house. They delighted me. Eschewing selfishness, I ventured to share my happiness with those about me; I read poems and things about “sick stockmen,” and “jolly country girls,” and “mulga and lignum,” and “grinning skulls,” and “wild dogs” to my friend and room-mate [Cecil] B[oland] —, a keen law student, and an enthusiast in Irish oratory, and lost his respect. … A “poem” about “going on the land” brought from B — some advice; he asked nothing for it either. He was subject, a little, to absent-mindedness. He said, “If you want to become a writer, send something to the “Bulletin;” if they print it — well, there’s some hope for you.”

Davis seems to have tried “Jackeroo” as a first pseudonym, but there is no known material over this name, and his first recorded publication was unsigned. It is “The Creeker’s First Sermon”, which appeared in Queensland Punch on 4 September 1893.

From this first fragment onwards, one of the enduring curiosities of Davis’s writing is how far in the past was the world he imagined? The Toowoomba Chronicle had used Mary Davis’s death to declare the passing of an era, and three years earlier again, in April 1890, the painter Frederick McCubbin had exhibited what one art critic excitedly called “the first truly ‘national’ painting”: A Bush Burial [The Last of the Pioneer]. Nostalgia for the pioneering days had been given official impetus by the 1888 centennial celebrations, but as McCubbin’s
alternative title suggests, the second century of European Australians were keen to see it as a period that was dead and gone to rest. Arthur Davis's stories, by contrast, tended to suggest that pioneering was a recent or even contemporary phenomenon; to link the personal discoveries and achievements of a life in the present with the conquest of an alien landscape in the past.

Davis's first published anecdote concerns what he alleges was the first church service at Emu Creek, in 1884, only nine years before he published the story, yet set at "a wild place, scarcely civilised, [which] boasted only of a few pioneer selectors". "Parson Blinkers", "the first gentleman wearing a white choker that ever placed foot upon the black soil of Emu Creek", passes round the plate which his congregation fill with kangaroo scalps. A reader who did not know that clergy of most denominations had been located on the Darling Downs thirty years earlier might well take the story as representative of bush society generally. It may have been the first Presbyterian service in that immediate area, but readers were invited to think that, in the bush, civilisation had only begun to reach the first pioneers a decade ago. Those who were inclined to read history as geography could see contemporary farming communities as "waybacks", simple-minded rather than simply living. Progressive Australia could not wait for those who were still grubbing out tree stumps and skinning kangaroos for the ears bounty.

The editor of *Queensland Punch* inadvertently drew attention to the alternative, more romantic way of reading Davis's stories. He placed "The Creeker's First Sermon" on the same page as a wry cartoon of two unemployed men, hands in pockets, captioned "Outside the Labor Exchange". "What's the matter, pard? You're looking thin," says one. The other replies: "I'm worried about the financial situation." Many Australian financial institutions had crashed that year, including the Queensland National Bank, and Davis would work as the shorthand secretary to the parliamentary commission of inquiry which tried to sort out the improprieties, scandals and kickbacks that followed. For Davis and pastorally inclined readers the bush represented an escape to a less corrupt, less other-determined world, geography as history, the past as the future. Civilisation was not to be trusted.

Having started to get his work accepted in Brisbane magazines, Davis raised his sights and peppered the Sydney *Bulletin* with poems and prose. For eighteen months he was unsuccessful, partly because he seems initially to have set out to concentrate on poetry, inspired by Adam Lindsay Gordon, after whom he named his first son. The *Bulletin* editor J.F. Archibald's first reply to "A.H.D. (Brisbane)" is in the "Answers to Correspondents" column in the *Bulletin* on 1 April 1893: "Good jingle, but sadly lacking in sense; sounds just like a distant cow-bell ringing in Hebrew." More positive encouragement came later the same year (25 November), in response to not one but two stories Davis had sent: "(1) Might have made
a pithy little contrast-sketch in a quarter of the space. (2) Could crush 'Jack' to half with advantage." Davis immediately sent another two and Archibald (23 December) was more scathing: "'Ikey' vigorously declined ... 'Baktrax': Beautiful, high-flavoured crocodile lie."16

Presumably Davis then over-reacted by trying to write more realistic stories in a more economical style, because later criticisms include "Not pith enough" (31 March 1894), and "Send us a yarn which hasn't been disembowelled quite so carefully" (18 August). Steele Rudd, who had made his debut with rowing notes in the Brisbane Chronicle late in 1894, first appears instead of "A.H.D." on 23 March 1895, when the Bulletin poured scorn on another poem, but by this time Archibald in private correspondence had accepted "Starting the Selection". Arthur Hoey Davis was a married man of four months, Steele Rudd was a Bulletin author; part of the legend of the nineties.

Questions of Authorship

The writing voice Davis crafted was determined partly by his own temperament. He recognised his own gloomy tendencies and short-circuited them by acting out the role of Joe Rudd, playing practical jokes, imagining carnivalesque subversions even if he could not carry them out, and by energetic physical activity: walking, horseriding, polo. Similarly, his writing struggled to find a balance between downbeat and over the top. Early in 1901 he sent A.G. Stephens a draft of "Dave Becomes Discontented", the story in which Dave rebels but eventually capitulates to Dad's authority. It ended simply: "And Dave came". Then he decided that was too flat, and sent a letter after it, proposing "Dave came and three days after Dad threw a well-bucket at him and called him a fool and a cow and a useless dog." It was Stephens who found the balance: "Dave came. And two days later Dad called him a useless dog."17

A.G. Stephens repeatedly manipulated both the stories and the biographical legend of their author to create this laconic--humorous voice. In 1899, after Henry Lawson's bitter article, "'Pursuing Literature' in Australia", appeared in the Bulletin on 21 January, Davis presumed to diagnose Lawson's problems in a private letter to Stephens:
Poor Lawson, and that Hard-up Confession of his, nearly made me sad. Would like to have him in a spring-cart with the winkers off the horse, just to chase those funeral services out of his bright head.

Stephens promptly published this in the *Bulletin (27 May)* — not of course as real advice, but as part of the creation of the myth of Steele Rudd, the laughing philosopher. Readers found the same optimism even in the grimmest Rudd stories, and Stephens encouraged them:

The first chapters of “our Selection” are an almost unrelieved record of failure and disappointment; but the story could hardly be less gloomy. The tragedy in and beneath the lines is only remembered for the comedy distilled from it; the clouds are only used to show the silver lining.

This was in the *Bulletin’s* sales-beat-up review (16 December 1899) of the first book of Steele Rudd stories which Stephens himself had edited, and which the *Bulletin* published in the same month: *On Our Selection!* The exclamation mark, used also for *Our New Selection!*, was gradually lost in the reprintings, but it is significant in emphasising for readers that jolly note, and was almost certainly Stephens’s invention, as, indeed, was the title itself.

So too was that first book’s structure and a considerable amount of rewriting; it was not just a compilation of the stories as they had appeared in the *Bulletin*. At least three were significantly rewritten and expanded to combine shorter episodes and so strengthen the storyline. Most importantly stories were combined and sometimes renamed to focus on a single character. “About Dancing” and “A Wedding at Our Selection” became “Kate’s Wedding”; similarly two stories and a fragment of a third were reworked to produce “When Joe Was in Charge”.

It was arguably the *Bulletin’s* editors who created the Rudd family. Archibald originally suggested the idea of turning the stories into a book, and the text editing of A.G. Stephens at times amounted to co-authorship. In perhaps the most significant example of this silent, unacknowledged work of the editor in creating the “Selection” characters, Stephens dovetailed together two original *Bulletin* sketches to form the famous “Crank Jack” story which the critic Dorothy Green thought was the only time Davis achieved a standard worthy of comparison with the great Russian storytellers such as Gogol or Dostoevsky.  

Stephens ambiguously referred to this in 1903 when he compared Steele Rudd’s success in Australia to Henry Lawson’s career in England at the same time. Stephens thought Lawson’s departure from Australia in 1900 a mistake; and one can sense his editorial hand itching to do to Lawson what it did to Davis:

“Steele Rudd’s” *On Our Selection* came to its editor as a gathering of sketches of Queensland farm life. Families with different names were shown living in similar ways. By the obvious device of concentrating interest on one set of names, one set of
personages; and by arranging some chronological continuity, some climactic effect; the book gained value of unity. Loose bricks found their place in a building.

Lawson's *While the Billy Boils* — with his wealth of material later available — asked and still asks for similar treatment. A reader of Lawson's work is continually setting out for short journeys all round the compass. Even without the beginning and middle and end of a good plot — simply by hanging his rambling episodes upon a skein of identity — Lawson would have gone nearer the South Pole of literature.¹⁹

This was not disinterested criticism, since Lawson had been Archibald's discovery and nurture, though his books had been published by the rival firm of Angus & Robertson, while Steele Rudd was Stephens's and the *Bulletin*’s sole creation. It is possible that the example of *On Our Selection*¹⁸ was noted by Lawson, since in *Joe Wilson and His Mates* (1902) critics have noticed a “sustained characterisation” lacking in his earlier volumes of short stories.²⁰ *On Our Selection* led the way from the short story of the nineties to the discontinuous Federation novel — the same characters, different incidents — which Lawson, Edward Dyson, Sumner Locke, Henry Fletcher and others would exploit.

Stephens’s contribution to the final literary and artistic success of *On Our Selection* was not restricted to flamboyant editing of the text proper. The manuscript version of the famous Dedication, which survives as Davis supplied it to Stephens, is quite unlike that which eventually appeared in print.²¹ Davis’s original is quiet and humble, and far more conventional. It begins: “Dedicated most affectionately to ‘Dad’ and the surviving sdeaors of the Darling Downs, Queensland, Australia”, goes on to disclaim any literary ability, and ends by thanking his editors for their advice and encouragement. Stephens threw out most of this, and replaced it with the bold declaration:

**PIONEERS OF AUSTRALIA!**

TO YOU “WHO GAVE OUR COUNTRY BIRTH;”

TO THE MEMORY OF YOU

WHOSE NAMES, WHOSE GIANT ENTERPRISE, WHOSE DEEDS OF

FORTITUDE AND DARING

WERE NEVER ENGRAVED ON TABLET OR TOMBSTONE;

TO YOU WHO STROVE THROUGH THE SILENCES OF THE BUSH-LANDS

AND MADE THEM OURS;

TO YOU WHO DELVED AND TOILED IN LONELINESS THROUGH

THE YEARS THAT HAVE FADED AWAY;

TO YOU WHO HAVE NO PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF OUR COUNTRY

SO FAR AS IT IS YET WRITTEN;

TO YOU WHO HAVE DONE MOST FOR THIS LAND;
TO YOU FOR WHOM FEW, IN THE MARCH OF SETTLEMENT, IN THE TURMOIL
OF BUSY CITY LIFE, NOW APPEAR TO CARE;
AND TO YOU PARTICULARLY,

GOOD OLD DAD,

THIS BOOK
IS MOST AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED.

"STEELE RUDD"

Davis then, in turn, adopted the format and tone of this for his own later
dedications in Our New Selection! ("To The Memory of the Wives of Australia’s
Pioneers") and Sandy’s Selection ("To the Memory of the Good Old Times!"). But
the model, and the bombastic voice, belonged to A.G. Stephens.

Furthermore, it appears to have been Stephens who, in a moment of myth-
making and marketing genius, gave the family the same surname as the supposed
author, and so turned documentary realism into pseudo-autobiography. Davis
initially resisted this shift, specifically asking Stephens to change Dad’s surname
to “Ross” in the story, “A Scheme of Dad’s”, and that is how it appears in the
Bulletin of 29 October 1898. For the book, Stephens changed it back again:
Murtagh Colin Joseph Duncan McGregor Ross becomes Murtagh Joseph Rudd.
As Stephens himself declared in that same 1899 review: “Carrying the same
characters through 250 pages, Arthur Davis gains a continuity of interest which
almost takes the place of plot.” Steele Rudd gained a family and a history; Arthur
Davis gained a literary reputation as a novelist which he did not yet quite deserve.

Two letters from Davis to Stephens late in 1899 confirm the latter’s controlling
influence. “Note what you say re order of yarns and bow to your better judgment,”
Davis wrote on 7 October, adding on the 24th: “Yes, have noticed you cut and
spliced yarns in places and I think for the better.” The original yarns had of course
been boiled down to the Bulletin’s serial specifications: in June 1895 Archibald
had written “Can you let me have for Xmas a well-condensed one-column sketch
of the “Starting the Selection” order?” Davis responded with “Before We Got the
Deeds” — which in fact occupied two full columns of the 14 December issue —
but the requirements of subject matter and the insistence on brevity were the
editor’s. In later years Davis expressed his admiration for many great authors of
the past, particularly Charles Dickens, but his style was to a large extent shaped
by what first Archibald and then Stephens thought the Bulletin’s readers wanted.

Stephens was a brilliant publicist, and it took him barely a year to create the
legend that is still part of On Our Selection! today. “The Jolliest Book Ever Printed
in Australia”, claimed his Bulletin Book Circular in 1901, and the following year,
after Davis had mentioned some fan mail he had received, it declared:
The author has been honoured by an affidavit of thanks, signed by a whole township; at far-back Queensland festivities it is the custom to read chapters of his book between the dances, and from many a struggling, cheerful, courageous denizen of the Back Blocks has come the testimony that ON OUR SELECTION is (adj) good and (adj) true.

Without A.G. Stephens there would have been no Steele Rudd phenomenon, no Rudd family, and no best-selling and flamboyantly illustrated novel.

Davis's view of the role of the author in this earliest stage of his career was very different from his later image of himself as a professional writer and man of letters. He was living at the end of a century which had celebrated scientific discovery, geographical and cultural exploration, human anthropology, and which consequently elevated content to a new importance over form. From Cobbett's *Rural Rides* to Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*, from detective fiction to the travel writings of dozens of journalists and professional authors, the spirit of the age focused on journeys of adventure, written up as reports on subjects that were unfamiliar but fascinating to readers: the bush, the slums, other lands and peoples. In the unpublished draft Dedication Davis modestly declared: "The writer is no poet but only a dry matter-of-fact observer." Cultural value was allegedly weighted towards the provider of "real" anecdotes, even if they were rough gemstones which others would have to shape and polish.

It was also essential for a popular writer to have a recognisable voice, a writing style that made the disparate material familiar and attractive to readers. The great model in the late nineteenth century was the American Samuel Clemens — "Mark Twain" — with whom Davis has been repeatedly compared (predictably enough, the first to do so was A.G. Stephens). Both celebrated the ordinary with dry, laconic humour.

There was also a more gentlemanly set of attitudes which suited Davis's upwardly mobile self-image, for the professional scribbler was not necessarily a person to admire. Davis was a civil servant, like other notable literary figures such as George Essex Evans, district registrar at Toowoomba. His output was not yet great; writing was a leisurely, dignified sideline to his career, and if he occasionally spent a quiet afternoon at his desk at the Supreme Court on private interests rather than public duty, that was consistent with a civilised society. If others wanted to poke and push his literary material into different shapes for different kinds of publication, that was acceptable, provided they did not distort the "facts". Like Mark Twain, Davis had found a style of writing which classified him as a "humourist", and this suggested to his readers a way of reading him that would survive editorial tinkering. Literary skill and craft was important, but the emphasis was on representation of the external world in a way that readers believed was accurate, in a voice they recognised and trusted and enjoyed hearing. Publishers
went looking for personalities with unusual stories to tell. It didn't matter if their
to
powers of expression were limited; that was what editors were for.

Part of the strategy for assuring readers that the narrator had true worldly
knowledge was the creation in the biographical legend of authorial expertise on
the narrated subject. As Boris Tomasevskij once wittily observed, at about this
time “writers all vied with one another in crying out that they had no formal
education because they had been expelled from high school and from trade school,
that they had only torn trousers and a few buttons”. Arthur Davis’s bush
upbringing partly fitted this image, but he had no desire to promulgate it except
as Steele Rudd. Davis was on a career path appropriate to rather better-educated
bureaucrats, and writing was part of his gentleman status. Steele Rudd, however,
could fulfill readers’ fantasies of the ragged-trousered rural reporter, inviting them
to admire not so much his well-turned phrases as his apparently artless, wise and
knowing reflections of life’s external canvas. It is a world described, not analysed;
we never find out why Cranky Jack goes in such terror of his long dead father
that he plots to exact murderous revenge on him. Behaviour, like the weather, was
objectively observed, never subjectively explored. We might look to Arthur Davis’s
psychological makeup to explain his reluctance to write about the emotions, the
why of actions, but it was (and is) also a popular way of addressing a hostile world:
“mustn’t complain”; “can’t explain it”, “what’s the use?”; “you might as well laugh”.

In writing about the creation of On Our Selection!, critics have occasionally
mentioned Stephens’s role, without realising the extent of his contributions to the
book version, and have also remarked upon the discrepancies between Arthur
Davis and Steele Rudd. There has been a tendency to try to distil, and preserve
for Australian literature and posterity, a high-art, more tragic author, Arthur Hoey
Davis, out of the more diverse and sometimes more popular Rudd. In particular
one question of interpretation has been canvassed again and again: the role of the
illustrations.

Nearly all of Rudd’s books were published with pen and ink sketches by artists,
many of whom, particularly Lionel, Norman, Percy and Ruby Lindsay, later
became famous in their own right. The original Bulletin stories had few illustra-
tions, and none of recognisable characters, but in the books up to four drawings
per story illustrated the main characters — Dad, Joe, Mother, Kate, Sarah, Dave
— and key moments in the action. For the first books all the drawings were
commissioned by A.G. Stephens who clearly wanted to portray the major
characters, and emphasise comic incidents. These were exactly the qualities of rich
characterisation and emphasis on the “silver lining” which he had decided were
the essence of “Steele Rudd”. Readers were guided in their fanciful imaginings
of the Rudd family, and told to expect comedy.

The illustrations influenced the reader’s perception of Steele Rudd as a
humorous-farcical writer rather than a realistic one, and in particular shaped popular interpretations of the character of Dave. In the first stories in *On Our Selection!* Joe is central as the chief foil and antagonist to Dad and he was portrayed by A.J. Fischer as a grubby, shock-haired kid. Further on in the 1899 edition there is a full-page sketch by Fischer of Dave as an intelligent, baby-faced youth. In *Our New Selection!* Joe is much the same, but two different images of Dave compete. Lionel Lindsay makes him thicker-set, with a black droopy moustache and a large dark hat, similar to drawings of Arthur Davis himself. Norman Lindsay’s idea of Dave in the same volume was different; the hat is lighter and turned up at the front, the moustache shorter and less prominent, and the stance lop-sided and bent-kneed, with the backs of the hands turned forwards. This representation held potential for caricature and Fred Macdonald used it as the inspiration for the stage Dave’s costume and walk after 1912. Macdonald’s bravura performance brought into prominence the phrase “Dad and Dave”.24

Dad was even more Protean, as Douglas Stewart noticed in 1958:

Lionel Lindsay makes him the bald, rotund, white-bearded figure like Santa Claus which has become the standard portrait. In Alf Vincent’s drawing ... he is short, decrepit, bristling and wooden ... A.J. Fischer makes him a gnomelike little person, very ancient, the father of twelve children.

Suddenly in A.H. Fullward’s portrait he turns into a ferocious hairy giant, pointing an accusing figure at the reader, about twenty years younger than most of the other artists show him. Ruby Lindsay transfigured him into a little, bearded egg. Norman Lindsay for the most part made him a burly, roaring, most alarming-looking old brute, but on one or two occasions relented and turned him into Lionel’s Father Christmas.25

Arthur, in fact, much preferred Norman’s burly brute. “He’s the only one to have caught “Dad” as I intended him,” he wrote to Stephens in 1903.26

Douglas Stewart’s article tried to establish the “true” Dad Rudd by noting biographical details and physical descriptions in the stories. At times this leads to sheer silliness, such as his conclusion that Dad was a small man, because in one story Sarah’s leg is described as being “as thick at the ankle as Dad’s was at the thigh, nearly”. On the basis of such dubious evidence and his own preconceptions Stewart demanded:

But how did this thin, harassed, fiery little Englishman [sic], incessantly kicking the dogs in mid-air, dashing at his children with the hoe, banging the horse with the plough-scraper or brooding in despair at the fireside, as we see him in Steele Rudd’s original concept in “On Our Selection,” ever come to be either the roaring, burly buffoon of “Our New Selection” or the forthright, four-square figure we all know and cherish in the national myth?

His conclusion was that, when Davis saw the illustrations, he changed his writing
style, and Dad's physiognomy, to “keep in step”. But the shift to a less sombre tone occurred before the “New Selection” illustrators busied themselves, and Davis himself always justified the change as being appropriate to the world of the more prosperous post-pioneering farming communities.

In blaming the cartoonists, Douglas Stewart was only one of many critics who have tried to save Davis for Australian literature in spite of himself by distilling a high-culture tragic realism from Steele Rudd's many and varied styles. It was Cecil Mann, later literary editor of the Bulletin, who in an obituary for Davis in the Australian Writers' Annual in 1936 first suggested that the artists “gave us a visible Dad and Dave — the legendary figures we have accepted, such as they are”. His conclusion was uncompromising and austere: the best memorial Davis could have would be “an edition of On Our Selection — without the pictures”. Later commentators, from Stewart and Cecil Hadgraft in the 1950s to Dorothy Green and Ken Stewart in the 1980s, have agreed, though a rare voice to the contrary came from A.D. Hope, who thought that “Steele Rudd was lucky in his illustrators”. Angus & Robertson had republished the first two books in 1953 with fewer illustrations and Hope thought “the scenes were much harder to visualise and the humour lost a lot of its bite”.

Curiously for both On Our Selection! and Our New Selection! Davis seems to have spent more time worrying about the illustrations than about what Stephens was doing to his characters and storylines, but his comments on the galleys Stephens sent to him are consistent with the “matter-of-fact observer” role he was playing at the time. He was concerned solely with verisimilitude: would those who knew cattle, horses, and life on a selection find the drawings realistic. Humorous exaggeration was allowed, provided the artist knew what he was misrepresenting and there was no hint of the city laughing at the country. “Crows are farfetched”, he annotated one sketch, “but the mare is sufficient provocation for the impudence”. But the characters, particularly the women, had to be “real”, he said, and pure. He thought Sarah's hat too “loud”, and that she had a most unwanted “hint of the street”; there were no sluts on his selection. He wanted Kate to be a “comely kind bush-woman”, very much as he wanted his wife to be. Realistic settings were essential; an illustration of Dad trying to rope and restrain a cow drew the comment “This would be right enough if the cow was in a yard, but she isn't. Kindly have her yarded,” forgetting that the cow in the story has in fact escaped from the paddock and is dragging Dad down the lane. Interestingly, Stephens seems to have taken little notice of Davis's criticisms; changes between the galleys and the published illustrations are minimal.
A.G. Stephens worked obsessively on *On Our Selection!*, leaving nothing to chance. He originally planned the date of publication to catch the Christmas market in 1898, but it took a full extra year before he was able to bring to book the author, the illustrators, the printer, and the *Bulletin’s* cautious business manager, William Macleod. “Suppose getting near the end now?” Davis wrote anxiously on 13 October 1899, fearing another deferral. One of Stephens’s last touches was to suggest to Davis that while “Steele Rudd” was a satisfactory name over which to publish supposedly autobiographical sketches of bush life, a novel required a statement of conscious artistry, of creative distance from the narrative and its characters. The New Zealand writer Arthur H. Adams, recently arrived in Sydney, had published his first poems with the middle initial letter in his name, and Davis liked the style of that signature. Consequently on the title page of *On Our Selection!* there appeared:

> “Written by
> Arthur H. Davis
> (‘Steele Rudd’)
>
> Stephens immediately set out to build this new life-myth: the real author as literary genius. Whereas he confessed in his review that he felt a “lack of perspective” since he had “meddled in the matters set for trial”, the *Bulletin’s* literary editor puffed the newly invented Arthur H. Davis grandly:

> The author is so simple, so natural, that few people will realise at first how very rare is the talent that he exhibits. … In Arthur Davis, indeed, we have the first Australian humourist who has risen to the eminence of a Book; he takes as a writer of humourous prose the place which A.B. Paterson holds as a writer of humourous verse; and is even more racy of the soil. Lawson’s is a saturnine humour; but Paterson and Davis bubble with spontaneous fun.

> It is not quite clear to what extent it was publicly known before this moment that Steele Rudd was Arthur Hoey Davis, a minor Queensland civil servant, but this hardly matters. The new name never really took off as an alternative in the popular consciousness, although the two names argued the toss for the next twenty years. By the time *The Romance of Runnibede* was published, however, in 1927, Arthur H. Davis and A.H. Davis had disappeared altogether.

> Of rather more immediate concern was the fact that the government of the state of Queensland now knew officially that one of their employees was supplementing his income quite substantially as a popular and successful author. Some
of Stephens’s later publicity and writings unfortunately tended to suggest that Arthur Davis spent a good part of his time making money, and a lot of money, in this way. In February 1900 Davis told Stephens of a plan he had (but did not implement then) to appear in theatres reading excerpts from On Our Selection ‘à la Dickens’; Stephens duly published this in the Bulletin as more grist to the legend.30

However Davis’s earnings from his book became a matter for public debate principally because of Stephens’s desire to counter Henry Lawson’s most insistent complaint in the article, ‘Pursuing Literature’ in Australia’, about the poor financial returns on his books. He claimed they had failed to liberate him from poverty, and that no writer in Australia could live by his work:

My advice to any young Australian writer whose talents have been recognised, would be to go steerage, stow away, swim, and seek London, YankeeLand, or Timbuctoo — rather than stay in Australia till his genius turned to gall, or beer.

Stephens seems to have felt personally attacked by the article (though Lawson had specifically excluded the Bulletin from blame) and pointed out in reply that, foolishly, Lawson had exchanged his royalties for a cash payment.31

Stephens was keen to use Davis’s contract with the Bulletin as evidence that good writers could live by their pens in Australia. In an article in 1903 deploiring Henry Lawson’s decision to take his own advice and go to England, Stephens claimed that Davis, by staying and publishing in Australia, was earning some £200 a year from his writings.32 This may be a mild exaggeration, but bank deposit slips from 1902–3 do seem to indicate that Davis was saving each year at least the equivalent of his official annual salary of £250.33 If this was not quite the vast fortune some people imagined he was making, it was enough, when added to the minor scandal over his sudden leap to the under-sheriff’s job, to make some members of the parliament remember with suspicion the name of Arthur Hoey Davis.

Davis wrote to Stephens after reading his article: ‘Go to London’ to me, too, seems absurd — but will have a few remarks to make on this when saying ‘something about myself’ in Filchett’s new magazine presently.’34 He was referring to the article “How I Wrote ‘On Our Selection’”, which appeared in Life on 15 February 1904:

Does literature pay? Not so well as wool, or beer, or town properties or old clothes, perhaps. Still it pays. And to prospective Australian authors I say: Let your first book be equal to “Robbery Under Arms,” or “While the Billy Boils,” or “The Man from Snowy River,” your second not worse, and your third a lot better; use your brains on the publishers, and I see no reason why your incomes should not average £600 per annum. Should England call, by all means pack up and clear, but until she does, play in your own backyards — write in Australia, on Australia, for Australia.
After he wrote this optimistic prognosis, but before it appeared in print, what he had intended as encouraging advice to other artists, suddenly became a challenge for his own career.
Gibbon observes that in the Arabian book par excellence, in the Koran, there are no camels; I believe if there were any doubt as to the authenticity of the Koran, this absence of camels would be sufficient to prove it is an Arabian work. It was written by Mohammed, and Mohammed, as an Arab, had no reason to know that camels were especially Arabian; for him they were a part of reality, he had no reason to emphasize them; on the other hand, the first thing a falsifier, a tourist, an Arab nationalist would do is have a surfeit of camels, caravans of camels, on every page.

Jorge Luis Borges, “The Argentine Writer and Tradition”
On a wet afternoon in July 1903, the under-sheriff of Queensland sat at his desk in the old Supreme Court building, and wrote a long letter to his father. The disastrous drought of 1901 and 1902 was over, the rain was “falling thick”, and his mood was quiet, reflective, and somewhat self-satisfied and pompous. The drought “had taught lessons that prosperity could never know”; it had “done more good to Queensland than half a dozen good seasons”. This was not the voice of someone who retained much intuitive sympathy for battlers. Critics might later argue that farcical cartoons and popular success had lightened Steele Rudd’s writing style, and turned Dad and Dave into figures of fun, but Arthur Davis himself was twenty years from the intensely felt tragi-comedy of adolescence and pioneering life on a selection.

He was now approaching his thirty-fifth birthday; he had worked in the city for nearly nineteen years and in the same building for fourteen of them. He had moved from a bench and a high wooden stool to a wide desk and a padded chair, from a corner and a blank wall to a personal office with a panoramic view of the muddy Brisbane River. He had grown from a thin-faced country boy awkwardly overdressed in a stiff collar, to a tall, solid, well-groomed bow-tie city gent with dark bushy eyebrows and a large, neat moustache. His muscles, though still stimulated by his passion for polo, were those of a pen-pusher, not a manual labourer. Recently his brother Dick, a railway porter, had been down to stay and spoken hopefully of escaping from wage drudgery by becoming a farmer. Arthur was sententious and cautionary. Whatever Steele Rudd had written or would write, Arthur Davis knew that for a life on the land “some capital is necessary. Money makes money.” Going on a selection in the twentieth century was just an impractical daydream.

Like most public servants Davis thought his political masters were fools, and he had his own idealistic vision for rural prosperity. “Were the best available land to be thrown open and given away, and when it was settled on taxed nothing could stop this country being an important and prosperous place. But I’m afraid the land policy from the beginning of our short history has been the country’s leg irons”. Not, he added predictably, that he was much interested in politics. “My mind runs more in the literary world — and writing.”

Having committed himself to this piece of unguarded enthusiasm, he then backed off and wrote that he “would sooner play one good polo match” than be a famous writer. “I don’t see as much glory about it as I used to.” He hardly had reason to complain. In the last four years he had published about twenty new
Rudd family stories in the *Bulletin*, enough for A.G. Stephens to begin putting together a second volume, *Our New Selection!*, which was nearing publication. The first book was having "a surprising run" at the stiff price of six shillings a copy, a shilling more than any other *Bulletin* book or comparable Angus & Robertson cloth edition such as Lawson's *While the Billy Boils* or Paterson's *The Man from Snowy River*. It was into its fourth reprinting, each run larger than the one before; 20,200 copies in all. His royalties had made him wealthy enough to be able to send five pounds to a needy Darling Downs family who wrote begging his help, and he sentimentally bought the block of land in Drayton where he had been born. The good times were continuing, and the new book would sell nearly as well, although the *Bulletin*, in spite of Stephens's efforts and Steele Rudd's sales, was rapidly backing away from the book market. The big imperial firms were reasserting their dominance in the trade. Lawson was not unusual in looking to London publishers.

At the end of the letter to his father that wet July afternoon Davis added a quick obligatory paragraph about his children. Lin was doing well at school, Gower was rough, humorous and horsey, Violet ("Possum") was a bright little girl. He had recently dedicated the new book "to the memory of the first women of the Bush and to the mothers of the Bush", but the letter does not mention Tean or his principal place of employment. His wife and his job were an assumed background, there to serve his enthusiasms. Neither apparently was a central interest, but nor was either a declared problem. There are no hints of mid-career or mid-marriage difficulties; nothing to suggest a desire for change.

The forces that would disrupt this still moment were highly political, and again the Davis family's mentor, Sir Arthur Rutledge, was a key figure. Since 1890, almost as long as Davis had worked at the Supreme Court, Queensland had been governed — occasional defections and turbulence notwithstanding — by what became known as the "continuous ministry". This loose coalition of conservatives and liberals was led into the new century by the ineffective Townsville merchant Robert Philp, and was propped up for much of its time in office by the support of Brisbane's major newspaper, the *Courier*. Under Philp little of substance and nothing progressive seemed to be getting through parliament: legislation for universal suffrage, votes for women, and workers' compensation were all defeated.¹ The drought had brought the state to financial crisis, and most of the bills that were passed seemed to be desperate attempts to manage a failing treasury by unpopular measures hostile to workers and government employees. Two Special Retrenchment Acts were used to cut the size of the public service though the parliament drew the line at a proposal to reduce its own size and cut members' salaries, — and a new form of taxation, income tax, was introduced. It passed by one vote.²
In 1903 the *Courier* decided to withdraw its support from the floundering PhUp regime, possibly because of the leadership ambitions of the deputy premier, Sir Arthur Rutledge, who was the editor’s father-in-law. In September PhUp unexpectedly resigned, but Rutledge and the government badly misjudged their strength, and a coalition of the Labour Party and independent liberals took office; the liberal former Speaker Arthur Morgan was the new premier. This was disastrous to Rutledge’s political career. He was not called upon to form a government until a year later, when Morgan resigned after a vote of no confidence. The move failed, and at the general election that followed, Rutledge found himself voted out of the parliament altogether. Arthur Davis’s front door to political influence and protection was suddenly closed.

