‘My pen shall add a testimony to men noble and daring’: Poetry, Heroism and the Wreck of the SS Admella (1859)

Nicole Anae

The *South Australian Register* first coined the term ‘Admella poetry’ in November 1859, almost two months after the wreck of the inter-colonial steamer the SS Admella off the South Australian coast on 6 August 1859. The vessel, a Clyde built screw-steamer of 478 tons and costing £15,000, broke into three parts and of the 113 passengers and crew, eighty-nine lost their lives, with the nineteen survivors huddling for eight days on the Admella’s storm ravaged and severely damaged after-deck. Survivor James Miller later wrote in a letter, an extract of which was published in the *Nelson Examiner and New Zealand Chronicle* on 24 September 1859, that ‘For eight days, I may say I was face to face with “the King of Terrors,” but am yet alive by the blessing of God’ (3).

Miller’s letter was just one voice in the unparalleled surge of missives newspapers around the country received from local and international readers in response to the wreck. The outpouring of sympathy and support in the wake of the disaster was unprecedented. Never before had one single event mobilised colonial communities throughout Australia. ‘The calamity was one which afflicted all. Legislation was suspended, shops were empty, crowds stood in the street day and night for a week.’ Parliamentary members were involved in relief efforts at a bureaucratic level, while communities local and interstate organised charity events, and popular visiting and local theatre stars of the period donated proceedings from performances to the cause. One report claimed that ‘the loss of the Admella has developed in a most marvellous manner the intense, though perhaps heretofore unsuspected sympathy which binds South Australian colonists together’. The report also doubted whether anyone could ‘call to mind an instance in which a whole community ... consented to yield up time, thought, feeling – all to the contemplation of one calamity’. Thus, domestic publications ensured that the British readership was kept especially well-informed; ‘The disaster of the Admella, and the suffering of the survivors created a profound sensation in the colony; and, in fact, in England subscriptions were liberally made for the survivors’.

Many English journals and print reports ensured the transnational connection between the Admella disaster and the Imperial spirit. References in the *British Millennial Harbinger*...
of 1859 emerged in the form of two obituaries, both causalities of the Admella disaster: Edwin Chambers, ‘a very promising disciple [Latter Day Saints]’ and noted Adelaidean James Magarey.  Two months after the wreck the English Illustrated Times related news of the wreck and the Medical Times and Gazette included the death notice of one of the Admella’s passengers, one James Vaux, ‘surgeon to the Norfolk’. The reference to the Admella in the 1861 edition of Transaction of the Royal Scottish Society of the Arts came in the form of Thomas Sheddon’s article ‘On the Construction of Iron Ships’. Sheddon’s contribution focussed on the structural integrity of the Admella and the question of cause. Other transnational connections between the Admella disater’s aftermath and the Imperial spirit emerged in the expressions of valour conferred upon various seamen and volunteers by the Royal Humane Society, the Royal Benevolent Society, the Privy Council of the Board of Trade, and other English and Australian colonial associations.

The Wreck of the SS Admella
The inter-colonial steamer SS Admella wrecked on Carpenters Reef some nineteen miles north-west of Cape Northumberland on the morning of Friday 6 August 1859 as she made her journey from Port Adelaide, in South Australia, to the port of Melbourne, in Victoria. Initial reports claimed the cause of the wreck was the shifting of one of the three race horses the vessel carried as cargo (a theory later discredited although one oft-cited, even today). Later investigations established that a design fault caused the vessel to break into three parts. The first survivors to make it to the shore two days later were seamen John Leach and Robert Knapman. They navigated their way to the MacDonnell Lighthouse at Cape Northumberland believing they were the sole survivors. The lighthouse keeper, Benjamin Germein, then


7 Details published in the 1 December 1859 edition of the British Millennial Harbinger (661), via details written by one Henry Warren, Hindmarsh, South Australia, 16 September 1859.

