

The Ghost of Dad Rudd, On the Stump

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Much of the work of politics involves creating and recognising constituencies. It involves persuading a group of people to identify themselves as part of a particular community of interest. The language of the “ordinary”, the “forgotten”, people, the “battlers” have all been used in Australian politics to imply such a community. In looking at the various adaptations of stories by Steele Rudd (A. H. Davis), it becomes apparent that popular culture involves a very similar process of constituency building. The adaptations of Davis’s stories illuminate this process in both cultural and political contexts and prompt speculation as to how popular culture and politics continue to influence one another in Australia.

Dad Rudd is a figure who has come to haunt Australian politics as well as our popular culture. Like politicians, those involved in the production and marketing of Davis’s stories have used the language of nation to imply and create a broad community of interest, in this case a market for their books, plays and films. They do so largely through the establishment of Dad as a character representative of the Australian community, and they establish him as this representative through his involvement in politics, and more particularly through his speeches. These speeches suggest some ways in which popular culture can reflect and also contribute to people’s understandings of themselves as part of a political community.

The adaptations of Davis’s stories invite reflection about how this process of constituency building works. Australian cultural, literary and political historians have been notoriously fixated on the idea of national identity. The ways in which Davis’s texts and their adaptations position audiences and readers suggest that collective identity is not established through people’s identification with a national character or set of characteristics. Instead, we come to feel part of a community when we identify with one another in recognition of shared attitudes towards them. The use of words such as “plain” and “ordinary” signal this process: the use of these terms in a public context, such as a speech, implies a shared set of understandings, and thus a

group of people who share these understandings. The ghost of Dad Rudd is the idea of the “ordinary Australian” that we recognise even though we might not identify with it.

The Rudd family first appeared in a series of short stories by “Steele Rudd” in the *Bulletin* in 1895. They have since gone on to appear in at least eight collections of stories, an enormously popular play (1912 onwards), two films by Raymond Longford (1920-1921), four by Ken G. Hall (1932-1940) and one by George Whaley (1995). Their popularity extended from the 1930s through to the 1970s with a long-running radio serial (1937-1952), a comic strip, a television program (1972) and a theatre adaptation (1985). For over a hundred years, the Rudd family has formed part of Australia’s popular culture. Writing in 1956, Miles Franklin could assert that the members of the Rudd family “are the only fictional characters familiar throughout the land” (Franklin 117).

Richard Fotheringham argues that the lack of control over the intellectual property of Davis’s work allowed his stories to undergo so many and such different adaptations (Fotheringham, *In Search of Steele Rudd* 186). I’d suggest that Davis’s stories have been adapted so freely and in such clear reflection of commercial expectations also because of the lack of plot in the original stories. In the imposing of story upon Davis’s incidents and characters, those responsible for adaptations have been able to fit them into the generic structure most suited to the time and audience. In this way Dad Rudd’s character has changed over time, incorporating beliefs about Australia’s character and history, and the expectations of the various media and genres in which he has appeared. So the great ghost ship Rudd steams onwards, with his pioneer barnacles, into the twentieth century and beyond, his outer carapace solidifying onto the image of the Australian battler.

Dad’s character as battler becomes entrenched, and begins to represent the Australian character and community more broadly, when he enters the adversarial sphere of politics. Dad is first prevailed upon to stand for Parliament in stories published in 1904 in *Steele Rudd’s Magazine*, the Queensland *Worker* and *Life*. Two of these stories appeared in revised form as the final two chapters of Davis’s third collection, *Sandy’s Selection* (1904). These were revised to become part of another collection, *Dad in Politics*, in 1908. This collection is quite different from Davis’s previous work in that the focus shifts from the details of one family’s life on the land to matters affecting a broader community in the Queensland Parliament. The tone of the writing shifts accordingly, from one of broad comedy and bush realism to pointed, topical satire.