By October 1903, rumours were flying that a major reorganisation of the public service was underway. The new government tried to garner support for its plans and prepare the way for wage cuts by drawing attention to various anomalies in salary levels which resulted in some junior employees being paid more than their superiors. Nevertheless a major reduction in staffing was also expected. When Davis received advance copies of *Our New Selection!* on 28 October, he wrote with pleasure and bravado to Stephens: “’Twill be something to have behind me if I’m counted among those to be slain in the Service directly. Let ‘em come!”

A month later he still had heard nothing. On Tuesday, 1 December, he wrote from his desk to J.F. Archibald, the *Bulletin’s* editor and someone with influence in political matters, asking him to lobby the government on behalf of the cartoonist Ashton Murphy, who was working as a Post Office linesman in south-west Queensland. Murphy had come to Davis’s attention when he began contributing illustrations to the *Bulletin* in 1897, and the two had met occasionally since then and corresponded frequently. Together they planned “to bring out a small, pocket magazine for Xmas ... called Steele Rudd’s Magazine”. Some hours afterwards Arthur reopened the not-yet-posted letter and added a postscript: “Later — a suspicion that something was in the wind as regards my billet prompted the magazine. Today I was told *in confidence* by the Attorney-General that my position is to be done away with on the 1st January next. I suppose I’ll be able to live?”

The next day — Black Wednesday, as it became known — it was officially announced that the Morgan government had decimated the public service. The *Courier* attempted to justify the action:

In the Department of Justice economy has played havoc with ornamental functions and venerable traditions, whose merit has hitherto remained unquestioned because of the divinity that doth hedge the lawcourts of the King, as well as the King himself. The positions of Sheriff and Under Sheriff have been abolished, and apparently the tipstaffs are being relegated to obscurity.
Davis and his colleagues each received letters which had "the honour" to inform them that "His Excellency the Governor ... has been pleased to direct that your services as an officer in this Department be dispensed with".

"There's what it's come to", he said, returning from the office one evening, and handing his wife an official letter in a blue envelope; "they've bumbled me, Kit! The 'native born Ministry!'"

Mrs. Duff turned pale.

"Malice!" Duff hissed viciously. "Malice and dirt!"

The wife read the official rigmarole dispensing with her husband's service, then dropping it on the floor, stared at him in dismay.

"Ain't it a knockout!" and Duff threw his leather hand-bag on the table and commenced cracking his fingers.

Mrs. Duff gazed on in silence.

"Let them keep their billet! Gad, if I can't make a living at something else!" and Duff started rolling himself a cigarette and pacing the floor.

"Retrenched", On Emu Creek

Davis and his family's view was that the publicity Stephens and others had given to the financial aspect of his literary success had prejudiced the government against him. Alternatively, the close identification of his public service career with one now out-of-power politician might have made his rapid promotion seem more a matter of political influence than administrative merit. Yet quite probably the Morgan government was indifferent to the extra-salary earnings of its under-sheriff or the manner in which he had won the job, since its attack on the Supreme Court staffing was indiscriminate and savage.

In one other respect Davis does seem to have courted his own demise. For a prominent public servant to be spending many work hours editing a Christmas magazine at a time when a cost-cutting committee was examining overstaffing and inefficiency in the department was foolhardy, to say the least. Ashton Murphy, like Davis, later spoke of their plans as a response to Davis's dismissal, but it is clear from the letter to Archibald that this was not so. Murphy had come to see Davis some time earlier — possibly in August — while on a trip to Sydney to sell drawings to the Bulletin; their plans must have been well advanced to have sought and received copy from other contributors, added photographs and sketches, secured paid advertising from a local firm, and got the first 24-page issue on to the bookstands two days before Christmas.6

In later years the legend would spread that Steele Rudd had been "game enough to give up a safe job to devote time solely to writing", as the Fellowship of Australian Writers eulogised.7 Steele Rudd may have been, but Arthur Davis was not; he was retrenched against his will. At most Davis may have subconsciously invited disaster, being bored with his work and drawn romantically to the
attractions of independence and literary fame. Certainly he was at a triumphant moment in his writing career. *Our New Selection!* appeared in the bookstores on the same day he was dismissed. Like its predecessor it was expensive at six shillings, but it sold four thousand copies in the first week. It was a heady time to try to make a sober decision about the prospects for a long-term literary career.

Also pushing him away from the past was his rage and humiliation at his dismissal. The “reorganisation” was certainly the action of an inexperienced administration working from prejudice rather than knowledge, since much of the day-to-day running of the Supreme Court, in particular the calling in and empanelling of juries, simply could not occur without the services of a Sheriff’s Office. For a time an attempt was made to combine the operations of the District and Supreme Courts, but then the decision to abolish the Sheriff’s Office was reversed.

Davis’s letter of dismissal contained a clause stating that he would have clear preference for re-employment as soon as a suitable position became available. The first offer came less than three weeks after Black Wednesday, when the acting secretary to the Public Service Board wrote to offer him employment in the Income Tax Department at ten shillings a day until the situation was resolved. Davis’s reply — which he published defiantly in the February 1904 issue of *Steele Rudd’s Magazine* — was short and bitter.

Sir, — In reply to your letter of the 21st instant, I have the honour to inform you that I am not willing to accept temporary employment with salary at the rate of 10 shillings per diem — not while I possess a talent “fit to win success in life’s career.” After nineteen years’ service, temporary employment at ten shillings a day! Queensland, my mother!

Yours obediently,

(Signed) A.H. DAVIS, Under Sheriff

In a postscript he added a swaggering quotation from Adam Lindsay Gordon:

He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
Who fears to put it to the touch,
To win or lose it all.

Davis was a proud, stubborn man, and this savage reaction, his subsequent sneering contempt for governments, his refusal to compromise and accept offers of re-employment, his determination to distance himself from the career public servant he might have been and revise his life-myth accordingly, were to have major consequences for him, as well as for his writing and his family. Only once, in a sad, personal letter to his youngest son, Eric, in 1928, is there evidence that he ever revisited this life-transforming moment, and wondered if he’d made a
mistake. He could have gone back to the public service and risen to the top of a department. "I did not think so then, though", he wrote.8

Steele Rudd never considered the possibility.

There are hints in Eric’s biography, based for these years on his older brothers’ and sister’s accounts, that the tensions in the Davis household rose sharply. It seems likely that Mrs Brodie started to pull political strings. Morgan’s coalition government depended for survival on a group of independent members sitting on the cross-benches who were called the “Darling Downs Bunch”. The Brodies had considerable influence among this group, which included Donald Mackintosh, the Davis’s former neighbour, part-model for Dad Rudd, and now the member for Cambooya. Or perhaps it was simply that Steele Rudd, even without Rutledge’s backing, was a figure of some prominence in Queensland; good copy for attacks on the new government.

Whatever the reasons, Morgan’s ministers quickly came to regret having stirred up unfavourable publicity. According to Eric, the new treasurer, William Kidston, and later the attorney-general, James Blair, approached Davis to see if he would accept alternative employment. He was openly rude to Kidston, reportedly writing that he was “particular whom he met and didn’t want to meet him”. Eric Davis mentions that his father quarrelled with his mother-in-law over the matter, in which she may have acted as go-between.9 Blair’s offer received calmer consideration but was also rejected, in spite of Tean Davis’s concerns. As her anxiety increased year by year, the question of him again taking secure government employment surfaced repeatedly. Henry Lawson’s wife, Bertha, had endured similar feelings of powerlessness and desperation during their English sojourn from 1900 to 1902, resulting in her temporary hospitalisation in 1901. Life for the dependent wife and family of an Australian man of letters was not always easy.

On 20 January 1904, just after the beginning of these traumatic changes in Arthur’s professional and domestic life, his father, Thomas, died suddenly from a heart attack. He was seventy-six. The Toowoomba Chronicle, as ever keen to romanticise the pioneers, wondered if he might have been “actually the oldest resident of the Downs”, and mentioned in his obituary that he had been in good health and was splitting a log with an axe the night before he died, still living on the old selection.10 For Arthur the last major link with his family of origin and that thirty kilometres by ten of his adolescence was broken; there was one less reason to maintain contact with the life and people of the Darling Downs.

Arthur may have last seen his father in 1899, when he had come down to Brisbane to visit.11 “Dad’s Trip to Brisbane” appeared in the Bulletin in 1903, and in spite of Arthur’s use of incidents in the lives of at least three Darling Downs selectors, the sense that Thomas Davis was Dad Rudd remained strong for some readers, even as recently as the publicity concerning his convict origins in 1987.
As far as is known Thomas Davies/Davis maintained no contact with his Welsh relatives, and there are no traces of any preoccupation with the traumas of his adolescence, though who knows what torturing visions were hidden along with the suppression of the convict stain.

Fate paid Thomas two last tricks. He was buried at Greenmount — supposedly because late January rain made impassable the road to the Toowoomba cemetery where Mary was buried — and later, when a joint headstone was placed over her grave, it said Thomas and Mary Davies. In the end, Thomas Davis, the free selector, could not deny Thomas Davies, the convict. The past consumed the present, and the curse was on the sunset as well as the dawn.

In resonant ways both different and similar, Arthur Hoey Davis, the farmer's son who now wanted to be a professional man of letters, always struggled with his alternative identity as Steele Rudd, the writer who wanted to be a farmer. Like his father he eventually lost the battle.

-Man of Letters-

Six months later, Titt Duff left the city and came to Emu Creek, and brought his family with him. He also brought some furniture; a heart full of hope; a head empty of agricultural knowledge, and a pair of hands that had never done anything harder than roll a cigarette or wield a cricket bat.

When Joe Rudd's son-in-law Titt Duff is retrenched from the civil service in On Emu Creek, Davis has him leave almost immediately to take up a farm selection. At that time of writing, about 1917, there was a growing belief that the soldiers beginning to return from the First World War — supposedly fit, disciplined, noble and hard-working — could best be reintegrated into society by “going on the land”. Perhaps Davis was shaping the Titt Duff narrative to echo that belief. Australian governments and major elements of Australian society clung long and fervently to the agrarian myth, the small farmer under his apple bough, which Steele Rudd did so much to immortalise, in spite of Arthur Davis's caveats.

When Davis left his Supreme Court office for the last time on Christmas Eve 1903, he had not the slightest intention of ever becoming a farmer. He wanted to live by his pen and for most of the rest of his life he succeeded. He made money
by writing, but lost it trying to set his sons up on farms, trying to live in a place and a manner which his wife found tolerable, and making bad investment decisions. He, and he almost alone in this period of Australian history, made enough money as a freelance writer to support himself and his family in moderate comfort, and would have continued to do so if factors that had nothing to do with the literary marketplace had not intervened.

He has been frequently accused of being a poor businessman, yet his literary, dramatic and film contracts won for him higher advances and better royalty agreements than anyone else achieved in the same years, with the possible exception of Banjo Paterson. There are other writers — Edward Dyson comes to mind — who like Davis (but unlike Paterson) were never salaried journalists, yet who also managed to support families by their pens, but Dyson’s was a much lesser achievement. However else he is classified, Arthur Davis was one of the great professional Australian authors of his day. From 1 January 1904 onwards he wrote to live, and consequently his decisions about who Steele Rudd was, and in what genres and about what subjects he told stories, partly came out of opportunities and negotiations in the marketplace. Professionalism was not necessarily a guarantee of quality: often he had to be his own editor, and he was working to self-imposed deadlines with a family at home waiting to be fed. His first two books each took four years of part-time storytelling, but his output accelerated dramatically when writing became his work. Though he quickly found that writing and magazine editing could be just as tedious as long days in court, his self-image became that of an author in a way it had never been a public servant. If some of his work was hackwork, written too quickly to formulas and prior expectations, much of it nevertheless remains extremely interesting. For the rest he could at least claim Dr Johnson’s defence — only a blockhead wrote for anything except money.

Six days after receiving his retrenchment notice, Davis and Ashton Murphy floated Steele Rudd and Company Incorporated with a nominal issue of one thousand one-pound shares, of which the first sixty were taken up by Davis and Tean, Powell and Co., the firm which had contracted to print Steele Rudd’s Magazine, and a few friends who included the real estate auctioneers Jack Isles and Jim Love, and the Brisbane lawyers Austin Douglas Graham and Jock McGregor. Apart from Davis, only Graham had a major creative input, acting as the magazine’s business manager and also, as “Thersites”, regularly writing a column of literary comment, but all the participants, except Tean Davis and the printers, contributed copy at one time or another. The Brisbane office was in Adelaide Street. The magazine appeared monthly and from the first issue was distributed to newsagents and booksellers Australia-wide through Gordon & Gotch. Davis himself was the only person paid a salary. Though Ashton Murphy
continued to contribute numerous pen and ink sketches, he was not closely involved. He had failed to secure a transfer and was still working at St George, drawing in his spare time and posting off the results.

The first issue of Steele Rudd's Magazine was twenty-four pages, a figure that trebled in the next few issues, and reached a hundred pages in the Christmas 1904 edition. With a significant but by no means exclusive rural bias, the coverage was soon expanded to include sporting, fashion and theatre columns; and a prize of five pounds was offered to the first reader to write in stating "from what Advertiser, according to Advertisements in this issue, may the following things be bought, made, or done?" The advertising covered products from corsets to horse rugs.

Richly illustrated, with flamboyant titles and plenty of jokes and cartoons, Steele Rudd's Magazine was also a major outlet for Australian writers for nearly four years. Among the contributors were Joseph Furphy (writing as Tom Collins), Mary Gilmore, George Essex Evans, Victor Daley, Miles Franklin, Arthur Bayldon, Ethel Mills, Henry Fletcher, Ambrose Dyson, Mabel Forrest, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Roderic Quinn, Louis Esson, Will H. Lawson, Albert Dorrington, and Furnley Maurice; and articles were also published by Queensland Cabinet minister Peter Airey and the federal politician William Morris Hughes. Vance Palmer acknowledged Davis as a mentor. He published Palmer's first poetry and prose, beginning with the essay "An Australian National Art" in the January 1905 issue; encouraged his writing and even at one stage tried to arrange for him to become the assistant editor; and advised him to go to England to make his living. Davis's rebuttal of Lawson and his rosy vision of writing "in Australia, on Australia, for Australia" had evidently been tempered somewhat after a year of being a freelance writer himself, but Steele Rudd's Magazine set a standard which both A.G. Stephens with his Bookfellow and J.F. Archibald with the Lone Hand would set out to try to match three years later. George Taylor claimed on the magazine's second birthday that this was already a record for the survival of a major literary magazine in Australia. That may or may not have been so, but Steele Rudd's Magazine made a major impact on the literary culture of the 1900s, and on the careers of many of its most celebrated writers and writing aspirants.

The magazine was lucky also in attracting many of the best visual artists of the day. Ashton Murphy's talent was for detailed comic representations of "outback realities", a style suited to the rich source of primary material around St George. Another bush artist who made her reputation through Steele Rudd's Magazine was Ruth Simpson. Davis immediately used the unsolicited pen-sketches she sent from western Queensland, and also forwarded her name to A.G. Stephens in Sydney for possible contract work on Sandy's Selection. Her drawing combines careful anatomical accuracy and detail, particularly of horses and other animals, combined with a light, traditionally feminine softness; there was more gentle
mirth than tragedy on her selection. Arthur J. Hingston, who had worked for several years in London, was a more eclectic and experimental cartoonist. He seems to have led a shift away from ink outlines to a variety of visual styles including watercolour shadings. Because he was based in Brisbane, Hingston was often called on when a story required an illustration at short notice, and he became the magazine’s most prolific visual contributor, as well as an important gallery artist in his own right.

Through his Bulletin contacts Davis was able to bring to the Magazine the work of the Lindsay siblings, Norman, Lionel and Ruby, who also illustrated stories in many of the Rudd family books. Even more important in the Magazine’s first year were the many contributions in ink, pastel and prose of the eccentric cartoonist, journalist and raconteur George Augustine Taylor. Taylor began forwarding pen sketches and colourplates from the outset, and later contributed a series of articles on “Caricature and Its History”, which he also republished as a booklet. A flamboyant artist with an ability to make strong visual statements with clean lines and sharply contrasted shadings, he was responsible for many of the most memorable early illustrations. He drew yet another version of Dad Rudd as a kind of albino balloon for the “Dad in Politics” stories, to which Hingston also added some inspired sketches. Unfortunately these were all replaced by the much blander sketches of H.J. Weston in the Dad in Politics book in 1908.

Central to the success of the enterprise were the stories and the personality of the supposed author himself. Steele Rudd became a marketing concept, a person to write to, a signature on editorialists, a name against which banks would lend money, backers purchase shares, shopkeepers extend credit, and businesses advertise. Each month “Steele Rudd’s Guide to Brisbane” endorsed selected hotels, shops and services: “Country Folk about to make a trip to Brisbane should study the following, then cut it out and paste it in their hat.”

In more literary mode Davis also wrote a Correspondents Column where he copied A.G. Stephens’s manner of offering partly mock advice to unsuccessful contributors, such as: “THE BARB: Cease singing of the ‘Golden Age’. There never was any, and there isn’t likely to be any so far as Australia is concerned.” By November 1904 this vigorous column had grown to two and a half small-print pages of comments, arranged by the state of origin of the contributor, with many letters held over for a later reply; perhaps clear evidence of the journal’s nationwide impact. Witty, sardonic, prolific, intelligent, and well read, the professional man of letters named Steele Rudd, of the handsome magazine which bore his name, was a different construction from the Darling Downs bush writer, but no one seems to have noticed. To acknowledge differences would have challenged belief. It passed without comment that the humour was often of a more sophis-
ticated order and from a somewhat more distant and cynical point of view than
the humour in the Rudd family stories:

The selection where I was reared was a queer place twenty-five years ago; it was a queer
place twenty-five months ago.

“The Selection Where I Was Reared”, Steele Rudd’s Magazine, April 1906

The best example of the failure to recognise that the writer of all this material
was more than a backblocks naif comes from Norman Lindsay’s account of his
first meeting with Davis, or “Steele Rudd”, as he called him:

Turning on me a slow smile, Steele said, “You know, I’m beginning to get the hang of
this writing business. In the past, supposing I was describing a picnic, I’d say, “Mrs
So-and-so brought the cake and Mrs So-and-so brought the sandwiches.” But now I’d
say, “Each guest brought the viands requisite for the occasion.””

This instance of how not to write enchanted me, and still does, and he was so pleased
with it that I could not bring myself to contest its innocence.\(^{15}\)

It evidently did not occur to Lindsay that the comment, if it occurred, was
certainly meant as a joke.

In these first freelance years Arthur Davis engaged frenetically in simultaneous
activities of many kinds. He had never before been without a steady salary, and
perhaps this made him take on too much; there are suggestions his health
sometimes suffered, and overwork may have been a cause. New stories appeared
in rapid succession in a variety of periodicals — the Bulletin, Commonwealth
Annual, Worker, Taylor’s Our Swag Life, Australian, and others. They were then
revised, reordered, topped and tailed, and assembled as books. In all there were
seven in five years: Sandy’s Selection (1904), Back at Our Selection (1906), The Poor
Parson (1907), Dad in Politics, For Life, and In Australia (all 1908), and From
Selection to City (1909).

This output inevitably involved some duplication, particularly when a story
was popular. The first “Dad in Politics” story appeared in Steele Rudd’s Magazine
in November 1904, was revised as Chapter 18 of Sandy’s Selection which was
published the next month, and then was further revised and expanded as the first
three chapters of Dad in Politics two years later. For much of this time Davis was
also producing voluminous editorial copy for the magazine, as well as soliciting
contributions from established writers, and reading and commenting on the
unsolicited offerings of dozens of hopefuls. He wrote to A.G. Stephens in October
1904: “Between Sandy’s Selection, Dad in Politics, girls coming in with poetry,
youngsters with the mumps, Steele Rudd doesn’t know where the blazes he are
just now.” Arthur Hoey Davis however thought he did know. He had suddenly
experienced a new and attractive vision of personality and lifestyle: the bohemian
man of letters.
In the middle of 1904, Davis went to Sydney for the second time in his life and the first since he had become a famous author. In later years he described the visit with deliberate casualness as mere business. Certainly he wanted to meet in person J.F. Archibald, A.G. Stephens, the Lindsays, and others with whom he now had a two-way trade — they illustrated his books and he published their work in _Steele Rudd’s Magazine_. However the trip seems to have been more than this. For the rest of his life, whenever he could, he headed for Sydney. Like a ping-pong ball in a box he bounced back and forth between Brisbane, Sydney, and the bush; between family obligations, literary fame, and the backblocks world of his stories. There was no doubt where Arthur Hoey Davis’s preferences lay. It was Steele Rudd who headed for the Darling Downs.

Dinner at Archibald’s at Darling Point, attendance at one of “A.G.’s” Saturday night symposiums, membership of the roistering Dawn and Dusk Club — these were the places and the occasions which gave turn-of-the-century Sydney the sophisticated bubble he found attractive: here was the centre of radical-nationalist Australian literary culture. He dropped in to watch Norman Lindsay painting naked women. He was welcomed at literary gatherings where people were passionate about art. The Dawn and Dusk Club gave a dinner in his honour, with Banjo Paterson in the chair. It was heady stuff, and Davis enthusiastically added the tipsy bohemian to his repertoire of life-myths. “You must _drink_ Stephens! Reform before it is too late,” he wrote cheekily from Brisbane after his return. Davis himself was starting to drink more heavily than before.

Sydney was the hub of the Australian literary marketplace. It was where most of the powerful buyers of Australian nationalist stories lived, and where most of the dedicated writers of these stories clustered — a few defiant Melburnians excepted. The _Bulletin_ had a succession of editors and literary editors over the years; Archibald had already left by the time Davis caught the train south, and Stephens, who was being marginalised, would leave two years later. It was obviously going to be much easier for Davis to adjust to new fashions in journalism and literature and new faces in editorial chairs — and continue to have his work published by them — if he could meet them at the office on Saturday mornings when staff and the contributors were paid, and have a drink with them afterwards in a nearby pub. Most of the big publishing houses were based in Sydney, as were many of the book and magazine distribution companies. In particular it was the head office of an organisation that would shortly take the
The name of Steele Rudd to new heights of popularity — the New South Wales Bookstall Company.

Davis met the Bookstall's famous owner and manager A.C. Rowlandson and, again, told of the encounter as if it were casual serendipity. Having tried and failed to control his life, he often looked back on the past as if human agency were a sham and chance ruled history. Indeed, in the article "How I Met A.C. Rowlandson", the story becomes an echo of his banishment from selection to city back in 1885, with a letter arriving from an unknown person which changes his life dramatically. In this case the letter is from a Sydney publishing company, also unknown, offering to publish a book of new stories, and arrives coincidentally just before Davis was leaving for Sydney. "So eventually I replied telling him that I would look him up when there; that was, if I hadn't anything more exciting to take up my time."¹⁷

In fact Davis must have had prior dealings with Rowlandson and his company on at least two occasions, since the Bookstall's Christmas Commonwealth Annual for 1901 and 1902 contained Steele Rudd stories. In fact nearly all of what became the new book, Sandy's Selection, had already been published in the Bulletin, Commonwealth Annual, Steele Rudd's Magazine, and elsewhere by the time Davis went to Sydney. Rowlandson was negotiating a known quantity, not a fanciful proposition.

The New South Wales Bookstall Company was, until Rowlandson took it over in 1897, a chain of newspaper stands with a contract from the Sydney Tramways Company to sell books of tram tickets at a discount (eight one-penny fares for sixpence). Rowlandson had worked for the company for fourteen years before becoming its managing owner. It was his knowledge that he controlled the perfect vehicle for distributing cheap mass literature, and his company's connections with public transport, which he drew on to launch his "Bookstall" series of popular paperbacks.¹⁸

"Quality" books were not Rowlandson's interest: his primary market was the casual purchaser facing a boring tram, train or ferry journey, and others such as those in "the bush" whose leisure-reading time was likewise limited to an occasional quarter-hour. He wanted lightweight pocket-sized books of very short stories — not too complex, each one complete in itself — which travellers and workers would relish in their idle moments. The work of the more popular writers of boiled-down anecdotes for periodicals such as the Bulletin — Steele Rudd, Edward Dyson, Randolph Bedford, Ambrose Pratt, Arthur Wright — were ideal. It was not exactly "yellowback" or "shilling shocker" literature, since Rowlandson did not print anything in the bodice-ripping or murder-mystery genres popular in Britain and America, but it was a long way downmarket from the two Bulletin hardcover books, or from Angus & Robertson's occasional contributions to
respectable Australian literature. Rowlandson's only concessions to quality — or, more accurately, to eye-catching and easy-reading presentation — were multi-coloured covers and plenty of illustrations.

Rowlandson knew that to launch the series he needed to attract a big name among the contributors, and the biggest name around in 1904 was Steele Rudd. Probably he did initiate the meeting with Arthur Davis, which came propitiously when the Bulletin was abandoning book publishing after Archibald's departure. However, like almost everything else drawn from Davis's memoirs, the account of his meeting with Rowlandson is so full of evident errors that any conclusion inevitably is suspect. Davis remembered the Bookstall's office as being opposite Central Station — which is unlikely as the station wasn't completed and opened until more than two years later — and even his details about the contract he signed are inaccurate. At least it can be verified that later in the year, when he was back in Brisbane, he signed a memorandum of agreement with Rowlandson for what was then called On Sandy's Selection. Like "Steele Rudd" the words "On" and "Selection" had become useful pointers to the mini-genre of the Rudd family. The agreement, signed on 17 October, was for a staggering £500 advance on a 25 per cent royalty on the book, with additional royalty payments to follow after the Bookstall Company had realised an equal profit. It was by far the largest advance made on a novel published in Australia, and would remain so for many years; Davis himself was never able to achieve the like again. On Our Selection! was the high point of his artistic reputation, and Sandy's Selection the financial apex.

He could not have known that the next thirty years would be mostly downhill. If there was any chance that he would return to the safe life of a public servant before the Sydney interlude, this astonishing financial success, on top of the discovered joys of bohemia and the flattering attention of world-famous writers, ensured that there was no chance after he returned. Sydney was where power lay, where deals were struck, where people believed in writing and writers. Tean Davis and her mother did not believe in writing as a career, and they must have noticed this change in Arthur with regret. Their gentle efforts to turn him around and back to the government office desk met with stubborn resistance and, it seems, increasing irritation and conflict.
"Would to heaven I'd have known I'd be afflicted like this! ... if ever you write a book, don't dwell on any of the characters too long. Let 'em go once you've used them ..."

George Taylor, "An Ideal Interview with Steele Rudd"

George Taylor’s prophetic comment was written in December 1905 as part of a fictional encounter in which he interviewed a fantasy “Steele Rudd” surrounded by the ghosts of his characters. By this time Arthur Davis had published only the first three of the eventual nine Rudd family books. Popularity, profitability and perhaps sentimentality kept the Rudd family going for the rest of Davis’s life; Dave and Joe Rudd even turn up as minor characters in his last novel, *Green Grey Homestead*, in 1934. Steele Rudd as author of anything could make potential buyers of magazines and books choose a title off the shelf, but it was Steele Rudd writing about the Rudd family which guaranteed that they bought it. This was A.G. Stephens’s discovery and A.C. Rowlandson’s marketing opportunity; and it became Arthur Davis’s cross to bear — the price of professionalism.

*Sandy’s Selection* was not Davis’s most inspired work. He tired of writing it before it was over, and A.G. Stephens, who moonlight-edited it for Rowlandson as part of his disenchantment with the *Bulletin*, added two “Dad in Politics” stories near the end to liven it up. In Stephen’s later review of the book for the *Bulletin’s Red Page*, he again cryptically flagged his own contribution to the legend:

“We have some new characters in old guises, and old characters in new guises. Sandy and Kate are shown struggling on a selection much as Dad and Mother struggled in the earlier book; with some variation of incident and detail the theme is the same. Dad goes into politics, and it is notable what an accession of life the story receives as soon as he comes into the current”.

*Sandy’s Selection* appeared in December 1904. The cloth edition, as impressive as the *Bulletin* volumes, sold at four shillings and sixpence, but it was sales of the one shilling paperback which quickly rose to more than thirty thousand copies, and eventually to almost one hundred thousand. This was a spectacular launch for the Bookstall’s move into fiction, and Steele Rudd’s £500 advance was more than justified by the sales as well as being grist to the publicity mill. How fast the series took off is less clear; it was three years before the number of new titles started to increase significantly. Ultimately what Rowlandson was purchasing was both
Steele Rudd and the Rudd family, and in 1909 he cornered the market by buying all the extant titles, including *On Our Selection!* and *Our New Selection!* from the *Bulletin*.

After that, the success of the Bookstall was assured for the next decade and more, but it came at a cost to Steele Rudd's artistic reputation. Rowlandson's publishing methods were ruthlessly indifferent to the structure of the novels which A.G. Stephens had so carefully assembled. For Rowlandson they were sequences of separate stories and the *Bulletin* books too large and expensive. He cut off the last ten chapters of *On Our Selection!* and the last seven of *Our New Selection!* published the shorter collections in paperback under their original titles (but, mostly, without the '!'), and combined the leftover stories into a third volume, *Stocking Our Selection.*\(^\text{23}\) For the next eighty years, the only readers familiar with the original *On Our Selection!* novel on which Arthur Hoey Davis's literary reputation increasingly came to depend were those who located a rare copy of one of the old *Bulletin* impressions. Few knew it was ever more than the slim, less lavishly illustrated Bookstall volume which became the *sine qua non* of Australian pulp publishing.

As well as Rudd family stories Davis began a new series of Darling Downs yarns about a "poor parson" and his constituents, one of whom, an ebullient Scotsman named Duncan McClure, becomes a variant of Dad Rudd, with a virtually identical family. He began but abandoned after three stories an idea for a novel about two friends — based on Ashton Murphy and himself — who are obliged to go out "on the Condamine" cutting prickly pear for a living. He fictionalised as *For Life* (1908) his experiences as a shorthand reporter assisting in the investigation of a suspect's alibi after the infamous Gatton murders of 1898. These years were ones of prolific invention and substantial achievement, and led to popular and profitable books.

One unexplained mystery is the fortune of *Steele Rudd's Magazine*, in which most of the stories appeared before book publication. Ashton Murphy said it was a failure and cost Jock McGregor, one of the original shareholders, a great deal of money.\(^\text{24}\) Certainly it was remarkable value at sixpence a copy for a hundred liberally-illustrated pages each month, and must have needed very large sales to cover costs. Davis claimed that it had been a great success and that its demise had nothing to do with its financial viability. Eric Davis believed that, whatever may have happened to other shareholders, his parents were able to extract themselves from the company without serious financial loss. There may be some truth in all of this, since the enterprise seems to have had a turbulent, up-and-down existence.

Early in 1905 Davis and his fellow shareholders sold the magazine to new lawyer entrepreneurs, one of them, J.F. Millington, becoming the editor. Davis retained a minority interest and continued to contribute stories each month but
the September issue did not appear and in December Davis suspected that the owners were trying to sell the business behind his back to Angus & Robertson. With Walter Powell of the printers Powell & Co., he arranged to buy back the magazine in the name of Steele Rudd & Co. Announcing his return to the editor’s desk in the January 1906 issue, Steele Rudd wrote: “I find it necessary … to assure not a few loyal friends and supporters of the magazine that I was in no way responsible for the causes of the complaints made by them against the recent management.”

Presumably what Davis offered his co-owners in refloating the enterprise was a new vision to fill the gap left by the Bulletin’s withdrawal from Australian book publishing. At the end of the year the next collection of Rudd family stories, Back At Our Selection, appeared, published by Steele Rudd and Co. In the middle of 1907 Davis also published Rocky Section: An Australian Romance, the first novel by Kate Stone, writing as Sydney Partridge, who went on to other successful work. Like his own stories this had been serialised first in Steele Rudd’s Magazine, and it boosted Davis’s image of himself as the new A.G. Stephens, the serious and senior man of letters, the maker of others’ literary reputations as well as his own.

The most remarkable of his own writings at this time is the “Dad in Politics” sequence of eleven stories which appeared in various places before being republished in the Bookstall series in 1908. A rollicking and hugely enjoyable farce in the familiar genre of political satire, full of obvious jokes such as those about the drunken Member for Fillenupagen, it is driven forward by the furious interventions of Dad Rudd puncturing the pomposity and social engineering of legislators and legislation:

“Did I get flash machinery and money and a secretary to run after me with his inkpot, when I went into the bush forty years ago? (Hear Hear.) No! I had to take my wife and youngsters with me. … They worked — worked night an’ day, worked in the house, and in the yard, and in the paddicks, and on the drays, and beside the stacks. They weren’t afraid of gettin’ sunburnt. They had courage. They had hearts! (A burst of applause.) And many a time they went without a bit o’ meat.” (More applause.)

“Weren’t there any ‘possums or dingoes where you were?” squeaked the member for Coal Falls, from a distant corner of the Chamber. (Laughter.)

“There was dingoes,” Dad said, jumping round, “but there was no donkeys.” (Loud laughter.)

