

## ***In Search of Steele Rudd***

*Opening address to coincide with the launch of the Exhibition by the Supreme Court of Queensland Library, "In Search of Steele Rudd", delivered at the Banco Court, Friday 22 August 2003, by Associate Professor Richard Fotheringham, Head, School of English, Media Studies and Art History, The University of Queensland.*

### **[Illustration 1: Title – "In Search of Steele Rudd"]**

Chief Justice, your Honours, members of the Supreme Court Library Committee, Distinguished Guests including Professor Jörg Nagler of Schiller University, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Can I begin by thanking the Honourable Justice Margaret White and the library committee for this opportunity to speak, and Aladin Rahmetula and his assistants Siobhan Doherty and Laura Whitton, who have put together the exhibition in the rare books area to your right. I'd also like to pass on to you the apologies of Karen Davis, the great granddaughter of Arthur Hoey Davis, and extend my thanks to her. Karen first contacted me in 1986 after I'd received publicity for locating some lost manuscripts of Steele Rudd, and gave me the idea of writing his biography. More recently she has generously loaned to the Supreme Court library a quantity of family memorabilia, some of which is on display as part of the exhibition. Other members of the Davis family are present and I'd like to warmly welcome them.

The first thing I need to alert you to is the quibble in the title of my talk: while it might be possible to define "Steele Rudd" as synonymous with Arthur Hoey Davis, as soon as we add "author of Dad and Dave": we produce a search which will never end. Although the phrase "Dad and Dave" appears in Davis's very first story, "Starting the Selection" in 1895, it did not have the recognition in his lifetime that it has today. In explaining why this is so, I have to do three things: firstly give an account of the life of Arthur Hoey Davis, 1868–1935, country child, city public servant, professional author, then would-be gentleman farmer, then down and out in Brisbane and Sydney, whose career as an officer of the Supreme Court of Queensland provides the immediate reason for gathering together in this place. Secondly I want to give an account of his – *and others*' – achievements as "Steele Rudd", author and playwright, which led to Davis being widely acclaimed as one of the people whose ideas most decisively shaped Australia in the twentieth century. Thirdly, I'd like to give a short account of some of the other contributions, including several major exploitations of his work, which – paradoxically, since they brought him and his family little or no financial reward – are why he is sufficiently well remembered today to interest our gathering.

The man Arthur Hoey Davis, the literary figure "Steele Rudd", and the legendary author – in fact authors, plural – of "Dad and Dave" – these three subjects are not the same thing. This is my challenge in talking about not just a man, but an extraordinary cultural phenomenon, starting with an imagined author people thought was writing autobiographically as "Steele Rudd" about the Rudd family in which he was a younger son, followed by the appropriation of the characters from that fiction – in particular the pioneering father Dad and his laconic second son Dave – by artists, cartoonists, stage actors, film makers, and a long-running radio serial – to create a

legend which grew stronger rather than weaker after Arthur Hoey Davis's death, and which to some extent is still with us, although so encrusted with misapprehensions about authorship and reworkings of the stories and characters, as to be mostly unrecognisable.

Let me begin with a *vox populi*. The coffee cart near where I work at The University of Queensland has a daily trivia quiz question, and on Monday 7 July this year the question was "Near which Australian city is the dog on the tucker box?" According to the barista, only three people during the entire day knew the answer, and I suspect only I remember the popular song that is the obvious prompt:

*My Mabel waits for me  
Underneath a bright blue sky,  
Where the dog sits on the tuckerbox  
Five miles from Gundagai.*

Gundagai, in New South Wales, not Queensland's Darling Downs where Arthur Hoey Davis set his "On Our Selection" stories; and sung by a Dave without a surname about his beloved Mabel, not Dave Rudd about Lily White, Dave's girlfriend in Davis's stories. Yet, as we shall see, there is a continuous line of textual transmission back from the coffee cart question in 2003 to Arthur Hoey Davis in 1895, and the ideas that lead to this storytelling go back much further.