Many Australians came to know Dad Rudd, as played by Bert Bailey, in the popular stage melodrama, *On Our Selection*. *On Our Selection* was immediately and lastingly popular on the stage. When first produced at Sydney's Palace Theatre in May 1912, every night sold out by 7.15pm, and the crowds were such that traffic was held up on Pitt Street for every night of the run (Hamilton 41). The production then toured throughout New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and New Zealand in that year, and it played somewhere in Australia almost every year for the following 17 years (Musa 10; Hamilton 44). Three months after the play opened, newspaper advertisements hailed it "A tremendous boom wherever played. Absolutely the greatest success ever known in this country. Overflowing audiences nightly" (Adelaide *Advertiser*, 30 July 1912). Fotheringham goes so far as to refer to *On Our Selection* as, "the greatest success the Australian live stage would ever know" (Fotheringham, "The Plays of Steele Rudd" 86). Adaptation for stage melodrama required significant alterations to Davis's plot and characters, and much of the added conflict is structured by Dad's involvement in politics to defeat the play's villain.

Twenty years later Ken G. Hall, working largely from the theatre script, made his first "Dad Rudd" film, also starring Bert Bailey. Following its success he went on to make three further films that aggressively modernised the Rudd family, the last of which, *Dad Rudd, M.P.*, opened in 1940.

The construction of Dad Rudd and his ghost has long been the product of collaboration. His path to becoming representative of a much broader constituency began with the dedication to *On Our Selection!* as re-written by A. G. Stephens. Davis's original dedication to *On Our Selection!* read: "Dedicated most affectionately to 'Dad' and the surviving selectors of the Darling Downs, Queensland, Australia." This would have set the book up in the mode of the semi-documentary writing that was so popular in the period, attaching the story to a particular set of people in a particular place and time. The dedication that was re-written by A. G. Stephens has a very different tone, placing the Rudd stories within the context of a grand pioneering past:

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 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. (Rudd, *On Our Selection!*)

This is a memorial dedication, setting up “Good Old Dad” and his family as representatives of a benign, preferable and shared past. Our shared familiarity with “Good Old Dad” becomes more explicit in subsequent volumes of stories which deal with the next generation of Rudds: *Sandy’s Selection* (1904) is dedicated “TO THE MEMORY OF THE GOOD OLD TIMES!” and also “to you, OLD FRIENDS! . . . You who shared with me those careless days” (Rudd, *Sandy’s Selection*). The various versions and adaptations of Davis’s stories have built on this ever since in a steady accretion of familiarity and nostalgia that acknowledges a community of readers who have followed the Rudds through the events of their lives as well as, by association, the “development” of the nation.

This dedication links the “pioneers” with the Australians who are positioned as inheritors of their virtues: the battlers. The pioneers are described in terms of their ability to explore, mine, settle and develop the land. Such acts are conflated in the use of a quote from Henry Lawson’s “The Roaring Days”, a nostalgic celebration of mateship on the goldfields, alongside allusions to explorers and settlers who, “strove through the silences of the Bush-lands and made them ours.” The pioneers are also described in terms of their invisibility in public life, their “names never engraved on tablet or tombstone”, for whom “few now appear to care.” This implies that those who are not acknowledged in public life, the ordinary people, create and constitute the nation. This claim is at once vague and forceful, prefiguring the idea of the “plain people” which emerges in Dad Rudd’s speeches as well as foreshadowing the Liberal Party leader Robert Menzies’s idea of the “forgotten people” (see Brett, *Forgotten People*). This emphasis on the voiceless, nameless people who do all the hard work to get us where we are—be they selectors or the middle class—enables a wide range of people to see themselves, and the work they do, as important to and representative of the national community. The Dad Rudd texts and adaptations play out the mechanisms for building a national constituency that were to prove so successful for the Liberal party under Menzies in the 1950s, and later under John Howard: the linking of the hard work of individuals on behalf of their families to the good of the nation as a whole.

This dedication positions a certain kind of people at the heart of the national story, and suggests Dad as their champion and representative. Dad's defining characteristic is his social mobility, which is established, in large part, through his participation in politics. He can come to represent not only the pioneer and the battler but also the "aspirational" members of the middle class.

Dad in Politics (1908) has received little critical attention, despite its influence on the more popular adaptations that were to follow. Davis, Bailey, and Ken G. Hall plumbed Dad's speeches to Parliament, journalists and the public in this volume for their theatre and film adaptations and his career as a politician has formed part of nearly all subsequent adaptations of Davis's stories. In this way Dad's involvement in politics has had a major impact on how his character has continued to be perceived within popular culture.