“Kid-gloved Selectors”, Dad in Politics

Dad is both hero and clown, brawling with fellow members, refusing to obey the Speaker, declaiming on the virtues and sufferings of the pioneers, shouting with outrage at the attempt to make him contribute to the cost of a government railway line, even though it will benefit his property. In “The Land Betterment Bill” the treasurer, “a sturdy, pompous, Cromwellian sort of politician with a Scotch
accent", rises to explain to his less well-educated fellow parliamentarians the Lockean principles by which ownership of land is justified by the addition of value to its purchase price, using as his authority John Stuart Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy*.

“Suppose John Smith buys 100 acres of land at £1 per acre; and suppose further that he improves and clears that land, or spends money or labour on it equal to £4 per acre, then everyone must recognise that John Smith has a property right in that land to the extent of £500.” Everyone did; they got up and cheered the prophet. “But,” he continued confidently, “further suppose that a railway is built into the district where that land is, and the value of John Smith’s holding is increased thereby in value from £5 to £8 per acre, then it must be clear to everyone that if John Smith has a property right in the £5 per acre which he created, the community which added another £3 per acre to the value of the land has a property right in that increased value — ”

“‘Tis a lie, ’twould be a robbery!” Dad shouted. ...

“Nonsense!” from the Treasurer.

“‘Tis not nonsense!” Dad yelled back. “This bill is nonsense; and all the rot you have been telling this House about it is nonsense! With your prattle about things what someone called Mill have to say! What’s the good o’ that?”

Dad is suspended from the parliament for a week, leaving the Chamber resounding with his parting cry of “Thieves! Robbers!”

To a large extent the Dad Rudd of these stories was inspired by the adventures of the extrovert Scotsman, and more recently “Darling Downs bunch” politician, Donald Mackintosh. Dad is the Member for Eton Vale, and Mackintosh had in 1899 become the member for Cambooya, the original railway siding for Eton Vale station. Indeed, Mackintosh was not only one of Davis’s original “trinity” from whom Dad Rudd was constructed, but also had, during Davis’s childhood, moved his family from Emu Creek to a new selection further south, which is just what happens to the Rudd family in *Our New Selection*! He was a plain-speaking agrarian populist who reminded honourable members of his many years as a pioneer landowner. Many of his Hansard speeches, like Dad Rudd’s, are punctuated by recorded interjections and laughter. He opposed income tax, free education and government regulations on dairying; he supported the sale of crown lands to finance railways; he demanded unequal, gerrymandered electorates to ensure strong rural representation; he despised experts of all kinds, from government advisers on land use to lecturers at the Agricultural College.27

Nevertheless the Dad Rudd of *Dad in Politics* is no closer to any real-life figure than any other of Davis’s inventions, and in fact Mackintosh explicitly supported the taxing of farmers who benefitted from new railways.28 The politician who was openly and directly parodied was the treasurer and leader of the Labour Party, William Kidston, whom Davis blamed for his own retrenchment and whom he
had personally insulted when Kidston offered the olive branch of re-employment. The treasurer's speech quoted above, including the lecturing on John Stuart Mill's principles of added value, is taken almost word-for-word from Kidston's speech on the second reading of a Land Betterment Assessment Bill on 17 November 1904.29

Relations between Davis and the government dipped even lower after the first "Dad in Politics" stories started appearing in Steele Rudd's Magazine, and he was mentioned in Hansard — an honour he gleefully and immediately quoted in the January 1905 issue. Various accounts have it that he was to be called before the Bar of the House, or prosecuted for defamation, but all the parties backed off, including Davis.

**Sydney or the Bush**

Davis's next stories, published as *Back at Our Selection*, included a linked sequence dealing with Dave Rudd's marriage to Lily White and Dad's encounter with Lily's formidable mother-in-law, who comes to stay with Dave and Lily and who, for her daughter's benefit, battles Dad to a standstill across several chapters. In "Dad Forgets the Past" Dad Rudd capitulates, builds a new house for Dave and Lily, and invites Mrs White to come with them to the races:

And that night, while Mrs. White at tea eulogised Dad to Dave and Lily, and said he was a "fine old Man," Dad, at our table, spoke of no one but Mrs. White, "a splendid woman," he said, "a woman of the world — a woman with a business head, believe me."

Arthur Davis however was engaged in a less-romanticised struggle with his own wife and his mother-in-law, and in 1907 there appears to have been a temporary separation.

As Eric Davis tells it, his father was certain that Steele Rudd's Magazine, and his own writing career, were suffering because of his isolation: "He was convinced, through experience, that concluding business arrangements by post had its limitations" and demanded that they all move to Sydney. Davis's children sided with their mother in bitterly opposing the move, seeing it as a disaster from start to end, and later attributing to their father alone its unforeseen consequences: he "could only blame himself".30 In fairness to Davis, it needs to be pointed out that
his analysis, however biased by the attractions of Sydney bohemian life, was certainly correct: the eight months he spent in Sydney in 1907 were fruitful, resulting in collaboration with Beaumont Smith on the first draft of the *On Our Selection* play; a lucrative royalty-paying contract for *The Poor Parson* with the Bookstall Company; the sale of other books old and new to the same organisation; at least preliminary discussions with another company about a novel; and renewed enthusiasm for writing on different subjects in a variety of genres. Abandoning all this at the end of the same year meant that he was out of town and out of sight when subsequent major deals were struck: between the *Bulletin* and Rowlandson for the paperback editions of the first two books, and between Beaumont Smith and the actor-manager Bert Bailey for the right to stage the play. In the latter case at least he was outrageously betrayed in a way that could not have happened had he been on the spot.

There is little doubt that Davis, as his son reported family legend, was at the time stubborn to the point of pig-headedness and uncaringly selfish about the need to move to Sydney, and that for his family it proved one of the most traumatic years of their lives. He walked out of the Clayfield home in January 1907, leaving Tean to arrange the sale of their house and other details of the family’s relocation (including the dispatch of Mrs Brodie back to the Darling Downs). The process was expected to take six months, but Tean seems to have suffered a major panic attack. She sold the house at the first offer well below its market value, auctioned the furniture, and bundled the children on to the Sydney train barely a month later. Arthur met them at the newly opened Central Station, but it was an uneasy reunion. No accommodation in Sydney had been arranged and they all stayed first in Arthur’s small flat in the city, then in a succession of rented houses in Woollahra, Randwick and Edgecliff. The arguments increased, as did Arthur’s tendency to stay out late drinking. He was sliding into alcoholism: “What sort of health could I have been in”, he reminisced years later, “when drink, and not a lot, injured me so.”

There were compensations however. There is a photograph of him posing with other literary luminaries of the time: A.G. Stephens, Norman and Lionel Lindsay, Roderic Quinn — evidence that he was enjoying the role of Sydney bohemian and *littérateur*. He also continued to write prolifically and well and completed two volumes of stories.

His major achievement was *The Poor Parson*, though, it too, was later split by Rowlandson into two shorter volumes, the second taking its title *Duncan McClure* from the other main character. Narralane — a name as deliberately allegorical as Patrick White’s later Barranugli — is a small farming community in the heart of Rudd family country, and indeed in the first episodes published in *Steele Rudd’s Magazine* in the middle of 1906 it is Dad Rudd who reluctantly agrees to
contribute to a church building fund and to the stipend for a resident minister, but then becomes the poor parson’s most vigorous supporter. When Davis took up the material again at the end of the year just before the move to Sydney, he decided to replace Dad with McClure, a burly, mischievous, good-hearted, impetuous and not particularly God-fearing Scotsman. Davis’s in-laws all had Scottish Presbyterian origins, and this new angle on a familiar subject reinvigorated his writing. Although never the runaway bestseller his first book had been, it was popular enough. The contract offered him a per-copy royalty for the first time, leading Davis to claim it as his most enduring financial success.

The stories are linked by the parson’s journeys and adventures as he moves around his parish, but it is Duncan McClure, like Dad Rudd, who energises the incidents: abusing his fellow parishioners for failing to pay the minister his salary, saving the “pairson” from his own credulous generosity when he is exploited by a no-hoper farmhand, Bill Eaglefoot, and repeatedly confronting and outwitting a mean-spirited storekeeper. The events shift within a few paragraphs from the boisterous fun of a bush dance to the death of a widow the same night; from the knockabout farce of McClure accidentally throwing dirty water over Bill Eaglefoot to a curious melodramatic sequence where a desperately impoverished farmer tries to force his daughter to marry the wealthy storekeeper’s son. The poor parson’s stoic tolerance pervades the storyline, as does a powerful sense of idealised, romanticised place. As the parson travels about, Davis offers us repeated panoramas of the landscape, here remembered in terms of the politics of pastoral dream:

And, as the good shepherd jogged leisurely along beneath a canopy of the clearest blue, with a fresh crisp breeze fanning his face and playing with the puggery that fluttered from his hat, covering mile upon mile of the richest and grandest country on God’s earth — almost every acre of it lying fallow, when it might have been dotted with smiling, prosperous homes and homesteads, and bringing forth bread and fruits for the millions of souls that the Almighty intended it should — his thoughts went out to the small, courageous band of untutored pioneers scattered over that vast, primitive area, and, in sympathy for them, forgot for the moment the stern reality of his own trials and troubles, and the difficulties he was beset with ere he could subdue and promote those rough conditions, in a social and spiritual sense. …

“Lord God,” the minister would murmur as he measured the magnitude of the great solitary bush at a glance, “open the eyes of the rulers of our nation to the wealth that is hidden away here, that they may direct the steps of Thy people to this land.”

No doubt there were many readers at Emu Creek and elsewhere who believed in the “solitary” emptiness of terra nullius, and many in rural Australia who blamed the failure of the pastoral vision on the political ineptitude of land legislators, but
the rest is fantasy, children's dreams, which Arthur Davis himself certainly had no intention of measuring against reality.

His other work dating from 1907, *For Life*, also offers a panorama of south-east Queensland, but the writing is much tougher and less sentimental. A short ten-chapter novella, it is unusual in that it was not first written for magazine publication, and is one of the most curious and, for adult readers, most satisfying of his works.

The story is closely based on a sensational and much-publicised incident in which Davis had been involved in 1899 as part of his public service duties. During the evening of Boxing Day 1898 two sisters were raped and they and their brother murdered on their way home from a dance at Gatton, a town midway between Brisbane and the Darling Downs. One of the prime suspects was an ex-prisoner and known erotomaniac, Richard Burgess (called Burke in the book), who had just been released from the prison on St Helena Island in Moreton Bay; he had been in the general area of the crime at the time, begging or stealing food and looking for work. He was quickly arrested on a series of trumped-up holding charges, which caused southern newspapers, not for the first or last time, to comment disapprovingly on the collusive operations of the police and the judiciary in Queensland. Under duress, Burgess reluctantly agreed to retrace his movements from the time of his release from prison to the day after the murders, and in February 1899 he and a police guard set out from Brisbane. Arthur Davis went with the party as the shorthand reporter, his task being to write down all the suspect's claims as to his wanderings and encounters.

There is no doubt, from the evidence of both the real investigation and Davis's fictionalised account, that some of the police had already decided Burgess/Burke's guilt, and would have willingly misread or even manufactured evidence in support of their prosecution. ("I don't care a d- what the evidence is!" the Chief replied. "I still stick to my conclusion — that Burke was the man.") For his part Burke, in Davis's story, expects no better from his captors, and one of the narrative's strengths is the way the storyteller/shorthand reporter and the unpleasant, dangerous, but impudent and quick-witted suspect negotiate a mutual trust as his innocence of this crime, if not of others, is established, to the chagrin of the police. When a witness identifies the reporter as the suspect, the story's investment in careful, objective reportage suddenly assumes personal importance, as though anyone might find themselves wrongfully accused and need such assistance against wild police speculation and media hysteria.

It is a potent murder mystery which avoids simple characterisation — Burke is probably capable of appalling crimes, but not this one — and which resists the detective story drive to offer a solution, just as the Gatton murders themselves have remained unsolved to this day:
A few weeks after, Burke was released. He came to my office in the city and said he was grateful to me for having made a truthful report.

“What is your private opinion about the murder, anyway, Burke?” I asked as he rose to go.

“I have no opinion about it,” he said; “no more than the police have.”

Although a minor work, *For Life* is part of the tradition of the creative writer as investigative reporter, such as Chekhov's journey to Sakhalin Island, or Orwell's visit to an underground mine. The power of the narrative is in the objective voice, the matter-of-fact presentation of a nightmarish environment unknown to the reader but believably described. It is a selected, contrived world — Davis was working from memory, not his own transcripts of the time — but Burke moves among poor battlers like himself, and the reader has the prurient pleasure of the bush equivalent of slum tourism. Interestingly, this is not a world of squatters, selectors or even of Australians, but of small-minded, suspicious immigrants: a brawling Irishman who peeled potatoes with his fingernails; a fearful Danish widow who gave Burke a meal of stewed rat but, careful to avoid trouble and perhaps detecting his sexual mania, lied that her husband was asleep inside the house. Neither Arthur Davis nor Steele Rudd was ever very interested in the Australian tradition, in redefining such characters as essentially shaped by their local environment; nor, presumably, was it a quality demanded by his readers.

Davis may have been close to an alcoholic breakdown, and the magazine may have been losing money, but works such as *The Poor Parson* and *For Life* showed that he was still writing regularly, inventively, with control and with success. His home life was in a very different state. Eric was conceived in June, but the encounter between his parents must have been tinged with mutual mistrust and even anger. Tean's grasp on the purse strings had become tighter and more secretive as the magazine faltered; according to the family, not even Arthur knew that she had managed to save some three thousand pounds around which she was building a vision of a return to the Darling Downs, buying land there, and turning her sons into farmers. It is not clear why Arthur eventually gave in to her dream, and his own brief and cryptic account — that he found he was doing all the work on the magazine while others profited — seems insufficient.

Whatever the pressures or the precise sequence of events, by November 1907 the whole situation had exploded, Arthur had closed down *Steele Rudd's Magazine*, and had given up Sydney for the bush. They did not return to Brisbane, but to Greenmount, Tean's relatives, and her mother. It was a collapse into childhood, into Steele Rudd, into that safe known world thirty kilometres by ten — “Narralane” — into the vision of taking up a selection which the poor parson had romanticised but which Arthur, when he turned back to old personal experience, remembered as more like the succession of miserable and soul-crushing struggles
which the travellers repeatedly witness on their journey in *For Life*. Arthur Davis would now spend ten years gradually revising his identity, forging a new life-myth much closer to his pseudonym as it had originally been imagined more than twelve years earlier. Steele Rudd was back on the Downs, and readers — and soon playgoers and filmgoers — quickly forgot, if indeed they knew, that he had ever left.
"Steele Rudd" intends to give up writing, and Mr. A.H. Davis will devote himself to his comfortable farm in Queensland.

_The Lone Hand_, 1 November 1912

I took the advice of those around me, I sold my book and play interests, put it into land and stock — and lost financially, and heart and every way. I was a fool to listen to anyone. ... I sacrificed my ambition for the chances of dirty farm work.

A.H. Davis to Eric Davis, 28 February 1928
A chair on the front verandah

In 1907 the railway line from Sydney to Brisbane still took the inland route through Armidale, Glen Innes, Stanthorpe, Warwick and Toowoomba before turning east down the range to Brisbane. It was a simple matter to request the guard to stop the train briefly at West Greenmount siding and for Arthur, the six-months' pregnant Tean, their three children — Lin, now aged twelve, Gower, ten, and Violet eight — to jump down on to the platform. They were “home” for Christmas. At first their visit may not have been planned to extend much beyond Eric's birth, which occurred on 2 March 1908, since Arthur was actively engaged in trying to refloat Steele Rudd & Co. in Brisbane. But nothing came of this. They stayed first with Tean's brother Dan Brodie and his family, and after deciding on a more permanent stay rented the nearby house which Arthur facetiously named Pott's Point.

Perhaps he was trying to flag his protest at his reluctant withdrawal from Sydney bohemia, and that once more a stubborn, demanding woman had destroyed another of his life-myths. He clung on to as much of the dream as he could, and determined to go on writing. He heard a rumour that the Commonwealth government was going to employ historians on a project “writing up Australia”, and wrote to the federal member for the area, Littleton Groom, asking for a share of the work. Groom held the seat previously represented by his father, the William Henry Groom whose convict history had paralleled Thomas Davis's, and whose rise to the status of leading Downs identity the Davis family had supported. The tone of the correspondence between Davis and Groom does not suggest a past friendship, but Arthur, the famous author, flattered the not-yet-distinguished parliamentarian by sharing with him his plans for a new book, a journalistic exposé with political resonances:

The knowledge that youngsters of tender years are being roused from their beds before it is scarcely dawn in connection with the dairying industry, and who in consequence drop off to sleep on the school desks, has prompted it. I have not yet read the “Wages Board Bill” but if its objects are to provide farmers with men who understand the work as well as regulate the hours and wages, and to sit down hard on child labour, I think it would certainly make for good.1

No government-contracted writing work resulted, but many years later he was able to use Groom's influence to gain employment for his son Gower and for a professional friend fallen on hard times. As always, Davis knew where power lay, and how to infiltrate it.
Tean Davis, too, had a vision for the future, one that she doubtless thought virtuous, hard-headed and sensible, but which, judged with the wisdom of history, was considerably more quixotic and disastrous than any of Arthur's. Her vision appears to have been motivated not just by personal needs but by unconscious neuroses, in particular chronic anxiety. The money she had carefully saved, she rationalised, could be invested in land, and her sons could become respectable, sober farmers — another generation of selectors, with capital behind them to avoid the struggles, hardships and desperation of the Davis and Brodie (and Rudd) families' early years. Her own family knew the area, knew where the profits were and how to make them, and where to find a bargain. She overlooked the fact that her children were city born and bred, unused to manual labour, ignorant of country skills and country ways. She vetoed Arthur's plan to send them to the Grammar Schools in Brisbane. She ignored the fact that he was totally opposed to the idea of going on the land. Wasn't it exactly what "Steele Rudd", through the voices of Dad Rudd and the Poor Parson, had repeatedly encouraged? Tean started looking for a family farm.

Again Arthur's resistance was stubborn but eventually unavailing. During 1908 he bought land in Greenmount, intending to build a home in the township, but the next year a 160 acre selection, The Firs, became available ten kilometres away, not far from the railway siding at Nobby. This was the world of Eric Davis's childhood, and he wrote about it in *The Life and Times of Steele Rudd* as if it were a little Arcadia. It was an active working farm with livestock and equipment, fruit trees, grape vines, fir trees on the east and south sides, and large pepperina trees on the west to shade the afternoon sun. The house was in good condition, with substantial outbuildings, machinery, a windmill, a five thousand gallon tank, and the luxury of a shower room on a concrete slab under the house tank. The Brodies — Tean, her mother, and her brothers — thought it was a bargain, although to complete the sale they had to enter into a substantial mortgage.

Arthur gave in, but made it clear that he was not going to be responsible for the farm operations, and rationalised that it was as good a place as any (except Sydney) to write. A young neighbour was employed to manage the property. While the manager was teaching Lin and Gower about agriculture and dairying, Arthur determinedly remained in the house, writing at the dining-room table or in a verandah chair; at one stage he even partitioned off a dark corner of the barn with heavy curtains and wrote by the light of a kerosene lantern. Occasionally the nostalgic desire to be a gentleman-farmer resurfaced and he emerged into the sunlight to give Lin some ineffectual help:

One day while living at "The Firs" Dad and I were out pulling corn — it was during the mice plague — and suddenly a mouse ran up one leg of Dad's pants and down the other, and I will never forget the look of consternation on Dad's face while the mouse
was doing “Loop-in-the-loop”. His thought, I fancy, ran to that of a snake. Anyway he knocked off shortly afterwards and went back to the house to do some writing, seated on the deck chair on the front verandah.

Writing may have been Davis’s escape from farm drudgery, but the effect of the move to the Darling Downs on his creativity was dramatic and disastrous. Between 1908 and 1913 he produced five books of stories, but all suggest that he had been brought suddenly face to face with the world of his childhood and of his stories, and that he was appalled and creatively destroyed. The characters he invented are without exception unattractive, the stories uninspired, the writing flat, and the rendition of dialogue full of thick accents and bad grammar that makes the Rudd family seem articulate. The treatment of animals is more vicious, the identification of humans by their physical differences callous (“Limpy”), the physical jokes (biting someone’s toe, jabbing another’s leg with a fork) stupidly cruel. The central families: the Potthouses, the Dashwoods, and the Pettigrews — those whose lives we follow from story to story — are, as Cecil Hadgraft emphatically observed, unpleasant, oafish, jealous, deceitful, callous, ignorant, clumsy, and inept. Gone were the dignity of Dad Rudd’s struggles, the ebullience of Duncan McClure, the tolerance of the “Poor Parson”. Davis started to reuse old characters and stories in ways that suggest flagging inspiration. The spark of imaginative creative joy had died or been stamped out. It never burnt as strongly or as consistently again. Arthur Davis, forced back to living on a farm, discovered that compassion had been easier to invoke from a distance.

The first book written on the Downs, *In Australia* (1908), was his first failure, and even though he was at the height of his popular success he was unable to attract a publisher. He arranged instead for it to be printed by Pratten Brothers in Sydney, the same company he would turn to twenty years later when in the same situation with *The Miserable Clerk*. For the first time there was no hardback edition and no illustrations: *In Australia* was just a cheap paperback. This was the novel he had described in his letter to Littleton Groom, about the exploitation of orphan children on dairy farms, and the shadow of Charles Dickens falls heavily over the attempt to write as an investigative journalist-novelist.

Early in the book, after the death of Mrs Ryle, young Eric, her son, joins another foster child, Snowy, on the farm of the odious Piggy Potthouse and his wife. The birth of Davis’s own son Eric at “Pott’s Point” during the time he wrote the novel gives its “Eric” and “Potthouse” odd resonances. After repeated drawn-out incidents of abuse and degradation, the novel ends through an elaborately contrived combination of an escaped criminal, an unjustly imprisoned man, a stolen will, and the cleverness and daring of the two orphans who secretly train one of the farm horses and race it to victory. Although later reprinted in the
Bookstall Series, the book has drawn little notice or interest, and for once the neglect may be justified.

There were obvious autobiographical leanings in the next two books, On an Australian Farm (1910) and The Dashwoods (1911), which were both about the Dashwood family. The setting is a contemporary farm, with traction engines and cream separators, but the family is contemptuously observed. For part of each volume the Dashwoods are bushies in the city, and the comedy is predictable and repetitive. In the fifteen years since Davis had invented the Rudd family, they had come to be recognised as the origin and the less-parodic end of a substantial body of Australian writing which poked fun at bush simpletons unable to comprehend or cope with progress; the title of Henry Fletcher's The Waybacks in Town and at Home (1902) is a good guide to the genre. With the Dashwoods, Davis began to write below his standard and within the pattern. Published in paperback by the Bookstall, the books were poorly illustrated, with dull and sometimes darkly over-inked drawings.

A return to the Rudd family, The Book of Dan in 1911, charted the life of the least attractive member of the family, Dan, the no-hoper eldest son, but the arrival at the Bookstall Company of Lionel Lindsay as a principal illustrator significantly improved the interplay of text and pictures. With “The Old Homestead” stories, written and published in the Bulletin in 1912–13, Steele Rudd announced his intention to stop writing forever. Others were colonising the field, particularly Helena Sumner Locke with her female equivalent of Dad Rudd, Mum Dawson. After the Bookstall’s regrouping and reissuing of all the earlier Steele Rudd material between 1908 and 1911, perhaps Rowlandson at the Bookstall or Davis himself felt the market had reached saturation point.

Davis was left in limbo, a farmer who didn’t farm, a writer who no longer took pleasure in imagining worlds. By early in 1913 he had abandoned writing, and in other ways was beginning to make the best of his situation. While Tean condemned the eldest boys to do the milking seven days a week and while the farm struggled towards profitability, Davis selectively chose a few pleasant and prestigious activities to pursue: he indulged his love of horses, riding and polo. Acquiring a paddock opposite the farm, he had part of it levelled for a polo ground, formed a team, and became the leading coach and umpire in the district. Gradually he was absorbed into the social fabric of the Downs. He shot quail with various bank managers and became a local identity. He declined a request from the Liberal Association of Queensland and the Women’s Electoral Lobby who wanted to put his name forward as a candidate for the Senate, but when the shire of Cambooya was created in 1914 he was elected unopposed as a councillor.

At the first council meeting on 2 September that year he became the foundation chairman of the shire. He started to enjoy the role of benevolent and all-powerful
squire. Seated in the council chambers he adjudicated local disputes, spoke and wrote on behalf of his constituents, promised quixotically to do what he could to eradicate prickly pear from the shire. “Toowoomba (Q)” reported the Theatre Magazine on 1 October 1915, is “the district in which Mr Davis was born and still lives”. “Steele Rudd”, except for the one “Selection to City” story, had always lived on the Downs. Twenty-two years of city living had been erased from Arthur Davis’s biography to make it fit the other legend. Davis let it go.

The On Our Selection play

Another reason for Arthur Davis’s decision to stop writing new material was that the attempts he and others had been making for many years to interest the commercial theatre in the Rudd family’s popularity finally began to show results. In May 1912 the actor-manager Bert Bailey staged a version of On Our Selection which became the most popular Australian play of its time and probably, per head of population, of all time. Between 1912 and 1916, it was seen by one million people in Australia and New Zealand and was regularly revived until 1929, with Bailey himself usually starring as Dad Rudd. This spectacular and long-lasting success led Davis to realise that he had created a legend, and that continuing financial success might involve exploiting existing material as much as, if not more than, writing new stories. In fact Davis and his family thought initially that they were on the way to becoming very rich indeed. “The dramatisation of On Our Selection will bring me more money than I have made out of all my books lumped together,” he confidently told Theatre Magazine a month after the play opened.

Theatre in Australia was in these years a major commercial industry, and in both England and America it was well known that a number of authors had succeeded financially by writing plays for which they received a per-performance royalty, and in some cases a direct share of the profits. But the practice was at the time almost unknown in Australia. Here writers sold scripts outright to actor-managers, and in any case few Australian plays had received more than one short public season, in one or two cities.

Davis was the first Australian writer, except for those closely involved with the professional theatre in other ways, to wrest significant long-term payments from an entertainment industry more used to intellectual theft by overt or covert piracy and plagiarism. Even so, what he received was only a pathetic fraction of what he
had hoped. The weaknesses were that he was at first not experienced in dramatic craftsmanship; that he only had bush lawyers and local bank managers to advise him and was not in Sydney to participate directly in the crucial negotiations over contracts; that (as had occurred with his stories) his first success, when his bargaining power was weakest, was by far his most significant; and that he was dealing with some very hard-nosed and sometimes unscrupulous businessmen.

By 1904 Davis seems to have begun work on a stage play, to be called *In Australia*. Some of his stories described a play of that title: in “The Play’s the Thing” (*On an Australian Farm*), he has the Dashwood family going to the city and visiting a theatre, where the curtain rises on “the home of a poor selector” and his wife. The play they see is clearly an early draft of the *On Our Selection* play: there is a stuttering younger son (unnamed, but clearly Joe), a daughter Sarah, and older sons Dan and Dave; an older daughter Kate who is “sweetheartin”, “an ancient and asthmatic uncle”, and a boisterous Irish neighbour.

In the story the Dashwood family watch with great excitement this play about people like them. A bushfire has taken the selector’s crops and the storekeeper has told them he has credited their account with the cheque for their earlier harvest of corn and that they now owe him only three pounds. The old selector Tom Broggs rises from his despair and declares, in Davis’s first attempt at a melodramatic stage speech:

“We have our health, and we have our strength — and we have fought fires before, and floods, and droughts, and debts, and enemies, and what we have done before we can do again, and will do.”

A great cheer came from the audience. Old John squeezed a tear from his eye and whispered to Polly: “Ah moost breng your Mother an’ Granny to see this!”

It is this speech which was rewritten and expanded into the great claptrap which ends the first Act of the *On Our Selection* play, and on which Bert Bailey built the popular appeal of Dad Rudd both here and in his subsequent appearance in sound films between 1932 and 1940.

Davis, Bailey, and a journalist named Frank Beaumont Smith each made a claim to principal authorship of the play of *On Our Selection* as performed in 1912, and Bailey’s partner Edmund Duggan was also credited on the early playbills. Duggan appears to have simply padded his own role of the comic Irishman, Maloney; all the other claims need to be viewed with suspicion. All were made in the knowledge that the play had become the greatest success the Australian stage has ever known.

Davis’s version, recounted in the early 1930s to Winifred Hamilton, claims that Beaumont Smith approached him in Sydney in 1907 with an idea for a plotline which required Kate Rudd to go to Brisbane, become involved with a
city slicker, and return unmarried to the selection with an illegitimate child. Smith, who later became a major Australian filmmaker and theatrical entrepreneur, first comes to notice during 1905–6 when he contributed articles and stories to Steele Rudd’s Magazine. He may have had some professional stage experience and so was able for a time to represent himself as the stagewise collaborator Davis needed to make his play performable.

Rejecting the love child detail but otherwise adopting the linking narrative this idea provided, Davis and Smith together wrote the first draft of the play in Sydney early in 1907. As the Brisbane Courier (15 June 1907) accurately reported:

Report says that Mr. Beaumont Smith, an Adelaide journalist, and Mr. A.H. Davis (“Steele Rudd”) have written a drama on the lines of “On Our Selection” and that rights have been provisionally purchased by Mr. J.C. Williamson. It is understood that he pays £100 for the option of acceptance, and that should he decide to produce the play, the authors will receive a royalty ranging from £1 to £5, according to the importance of the town where it is performed.

Williamson decided not to take up his option to perform the play, and the next year Smith tried to stage a reading of it at the King's Theatre in Melbourne. Under the law of copyright at the time, this would have been sufficient for him to seize the rights to any dramatisation of On Our Selection. It is not clear if the reading took place; a newspaper report says it occurred, but Davis denied he prevented it. It is more important to note that in the King's Theatre company at this time were both Bert Bailey and Edmund Duggan, who now became aware of the project at this point, if they had not been so before.

Davis and Beaumont Smith became bitter enemies, almost certainly as a result of Smith's attempt to seize the copyright. Smith continued to try to market “his” script; Davis wrote a new version for J.C. Williamson which Williamson liked but felt still needed reworking by an experienced theatre professional. However, it was not Davis's script which was to get Bert Bailey's professional attention, but the earlier Davis/Smith collaboration, at Beaumont Smith's instigation.

Davis was by this time back at Nobby and nothing he wrote suggests he suspected Beaumont Smith's continuing involvement in the negotiations which led to Bailey's production. However, Smith could not use the title On Our Selection, and the first legal documentation which survives is Davis's contract with Bert Bailey, dated 9 January 1912, allowing Bailey to adapt and perform as the stage play of On Our Selection material from the five Rudd family books then published.

Bailey however was no ethical paragon himself. He claimed later, when Davis and more particularly Tean Davis began to complain at the low level of royalties they were receiving, that this contract was identical to the one he and Edmund Duggan had signed with the manager William Anderson for their own play The
Squatter’s Daughter in 1907.\textsuperscript{11} This was not true, as all the loopholes which caused Davis problems had been carefully sewn up in Bailey’s contract with Anderson;\textsuperscript{12} It was for three years, for example, whereas Davis’s had no sunset clause. Davis only received from Bailey a royalty payment of £6 per week if the theatre company performed a full week of six evening performances; in any week where a night was missed through travel no payment was made. By contrast the Bailey–Anderson contract had a number of clauses specifying fractional rates of payment in such circumstances. Both contracts made provision for an additional payment if the gross takings for the week exceeded £600, but the Bailey–Anderson agreement recognised that only the thirteen largest cities in Australia and New Zealand could provide such a bumper box-office, so in smaller towns they were to receive a bonus on the gross weekly income over £100. It seems clear that Bailey drafted both contracts, and the differences reflect his personal stake. The first was a tough agreement between experienced theatre professionals, the second was with an outsider who without expert advice never had a chance. As Lin Davis noted:

> It was when the play was on tour in the country towns that Dad — or at least Mother and I — found how he had been taken down in the agreement. For the country towns takings ranged from £50 to £100 a night and then sometimes a night during the week would be missed due to travel.\textsuperscript{13}

The only defence that could be made for Bailey is that he in turn was being hard pressed by Beaumont Smith, with whom he divided the profits evenly.\textsuperscript{14} For his share Bailey had to produce, direct, and star in the play, while Smith simply received each week a very handsome cheque. This agreement lasted until 1930, when Smith’s wife Elsie, in whose name he had placed his interest for tax reasons, finally sold out to Bailey alone.

The story has been told several times of the opening night of On Our Selection at the Palace Theatre in Sydney on 4 May 1912, and its subsequent triumphant progress around Australia for the next decade and more.\textsuperscript{15} The Bulletin (9 May) enthused:

> There is more humour to the square inch of “On Our Selection” than to the square fathom of many allegedly humorous plays which are hauled hitherward, at more or less expense, from London or New York. On Saturday night, an audience which packed every corner of the house, rocked with laughter throughout. A large man, with a red face, leaned his head over THE BULLETIN’s seat, and gasped, “I wouldn’t miss this for quids!” That was the first occasion on which this paper has agreed with a large man with a red face.

