



For the Term of his Natural Life: A Convict Tale of Early Australian History

Marcus Clarke

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The Classic Tale of Convict Life in Australia

For the Term of his Natural Life

By Marcus Clarke

For the Term of His Natural Life, written by Marcus Clarke, was published in the Australian Journal between 1870 and 1872 (as "His Natural Life"), appearing as a novel in 1874. It is the best known novelisation of life as a convict in early Australian history. Described as a "ripping yarn", and at times relying on seemingly implausible coincidences, the story follows the fortunes of Rufus Dawes, a young man transported for a murder that he did not commit. The book clearly conveys the harsh and inhumane treatment meted out to the convicts, some of whom were transported for relatively minor crimes, and graphically describes the conditions the convicts experienced. The novel was based on research by the author as well as a visit to the penal settlement of Port Arthur, Tasmania.

The story starts with a prologue, telling the tale of young British aristocrat, Richard Devine, who is the son of a shipbuilding magnate, Sir Richard Devine. In an incidence of domestic violence, Richard's mother reveals to Sir Richard that his son was fathered by another man, Lord Bellasis. Sir Richard proceeds to threaten the mother's reputation if Richard does not leave and never come back. He leaves him to pack for a while, claiming that he will fetch his lawyer to alter his will so that Richard receives no inheritance. When Richard leaves, he comes across a murder scene: his biological father, Lord Bellasis has been murdered, and Richard witnesses Sir Richard walking away from the scene of the crime. The police come and lock up Richard, who now gives his name as Rufus Dawes (which is used for the remainder of the book), for the murder of Lord Bellasis. Additionally, Sir Richard returns home and dies straight away, possibly of a heart-attack, without altering his will. Rufus Dawes/Richard Devine never finds this out. Rufus is found not guilty of the murder but guilty of the robbery of the corpse and sentenced to transportation to the penal colony of Australia.

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