8 Medical Times and Gazette 22 October 1859, 419.

9 Benjamin Germein (d. 1893) received a gold medal, and silver medals awarded to the surviving crew, with plans ‘to confer the honor of knighthood upon the Hon, J. H. Fisher President of the Legislative Council’ (South Australian Advertiser 6 July 1860, 2). Germein repaired the Admella lifeboat and five times attempted a rescue (the final, successfully although the vessel capsized three times) acting as coxswain among a crew numbering six. His efforts saved four survivors (see Advertiser 26 September 1893, 7; Border Watch 4 October, 1893, 4; Advertiser 26 April 1952, 6. For an account of his death by suicide, see Register 20 September 1893, 7). Captain James Fawthrop (d. 1878), who commandeered a lifeboat towed to the wreck by the Lady-Bird and rescued 19 survivors, also received a silver medal for gallantry from the English Board of Trade (South Australian Border Watch 20 November 1878, 2). The Shipwrecked Fisherman and Mariner’s Royal Benevolent Society awarded Germein a gold medal for bravery and humanity, and silver medals to his crew (Henry Smith, Charles Allmack, William Maben, Henry Wylie, Thomas Anderson and William Baker). Silver medals were also awarded to the ‘Pilot-Boat’s’ crew (Louis Thomas, Peter Smith, William Thomas, George Fowles, Uriah Marshall, and John Penny), as well as to John Leach and Robert Knapman. See Advertiser 6 July, 1860, 3.

10 The three racehorses aboard the Admella included ‘Jupiter’, ‘Shamrock’ and ‘Barber’. Reports vary concerning who owned which horse – some claim brothers Hurtle and George Fisher owned Jupiter and Shamrock, and William Filgate owned Barber (Register 23 January 1872, 4; Perth Western Mail 14 September 1939, 17). Others claim Shamrock and Barber were owned by William Filgate (Perth Inquirer & Commercial News 24 April 1896, 15). ‘Shamrock’ was killed. “Jupiter” reached the shore with a broken leg, and was destroyed. The third horse, “The Barber” gained the beach, apparently uninjured and was taken to Melbourne [to compete in the First Champion Sweepstakes], Border Watch 9 February 1923, 4. For Fisher’s obituary, see Register 1 July 1905, 7. For Filgate’s obituary see Perth Inquirer & Commercial News 24 April 1896, 15.

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trekked to the nearest telegraph in Mount Gambier where the station-master raised the alarm with transmissions to Portland, 93 miles (150km) to the west, and Adelaide, some 280 miles (450km) north east. Two rescue vessels were launched from both centres, the *Ladybird* from the former, and the *Corio* from the latter. Initially, neither vessel successfully located the wreck given the horrendous weather conditions and poor navigational information. The wreck was also twice passed-by unnoticed by two other vessels, the *Havilah* (just after dawn the morning the *Admella* struck) and P. & O.’s steamer the *Bombay* on Saturday evening.\(^\text{11}\) In fact, the *Corio* also passed the wreck without seeing it. It was eight days before the *Corio*, together with the *Admella*’s lifeboat commandeered by Germein, finally reached the wreck. The *Ladybird* also successfully towed the *Portland* lifeboat to the wreck, although by the time both lifeboats arrived, all fourteen children had perished as well as all nineteen female passengers with the exception of one: Bridget Ledwith. Cheering crowds in the thousands greeted the *Ladybird* as she ferried her complement of nineteen survivors into Melbourne Wharf on 18 August 1859.\(^\text{12}\)

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{wreck.png}
\caption{An illustration of the wreck of the *Admella* from a drawing by C. Dickson Gregory as published in an edition of the Melbourne Argus.\(^\text{13}\)}
\end{figure}

\(^\text{11}\) *Advertiser* 18 November 1859, 5; *Register* 20 August 1859, 2; *Portland Guardian and Normanby General Advertiser* 28 September 1859, 2.
\(^\text{12}\) The *SS Admella* and the *Ladybird* each attracted the interest of painters and artists. See *Advertiser* 18 October 1859, 4.
\(^\text{13}\) C. Dickson Gregory, ‘A Racehorse Caused a Tragic Wreck’, *Argus* 26 January 1946, 8.
The Significance of the Telegraph

"but for the telegraph, not a soul (Leach and Knappman excepted) would have been saved from the Admella." 14