The use of satire in *Dad in Politics* enables Davis to draw on popular distrust of politicians to position Dad in comparison with them as the natural and moral representative of the people. This satirical register and attitude towards politicians is established in the opening line of the volume: "Smith, the member for our district, died one day, and we forgot all about him the next" (Rudd, *Dad in Politics* 1). Dad's election is seen as a *fait accompli* because he is not like Smith and his colleagues. When Dad speaks to the people of his district, he is seen to use "plain language" and to be "plain and honest", so a common set of attitudes and beliefs, and a common language are acknowledged. Dad is "plain" because, when he speaks in public, he is intelligible to the people of his local community. He "travelled round the country and addressed the electors at the Middle Arm and Cherry Gully, and Bible Creek, and Tannymorel, and Hell-hole, and any place there was a school or barn or shed or anything he could stand up in." He is received with "joy and enthusiasm", and "when polling day came round they voted for him to a man and with a big cheer put him to the head of the poll" (4).

Dad Rudd is further established as representative of the ordinary people in opposition to those already in power through Davis's use of "fish out of water" humour. In his first day in Parliament in the stories, Dad "entered the building as if he was proprietor of it." He certainly doesn't look like a politician, so when he asks where he should go, he is sent up to the gallery:

Dad blundered up like an elephant, his footsteps and false steps echoing all over the building. He reached the top breathless, and when

his eyes rested upon a group of ordinary-looking people crouching in listening attitudes, he looked bewildered . . . Dad looked down and saw all the eminent legislators of his country lolloping idly on the benches.

“Damn it!” he exclaimed in a loud voice, “that’s where I’ve to be!”
(8-9)

Whereupon Dad engaged in the first of several hand-to-hand altercations in his first day as an elected member (see Figure 1. below).



Figure 1. Dad puts both hands to the policeman (Rudd, *Sandy's Selection*).

In Lionel Lindsay's illustrations for *Sandy's Selection*, Dad's scuffles are watched over by the delighted faces of the onlookers in the gallery. Throughout his time on the floor of parliament, the "ordinary-looking" people in the gallery actively cheer him on. With Dad's interjection from the gallery to the floor of Parliament, Davis sets up his role as a liminal figure who clearly belongs, and is seen to belong, in the world of the gallery but learns to function in the realm of the powerful, and in that process establishes his authority to speak for ordinary Australians. This situation dramatises the way that audiences both within and external to these texts are joined together in recognition of Dad as representative of their community.

Throughout *Dad in Politics*, Dad stands up for the people against the politicians, describing the people in terms similar to those of the dedication

to *On Our Selection!* He stands up to publicly represent “his” people, who have been overlooked, ignored, badly done by. In Dad’s maiden speech in parliament he describes exactly who constitutes his community and what they are like. The Land Settlement Bill aims to help poor city folk settle on the land. Dad responds vociferously to this suggestion:

Why can they not help the people who are on the land *now*—people who’ve been there all their lives, workin’ their hearts and souls and very eyes out among stones, and sand-hills, and bog-holes, and dry cricks, and the devil on’y knows what. (Great laughter.) Let them show they’re in earnest by helpin’ those poor deservin’ people, and stop foolin’ about with gentlemen friends of theirs . . . (Rudd, *Dad in Politics* 36-37).

Here Dad sets out an opposition between his representation of the disenfranchised, “poor deservin’ people”, and the other politicians, looking out for their “gentlemen friends.” He also expresses his belief that ownership of the land can only be earned through hard work: if you have to be helped to settle on it, you have not earned it and will not last. He expresses this through talking about the hardships of his family, and their defining characteristic is that:

“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.) (37)

In the context of arguing against government money being used to support city people to settle on the land, Dad stakes out his distinction between the deserving and undeserving owners of land. In the stage play of *On Our Selection*, this speech reappears, with the added line, “and there is ‘undreds of families doin’ the same this very day” (Bailey 133). Subsequent adaptations emphasise the Rudd family’s role as representatives of a wider community.