**[Illustration 2: Pencil sketch, mid-nineteenth century, Aberdare from Abernant Hill]**

### **Part 1 – The Davis Family**

Davis's father, Thomas Davies, was from "The Trap", an area in the village of Abernant, now a suburb of Aberdare in south Wales, where probably he was an apprentice blacksmith in what was then a grim, tough district, although this contemporary sketch tries to balance industrialism with the idyllic. "The Trap" was so named since it was where the hotels were located, on the road between the collieries where the miners worked, and their homes at the bottom of Abernant Hill.

**[Illustration 3: Photograph, c.1880, Collier's Row, "The Trap"]**

This area of Glamorganshire was at the heart of Welsh opposition to the rotten borough system of parliamentary representation. Aberdare itself was the location for clandestine political meetings where copies of Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* were secretly circulated, and five miles away in Merthyr Tydfil, massive rioting broke out in 1831 while the Electoral Reform Bill was under debate in the House of Lords. Order was restored only with the help of the army, a reading of the Riot Act, and the hanging of one young miner convicted of sedition.

Thomas Davies was then only three, and it is not clear what his later political views were, although it may be relevant to note that seventy years later, in 1902, his son Arthur Hoey Davis was one of the founders of the Queensland State Service Union. But Thomas Davies seems to have had difficulties more personal than political, and grew up to be a troubled young man who, during a period of homelessness in 1847, committed two acts of petty theft. At his trial he was represented by both a barrister

and a solicitor, but was convicted and sentenced to two years in prison followed by transportation to Australia for a further five years. He later changed his name to Davis, presumably to conceal his convict past, although his headstone in the Toowoomba cemetery says Davies.

While working in Queensland in 1851 he met and married Mary Green, a young servant from the west of Ireland. Mary had been living in the Tuam workhouse during the Irish potato famine and came to Australia under Earl Grey's Orphan Girls Emigration Scheme. On arrival in Sydney, she was assigned to the family of a schoolmaster, James Rutledge. When Rutledge moved to Drayton to open a school in the area, Mary Green went with his family, and one of her duties was to tend their infant son, Arthur – later Sir Arthur Rutledge, Attorney General for the colony and state of Queensland. This connection would prove useful thirty years later, when Mary decided that her own eighth child, a boy she named Arthur after Arthur Rutledge, had an aptitude for the office rather than the stockyard, and might do well in the Queensland Public Service.

**[Illustration 4: Photograph, 1991, The Selection, East Greenmount]**

For twenty-four years, while Mary raised their ten surviving children, Thomas Davis worked as a labourer and blacksmith on and around the Darling Downs west of Brisbane. In the period after 1840 this large area of rich soil was appropriated by “squatters”. However in 1867, a year before Arthur Hoey Davis was born, a Crown Lands Sale Act of the Queensland parliament began the process of breaking up the squatting properties. Regulations were established and finance provided so that poor people could “select” and purchase small farms for crops and dairying. Subterfuge by the squatters, and the consequent realisation by the “selectors” that they were being offered mostly second-rate land, intensified bitter resentment and political rivalry.

The ideas that lay behind this belief in the small farmer as the backbone of civilisation go back to the earliest surviving Western literature, where 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. 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. Bucolic, however, suggested the harsher world of the cow-cockies: hard-working, stoic, struggling with the unpredictability of nature, suspicious of change, feet in cow dung. For their contribution to basic human needs such as food and clothing, farmer characters were charged with common sense: potentially heroic. In their ignorance of other worlds and resistance to other ways they were potentially comic, even ridiculous.

These different ways of viewing the countryside were parts of the intellectual – and anti-intellectual – traditions Europeans brought with them to Australia; basic beliefs which had become interweaved and opposed, withered by evident absurdity and reinvigorated by new visions. It was 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, Locke in his *Second Treatise of Government* declared that all who were “Industrious and Rational” had a right to own land: “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.