Acclaimed in 1857 as ‘the wonderful annihilator of time and space,’ 15 the inter-colonial electrical telegraph – which in 1859 was still a relatively new invention, at least in the colonies – played a vital role in disseminating information about the wreck with ‘telegraphic speed’ both within and beyond Australian settlements. 16 Telegraphic exchanges performed a vital function in servicing public interest in the Admella disaster and typically provided highly graphic updates and accounts; 17 ‘The scene was heartrending ; – bodies floating round the wreck, passengers clinging to the hull and frantically offering money, jewels, everything they possessed, to be safely carried ashore’. 18 Newspapers printed columns of numerous up-to-date inter-colonial telegraphic exchanges relayed between signal towers, and those transmitted to and from stations directly to newspaper offices within and beyond South Australia: ‘We can see several living beings, but cannot distinguish them ... They have neither food nor water, nor have they had any since Friday’ (quoted three days after the wreck). 19 ‘Hundreds met at unusual hours’, as telegraphic offices became assembly points for people to gather in the wake of the disaster: ‘The portico of the Exchange was crowded all day with friends of the passengers, and great anxiety was shown to get the latest news by telegraph’. 20 Another issue reported that; ‘At all hours of the day crowds of people were waiting round the doors of the telegraph-station’. 21 The medium of the telegraph thus shaped the national mind-set in the experience of the disaster as a collective event of ‘loss and distress’; ‘the feelings of the whole community have, during these last few days, been acted upon as one mind by every throb of the telegraph which connects the city with the scene of despair on the seashore’. 22

One particular edition of the Register offers vital conclusions perhaps explaining why the wreck of the Admella had exerted such an unprecedented mobilising force upon the colonial consciousness in the claim; ‘the misery of our position is that it is one of lingering uncertainty – a terrible state of alternate hope and fear’. 23 Yet another account identifies a source of this ‘lingering uncertainty’ in the claim that; ‘Hour by hour and day by day we have received piecemeal a narrative of horrors which even as a history of past events would appall

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14 Register 17 November 1859, 3.
15 Sydney Morning Herald 23 December 1857, 4.
16 Register 15 August 1859.
17 The price of sending a ten-word telegraph between Adelaide and Melbourne in 1859 was six shillings, and for press matter the initial cost of a penny a word for 300 miles increased to two-pence for every mile beyond that radius. See Sydney Morning Herald 23 December 1857, 4. The cost of transmission between Tasmania and New South Wales was nine shillings for ten words, with 6d (6 shillings) charged for each additional word. Press matter in the form of newspaper reports transmitted from Sydney to Tasmania cost 3d. (3 shillings) per word.
18 See Mailand Mercury and Hunter River Advertiser 22 December 1859, 3.
19 Argus 10 August 1859, 5.
20 Register 15 August 1859; Argus 10 August 1859, 5.
21 Register 18 August 1859, 6.
22 Register 13 August 1859.
23 Register 13 August 1859.
[sic] the stoutest hearts’. Telegraphic exchanges recounting this real-life tragedy presented episodic and fragmentary narratives of the disaster which transformed the status of the telegraph as fundamentally paradoxical. While entrusted as a principle source of information, telegraph accounts also became prime sources of confusion and anxiety. Many newspapers noted ‘several contradictions’ in telegraphic missives, while other reports accounted for these discrepancies thus:

The greater part of these messages come in the name of the Mount Gambier telegraph-master, who is a very trustworthy and able officer, but who in these cases of contradiction must evidently be regarded as merely communicating to the citizens of Adelaide, information delivered to him by different persons who have gone down to the beach. As their impressions of the event and its consequences vary, so would their reports vary; and in the excitement of the occasion, and the transference of the news from one individual to another, it is not to be wondered at that what were originally mere conjectures, should ultimately be telegraphed as facts.

Perhaps most worryingly, accounts claimed that incorrect lists of the dead, and the survivors, were regularly transmitted from Mount Gambier station, within thirty-five miles of the wreck, to central exchanges where families gathered in prayer and hope. Many families and loved ones therefore received telegraphic exchanges as proof of life only to discover the information was erroneous:

Parents and spouse, child and sister, condemned almost to see the loved one perish inch by inch, as the electric wires noted for us each change that could be discerned of the wreck. The announcements hour after hour by the telegraph had a fearful interest ... With what terror the friends of those particularised looked forward to the next bulletin to see if they still survived, and with what feelings the kith and kin of the unmentioned rushed to learn whether the next lightening message would bring word of the objects of their solicitude being among ‘the recognised’.