A backdrop by Robert Vaughan of huge gum trees and original music by Charles Taylor gave realism and atmosphere to the performance, but one suspects they were irrelevant to an audience which came expecting and getting virtuoso comic
enactments of well-remembered sequences from the stories: the dead kangaroo in the drinking water, the parson and the scone, Dave's wrestle with arithmetic.

Fred Macdonald, elbows turned out, with a lanky rolling gait and monotonous vocal drawl, made Dave the quintessential slow-witted country bumpkin and almost stole the show from Bailey's Dad. Bailey and Macdonald based their physical interpretations of the characters on the story illustrations, particularly those of Alf Vincent and Norman Lindsay, but from now on visual representations of the Rudd family were based in turn on the actors in the play. Bailey was Dad, Macdonald was Dave. The character of Joe, chief foil to Dad in the stories, became minor, and "Dad and Dave" began working its way into the cultural mythology of Australian society.

Only in London in 1920 was the play a failure, although the love scene between Dave and Lily White — shyly communicating via the messages on conversation lollies — reminded Lord Beaverbrook of Audrey and Touchstone in Shakespeare's comedy As You Like It. The connecting plot, in which Kate and Sandy's romance is interrupted when Cranky Jack murders an unscrupulous squatter's son and Sandy is blamed, was seen from the first as a hoary convenience, and a surviving typescript of the play more or less as first performed in 1912 shows that these sections, for which Beaumont Smith was presumably primarily responsible, are of poor quality; they were later extensively revised.

During the next ten years Macdonald somewhat unscrupulously played virtually the same role under different names in Kate Howarde's Possum Paddock and in three silent "Hayseed" films for Beaumont Smith(!), and even took the conversation lolly scene around New Zealand as a vaudeville act. But if the role of Dave was on its way downhill towards Woop-Woopism, as Hal Porter charged, that of Dad Rudd gained new dignity. Bert Bailey was himself a self-made man and a successful business entrepreneur. Though he overstated his claim to have "written" the play, his reworkings were significant, and they tilted the narrative away from Davis's pessimism towards an aggressive and defiant belief in self-help. For Bailey the agrarian dream, redefined as democratic capitalism, was achievable.

The clearest example of the change in tone which subtle revisions could effect is his reworking of Davis's "Dad and Carey" story, which Bailey combined with the Tom Broggs speech from "The Play's the Thing". Instead of episodes in which Dad Rudd is repeatedly defeated by a cunning competitor, Bailey's version becomes one of pugnacious success followed by disastrous reversal, and then a defiant refusal to give in. Unlike Davis's story, in the play Dad beats "old Carey" to a valuable piece of land. Carey responds by impounding all Dad's cattle because Dad owes him money, and Dad counters in turn with the great speech which Bailey used to provide a strong curtain to end Act One:
CAREY: I'm going to take possession of every head of stock on the place and get them away. I'll break your spirit, Rudd. ([He crosses down R.]

DAD: [Sitting at table, brooding] For years I've fought the droughts and the floods of this country. Two successive seasons the wheat failed and then when it had grown higher than the fence a late frost withered and blackened it all up in the night. Much more of that and we'd be lucky to 'ave a stick left. Jimmy Tyson 'imself couldn't stand wot I've had to fight against. Yet I've always been proud of this bit of land I owned and it's the thought and the hope of gettin' on that puts go into a man — if he is a man and if he isn't it doesn't matter — and encourages 'im to work and use his head and do his level best and it's the wish that's in his 'eart to succeed and make money and own property that takes the sting out o' hard toil. [Turning abruptly to CAREY] You want to break up the old home, the place where me sons and daughters were born. Well, take me few 'eads of cattle, take every stick in the place. But if you think you can break me spirit [striking the table with his fist by the Lord, no! It's the spirit of the pioneers who struggled to make the land.

CAREY: Talk! Talk! Fine words no doubt, but what do they all amount to? The drought has got your crops, I've got your stock. What can you do now?

DAD: Wot the men of this country with health, strength and determination are dways doin'. I can start agdn.

CURTAIN

The speech was not Bailey's invention; but it was Bailey who expanded it, adding the colour, the faith in free enterprise, and the never-say-die optimism. It was the play's audiences who encouraged him: the speech as printed here, dating from the 1920s, is twice as long as it was when first performed. Bert Bailey's Dad Rudd became the farmer-hero many readers from A.G. Stephens onwards had always wished him to be — the voice and the spirit of the battler; the one who never gives up and never says die; the one who starts from nothing and might just defy the odds and win through. Dave, by contrast, was born to miss opportunities, to be dominated by others, to lose.

After 1912, when people read Steele Rudd, most imagined Bailey as Dad, and Macdonald as his gangly, laconic (some said congenitally imbecilic) second son. For thirty years they played Dad and Dave on stage and screen, with Bailey making Dad the hope and the spirit of democratic white Australia itself. From this moment on there was a paradox at the heart of the Steele Rudd phenomenon. Steele Rudd's enduring popularity, and the continuing sales of Davis's books, were now centrally in the hands of others, particularly Bert Bailey and Fred Macdonald.

It is unclear how much Arthur Davis understood of this shift in what the Rudd family meant, and in the way creative and interpretative power had slipped
through his fingers. He was not in Sydney for the opening night, but according to Lin Davis he and his father went down to Sydney the Monday after the play opened. Tean Davis, who seems to have had sole control of the family finances at this time, agreed to fund the trip, and suggested that Lin accompany Arthur. This was probably a shrewd calculation. With Lin to look after, Arthur would be less likely to head back to his drinking companions.

Accompanying his famous father, Lin remembered the journey as a great adventure: “I remember how I admired my father, how handsome he looked — an outstanding personality, standing six feet, athletic, and well-built.” But they arrived unannounced; Bert Bailey was not expecting them, and there seems to have been a hastily arranged and somewhat tense meeting between the parties to the agreement. “Father was ... not a good businessman, and young as I was, I could see that he was dealing with shrewd business people.” This is probably post facto rationalisation, but clearly Davis had simply not been considered a significant contributor to the project. Bailey had even neglected to send him an opening night invitation.

They saw the play several times, and Arthur is supposed to have helped the cast to improve their characterisations, though his contributions seem to have been principally notes on verisimilitude — the same kind of “bush expert” role he had played in A.G. Stephens's editing of his stories. The newspapers attributed to him improbable statements, partly straight invention and partly Bailey’s publicity machine, such as: that ‘Steele Rudd’ hadn't written the play, but he thought it better than his own books. Lin observed: “I was also mentioned ... making remarks which I never uttered. Dad laughingly informed me that was the practice of all newspapers. He knew their ways”. It would soon become clear however that Arthur Hoey Davis’s contribution to the play was being ignored, both financially and in creative acclaim. The initial playbills for On Our Selection credited the dramatisation to Beaumont Smith and “Albert Edmunds” — the joint pen-name of Bert Bailey and Edmund Duggan. After a time Davis insisted that Smith’s name be removed. Bailey did not need much persuading — Steele Rudd was a much more marketable concept — and Smith was happy just to pocket the cheques. But the damage to Davis’s professional writing reputation was severe.

The Steele Rudd phenomenon received a massive new impetus in these years, and took on new dimensions through the interpretations of Davis’s collaborators and stage and screen visualisations of his characters. But this renewed popularity came at a price. If there is a moment during Davis’s life when Steele Rudd and the Rudd family characters escaped decisively from his control and became public property, it was the opening night of On Our Selection at the Palace Theatre in Sydney on 4 May 1912. It is also, not coincidentally, the moment when Davis's
own creative effort starts to disappear from the public record, and when Steele Rudd became a writer of a past era, someone who had written rather than someone who was writing. Davis's vital input into all the plays and films between 1912 and 1935 was ignored at the time and has been overlooked ever since. Even scholarly accounts have denied Arthur Davis, or even Steele Rudd, his due: for example, Pike and Cooper's *Australian Film 1900–1977* credits Bert Bailey with writing the play on which the film *Grandad Rudd* (1935) was based regardless of the opening title which states “From the play by Steele Rudd”;<sup>21</sup> and then in 1984 when the stage version of *On Our Selection* was published, the name of Bert Bailey was given as sole author.<sup>22</sup>

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**Steele Rudd, playwright**

My advice to the Australian dramatist is, therefore, “Get your play produced. Failing the Managers, get it done by amateurs”... Our only hope is to write plays that no Australian manager can refuse; and to learn our trade we must have our plays produced... The education thus afforded to the dramatist will in the end repay that mythical patriotic Australian manager.

Arthur H. Adams, “The Australian Drama”, *Lone Hand*, 1 December 1908

No doubt Arthur Hoey Davis knew of the debate that took place in the pages of J.F. Archibald's *Lone Hand* magazine during 1908 about the difficulties Australian playwrights encountered in getting their work performed. Whether he remembered the advice of his fellow *Bulletin* writer Arthur H. Adams is less certain, though Adams was undoubtedly the major champion of Australian dramatists at this time (and a significant playwright himself). He and several other Australian writers mounted amateur productions of plays that were later taken up by commercial managers. It was a strategy that Davis, having been thoroughly duded over the profits from *On Our Selection*, took up with spectacular success on two later occasions. The copyright law had changed in the middle of 1912, giving him watertight protection over his story material. It was just a few weeks too late to help him in his negotiations over *On Our Selection*, and he was cursed
on the stage, as in print, with not quite being able to repeat his initial triumph. Nevertheless he fought back with three major stage successes — and never again allowed anyone to claim authorship of his plays.

He was not at first, however, in any hurry to resume writing. Around 1913–15, relative domestic harmony returned to the Davis household. From Eric’s point of view as the baby of the family, these were the happiest years of his father’s life. They bought a piano which Tean played, and enjoyed family singalongs; when, later, they purchased a gramophone, they tried recording songs as well as playing records. The farm started for a time to pay its way, and Arthur concentrated on polo and local politics.

He also started to take more interest in his children. His “rough, horsey” second son Gower, having finished school, was the first to need special assistance. Whereas Lin had accepted the challenge of learning to run a property, Gower, like his father and grandfather before him, was more reluctant. Arthur tried to be a good father. He acquired a second property on Budgee Creek close to his own childhood selection. It had a permanent water supply and ample grass for stock, and he and Gower camped there in a tent occasionally, ringbarking and fencing and making improvements. This could have become Gower’s own farm, but father and son both appear to have been bluffing in their enthusiasm, and they soon found ways to escape from what was almost certainly another manifestation of Tean Davis’s dream.

After the outbreak of war in 1914, Davis, as shire chairman, was charged with organising the recruitment of volunteers in the area, which entailed public functions and fundraising events. Coincidentally, at about the same time he received two letters from a writer in Victoria, George Arnott, who wanted permission to turn *The Poor Parson* into a play. By this time Davis was well aware that he had been exploited by Bailey and the fact that he did not reply to Arnott’s first letter suggests that alarm bells immediately started to ring, followed by the idea that to secure his share of the profits from any staging he should dramatise the book himself. He took up his pen again.

Combining his official duties with his creative interests, Davis arranged for a group of amateur local thespians to stage his new “Scottish-Australian comedy”, *Duncan McClure*, as a war fund-raising venture. He must have reasoned, as Arthur H. Adams had argued, that amateur theatre could be used as a stepping stone towards professional performance — and hoped as well that a successful production would demonstrate that he had been the playwriting genius behind *On Our Selection*, not Bert Bailey. To make it clear that he alone had brought the new project from first draft to successful stage performance, Davis financed and supervised the production. The settings were painted in Sydney by a major
Drayton, 1856 (State Library of Queensland)

Mary and Thomas Davis and two of their children, c.1859 (National Library of Australia)

The miserable clerk, c.1885 (National Library of Australia)
Arthur's older brother Ned, sometimes the model for Dave Rudd, c.1888 (National Library of Australia)

Shingle Hut, c.1893, with an iron roof. Standing at the rear are Arthur's older brother, Ned, and younger brother, Harry, with their father (National Library of Australia)
Above: Arthur Davis on his wedding day, 26 December 1894 (National Library of Australia)

Above right: Tean Davis, née Brodie, on her wedding day, 26 December 1894 (National Library of Australia)

Tean, Violet, Gower, Arthur and Lin, c.1899 (National Library of Australia)
The under-sheriff and his polo pony, c.1902 (National Library of Australia)

Tean's mother, Violet Brodie, née McIntyre, c.1905 (National Library of Australia)

Steele Rudd, a caricature by A.J. Hingston (Our Swag, December 1905)
"The engine tore itself loose from the rest of the plant."

"The yard contained swine of all sorts and sizes."

"Dad squeezed O'Riley into the cushion."

Illustrations from Steele Rudd’s Magazine: Ashton Murphy from the story "Sandy’s Selection"; Norman Lindsay from "Dad and the Pigs"; and Taylor from "Dad in Politics" (Steele Rudd’s Magazine, 1904)
Map showing location of the original selection and The Firs

railway line: -------
scale: 1 cm = 3.3 km

160 acres or 64 hectares
Eric, Arthur, Lin and Gower in Brisbane, c.1920 (National Library of Australia)

Dad (Percy Walshe) and Dave (Tal Ordell), The courage of the pioneers, in Raymond Longford's *On Our Selection* (1920) (National Film and Sound Archive)
Gothic gloom: Raymond Longford's *On Our Selection* (1920) (National Film and Sound Archive)

Dad and Dave, *Smith's Weekly*, 5 January 1924

_Townies and Hayseeds* poster: Beaumont Smith’s view of the bush (National Film and Sound Archive)

Dave: I see be the papers there’s thousands ’v men outer work.”
Dad: “Serves the cows right! If they’d learnt ter milk, I’d give two of’em a job ’t anyrate.”
Winifred Hamilton and Arthur Davis in Sydney, c.1927
(Mitchell Library)

Dad and Dave sell progress, *Smisi's Weekly*, 18 January 1930

Dad and Dave in watercolour, by Lionel Lindsay
(University of Queensland Art Museum)
Classical origins: Dad Rudd as Dionysus, by Lionel Lindsay (Fellowship of Australian Writers Programme for *McClure and the Parson*, 1930) (Mitchell Library)

The cast of *On Our Selection* on location near Agnes Bank, 1931, from left: Fred Kerry (Cranky Jack), Ossie Wenham (Joe), Alfreda Bevan (Mum), Bert Bailey (Dad), John McGowan (Maloney), Bobbie Beaumont (Sarah), and Billy Driscoll (Uncle) (National Film and Sound Archive)
Pastoral harmony: Alfreda Bevan (Mum) and Bert Bailey (Dad) on location in 1931 for On Our Selection. In the background are the Nepean River and the Blue Mountains (National Film and Sound Archive)

Poster for Ken G. Hall's and Bert Bailey's On Our Selection (1932) (National Film and Sound Archive)
Joseph Wolinski
Germany/Australia 1872–1955
Portrait of A.H. Davis (Steele Rudd) 1933
Oil on canvas
91.5 x 72cm
Purchased 1938
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

Below left: Heenzo cough advertisement, Fred Macdonald as Dave Rudd, Smith's Weekly, 7 September 1935

Below: Hollywood populism, Australian style: Dad and Dave Come to Town poster (1938) (National Film and Sound Archive)
The Famous George Edwards Radio Play, now done in black and white for "Smith's Weekly" by Stan Cross

A hit story series, Dad's Adventure, has been published in and the only hope for it is the government of Uncle Chomley, who has promised help, not so shortly. Meanwhile, the play has been acted by the police department.

In a district such as Snake Gully, residents are so close and friends are close by the police department. There comes news from the outback of a band of Outlaws. To an armed band of Outlaws. To the police department. The news from the Outlaws. To the police department.

Mr. Johnson, the bank manager, does not want to lose his money, and "gives him the week," as he says.

By Cripes! Isn't there? There's fifty two hundred pounds. Take it out of that.

The Dad and Dave radio serial in pictures, Smith's Weekly, 9 July 1938
Australia's Churchill: *Dad Rudd M.P.* poster, 1940
(National Film and Sound Archive)

Beatrice Sharp (courtesy Cecile Ramsay-Sharp)
STEELE RUDD MEMORIAL

ARTHUR HOEY DAVIS ("Steele Rudd") died in Brisbane in 1935 and was buried in Toowong Cemetery. He and his writings, with their picturesque characters, are affectionately remembered by many Australians, but over his grave.

"where brown Summer and Death have meted,"
the weeds grow wild and the rank grass is disturbed only by straying dogs and flying birds.

Here is a photo of "Steele Rudd's" grave at Toowong, taken in July, 1953.

The grave as it is

Queensland Authors and Artists Association brochure, 1953 (National Library of Australia)

The headstone unveiled in 1956
“Shingle Hut” as built in 1987 on the original site

Dad in politics: the last days of the Bjelke-Petersen government in Queensland, *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 30 November 1987 (Courtesy Mac Vines)
Once a heavily timbered box flat: the selection at Mt Sibley, 1990

The selection in 1990, with the post installed by Ned Davis and the Cambooya Shire Council plaque. Mt Sibley is in the background.
Dad and Dave at the Snake Gully Tourist Centre near Gundagai, New South Wales
The Darling Downs remembers Steele Rudd
(Courier-Mail, 7 August 1992)

On the road between Toowoomba and Warwick, 1992

See the ‘home’ of Dad and Dave

Rudd’s Pub

★ Cold Beer
★ Good Country meals
★ Friendly atmosphere

Your hosts are
Eugene and Vicki Hollis-Neath

Nobby, Queensland (076) 96 3211

On the road between Toowoomba and Warwick, 1992
Joan Sutherland (Mother) and Leo McKern (Dad) in the film Dad and Dave: On Our Selection (1995) (Stills photographer Robert McFarlane)
professional stage artist, Harry Whaite, from Davis's instructions and sketches, and arrived in Toowoomba by rail.

The Gallipoli invasion in April 1915 hangs heavily over the amateur version of *Duncan McClure*. The season was for three nights in conjunction with the “Patriotic Day” fundraising and commemoration ceremonies on 28 August (the event was repeated the next year on 26 April and became Anzac Day), and the play as staged was a piece written specifically for the occasion. The extant script (the copyright reading version) unfortunately precedes the performances by several months and is in three rather than the eventual four acts, but it is clear that this was perhaps the most contemporary social statement Davis ever made: a work of presence rather than memory. Though often resorting to conventional cliché, the play, when read in the context of the massive casualty lists appearing in the paper each morning must have seared the soul of every member of the capacity audiences who packed the Toowoomba Town Hall.24

At the end of this first version a wounded Alex McClure returns from the Dardanelles. He has won the Victoria Cross, but the ending is downbeat, not triumphant:

But others there are, brothers in arms, who joined the colours and sailed with me will never be welcomed to their homes again. ... Thirteen thousand miles away on the shores of Gallipoli where their life blood stains the sands of the beach sleep the heroes of Australia. One by one I saw them fall — one by one I saw them rise and fall again. A glorious death was theirs. Let the children and the children's children of Australia honour and respect their noble memories; and may the Angel of Love watch over their last and sacred resting place.

CURTAIN

Because the local community was in trauma, seeking consolation from grief and anxiety, this performance was a highly charged occasion. In the last week of rehearsals a cast member heard of her brother's death at Gallipoli and withdrew from the production. Her role had to be hastily recast and rehearsed. Then, four days before opening night, Gower Davis cleared out of Budgee Creek and with some of his friends walked into an army recruiting office in Toowoomba and enlisted. He had just turned eighteen and so did not need his parents' consent. In any case Davis, being in charge of the war-support effort for the district, could hardly object. There is no record of Tean's immediate reaction, although Eric suggests that it “put an added strain on mother's state of nervous health”.25

The Toowoomba season of *Duncan McClure* was the high point of Arthur's years back on the Downs. The *Chronicle* (31 August) noted approvingly “the golden thread of patriotism” that ran through the play, and mentioned that when, after the second performance, Davis made a short speech between the third and
fourth acts, he was greeted with “a salvo of cheering”. Elsewhere the event was also marked, but rather less sulkishly. An unusual amount of publicity for a minor provincial amateur event did find its way to Sydney’s Theatre Magazine, although the comments were not particularly favourable. The issue for 1 July obligingly ran advance notice of the production, but noted in a superior metropolitan manner: “it remains to be seen what will be the fate of ‘Duncan McClure’ without having behind it — as did ‘On Our Selection’ — a stage-manager with the experience and an actor with the personality of Bert Bailey”. Later (1 October) it reprinted not the glowing Toowoomba Chronicle reviews but a less favourable account which had appeared in the Darling Downs Gazette — the voice of the squattocracy, and no friend to the Davis family. The matter degenerated into a series of abusive letters, including accusations that the adverse critical notice had been penned because the Gazette editor’s wife was miffed at not being asked to direct the production. As an advertisement for Davis’s abilities as a playwright it was a mixed success; nevertheless Bert Bailey bought the rights — and the sets — for production the next year.

By the middle of 1916, when Bailey’s professional staging of the new play went ahead, the war had become less popular as a theme. The revised script, renamed Duncan McClure and the Poor Parson, eliminates a German shopkeeper/spy plot and generally minimises references to the war. This is at times unfortunate: Alex McClure’s farewell to his parents and his girlfriend as an enlisting soldier must have been a moving scene in 1915; his leaving to take horses to South America in the revision is much less so, and he returns unannounced and uninjured. Either Bailey or Davis decided the original scenes would be too harrowing for audiences; we find out indirectly in Act Two that Alex “enlisted and went to the Front from the Argentine”.

Without the war theme, Duncan McClure and the Poor Parson is the closest Davis came to writing broad farce, with comic episodes linked by the romantic complications of three sets of young lovers ending predictably with a wedding. The scenario has moved away from the pioneering days to the world of the prosperous but still tightfisted farmers of the new century. Only the parson, Mr McCullock, continues in stoic poverty, and, as in the stories, Davis’s sympathetic portrayal of the minister’s role in a small Presbyterian farming community is unusual. The lazy farmhand Bill Eaglefoot (predictably played in Bailey’s production by Fred Macdonald) was the play’s most acclaimed role, but it was Bailey as Duncan McClure whose bighearted ebullience drove the action of almost every scene, and Bailey and Macdonald together who again stole the show:

BILL: I came up to sharpen the axe.

DUNCAN: Get awa’ and dae somethin’ to blunt the damn thing.

BILL: But a man does twice as much with a sharp axe.
DUNCAN: Aye and a sharp man will do as much wi' a blunt axe as you'd do wi' a circular saw — get to waurk.
BILL: Don't speed me up, boss, ye might lose me.
DUNCAN: I'll never lose ye — yer a sticker, Bill.
BILL: A bill sticker? (Guffaws) Not bad for you, boss. (Imitates Scotch) We scotchmen hae a great sense of humour, d'ye ken.
DUNCAN: You! What pairt o' Scotland did ye come frae?
BILL: Gippsland. (Exit through gate)

If the success of the Duncan McClure play suggests that Davis had made his peace with the Darling Downs, the only collection of prose stories he attempted during his farming career corrects that assumption. *Grandpa’s Selection* is a slim volume of eleven connected stories and four others, making a bare 122 pages of easy Bookstall reading. “Farmers! We’re all farmers,” it begins, but the storyteller is an anonymous fly-on-the-wall, sharing the point of the view of the children while writing with an detached and cynical adult eye.

The Grandpa in question is a miserly, cantankerous, demanding old man who viciously attacks his sons and in the very first chapter hits his grandson over the head with a stick, drawing blood. The presence of a lazy “Uncle Dan” suggests that this is in fact the Rudd family thirty years on, though they are not identified as such. It is not clear why Davis did not at first name them as his most famous and lucrative characters. Perhaps he still felt a desire to distance himself from a phenomenon which might bring him money but further damage his reputation as a more original and substantial writer. Conversely, perhaps the new names served to conceal the fact that at least four of the stories are virtually rewrites of earlier Rudd family episodes.

Whatever the initial impulse, the prospect of another profitable Bert Bailey production brought a swift reverting to type. Grandpa became Gran’dad Rudd, and the play of that name went straight into professional production at the King’s Theatre, Melbourne, on 22 September 1917. The earliest scripts — one in Davis’s handwriting, and his copyright typescript — are close to the play as performed, but it is not clear whether national audiences and critics realised how minor Bailey’s script contribution had been; certainly Bailey did nothing after Davis’s death to discourage the notion that he had made a major input into the scripts for all the plays and films. The pattern of comment remained the same as it had been for *Duncan McClure*: in Toowoomba and Brisbane, the provinces, Steele Rudd’s triumph was affirmed; in Sydney and Melbourne, the metropolis, it was Bailey’s.

In *Gran’dad Rudd* the Rudd family have moved on a generation; Dad is Gran’dad, and Dave and Joe are married family men. As before Davis found writing for the stage creatively more exciting than prose stories, and new ideas
provided much of the action. Reviewers thought it a much better written play than either of its predecessors. The young farmer and inventor Tom Dalley has the plans for his successful potato harvester stolen, and the plot is predictable though at times spirited. “Ain’t it wonderful ‘ow you city blokes always takes us bushmen for mugs,” comments Dave, as he and Dan confront the thieving middleman Henry Cook and execute joyful revenge. Dan is Gran’dad’s eldest son who quarrelled with his father and left home many years earlier; his return home and his wooing of the “guiding star” of the temperance movement, Amelia Banks, is another new comic element. *Gran’dad Rudd* was the second most popular and enduring of the plays, and is the other script which has survived to this day in the form of a 1935 sound film.

There is in addition one more stage play, known by many titles, which is a curious work: partly fresh and interesting, but often reminiscent of other scenes in other comedies. It is also in part old-fashioned melodrama, and was many times rewritten. Davis started it in 1917, but his other three successes had flooded the market and it was not taken up professionally for another decade. Again he turned to amateur performances in order to publicise it, and a new version reached the stage three years later as *On Grubb’s Selection*, the character names being taken from a series of stories which had appeared in magazines and newspapers in 1922–23, but which have never been collected or republished. It was first performed in January 1924 by Toowoomba amateurs, including several from his old *Duncan McClure* company, as a benefit for the local hospital, and then in Brisbane in December the same year by members of the Queensland Authors’ and Artists’ Association, a group which Davis helped to found. This script is the first to have survived, and is a version almost certainly rewritten for that particular occasion. The comically autobiographical character of the short-story writer Jimsy Barden seems to be aimed at this particular audience of would-be writers, especially in the scene where Jimsy’s girlfriend Peggie Grubb refuses to marry him and points out to him the many ways in which publishers grow fat while authors starve:

**PEGGIE:** [The author] don’t get paid he only gets a smell. And see here Jimsy, a man who only owns a water cart and an old horse with some harness on is a better man than an author the way things are seemingly, because whatever he earns is his own if it’s only ten bob a week. [**JIMSY** *takes a manuscript from his pocket and throws it down contemptuously, and jumps on it.*]

**JIMSY:** There! That’s the manuscript of my second book and the end of my career as an author. I’ve got money enough to buy a horse and cart, Peggie, and from this out I’m a wood-and-water Joey. Now will you have me?

**PEGGIE:** Yes, Jimsy, I will, my love. [*They embrace.*]**

In May 1928 the play was marginally rewritten, retitled *The Rudd Family*, and
became a major commercial success when staged throughout eastern Australia by William Anderson, with Edmund Duggan as director and star. The play's title was intended to suggest strongly that the play was a sequel to *On Our Selection*, although the family in fact are not the Rudds but the Dicksons. The tour was cut short by the financial crash of 1929, but Davis prepared a shorter version designed to tour country towns during 1932. It is this last script which helps to chart the shift in the representation of the pioneering bush family across the full spectrum of Davis's stage career. Jimsy Barden had already disappeared by 1928, and the villain exited from the 1932 version, leaving a plotless flow of comic/epic sequences. In the end, Davis was unable to resist the drive by actors, managers and the public to create the figures of fun who were becoming “Dad and Dave”, to be laughed at rather than with.

**Back to Brisbane**

At the start of 1916 Gower Davis, having been through basic army training in Brisbane, passed through Nobby on a slow train that did not stop. His family were among a party on horseback who rode out to the line and alongside the troop wagons, and there was much shouting and waving. He left Sydney on HMAT *Boonah* as part of the 13th reinforcements to the 2nd Australian Light Horse, and arrived in Suez on 5 March just as the 1st and 2nd Divisions, resting after the end of the Gallipoli disaster, began leaving for the Western Front. In Suez, Gower and six of his Downs friends were all transferred to the 11th Field Artillery Brigade, and after further training in Egypt the Brigade sailed from Alexandria in June. By the 22nd they had been transported across France to the Belgian border, where for the next two years they drove the horse teams which dragged the heavy guns through the mud of Ypres and Armentières.

There were a number of reasons, apart from luck, why Gower Davis survived the war. Because of his knowledge of horses he was a driver rather than an infantryman — his mother’s obsession with farming at least had some benefit — and his commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel F.A. Hughes, appears to have been cautious and intelligent. Hughes’s War Diary, for example, records a heavy German bombardment on Boxing Day 1916:

> As it was evident that [our] battery positions were accurately registered by enemy guns, and that our gun flashes are visible unless in very foggy weather, I stopped firing the
batteries. [Our] batteries were shelled as usual, but men were kept under cover. There were no casualties.  

However, four days later Gower reported sick to a field ambulance with what appears in his service record as bronchitis, but which was almost certainly the effects of a German poison-gas attack. He was invalided to England, and so missed some of the worst months of Passchendaele — the third battle of Ypres. By such combinations of chance and mischance he survived what Lloyd George called “the battle of the mud” and A.J.P. Taylor, “the blindest slaughter of a blind war”.  

In the two years Gower was away, Tean Davis’s world began to disintegrate. It is not clear when the decline began, or whether the rational reasons her family gave, such as anxiety over Gower, were all that precipitated the problem. Tean’s mother, the formidable Mrs Brodie, had died in 1911 at the age of seventy-seven, and Tean, as the shire chairman’s wife, had become a leading member of the community in her own right by the time war was declared. She found some duties difficult. Like the poor parsons of the community, she was sometimes involved in the unwelcome task of visiting local families to comfort them after the death or injury of their sons. Several other Davis relatives had made “the supreme sacrifice” and she scanned every newspaper casualty list for news of her own son. Riven with anxiety, occasionally incontinent, she was forced to accept that her condition required specialist medical treatment. At about the time she heard of Gower’s gassing and hospitalisation, she went to Brisbane for some weeks for treatment, accompanied by Violet.

There were other pressures, too, on Arthur and Tean. During 1915 and 1916 there had been a prolonged drought across the Downs. Some rivers stopped running for the first time since the arrival of Europeans, and farms started to fail. With Gower away, Arthur was forced to help Lin with more of the farm work. It may have been his distaste for this and worry over their declining finances, as much as concern for Tean’s condition, that prompted a curious sequence of letters to and from the Public Service Board in Brisbane. For about two years he tried to rejoin the public service, and the correspondence is a rare insight into his volatile character during these silent years.

On 7 March 1916 he wrote to the Chairman of the Public Service Board asking if he was “eligible for reappointment”, but adding cautiously: “This inquiry is not made with the object of seeking re-appointment.”

On 23 March, Arthur formally applied to rejoin the public service, citing as reasons the drought, Gower’s departure “for the front”, and “a probability” that Lin would also be joining the army. He was asked what salary he would accept, and suggested “about £300 per annum”, adding that he would be available to start work more or less immediately. This was £50 more than his salary when he was
retrenched, and his file was simply marked "Hold over for suitable appointment". No offer followed, and three months later he withdrew his application in a single sentence, giving no reason for his change of heart, although it did coincide with Bailey's successful production of *Duncan McClure and the Poor Parson*, and the prospect of significant new literary income.

In January Arthur wrote a long letter reactivating his application and setting out his financial circumstances:

> I am aware that from my work others derived a *fortune*. I had to live and there was no alternative other than to accept what publishers and theatrical managers would give me for my stuff, just as today I had to accept 3/6 for wheat that I know must be worth 5/- to the miller.

> As regards my farm — that was purchased on terms for my boys. But the war and the drought have had so much to say in it that I would gladly part with it for the liability that is on it.

His name went back on the public service waiting list, and he wrote again six months later advising that he had moved to Brisbane and supplying his new address — evidence of his continuing availability. No offer of reappointment was made.

Again, when push came to shove, he had backed down. Again, his life was determined by others. He had had three possible careers: powerful public servant, famous author, comfortable farmer. For each he had fashioned a different life-myth, a particular understanding of himself and the world, a preferred way of living and succeeding. Each career had now been destroyed once; two of the three, as it would happen, forever. For another decade he still lobbied politicians and judged cattle at the Brisbane Show. But he was nearly fifty, and too old to learn new tricks. From now on he could only be a writer.
Mr Wood seemed at a loss. "What is the nature of the impediment?" he asked. "Perhaps it may be got over — explained away?"

"Hardly," was the answer. "I have called it insuperable, and I speak advisedly."

