

## The un-loving of *Coonardoo*

A white woman's version of a black woman's life, first published in 1929.

What is this book about? It seems obvious. The first word is 'Coonardoo', and the last pages show her in the final moments of what has become a wretched existence.

She crooned a moment, and lay back. Her arms and legs, falling apart, looked like those blackened and broken sticks beside the fire.

The book ends, as it begins, on a station property called Wyaliba. It's in the north west of Western Australia, and the name, according to the Glossary of Native Words, means 'the fire is all burnt out'. What fire? Wyaliba has been the centre of much activity, and personal dedication, throughout the book. It's only at the end, when Coonardoo returns to what has been her home, that the desolation of the property, and her own personal desolation, finally overwhelm her. She lies back, her arms and legs falling beside her, and I think it is clear that she, in whitefella terms, is giving up the ghost.

The ghost, from the German word *geist*, means spirit: the holy spirit. You will notice that even as early as this in my essay about whitefellas and blackfellas living side by side in the Kimberleys, I am using a word, an idea, that is a product of the whitefellas' minds, not the blacks'. But then, if we go back to that glossary, we are offered *jinki* for spirit, *narlu* for evil spirit, and

*moppin-garra* for magician. No doubt the black people had other words for ideas of this sort. Have another look at those words, dear reader – *jinki*, *narlu*, *moppin-garra*. They don't mean much to us, do they? And yet, when they're put in a context, we can feel something of what they mean. Here's a passage from very late in the book, not long after Coonardoo is rejected by Hugh Watt, the white man who has loved – or perhaps it's not loved – her since they were children together, and has fathered one of her three children. Coonardoo has clung to Hugh, he's struggled to free himself, Coonardoo has fallen into a fire. She's still alive in the morning – Hugh has ridden away – but the stockmen are distressed by what's occurred.

All day the boys riding with him averted their gaze. They were silent together, riding after and rounding up cattle, heading them from the hills to the yards in the narrow valley of Koodgeeda gap. As though he were an evil spirit, possessed by a *narlu*, the boys kept out of Hugh's way, fear and mistrust in their eyes.

Katherine Susannah Prichard doesn't spend much time trying to explicate the inner workings of her characters' minds. For the most part, her presentation of character is fairly simple; her attempts at what white people – though hardly the Kimberley cattlemen! – would call psychoanalysis, are few and far between. This is not to say, though, that her apprehension of her characters is necessarily shallow. 'Coonardoo', we learn as early as the title

page, means 'the well in the shadow', and this meaning for the central character's name – if she is the central character: more of that in a minute – seems to develop in importance as the story goes on. We learn at some stage that 'Winni', the name Coonardoo gives the boy whom Hugh has fathered, means 'son of the whirlwind', and similarly, we catch a glimpse of this other dimension to life in the Kimberleys when Phyllis, one of Hugh's daughters by Mollie, the wife for whom he has no love, says to her father as she gets off a horse:

"It's been great, Hugh," she said. "I feel as if I've been starved and am devouring the sight of it all ... plains, wind grass, and those dark hills. The 'wild To-Morrow ranges', I say to myself. They look so mysterious and impenetrable. It's got a taste for me, dad, the sight and sound of everything. Food for my soul, that's what it is ..."

The wild To-Morrow ranges! I am inclined to think that the region where Prichard's story is set is the heart of the book; that is, that the book's central character is a place, an area, a setting, a harsh and violent eco-system which even the black people find hard and white people who are unaccustomed to it find atrocious. Early in the book a young woman called Jessica comes up to see if she's ready to help Hugh run Wyalaliba when his mother hands on the property. Jessica hates the place and can't see how anyone could like it, let alone feel for it the love which Hugh and his mother feel. Jessica leaves. Some years later Hugh brings Mollie to Wyalaliba, but, although she doesn't repeat Jessica's dismal failure, she is unsuited to station life, having next to no sympathy for, nor interest in, the black people, whereas Hugh and his

mother, who love Wyalaliba, realise full well that any whites who live there must accept that the land is more than those who claim to own it: that is, they must accept a new creed incorporating much that the black people take for granted. The aboriginal stockmen are every bit as good with horses and cattle as their overseers, and the north-west knows it. Hugh's mother, Mrs Watt, Bessie, Mrs Bessie, Mumae, as she is variously called, doesn't have white stockmen on the property, partly because she doesn't need them but principally because they will interfere with the black women, and she believes, or so Prichard tells us, that the traditional way of life should be maintained as far as possible.

