



Lobster tales

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Literary lobsters

writer TERRY MULHERN

images courtesy of ALLPORT LIBRARY AND MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS and
TASMANIAN ARCHIVE AND HERITAGE OFFICE

Freshwater crayfish lurk beneath the surface of Tasmanian literature. All three stream-dwelling Tasmanian freshwater crayfish are represented: *Astacopsis gouldi* – lutaralipina, the giant freshwater crayfish from the north; *Astacopsis franklinii* – tayatitja, the small freshwater crayfish from the south and east; and *Astacopsis tricornis* – the medium-sized freshwater crayfish from the west, for which the Aboriginal name has been lost.

Tasmanian Friends and Foes: Feathered Furred and Finned (1880). The first literary lobster is the oldest. It’s in Louisa Anne Meredith’s novel about the Merton family. While the Mertons are fictional, we are assured “Every adventure

narrated is strictly true” and based on “a residence of 39 years in Tasmania”.

Louisa Anne Meredith (née Twamley) (1812-1895) arrived in Van Diemen’s Land in 1840 with her husband, the future Tasmanian politician, Charles Meredith. Nineteen years earlier, Charles and his family had settled at Oyster Bay where his father George prospered, becoming known as the “King of Great Swan Port”. Charles travelled back to England in 1838 to find a bride and returned with Louisa, his cousin.

Louisa published poetry and memoirs of colonial life. She also authored three novels, *Tasmanian Friends and Foes* being the last. It’s richly

opposite *Astacopsis tricornis*, from south-west Tasmania,
depicted as “Freshwater Crayfish” by W.B. Gould, from the *Sketchbook of Fishes* (c1832)



“A Cool Debate” by Louisa Anne Meredith, from *Tasmanian Friends and Foes* (1880)

decorated with Louisa’s own natural history paintings. But she earns a black mark from me. There are no illustrations of freshwater crayfish!

In *Tasmanian Friends and Foes*, Mrs Merton is asked by her “native-born” son to compare Tasmania’s marine cray (*Jasus edwardsii*) with the European lobster (*Homarus gammarus*). Cultural cringe rears its ugly head. Mrs Merton describes the cray as a “good substitute” but can’t help pointing out its “inferiority” due to its lack of large claws. Then Louisa saves herself, pointing out, possibly from first-hand experience, “A true lobster inhabits the fresh-water streams of our north coast.”

From 1844-48, Louisa and Charles lived at Port Sorell, where Charles was the assistant police magistrate. As a pastoralist and businessman, Charles was a failure – unusual credentials for the future colonial treasurer. With bankruptcy looming, “King” George called in a favour from Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Eardley-Wilmot and a job was found for Charles.

At Port Sorell, the Merediths’ first home was a drafty, unplastered cottage eight kilometres south of the township, surrounded by “damp, dark and dismal” forest. Louisa disdainfully referred to it as “Lath Hall”. I can’t imagine the proud Louisa hitching up her skirts and sloshing about in creeks to catch *Astacopsis gouldi* for the pot, but it’s likely she sampled this local delicacy.

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Flames (2019). The next literary lobster is the most recent. It’s in Robbie Arnott’s much-lauded debut novel, set in the present, but with a plot driven by an imagined ancient mythology. Arnott’s pantheon of gods and demi-gods, some in animal form, interact with people. But the “pale apes” don’t even realise they exist. The god of the South Esk River takes the form of a rakali, the native water rat (*Hydromys chrysogaster*). When the river god is trapped and skinned for his magical pelt, the creatures of the river emerge to wreak gruesome revenge on the perpetrator. It’s a small role, but the crayfish, in this case *Astacopsis franklinii*, “execute” it with aplomb.

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The rakali “*Hydromys chrysogaster* – Golden-bellied Beaver Rat” by H.C. Richter, from John Gould’s *The Mammals of Australia Volume 3* (1853)

Roving Party (2011). Lobsters appear in Rohan Wilson’s award-winning novel set during the Black War. Wilson takes his main characters and events directly from history, but he fills in the blanks vividly.

William “Black Bill” Ponsonby is an Aboriginal man stolen as a child and raised by whites. Bill straddles the frontier, with a foot in each camp but not fully accepted by either. He’s a member of John Batman’s infamous paramilitary “roving party”, tasked by the governor with hunting down “hostile blacks”. Batman also employs two Dharug men from the mainland as trackers. The roving party’s



“Manalargenna, a chief of the East Coast, V. D. L.”
by Thomas Bock (c1831)

quarry are led by the feared Plindermairhemener warrior and cleverman, Manalargena. Early on, Manalargena entreats Bill to leave Batman and join him, but Bill refuses. Bill and Manalargena then repeatedly swap the roles of hunter and hunted in this blood-soaked drama.