In order to provide *On Our Selection* (1912) with a plot appropriate to melodrama and to the stage, Bailey, Davis and Beaumont Smith emphasised the existing conflicts in the stories and invented a new one.¹ In the stories, Dad’s triumph is figured primarily in terms of his material success. His struggle is, first and foremost, against the elements to make his selection viable. In the play Dad, as hero, battles and triumphs over a human villain, Old Carey. Dad’s conflict with Carey is fought on three fronts: land ownership and financial success, political power, and the marital happiness of Dad’s daughter, Kate: that is, land, love and politics. The convolutions of the plot conflate these three battles with one another. The introduction

of a conflict-driven plot gives Dad Rudd a great deal more agency, or the impression of agency, than he ever exhibits in the preceding stories. He also becomes a more positive figure: his grievances can be confronted because they are specific, and his triumph is assured. Transposed into the moral universe of the melodrama, Dad's constituency takes on a more generalised and moral dimension, and so he comes to represent not only the farmers or selectors, but the forces of good against those of evil. By the time Bailey first played Rudd on the stage, he was already widely-known by audiences from his work in other Australian "backblocks" stage comedies such as *The Squatter's Daughter* (1907) and *The Man from Out Back* (1909) and so brought to the public imagining of Dad all of the nostalgia and familiarity invoked in those plays.

In *On Our Selection* Bailey gave the speech that went on to define him and his representation of the Australian ordinary:

DAD. 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 'is '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 I've fought and struggled for years, where me sons and daughters were born. Well, take me few 'ead 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 always doin'. I can start again. (Bailey 95)

Fotheringham notes that this speech expanded over time in response to the reaction of audiences (*In Search of Steele Rudd*). In this way a piece of popular theatre becomes a response to the tastes and beliefs of its audiences as much as it comes to structure them. In this speech Dad speaks explicitly of representing "the men of this country" who have inherited "the spirit of the pioneers who struggled to make the land." This spirit, and inherited virtue, is defined by

the act of making money and owning property. Bailey did not invent this aspect of Dad's personality: the parts of the speech that mention "getting on" and making money are copied directly from "Dad on Socialism", a chapter in *Dad in Politics*. The play may have emphasised Dad's social mobility because it fits so well with the generic expectations of melodrama, in which virtuous heroes are rewarded by sudden improvements in wealth and status. What is certainly new to the play is the explicit linking of the earning of money and property to the work of the pioneers and thus the development of the nation. Judith Brett has shown how ideas linking private to public financial wellbeing can be a powerful force for creating community and confidence in government, and that this was particularly the case prior to the influence of Keynesian economics, as the earning and saving of property by individual families could be related explicitly to the economic wellbeing of the nation. This became most apparent with Government appeals for investment in war bonds (Brett, *Australian Liberals*). Popular culture can set up and entrench this process, in this case by conflating Dad's success in terms of financial security with that of moral and political triumph.

Perhaps more so than fiction, theatre and film create immediate communities. Humour can challenge or reinforce community attitudes for members of an audience. The theatre and film adaptations of Davis's stories interpellated an audience who recognised Dad Rudd and his family as representative of Australians more generally. The idea of the Rudds as "typical" of a certain group of Australians is common throughout the marketing and reception of the texts, and establishes Dad Rudd both as representative of other Australians and as part of a broader concept of the Australian national "type".

By the time *On Our Selection* was produced in Australian theatres, reviewers had come to see the Rudd family character "types" as representative of people on the land, and in some cases of Australians more generally. Reviewing the Melbourne production, *Punch* claims it to be "thoroughly Australian in every respect: the types of character are essentially Australian" (Irvin 20). "Le Roi", writing in *The Theatre* in 1912, states that *On Our Selection's* "popularity is easily understood. The characters represented are all true types—'cockies' of the real lovable class. The humour is undeniable, and sweet." This reviewer assumes that the play's popularity is a result of audience recognition of the types and their affectionate attitude towards them. In 1956, A. D. Hope writes that Rudd's writing is funny "in the same way that a caricature of someone we all know is funny" (Hope 26). Critics relate the popularity of the Rudd characters to the ability of audiences to form shared attitudes towards them, that enable audiences to find the characters funny. In this way

humour, particularly in the context of popular theatre, confirms and in some cases creates communities of shared attitudes.

The ability of an audience to come together and recognise certain character types as uniquely Australian establishes that they have something in common and belong to a particular community. In this sense the derogatory elements of the character types do not really matter; audiences do not identify with them so much as acknowledge shared attitudes (of affection, of recognition, of nostalgia) towards them. Such character types have continued to play a part in popular comedy in Australia, for instance in the ABC's *Kath and Kim*. Dad Rudd and his family are widely asserted to be successful at engaging audiences' recognition of such types. This effect is compounded by the frequent adaptations and the sense of nostalgia with which the Dad Rudd texts have been marketed, as well as by the genre of melodrama itself, which works through the recognition, by audiences, of particular character types, plot developments and moral attitudes.