Bessie Watt's regime, then, respects the earlier way of life, and in particular the black women. The trouble, the tragedy, to use a European word, starts when she is no longer there, when she has passed Wyalaliba to her son, who would seem to be the ideal person to take over, but unfortunately is not.

It's not possible to think about Hugh's shortcomings, as manager and as man, without broadening our discussion to mention some of the ways in which the European thinking of the station people is not satisfactory for the places they are running. This will not be easy to do and I ask the reader's patience as I try to prepare the ground for the sort of discussion which Coonardoo, the book and the character, needs.

The first thing to say is that the north-west is a male frontier. The blacks are there in equal numbers of men and women, so their social life includes ways of managing sexuality and family relationships which have been tested over thousands of years.

This is not so for the whites. Bessie Watt is unusual among station owners in being both female and highly capable. Far more common is the situation on the adjoining station, managed by a man called Sam Geary.

Sam is a figure of great importance in *Coonardoo*. Bessie Watt looks down on him because he doesn't meet her standards of behaviour. Hugh Watt detests him. Black women are not safe in his presence and he goes further in that he desires Coonardoo, and is jealous of Hugh's special relationship with her. Sam has a black woman himself, known as The Queen of Sheba, or Sheba for short, who drives his car for him when he's drunk, and there's another black woman, no longer required for Sam's bed, but still respected. Sam has been known to take the two gins to a hotel on the coast and book rooms for them, something no other white man has felt willing to do. In some respects Sam may be seen as the dark, inadmissible side of Hugh's mind, the shame in the shadow I would like to say. It is Sam who triggers off Hugh's final madness, his rejection of Coonardoo, and all that follows from it, right to the last, miserable pages.

The second difference between European and aboriginal thinking I would point to is in their understanding of sexuality. Prichard puts this powerfully, and she chooses her moment well. Hugh's wife Mollie has brought a baby into the world; Hugh plays with the child, but his thoughts are with Winni, the child he's had by Coonardoo.

Coonardoo had been the one sure thing in his life when his mother went out of it. He had grasped her. She was a stake, something to hang on to. More than that, the only

stake he could hang on to. He had to remind himself of her skin and race. Hugh had never been able to think of Coonardoo as alien to himself. She was the old playmate; a force in the background of his life, silent and absolute. Something primitive, fundamental, nearer than he to the source of things: the well in the shadows.

Prichard takes Hugh's thinking further:

... here in a country of endless horizons, limitless sky shells, to live within yourself was to decompose internally. You had to keep in the life flow of the country to survive. You had to be with it, and of it, in order to work, move as it did. After all what was this impulse of man to woman, woman to man, but the law of growth moving within them? How could a man stand still, sterilize himself in a land where drought and sterility were hell? Growth, the law of life, which brought beauty and joy in all the world about him? No wonder the blacks worshipped life, growth – sex – as the life source.

'The life flow of the country': Hugh, like his mother before him, has a powerful understanding of what this means. It means shifting cattle, fixing windmills, stocking up or selling, according to the country's capacity to carry. It means having infinite patience, and seizing opportunities when rain puts life back into the land. It means having your horses and saddles, your stockyards and more than that, your bodies and minds in readiness and repair. Hugh is a hugely hard worker. But he is a white man, with a wife he doesn't care for, and he's alone on Wyaliba once Mollie takes the children to Perth, with the allowance – never enough, she

writes – that Hugh gives her. Gives them, for the children are his, though the book only allows us to get a look at one of them: Phyllis, whom we shall come to later.

‘The life flow of the country’. The genius of the black people is that for them this is the same thing as the life flow of their minds, their ways of living, their stories ... Their thinking does not separate them from their surroundings: quite the opposite. The black people in *Coonardoo* offer an on-going but latent criticism of the whites. The whites own the stations, and give the orders; further back, and more powerful, of course, are the bankers, who tip out any station owners who can’t meet their interest payments; this is what happens to Wytaliba in the end, when the bank dispossesses Hugh and sells the station to Sam Geary. Sam elects to run it from his own household, the black people transfer themselves – we must assume – and Coonardoo, the well in the shadows and the spirit of her land, returns to nothing. She dies alone.

