

Australian Classics

50 great writers
and their celebrated works

Jane Gleeson-White


ALLEN & UNWIN

I

ROBBERY UNDER ARMS:

*A story of life and adventure in the bush
and in the Australian goldfields*

Rolf Boldrewood (1826–1915)

Rolf Boldrewood's bushranging tale *Robbery Under Arms* was one of the first novels written in Australia to be considered a classic. Reviewing the book in 1889 on its publication, the *Age* called Boldrewood 'the Homer of the Bush' and his novel, with its 'unmistakable air of verisimilitude', second only to *Jane Eyre* (1847) as fictional autobiography. The following year, the Melbourne *Argus* hailed *Robbery Under Arms* as an 'Australian classic'.

First published in serial form by John Fairfax & Son's *Sydney Mail* from 1882 to 1883, *Robbery Under Arms* caused an immediate sensation. Its instalments became so eagerly awaited that when floodwaters prevented the latest issue of the *Sydney Mail* from reaching one outback town, its residents arranged for the whole chapter to be telegraphed from nearby Dubbo.

Robbery Under Arms is narrated by condemned bushranger Dick Marston, who tells his story in a rhythmic vernacular with such engaging directness that it feels alive more than one hundred years after its first telling: 'My name's Dick Marston,' he begins,

‘Sydney-side native. I’m twenty-nine years old, six feet in my stocking soles, and thirteen stone weight. Pretty strong and active with it, so they say.’ Dick’s escapades on the wrong side of the law start with his introduction to crime by his father, Ben Marston, who was transported to New South Wales for poaching, and his corruption of his younger brother Jim. Their sister Aileen, who shares her brothers’ high spirits and gift for horse-riding, attempts over and over again to persuade them to stay home and work the land honestly, like their dull but upstanding neighbour George Storefield. But they can’t resist the call of freedom and easy money.

The brothers’ reckless adventures escalate when their father introduces them to the notorious, enigmatic bushranger Starlight, who is as charming and gentlemanly as he is lawless. As Dick recalls from his father’s hideout Terrible Hollow, while anticipating his first meeting with the mysterious Starlight: ‘I began to be uneasy to see this wonderful mate of father’s, who was so many things at once—a cattle-stealer, bush-ranger, and a gentleman.’ After successful episodes of cattle-duffing, prison-escape and armed robbery—interrupted by a lawful stint of mining on the Turon goldfields near Bathurst—Starlight and the Marstons soon become the colony’s most wanted men.

And so Dick confesses his incorrigible ways from a prison cell, addressing the reader with a frank and easy familiarity: ‘it’s all up now; there’s no get away this time; and I, Dick Marston, as strong as a bullock, as active as a rock-wallaby, chock-full of life and spirits and health, have been tried for bush-ranging—robbery under arms they call it—and though the blood runs through my veins like water in the mountain creeks, and every bit of bone and sinew is as sound as the day I was born, I must die on the gallows this day month.’

Boldrewood’s novel was so popular that it was serialised a second time, from 1884, and was published in three volumes in London

in 1888. While the British reviewers criticised *Robbery Under Arms* for its focus on criminals and its ‘slang and rough language’, they conceded that it made gripping reading. They were torn between their concern for the book’s immoral subject matter and its irresistible storytelling. The *Guardian* called *Robbery Under Arms* ‘a capital story full of wild adventure and startling incident’ but worried that it was possible to ‘feel some admiration’ for the bushrangers, ‘even to entertain real sympathy for their fate’. As the *Spectator* lamented: ‘The fact is that the book is too fascinating.’ And so it is. *Robbery Under Arms* has rarely been out of print since 1888.

Today the novel is still striking for its uncanny truthfulness, its ‘air of verisimilitude’ so noted by contemporary readers. As one Sydney journalist recalled in 1889 of his first reading *Robbery Under Arms* on the Monaro, the reason he ‘loved the story years ago’, was that ‘even then I knew how true it all was. I knew the very landscape; I believed I had met men and women that might have served for originals of those distinct copies; the whole story came to me as clear, as distinct, as personal, as if it had been part of mine.’