The speaker came forward and leaned on the rails. He continued, uttering each word distinctly, calmly, steadily, but not loudly — "It simply consists in the existence of a previous marriage. Mr Rochester has a wife now living."

Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre

All Australia knows — and loves — Steele Rudd, most famous Author and Playwright born beneath the Southern Cross. We have laughed with him over the adventures of Dad, Mother, Dave, Sarah, and all the rest. We would have wept with him too, if he had wanted us to weep ...

Programme note to "Steele Rudd's" play McClure and the Poor Parson, staged by the Fellowship of Australian Writers, Sydney, 15 December 1930
Starting over

“Steele Rudd’s Annual” means to come out in December of each succeeding year. It will take a leading hand in featuring the love, the loyalty, the literature and art of Australia, and be a boon, a blessing and a joy forever in the land. Its mission mostly will be to entertain and amuse with humour peculiar to and characteristic of Australia.

Editorial, Steele Rudd’s Annual, December 1917

In the middle of 1917 the Davis family left The Firs forever. The stock, plant and machinery were auctioned, and their furniture and other domestic possessions were railed to Brisbane. Davis arranged for a Downs farmer, J. Achilles, to work the property on a share basis, but Achilles’s own sons were away fighting overseas and in 1918 he was forced to withdraw from the agreement. The Greenmount community rallied to support them in their distress. The Shire Council gave Arthur a magnificent roll-up writing desk in gratitude for his work as chairman. A retired Downs grazier, Harry Bracker, agreed to rent them a modest house in Wagner Road, Clayfield, just a short walk from the grand home they had owned only a turbulent ten years earlier. Later, when another house owned by Bracker in Wagner Road came on the market, he allowed them to purchase it, according to Eric, at a generously low price. He also found a job for Lin, who began attending the Brisbane Technical College to study wool-classing. Tean began receiving regular treatment from Dr E. Sandford Jackson, an old friend from Arthur’s polo-playing days in Brisbane, and her condition appeared to stabilise.

The move to Brisbane was not simply a retreat. Arthur’s partner in his original magazine venture, Ashton Murphy, had come back into his life during the Firs years as the postmaster at Greenmount. In 1916 he was transferred to Brisbane, and it is possible that Arthur’s vacillating attempts to rejoin the public service the same year were connected to a plan he and Murphy now revived. It was in fact the original project — a Christmas annual — that had been mooted in 1903, before the more ambitious publishing project ever took it. The revived plan was more modest: Steele Rudd’s Annual. It first appeared in December 1917 and thereafter most years until 1922, with many of the old contributors from Steele Rudd’s Magazine — Vance Palmer, Mabel Forrest, Lionel Lindsay, Ruby Lindsay — some old contributions, and much new material from the two partners. For Arthur, writing to a deadline was a spur, and the annual was a chance to exploit the resulting completed or near-completed set of stories before seeking book
publication for the series. The Memoirs of Corporal Keeley appeared in the first issue, We Kaytoni in 1918, On Emu Creek in 1920, and a never-republished series, “On Grubb’s Selection”, in 1922. Increasingly, Davis had to remind book publishers that his material still sold, and sold well. The annuals were his principal weapon.

To finance the first issue, Arthur sought advertising. V. Brodie and Co., Merchants and General Storekeepers of Greenmount and Nobby, took a full page, and the Bert Bailey Company splashed the success of Steele Rudd’s plays across two. Davis could not resist captioning one illustration: “Bert Bailey Considering the Author’s Royalties”. As Steele Rudd, he also received the support of the Queensland Department of Lands. The 1917 Annual carried a profile of John McEwan Hunter, the Minister for Lands, a former Darling Downs selector whom “the editor” praised as a “marked success and a benefactor in his district”.

In spite of Arthur Davis’s recent and bitter experiences trying to make selection farming pay, the 1917 Annual was in places an organ of government pro-farming propaganda. “What to do with our soldiers?” after they returned from the First World War, asked “W.B.”:

Queensland is a land of vast open spaces, mighty natural resources, and wonderful possibilities. These spaces must be filled; these resources must be developed; these possibilities must be exploited. Who then is better fitted for the work than the soldier? This the Government of Queensland has recognised, and it is reserving great tracts of fertile land for the soldiers.

The relevant act, for which the Minister for Lands modestly took credit on behalf of the government, had been the first of its kind “in the Commonwealth, if not in the Empire”, and was alleged to be still “the most liberal on the statute book of any State in the Commonwealth”. Photographs of a “typical” returned soldier’s farm, with a comfortable house, and of “one of the Pineapple Farms on the Beerburrum Soldier Settlement” drove home the message: the pastoral dream was alive and attainable. Arthur Davis, in spite of adequate capital driven off his “comfortable farm” by drought, poor market prices, a global war and family illness, kept his silence; Steele Rudd’s Annual, the new from-scratch publishing venture of the fantasy successful farmer-author, sold the message: going on the land was noble, profitable, easy.

The government propaganda continued in later issues: the 1920 Annual ran a long anonymous article on “The Land We Live In. Queensland Extends a Welcome Hand to New Settlers”. Australian society was moving on, and the war accelerated this change. If Steele Rudd embraced the soldier-settlement scheme, it was at least in part because nowhere else in popular mythology was the future the same as the past. Arthur Davis had invested too much in the past to deny it,
and his difficult personal life and intense puritan sense of privacy prevented him writing autobiographically about the present.

Even before the return to Brisbane, Davis was actively writing new stories and marketing old. He revised and expanded as *The Old Homestead* the stories printed in the *Bulletin* four years earlier, and began a novel, *The Memoirs of Corporal Keeley*. The first he dedicated to Gower, fighting in France, and the central character in the second was Frank Keeley, a young farm worker and then soldier, obviously based in part on Gower.

*Corporal Keeley* marks a further change in Davis's writing style, prompted probably by the success of C.J. Dennis's *The Sentimental Bloke* and *The Moods of Ginger Mick*, the Australian publishing sensations of 1915–17. Like the Bloke, Frankie Keeley is a rough larrikin, fond of fighting but sentimental in love. After many adventures at home and (like Ginger Mick) at Gallipoli, he marries his sweetheart — with the unbelievable name of Connie Crutch — and takes up a "little fruit farm". The language of the novel also echoes Dennis's use of dialect speech in its simplified verb tenses and pseudo-phonetic spellings such as "sez", "oppersit", "doorin" ("during"), and "monick" ("monarch"). As Cecil Hadgraft observed, the actual pronunciation of such words ("wimmen") is often quite regular; what the eccentric written form gives is the impression of an unsophisticated narrator.

Davis had always experimented with ungrammatical, colloquial, "realistic" language, and had taken it to extremes in the works written at The Firs, but there he was coldly objective about characters he disliked; Corporal Keeley is a hero. The book preserves what must have been some of the contemporary responses by bush workers such as Gower Davis to this sudden, fearful, yet exciting opportunity:

"Y" can only get killed once," they said. "An' y' got to die sometime, anyhow, an' y'll get a chance to see th' blanky world before y' do!"

Gower's letters provided realistic and unsentimental details of army life, and *The Memoirs of Corporal Keeley* proved to be one of Davis’s best-written and most popular late works.

The book publishing world to which Davis returned was a much less inviting one. The state of the industry at the time can be imagined from the correspondence between Davis and publishers he approached as he fought to regain his place in the market. He first targeted Angus and Robertson, a considerably more prestigious firm than the Bookstall Company, with a more "literary" reputation, and at the time enjoying success as C.J. Dennis’s publisher. Rejecting *The Old Homestead* in May 1917, A & R’s Fred Shenstone wrote:

We were hopeful that it would prove suitable for a 3/6 volume, but we find that it
would only make a 1/- volume. We decided several years ago that there is nothing in publishing shilling books owing to increased cost of production, and we are clearing out the whole of our Commonwealth Series in consequence.\(^5\)

Six months later Shenstone allowed that Corporal Keeley was “quite good”, but only “for a 1/- novel”, and gave the same reason for declining to publish it.\(^6\)

Between 1919 and 1926 Davis also tried to interest A&R in We Kaytons, On Emu Creek, Me an’ the Son, The Rudd Family, and The Romance of Runnibede, extracting on one occasion an even more defeatist and grumpy letter from George Robertson himself:

... what with the 44-hour week and other labour conditions we are being driven out of publishing, except in the case of high-priced books. ... No novel can be made to pay if published under 7/6, and we do not care to try one at that.

He had not, it appears, even bothered to have the manuscript read.\(^7\)

By the 1920s Steele Rudd was in the minds of some readers synonymous with illiterate rubbish, or, at best, writing within a very narrow field; his later works were repeatedly compared to On Our Selection! and found wanting.\(^8\) In vain did Davis insist repeatedly that the manuscripts he forwarded were “not of the ‘Selection’ but something new and fresh”.\(^9\) A report on Runnibede requested by A&R in April 1926 was savage: “the story is scrappy and disconnected and is of little or no interest”. The reader went on with two pages of vituperative abuse which ended with “etc etc etc and many more”.\(^10\) Such reports were confidential; Davis was only told that his manuscripts had been rejected.

Like other Australian writers in this period when local publication was becoming more difficult, he sought and secured a London agent, Curtis Brown Ltd, and sent off Corporal Keeley. The reply explained to the newcomer the first rule of the game: “The fact that the book has already been published in Australasia makes it almost impossible to place it with an English publisher”.\(^11\) In 1920 the agent managed to place We Kaytons with Hodder & Stoughton; they also took a first option on future work and were keen to secure the English rights to On Our Selection! (published in Australia or not). Davis shot back a telegram “Cannot sell On Our Selection book. Accept Hodder’s offer for Kaytons”.\(^12\) For a time Davis thought that the Kaytons deal — a 10 per cent royalty on British sales and 15 per cent in the rest of the Empire — would be the major new success he needed, but sales, as far as is known, were poor. Apart from one or two early Bulletin stories reprinted in English magazines, this was also his only non-pirated overseas publication. He sent a letter explaining that the NSW Bookstall Company owned outright the copyright for On Our Selection!, and there is no evidence of further negotiations for the licensed overseas publication of that book.\(^13\)

It was unfortunate for his literary reputation and income that We Kaytons,
written during some of the most difficult personal months of Arthur's life, was not better than it was. It resembles a précis of his opus, beginning with a fictional rewriting of the autobiographical sketch he had placed in the journalists' association magazine five years earlier. After half a chapter of prospecting for gold — a more romantic pursuit than tin — the family become struggling agricultural selectors; in Chapter Six suddenly and inexplicably they become prosperous cattle graziers; and for the rest of the novel they are living on their profits in Brisbane, where events and personalities drawn from Davis's city life and friends, past and present, are loosely sequenced by the Kayton daughters' courtships and a son's boxing career. It is as if Davis repeatedly began one kind of story, gave up in despair, and started another. When the NSW Bookstall Company finally published an Australian edition as Kayton's Selection in 1926, they omitted the last two chapters in their usual cavalier fashion, but there was no plot to lose.

The Bookstall Company, to whom Davis turned again as a last resort, was also experiencing more difficult market conditions, particularly after the war ended and the international book trade picked up. With so many young Australians away fighting in Europe, there were insufficient workers in the local timber industry, paper had to be imported, and the cost of locally produced books rose. A.C. Rowlandson was neither willing nor able to pay large sums in advance for new books, nor offer royalties. Even so, when Rowlandson died in June 1922 there was a large pile of cheaply purchased manuscripts, paid for but not yet (and in most cases not ever) published, including works by Vance Palmer, A.G. Stephens, and Rolf Boldrewood. Only a few authors bought back their manuscripts when their fate became evident because there were no other publishers in Australia to turn to.

Steele Rudd was still important and successful enough to be able to jump the queue on eight occasions, from Grandpa's Selection in 1916 to The Romance of Runnibede in 1928, but even one of his last works, "Bush Horses and Bush Horsemen", purchased in 1928 just before the Bookstall Series was discontinued, was left unpublished and the manuscript later lost. Standards of editing and presentation were declining even while Rowlandson was still alive; and an out-of-sequence chapter in Corporal Keeley (1918) has remained nonsensically misplaced in all reprintings to date.

The Bookstall's managers after Rowlandson were considerably less adventurous than he and no more generous. When Davis offered Reginald Wynn The Rudd Family in 1925, he reluctantly agreed to consider it, but wrote:

I cannot pay a high price for same ... The ... sale of our Bookstall Series has been affected very much by the competition of 2/- nets [sic] published in London. This edition pays the Newsagent and Bookseller a far better percentage than the local line, and naturally they are putting their best endeavours into the sale of same.
Davis eventually sold this book to Wynn for a paltry £50. For the entire period that he dealt with the Bookstall after resuming his literary career in 1916, his average annual income from all sales to them was only £65, and all were outright sales and no royalties were paid.¹⁸

Probably the most successful of Arthur's literary ventures at this time was the Annual. Here there were no business managers or other editors or doubting assessors to contend with. Some at least of the issues were moderately profitable: surviving financial records for the 1920 volume show that Davis was in equal partnership with Ashton Murphy, and that publishing and distribution costs were borne by a printing firm on a contract basis. In that year sales probably exceeded five thousand copies. After paying approximately £73 to contributors, Davis and Murphy each received just over £100 in the form of a salary.

In June 1921 Davis did exactly what he and A.G. Stephens, shaking their heads in disapproval, had observed Henry Lawson doing twenty years earlier. He sold outright, to Rowlandson for £400, those books from his earlier period over which he still retained some rights and received some royalty payments. This left him with no ongoing investment in his previous work, no small but regular income by way of royalties except from theatre and film. Play royalties still provided substantial if intermittent income: the royalties on the Gran'dad Rudd play alone were worth £136 in the 1919–20 financial year, but the production was withdrawn soon afterwards. Bailey reverted to endless revivals of On Our Selection. In September 1921 Davis wrote to Gower: “Bert Bailey had to pull off his new play in Sydney and put on the Selection again. He told me he was going to spell it for two years. He evidently can't do without it”.¹⁹ Even it was no longer popular enough, given Davis's disadvantageous contract, to provide more than an occasional small royalty payment.

His income from writing in the early 1920s averaged about £700 a year, so why he was driven to cash in his literary royalties at the same time is not clear.²⁰ There seem to have been only two substantial calls on this otherwise healthy financial situation: Tean's medical expenses, and the farms, lying fallow in the midst of continuing drought.

**Alone**

During the first two years of this upheaval and relocation and reorientation of his parents' and brothers' and sister's lives, Gower Davis was still in Belgium and northern France, driving the horses that dragged the heavy guns through the
Flanders mud. In *Steele Rudd's Annual* for Christmas 1917 Davis proudly published a photograph Gower had sent of seven "of the flower of the Downs manhood" lined up like tin ducks in a shooting gallery, "two of whom, unfortunately, lately collided with some shrapnel, instead of promotion". Arthur was apparently more concerned with the fact that his hero son was still a private and had not been mentioned in dispatches for conspicuous bravery than with the shrapnel injuries to his mates.

Around this time Gower's brigade moved south to the Somme where in March 1918 they found themselves in the middle of the massive German counter-offensive. Miraculously Gower was not one of the several million casualties in this final year of the war's madness, though his lung damage from the chlorine gas troubled him for the rest of his life, and the horror, terror and carnage he had experienced may well have contributed to his later lonely wanderings. He returned to Australia in mid 1919, disembarking in Sydney on 11 June, and was discharged in Brisbane on 4 August. Four days later Tean Davis was admitted to the Hospital for the Insane at Goodna.

It was thought, at first, that the joy and relief at having her son home had simply been too much for her nervous condition, and that she would in time be able to rejoin her family. She was fifty-one and presumably going through menopause, in which case the symptoms might have been expected to subside. She was allowed out on Christmas Eve, and together the family struggled on into 1920. Tean's brother and sister, Dan Brodie and Agnes Davis, came to stay on several occasions during the saga, but in April she went back to Goodna. When the next Christmas approached they tried to look after her at home again but this time she was readmitted after only three weeks. Eric Davis, only eleven when she was first admitted, noted simply and sadly of this time: "Mother was lost to the family circle:"

I was eleven years old. But as the years went by, up to the time of writing this story, I cannot help but admire the strength of character Dad displayed during the stress and strain of it all, and by example gave strength to the rest of us. He kept the home together ... but there were times later on, when only the two of us were together his emotions overflowed in tears. My Dad and I were very close.

The tragedy had financial as well as human consequences. Some of the family's land and other assets were in Tean's name, and these were frozen by the Public Trustee. The farms were also a problem. After the Downs farmer J. Achilles was forced to withdraw from the agreement to work The Firs, Arthur engaged him on wages to plant a wheat crop, but that failed. The drought that was causing such hardships when the Davises decided to leave intensified in the years to 1921. The unproductive farm cost him about two hundred pounds a year in interest
payments, rates and other expenses. Eventually The Firs was resumed by the former owner, who allegedly wrote off the rest of the mortgage.²⁵

There was also the Budgee Creek property, lying neglected, and likewise, accruing liabilities. Arthur still hoped that Gower, after his return from the war, might take up one of the properties and become one of the noble soldier-settlers from whom Australia was expecting great things. Early in 1921, after Arthur had received a letter of demand from the land commissioner at Ipswich for unpaid rates, Gower rode over the area, looked at both farms, and then, Arthur noted with disappointment, “hurried west as hard as he could go”. Arthur was forced to surrender his remaining land, adding a sardonic note to the land commissioner that he had no further interest in them, except perhaps to write a volume of stories called “Our Forfeited Selection”, “to get back some of the money it has cost me”.²⁶ Steele Rudd, of course, suppressed the realisation of any such fictional acknowledgment of the distance between reality and Tean Davis’s — and Australia’s — pastoral dream.

Though Gower’s later letters to his father are thoughtful, intelligent and articulate, he spent his life unambitiously as a seasonal farm worker and stockman on various properties, mostly in far north Queensland. His condition was probably at least in part a traumatic reaction to his war experiences, and to the family tragedy that greeted him on his return. Arthur may have had some notion of this, because years later he wrote: “He has had a hard and disappointing time and is soured of everything in many ways — and no wonder! He is the one who is most deserving, yet the one who has been the least considered, and with the hardest lot.” Arthur fantasised that Gower might become a writer, urging Winifred Hamilton: “Point out to him that you would like his recollections of the polo and mountain days — and taking his experience of bush men and bush horsemen, since the war, which has been extensive, how would his father compare with those men?”²⁷ Except for an occasional letter home, Gower remained silent and like his mother disappeared from the family story. Neither he nor Lin married.

Violet, who had turned twenty-one in 1920, slid intermittently into her mother’s role at Wagner Road, while Eric started at the Brisbane Grammar School in the third term of 1921. Without Tean to veto higher education, Arthur was able to give Eric a year-and-a-half’s secondary schooling, enough to shift his career goals from the manual and technical work of his brothers to clerical duties and eventually a moderately successful career in banking. Arthur was disappointed by his elder sons’ limited achievements, and he and Eric became close in a way Lin and Gower noticed and perhaps resented, though by 1922 both elder brothers had left home for good. Violet’s attitude is not known; she maintained a closer contact with her mother’s family on the Darling Downs, the McIntyres, and lived
partly with them; in any case only Eric both witnessed and recorded the misery his father was experiencing, the nightmares and the desperate breakdowns.

_The first Selection films_

I might mention that "On Our Selection" is being "filmed" by a big American Coy in Sydney. ... I am glad for Steele Rudd's sake for the lean years have been many.

Ashton Murphy to the Registrar of Copyrights, 28 August 1919

In the middle of the Davises' domestic tragedy and Arthur's professional struggle, one magnificent project went against the downward trend. The silent film of _On Our Selection_, eventually made in 1920 by the Australian director Raymond Longford after several false starts, arched back over twenty-five years of Steele Rudd to reclaim what Longford believed was the original documentary-like quality of Davis's first selection stories. The film, saved by the chance survival in England of a shortened but good-quality print, is the principal glimpse bequeathed to Australian cultural history of a tragi-comic, dignified version of Steele Rudd, the chronicler of the pioneers. It is considered an early realist classic and, along with Longford's even more famous _Sentimental Bloke_ made the previous year, one of the finest achievements in early Australian film. A sequel, _Rudd's New Selection_ (1921), though now lost, was also acclaimed in its time, and the two films together revived both Davis's reputation and, indirectly, his finances.

With rare foresight and wisdom, Davis had guessed correctly where entertainment capital would shift. By 1914, if not earlier, he was reserving the "picture" rights as well as the dramatic rights to his work, even when he sold off his literary copyrights. As live theatre slowly ossified during the 1920s, film became his central hope for windfall profits and the cause of his most disastrous financial reversal, but also the reason he was able eventually to climb back at least one rung from the brink of ruin and despair.

In July 1917, only weeks after the family's return to Brisbane, Davis registered for copyright a brief scenario in anticipation of an _On Our Selection_ feature film being made. By 1919, possibly earlier, the entrepreneur E.J. Carroll had purchased the rights to this film, but production was still delayed. Carroll was concerned
first to build up a major film distribution company, and began marketing a variety of existing titles from Longford's defiantly and uniquely nationalistic films to a number of pseudo-westerns starring the Australian athlete "Snowy" Baker. Only after the success of these did Carroll begin to invest seriously in production, drawing on American script, directing and technical expertise. Early in 1920 the company converted an old mansion south of Bondi in Sydney's eastern suburbs as a "photo-play studio" and, since his American director Wilfred Lucas was on his way back to Hollywood to "secure the latest appliances and technical expertise", the job of director of On Our Selection was given to Raymond Longford.

Unlike Arthur Davis, Longford, riding the crest of artistic and financial success after his two C.J. Dennis films, had no reason to mute his criticism of Bert Bailey's play, and also swiped obliquely at his rival and bête noire, Beaumont Smith, whose four "Hayseed" films of 1917–18 had allegedly driven bucolic comedy down to new levels of crassness and technical incompetence. Longford was determined to reclaim On Our Selection for Australian national high culture, assert the dignity of the pioneers, and so distinguish his film from other cheap or populist versions. He doubtless felt a personal affinity for the material; as in much Australian film before and since, narratives of success against the odds resonated as a metaphor for the local film industry itself, which was under-capitalised and struggling to survive and prosper.

From April to August 1920, while the film was being shot and edited, Longford kept up a steady stream of press releases and interviews in which he insisted on the realism of acting, locations, and situations, and explicitly contrasted this to the "buffoonery" and "exaggeration" of other versions. "The bush has been burlesqued enough on the screen," charged Picture Show.

Mr Longford's idea was to put into films the true Australian of outback, the casual Australian who doesn't parade his feelings much, the indomitable chap who just keeps on slogging in spite of all setbacks, who has his jokes, but doesn't always cut a comic figure. ... It is funny, but it would be tragic in places if the real Australian knew how to be tragic.

Smith's Weekly however, then beating up support for the soldier-settlement schemes and anxious to put a positive face on selection farming, was appalled. "The ugliness of bush life is presented without the saving grace of kindliness and good nature. The youngest boy's fondness for smashing mice with his hands is revolting, and should be cut out." It complained that the "drought and fires scenes are harrowing", and advised "discretion" in holding "the mirror up to nature".

Longford's film, even as viewed today in the surviving cut-down print intended for English audiences which omits some of this graphic harshness, is a remarkable achievement, and Arthur Davis was delighted. "Selection Picture Tremendous Reception" he telegraphed after the trade viewing in Brisbane. "Congratulations
Yourself, Higgins [the cinematographer] and Company."^33 The opening credit sequence, full of dark overhanging trees and brooding, gothic gloom, leads on to episodes which dwell sympathetically on images of bush hardship: pasting newspaper on the walls to prevent draughts, planting, harvesting and shelling the first corn crop, fighting a bushfire, lopping trees for the cattle during a fierce drought.

Ironically Tal O'Byrne, who had played “Dad Hayseed” for Beaumont Smith, was Longford's Dave Rudd, still physically gangly and socially gauche but comparatively restrained when viewed against Macdonald's performance in the sound film a decade later. Restraint in fact was the dominant note, and though the second film, the now-lost Rudd's New Selection, seems to have included rather more melodrama and farce, Longford's interventions in the legend of Steele Rudd comprise a brief, late, golden moment in a saga of compromise, opportunism and exploitation.

Longford's films also had some indirect financial benefits for both Arthur and his eldest son Lin, though again there had been an outright sale of the film rights without reference to royalties being paid. After the films had completed their initial seasons, Carroll agreed to lease a print of one of the films^34 to Arthur for south-east Queensland screenings, and for about three months he and Lin became picture-show men, with Arthur giving talks before the show, and Lin acting as advance agent and business manager. Arthur obtained a free rail pass from the Queensland government, and a letter from the Minister for Education, John Huxham, recommending that schoolchildren and their parents see the film. According to Eric, “the overall response from teachers, parents, and pupils was remarkable”.^35 Another indirect benefit followed a decade later. The early stage contracts with Bailey made no mention of film, and E.J. Carroll, with his experience as a screen and stage entrepreneur and with a rather more genuine concern for Davis's interests, was able to advise him in the haggling with Bailey which went on over the making of the 1932 sound film of On Our Selection. Six years earlier, in another sell-off of his intellectual property, Davis sold to Bailey for £600 the right to make films from any of his stories apart from those covered by his contract with Carroll. No such films were made, so for once he got at least part of his own back.^36 After the picture-show adventure Arthur returned to Brisbane, and Lin continued on screening the film through northern New South Wales before returning the print to Carroll's company in Sydney, where he took a job with a firm of wool-classers.

Arthur kept writing for his sanity and his livelihood, and in 1923 persuaded the editor of the Brisbane Courier to begin publishing what eventually became three separate but interspersed sequences of occasional stories which appeared between the middle of that year and 1926. The first was a relatively direct glimpse into the interplay between his life at the time and his work: Me an’ th’ Son. Eric
had no doubt that this was a semi-autobiographical account of his father and himself in the dark years of 1921–24, and for once there may well be an uncomplicated connection between Arthur’s behaviour and his depictions in the stories of an old selector, Davidson, who comes down from the farm to explore Brisbane with his adolescent son. If so, then the stories were written by a lonely, sexually frustrated and emotionally repressed man, desperate for companionship and physical affection. In one story, “Going to the Loan Art Exhibition”, Davidson is rebuked for trying to help a strange woman whose dress has a button undone at the back; in “Garters”, this father and his son sit in particular seats on a Brisbane tram so they can see up women’s skirts as they climb aboard. In “The Shop Windows” a mesmerised Davidson stares at length through the glass of a tailor’s window at a display of dummies dressed in women’s underclothing. For an author who elsewhere studiously eschewed any mention of sex or sexuality, the dirty-old-man tone of the father-narrator is intriguing.

Winifred Hamilton was in her early thirties when she first met Arthur at Clayfield in 1917. The daughter of a “bookman and bookseller” in the Victorian country town of Daylesford, she was sixteen years younger than Arthur. Like him she had endured a difficult marriage and raised children. She separated from her husband some time during the First World War and began looking for work. Teaching herself to write for publication and imbibing radical politics at the classes run by the Workers’ Educational Association in Brisbane, she was in awe of the legendary Steele Rudd:

I rose to meet a tall robust ruddy faced man with very dark, very melancholy looking eyes. He seemed horribly ill at ease, could find no words either in question or reply, and infected me with his nervousness. I managed to get through the business, wondering if I were mad or he was a fool. Before I reached my tram I decided he was a fool and left it at that. On that first meeting I gained no inkling of the many wonderful hours that peculiar personality was to give me. The harshness of character, the gentleness of heart, the fiery untameable temper were all a closed book to me. It was these contradictory and contrary characteristics, sometimes hateful rousing me to a fury of dislike, sometimes subtle and delicate and charming, which has made our long and intimate friendship such an exciting adventure. I never knew when I was going to quarrel violently with him or when his companionship was going to be a thing of delight. Buoyant, mercurial, irresponsible as a child at times. Again vitriolic, intolerant, pouring scorn and contempt on all people and all things.

After having some of her work published in a Brisbane newspaper, Winifred began offering essays and stories to Steele Rudd’s Annual:

He formed the habit of visiting my home in the evening and there on a balcony drenched in moonshine or starshine with the hills crowding round and the lights of the city dancing, I learned of his baby days, his boyhood and manhood. … Sometimes
his moods were electric ... At other times he was sunk in abject gloom and melancholy, for at this particular period his life was swathed in deepest tragedy. I have since realised with some joy that my place in his life then was a very important one. To me he unfolded his heart, to me he turned for help and understanding, and because my own life was all awry I was able to give in some degree the mental and spiritual help he stood so much in need of. ... Many a time I gave him a horrible shock with my outspokenness, my hatred of humbug and sham, my lack of orthodox religion — he shared these opinions but it was a marvellous thing for him to hear a woman voice them so emphatically and it took him a long time to accept them without shock.  

Exactly when they became lovers is not clear, probably early in 1923, but it may not have been soon enough for Winifred, who wrote: “There is in him all the mysticism of the Celt with a strong dash of Irish prudery — yes, most positively Irish prudery. It comes out in most unexpected ways. Irish pride and prudery it was that for so long made him deny the tragedies and worries of his life.”

The news that Arthur had started a new relationship caused an angry reaction from Lin and to a lesser extent Gower, who reproached him for betraying their mother, and Tean’s mother’s family was furious. If Arthur was prudish, the McIntyres were dour agricultural Scottish Presbyterians. They had grumbled privately while Arthur was at Nobby about this lazy good-for-nothing who sat on the front verandah writing worthless rubbish while his farm went broke; they were suspicious of his role in Tean’s decline; but as a son-in-law and father of Tean’s children, he was still welcome in their homes — until they heard about Winifred Hamilton. They immediately reconstructed events to make his new relationship the cause rather than the consequence of Tean’s collapse.

It is hard to imagine a stronger contrast of personalities than between Tean Davis and Winifred Hamilton. Tean was an unsophisticated bushwoman, deeply and simply religious, a McIntyre who although loyal to her husband could not take his writing as seriously as life on the land. Winifred Hamilton was an agnostic intellectual who believed devoutly, not in God, but in books and writing, art, music and Culture. She was a passionate socialist and feminist, eager to pursue her literary career. With a fiery temper and of independent mind she was usually able to give Arthur as good as she got. She took him to galleries, concerts, and debates as activities central to life. More importantly, from Arthur’s point of view, Winifred believed in him as a writer, a great Australian author. He was still penning and publishing occasional Rudd family and other selection stories in the Bulletin and elsewhere, and would do so until about 1933, but Winifred urged him to do more than what had become hack work. It was because of her that The Romance of Runnibede was written. She coaxed it out of him chapter by chapter at a time when he again wavered on the brink of despair. She also became Boswell...
to his Johnson, working with him for about two years until early 1932 on a biography of his life. Suddenly, after a life shrouded in secrecy and often glimpsed only through Steele Rudd, there are ten years of a closely witnessed Arthur Davis. Unfortunately it was a decade of few achievements and much suffering for both of them, and her biography is, as she acknowledged, “largely a narrative of disappointment and hardship”.

In 1923 Arthur gave Winifred a job as his assistant editor, and together they tried to turn the Annual back into a monthly magazine, *Steele Rudd's Monthly*, an idea Arthur had toyed with for several years. Ashton Murphy reportedly thought three was a crowd and backed out of the new enterprise. It was a struggle; sometimes there was no new issue for several months at a time. To finance it Arthur reduced his expenditures and cashed in more of his assets. He ended Eric's schooling by finding him a job; later the same year he sold the home in Wagner Road. He and Eric moved into an inner-city hotel and, after Violet returned from an extended stay with the McIntyres, the three of them took a flat across the river in South Brisbane.

Winifred's contributions to *Steele Rudd's Monthly* were mostly essays that boldly and directly confronted the sexism of her era. In “For the Public Good Woman Declares War” she savaged the arbitration system for allowing unequal pay for women doing the same work as men; in her “Woman to Woman — and Others” column, writing as “Callisto”, she advocated educational reform, attacking those who denied women economic independence and condemned them to the kitchen. She told Australian women to colonise the world of professional writing, and advised them to read Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. It is doubtful if the circulation of the magazine ever was large enough to make it a significant voice in Australian culture of the 1920s, but through it Nettie Palmer, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Miles Franklin, Jean Devanny and others came to know of this fellow spirit, and they welcomed her into their literary circle.

Arthur tried to balance this fiery polemic with occasional sub-editorial interjections in the midst of her outbursts, though they were more to provoke and challenge than to censor:

> I was amazed and disgusted to be told seriously a while ago that most business men look on a woman whose business brings her in contact with men, as fair game, and not entitled to consideration and respect. I refuse to believe that men are so stupid and hidebound as all that. (What says the lady canvasser? — Ed.)

In his “Editorial Smoke Room” column Arthur ran duologues with “the Understudy” where he tried humorously to assert his threatened patriarchy. Such interference and banter came out of their professional working relationship and spilt back into it. Eric came in one day to find Winifred crying bitterly at her
desk. About another contretemps with Arthur over a book review she had written, she wrote: "Suddenly I heard him chuckling to himself and, coming behind my chair he said "Come out and have an ice-cream" and that was his apology". Elsewhere she speculated about him being an emotional sadist, but dismissed the thought: it was just "that mischievous spirit he had".