*For those who come across the seas,  
We've boundless plains to share*

... as the second verse of the Australian national anthem has it.

Neither Locke nor Peter Dodds McCormick considered the possibility that the Aboriginal peoples might have some interest in the boundless plains which were to 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 appears most famously in Australian narrative 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. Here is a later revisualisation of this, Dad and Mum Rudd at the end of the 1938 film *Dad and Dave Come to Town*:

**[Illustration 5: The last image from  
*Dad and Dave Come to Town*, 1938]**

The possibility of such a vision becoming reality inspired bucolic puritans, radical Arcadians, and quasi-democrats of all kinds who attacked European high society and insisted on the nobility of manual labour. In 1759 Voltaire ended *Candide* by demanding 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, Gray's “Country Churchyard”, and Longfellow's “Village Blacksmith”, were read by young Australians who had little Latin, less Greek, and no idea where the real Arcadia was, but who were told again and again of the virtues of the bush 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 the chicanery of government.

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 observing the small landholders in his neighbourhood, each "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 poverty and 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 fantasies 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. But it was also romantic pastoral, and the bucolic farmers were having none of it. In his 1908 collection of stories *Dad in Politics*, Arthur Hoey Davis has Dad Rudd take his seat in the Queensland parliament, where he is both hero and clown, brawling with fellow members, refusing to obey the Speaker, and declaiming on the virtues and suffering of the pioneers. In "The Land Betterment Bill" the Queensland treasurer, "a sturdy, pompous, Cromwellian sort of politician with a Scotch accent" – an undisguised portrait of William Kidston – rises to explain the principles by which ownership of land is justified, using as 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 is nonsense! With your prattle about things what someone called Mill have to say! What's the good o' that?"*

The story of how this vision was narrowed down to the idea of the 160-acre "selection" is also a fascinating one. As Andro Linklater has described in *Measuring America*, in 1785, on the banks of the Ohio River, the process began of dividing up almost the entire United States north, south and west into square miles – 640 acres – a

number which can be divided into quarters, eights, and sixteenths: the 40-acre block, 20 cricket pitches by 20. In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln introduced the Homesteaders' Act, which allowed anyone to own 160 acres, as long as they built a cabin and lived on the land and worked it for five years.

In the next five years all the eastern Australian colonies would copy this legislation with one major exception – land was sold, not given away. Sold cheaply under easy terms with government finance, but sold nevertheless, and whether from this difficulty or simply because the life was so hard, after five years fewer than half those who selected 160-acre blocks on Queensland's Darling Downs were still on them.

**[Illustration 6: Photograph, 1991,  
the reconstructed “Shingle Hut” on the Selection]**

In 1875 the Davis family started living on one such 160-acre selection, which they'd taken up five years earlier but which they'd neglected to occupy and work until it was almost too late. The desperate struggle to clear the land, plant crops, and establish a viable farm before the government inspector called, forms the subject matter for Davis's first collection of stories: *On Our Selection!* Probably there never was a Shingle Hut on the real selection – at least until the 1988 Bicentennial year when a local youth group built the one you can see – since the earliest description of the original house, two years after it was built, says that it had a galvanised iron roof. Possibly Davis conflated this with the earlier hut in Drayton where he'd been born, but at the heart of the legend is the idea of a place of ultimate simplicity and innocence, owing nothing to civilisation but an axe.

Most of his early stories featured “the Rudd family” of poor selectors: Dad, Mother, Dan, Kate, Sarah, Dave, Joe, and other children including the narrator, “Steele Rudd”. As many commentators have noted, the character of Dad – the Australian pioneer, 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”. 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.*

**Part 2: Arthur Hoey Davis and “Steele Rudd”**

The rural experiences of those ten years of childhood and adolescence “on the selection” from age 7 to 17, provided the subject matter for most of Arthur Hoey Davis's writing throughout his life.