Film director Ken G. Hall was responsible for enabling Dad Rudd to represent a twentieth-century public. Hall's film adaptation of *On Our Selection* (1932) closely followed the stage play, to the extent of using several of the same actors. Shot at a cost of \$12,000, it soon grossed more than \$120,000 (Yates). Its stories of humour in the face of poverty and hardship, and of hard work leading to eventual prosperity must have been particularly appealing to an audience experiencing its own hardships during the Depression.

Hall's subsequent adaptations built on the popularity of the earlier play by continuing to emphasise the idea of these characters as traditional Australian types, while presenting them in situations he knew would appeal to contemporary audiences. *Grandad Rudd* (1935), an adaptation of Davis's stage play of that title, is the first of Hall's films to specifically modernise the context in which the Rudd family's stories are played out. It concerns a romantic triangle involving a young relative of the Rudds, an unscrupulous city man and an honest farmer. *Dad and Dave come to Town* (1938) is a "fish out of water" story, owing much to Frank Capra's 1936 film *Mr Deeds Goes to Town*, where the Rudds inherit a fashion store in the city, and battle against the competing store across the road (run by an evil Frenchman whose name, of course, is Pierre) to make their own store a success. In the end a neighbour saves Dad financially, and the film concludes with him and Mum back on the farm pondering the differences between life in the country and in the city:

Up here we're close to the earth we live on, and down there they only read about it. But men are much the same whether you meet them

on a bush track, or in the main street of the city. This little world of ours goes round here much like it does outside. (Hall *Dad and Dave Come to Town*)

Thus the film mediates Dad's transition to unquestioned wealth, a semi-urban existence, and to a broader and more generous view of who might constitute his community.

Dad Rudd, M.P. was released in June 1940, and was "an immediate financial success" (Pike 249). In a review that is generally well-balanced, the *Australasian's* film critic "The Chiel" notes "a queue that was 100 yards long to the box office, a crowded theatre, and sustained applause indicated that the Australian people have no fault to find with 'Dad Rudd, M.P.'" Like *On Our Selection* (1912 and 1932), *Dad Rudd, M.P.* traces Dad's conflict with a villain on romantic and political fronts and in both, his election to parliament marks his triumph. His material success is assumed and expressed through the overt demonstration of the family's acquisition of modern consumer goods such as contemporary fashion clothing and kitchen appliances.

The climax of the film is the speech Dad gives to Parliament upon his election. The tone of this speech is remarkably different to his earlier speeches in the stories and play. Instead of shaking his fist and emanating defiance, Bert Bailey as Dad becomes an instant statesman, a man of gravity and seriousness. He looks and speaks like a politician, his demeanour decorous and his words polished, and his speech is met with the approval of those both in the gallery and on the benches. Politicians look at one another and nod approvingly; the speaker brings his hand thoughtfully to his chin. In marked opposition to the stories, here gallery and benches are united by Dad's depiction of the "plain" people and what they mean to the country and the Empire. Its wartime context enabled the much more unified, and positive, vision of the relationship between politics and people in the film. American comedies such as Capra's *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*—which was released in Australia earlier in the same year as *Dad Rudd, M.P.* and was very popular here—also influenced this vision. Capra's and Hall's films both concern an "everyman" figure fighting against a crooked politician and, curiously, both battles focus on a dam. In Hall's case the dam provides for some spectacular nation-building footage of men in hard hats working industriously to tame the natural world. Dad has been arguing for the dam to be built high enough to provide water for the small farmers of his district and in his maiden speech uses this dam to describe his constituency:

Some members have spoken about the cost of increasing the height of this dam another 50ft. I want them to think of the people who

made this work necessary. The pioneers who crossed the plains in their dragging, creaking drays, who strove through the silence of the bush and made it ours.

Many of their names are not engraved on tablet or tombstone, and they have no place in the history of our country so far as it is yet written. But they are the men and women that gave our country birth. They had faith, a magnificent faith which is our heritage . . .