They both had their problems, and if their relationship was on balance a positive force for both of them, it did not always prevent collapses back into despair. One small incident illustrates how close Arthur remained to the edge. In 1925 Vance and Nettie Palmer moved north from Melbourne to the nearby seaside resort of Caloundra and continued in isolation to write and consolidate two of the most important literary careers of the inter-war years. They invited Arthur to stay with them for a few days; perhaps they had heard of his state, or simply wanted to renew their acquaintance with a figure who had inspired them and mentored Vance in earlier years. Arthur set out for Roma Street Railway Station, vacillated, and when he arrived was relieved to find that the train had left. Apologising for his behaviour in a letter to "Mrs Palmer" some years later, he explained:

I had just come through a dreadful strain of fruitless nursing of one who I knew, if Belief and Faith in the Almighty counted in this life, was deserving of the best; and so with me it became a fight between my sentimentalism and my sense of the ridiculous to keep my balance. The few moments when I would be my careless optimistic self I made good resolutions; the rest of the time I was mostly as a sulky eagle desiring only to claw the Almighty for his false idea of justice and mercy.

**Echoes of times past**

There were other torments in store for Arthur Davis and Winifred Hamilton. In Arthur's first surviving letter to Winifred, when she was out of town at the end of 1925, he mentioned that he hoped "your head-pains and worries have left you for good". She had begun to suffer from glaucoma. Her sight was gradually and permanently impaired and she also suffered from acute headaches and attacks of dizziness which forced her to rest and prevented her from reading; for a woman of letters, it was a cruel affliction. During these bouts Arthur read the Bible to her, enjoying the ribaldry and finding solace in the "sonority and grandeur" of
the Old Testament prophets, particularly the apocalyptic visions of suffering and redemption in Isaiah.\textsuperscript{55}

Suddenly in the early months of 1926, Arthur decided to return to Sydney. The magazine had gone down again; there seem to be no Brisbane-based issues after February 1925. He received a visit from Alex Frater, son of the writer Barbara Baynton, who was in Brisbane on business. Frater suggested the idea of refloating the magazine in Sydney, with union backing. Davis made a trip to Sydney, and was suddenly filled with his old enthusiasm for that city; by March 1926 he and Winifred were both in Sydney, exploring these new possibilities.

At the time of the move Violet was engaged to be married, and Eric was working for the Queensland National Bank, although he was only seventeen when his father suddenly left him to fend for himself. Later when he wrote his father's biography, he was generous in his estimation of his father's behaviour,\textsuperscript{56} but at the time he was angry and upset.

Violet's marriage did not eventuate; she evidently experienced some financial difficulty and was obliged to take a job as a housemaid. Eric was obviously troubled; in a letter to his father in 1928, he asked the kind of questions he had never asked as a child. In the long, tortured reply, Arthur gave his version of the events before Eric's birth and during his early childhood. He reviewed the key moments of his adult life, expressed his frustration at Tean's insistence in going back on the land and her refusal to let the older children be better educated, and blamed his financial ruin exclusively on the farms. Arthur also tried to explain his abrupt departure:

\begin{quote}
I lost heart four years ago, and couldn't see much use in trying any further. I was in debt — the boys couldn't help me. I'm in debt now — Winifred Hamilton took a sympathetic interest in me, and helped by inducing me to continue again, in fresh writing. She has helped me in dealing with the business world in a way that I wasn't helped before. She is helping me now, and the struggle is still going on. It is only with her help and advice and sympathy, that I have today got a chance. I only wish I could achieve something at this late hour to help you all.

That I must do all I can to help Violet, I know and will — but words are useless. But I have said enough now to show you what is in my mind—Alone, I am useless!\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

The move to Sydney in fact began with two years of some hope. Steele Rudd's \textsl{Monthly} was refloated as the curiously named \textsl{Steele Rudd and Shop Assistants' Magazine}, with the backing of the Australian Workers' Union. It was a sixpenny publication, rather less lavish than its predecessors with their colour illustrations and glossy paper, but a bold attempt to extend trade union interest in quality of life issues beyond those of salaries and conditions. According to Hamilton, however, the state of Australian publishing and the magazine's socialist connec-
tions made commercial distributors look at it with either indifference or suspicion:

The greatest efforts proved unavailing to compel distributors and sellers to give it a fair deal. The market was flooded with English and American publications and Australian magazines had a hard time in procuring adequate representation. Many a wordy argument have I had with stationers and book stalls who simply put the publication under the counter and would even tell intending purchasers that they had none. I have my own convictions as to the cause of this.*

One immediate benefit was that Davis completed *The Romance of Runnibede* and published it in the *Magazine*. He seems to have abandoned it after Angus & Robertson rejected the sample chapters he had supplied, but took it up again at Winifred Hamilton's urging. It was completed by the middle of 1927, and with it he made a bold and successful attempt to stitch up a last big deal, as always using the magazine as advance publicity:

The Romance of Runnibede, appearing in serial form in this Magazine, is finding great favour among our readers, judging by the numerous appreciative missives that reach us. It is a big punch for the Shop Assistants' Magazine to get this Australian story first-hand, particularly so when it is observed that the dailies are serving up the cheapest of cheap imported serials of the blood and thunder or slop and sob order. "Runnibede" is going to tell the world about Australia when the picture of it is shown overseas. It is the first story selected by Australian and American brains to be filmed for a world market. The first of six big Australian pictures to be produced in Australia within the next few months. Those who were so unfortunate as to miss any of the story may procure back numbers by applying to this office.\(^{59}\)

Arthur Davis may not have been a good businessman, but his decision to share in the risk of making a film from his book would have seemed like a good idea at the time to more cunning investors than he. Profit-sharing was the only means by which most playwrights and screenwriters could extract more than token financial reward for their efforts, and had proven its worth for authors on both the British stage and the American screen.

According to the popular press of the time, 1926 and 1927 were also the years in which Hollywood discovered Australia. The celebrated film of *For the Term of His Natural Life* was being made with American expertise and an American star, Eve Novak, and appeared headed for international success. Even Raymond Longford, removed as director in favour of the American Norman Dawn, "seemed convinced that employing Americans to make films in Australia was a sure way of gaining access to the eldorado of the American market".\(^{60}\) Several other Hollywood directors were making well-publicised tours of Australia, and American entrepreneurs were floating local companies. One such businessman, Fred Phillips, negotiated with Davis and was given the rights to *Runnibede* on a
profit-share basis, and was lauded in *Steele Rudd and Shop Assistants’ Magazine* for April 1927 as a man of “indomitable energy, foresight and great dynamic driving power ... His success in the face of the greatest difficulties has been phenomenal. Nothing daunts him”. Phillips had signed up Eve Novak to return to Australia in May to star in *Runnibede*, and Davis wrote enthusiastically that the “huge profits which are being made overseas prove that the ‘movies’ have come to stay”.^61

Only one of the difficulties this project encountered could have been foreseen: Davis had sold the film rights to all his earlier material to either E.J. Carroll or Bert Bailey, and *Runnibede* was neither a good book nor a known title. The only promotion angle was Steele Rudd, but the new novel was no comedy. Nor was the book yet published, though the Bookstall Company was persuaded by all the big talk to publish a hardcover edition using stills from the movie as illustrations, and a launch to coincide with its premiere.

The next problem was the wall of hostility which Phillips Film Productions met in press and parliament. This independent company had no direct access to the major distributors who also controlled the trade magazines through their advertising. In addition a major royal commission into the film industry in Australia was then in progress, and Phillips was attacked by the chairman for importing Eve Novak: he strongly resented seeing an American star in an Australian film. Phillips argued that it was a compromise, but in his view a necessary one, and *Steele Rudd and Shop Assistants’ Magazine* agreed: supporting Mr Phillips was a “patriotic necessity”, even though the “patriotic pill will be very heavily sugared”.^62

Davis actively involved himself in the film production, helping to rewriting the scenario during the early part of the shoot, and travelling by boat as far as Brisbane with the cast and crew who were on their way to Murgon, where the culture of the Aboriginal community at Barambah (now Cherbourg) was to be exploited for American cinemagoers. For Arthur this was a chance to see Eric and Violet, and on the voyage up the coast to enjoy some of the status of great author sharing sunsets with famous Hollywood star. Wallace Worsley, the celebrated director of the 1923 Lon Chaney *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, was at that stage in charge of the production, and Arthur wrote to Winifred: “Sunday. 2.30pm. At Sea. ... Worsley is taking great care with the production and subjects them to a lot of rehearsing before turning the camera on.”^64 When they reached Brisbane, both Arthur and Eric noticed with some concern that no expense was being spared on comfort and entertainment; it was going to be an expensive shoot.

When the director originally hired to make the film, Scott Dunlap, eventually arrived from Los Angeles and took over from Worsley with the film three-quarters complete, he rejected most of the footage and much of the plot, and the already lavish budget began to skyrocket alarmingly. Roles filled by imported actors on
large salaries virtually disappeared from the release print, and the film became a much less complex story, concentrating on almost everything that is conventional and mundane in the novel. It is set in the present, not the past — for Hollywood, Australia is the past — and concentrates on the capture of the heroine by the Aborigines who are misled by a "witchdoctor", and the attempts to rescue her by two competing admirers, one of whom conveniently dies heroically so she can unproblematically marry the other.

As audiences and reviewers quickly noticed, the film of The Romance of Rumnibede, in spite of, and partly because of, its Hollywood point of view, is one of the worst Australian feature films ever attempted. It clearly addresses an audience of Americans, with maps and intertitles explaining basic Australian geography, and travesties the customs and ceremonies of the Aboriginal people with pseudo-African and pseudo-Hawaiian dancing and costumes, and even a blacked-up white actor as the "witchdoctor". The two actors who vie for Eve Novak's affections are gauche and wooden, respectively, and much of the film is technically poor. The camera operator struggled with the aperture, trying to match white and black faces in the bright light.

The premiere in Brisbane was on 9 January 1928 and in spite of initial interest the film quickly proved to be an expensive flop, some £10,000 in the red. As the backers of For the Term of His Natural Life were also discovering, American involvement did not guarantee American screenings, and by August Phillips was bankrupt and his Phillips Film Productions in receivership. Eve Novak and the production manager were each owed more than £4,000 and returned to Hollywood, apparently with the American rights in lieu of salary, but there is no record of screenings there. A British release was secured, but 1928 was the year in which sound films transformed the industry and ended the possibility of long runs for silent films. Davis sued for £150 owing to him, but it was never paid.

It would be easy, in recounting the appalling misfortune, folly and despair of Arthur Davis's last years, to forget the continued existence of Steele Rudd as an imagined someone very different. Just as overseas film-makers looked on Australia as a kind of romantic past—present, a living museum of exploitable locations and primitive peoples, so Australian mythmaking continued to appropriate Steele Rudd as witness and chronicler of the bush pioneers, heroic in the past, comic in the present. In May 1928, just as the Rumnibede venture was collapsing, William Anderson staged The Rudd Family in Adelaide. Davis attended on opening night. This play, like On Our Selection, contained a fairly tasteless sequence of amateur doctoring, which the Adelaide Advertiser could only defend by reference to the authority of the author:

Steele Rudd himself was there, and when the lanky, quiet bushman stepped on the stage to thank them for their reception of his work, the audience knew that he had
written out of the fullness of his own experience as the son of a pioneer of the Darling Downs. Even those who objected to the boisterous fun of removing a tick from Dad’s neck, were satisfied that these little things occur in the bush.  

The audience, according to the critic, saw not Arthur Davis but Steele Rudd, not a comic scene common to many plays of the genre but a truthful representation of personal experience. In 1930 Davis fed this myth by undertaking a series of public lectures — speaking as “Steele Rudd”; these and a few late uncollected Rudd family stories were his last attempts to exploit a stereotype that was an anachronism in the twenties and thirties; an echo of times past, or places primitive.  

*The Rudd Family* toured Australia for eighteen months and the royalties restored Davis’s unhealthy financial situation. He even put down a deposit on a block of land at Castle Crag on Middle Harbour, intending to build a home where, to assuage his guilt, he imagined Violet and Eric could join him. He was persuaded to float Steele Rudd as a company once again, but again things went wrong. Only a few issues of a new series of *Steele Rudd’s Magazine* appeared, and by mid 1930 the great financial depression had struck, the play was withdrawn, the company had folded, and the Australian Workers’ Union had sued him for unpaid printing bills. His son Lin left Sydney at about this time; they had seen one another infrequently, and apparently the meetings they had were not very amicable. Davis’s physical and psychological health was declining. Since the incarceration of his wife a decade earlier he had again become a heavy drinker, although he alternated his bouts with periods of self-proclaimed virtuous abstinence.

In spite of her own troubles, Winifred Hamilton was a tower of strength and energy. In 1929 she became editor of the *Wentworth Magazine*, published by the elite Sydney hotel of that name. She used it as a new platform for her own vigorously held opinions, and attracted contributions from Nettie Palmer and others. The magazine was published every two months, and with this unhurried schedule she found time to begin work on her biography of “Steele Rudd”, and even to go up to Queensland and explore the old selection site, an experience which distressed her:

Miles and miles of absolutely treeless country, an ugly modern cottage built on the rising ground of the selection … where the original home once stood was left but a post or two. Some straggling bushes and a very old peach tree: from this tree I brought away half a dozen immature peaches and on my return to Sydney gave them into the hands of Steele Rudd.  

By the second half of 1930 he was destitute, living alone in a “sunless, cheerless” room, occasionally unable even to afford food. She cooked meals and took them round to his flat, and secretly alerted friends, admirers and his relatives to his plight. A small amount of money trickled in, and a benefit performance was given
by the Fellowship of Australian Writers. The AWU agreed to accept the manuscripts of some new unpublished stories instead of forcing him into a pointless bankruptcy. Winifred also arranged secretly for an application to be made on his behalf to the Commonwealth Literary Fund for a pension. In September 1930 he was granted “immediate assistance” of £1 a week for a year, and she reapplied successfully the next year to have it extended for the duration of his life. Arthur accepted the pension but was apparently angry and ungrateful at Winifred’s public declaration of his poverty. To admit that all his success had come to nothing was beyond him; he offered his *McClure and the Parson* play to the Fellowship of Australian Writers for a benefit performance for another poverty-stricken member, and refused to take any payment himself, and he even tried to pay the writer and fellow FAW member Dulcie Deamer interest on a small loan she made to him — which he had repaid the next day.

At the end of 1930 the *Wentworth Magazine* too ceased publication, another victim of the depressed economy. For some reason Winifred Hamilton decided to return to Brisbane where she found work with the former printers of *Steele Rudd’s Magazine*, S.A. Best, and then, ironically, moved to Toowoomba as editor of the *Country Woman*. Before she left Sydney, Winifred persuaded Arthur to move into a small guest house in Darlinghurst, where at least some of his meals were cooked for him.

At this black moment in his life, two events came together by coincidence and saved him from total financial ruin. Bert Bailey decided to turn *On Our Selection* play into a sound film, and E.J. Carroll, who still held the film rights to the early Steele Rudd books, was diagnosed in London as having terminal cancer and came back to Sydney. In March 1931 he encountered Davis by accident in the street just as Davis seemed about to lose out yet again in the negotiations with Bailey. Carroll helped him to negotiate a deal which gave him modest royalties; this income, on top of his literary pension, enabled him to live in rather better circumstances.

His letters to Winifred gave her regular reports on the negotiations with Bailey over the film, and he expressed the hope that the royalties would enable them to set up a small bookshop together. The letters, which she included in the biography which she was completing at the time, are long and loving. In December 1931 he was trying to interest a publisher in a volume of her stories. However it seems probable that they never met again.

A “familiar figure in Sydney streets”, a “tall, gentle man who might, with his close-clipped moustache, have been a retired solicitor or army officer”, as the *Bulletin* described him, Davis was particularly attracted to that high-Victorian mixture of atheism, empire, social Darwinism and stoic philosophy, Winwood Reade’s *The Martydom of Man*, which Winifred had given him: “a season of mental
anguish is at hand, and through this we must pass in order that our posterity may rise. The soul must be sacrificed; the hope in immortality must die." He struggled with alcoholism and loneliness, and kept himself fit by walking around the Domain and swimming at the Rushcutters Bay baths.

At Christmas 1931 Eric Davis married, but Arthur did not attend the wedding. The date had been changed at short notice, Eric wrote in his biography, and once again absolved his father from neglect. Davis celebrated Christmas instead with others from the baths and the guest house at the Hydro Majestic Hotel in the Blue Mountains. There he met a wealthy widow and divorcée, Olive Beatrice Sharp. Early in the new year he was reassuring Winifred: "You are indeed wrong if you assume that I have made a friendship with a view to mending my finances!" The biography was completed at about this time, and no more letters were transcribed; many of the originals, including those written to Winifred after March 1932, were accidentally destroyed. Twelve months later Davis was writing not to Winifred but to Beatrice Sharp: "Through you I have awakened to realise how utterly incompatible and misfitted were associations of the past which now are so clearly dissolved that they can never rise again!"

Although Eric Davis claimed that it was Winifred who ended the relationship, reporting presumably what her son Douglas Cook told him, a surviving letter to Winifred from one of her confidantes, the novelist and socialist Jean Devanny, throws doubt on this:

As for your trouble with Steele Rudd: Mary Gilmore told me something about it. She was furious with him and I must say I was surprised to hear it. But, my dear Winifred, the world is full of torture and women are bound to suffer a lot in the acquisition of their freedom.

It does seem to be true that Winifred at some time during her years in Queensland formed a new relationship, but this letter dates from December 1933, and suggests a longer and messier separation and transference of affections from Arthur than is recorded elsewhere. They had of course been unavoidably physically separated for a year when he met Beatrice Sharp, but Winifred had invested about eight intense years of her life in a relationship she regarded as being between soul-mates, and another two writing the story of his life; there were complex emotions at work, and she felt betrayed. She returned to Sydney in 1934, but by this time Arthur's relationship with Beatrice Sharp precluded any renewal of their close comradeship in the last year of his life.

Beatrice Sharp was a quick, witty woman about the same age as Winifred Hamilton, and in her late forties when she met the man she called Steele Rudd. It is a curiosity of this last relationship in his life, given the struggle that had gone on for nearly forty years between his personal and his literary identities, that his love letters to her are signed by his pseudonym: now there was a real Steele Rudd.
He seems to have become childishly infatuated with her in a way that had never been possible with the sensible, outspoken Winifred Hamilton. On 10 February 1933 he made Beatrice a beneficiary in his will, and wrote a few weeks later: "You like the Sunshine jumped into my heart and mine went wholly out to you."

Beatrice too had family tragedies to lament and scars to bear. She married a printer, Ramsay Sharp, who died leaving her a young widow with a son and a daughter. A second marriage to a prominent Sydney lawyer lasted only a few hours: when he informed her after the ceremony that her children were to be sent to boarding school she promptly left him. This caused headlines in the Sydney scandal-rag, the *Truth*, and the lawyer kept her under surveillance for a long time, trying to find evidence of adultery. Her daughter was killed in an accident on Sydney Harbour in 3 November 1927 when the ferry *Greycliffe* was rammed by the liner *Tahiti*. At the time Steele Rudd started accepting Beatrice's dinner invitations, she was living with her son in a large comfortable house in Vaucluse. Shortly afterwards he moved into a small flat in the house.

It is not clear if their relationship was physical. In a copy of Plato's *Republic* he gave her, one passage marked as significant was: "with relation to myself, as the pleasures respecting the body become insipid, the desire and pleasure of conversation increase", and on the next page a line was scored beside Socrates' famous comment that in old age he had escaped from "the pleasures of love ... as from some furious and savage master." However, Beatrice Sharp was also a more conventional woman of her times than Winifred Hamilton, and it is probably significant that when they announced their intention to marry she insisted he move out of the flat in her house. She seems to have stirred the old prudishness in him; they both wanted a respectable marriage, not just an affair. Consequently in 1933 he instituted proceedings to divorce Tean on the grounds of incurable insanity. He made two trips to Brisbane, but made no attempt to contact his children either time. During the first part of the proceedings he went to the Willowburn Hospital for the Insane in Toowoomba, and pointed out Tean to his law clerk companion, who served on her a copy of the writ. There is no record of her reaction, and indeed no way of knowing if, when, or how often Arthur had visited her on previous occasions. She did not contest the divorce and the medical superintendent at Willowburn in evidence described her case as hopeless. Other agonising echoes of times past sounded when the matter came before the Supreme Court on 16 October. It was heard in the building he had known so well and in the courtroom where he had sat as under-sheriff. Presiding on the bench was the chief justice, Sir James Blair, who as the attorney-general thirty-one years earlier had told Arthur Davis he was to be retrenched from the public service.
Death and Reckonings

I give to universal history a strange but true title — The Martyrdom of Man. In each generation the human race has been tortured that their children might profit by their woes. Our own prosperity is founded on the agonies of the past. Is it therefore unjust that we also should suffer for the benefit of those who are to come?

Winwood Reade, The Martyrdom of Man

The divorce was made absolute in January 1934, and Steele Rudd and Beatrice Sharp were engaged in March. In the convention of “respectable” divorcees of the times, he described himself as a “widower” in his Who’s Who in Australia entry for that year. His last novel, Green Grey Homestead, eventually appeared, although it had been substantially written four years earlier. Yet another story of taking up a farm, it is distinguished mainly by its odd stylistic device of being written in the future tense: “You’ll be single when the idea of taking up a homestead first gets you.” It was originally to be called “You’ll Be” and to be published by the Bookstall, but it eventually appeared from a small private press run by Frank Johnson, whom Davis had met at Fellowship of Australian Writers’ meetings. It sold about 1,500 copies.

He and Beatrice did not marry, possibly because his health was failing. He had stopped trying to maintain contact with his friends, but was pleased to get a letter from Eric in July 1935. In his reply he wrote:

Lin has written me several times, but as his letters are such quaint high-falutin’ effusions when they are not recounting woes that could never be helped and are better buried, I generally wait until he writes again.

I have a room here, and breakfast in it by myself — then take my other meals at different cafes, always trying to secure a quiet table where I won’t have to look into the faces of strangers. … Sunday’s tea I have with Mrs. Sharp and her son — and one evening a week I have dinner with her in the city.

Through 1935 he was still writing, and completed a screenplay based on The Miserable Clerk. He was still negotiating with Bert Bailey, the most recently project being the film Grandad Rudd which premiered in February that year. Steele Rudd occasionally still attracted the attention of a grateful nation; he was awarded the King’s Silver Jubilee Medal in May. In September Arthur began suffering intense pain and showing signs of jaundice. Tests at St Luke’s Hospital at Bondi revealed advanced cancer of the pancreas. He decided to go up to Brisbane, and Beatrice
farewelled him at the train. In the General Hospital where he was admitted Violet and Eric visited him before he lost consciousness with merciful suddenness and died on 11 October.

Winifred Hamilton, searching for a fine phrase to end her biography, went to Tennyson’s *Ulysses*:

‘Tho’ much is taken, much abides; and tho’
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are:
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.’

She was thinking, of course, not of his death but of his struggle and suffering at a time when he should have been sitting back and enjoying the results of his extraordinary achievements. Yet, as he himself knew, if he’d stuck to writing and invested carefully, he *would* have lived very well indeed. For Winifred and the novelists, poets, essayists and scholars at a time when Australian literary and popular culture wilted before the onslaught of British publishers and American film-makers, it was important to blur the distinction between Arthur Davis and their imagined Steele Rudd, the most successful author of his age. If Steele Rudd couldn’t make a living from his pen, who could? Such beliefs helped to fuel the determination of those fighting for a better deal for Australian artists.

Davis had helped to establish the Queensland Authors’ and Artists’ Association in Brisbane in 1921, and at the inaugural meeting suggested that an advisory board be appointed “for the purpose of giving assistance and advice to young writers who were inexperienced in the ways of publishers”. He promoted and published Australian writers — and paid them royalties — and with the Authors’ and Artists’ Association, and later the Fellowship of Australian Writers, he donated his work for the benefit of the organisations and their members. If he finally failed to wrest fair deals from his publishers, performers and popularisers, he nevertheless achieved more than any other writer in his lifetime. Arthur Hoey Davis left to posterity some twenty-four books, five plays and several film scenarios, but this was not the end of Steele Rudd.
GRAVE ROBBERS

I have in another Place, and in a Paper by it self, sufficiently convinc’d this Man that he is dead, and if he has any Shame, I don’t doubt but that by this Time he owns it to all his Acquaintance; for tho’ the Legs and Arms, and whole Body of that Man still appear and perform their animal Functions; yet since, as I have elsewhere observ’d, his Art is gone, the Man is gone.

Richard Steele, The Tatler, No.1, Tuesday 12 April 1709

If all the Dad and Dave stories now in circulation were laid end to end they would stretch to infinity; for there would be just as many before we had finished with those already in existence.

A.D. Hope, “Steele Rudd and Henry Lawson”
On Saturday, 12 October 1935, Arthur Hoey Davis was buried in the Brisbane General Cemetery at Toowong. His body had been placed in one of the plainer coffins with nickel-plated handles, and taken from John Hislop’s funeral chapel to an unselected gravesite on the northern edge of the cemetery. The Reverend J. Scott Macdonald, minister at the Clayfield Presbyterian Church when the Davis family had first lived in that suburb, gave the brief panegyric. He could not resist the obvious pun: “his mortal part is today consigned to the smallest and most inevitable of all selections”.

On the assumption that Steele Rudd was also dead, the event attracted considerable publicity, and the premier of Queensland, William Forgan Smith, represented the state at the graveside. Forgan Smith’s press statement declaimed grandiloquently on the “heavy loss” to “Queensland as a state and Australia as a nation”, and assured Australians that his “contribution to literature will be appreciated by posterity”, because “he saw clearly, wrote clearly, and his work is monumental”. Obituaries — to Steele Rudd — were published in most of the major newspapers, mentioning that tributes had been sent by literary groups such as the Queensland Authors’ and Artists’ Association and the Henry Lawson Society, and trying to account for the life of one human being who had tried to be many, and who had now disappeared in fact as well as in at least one name. Inevitably, in so oblique and hidden a life, they mixed up fact and fantasy.

Drawing on the 1934 *Who’s Who* entry, they reported on his father’s “engineering” feats with Sir Thomas Mitchell, and that Davis’s “first wife” had died “several years ago”.

“Bookman”, writing in the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* on the day of the funeral, was factually no more accurate than the rest, but unusually clear-sighted in disentangling the life of the author from his biographical myth. He began unequivocally: “Arthur Hoey Davis was the only Australian writer whose baptismal name was completely submerged by his pseudonym. He was known by readers throughout Australia as ‘Steele Rudd’.”

This is not quite true — Tom Collins and Price Warung and Rolf Boldrewood, and to a lesser extent Henry Handel Richardson and even Banjo Paterson were pseudonyms — but the essential point is valid. Only Arthur Davis had become a victim of his own literary role, an unhappy shadow behind a cheerful ghost. What no one could have guessed, as they walked away from the real author’s graveside, was that at some point, as plagiarism and popular legend endlessly reworked “Dad and Dave” and looked for an author to attribute these characters,
stories and jokes to, Steele Rudd would get up out of Arthur Hoey Davis’s grave and walk away as well.

At the Brisbane General Hospital, the few possessions Arthur had with him were gathered together. His watch, spectacles, gold cufflinks, and his last literary pension cheque, were parcelled up and forwarded to Sydney solicitors Wilson & Clapin, together with a typed list of the contents. His children received most of these few remains and Beatrice Sharp got his walking stick. One item however, went missing: Arthur’s last story, “Celebrating a New Shire”, which he had been working on in the hospital. The surviving copy of the list has been annotated by Eric Davis: “No trace has ever been found of item No 16.” It may have been a chance loss, since there is no evidence the story was ever published or the manuscript sold for profit, but as an emblem its disappearance is telling: the grave robbers had begun to swoop.

But though Steele Rudd would live again, no one, it appears, including his children and the executors of his estate, had any continuing interest in the good name of Arthur Hoey Davis, or in protecting his work from intellectual piracy. The principal executor of his estate, Harry Clapin, was still owed part of his fee for settling Davis’s divorce two years earlier and, as he could see no prospect of being paid for any further work, he was disinclined to put himself to unnecessary trouble. He claimed that he had not been able to contact his co-executor E.G. Theodore, the former Queensland premier and federal treasurer, who was now living in Fiji. Clapin closed the file, and stopped answering letters.

On the family side, the question of the administration of Arthur’s estate appears to have led to disagreement among his children, and to an even more protracted delay. Eric had made the initial contact with the solicitors, the hospital, and the funeral directors, but Lin, twelve years Eric’s senior, asserted his role as first-born and took control of affairs. However, it took him five years to begin applying for letters of administration for the estate, and when he did so he apparently misrepresented himself as acting on behalf of his brothers and sister, without having asked them first. When Eric saw a copy of the relevant correspondence many years later he annotated it: “No authority was ever given herein by my sister or myself.” Lin, knowing that there were debts to pay and assuming they would far outweigh any legacy to be passed on, discontinued his efforts and the estate remained unproved.

But Eric Davis, too, failed to pay the bills which arrived in the letterbox. Almost twelve months after the funeral, George Waugh, Davis’s Brisbane solicitor, wrote in some embarrassment to Eric mentioning that he was still getting reminder notices for several unpaid bills, including both the Sydney and Brisbane hospitals, and the funeral directors. “As I practically guaranteed this account when I introduced you to the Undertaker, it puts me in a very awkward position, as I do
not want to be held personally responsible for the debt”. He had written to Harry Clapin, his Sydney counterpart, without reply, and told Eric: “As the executors apparently have taken no interest whatsoever in the business of your late father, surely the family can arrange to pay at least the funeral expenses.” Eric sent the letter on to Lin. Two months later Waugh received another bill, and wrote again, upset and angry:

I cannot understand the attitude of the family in this matter; firstly in not arranging to pay the account; and secondly, towards myself personally after the manner in which I assisted you and your brother at the time of your father's death.  

Eric sent this letter on to Lin as well, and again nothing happened. Eventually an entry was made in the Register of Burials at the Toowong Cemetery office: “Do not allow any work to be done on this job. Nothing paid to J. H.[islop] & Sons.” For eighteen years weeds were allowed to grow unchecked on the plot, until in July 1952 a group from the Queensland Authors' and Artists’ Association set out to find Davis’s — or as they thought Steele Rudd’s — resting place. Through them, word reached Eric of the state of the grave and of the entry in the burial register, and he at last paid the bill.

In the same month, on 28 July 1952, Tean Davis died at Willowburn Hospital in Toowoomba. Publicly declared dead by her “widower” husband in 1934, she had outlived him by seventeen years, finally succumbing at the age of eighty-three to heart failure and senility. Violet, now married and living at Bell on the north-western Downs, handled the formalities. On the same day the notice of Tean's burial appeared in the Toowoomba Chronicle — with no mention of her former husband — a local news item on another page carried a photo and story about members of the local art society holding their annual field day “on the site of Steele Rudd’s birthplace at Drayton” — with no mention of his former wife. Violet Christina Davis, née Brodie, passed from history as anonymously as she had lived.

Bert Bailey’s death on 30 March 1953 was the next event which made lawyers turn again in puzzlement to the silence that surrounded the Davis family. There was some £300 owing to the estate from royalties on screenings of the On Our Selection sound-film. In fact, this was almost certainly a gross underpayment, since the agreement was for 6 per cent of the net profit on this massively profitable movie (and nothing was ever paid for Grandad Rudd), but with the general neglect of Arthur’s estate there was of course no one checking the accounts on the Davis family’s behalf. The royalties that had been paid could not be released to the family until Arthur’s will received probate. Lin still did nothing, and it was more than a decade later again, in July 1964, before Eric, now a senior bank officer with
considerable expertise in such matters, steered the paperwork through the Supreme Court and was granted letters of administration.  

Thirty years after Arthur's death, the process of family reconciliation now began. Lin started scribbling down his memories of his father; Eric started collecting together what few letters, manuscripts and financial records he could find and announced his intention of writing a biography. He even contacted some of the descendants of Beatrice Sharp, who had died in February 1938, and Winifred Hamilton, who survived until 1959. When he came to write *The Life and Times of Steele Rudd* he was able to look back with understanding on his father's plight and to record his mother's fate without attributing blame.

He had less success with the tightfisted daughter of Bert Bailey, Tim McLean, who flatly refused to let him view her copies of the stage and film agreements which Arthur had made. These appear to have been with Bailey rather than the Cinesound film company, since its successor, Greater Union, informed Eric that there was no reference to his father in their files. Since Arthur's copies of his film contracts had for the most part been lost, this severely hampered Eric's attempts to find out what the copyright situation was in regard to the widespread use being made of Steele Rudd's work on radio, film, and television.