**[Illustration 7: Quotations:**  
**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”]*

However, it is in charting his life from the age of 17 that a biographer of Davis begins to encounter difficulties, because the life of the author was radically different from the life his readers imagined he was leading, and Davis himself became complicit in constructing that imagined author, “Steele Rudd”, whose values and life were quite unlike his. Although he was reluctantly persuaded to return to the Darling Downs to live for some years in middle age, Davis never farmed again.

In 1885 his mother wrote to Arthur Rutledge MLA and arranged for her Arthur to become a clerk in the government public service in Brisbane. Rutledge took a personal interest in Davis’s career, and in 1902 obtained for him the position of Under Sheriff. Prestige, fame, and for a time prosperity were his, rather than a life as a small farmer, and when Davis did try to live the life he wrote about, returning to the Darling Downs between 1908 and 1917, he found farming intolerable. But in his writing “Steele Rudd” always expressed his preference for living on the land.

It would have been easy enough to write a biography pointing out these inconsistencies and contradictions; however, in the end we are dealing here with a person who is remembered not for what he was, but for what he wrote – or more precisely, what “Steele Rudd” wrote, and who requires a *literary* biography, which deals as well with what readers imagined him to be. Further, the creation of “Steele Rudd” involved other people: editors, illustrators, actors, film directors, and popular magazines which started using ‘Dad and Dave’ for cartoons and jokes.

In thinking about this, I was struck by the Russian critic Boris Tomasevskij’s argument that, while factual documentation is as relevant to studying the life of a literary author as it is to that of any individual’s actions in history, *literary* biography also has to consider the extent to which such facts and any widely-believed simplifications and distortions of them, *and even lies and deceptions*, are widely known, and the consequent extent to which all these contribute to what he calls ‘biographical legends’: i.e. widely-shared beliefs about the author which determine whether readers buy a book, what they expect when they sit down to read it, and how they interpret it.

**[Illustration 8: Cartoon by “Low”, c. 1906,  
 of “Steele Rudd” and pig]**

An example from “Steele Rudd” in the live theatre will I hope make the relevance of this to Arthur Hoey Davis clear. In 1928 he travelled to Adelaide to attend the opening night of his play *The Rudd Family*, which contained a scene demonstrating

bush medicine (a comic sequence in many bush farces of the time, probably deriving from similar American plays). Davis appeared on the stage after the performance, and the *Advertiser* commented:

*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 of things 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 biographical legend has here taken on a life of its own. The *Advertiser* critic saw not Arthur Hoey Davis but “Steele Rudd”. Davis was a smart dresser, a city-dweller for forty of the last fifty years of his life; a regular theatregoer, often spoke publicly as chairman of various public groups, and prided himself on speaking and writing well. “Steele Rudd” however was shy, a lifetime bush dweller, awkwardly dressed for his visit to the city theatre, but a naive genius offering an artless representation of outback realities. “Steele Rudd’s” play was a window on the difficulties and deprivations of the pioneers; Arthur Hoey Davis’s would have been just a city dweller’s mocking joke. His pseudonym was a convenient front, behind which Davis could hide when he so chose; but it was also a straightjacket around his literary and dramatic output.

Davis produced twenty-four volumes of short stories and novels, all but one principally concerning rural life. The one exception, a collection of late stories called *The Miserable Clerk* about his experiences in the office of the Supreme Court, was rejected by every publishing company he tried. As far as readers and publishers were concerned, “Steele Rudd” knew nothing about city life and couldn’t write about it, except for a few formulaic “hayseeds in the city” genre stories.