The Observer attempted to offer assurances as to the verity of the telegraph by claiming that ‘These contractions, however, only show the difficulty of arriving at a satisfactory conclusion ... as to the cause of the wreck ... they do not in any way lessen our fears as to its results.’ And, after numerous, some almost fatal near-misses and botched rescue attempts, news of the survivors’ recovery finally ‘flew through the country with the speed of lightening, and for hours after our first publication of the telegrams, crowd succeeded crowd, of men, of women, and children, on foot, on horseback, and in vehicles, until the tidings of “twenty-two saved” were spread far and wide’.

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24 Register 13 August 1859.
25 Register 18 August 1859, 6.
26 Advertiser 18 August 1859, 6.
27 Age 17 August, via Sydney Morning Herald 26 August, 1859, 2.
28 Observer 13 August 1859.
29 Register 18 August 1859, 6; Advertiser 15 August 1859, 3.
The telegraphic station at Cape Otway, Victoria regularly transmitted details of the Admella wreck to the Post-Master General. One of the Admella’s mailbags containing 200 letters was found by Cape Otway’s lighthouse-keeper in early September 1859.30

The other significant element influencing the unprecedented interest in the wreck of the Admella was the telegraph’s dominance in mobilising colonials in an emotionally-charged communal experience of spectatorship. The telegraph mediated and defined the nature and scope of communal sympathy in generating, according to one report ‘an electric sympathy which vibrated through every mind’.31 Another report connected telegraphic accounts directly with experiences of emotional unity by claiming; ‘Hearts beat responsive to every mysterious throb of the tiny instrument’.32 Crucially, even despite the reputed unreliability of telegraphic sources, those very sources made possible a wholly collective participation in the event, even by those not directly connected with the Admella shipwreck as a real-life tragedy:

With so much vividness have some of the scenes of this frightful drama been impressed upon the minds of colonists that never before, perhaps, were the horrors of a shipwreck so intensely realized by those who were not actual

30 Illustrated Sydney News 16 November 1865, 5; Register 7 September 1859, 2.
31 Register 23 August 1859, 2.
32 Register 23 August 1859, 3

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sharers in them ... almost every emotion, whether of hope or dread, on the part of those engaged in the desperate struggle for life – were flashed along the electric wires.\textsuperscript{33}

Despite, or perhaps even because of the fallibility of telegraphic accounts, this technology united colonials in a collective act of spectatorship in an event which was, according to one report, ‘a disaster that thrilled Australia.’\textsuperscript{34} Indeed, ‘thrilling’ was the term used by Admella writer Samuel Mossman to describe the impact of the disaster on the collective mind-set as a kind of pleasure: ‘There are circumstances attending the rescue of the survivors that exalt the subject to a higher position in the chronicles of humanity, the recital of which compose a drama of thrilling interest.’\textsuperscript{35}

\textit{‘Admella’ Poetry}

Existent ephemeron verifies a direct correlation between telegraphic narratives of the disaster and its impact on the body of verse termed ‘Admella poetry’: ‘They [Admella poems],’ claimed one account, ‘consist for the chief part of versifications of the public telegrams in which the incidents of the shipwreck have been recorded.’\textsuperscript{36} Another reviewer claimed that Mossman’s ‘Narrative of the Wreck of the Admella’ consisted largely ‘of the particulars of the wreck already published in the newspapers’.\textsuperscript{37} Poetry coalesced with telegraphic communications to chronicle the interplay between tragedy, communal grief and valourous ideology inspired by the ‘disaster that thrilled Australia’. The Admella poets, like many of the telegraphic sources from which they drew, engaged in ‘the articulation of desire’ using an ‘elegiac currency ... [of] words, tears, sighs’.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Register} 15 August 1859.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Argus} 31 March 1906, 6.
\textsuperscript{35} Samuel Mossman, \textit{Narrative of the Shipwreck of the ‘Admella,’ Inter-Colonial Steamer, on the Southern Coast of Australia: Drawn up from Authentic Statements Furnished by the Rescuers and Survivors} (Melbourne: J. H. Moulines, 1859) 5.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Register} 24 August 1859, 2.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Register} 1 December 1859, 2. Mossman’s volume was ‘published under the auspices of the Melbourne Admella Relief Fund Committee’.
\textsuperscript{38} Kate Lilley, ‘To Dy in Writinge: Figure and Narrative in Masculine Elegy’, PhD thesis (London: University of London, 1988) 50.