For several years he flailed around trying to take out Supreme Court injunctions to prevent what he thought were unauthorised broadcasts and screenings by everyone from the British Empire Film Distributors to the Australian Broadcasting Commission. "Being his son I am very proud of him," he wrote to the Brisbane radio station 4KQ which was repeating the *Dad and Dave* radio serial, "and as administrator of his estate I reiterate the outbursts of many of his admirers that this hillbilly nonsense must stop." They fobbed him off, referring him to the owners, EMI Australia. In 1972, when Channel Seven announced a *Dad and Dave* television series, Eric Davis and Tim McLean separately voiced their objections. The production company, Aztec Services, told both of them that the work was not based in any way on the works of Steele Rudd, and reworded the title as *Snake Gully with Dad and Dave* to stifle any challenges. For Arthur Hoey Davis's literary reputation — not to mention the financial benefit of his heirs — it was forty years too late.
Two ordinary Australians

In the same forty years, while the older real-life participants in this saga were dying and the younger were getting on with their lives, a savage feeding frenzy was taking place over the stories and characters which Arthur Hoey Davis — and A.G. Stephens — had created. The Steele Rudd phenomenon became the “Dad and Dave” phenomenon.

Although Bert Bailey and Fred Macdonald had done much to make Dad and Dave the most memorable duo in the Rudd family, the phrase Dad and Dave at the time of Davis’s death, had not achieved the mythological status it was about to assume. Steele Rudd, the Rudd family, and the Selection, were the marketing catchwords. Character names in various Davis obituaries were “Dad, Mum, and Dave” (Melbourne Argus), “‘Dad’ and ‘Mum’ and the other members of the ‘Rudd’ family” (Brisbane Worker), “Dad and Mum” (Toowoomba Chronicle), “Dad and Mum Rudd, and Dave and the rest of the family” (Brisbane Courier-Mail) — and Joe still occasionally received honourable mention. CecU Mann came closest to the future phraseology when in a Bulletin notice he referred to “the creator of Dad, Dave and Mum”, pointing out in the same paragraph that “one of those legendary characters he did not create at all — Mum; he always called her Mother, and was fond of her and respected her above all his other people — and the other two, Dad and Dave, are not in his first book the figures they have become in the legend.” Dad, he felt, had become “fatuous”, and Dave “moonstruck”.

It is not clear where Cecil Mann took this Dad and Dave from, since his descriptions are hardly those one would apply to Bailey’s and Macdonald’s energetic interpretations, however far the characters may have shifted from the original selection. But an oral tradition of jokes was already in circulation, and one major case of plagiarism was alive in the land: Dad and Dave had become cartoon characters in Smith’s Weekly.

Helped into life in 1919 by J.F. Archibald, Smith’s Weekly consciously championed the extreme nationalist position which Archibald’s Bulletin had espoused in the 1890s, although its thump anti-communism and strident white Australia racism showed how the radicalism of the 1890s had become unpleasantly reactionary in a different era. Smith’s Weekly was a fanatical supporter of the returning diggers and, renewing the rhetoric of the yeoman farmer, believed passionately in “settling the A.I.F. on the land”. “Where Is the Promised Land?” it demanded, chafing at administrative delays to the soldier-settlement schemes. It is not surprising, given its interest in farmer-heroes, that almost from the first
moments of its flamboyant thirty-one year publishing career Smith's Weekly began to exploit in cartoons a Dad figure, an old bushman with a Bert Bailey physique and white beard. Most of the paper's cartoonists visualised the character at one time or another, but first and foremost was Stan Cross, the immortal sketcher of "For gorsake stop laughing — this is serious", "The Potts", and "Wally and the Major". (Indeed in his cartoons Dad sometimes takes on very Major-like features — yet another shift in this most protean of Australian comic characters.) By 1924 Dad was joined frequently by a son, Dave, and later Mum and a daughter Sarah occasionally turned up as well. By 1930 the figures of Dad and Dave as Smith's Weekly imagined them had also moved into the paper's advertising columns, and were selling farm machinery.

In 1935, while Arthur Davis was still alive, Stan Cross took Dad, Mum and Dave on a European holiday, expanding the "hayseeds in the city" theme to the international arena. George Blaikie in Remember Smith's Weekly? recalled this as one of the high comic moments in the paper's history. But these were only single-frame images; it was impossible to copyright the word "Dad", of course, or "Dave". It was rather thin evidence on which to base a court action, even if Davis had been rich and litigious enough to try. Bert Bailey evidently thought it was better to join them than to beat them, and he and Fred Macdonald both appeared in Smith's Weekly advertisements — Macdonald as Dave selling "Heenzo Cough Syrup".

This relatively contained artistic and commercial appropriation changed on 31 May 1937 at 7 p.m., when the first episode of Dad and Dave from Snake Gully began on Sydney 2UW. Initially broadcast four nights a week, Monday to Thursday, it reached episode number 1000 in April 1942. New episodes were written and broadcast, though less frequently, for another decade — 2,273 episodes in all. At the peak of its popularity, so the legend goes, you could walk down any suburban street in Australia and not miss a word, since the radio in every front room was tuned in and playing loud enough for all the household to hear. Forty years later, in the mid 1990s, Dad and Dave is still being replayed on country and special-interest radio stations.

The famous serial originated out of a mixture of inspiration, opportunism, and marketing rat cunning. In 1937 Wrigley's, the confectionery company, was trying to counter Australians' widespread belief that chewing gum was an unpleasant American habit. They decided to sponsor a radio serial with "distinctive Australian" characteristics. Their advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson, approached the Sydney-based radio production team of George Edwards and Nell Stirling. The idea on which the initial contract was made was to model a show on the very popular American serial Amos 'n' Andy, with Australian characters replacing the comic negro caricatures. Dad and Dave were to be used to sell American gum,
and sure enough, after the show’s sensational success, the tin advertising hoardings nailed outside virtually every corner store across Australia declared: “Wrigley’s Chewing Gum: As Australian as Dad and Dave”.

There is some dispute about the extent of the program’s debt to *Amos ‘n’ Andy*. D.F. Jones of Grace Gibson Radio Productions is supposed to have claimed in 1978 that *Dad and Dave* was “deliberately modelled” on the American original, while Patti Crocker in *Radio Days* remembered that Lorna Bingham, “first adapted, and then wrote” episodes from 1940 onwards, suggesting that at least during the program’s early years some kind of localising was done, presumably from imported scripts. This has been hotly denied by Richard Lane, a radio writer of the time (though not with the Edwards–Stirling company), who has insisted that the sponsors only wanted a program “as successful as *Amos ‘n’ Andy* had been in America”.

*Andy ‘n’ Amos* were two simple-minded farmhands who set out for Chicago to make their fortunes. Amos was the optimist, the hardworker, the one with impractical dreams and schemes for getting rich which repeatedly collapsed in disaster. Andy was lazy and slower-witted, and one early episode has a comic scene in which he wrestles with simple arithmetic (trying to work out the train fare to Chicago) in a manner similar to Joe’s and Dave’s struggle with the sale of wheat in *On Our Selection* (book, play and film). A number of early *Dad and Dave* scripts do involve Dad’s harebrained money-making schemes, but some stories of Arthur Davis also had this motif. The scripts for the two radio programs are not sufficiently alike to prove direct localisation, and the often similar character types, basic situations and incidents suggest only the unending appeal across many cultures of the genre of bucolic comedy.

However, in spite of *Dad and Dave*’s dubious origins and motives — and the injustice done to the works and the memory of Arthur Hoey Davis — listening to a sample of some forty episodes from the surviving discs held in the National Film and Sound Archive in Canberra is a surprising experience. Surprising because, exactly as happened with Steele Rudd, it is clear that it was the popular imagination which remembered *Dad and Dave* as “hillbilly nonsense”. It was the oral tradition of bucolic jokes which gave the names Dad and Dave to stories about rural stupidity and misunderstanding, and made Dave and Mabel the characters in every dirty yarn about sex. The radio serial’s success merely provided the opportunity. In fact *Dad and Dave from Snake Gully* was never simply comedy, often not even particularly funny, and like most long-running serials it mixed genres in order to diversify its appeal. Like Bert Bailey, it wanted Dad to be an Australian hero.

The voice which introduced the first episode over the Jack O’Hagan tune
"Along the Road to Gundagai" was cultured in its tones and firm in its vision of the heroic:

We now present the first episode of Dad and Dave, a human story of two typical Australians, their families, their lives, their hopes, their doubts, their fears and their triumphs. The characters of Dad and Dave represent all that is sturdy, honest and resourceful in the great Australian outback. You'll laugh with them, you will sympathise with them, and perhaps their troubles may in some way remind you of your own. And perhaps their courage will inspire you. Now let us visit the homestead in Snake Gully, just off the road to Gundagai. It is a typical Australian homestead. There's a verandah running almost right round the house. In front of the house are a few trees, and a small, well-kept garden. Now let us enter the homestead. It is night time, and in the living room we make the acquaintance of Dad and Dave. Dad is sitting at the table, laboriously writing, while Dave has just finished reading the daily paper.

What followed, establishing the serial's central characters, was a cocktail of the Rudd family's names and stage accents. George Edwards's Dad was closer to Bert Bailey's active hero than to Arthur Davis's passive stoic, while vocally John Saul's broad-accented Dave echoed Fred Macdonald's. However the radio Dad was not the aggressive successful businessman that Bailey championed, and Dave was never played as dimwitted: the stage Dave could only read a newspaper with difficulty. Dave on radio was also a more forward lover than his naive and awkward stage counterpart; he courted numerous girls in a brash, larrikin manner, and "me 'eart's broken" was one of his stock phrases, after the inevitable come-down. His regular if much neglected girlfriend (and later wife) was Mabel Smith rather than the Lily White of the stories and plays, but Nell Stirling modelled Mabel's drawn-out breathy nasal vowels ("Aaw geee Daave") on the yokel daughter Sarah Rudd, as played by Bobbie Beaumont in the 1932 On Our Selection film.

The language of the radio characters became a major influence on popular slang for many years. Dad said "starve the lizards" frequently, referred to "good cobbers" and warned against "doin' yer block"; Dave's signature, as in the plays, was "cripes" or "by cripes", while Mabel's cocky and boasting father Bill Smith exclaimed "Jiminy Crikey". Dad's tempestuous relationship with Bill Smith was a principal motif throughout the life of the serial, and in episode 1,134 they fought in a boxing match at the Snake Gully Carnival. Bill Smith's wife Hattie had pretensions, while their son Alec was a bucolic simpleton. But some of the serial's complexity can be glimpsed in two episodes in which Alec Smith begins a relationship with a former actress, Ursula Debrett: in spite of the obvious potential for the caricature of both figures, the actress was played as a sensible complex character and their love scenes were not parodied. Later episodes shifted the comedy away from Dad and Dave altogether to Alf and Annie Morton, a loving
couple of born losers. Alf was a social misfit, a would-be poet who by episode 1,600 was editing the *Snake Gully Times*.

On radio, George Edwards's Dad called Loris Bingham's Mum “Sarah”, but everyone else called them “Dad” and “Mum”, even if they were as old or older. In this way the radio family never had a surname, which helped it — together with the “from *Snake Gully*” subtitle — to skate narrowly past the issue of plagiarism. The Davis family were locked up in their own game of repression and denial, and Cinesound Films decided against taking any action. Ken G. Hall claimed that Bert Bailey believed you couldn't copyright character names. Perhaps with “Dad and Dave” already loose in *Smith's Weekly* and folklore, and not wanting his own use of Arthur Davis's material examined too closely, he was right.

*Dad and Dave from Snake Gully* was set in the present, not the past. The time represented was always that of the date of its broadcast; each first Tuesday in November punters could go home from their Melbourne Cup meetings and hear the Snake Gully Cup run the same evening, sometimes with Cyril Angles, 2UW’s racing commentator, calling both races, real and fictional. The radio characters were familiar with modern technology, which was not a subject for satire on the characters’ lack of sophistication as in most bucolic comedy. Dad had a car from the first episodes, and Mum's first entrance words in episode 1 are “Thanks for the lift, Joe. I'll have my own car soon”. In episodes recorded in the mid 1940s Dave taught Mabel to fly their aeroplane and in one scene she goes up solo for the first time. Her “perfect landing” is warmly applauded by Dave, Mum and Dad; such scenes are genuinely affectionate and not parodied. While new inventions and fashions were sometimes joked about (for example, the visiting actress's blue fingernails), the serial was careful not to oppose “progress” and a reasonable statement by a major character supporting change was always included. While Dad suggests that the new sleeveless dresses being modelled at a fashion parade won't sell “in Snake Gully”, Mum thinks they're quite nice, and Dad demurs: “I hope I wouldn't be narrow-minded enough to push my views down everybody else's throat”.

The serial always had strong politically progressive attitudes, expressed through social-problem situations such as the Snake Gully community's bigoted and unjustified suspicions about the “morals” of a sophisticated French woman, and the plight of another lonely migrant woman ignored by the wives of the town, while the struggles of farmers hit by the drought and the depression were frequently alluded to during the first years of broadcasting. Predictable small town events such as carnivals, picnic races, and rehearsals for the amateur dramatic society play were exploited for sequences of episodes, and after the Second World War the serial’s location near Gundagai enabled Dad and Mum to visit Mt Buffalo
and see the Snowy Mountains scheme being built, and subsequently for the Snake Gully store to organise a fashion parade to raise funds for the “Mt Snowy project”.

To some extent however there were two distinct if overlapping Dad and Dave serials. The first ran from 1937 to some time in 1939 when John Saul quarrelled with George Edwards and left the studio. Dave was consequently written out of the series for nearly a year. Another change occurred early in the war, possibly mid 1940, when the original scriptwriter Maurice Francis joined the army and was replaced by Lorna Bingham. When Dave returned to the story he was played by Pat Pinney, an actor whose vocal tones were impeccably middle-class and with barely a trace of Australian slang, although Mabel’s dozy accent continued to fight with Bingham’s frequently proto-feminist storylines. Popular as the serial remained, and remains, its later episodes were significantly different from the original more broadly comic program which in 1937 triggered another explosion of popular bucolic humour, and the invention of never-ending “Dave and Mabel” jokes.

If Dad and Dave from Snake Gully has a distinctive, unusual quality, it is perhaps the regular preference by both scriptwriters to adopt storylines which avoid obvious or confrontational plot possibilities. For example, in the early episodes 57 and 58, Dad and Dave are in the city, but their actions are not caricatured. They go shopping for presents for Mum and Mabel, and after much discussion about size, colour, and price, buy expensive stockings from a shopgirl, Sue, whom Dave later takes to lunch. Predictable bucolic plot developments are all avoided — that they’ve paid too much, chosen the wrong colour, been exploited by the city slicker Sue, or that Mabel will find out about Sue when Dave gives the stockings to her. Instead the comic pay-off comes when they get home and discover that Mum has already bought a large supply of stockings from a travelling salesman. Another example occurs in the last two episodes, the first of which ends with Dave’s prize boar escaping and some speculation about the chaos it might cause, but in the next episode the fugitive is caught without incident. Like Arthur Hoey Davis’s Rudd family, and Bert Bailey’s, Dad and Dave was from first to last a celebration of the ordinary, the battlers. Like Davis’s, but unlike Bailey’s, it also immortalised the economically and socially unambitious.

The spinoffs from Dad and Dave’s instant success came quickly, with a stand-off and even at times co-operation among the principal thieves. Smith’s Weekly began to publish the radio stories in print form as a full-page strip cartoon drawn by Stan Cross, and Cinesound produced two further Rudd family movies, both scripted by their resident writer Frank Harvey assisted by Bert Bailey: all were as eclectic and plagiarist in their sources and opportunistic in intent as Dad and Dave had been. Again Bailey’s response, rather than trying to suppress
the radio serial, was to jump on the bandwagon of popular enthusiasm. He even included a scene — one of the funniest — in the first of these films where he as Dad and Macdonald as Dave go to a radio station and speak over the wireless.

This film, released in September 1938, had neither “Selection” nor “Rudd” in its Australian title, but stole back the new phrase: Dad and Dave Come to Town. The rest of the title was appropriated from Frank Capra’s celebrated 1936 comedy-drama Mr Deeds Goes to Town, and in England, where “Dad and Dave” had no resonance, it was even released as The Rudd Family Go to Town. Bower-birding indiscriminately from the last three years of Hollywood successes, Harvey and Bailey loosely based the plot on the 1935 musical Roberta, in which an American sporting hero inherits a Paris boutique. In Dad and Dave Come to Town Dad Rudd inherits a city fashion store and, assisted by his smart, sophisticated (and previously unknown) daughter, Jill Rudd, runs it successfully before returning to the farm.

In this film and the next, Cinesound began to rewrite the Rudd family master narrative. Dave’s wife disappeared, and Macdonald was obliged to play Dave as an isolated clown figure in both films. The scriptwriters also chose to invent new Rudd children as needed: Jill Rudd was a localisation of Irene Dunne’s starring role in Roberta. Jill was also a genuine if silent tribute to Bailey’s own mother, Harriette McCathie (1842?–1912), a milliner whose Sydney shop expanded into a major retail drapery and ladies’ outfitter. It was fitting therefore that Jill Rudd’s spirited rejoinder to a patronising male rival: “Don’t call me Girlie”, became the title for a 1980s’ documentary celebrating the achievements of women in early Australian cinema.

The last Cinesound feature, Dad Rudd, M.P (1940) still declared itself to be “Founded on the works of Steele Rudd”, but this was just advertising. The distance the narrative had travelled from Arthur Davis’s witty cynicism about the political process can be measured by comparing the opening lines of Steele Rudd’s Dad in Politics:

Smith, the member for our district, died one day, and we forgot all about him the next. Not that a politician is ever remembered much after he dies.

with Bert Bailey’s Dad Rudd upon hearing of the death of the parliamentarian the committee wants him to succeed:

Poor old Bill. The best member this district’s ever had.

In Dad Rudd, M.P the agrarian populism of Hollywood’s Frank Capra was again a closer narrative model than anything Arthur Davis ever wrote. In Capra’s Mr Smith Goes to Washington (1939) an unsuspecting rural bumpkin (James Stewart) is elected to Congress on a ticket rigged by crooks to make sure that when a new dam is built it will enrich their real-estate holdings; a year later
Cinesound's storyline has Dad Rudd standing for parliament ("Rudd won't rusticate") to make sure a new dam is built "high enough to serve the little man as well as the big man". The heroic scenes were freely mixed with Keystone Cops sequences involving Dad, Dave and the Ruddville Fire Brigade ("Any member attending a fire without his uniform will not be allowed to put the fire out. He will be sent home in disgrace, and hosed out of the brigade"). Again the model is Stewart's role in Capra's film; he is comically in charge of the local Boy Rangers. With such obvious attempts to imitate dominant Hollywood motifs, both the Cinesound films were successfully released in Britain.

It was, however, a long way from the radical nationalism of the *Bulletin* and the "real Australia" for which Steele Rudd had been acclaimed. *Dad Rudd, M.P.*, released in mid 1940 during the Battle of Britain, ends with Dad's maiden speech in parliament, in which he turns from the issue of the dam to "the drums of war [which] are sounding in every capital in the world". He demands support for the "blood of true nationalism", borrows freely from Sir Walter Scott ("this is my own, my native land") and, to the backing of "Land of Hope and Glory", asserts the brotherhood of the British Empire. The last image is of Bailey as Dad Rudd, white-haired, all-powerful kindly patriarch — Australia's Winston Churchill — superimposed over the fluttering Australian flag. Bert Bailey, the third major contributor to the Rudd family after Arthur Hoey Davis and A.G. Stephens, who more than anyone else drove the legend through the inter-war years and transformed it, took his handsome profits and retired to Darlinghurst in splendid comfort, both epitome and denial of his philosophy of the generous, caring, self-made little Aussie battler.

Gradually however, as the specifics of who had created or performed or written what faded from cultural memory, Steele Rudd returned to popular history, replacing Bailey and the radio production team as progenitor of the entire genre. *Dad and Dave from Snake Gully* became in legend "Steele Rudd's radio serial Dad and Dave", while even Arthur Davis's family did not realise, until thirty years afterwards, that the last two Cinesound Rudd family films had nothing to do with their father's stories or plays. Mabel joined the Rudd family by default, and many readers and listeners assumed that Davis's characters lived at Snake Gully. The erasure of the specifics, the texture, the dignity of Arthur Hoey Davis's writings was complete, but the legend rolled forward.
Memorialists

During this riotous period of popular and national mythmaking, critics, historians, friends, and one relative attempted to immortalise a different Steele Rudd, a figure at least nominally connected to Arthur Davis. A small number of loyal Rudd readers—Winifred Hamilton, Ashton Murphy, Cecil Mann, Brian Elliott, Tom Inglis Moore, A.D. Hope, Dorothy Green, and others—wrote in protest against the contradictions and excesses of the legend, and in support of what they believed was Davis's original tragi-comic conception and dry ironic style. With the notable exception of Miles Franklin, who attempted to locate and defend the phenomenon within “universal” folk culture, such supporters mostly limited themselves to a passionate but futile defence of the early On Our Selection stories, and until the 1970s were themselves for the most part marginalised in universities and “high culture” outlets, at a time when such influences were at their weakest.

One family member made a small but practical contribution to locating “Steele Rudd” in a specific time and place. Ned Davis, the closest to any real life model for Dave, outlived Arthur by a few years, and carved the first memorial to his famous younger brother on a solid hardwood post. He erected it at Emu Creek on the site of the old selection and chiselled on it “Steele Rudd’s old home”, followed by the names “Dad Mum Dan Sarah Dave Kate Joe Norah”. In 1968 the Cambooya Shire Council marked the centenary of their first chairman’s birth with a stone and plaque a few paces away. The original gateposts to the “old Selection” were all that remained, but gradually the razed and barren paddock acquired fence rails, a few inappropriate pine trees, and another plaque explaining that the site would ensure that “the memory of the pioneers of Australia, who gave our country birth, must never fail”.

In Toowoomba the Ladies’ Literary Society, which began in 1913 when Davis was resident on the Downs, worked steadily for about a decade on their own monument. The State Education Department granted the use of a few square metres of land in Drayton, and the Toowoomba City Council donated blue basalt stone from the local quarries for the cairn. On Sunday, 19 November 1950 it was unveiled by the Professor of English at the University of Queensland, J.J. Stable. Margaret Curran, the chair of the organising committee, also wrote to the newly elected prime minister, Robert Menzies, asking for official national recognition for the monument to this “forgotten genius”. She noted, slightly incoherently: “the travesties and parodies built around his name characters continue because Australian copyright it seems non-existent”. Menzies was evidently perplexed, and
one of his secretaries annotated the letter, presumably in response to the prime minister's query, "What did Steele Rudd write?" Official recognition, whatever that might have meant, was not forthcoming.

In 1953 the Queensland Authors' and Artists' Association, having located Arthur's grave in Toowong Cemetery, began a campaign for public subscriptions to erect a headstone. In 1956 another premier, Vince Gair, stood beside the grave, declared Steele Rudd to be "a great writer who was as authentic as the smell of gum trees and wattie", and unveiled the Association's memorial to "the interpreter of life on the land".

A tribute which failed was Winifred Hamilton's attempt to persuade the Commonwealth government, through the then-Speaker and acquaintance of Arthur Davis, Sir Littleton Groom, to buy a portrait by Oswald Paul which had been entered in the 1929 Archibald Prize. Her efforts began shortly after the painting was completed. Pointing out to Groom that no portrait of Steele Rudd was held in any gallery in Australia, she wrote "Considering he is the best known, and best loved, of all Australian writers this does seem to be a matter to be regretted and rectified." Nothing was done. Ten years later, in June 1938, Hamilton tried again, after Frank Dalby Davison and the Fellowship of Australian Writers had added their support. The portrait was inspected but not liked, and the matter lapsed until 1943. As late as 1948 Leslie Haylen MHR, possibly prompted by the tireless Winifred Hamilton, was still pursuing the matter, but to no avail.

The story of Winifred Hamilton's own last years, like much of the life of the more famous writer she loved, championed, protected and wrote about, is a tangle of glimpses and unknowns. Unable to find a publisher for any of her writings, she sold the typescript of her biography "Steele Rudd: His Life and Letters" to the Mitchell Library shortly after Arthur's death, and in 1936 suffered a breakdown in her health. Cared for by her son, Douglas Cook, she recovered and briefly resumed her literary career as a reviewer and columnist, forming part of a literary circle that included Miles Franklin, Marjorie Barnard, Flora Elder-shaw, Louis Esson, Frank Dalby Davison, Dymphna Cusack, and Roderic Quinn. By 1939 her glaucoma was debilitating so, with Nettie Palmer and Mary Gilmore's backing, she applied for a Commonwealth Literary Fund pension the next year. The application was unsuccessful.

By 1954, when the amateur historian Les Blake published the only record we have of her last years, she was needing periodic blood transfusions and intravenous injections, but her spirit was unbroken: "I laugh a great deal", she told Blake, "because life, blood, hospitals, and death are a great, if stupid, joke." She eventually died of cancer on 3 April 1959. She was a minor yet in some ways important figure in Sydney literary culture between the wars.
Steele Rudd Today

Any Australian book which sells a quarter of a million copies obviously can't be taken lightly.


In the massive process of reformation and redefinition of Australian society which began after the Second World War and which still continues today, Steele Rudd for a time followed Arthur Hoey Davis into near-oblivion, while "Dad and Dave" became a memory of a former crude, unsophisticated, mythical time and place. Nevertheless pockets of more complex and enduring memories turn up occasionally. Like many dimly remembered enthusiasms, different groups and individuals have constructed even more widely diverging interpretations of Steele Rudd than occurred at the height of Davis's success.

At the "high culture" end of the spectrum, as a memorial to genius, the Toowoomba Ladies' Literary Society makes the most determined effort to remember not just a one-time popular enthusiasm, but an individual, and someone they consider a major literary figure. After their success in building the memorial cairn, more or less on the site of the blacksmith's shop (or in grander references, "the engineering works") where the writer's father worked, the Society instituted an annual pilgrimage there. The cairn is opposite the Drayton State School, down and across the road from where Arthur Davis was born. Every year until recently the Society met at the school on the Sunday closest to his birthday to hear an address by a public or literary figure, to read excerpts from "Steele Rudd's" books, and to walk across to the cairn to read the words on the plaque written by the matriarch of the society, Margaret Curran: "To Australian Life and Letters he brought the rich gift of honest laughter with undertones of the struggles and sorrows of the pioneers."

The Steele Rudd Pilgrimage is an event where local politicians and other leading citizens demonstrate their appreciation of culture; their presence is duly acknowledged during an official introduction, and the apologies of others are read out and graciously accepted. The Society's president gives an address on some aspect of local history but more importantly, the afternoon includes the inimitable Connie Davidson reading from On Our Selection! A former English teacher and speech and drama aficionado, she reads slowly, deliciously, enjoying the wry humour, making the audience wait for the twist. It is the highlight of the afternoon.

The Toowoomba ladies also host an event each June for the other famous
Grave Robbers

literary son of the Downs, George Essex Evans, described by Alfred Deakin as Australia's "national poet". But that is a less egalitarian occasion, and Evans's patriotic poems are not as popular as they were when his "Federal Song" supposedly swung voting in the marginal states of Queensland and Western Australia in favour of nationhood. But none of this ambiguity surrounds the Steele Rudd Pilgrimage, which is the event of the Ladies' Literary Society's year.

As Australia's Bicentenary approached, the Society geared up for a major exercise in memorial building. On the site of the original selection a replica slab-walled, shingle-roofed hut was built by members of a rural youth club, and in February 1988 the then premier and Minister for the Arts, Mike Ahern, travelled to Toowoomba to announce an annual "Steele Rudd Award", a "national literary prize acknowledging the unique contribution to our culture of the Australian short story writer". The same year the Society succeeded in having the A.H. Davis College at the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education renamed Steele Rudd College — no one knew who A.H. Davis was — and Dr Peter Putnis, head of Communications at the Institute, edited a short commemorative volume, Steele Rudd's Australia.

But in the same years the format for the pilgrimage began to change. In 1987 the event proceeded as usual in a classroom at the Drayton State School, followed by the visit to the cairn. The long flight of stairs to the classroom was beginning to bother the older members of the Society, and it was hot, crowded, still and airless inside; several people had to move out to the verandah. Next year the organisers decided to try setting out the chairs and podium under the school on the concrete. The temperature plunged twenty degrees and a freezing wind howled through broken louvres. So in 1989 it was back to the upstairs schoolroom and another trying hot day, but after that the Society decided enough was enough: the rigours of pioneering life could be read about and sympathised with, without being endured. The pilgrimage is now held in the luxury of the dining room at Steele Rudd College, though numbers are down, and the walk across the road to the cairn is a thing of the past.

There are other ways, too, of remembering Steele Rudd. A few kilometres south of the cairn, a store, a petrol station and a crossroads have been named after "him", and the enterprising licensee of Rudd's Pub at Nobby has also organised several local festivals; this is unabashed bucolic commercialism, with dunny-cart races. Other places, even in New South Wales, also lay claim to the name. At Gundagai, near where the radio serial was supposedly set, bronze statues of Dad and Dave stand beside the Hume Highway at the Snake Gully Tourist Centre. And in 1991 at Agnes Bank, now just an outer western suburb of Sydney, another dimension of the legend received nation-wide attention.

According to the ABC Publicity Department, a million Australians "wait all
week for ‘Macca’ on a Sunday morning”. Since 1981, when *Australia All Over* began on ABC Radio, its host Ian McNamara has broadcast interviews with people in the outback, taken telephone calls from others from the Kimberleys to the Antarctic, read out their letters, listened to their yarns and comments, and played Australian folk songs such as “I Scored a Hundred in the Backyard at Mum’s”. He celebrates the modest and the ordinary, believing in the Bradmans who never get discovered.47

Genial and laconic, Macca seems to have all the time in the world, letting an interview meander on and taking a genuine interest in its ordinariness, and then following it with “Have a listen to this,” as he cuts across to a recording of Australian bird song. One week he is hosting from Darwin, the next from Byron Bay, in each place providing a running commentary on what’s happening outside the broadcast caravan and yarning with passers by. When he’s in the Sydney studio he’s likely to mention that he’d rather be out in the country. He’s not keen on cities, and he’s not too impressed either with high levels of immigration, or American television (“Australians make the best TV programs in the world”) or plastic banknotes. He doesn’t like change, cultural or physical. This is a vision of Australia to which Macca and his listeners are passionately attached. They believe it’s on the way out, but not if they can help it. Macca would like to see Wattle Day revived as a national holiday.

It is hardly surprising that in 1990 the organisers of “Back to Agnes Bank Day” asked Macca to publicise their event. Fifty-nine years earlier, when Ken. G. Hall and Bert Bailey went looking for locations for the sound *On Our Selection* movie, they wanted the “real” Australia — but also electricity for the cameras and microphones. Agnes Bank, fifty kilometres west of Sydney, was about as far outback as they could go.

So the banks of the Nepean River became Queensland’s Darling Downs, birdsong from New South Wales provided sound effects for the “Bush Symphony” at the start of the film, and Devlin’s paddock was the location for the running of the Ruddville Cup. Hall and Bailey asked the Agnes Bank locals to repeat their latest Empire Day celebrations in the shade of a giant crab apple tree, and after three days’ filming the “Biggest Day in Ruddville’s History” became a scene in the most successful Australian film of the thirties.

The 1990 “Back to Agnes Bank” celebrations were organised by Norman Baker, who rode in the Ruddville Cup as a 13-year old film extra. There was a sense of urgency in the timing: if he waited a year for the sixtieth anniversary, a re-enactment on-site might have been impossible. A quarry company now owned part of the land and the bulldozers were closing in. As it was the crab apple tree had been hit by lightning a few months earlier and had died.

Macca publicised “Back to Agnes Bank”; the eighty-nine-year-old Ken G. Hall
agreed to attend and bring his photos; some locals who, like Norman Baker, had been extras in the film contributed more memorabilia; the Richmond Amateur Players offered to dress up as the Rudd family; the Londonderry Pony Club (these days, all teenage girls) agreed to re-enact the Ruddville Cup; and a picture of Bert Bailey as Dad Rudd gazed philosophically from the Souvenir Programme handed out at the gate. About the only noticeable absence was any mention of Arthur Hoey Davis.

This was a much less refined carnival than Toowoomba’s: marquee tents, men with loudhailers directing traffic, an ambulance with a jolly officer on standby, the local Lions selling gristly steak sandwiches and Coke, Mellow Yellow, lukewarm teabag tea, or instant coffee. There were physical types straight off the selection: self-important red-faced Dads discussing “the rain we had Thursday”, freckled lanky Daves and nugget Joes crinkling their empty drink cans in bored embarrassment, Sarahs and Kates struggling through the long grass in old-fashioned dress, hitching up their long skirts.

Norman Baker was the MC, announcing over the PA system that people had come from “all over Australia” to summon up the past. He called people to the microphone to reminisce and the commentary flowed: “wouldn’t happen these days”, “given everything on a platter these days”, “rode a pushbike nine miles to the school and nine miles home”, “those were the days”. Norm even called out past pupils of the school and led them in the pledge they said every morning at assembly: “I love my God. I serve my Queen. I honour the flag”. He noted regretfully that perhaps they had better sing “Advance Australia Fair” instead of “God Save”, although “Empire Day was the highlight of the year in those days”. Norm and everyone else began to get Ruddville and Snake Gully all mixed up. “We called it the Snake Gully school,” someone said, although Snake Gully wasn’t invented until Dad and Dave came along, six years after the film of On Our Selection.