Boldrewood’s use of the ‘colonial vernacular’ has been compared to Mark Twain’s use of the vernacular in *Huckleberry Finn*, published in 1884, two years after *Robbery Under Arms* first appeared. As with Twain’s novel, it is the brilliant vitality and intimacy of Dick’s narrative voice, as well as the wild adventures he has with his brother Jim, Starlight and the women they love, that make *Robbery Under Arms* such lively reading. And at times Dick’s voice, with its conversational ease, evokes JD Salinger’s twentieth-century misfit, Holden Caulfield: Kate ‘had a way of talking to me and telling me everything that happened, because I was an old friend she said—that pretty nigh knocked me over, I tell you.’ Through his Antipodean tale-teller, Boldrewood weaves together many of the true tales he heard in the courts while

travelling across western New South Wales as a magistrate, and later as Goldfields Commissioner and Coroner.

Rolf Boldrewood is the pseudonym of Thomas Alexander Browne, who took the name from ‘Marmion’, a poem by Sir Walter Scott. Browne was born in London in 1826. Five years later, he sailed for New South Wales aboard his father’s ship *Proteus*, which carried a cargo of convicts. Captain Brown (Thomas added the distinguishing ‘e’ in 1875) established a whaling business in Sydney and gave his son Thomas a gentleman’s education. After a stint as a squatter in western Victoria and New South Wales, which he abandoned in 1870 because of drought, Thomas Browne returned to Sydney with his wife and children. The following year he became Police Magistrate in Gulgong. It was then—‘as an overburdened paterfamilias’, as he put it—that he turned to writing to supplement his income. Boldrewood’s stories of squatting life appeared in weekly newspapers and his first book, *Ups and Downs: a Story of Australian Life*, was published in 1878.

In 1882, at the suggestion of a friend, Boldrewood began a novel on bushranging, a subject that continued to fire the public imagination. Bushrangers had terrorised the colony during the 1860s and 70s; Boldrewood himself had been held up in 1867 and never forgot the feeling of having a pistol held to his head. He became so intrigued by the bushranging phenomenon that he later interviewed one of his assailants in Wagga Wagga gaol. By 1882, two sensational bushranging stories had gripped the nation: the 1879 capture of the notorious Captain Moonlight (said to be Starlight’s original; although there was also a real Captain Starlight: Frank Pearson) and Ned Kelly’s capture and execution in 1880.

The novel that resulted from his friend’s suggestion was *Robbery Under Arms*. But despite the public’s fascination for bushrangers, Boldrewood initially struggled to find a publisher for

his novel because of its criminal heroes. Once published, however, his story of three fearless bushrangers was an immediate hit. As one critic observed in 1891: ‘What a curious comment it is on Australian history that the heroes of our best novels are convicts and bushrangers.’ The success of *Robbery Under Arms* established Boldrewood as a writer and he wrote fifteen more novels, but none was as popular as his great bushranging tale. After his retirement Boldrewood lived mostly near Melbourne, where he died in 1915.

Since it first appeared, *Robbery Under Arms* has inspired scores of adaptations, including a popular stage version in 1890. *Robbery Under Arms* was made into one of the first Australian feature films, in 1907, and four years later was adapted for screen a second time as *Captain Starlight*. In the publicity brochure for the popular 1907 film, the producers were keen to distinguish their film from a recent film on the Kelly gang: ‘The story of the Marstons is not the story of the Kellys. The Kellys, however you may gild them, remain brutal realities . . . But the Marstons were always in a certain glamour of the ideal . . . Their story is the story of men of nominally good instincts, twisted by heredity and weakened by insidious elements of circumstantial environment.’ In 1957 an English film version of *Robbery Under Arms* starring Peter Finch as Starlight was made in an attempt to compete with Hollywood’s Westerns. Its publicity promoted Finch as Captain Starlight, ‘the notorious robber whose most potent weapons were a polite phrase and a disarming smile’. The most recent adaptation of *Robbery Under Arms* was made for screen and television in 1985, starring Sam Neill as the charming Starlight.



Gold

Halfway through *Robbery Under Arms* the Marstons read the following news:

WONDERFUL DISCOVERY OF GOLD AT THE TURON. We have much pleasure in informing our numerous constituents that gold, similar in character and value to that of San Francisco, has been discovered on the Turon River by those energetic and experienced practical miners, Messrs. Hargraves and party . . . It is impossible to forecast the results of this most momentous discovery. It will revolutionise the new world. It will liberate the old. It will precipitate Australia into a nation.