I’ll say a little more about *The Miserable Clerk* volume shortly, but in examining Davis’s output, we should note that critics generally have echoed popular taste in finding most of the best writing in the first volumes: particularly *On Our Selection!* Using a spare and understated style, Arthur Hoey Davis repeatedly presents comedies of defeat. Any success prefaces a reversal; anything that can go wrong, will. In “Our First Harvest”, the corn crop which they have laboured so hard to produce brings in less than they already owe to the store keeper who has sold it for them, and the parents sit penniless and miserably gazing into the fire. In “Before We Got the Deeds”, just as they get the freehold title to their farm, their horse dies and they are thrown back into poverty. Further, Davis’s narration is almost exclusively descriptive. In “Starting the Selection” we never find out why the Mother “used to sit on a log ... and cry for hours”, except that she was “lonely”. In one of the most acclaimed stories, “Cranky Jack”, a mentally disturbed farm hand sees himself in a mirror and thinks it is his father. He is so distressed that he has to be locked in the barn but later escapes and smashes the mirror with an axe. Davis does not speculate as to why he behaves as he does.

Nevertheless the stories were read as comedy, and were wildly successful. The simplest measure of their popularity is in the publishing records of the New South Wales Bookstall Company; the major publisher of popular paperback editions of Australian novels, stories and poetry until the 1950s. “Steele Rudd” contributed 21

books to its catalogue, more than any other author, and they were reprinted 239 times. *On Our Selection* alone sold at least a quarter of a million copies.

This success story bewildered those who wanted to elevate other Australian writers of the 1890s, particularly Henry Lawson, to high-art status. “Steele Rudd”, they felt, was of a lower order. Years later Australian literati such as Nettie Palmer were disconcerted to find that when distinguished European professors discussed Australian literature, as did Gustav Hubener from Bonn University when he visited Australia in 1934, Steele Rudd, not Lawson or Banjo Paterson, 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 in the Third Reich 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.*

Unauthorised translations of Davis’s work existed in many European and Asian languages, and in this way 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!*”).

Together with contemporaries such as Lawson, Davis helped establish “bush realism” as the dominant mode of Australian prose writing at a time, the 1890s, later mythologised as the key decade which laid the foundations of a distinctive European-Australian male character based on the bushman — laconic, stoic, able to endure endless misery and hardship without complaint. His stories, with their agrarian populism and anti-intellectual contempt for sophistication, social planning and visionary ideals, reflect many of the ongoing political and cultural differences between country and city in Australian society today.

Arthur Hoey Davis was not, however, just remembering rural life as he had experienced it in his childhood. Consider this image from the Corcoran Museum of Art in Washington, D.C.:

**[Illustration 9: Richard Norris Brooke (USA, 1847 –1920)  
*A Pastoral Visit* , 1881, Corcoran Gallery, Washington DC]**

Those of you who know one of “Steele Rudd’s” most anthologised stories, “The Parson and the Scone”, will recognise the narrative here, which predates Davis’s version by fifteen years. In Norris’s painting the African-American family are obliged to pretend they aren’t hungry, while they feed the parson the last of their scarce and hard-earned food. Davis may have experienced a similar situation – “family hold back” isn’t unusual even today – but his story is a crafted local rendition of an already well-known international rural myth.

In other respects as well Davis is an unlikely candidate as an Australian national author. He does not foreground his characters as “Australians”; indeed he has no national vision except that of geography. His many European but non-English characters (Scots, Irish, Scandinavians, Germans) adhere in speech and behaviour to their cultural origins rather than blending into their new environment. Nor has he any conception of mateship, that close platonic bond between working men which is the basis of Lawson’s and many other writers’ representations of “Australian” social relationships, and which also became part of the male national and Anzac legends. For Davis the nuclear family is the primary social unit, and the later popularisers of his material as “Dad and Dave” were correct in seeing the father-son relationship as central.