In one of the tents some of the locals examined Lands Department maps of the area pinned up on a board, and criticised the mapmakers for their lack of local knowledge: “How would they know? All they do these days is fly around in a plane with a camera.” In another tent a video copy of the film was showing as the famous race scene draw near a crowd gathered to watch, thanks to Norm on the loudhailer: “There’s Dad Rudd. Acted by Bert Bailey”. He had already upstaged the video by recounting the last joke in the scene: Dad is appointed one of the judges and Joe Rudd, riding Dad’s draughthorse, takes an illegal short cut but still comes last; and when Dad is asked who won he replies: “How would I know? I was watching me own horse.” When that moment came in the film, the adults laughed again, twice as loud as before.

The day ended with a re-enactment of the race scene by the Richmond Players.
and the Pony Club — and three-legged races, potato, apple and obstacle races, throw the bone, step the distance, and drive the nail. In 1931 Agnes Bank immortalised itself in affectionate self-parody and in 1990 still liked what it now recalls as Dad, Dave, and Snake Gully.

Dad and Dave jokes continue to circulate whenever crude rural idiocy is required. Among the most recent is this:

Dad and Dave were watching a dingo licking its genitals.
“‘You know, Dad,” said Dave. “I hate to admit it but all my life I’ve wanted to do that.”

“Go ahead”, Dad replied. “But I’d pat him first. He looks vicious.”

In 1994 a slightly different version of this was used to introduce a thirty-page section on Dad and Dave in the Penguin Anthology of Australian Jokes — it was the first joke in the first section in the book.48

It is an irony of the “Steele Rudd” industry that because everyone after Arthur Davis was a thief, no one had the gall to try to assert sole copyright ownership. This lack of control over intellectual property in effect gave the stories and characters over to Australian society at large to remake in whatever forms it chose. Indeed, it may only be possible for a myth of this kind to grow where there is a freer play of contributors than modern copyright law allows. Legends may develop from the work of single authors alone, but if they are to endure they must be appropriated, reworked, revitalised. If Dad and Dave had not existed, even fewer would now remember Steele Rudd or Arthur Hoey Davis.

Others altered and exploited the writing, but whatever their tampering did to the artistic credibility of Arthur Hoey Davis, it ensured Steele Rudd’s immortality. In 1986 a panel of Australian professors of Literature and History nominated “Steele Rudd” as one of the fifty men and women “who most helped shape modern Australia”.49 It is not clear if they were referring to what Arthur Davis wrote — or if they knew. Even the distinction between Steele Rudd and “Dad and Dave” has been lost: in 1988 “Steele Rudd” was given a Bicentennial listing among the “200 Top Australians” for having “created Dad and Dave”.50 As a measure of the cultural impact of “Dad and Dave” this is fair comment; and as a pointer back to the “Steele Rudd” phenomenon it was at least partially valid. For Arthur Hoey Davis it was the latest insult, though undoubtedly not the last joke.
NOTES

Introduction


2. Eric Davis, in The Life and Times of Steele Rudd (Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1976), pp.55-56, claims that his father used the full name "Steele Rudder" in his first rowing columns. There is no evidence of this and it is contradicted by Davis's own account of the matter in the unpublished lecture "How I Wrote On Our Selection".


15. John Locke, Two Treatises of Government, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1964). The extracts quoted are from the section “On Property” in the Second Treatise, paragraphs 34, 32, 36, & 37, respectively.


17. Voltaire, Candide, or, Optimism, trans. Richard Aldington (London: Abbey, n.d.), p.120.


1 Before Eden

1. The paraphrase draws on poems 84 and 85 of Poems 1913, as well as the sub-title “The Labour of Night” given to poems 73–85. A.R. Chisholm, ed., The Verse of Christopher Brennan (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1960).


5. Eric Davis, The Life and Times of Steele Rudd (Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1976), p. 15; also “Notes from Mrs G. Lewis”, in possession of Maurice French. Davis’s comments are based on those in the unpublished Winifred Hamilton biography, p. 1.


8. The following account is based on Maurice French’s published and subsequent unpublished research and correspondence with members of the Davis family, and I would like to extend particular thanks to him for his generous provision of all this material. The research of Elaine Walton, a descendant of one of Thomas Davis’s sisters
who married and moved to Utah in 1878, was particularly useful, supplemented by
the information provided by Elsa Reichle, the late Mrs Land through her daughter
Robyn Land, and Mrs Valda Davis.

11. For Groom's career, see *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 4, 304–5.
13. For Lowe's career, see *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 2, 134–37.
14. See Frances O'Kane, *A Path Is Set: The Catholic Church in the Port Phillip District and
15. For Chisholm's career, see *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 1, 221–23.
16. Henry Parkes, speech to the NSW Legislative Assembly, 14 August 1866, quoted in
Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonisation of Women in
17. By far the most detailed of many accounts of the Irish Orphan scheme, and that used
as the principal source in this summary, is Joseph Robins, "The Workhouse Child
1840–1860 — Orphan Emigration to Australia", Ch.2 of his *The Lost Children: A
Study of Charity Children in Ireland, 1700–1900* (Dublin: Institute of Public Adminis-
tration, 1980), pp. 197–221.
19. For Lang's career, see *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 2, 76–83.
21. This summary of political events in Wales is taken from David I.V. Jones, *Before
40–42, 55–61, 133–58.
22. Parish Register, St John's Church of England, Aberdare. This information was
supplied to the present author by Elsa Reichle from family records, and was
independently confirmed by a separate search done by Elaine Walton of a copy of
the Register held in the Aberdare Public Library (letter to Maurice French, 27
September 1987).
23. The court case was reported extensively in the *Cambrian or General Weekly Advertiser
for the Principality of Wales*, 12 March 1847. The article gives his occupation as collier,
but the cross-examination of one witness, David Davies, seems to imply that his
suspicious presence in a wood near the Aberdare forge could be explained by the fact
that he worked, or had worked, there. The following account is taken from this
report.
24. Eric Davis in *The Life and Times of Steele Rudd*, p. 24, states this was because "his
sister Maggie had chopped it accidentally with a tomahawk". Unfortunately this
book, being based on oral reminiscences, is often inaccurate. I have been careful not
to repeat the unsourced assertions which comprise much of the Winifred Hamilton
biography, and which are copied, embellished, and supplemented in Eric Davis's
work. Both are valuable sources, but must be used with caution.
25. Putnis, p. 49.
29. Robins, p. 211.
33. See e.g. “Emigration”, People’s Advocate and New South Wales Vindicator, 17 February 1849, pp. 5–6.
34. Robins, p. 212.
37. Sydney Morning Herald, 22 February; 8, 9, 10, 12, 16, 19 March 1849.
38. Sydney Morning Herald, 9, 10, 17 March 1849.
40. Sydney Morning Herald, 10 March 1849.
42. Probably Portland prison, near Weymouth, although this has yet to be confirmed.
44. People’s Advocate and New South Wales Vindicator, 29 December 1849, p. 4.
45. See Thomas Davis, letter to the Under-Secretary for Lands, 17 January 1879. Ms F772, Fryer Library, University of Queensland.
49. See Thomas Davis, letter to the *Queenslander*, 29 January 1898, p. 215, reprinted in the Toowoomba *Chronicle*, 26 March 1953. Burnett's *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry (3, 303-4) incorrectly states that he was absent from the Survey Office between 1848 and the beginning of 1851.

50. For Glennie's career, see his *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry (4, 255-56).


55. Hamilton, p. 4.

56. Compare "Mrs. Peterson's Remains" from *Back at Our Selection* with Act II, scene 1 of *In Australia; or, The Old Selection*.


58. For a discussion of this, see D.B. Waterson, *Squatter, Selector and Storekeeper*, p. 110.

59. This was not quite fair; Hodgson was in fact on his way back to Queensland, although he left for good in 1870. See his *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry (4, 405-6).


61. For Groom's career, see his *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry (4, 304-5).


63. *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, Second Series, 7 (Brisbane: James Beal, 1868), 16-17.

64. "The Darling Downs Selections", Brisbane *Courier*, I–XV, 7, 28 March; 4 April; 9, 16, 23, 30 May; 11, 13, 18, 25 July; 1, 8, 14, 15 August 1874.

65. Peter Flanagan purchased land in Warwick in 1865–66, see Crown Land Sales 1865–66, LAN/AB 10/11, M1557 Z1534, Queensland State Archives, Brisbane. He is mentioned in the General Muster of Convicts in NSW in 1837 as an Irish convict transported in 1826; he was born about 1800 and presumably retired to Warwick in the mid 1860s.

2 Going on the Land, 1870–1885

1. Eric Davis, *The Life and Times of Steele Rudd*, p. 56, claims this was his earliest published work, but the source, Davis’s “How I Wrote On our Selection” (*Life*, 15 February 1904, p. 172), does not. “Going on the Land” first appears, as far as is known, in the February 1904 edition of *Steele Rudd’s Magazine*, pp. 42–43, and has been reproduced in Peter Putnis, *Steele Rudd’s Australia*, p. 35. Its last line refers to “flash electric cars”, making it unlikely that it is the poem as written c.1893–94.


4. Copy of report, Mss F772, Fryer Library, University of Queensland.

5. The first version of this episode appeared as “Steele Rudd’s Autobiography” in *Copy! The Annual Shriek of the Australian Journalists’ Association*, 1 December 1913, p. 93.


7. See “School Roll 1875”, *Emu Creek State School Centenary Souvenir Booklet, Saturday May 24th, 1875* (n.p., 1975), p. 14. Mary, Richard, Edward, Margaret, and Arthur H. Davis were enrolled together, though not at the beginning of the year; Robert Davis was enrolled last on the list. Arthur was probably enrolled by August; he is 36th on the list, and a school inspection on 9 August noted 43 enrolments.


16. Copy of correspondence in Mss F772, Fryer Library, University of Queensland.


18. For Douglas’s career, see his *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry, (4, 89–92).

19. Photocopies of the Lands Department records are held at Mss F772, Fryer Library, University of Queensland.


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25. For an account of the reading habits of Australians, see Martyn Lyons & Lucy Taksa, *Australian Readers Remember: An Oral History of Reading 1890–1930* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992). Davis is indexed under "Steele Rudd".
26. Lyons & Taksa, p. 53.
28. *Emu Creek State School Centenary Souvenir Booklet*, pp. 3–4. This is a reproduction of an unsourced news report from the time.
29. Waterson, *Squatter, Selector and Storekeeper*, p. 244.
30. There are two accounts of Violet Brodie's life. One is a paper, “Certain Women”, by Lorraine Cazalar which was read to the Queensland Women's Historical Society on 8 October 1981, and for which a copy exists in the University of Southern Queensland Archives, VF018. The other is in the *Emu Creek State School Centenary Souvenir Booklet*, p. 5.
31. Arthur Davis, letter to A.G. Stephens, 27 November 1897, held in Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, NZ.
33. Hamilton, p. 5.
34. Hamilton, p. 5.
35. Hamilton, p. 13. The quotation as given by Green is slightly different.

3 From Selection to City, 1885–1903

2. After he was retrenched Davis published the official letters etc. concerning his public service career in *Steele Rudd's Magazine* (February 1904), p. 32.
4. A copy of this agreement, obtained by Eric Davis, is held in Ms4591, National Library.
5. Reproduced in Hamilton, p. 11.
8. Sir Arthur Rutledge letter to Thomas Davis, 29 July 1902, in Ms2285, National Library.
10. This nonsense seems to have started with W.E. FitzHenry's article "Steele Rudd", published in the Bulletin, 22 July 1953, p. 27. "If one thing made him wild, however, it was a Dad-and-Dave wireless programme that ran some years ago. He objected strongly, too, when he heard the Rudd parents called "Dad" and "Mum." "It is "Mother", "Mother"," he would shout, flushed in the face". Fitz Henry does not quite say it was the radio he was shouting at, but that implication was taken into popular magazine articles; see e.g. the undated newspaper clipping from Truth in Ms4591, National Library.
15. See French and Waterson, p. 146.
16. Davis's own memory was that Archibald's first reply had been "an opium-sodden dream, without beginning, middle, or end". ("How I wrote On Our Selection", 1904 version). I have not been able to locate this, and suspect it is an invention.
17. Thus, in the book of Our New Selection! in 1903. The version published in the Bulletin, 13 July 1901, under the general title "Our New Selection" has: "And Dave came. And two days later Dad called him a useless dog." It is not certain who deleted the awkward first "And" left over from the first draft, but on other evidence it was almost certainly A.G. Stephens. For Davis's revision see his letter to Stephens, 6 February 1901 [A2299 A.G. Stephens Papers, Mitchell Library].
Lindsay's sketch a "caricature", but this is to some extent reading back on to the original illustration the later connotations.

29. Eric Davis claims (The Life and Times of Steele Rudd, p. 69) that the Bulletin had revealed Arthur Davis's identity in "1879", which could be a typographical error for either 1897 or 1899. I have seen no evidence of the name Davis being used before the publication of the book and Stephens's review of it, both at the end of 1899.
33. Commercial Banking Company Deposit Slips, Ms2285, National Library.

4 From City to Selection, 1904–1907

1. G.C. Bolton, "Robert Philp: Capitalist As Politician", in Murphy, Denis, Roger Joyce and Margaret Cribb, eds., The Premiers of Queensland (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990), p. 211.
5. For details of Murphy's career see Bert Murphy, ed., On the Wallaby: Ashton Murphy (Brisbane: Boolarong, 1991).
6. Ashton Murphy, "Steele Rudd", All About Books, 14 November 1935, p. 190. The date of 23 December is in the copyright registration forms for Steele Rudd's Magazine, CRS A1716, item 279, Australian Archives, Brisbane.
16. Lindsay, pp. 63–67.
17. Steele Rudd, “How I Met A.C. Rowlandson”, Australian Mercury 1, 1 (1935), 65. This is an edited version of a longer account which is in the Hamilton biography and part of which is published in Eric Davis, The Life and Times of Steele Rudd, pp. 107–9. There is also a ms version, “Recollections of A.C. Rowlandson”, in the La Trobe Library, Melbourne (Ms5272 218/3).
19. A copy of the agreement is held in Ms4591, National Library.
23. It is not quite true to say that the exclamation mark disappeared from the title of the paperback On Our Selection, since the Bulletin edition’s title page was reproduced in full in at least some Bookstall printings. Nevertheless it is a convenient way of identifying the sixteen chapter Bookstall edition as distinct from the twenty–six chapter Bulletin original, and similarly the fourteen chapter reduction (from twenty–one) of the second book.

5 Gentleman Farmer and Playwright, 1908–1917

2. Lin Davis notebook, Ms4591, National Library.
10. See *The Theatre*, 1 June 1912, p.32; *Hobart Mercury*, 25 August 1908.
11. See Bert Bailey, letter to Steele Rudd, 12 October 1912, reprinted in Musa, pp.158-62. “I did not ... offer you for the rights of your books less than I was perfectly content to accept as part author of *The Squatter's Daughter*”
12. Copies of both contracts are in the Bailey Papers, Ms6141, Folder 102, National Library.
13. Lin Davis, memoirs, NL Ms4591, National Library.
14. See CRS A1336/1, item 2391, Australian Archives, Canberra.
17. *Sunday Sun* (London), 9 September 1921; discussed by Musa, pp.11-12.
18. Bailey, A.E. & F.B. Smith, “On Our Selection”, ts, CRS A1336/2 item 2391, Australian Archives, Canberra. This was deposited on 6 May 1912 — the Monday following the first performance on Saturday, 4 May, as was the usual practice at this time. The Sandy–Kate–Jim Carey sections in this version differ considerably from those in the later published script.
24. A typescript of *Duncan McClure*, in three acts, is in the Australian Archives Copyright Collection at CRS A1336/1, item 4347.
26. For the full exchange of comment and letters, see *Theatre Magazine* 1 July 1915, p.23; 1 October, pp.19-20; 1 November, pp.39-40; 1 December, pp.32-33; 1 January 1916, p.15; 1 February, pp.18-19.
27. The typescript of *Duncan McClure and the Poor Parson* is in the Bert Bailey Papers, Ms6141, National Library.
29. The only typescript of *On Grubb's Selection* is in the A.H. Davis Papers (MS 4591) in the National Library; it is undated and has several pages missing, or partly missing, from the end of Act Four. The 1928 script, *The Rudd Family*, substitutes the Dicksons for the Grubbs and omits the Jimsy Barden character but is elsewhere only slightly different from the earlier play; it exists in a typescript in the National Library (MS 4591). The 1932 version is a greatly shortened and simplified script omitting the villain and another role, which it seems was intended for country touring, probably by a company led by Fred Macdonald. No record of performances by this group has to date been uncovered. There are two slightly different scripts of the 1932 revision; one is in the National Library (MS 2285); the other in the Mitchell Library (MS 4297).
31. V.G. Davis, no. 1863, Personnel Dossiers for First Australian Imperial Forces Ex-Service Members, Series B2455, Australian Archives, Canberra.
33. Correspondence held in A.H. Davis file, PSC/1, Queensland State Archives, Brisbane.

6 Family Tragedies, 1917–1935

2. It is usual to state that it was published 1917–22, but I have not traced issues for 1919 or 1921. However a letter from Arthur to Gower, 9 September 1921 (in Ms4591, National Library) refers to work he was doing planning a 1921 issue.


7. For *We Kaytons* (then called *The Kaytons*), see Fred L. Shenstone, letter to Arthur Davis, 25 March 1918; for *On Emu Creek*, see George Robertson, letter to Arthur Davis, 14 November 1921. Ms2285, National Library.

8. See e.g. Hamilton, p. 117: “the Editor returned it saying it ‘wasn’t nearly so humorous as ‘On Our Selection’.”


16. Chapter 16, “Under the Hammer”, should be inserted between the two halves of Chapter 15, “We Hear About The War”, after “… up he jumps an’ led th’ way to th’ auctioneer.” and before “A week later.”


18. This estimate is based on the financial records in Ms4591, National Library, as well as the claim in the Hamilton biography, pp. 30, 31, 53, that he received £100 for “Bush Horses and Bush Horsemen”.

19. Arthur Hoey Davis to Gower Davis, 9 September 1921. In Davis papers, MS 772, Fryer Library, University of Queensland.

20. Financial records, Ms2285, National Library.

21. The information as to dates, etc. have been taken from the Petition for Divorce filed in the Supreme Court of Queensland, No. 394 of 1933, now held at SCT/T1205, Queensland State Archives, Runcorn.

22. The petition for divorce (see previous note) states that it was not in December 1920 but 1921 when Tean was allowed out for the last time, but other evidence, especially a letter, Arthur Davis to Gower Davis, 11 December 1921 (Ms4591, National Library) which makes no mention of this and indicates other plans, suggests that this is an error. The petition was not made until 1932.

details about Heal Davis's medical condition are held in the Wolston Park Casebooks in the Queensland State Archives, Runcorn. However at the time of writing the Davis family is unwilling to allow the file to be examined.


25. Eric Davis, *The Life and Times of Steele Rudd*, p. 151. He gives the date when the former owner Dunlop resumed ownership as 1920, but Arthur's 1921 Tax Assessment Notice still records a deduction of £140 "on farm land mortgaged to Dunlop and to AMP Society". Ms2285, National Library. Probably the transfer was completed around 1922, when the drought broke and the land became valuable again. Arthur Davis's own account, in the Hamilton biography (pp. 43–44), says only that the farm was "foreclosed on".


28. Aston Murphy, letter to E.C. Brown, 28 August 1919. CRS A1336/1, item 6053. Australian Archives, Canberra.


30. "Realism First", "Motion Picture News and Views", *Green Room*, 1 April 1920, p. 6. See also " 'On Our Selection' in Celluloid", *Green Room*, 1 August 1920, p. 16.

31. " 'On Our Selection' is Ready", *Picture Show*, 1 August 1920, p. 44.


33. This telegram was apparently still in Longford's possession in the early 1950s and sighted by the late Les Blake, who quotes it in Ch. 6 "Making a Selection Pay", of his unpublished biography of "Steele Rudd", now in the possession of Hugh Anderson. I have not been able to check the accuracy of the citation.

34. Eric Davis, *The Life and Times of Steele Rudd*, p. 159, assumes it was *On Our Selection*, a surviving letter, Arthur Davis to Gower Davis, 11 December 1921 (Ms 4591, National Library), mentions showing *Rudd's New Selection* at Clifton.


36. This may not be quite true; the status of the 1935 *Grandad Rudd* film is ambiguous, and the later sound films might be said to have been indirectly inspired by stories covered by this agreement. See Bailey Papers, Folder 102, Ms6141, National Library.


39. Hamilton, p. 2. In quoting from this very rough typescript, I have silently corrected evident errors.
41. Hamilton, p. 77.
42. Interview with Clyde and Dulcie McIntyre, 13 November 1994.
43. See Winifred’s ambiguous references to her own character in the biography, p. 120.
44. Hamilton, p. 123.
45. For simplicity’s sake, and because I have not sighted all issues alleged to have been published, I have not always tried to follow the many variant titles for the magazine, which include Steele Rudd’s for the 1922 Annual (given the full title in the running heads), Steele Rudd’s Monthly from April 1923 to September 1924; Steele Rudd’s from December 1924 to at least February 1925; Steele Rudd’s Magazine in July 1929, and The Steele Rudd in 1930.
46. Eric Davis, The Life and Times of Steele Rudd, p. 166.
51. Hamilton, p. 120.
55. Hamilton, p. 50.
58. Hamilton, p. 50.
61. Steele Rudd and Shop Assistants’ Magazine, April 1927, pp. 18–19.
62. The most complete account of the financing and making of the film is that given by John Tulloch in “Phillips Film Productions”, part of Ch.9 “The American Invasion: Second Wave”, in his Legends on the Screen: The Australian Narrative Cinema 1919–1929 (Sydney: Currency/Australian Film Institute, 1981), pp. 330–42. The chairman’s comment is quoted on p. 332.
63. Steele Rudd and Shop Assistants’ Magazine, April 1927, p. 19.
65. Tulloch, p. 339; Everyone's, 13 May 1928.
68. Hamilton, p. 50.
69. See Minutes of Central Committee, Commonwealth Literary Fund, CRS A3753, 72/2760 Part 2, Australian Archives, Canberra.
70. Hamilton, p. 79.
71. Eric Davis, The Life and Times of Steele Rudd, p. 208. Much of Winifred Hamilton's later career is sketchy and poorly sourced, and requires further investigation.
80. Eric Davis, The Life and Times of Steele Rudd, p. 216.
81. Jean Devanny, letter to Winifred Hamilton, 27 December 1933. JD/Corr (P)/73. I am grateful to Carole Ferrier for drawing my attention to this item.
82. "Steele Rudd" (Arthur Davis), letter to Beatrice Sharp, 3 March 1933. Ms4591, National Library.
83. Interview with Cecile Ramsay-Sharp, 9 June 1990.
84. I am grateful to Mrs Cecile Ramsay-Sharp for providing me with a photocopy of the relevant pages of this book, which is in her family's possession.
85. Interview with Cecile Ramsay-Sharp, 9 June 1990.
86. Documents concerning the divorce between Arthur Hoey Davis and Violet Christina Davis, SCT/T1205, 1933. Queensland State Archives, Runcorn.
87. An application under Freedom of Information legislation to examine Violet Christina Davis's mental health records, held by the Queensland State Archives and elsewhere, is still undecided at the time of writing. It was stated, however, in conference with the Queensland Department of Health that no record of visits existed.
88. Courier-Mail, 17 October 1933, p. 11.
89. *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 1 February 1934; Eric Davis, *The Life and Times of Steele Rudd*, p. 218. The date of 23 March 1934 was confirmed by Mrs Cecile Ramsay-Sharp in interview, 9 June 1990.


91. Hamilton, p. 129.


### 7 Grave Robbers

1. Macdonald forwarded a copy of the notes for his speech to Eric Davis, held in Ms4591, National Library.


3. See e.g. *Argus*, 12 October 1935, p. 25; *Chronicle*, 12 October, p. 7; *Worker*, 15 October, p. 9; *Bulletin*, 16 October, p. 14; *Everyone’s*, 16 October, p. 3; *Bondi Weekly*, 24 October, p. 3.


8. Note in Ms4591, National Library.


12. See correspondence between Eric Davis and Trout, Bernays & Tingle, held in Ms4591, National Library.


21. *Smith’s Weekly*, 5 January 1924, has a number of Dad and Dave cartoons (pp. 13, 19) and one with Mum as well (p. 18), although Dave as a character by himself had been
appearing at least two years earlier. See Smith's Weekly, 7 January 1922, p. 22. Sarah is in a “Virgil” cartoon on 3 January 1925, p. 19.


25. See e.g. Peter Dean, “Dad and Dave turn 50”, Courier Mail, 30 May 1987, Weekend 3.


27. Albert Moran, “‘All in the Family’: Australian Television Situation Comedy”, Australasian Drama Studies 1,1 (October 1982), 111.


32. Dad and Dave from Snake Gully, episodes 600–601.

33. Ken G. Hall, interviewed by author, 10 June 1990.

34. Dad and Dave from Snake Gully, episode 1601. The account of the serial given here is based on an auditing of episodes 1, 9–10, 19–20, 57–60, 600–601, 1132–37, 1600–1601, 2262–63, 2272–73, as well as a number of early episodes broadcast on Brisbane radio station 4RPH during September–December 1991, not all of which were identified by episode number, but which included episode 61.

35. See e.g. Dad and Dave from Snake Gully, Episodes 1132, 1600.

36. Dad and Dave from Snake Gully, Episode 1132.

37. Dad and Dave from Snake Gully, Episodes 1598ff.

38. For Maurice Francis's career, see Radio Pictorial, 1 May 1939, pp. 40–41, 64, and Richard Lane, The Golden Age of Australian Radio Drama, pp. 35–37.

42. Miles Franklin, *Laughter, Not for a Cage* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1956), pp. 113–14. See also her typescript article on Australian theatre (untitled) in Miles Franklin Papers, ML Mss 364, Mitchell Library.
43. See Margaret Curran to the Prime Minister, 18 November 1950, and a further letter (undated). Records of the Commonwealth Literary Fund, A462/1, 827/3/5, Australian Archives, Canberra.
45. See the relevant correspondence in the Commonwealth Literary Fund series A461/1 P370/1/4, Australian Archives, Canberra.
TIMELINE

1847–68
Thomas and Mary Davis

- On 3 March 1847, Thomas Davies, 18, of Abernant, near Aberdare and Merthyr Tydfill, South Wales, is convicted of two counts of burglary, and sentenced to ten years' transportation.
- On 4 November 1848, Mary Green, 14, of Tuam, County Galway in the west of Ireland, is one of a group of Irish orphan girls who leave Plymouth on the Inchinnan bound for Sydney. She finds works as a servant for a Penrith schoolmaster, James Rutledge.
- Thomas Davies leaves Weymouth on the convict ship Adelaide in August 1849. He arrives in Sydney on Christmas Eve, and is granted a ticket-of-leave - as Thomas Davis. He gains employment as a surveyor's assistant and blacksmith on the Darling Downs.
- James Rutledge moves to the Darling Downs in 1851, and opens a school.
- On 19 January 1852 Thomas Davis and Mary Green are married at Drayton.
- In February 1856 Thomas is granted a conditional pardon. Ten of his and Mary's children survive infancy, including the eighth, Arthur, born at Drayton on 14 November 1868.

1868–94
Arthur Hoey Davis

- On 19 September 1868 Arthur Davis's future wife Violet Christina ('Tean') Brodie is born at Ipswich, the daughter of Daniel Brodie, foreman, and Violet Brodie née McIntyre.
In 1870 Thomas Davis makes application to select 160 acres at Emu Creek south of Drayton.

In 1872 the family moves to Stanthorpe for eighteen months, then return to Drayton.

Tean Brodie's father is killed in a riding accident in 1874; her mother moves to Emu Creek to be near her own relatives, the McIntyres, and opens a general store.

About August 1875 the Davis family move to their 'selection'. Arthur attends the local school to age 12, then works as a farm hand on neighbouring sheep and cattle properties.

On 21 May 1885 Arthur is appointed a Junior Clerk in the office of the Curator of Intestate Estates in Brisbane. In 1889 he becomes a clerk in the Sheriff's Office of the Supreme Court.

Arthur begins publishing stories in local papers in 1893, the year his mother dies.

Arthur Davis and Tean Brodie are married on Boxing Day, 1894.

1895–1935
Arthur Hoey Davis and Steele Rudd

On 6 April 1895 the Sydney Bulletin publishes 'Starting the Selection' by 'Steele Rudd', the pen-name of Arthur Davis, and the first of his many short stories about life on a small farm.

Arthur and Tean live in Brisbane with their two sons, Lin and Gower, and daughter Violet.

Arthur's public service career blossoms; he becomes Under-Sheriff for Queensland in 1902.

The Bulletin's literary editor A.G. Stephens edits Arthur's stories to make them all about one family, the 'Rudds': Dad, Mother, Dan, Dave, Sarah Joe, Kate and Norah. Published in December 1899 as a novel, On Our Selection! sells some 4000 copies in hardcover, and eventually an estimated 250,000 copies in all.

On 2 December 1903 Arthur is suddenly retrenched in a government economy drive. A second volume of stories Our New Selection! is published the same day; his father dies a month later.

Arthur determines to live as a freelance writer in spite of Tean's objections; starts Steele Rudd's Magazine with the artist Ashton Murphy. Writes and publishes more books including Sandy's Selection, sold to the NSW Bookstall Company for a record £400.

Early in 1907 the family go to Sydney to further Arthur's literary career, but
leave after ten months. Arthur accedes to Tean's wish to buy a Darling Downs farm for their sons. A third son, Eric, is born in 1908.

- In 1909 the NSW Bookstall company purchase the copyright to all Steele Rudd's stories, and begins dividing them up and reissuing them as short, cheap paperbacks.
- On 4 May 1912 a stage adaptation of *On Our Selection* opens in Sydney, starring Bert Bailey as Dad and Fred Macdonald as Dave, and becomes the most successful Australian play of all time. Arthur's extensive work on the script is ignored, and exploitative clauses in his contract with Bailey mean that he receives little financial benefit.
- Arthur concentrates on writing further plays, two of which are performed professionally.
- In August 1915 Gower Davis enlists for the First World War. Arthur is obliged to do more of the farm work, which he hates. Tean begins to show signs of an unstable nervous condition.
- A prolonged drought, and Tean's illness, force the family to return to Brisbane in 1917. Arthur resumes full-time writing and restarts Steele Rudd's magazine.
- Gower Davis returns from the War and is discharged on 4 August 1919. Four days later his mother is admitted to a mental hospital; eventually her condition is considered 'hopeless'.
- Arthur raises his children alone, continuing to write prolifically.
- In 1920-21 two silent films directed by Raymond Longford, *On Our Selection* and *Rudd's New Selection*, are screened to great acclaim and revive Steele Rudd's reputation.
- In the same years the newspaper *Smith's Weekly* starts using the names 'Dad' and 'Dave' for characters in cartoons, which become enormously popular.
- In 1923 Arthur and Winifred Hamilton (1885–1959) start a relationship. She becomes sub-editor on the magazine. In 1926 they move to Sydney.
- Arthur has by now sold nearly all his literary, dramatic and film copyrights, and loses heavily in a film venture from his late novel *The Romance of Runnibede*. In spite of the success in 1928 of a fourth play, *The Rudd Family*, by 1930 he is destitute.
- Winifred Hamilton arranges for him to receive a Commonwealth Literary Pension of £1 a week for the rest of his life. She leaves to find work in Queensland in 1931.
- In 1932 the sound film of *On Our Selection*, based on the play, becomes the most successful Australian film of its time. Arthur's contract ensures him rather better royalty payments.
- Arthur forms a new relationship with a Sydney widow, Beatrice Sharp (1885–1938), and divorces Tean on the grounds of incurable insanity in 1933. He is
diagnosed with cancer of the pancreas in 1935, and dies in Brisbane on 11 October. Tean lives on until 1952.

After 1935
Steele Rudd

- On 31 May 1937 the serial *Dad and Dave* begins on Sydney radio station 2UW. New episodes are made until the early 1950s, and repeat broadcasts continue to the present day. Made by George Edwards, Nell Stirling and others from scripts by Maurice Francis and Lorna Bingham, it is erroneously but frequently referred to as “Steele Rudd’s radio serial *Dad and Dave*”.

- Between 1938 and 1940 two Rudd family films, *Dad and Dave Come to Town* and *Dad Rudd M.P.*, falsely claiming to be based on Steele Rudd’s stories, are made starring Bert Bailey.

- Dad and Dave continue to be used for everything from jokes, advertising slogans and restaurants to memorials and statues. Steele Rudd is remembered as progenitor of them all.
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