The sadness we feel for Coonardoo is great, but I want to spend some time now in analysing how, exactly, the story is brought to its final desolation, and how we, as readers, are brought to feel that the desolation we find so distressing is a natural, as opposed to a calculated, or engineered, outcome.

The book opens as Hughie, the little boy of Bessie, Mumae, Mrs Watt, is going away to school. His mother wants him educated, but will miss him terribly. So will Hughie’s playmate, one year older, the black girl Coonardoo, whom Mrs Bessie has taught to read, write, and count. Mrs Bessie realises the special

quality in the black girl, and she wants it for her son. She, Mrs Bessie, won’t be around for ever, and even though Hugh will marry, she supposes, he will need someone – she has Coonardoo in mind – who understands her son to look after him, to watch over him, to serve him with that love which is greater than any wish to possess. But there are complications, the implications of which are still to be drawn out.

Coonardoo has lost her mother, Maria. Maria was injured when she was kicked off the station verandah by a drunken Ted Watt, Mrs Bessie’s husband. She died a few days later; Ted Watt, drunk again the following month, walked off the balcony of a hotel in Karrara, and that was the end of him. Justice, the blacks thought. Mrs Bessie was free of a man not up to her quality. Coonardoo was in the care of a black woman called Meenie, the partner of a younger man called Warieda, who would, according to aboriginal custom not explained, one day have Coonardoo for his woman too.

All this by page 10! In a way, the rest of the book is a working out of the forces, the relationships and requirements, set out above.

Prichard tells us that Mrs Bessie is respectful of aboriginal custom, but she makes an exception of Coonardoo, who is not ready, in Bessie’s view, for a man. Mrs Bessie offers Warieda, who is to have Coonardoo, a horse and some new blankets if he’ll wait until she’s sixteen. This is not easy for Warieda, but neither is it easy to refuse anything asked by the boss of his station. He agrees, and, in the fullness of time he gets his horse and blankets

as well as Coonardoo. In the meantime, Warieda and a number of other men who are *nuba* to Coonardoo – that is, they are eligible to marry her, apart from the prior arrangement made by Warieda – lead her away and sit around her, singing. Warieda sings too, as he kneads and moulds her breasts; the young Coonardoo understands that the man she will be given to is developing her as a woman.

Mrs Bessie is aware of the various initiation rites for the boys and girls of the station blacks, and doesn't like them, even though she grasps their importance. It might be said that she is revealing the same unwillingness to come to terms with realities which will bring her son undone.

Mrs Bessie had fits of loathing the blacks. Although she had lived and worked like a man, so long in the Nor'-West, without the least respect for conventional ideas which hampered her in anything she wanted to do, her white woman's prejudices were still intact.

She was disgusted by practices she considered immoral, until she began to understand a difference to her own in the aboriginal consciousness of sex. She was surprised then, to find in it something impersonal, universal, of a religious mysticism.

Sometimes Mrs Bessie, Mumae, goes down to the *uloo*, the native camp, to watch a corroboree from the other side of the fire. On one such evening, Warieda invites her to stay for another corroboree his people have never before permitted a woman to watch. 'Appreciating the honour implied, Mumae sat down on the earth beyond the fire again.'

Part of the shadows, sitting there in the dark, she had glimpsed another world, the world mystic, elusive, sensual and vital of this primitive people's imagination. A presentiment of being part of the shadows, of the infinite spaces about her, and of the ceremonial dance itself, she banished peremptorily.

Mrs Bessie begins to see that she might have been wrong to prevent Coonardoo from mating at the normal time, and this feeling is redoubled when she becomes aware that Sam Geary has offered old Joey Coonarra, Coonardoo's father, a rifle, blankets and tobacco for the girl for whom he has a fancy. Joey likes the idea! Warieda brings his complaint to Mrs Bessie, and she takes Sam Geary to task. Sam, amusing himself by putting his shamelessness against the principles of stricter people, suggests that she might be glad to have Coonardoo out of the way before Youie (Hugh) comes home. The idea infuriates Mrs Bessie, but Sam even makes a half-hearted, though unsuccessful, attempt to kidnap Coonardoo. It's a relief for Mrs Bessie when she's able to give Warieda his horse and blankets, and let the black man have what he's always regarded as his.