Of Davis’s many later books, only a few are distinctive in approach and significantly different in subject matter from his starting-a-farm sagas and excursions into bush farce. One that relates directly to Davis’s work in the Sheriff’s Office is *For Life* (1908), an unusual semi-documentary account of a real-life journey he undertook as a shorthand secretary assisting an investigation into the infamous and still unsolved “Gatton murders” of 1898. Two sisters were raped and they and their brother killed, and his short novella chronicles the work of a police party as it rides around south-east Queensland checking the alibi of one of the prime suspects. What makes the story unusual and interesting is its mature objectivity and the way it resists murder-mystery closure. The narrator is under no illusions that the suspect is deceitful and certainly capable of such barbarity, but it becomes apparent, to the disappointment of all the investigators except the storyteller, that in this case at least he is innocent.

*For Life* was devised following the first of many personal setbacks that overwhelmed Davis in later life. Having risen to be Under Sheriff, he was retrenched in 1903 by a new government administration. He had married a childhood companion, Violet Christina (“Tea”) Brodie, and at the time he was retrenched they had three small children. In spite of his dependent family and subsequent offers of re-employment, Davis angrily turned his back on his public service career, and spent the rest of his life trying to live by his writing. This intensified the need for him to use the profitable characters and genres for which he had already become famous.

From 1908 to 1917, after an unsuccessful attempt to move to Sydney, he acquiesced in his wife’s decision to return to the Darling Downs and to invest his considerable literary earnings in an established farm. Davis evidently found country life easier to celebrate from a distance; his prose writing from these years is almost universally appalling. The characters, as the Foreword to the 1984 University of Queensland Press reissue notes, are “clumsy, ignorant, inept, jealous, deceitful, callous, and oafish”. He turned his hand more successfully to adapting some of his stories for stage performance, but by 1917 the farm had failed. One of his sons was injured in the First

World War, and his wife was permanently institutionalised two years later as a result of what appears to have been an extreme anxiety neurosis. By the early 1920s Davis was living with his younger children in various Brisbane boarding houses.

For about ten years he maintained a relationship with Winifred Hamilton, a younger writer, magazine editor, and author of a long unpublished biography of the man she admired and loved, in spite of his frequent gloominess. She coaxed from him, and possibly silently co-authored, a novel of the early squatting days, *The Romance of Runnibede*. They moved to Sydney in 1926, and both hoped this substantial novel would re-establish his “literary” reputation, but it and a film version failed to attract much notice. Eventually Davis separated from Hamilton and he began a final relationship with a moderately wealthy Sydney woman, Beatrice Sharp, but was diagnosed with cancer and died in Brisbane in 1935 before they could marry.

Paradoxically, it is that almost unknown volume of city stories, *The Miserable Clerk*, which is the work most worthy of notice in what is the sad chronicle of these last twenty-seven years of Davis’s life. Based on experiences from his early career in the Brisbane Sheriff’s Office, it appeared originally, like most of his work, as a series of newspaper columns. It was the only work he subsequently had to vanity publish, sold almost no copies, was not recorded as part of his literary estate, and was forgotten for forty years, until the University of Queensland Press reprinted it in the 1970s.

*The Miserable Clerk* is a minutely-detailed study of the day-by-day working of the court and legal system. It includes the horror of the double hanging of a man and a woman at Boggo Road gaol. Davis prepares for this 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 warder, crossed the square and involuntarily more than one air 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. 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 Miserable Clerk* ends with Davis’s account of another sensational real-life murder case that had given him one of his most difficult moments as Under Sheriff. He was required to convey to the two Kenniff brothers, convicted of the murder of two men including a policeman, that the death penalty had been waived for only one of them. Overall, it is a very fine volume of stories; and there are in fact a number of other *Miserable Clerk* stories printed in the *Brisbane Courier* in the 1920s that did not appear in the book, and I am gathering these together for eventual publication.