And so it did—the wealth of gold transformed Australia almost immediately. The *Sydney Morning Herald* announced the discovery on 15 May 1851 and two weeks later a thousand diggers had crossed the Blue Mountains for the goldfields. In *Robbery Under Arms*, Dick and Jim Marston join the rush. When they reach the Turon, they have never seen anything like it in all their solitary bush days: ‘Upon that small flat, and by the bank, and in the river itself, nearly 20,000 men were at work, harder and more silently than any crowd we’d ever seen before . . . My word, we were stunned, and no mistake about it.’ There, in country ‘like we’d seen scores and scores of times all our lives and thought nothing of’ were men everywhere digging up gold, ‘just like potatoes’.





In February 1851, Edward Hammond Hargraves and his guide, bushman John Lister, had travelled west from Sydney and followed a tributary of the Macquarie River, where Hargraves was sure he would find gold. Hargraves had just returned from the Californian goldfields convinced that they resembled the country around Bathurst west of Sydney. He was right. When four of the five pans of gravel and earth he sifted revealed gold, he exclaimed to his astonished companion: 'Here it is. This is a memorable day in the history of New South Wales. I shall be a baronet, and you will be knighted, and my old horse will be stuffed, put into a glass case, and sent to the British Museum!'

In August that same year gold was found in Ballarat, in the new state of Victoria. News of the flood of gold spread quickly round the world and thousands headed for the Australian goldfields. As Dick says: 'One thing's certain; Jim and I would never have had the chance of seeing as many different kinds of people in a hundred years if it hadn't been for the gold.'

Although gold had reputedly been discovered several times in the Bathurst region before 1851, the news had been suppressed in order to prevent the convicts rebelling and labourers abandoning their work. But with the announcement of gold in 1851, the colony's purpose was completely redefined in the eyes of the British government. It soon became clear that the transportation of convicts to eastern Australia was no longer a punishment—for, as the British Secretary of State made plain, the convicts were being sent 'to the immediate vicinity of those very goldfields





which thousands of honest labourers are in vain trying to reach.' So in August 1953, after 65 years, the last vestige of convict transportation to eastern Australia was abolished. (Transportation to New South Wales had been abolished in 1840, but had continued in Van Diemen's Land. Transportation to Western Australia continued until 1868.)

Gold also heralded technological change, including the first steam train in Australia, in 1854, and the first telegraph line, between Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, in October 1858. And most memorably, gold proved a powerful agent of democracy. As one visitor to the Victorian goldfields put it, Victoria had become 'an equalising colony of gold and beef and mutton'. This was recognised by British parliament with the granting of self-government on local matters and responsible government to the Australian states: Victoria in 1855; New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania (formerly Van Diemen's Land) in 1856; and the new state of Queensland in 1859.

But the most potent expression of the new democratic spirit came in 1854 at Eureka, on the Ballarat goldfield. Here the miners, already frustrated by their poor conditions, were provoked to rebellion by the murder of a fellow digger and subsequent release of those accused of his death. They responded with mass meetings and demands for reform, the focus of their agitation being the costly mandatory miner's licence. After mass burnings of licences, the miners erected a stockade at the end of November, which was stormed by troops on the morning of Sunday 3 December. The brief and bloody battle that ensued left twenty-two diggers and five





troops dead. As a result, the Victorian government granted the miners' requests for better conditions and replaced the licence with a 'miner's right', which gave miners the right to vote. The rebellion became one of Australia's most rousing symbols of the power of workers, stimulated the eight-hour day movement, and left as its emblem a new flag with southern-hemisphere stars. As Henry Lawson put it in 'Eureka':

But not in vain those diggers died. Their comrades may
rejoice,
For o'er the voice of tyranny is heard the people's voice;
It says: 'Reform your rotten law, the diggers' wrongs make
right,
Or else with them, our brothers now, we'll gather in the
fight.'

The gold rush of 1851 also brought an influx of Chinese immigrants—by 1861 the Chinese population on the Victorian goldfields was 24,062—and this sparked racial tension among the diggers. The New South Wales and Victorian parliaments responded by legislating to restrict the number of Chinese immigrants permitted into the colony, but the racial conflict eventually led to outbreaks of violence. There was a riot on the Buckland River in Victoria in 1857; and in 1860 at Lambing Flat in New South Wales the diggers attacked the Chinese quarter, leaving several people dead and others wounded. In June 1861 there was a second and more violent attack at Lambing Flat, with more than a thousand men marching on the Chinese quarters.





In response, the New South Wales Legislative Council passed the Chinese Immigration Act in November 1861, to control the arrival of Chinese gold seekers. (The act was repealed in 1867, once the rush for gold had waned.) And so the goldfields not only inspired the spirit of brotherhood among the workers, but also provoked racial animosity, another continuing theme in Australian life.