Why did Mrs Bessie delay the sexualization, the giving, of Coonardoo by three years? The easy answer, not a very good one, is that there is a primness, a negativism, in her that objects to what she sees is happening. She wants Coonardoo for herself:

... she was jealous of an influence on the child greater than her own. She did not wish to lose Coonardoo. Her people did not wish to lose Coonardoo either. She was theirs by blood and bone, and they were weaving her to the earth and to themselves, through all her senses, appetites and instincts.

Why did Mrs Bessie delay the giving of Coonardoo? My second answer is that her doing so is a device used by Prichard to make Coonardoo herself the issue, the selected example for us to follow if we are to understand what Prichard wants us to understand. The difficulty I have is that this novelistic device – making Coonardoo the exemplar of the many things brought under consideration by the book – alters the way we think about the issues before us. I have already said that the land, the region, the setting, is the central, or strongest force in the book. I have said, further, that the customs, the practices and thinking, the ceremonies and rituals of the black people cannot be separated from the land. Enter the white people, who have another history entirely. One of the nicest devices Prichard employs is to give names such as Hera, Pluto, Diana, Demeter, and so on to the Wytaliba station horses. Grand, and evocative as they are, they come from somewhere else. They belong to the thinking of another world. It is that thinking that needs examination, investigation, in a book set in the Kimberleys. In making Coonardoo the focus, both subject and object, Prichard diverts our thinking from finding its natural focus, which, surely, is inside the mind of, first, Mrs Bessie, and later, her son Hugh. Insofar as Coonardoo is brought to a wretched end, it is because of Mrs Bessie, and Hugh, not because of Sam Geary or anyone else.

It's best, I think, to consider Hugh and Sam Geary together. Prichard certainly intends us to read things in that way, but I want to skirt around her presentation of the two men, because it's not as honest, as *clarifying*, as it appears. Sam is coarse, vulgar, a villain. Sam is masculinity refusing restraint. Not only has he two

black women, he's had others, and the half-caste children on his property, Nuniewarra, are evidence of his profligate desires. A white man on his own, he can't control his lust for black women. Crude as he may be, however, he sometimes sees more clearly than Hugh.

"What are you givin' us, Youie?" Geary expostulated. "Have I got to mind my bloody p's and q's when I open my mouth on Wytaliba these days?"

"Too right you have," Hugh assented.

"You're one of those god-damned young heroes. No 'black velvet' for you, I suppose?"

"I'm goin' to marry white and stick white," Hugh said, obstinate lines settling on either side of his mouth.

Geary laughed.

"Oh, you are, are you?" he jeered. "What do you think of that, Bob? Well, I'll bet you a new saddle you take a gin before a twelvemonth's out – if ever you're in this country on your own."

Geary turns out to be right. Mrs Bessie dies, after a long and painful illness, she's buried on the property she's worked for so many years, and Hugh is on his own, a lost soul. He tries to steady himself with work, but at night, when his stockmen sit by their fire, he goes walking, making the blacks afraid. Coonardoo, who has sworn to Mrs Bessie that she will look after Hughie, follows him faithfully, trying to keep him from self-harm. One night, when he's lost in the scrub, unable to find his way back to the camp, she reveals herself to him. He realises that she's been watching over

him since grief took his senses away. They light a fire, they sit, Hughie realises how long they've been close to each other, part of each other, and his memories of their childish attachment swell, increase, with adult yearning and tenderness. He calls her to him and they make love by their fire: then they sleep.

It might be thought that the book has now reached the point it has been searching for, but Prichard moves us rapidly away from this moment. In the morning, Hughie tells the black stockmen that Coonardoo found him when he was 'fair bushed', and 'no more was said on the matter.' Hugh is more like his old self for a couple of weeks, reassuring the stockmen, but then he's seized by an illness. The black people think Mumae's spirit has entered her son, trying to reclaim him, but Coonardoo sends for Geary, and the cattleman we are supposed to despise offers to take Hugh in his buggy to the coast. Geary's arrival, and offer, make curious reading, because Hugh refuses to go with the other man, telling him that, instead, he'll get his own boys – blacks – to take him to the coast in a buggy, and they do, although Hugh is hardly conscious of what's happening.

Hugh never remembered that journey to the coast, except as a nightmare, in which he had swayed and jolted endlessly across the plains, up the steep walls of tablelands, red and bare where the surrounding country had subsided from them, through the grey seas of mulga, stretching away and away under dim, pale-blue sky.