**[Illustration 10: “Dad and Dave” cartoon, *Smith’s Weekly*, 1925]**

### **Part 3: Dad and Dave.**

The other legend, that of “Dad and Dave”, is an extraordinary one of the popular exploitation of his material during his lifetime, from which he gained only limited financial benefit, and of straightforward but unchallenged plagiarism after his death. However it should be pointed out that, from his earliest writings, Davis owed a considerable debt to his editors and collaborators. His first stories, published in the *Sydney Bulletin*, were fragmentary incidents concerning different families. For the book of *On Our Selection!* the *Bulletin*’s literary editor, A. G. Stephens, changed the characters’ names to make all the stories about the Rudd family (encouraging the legend that the events described were “Steele Rudd’s” unvarnished autobiography), combined many of the fragments into longer chapters, and sequenced the stories from

adversity to prosperity to create a “novel”. He also selected comic moments from the stories and commissioned illustrations to draw attention to them.

Stephens marketed *On Our Selection* brilliantly, reviewing it himself in the *Bulletin* in the week it was released, and insisting that in spite of the “unrelieved record of failure and disappointment” it chronicled, “the tragedy ... is only remembered for the comedy distilled from it”. The book appeared only in hardcover and at six shillings a copy was a shilling dearer than comparable works such as Lawson’s *While the Billy Boils*, but it sold 20,000 copies by the time its equally-successful successor, *Our New Selection!*, appeared four years later, coincidentally appearing in bookshops on the same day Davis was told he was to be dismissed from his position as Under Sheriff. His mistaken belief that he could live well by his pen alone was based on these heady but never to be repeated years.

Intervention of a different kind came in the years 1904–1909 when Davis began to sell his material to A. C. Rowlandson, manager of the New South Wales Bookstall Company, which had an exclusive contract to sell tram and ferry tickets at stalls set up beside transport terminals. Rowlandson decided to expand into the sale of cheap paperback literature. He lured Davis with a lucrative offer to publish his third book, *Sandy’s Selection*, and after the demise of the *Bulletin*’s publishing venture, bought the copyrights to the first two volumes as well.

Rowlandson was interested in very short stories cheaply packaged for reading during journeys on public transport. To create an extra book, *Stocking Our Selection*, he cut the last ten chapters from *On Our Selection!* and seven from *Our New Selection!*, but marketed the two known titles as if no changes had been made. Until Davis’s copyrights expired at the end of 1985 and other editions began to appear, few readers realised that *On Our Selection* ever had pretensions to being a 24-chapter novel. They knew it only as a slim collection of sixteen stories, and “Steele Rudd’s” literary reputation suffered in consequence.

#### **[Illustration 11: Cartoon of characters from *On Our Selection* play]**

Possibly an even more influential work was the stage *On Our Selection*, which from 1912 onwards toured Australia and New Zealand. It played to a million patrons in its first four years alone and was presented briefly in London in 1921. The stage actors and entrepreneurs Beaumont Smith, Bert Bailey, and Edmund Duggan revised the play before and during its long stage history, but Davis alone scripted three stage plays later presented professionally – though none became the runaway success *On Our Selection* was from its opening night onwards. As well as being possibly an even more powerful populariser of the Rudd family than the Bookstall paperbacks, it began the process that created “Dad and Dave” by fixing the interpretation of these two characters in the popular imagination. Bailey played Dad Rudd as a heroic small businessman, and his determination to make his selection a success as an inspiration for all independent entrepreneurs. Dave, as played by the lanky actor Fred Macdonald, was by contrast the stock slow-witted country bumpkin, walking with a side-to-side bow-legged gait, backs of his hands turned forwards, guffawing moronically.

This shift in the manner in which Davis's stories were being interpreted and realised by others did not go unnoticed. Indeed, from the earliest publications to the present day, high-culture critics have tended to blame Davis's illustrators, particularly the artist Norman Lindsay whose sketches of Dave clearly influenced Macdonald's characterisation, and the play itself, for beginning the slide towards caricature and farce.