My mind looks back over the years, upon the unforgettable picture of the plain people who have fought and won and lost and always carried on . . . it is the plain people who are the heart and soul and backbone of our country.

In an abrupt shift, Dad then goes on to describe the “drums of war” that are sounding at every capital in the world . . . We must not fail. In the name of that spirit which is their inheritance, a spirit which is yours and mine, and which will go down to their children’s children. In the name of these men, who are risking their lives, and all the future holds for them, I ask you to put aside bitterness and enmity, to let the blood of true nationalism run fast in your veins, and by unity and strength of purpose act so wisely that in peace may come prosperity, honour and great nationhood! To this our land. (Hall, *Dad Rudd, M.P.*)

In 1940, Ken Hall is able to draw upon much of the constituency-building rhetoric of the earlier texts and heighten it by using the language of sacrifice and high-minded altruism that resonates with a nation at war. In this speech, Dad explicitly describes contemporary people—those who need the dam, and soldiers and their families—as inheritors of the virtues of the pioneers. He describes “his” people as “the plain people” who are “the backbone of our country”: these are exactly the same words used by R. G. Menzies to describe *his* forgotten people, the middle class, two years later in his 1942 radio broadcast (Brett, *Forgotten People* 6). Hall and Menzies both understood the power of the language of the ordinary, the unrecognised, to create an image of the public which people could see themselves belonging to. Hall sought a broad audience in much the same way that Menzies would seek his constituency: by telling the nation a story about itself which showed people how their own lives could be important, and representative, of the nation as a whole. People did not necessarily identify with Dad Rudd or Robert Menzies, but they recognised them as representative of, and able to speak for, their community.

Dad Rudd’s metamorphosis from 1895 through to the mid-twentieth century illustrates the continuing force of a particular characterisation of the ordinary Australian, and also how it has been influenced by generic

and historical factors. His metamorphosis shows how the character of the pioneer can be transformed into that of the suburban battler and then the “aspirational” middle class by maintaining the same embattlement, the same fiercely-won sense of belonging.

The language used by Dad to describe the ordinary Australian has continued to have force in Australia, particularly in the rhetoric of our Liberal leaders. Prime Minister John Howard has successfully tapped into a set of stories about the hard working, socially mobile and overlooked ordinary Australian that have been told, re-told, and modernized for a hundred years in Australian popular culture. In his speeches he explicitly defines his project in terms of governing for the “mainstream”, the “ordinary” and the “battler” (Dyrenfurth). John Howard, particularly when he is on the stump, making speeches, is a medium for Dad Rudd’s ghost.

Dad Rudd has also continued to haunt our literary landscape, most notably in Andrew McGahan’s 2004 novel *The White Earth*. The novel is set, like Davis’s stories, on Queensland’s Darling Downs, and is peopled by spectres of the representative Australian: swagman, explorer, pioneer. John McIvor is, I believe, possessed by Dad Rudd’s ghost. He becomes obsessed with owning and farming a property so as to pass it down to his family. Like Dad Rudd, McIvor believes that the right to own land and be prosperous must be earned: he says to his nephew, William, “things like this station can’t just be given to you. You have to earn them, like I did” (McGahan 138). The novel suggests how a sense of belonging so fiercely dependent on the earning and owning of land is its own kind of madness. McIvor positions himself as the inheritor of the values of the pioneers: “Where were the bold pioneers that he remembered, the stockmen, the shearers? Lesser men had inherited the earth, and John knew that he alone was different, that an older and more vital blood flowed in his veins” (McGahan 196).

The White Earth is, in part, an examination of what contemporary Australia can do with the ghost of Dad Rudd and all that he represents. McGahan’s novel acknowledges a history that is manifestly silent in the Rudd family narratives, of the Aboriginal dispossession behind the claiming of the land for white settlement. In William’s relationship with his uncle, *The White Earth* points towards a process that continues to take place in Australian culture in relation to the ghosts of the ordinary that have been used to draw us together. Like William, we are all struggling to find ways of acknowledging them that do not require us to become like them.

NOTES

- ¹ The authorship of *On Our Selection* (1912) has been disputed. Fotheringham, in "When the Devil Drives", provides a detailed discussion as to who was responsible for the text of the play as produced in 1912 and beyond. He concludes that the script was product of collaboration between Davis and Beaumont Smith, and then Smith and Bert Bailey.

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