Why has Prichard given Hugh typhoid – I think that's what he's suffering from – and snatched him away from the happiness, and wholeness, which he's finally achieved? I don't propose to

attempt an answer yet, but I put the question because I have a feeling that Hugh's illness is another device, one that lets him get away to the south and return with a white woman as his partner, when we, as readers, know that he ought to stop denying his passion for Coonardoo. The illness allows the novelist to whisk the confused, and perhaps misguided young man away from the property which Coonardoo has in her soul even more deeply than he has, and make a decision, far away in the south, out of sight of the book's consciousness, to betray, to deny, the connection between himself and the black woman. I said earlier that the central reality of this novel is the region where it's set, and I drew attention to the bond, the unity, between the place and the black people who belong there. What Prichard is doing by making Hugh sick, is giving what he's doing the appearance of absolute necessity – seeking desperately needed help – when what he is actually doing is denying those bonds and obligations of soul and spirit which now, after his exchange of love with Coonardoo, should be the centre of his existence. Why does he make this tragic mistake?

For an answer, we have to turn to Sam Geary once again.

You will remember that Coonardoo has Geary called to Wyalaliba when she knows Hugh needs help. Here is the passage following his arrival.

... Sam Geary stamped along the verandah, full of bluster, and proud of his own importance. Old Saul and Bob followed when he walked into the shaded room where Hugh was lying.

"Now then, what's all this about?" he roared, looking from Coonardoo in the doorway to Hugh.

"Oh, I see!" His eyes hung on Coonardoo.

Hugh half raised himself, angry colour flashing, his eyes flashing.

"You see a damned sight more than there is to see," he gasped.

"Seein' double, am I?" Geary jeered. "Well, I don't blame you, Hughie."

Hugh lies back weakly, Geary doses him with whisky, and when Hugh has revived, his fighting spirit rises sufficiently for him to tell Geary that he'll get himself to the coast, and he'll outlast Geary and half a dozen like him. He remembers what his mother has told him about Geary's efforts to get Coonardoo ...

But always Mrs Bessie had thwarted the bargain. And Hugh instinctively sprang into the breach. Not as long as he lived, and could help it, would Geary get either Wytaliba or Coonardoo.

How decisive this sounds. How strong. Alas, I find it distorting, and silly. The whole business of Hugh's sickness, and the arrival of Geary, offering help, are distractions from the more pressing realities of Hugh's situation. Can he share Coonardoo with Warieda, can Coonardoo manage to give love and support to both? Can some sort of three-sided *modus vivendi* be worked out? What would such an arrangement look like? You may feel that these are artificial questions, but the last of them, at least, does have to be faced, and is. Coonardoo's one night with Hugh

as a lover, such a healing night that it is falsified by the sickness which the novelist drops on Hugh a couple of pages later, leads to pregnancy and a child. The black people, faithful to their understandings of spirits putting children into women's bodies for them to be born, don't connect Winni, Coonardoo's third child, with Hugh. Hugh himself, when he sees the child, knows in a flash. Sam Geary knows the moment he sees the child. Mollie, the woman Hugh has yet to find, and marry, works it out eventually, but Warieda doesn't know, and none of the blacks know except Coonardoo, and the arrival of her awareness takes time: she is more confused than convinced.

Hugh, as we've seen, leaves Wytaliba for treatment. He has a hellish journey to the coast, then a sea voyage, then a stay in a settled township. When he comes back, he has Mollie, his wife who is so unsuited to Wytaliba. When he has the money to do it, he sends her and the children away in the hot weather, and eventually these separations become permanent. There are five (!) children, and it's costly to maintain them so far from home, if Wytaliba be thought of as their home. Prichard tells us quite a bit about Winni, the young stockman who develops from that brief union of Coonardoo and Hugh, but virtually nothing of the five children he has with Mollie – except, of course, for Phyllis, who returns to Wytaliba, and the story, at a later stage. Mollie not only dislikes Wytaliba, but she realises that she's in something to which she not only doesn't belong, but is being kept secret from her. And eventually she perceives the truth.

Of course he had lied. Mollie knew her Nor'-West well

enough to know now that on this subject most men lied to their wives.

But so sour and hostile had her mind become towards Hugh that she found pleasure really, a secret mean joy, in following the suspicion which had risen against him, and piecing the evidence for and against it. There was much more for than against. She realized her knowledge would mean power. It was a whip she could use over Hugh. She knew well enough how to scourge him with it.