**[Illustration 12: Opening title to 1920 film of *On Our Selection*]**

However the silent film of *On Our Selection* (1920), from a scenario by Davis and the film's director Raymond Longford, is acclaimed as an early classic of the Australian screen. It has often been identified as pointing towards Davis's original conception of the Rudd family as essentially non-comic pioneers. While there are still a number of deliberate and very funny sequences, the dominant tone is of physical struggle in an almost Gothic landscape. The bushfire sequence:

**[Illustration 13: Bushfire sequence from 1920 film of *On Our Selection*]**

... is particularly fine, and Tal Ordell as Dave, though still in the bush simpleton mould, is comparatively restrained, and active in the scenes of struggle as well as those of comedy.

In the 1930s Bert Bailey and Fred Macdonald starred as Dad and Dave in four sound films, beginning predictably with *On Our Selection* followed by *Grandad Rudd*. The last two films, *Dad and Dave Come to Town*, and *Dad Rudd M.P.*, both made after Davis's death, use his characters but borrow their plots from Hollywood, particularly Frank Capra's *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* and *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*. They extend the elevation of Dad Rudd to Everyman status, the defender, champion, and voice of "the small man". *Dad Rudd M.P.*, made after the Second World War had begun, ends with Dad Rudd's maiden speech to federal parliament, urging Australia to come to the defence of the British Empire.

The full title of the last major reworking of Davis's material is *Dad and Dave from Snake Gully*, a radio serial that began in 1937. A Sydney advertising company devised it to try to overcome Australian resistance to the "American" habit of chewing gum, using the slogan: "Wrigley's Chewing Gum: As Australian as Dad and Dave". Though modelled on the American program *Amos 'n' Andy*, it used as "typical Australians" a farming family: Dad, Mum, and Dave. No surname was ever mentioned; this, and the subtitle, helped to make its unauthorised borrowings marginally less blatant.

The radio family lived at an imaginary "Snake Gully" near Gundagai in western New South Wales rather than in Queensland – so chosen because of the "Road to Gundagai" song which was its theme tune – and Dave's girl friend was called Mabel rather than Lily White. By 1952, when the last of over 2000 episodes had been made and broadcast, many people assumed that Snake Gully was the location of the *On Our Selection* stories and that Mabel was one of Davis's original characters.

**[Illustration 14: Sculptures of Dad and Dave, Snake Gully Tourist Centre]**

Here are Dad and Dave at the Snake Gully Tourist Centre near Gundagai; Mabel is there too.

In spite of its dubious origins, *Dad and Dave* was a charming, progressive pastoral, without Davis's negativity or Bailey's aggressive commitment to free enterprise struggle. It was set in the present and was intensely topical: a "Snake Gully Cup" episode was broadcast on the evening of the first Tuesday in November, the day the Melbourne Cup is run. More serious episodes took Australian society through the years of struggle following the great depression, the anxieties and sacrifices of the Second World War, post-war reconstruction, the arrival of the first European refugees and immigrants, and the start of the Snowy Mountains scheme.

**[Illustration 15: *Smith's Weekly* strip cartoon published to coincide with the radio serial, 1937]**

Dave became comfortably middle class and well-spoken and both Mum and Mabel, in spite of the latter's dopey accent ("Aw gee, Dave"), were spirited feminists who owned their own cars and flew planes, particularly after Lorna Bingham became the principal script writer in 1940.

*Dad and Dave* is still broadcast on country and special-interest radio stations. Gradually however everything else – the names of Arthur Hoey Davis, the Rudd family, and even "Steele Rudd" – have faded from public memory, together with the phrase "on our selection", the meaning of which now has to be explained to most Australians. Commercial tourist venues on the Darling Downs and five miles from Gundagai beside the "Dog on the Tucker Box", crude "Dad and Dave" and "Dave and Mabel" jokes, and political cartoons:

**[Illustration 16: *Telegraph* cartoon, "On Our Selection", with Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen as Dad, 1987]**

... such as this, from the now-defunct Brisbane *Telegraph*, about the last days of the Bjelke-Petersen government in Queensland, are the last surviving echoes of this extraordinary popular story-telling phenomenon of the first half of the twentieth century.