Astacopsis franklinii appear on the menu several times, but freshwater crayfish are also employed figuratively. In the first pages of the novel, Manalargena tells Bill a story, handed down to him by his father, about two brothers who live near a river. The brothers are stalked by a hunter from a rival clan. “He see them brother eating crayfish, singing song. He want crayfish too.” When the hunter pursues the frightened brothers, all three transform into wallabies who “... forget the crayfish. They eat grass and drink water ... Not two but three ... Who is brother. Who is hunter. They forget this thing.” This story is an invention of Wilson, not a traditional Aboriginal legend. Very little Aboriginal folklore was recorded by whites or survived as oral tradition after the Black War.

Wilson told me he wanted to emphasise how different the early colonial landscape was. Freshwater crayfish helped, as they’re simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar to modern Tasmanians. He knew that freshwater crayfish were important in the Aboriginal diet, and undoubtedly folklore. Wilson also drew on his own childhood experiences of catching freshwater crayfish with his father.

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The final two literary lobsters come from one of Australia’s best-loved writers, Richard Flanagan, who seems almost as obsessed with freshwater crayfish as me.

Gould’s Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish (2001). Flanagan’s third novel was inspired by the exquisite watercolour sketches of convict artist William Buelow Gould. Gould painted his *Sketchbook of Fishes* in the early 1830s while incarcerated on Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour. Flanagan’s version is a mind-bending fusion of fact and fiction, the past and present, history and hallucination.

The story follows the misadventures of convict “Billy” Gould. Each chapter is connected to one of W.B. Gould’s paintings. In Chapter 10, “The Freshwater Crayfish”, Billy escapes and is on the run. He encounters a freshly moulted *Astacopsis tricornis* on a rock by an alpine tarn near an empty Aboriginal village – the site of a massacre.

This freshwater crayfish is a metaphor for Tasmanian Aborigines, who are not the doomed primitives of 19th century Darwinism, but culturally adaptive and responsive to change. Freshwater crayfish shed their shell biannually. The new shell is pale and pliable. Before hardening, it expands, allowing the crayfish to grow. Despite more than two centuries of persecution and suffering, Tasmanian Aboriginal language and culture have survived and adapted. There are more Tasmanian Aborigines alive today than in 1803.

Death of a River Guide (1994). I’ve saved the best till last. Freshwater crayfish are woven intimately into the fabric of this book. Flanagan was himself

a white-water rafting guide on the Franklin River and seeing wild lobsters must have had a big impact on him.

During an expedition on the Franklin, rafting guide Aljaz Cosini becomes wedged underwater between two rocks, in clear sight of his companions, but tantalizingly out of reach. While drowning, Aljaz experiences visions from his own life and that of his forebears. With a Slovenian mother and a Tasmanian father, these visions allow Flanagan to explore how the Aboriginal, convict and post-war migrant experiences overlay and intersect.

The rafters encounter a freshwater crayfish on their second day on the river. “They startled a flock of swifts from a cliff face and saw a giant lobster sitting on a log at the river’s edge, glistening iridescent greens and blues in the sunlight, and even the punters did not have an immediate response to its proud perfection.” The lobster invokes both the wonder of pristine wilderness and how alien it is to city dwellers.

There are no “giant” lobsters (*Astacopsis gouldi*) in the south-west, only *Astacopsis tricornis*. But I’m prepared to cut Flanagan some slack. They are closely related and look very alike, and while not “giant” they can be quite big (one to two kilograms). Flanagan redeems himself in the rest of the book by dropping “giant” and just calling them “freshwater lobsters”. In convict records from Macquarie Harbour, this is what they were called.

In a vision, Aljaz’s father Harry cooks a boozy barbecue for a menagerie of native animals including “a serene-looking freshwater lobster”. But these aren’t real animals, they’re ghosts in animal form. The freshwater lobster quietens the revellers and relates how the young Harry lost his thumb in the gears of a winch while harvesting Huon pine deep in the rainforest. Harry’s companions, Smegsy and Old Bo, then embark on an epic journey, rowing nonstop for days to get the fever-stricken Harry down river and across Macquarie Harbour to Strahan. As they row, “Old Bo began to tell stories, strange wonderful stories” of “a world where past, present and future seem to collide and exist together”. Old Bo and the lobster merge, becoming one. Here and elsewhere, Flanagan invokes the use of animal totems in Aboriginal kinship.

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The allegorical use of lobsters by Arnott, Wilson and Flanagan resonate deeply with me. I’m not Aboriginal, but I feel a strong connection to the landscape and all living things, particularly the lobster. As an ex-Catholic atheist scientist, this feeling of oneness is as close to spirituality as I get these days. I firmly believe the world would be a better place if we respected this way of knowing, handed down from the Old People. Black or white, we all live on country and we’re part of country. We cannot be anything else. ■