Mollie tackles her husband. He's horrified at being found out. She tells him, after tormenting him for a while, that either Coonardoo and Winni must go, or she and the children will leave. It is a measure of where Prichard's story line has brought us that it is a matter of relief, not only to Mollie and to Hugh, but also to the reader, when Mollie achieves what she wants. Hugh takes her and the girls to the coast. Prichard's skill returns once they've left, leaving behind Hugh's boy, Winni, who is disgruntled because he hasn't been allowed to go with the family as normally, he thinks, he should have gone. Coonardoo, who has overheard most of the argument between Mollie and Hugh, looks closely at Winni, and sees, though she doesn't quite understand, how his ears are Hugh's ears, and his finger nails are not the same as hers. She understands that Mollie and the five girls are going to be away for a very long time, and an order which seems natural, and deeply right, has returned to the place. When Hugh returns from the coast, he hands the keys to the store room and the food bins to Coonardoo, and, as the seasons move on, the black woman points out the white cockatoos swarming around the homestead:

Mumae, she is sure, is among them. The old order, the pre-Mollie order, has returned.

This old order needs to be considered for a moment, because it is on the verge of failing, and being replaced by something which is the same and not the same. We have already glanced at the end of the book, when the banks foreclose on Hugh, and sell Wytaliba to Geary. I'm not sure why Prichard ends the book thus; I think she may be scoring the conclusion of the struggle between Hugh and Geary in favour of the user of black women, meaning that the worse side of the whitefella duality wins, at least for the time being, while the virtuous side has lost. This duality of Hugh – good, respectable – and Geary – coarse, despicable – offers the reader, repeatedly, the chance to escape a deeper, better analysis of the situation and the various actions done in response to the situation.

But the old order. This, years before, was a brutal struggle between the blacks and the invading whites:

You can't help seein' the blacks' point of view. White men came, jumped their hunting grounds, went kangaroo shooting for fun. The blacks speared cattle. White men got shootin' blacks to learn 'em. Blacks speared a white man or two – police rode out on a punishing expedition. They still ride out on punishin' expeditions ...

"Didn't police in the coastal towns get one and sixpence a head for abos they brought in?" Hugh asked.

"Reduced to a shilling after a bit," Saul replied. "The police was makin' a good thing out of 'punitive expeditions'. Used to bring the niggers in, in chains, leather straps round the

neck, fastened to their stirrup irons. Twenty or thirty like that, and I've seen the soles of a boy's feet raw when he came in ..."

So the stations in Prichard's novel, such as Wytaliba and Nuniewarra, are compromises between whites and blacks. Blacks are fed, given employment that suits them, and they're also given acceptance, on however low a level, in return for peace and white occupation. The quality of this settlement depends, if you care to think about it, on the humanity and decency of the whites who oversee – and control – this settlement. Mrs Bessie, while she's still alive, and Hugh, her son, are in no doubt that the standard, the quality, of the pact they make with their blacks is on a higher level than is practised on Nuniewarra. Katherine Susannah Prichard appears to be in accord with their view, and yet it is not at all clear to me that they are justified in making this claim. Perhaps my disquiet is based on what I think is an alternative field of judgement – that special relationship between Hugh and Coonardoo. Hugh spends most of the book in denial! When Geary teases him, sneers at him, sure that he'll take a black gin one of these days because any man on his own needs to, Hugh makes the mistake of asserting that he won't. This locks him into staying away from Coonardoo, and this staying away leads him to deny – to himself – the feelings he has for her, the feelings which could be his redemption and, in the very long run, the solution to the problem.

Even on Wytaliba, in the years of Mrs Bessie's reign, the blacks, welcomed and respected as they are, are regarded as

being on a lower plane of civilisation than the whites. Hugh, most unfortunately, absorbs this idea and never grows out of it. The opportunity is there for him to show the world – and more importantly, himself – that he not only loves Coonardoo but sees her as his equal – or superior. He never does this. He has years of denial, he spends vast amounts of energy in avoiding the truth, he makes the terrible mistake of identifying Sam Geary as his opposite, his rival and sometimes his enemy, when in fact Hugh is his own worst enemy, and the book refuses to show him in this way.

