



Ugly little, wicked little artists

The most powerful polity in the world settles another country just about as far away as you can get without entering an unlivable sea of ice, or spinning off, impossibly, into the unimaginable starry void of the firmament. It is a strange, desolate country, populated by bizarre, even repellent, creations, which, because you may be a famous naturalist, you carefully collect and catalogue, and which, because you are counted as the first to do so, might well end up being named after you. Of all the species of a plant that is, all but one are found only in that country. Such a feature might even render them symbolic one day. Though everyone knows that this country is already inhabited, that it's not running with rivers of gold, that it's of no real strategic value, that others have been there before, indeed, are living there now, you claim it as your own. You pour into it the criminal scum of your own country or, rather, countries, given you've done this sort of thing successfully before, then open it up to adventurers of all kinds, for the most part rapacious if incompetent buffoons. The existing inhabitants are filthy savages, hairy monkeys. They are not human, though you are happy to fuck their women. They have nothing to offer, though they somehow know how to live in what appears to you the most inhospitable hell on earth. You will steal their stinking land, and kill them, and denounce the survivors as anachronistic scum, and then you will congratulate yourself on your enlightened values, your pioneering attitude, your strength and generosity of spirit. If you feel any twinge of regret, you might shrug your shoulders and think, "well, I wasn't personally responsible, that's just what they did in those days and there's nothing I can do about that now, and why dwell on the sins of the past, anyway?" In fact, now you think about it, you've given enough already, you've sweated and bled, you haven't had it easy. And these people, these people, think they can complain, though they've had it so good, had special favours paid to them, have gone on and on guzzling your taxes like there was no tomorrow, and they still can't take any responsibility for themselves, the miserable shiftless scum. Forget it, there's nothing you can do. You've done your damndest to protect them, and they just throw it back in your face. Well, don't dwell on it. You've got to work, and this country's going places. You could be a young woman, pretty as May, walking along somewhere in the west, and suddenly you see, just squatting there in the Banksias, plain as day, "ugly little, wicked little men." The banksias are crawling with these men, they're swarming on every branch, and, as any psychoanalyst would say, dirty horrible things that they are (or so you would think if you'd even heard the name), that vision, innocent and childlike as everyone pretends it to be, is really a festering morass of sexual and political obscenity. An effervescence of furry flowers, the fact you are walking on land recently claimed...now even the vegetation is staring back at you with ten thousand baleful eyes. No, no, put it from your mind, those menacing creatures are really evidence of a delightful imagination, one that will edify and entertain generations of our children. But that won't happen until the war begins or rather ends, because it is a great war, a war that will end all wars. Things are harsh, you're an artist, you make these lovely cheerful postcards, and think of our boys at the front, and of happier times, when it comes to you, while you are snuggling in your bed of all places, that the second of your half-brother bush-babies will be Cuddlepot. The gumnuts are so cute, so infantile, so charmingly named, that no one would ever suspect them of harbouring nasty thoughts, or of hiding dirty deeds. Their niceness will impress good-hearted indigenous animals. Of their hairy Banksia adversaries, however, you should expect anything. You publish your book during the 1918 Armistice celebrations, dedicated to "The Two Dearest Children in The World, Lefty and Bill," who are, in fact, your parents. There's something funny going on with this family, if you ask me. But why would you quibble, they are so delightful! The images of your babies and the villainous Banksia men will propagate themselves like wildfire (in a non-sexual way, that is); the plant itself will become fodder for wonderfully inventive woodworkings of native nature. You will help to give birth to a nation of tourist shops, where you can find koalas made from kangaroo skins, or regional craft centres, where you can find nice vases lathed out of Banksia follicles, all shining and gaping with burrs and evacuated seed pods, kinda phallic and vaginal at once, kitschy and creepy. When everything else has been stolen, land, children, goods, then it's time to start on the culture, writing mutant messages to the heartland that are sure to be bestsellers, and, in the end, who would say that's wrong, except for the envious or the impotent. But then someone might come along and look at all the fake native fauna and flora exposing itself promiscuously, and think they can make a fetish spear, or a fetish club, or a fetish surveyor's tripod, all the edges carefully smoothed away or bristling with spikes or sprouting frizzy hair, or painstakingly craft a sort of barricade, turned spiny as an echidna and about as colourful. If nature camouflages itself as art, art tells you not to touch. Keep off, keep out, keep away, this is ours, you might hear it say if you're sensitive to that type of thing. Then you might further think, to your horror or perhaps to your delight, that this is an impossible situation to be in, and that the only way to keep on going, to make it bearable, is not to think about it very much. If art can sometimes reveal stuff to you, or force you to look at it again, it's not because a real spike is being driven into your eyeball, just a perceptible idea.

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