Hugh is dishonestly portrayed to the reader. Those five daughters, far away in Perth! His disregard of them is as much a moral crime, a failing in parental care, as Geary's half-caste children, but the book doesn't present the two men in a way that makes this clear. Hugh doesn't know his children until Phyllis gets hold of a car from somewhere and drives – how she drives! – to the top of her vast state to rejoin her father.

Surprised as he is when Phyllis arrives, Hugh is made happy for the first time in years. He has, again, a companion – one he can acknowledge, that is, for Coonardoo is always there – who loves Wytaliba as his mother did. For a time, Phyllis is a replacement for Mrs Bessie, and the station appears to be shifting back into a time of spiritual harmony and comfort, then ...

... then ...

... Phyllis feels the need for a man. To marry. For the sexual side of herself to be brought to life. A suitor – there's a word from another culture! – presents himself: Billy Gale, a man who works

for ... you guessed it, Sam Geary. Hugh dislikes the thought of his beloved daughter, his spiritual descendant, having anything to do with a man whose existence he wants to deny, but ...

... but ...

... here in a country of endless horizons, limitless sky shells, to live within yourself was to decompose internally. You had to keep in the life flow of the country to survive. You had to be with it, and of it, in order to work, move as it did. After all what was this impulse of man to woman, woman to man, but the law of growth moving within them? How could a man stand still, sterilize himself in a land where drought and sterility were hell? Growth, the law of life, which brought beauty and joy in all the world about him? No wonder the blacks worshipped life, growth – sex – as the life source.

Phyllis pours herself into her work, she exhausts herself, Hugh says she needs to go south and rest. Billy Gale, unknown to Hugh, goes south too. A letter reaches Wytaliba from Mollie, enclosing a newspaper account of the wedding of 'Miss Phyllis Watt, eldest daughter of Hugh Watt of Wytaliba station, to William Gale, of Nuniewarra and Catchy-Catchy Downs.' Mollie is happy with this development. Sam Geary is happy too.

"Nuniewarra and Wytaliba running in double harness, after all!" he chortled. "Well, I tried most ways – but I never dreamt of this one, Youie."

Hugh is more lost than he's ever been. The book has five short chapters to run, and Hugh has a few more ghastly mistakes to make, before Coonardoo dies, abandoned by all.

It's time to mention Warieda, her husband ... sorry, I know that's not the word, but nuba means a potential husband, and I don't even know what ceremony, or agreement, turns a nuba into the actual man in a woman's life. Coonardoo is going to die, and Warieda, the man who should be caring for her, protecting her, is already dead. The circumstances are worth a look.

Warieda has offended Munga, a crazed and highly dangerous *moppin*, who lives in the blacks' camp on Sam Geary's property. Warieda has given one of his daughters – it's not clear whether or not this is one of Coonardoo's children – to a certain man, when Munga's son has also made a claim. Munga is already offended by the Wytaliba people because they don't welcome him as he would like, so he points the bone at Warieda. When Warieda hears of this, he grows weak, accepting that he's going to die. Hugh, alerted to what's happened, abandons his cattle mustering and rides home to help. Nothing he says to Warieda can change the man's belief that he has to die, so Hugh sends for Munga, the *moppin*. Munga arrives on Wytaliba but ignores Hugh's orders and even his promises of a reward if he will take the spell off the stockman. Munga does nothing; Hugh drives him off the station; Warieda dies.

Who will have Coonardoo now?

Hugh realises after a time that Warieda's brother, who works for Sam Geary, can claim Coonardoo, and if he does, Geary will give him suitable gifts, and ...

... Hugh makes a decision.

"You will be my woman, now, Coonardoo," Hugh said.

“Sleep in the room at the end of the verandah. Winni can go to the buggy shed.”

The end of the verandah is where she remains. Hugh, fighting something in himself that he refuses to acknowledge, let alone define, sleeps alone, and rejects Coonardoo on the one occasion when she comes to his room and puts her head on his feet. (How moving is this!) He works even harder than ever, he’s pleased to see her on the verandah when he comes home from working his cattle, but he will not make her his wife, his partner, his lover; indeed one could turn the pages of a dictionary for ages looking for a term that’s right. We can hardly say she’s rejected when she’s kept so close, but Hugh will not, will not, *will not* give her the love she needs and he needs to give.

Hugh himself became gaunt as his beasts: his eyes were blood-shot with the stinging dust. His brain surged sun-stricken and would not sleep. Sam Geary, and Billy Gale, whom Sam had taken on as head stockman, finding Hugh almost insane on the roads, hauled him over to their camp.

“Look here, me boy,” Sam said, “you’ve got to let go somewhere. I know this country. You’ve got to get drunk and blot out or you’ll go mad on it.”

So he drinks whisky with Sam and Billy Gale, and he works, a little more sanely, for another seven years – seven years! – and then, as we saw earlier, Phyllis, his daughter, comes back to Wytaliba and for a while Hugh is happy. Then, as we have seen,

she goes south again, marries Billy Gale, and leaves Hugh to the madness of his refusal of Coonardoo.

Years, as they say, pass, and the last act begins. Hugh is out mustering. Rain falls, and there is a surprise on Wytaliba; Geary and another man arrive at the station. They’re wet through, they want whisky, dinner, and they announce they’ll stay the night.

Whisky has its way and the white men want women. Coonardoo sees the lust in Geary’s eyes, and ‘with that consciousness came the stirred weakness and desire of her waiting for Hugh. She had been half dead in her sterility. Geary’s grasp loosened instincts, which flamed greedily, clutching and swarming.’ Coonardoo does not run away when Geary comes for her.

But she did not move. As weak and fascinated as a bird before a snake, she swayed there for Geary whom she had loathed and feared beyond any human being. Yet male to her female, she could not resist him. Her need of him was as great as the dry earth’s for rain.

Hugh finds out eventually, he pours out his rage on the woman he’s been unable to love as she and everything in his own body require of him, he hits her, and when she clings to him, pleading, he pushes her away. She falls in the fire, she’s patched up by the other blacks, and she leaves the camp, although Hugh realises that Winni and others are riding away at night to tend her, then she disappears. Winni and another stockman called Chitali go out to find her, but she’s walked where she leaves no tracks, and they come back without her. Years pass, once again, in this sorry story, and Hugh, madder and stranger with the burden of his soul, loses

control of Wytaliba, and Sam Geary, yes, Sam Geary, buys the station from the bank. Winni leaves to find his mother, but can't, and doesn't, and Coonardoo, obeying the need of Prichard's plot, and perhaps her own soul too, decides to find her way back to the property, the land, where her life belongs. The *uloo* is deserted when she gets there, she lights a fire, she stretches out beside it, she slumps on the soil, and her sad journey is at an end.

The reader will note, I'm sure, that the events I've just narrated depend on two twists of the plot: the death of Warieda after the bone pointing, and Hugh's absence on the night when Geary and his prospector mate commandeer the Wytaliba homestead, and its black women, for the night. Both are *possible*, but they are not a necessary part of the events Prichard is narrating. They *need* to happen, so they are made to happen. In that sense Hugh is as much a victim as Coonardoo, and Coonardoo is as much a victim of the novelist who created her as she is of Mrs Bessie's legacy of righteousness to Hugh.

I have spent so much of this essay searching out the moments when the story is being managed so that tragedy and disaster can be brought about that there's no room now to suggest a re-casting of the plot to show how the book could be revised in such a way that the love of Coonardoo and Hugh, richly expressed because richly lived, would shine like a beacon down the years.

Besides, this is a path that shouldn't be taken because it's disrespectful of Katherine Susannah Prichard's achievement. One needs to be reminded that *Coonardoo* was published in 1929 when to write a book featuring an aboriginal woman was an uncommonly

bold undertaking. To give the black woman such richness that she is the human embodiment of the harsh yet miraculously lovable landscape surrounding her means that Prichard had to draw on levels of awareness that had rarely entered the English novel to that time. I'm not aware of anyone having done it for the north-west of Australia before her, and possibly since. Prichard's characters might not have been able to treat Coonardoo with the richness she deserves, but Prichard herself saw to it that the black woman was a worthy part of the powerful, daunting land where she lives, and manages, also, to convey that the same could be said of all the black people, so that although the title of the book moves our focus to the black, the sense of shame and failure that the book generates inside us is there because of the failure of the whites. I think of *Coonardoo*, the novel, as being like one of those awesome rock-piles to be seen in the centre of the continent, stopping travellers in their tracks, causing them to wonder, to ask questions, to think long after the thing's been left behind. The eye sees things, the ear hears stories, and then they live in our minds, influences, injections of new thought, affecting us, in later years, in ways we would never have suspected at the time.