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The _Admella_ poems straddle the two ‘movements’ in the ‘modes of expressing sympathy’ the South Australian _Register_ identified as developing in the disaster’s immediate aftermath: ‘One of them is a civic, the other a colonial movement’. 39 While eighteen days after the wreck the _Register_ claimed ‘We should require an almost double supplement to find room for all the ‘poetry’ concerning the recent shipwreck,’ the sheer volume of poetry alone indicates that verse-form responses to the wreck occurred within a much larger ‘colonial movement’. 40 The unprecedented body of poetry also tells us something very important about the utility of poetry to capture and accentuate the ideologies of heroism underpinning the telegraphic transmissions from which volumes of press editorials drew their narratives. 41 The poems as a collection therefore appeared to attempt to unite individual civic expressions of grief in response to the social drama of the disaster within a broader colonial movement expressing collective trauma, mourning and cultural heroism.

While the works by amateur _Admella_ poets under examination here include poems specifically crafted as literary expressions of heroism, it should be recognised that the _Admella_ poems of amateur writers spanned a variety of topical themes associated with the wreck. 42 Some works also played a pivotal role in contextualising the collection of ‘Ademilla

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39 _Register_ 18 August 1859, 6.
40 _Register_ 18 August 1859, 6.
41 _Register_ 24 August 1859, 2.
42 J S’s ‘Lines Occasioned by the Wreck of the Admella off the Coast off Cape Northumberland,’ appearing almost two weeks after the tragedy, is another example of _Admella_ poetry. See _Portland Guardian and Normanby General Advertiser_ 19 August 1859, 3. ‘J S’ appears to be a regular contributor of original poetry and
poetry’ as a form, such as Barry’s poem *The Wreck of the Admella: A Metrical Narrative* (1859). This verse was published in book form given the sheer length of the composition: ‘consisting of some 400 lines, irrespective of the “Introduction” in verse’. An important contextualising agent in Barry’s work was the poet’s aim to unite the twin elements that motivated the emergence and development of Admella poetry generally. Barry contended that poetry was ‘better adapted for preservation [of the incidents of the disaster] than the columns of a daily or weekly newspaper’; and asserted that his verse-form, as a:


memorial of the circumstances . . . has been compiled entirely from recollections of the telegram and occasional statements published in the daily journals relative to the disaster, the writer having been unable to procure any complete record of the incidents, or to communicate personally with any of the survivors.

What is also interesting about Barry’s poem is that its appearance inspired somewhat critical comments regarding other ‘Admella’ poems emerging in the wreck’s aftermath. A critic for the *Register* claimed that Barry had ‘made an attempt to rescue the “Admella poetry,” of which we lately had so much, from the character of insipidity which everywhere marked it’ and suggested it was ‘a very credible specimen of colonial made poetry’.

Ralph Crane (2001) contends that ‘in the early colonial poetry of Australia and New Zealand the center was privileged over the periphery to the extent that Australia and New Zealand are effectively absent, while Britain is omnipresent. Or at least discrete parts of it are’. Amateur Admella poems do illustrate the tensions between registering British poetic conventions while concentrating attention on a real-life Australian tragedy that must necessarily imagine a collective colonial consciousness. Rather than simply replicating the literary tradition of writing about, to coin John Macy, the ‘madly eloquent romance of the sea’ Admella poets emphasised the interplay between this specific colonial event and tropes of heroism as a trait of colonial identity. Particular Admella poets deployed modifications and distortions of style by exploiting and adjusting traditional poetic structures to memorialise in verse the colonial equivalent of a ‘wound culture,’ to use Graham Huggan’s term, in the aftershock of the *Admella* disaster of 1859.

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43 *Advertiser* 18 November 1859, 2. For an abstract of the first verse of Barry’s poem, please see *Register* 23 November 1859, 3.
45 Barry 3 & 4.

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The Poetry of Heroism: ‘This hero tale of Austral-land’
The Admella poems valourising heroism examined here were timely responses published between two weeks to twelve months of the actual event. In fact, they were the first examples of their kind among the volumes of verse poetry and prose writing by the more recognisable semi-amateur and semi-professional writers that followed, such as Adam Lindsay Gordon’s poem ‘From the Wreck’ (c. 1869) among others. Heroism as a trope is clear in the poem ‘In Memoriam’ by Theta (no doubt a pseudonym) appearing fourteen days after the event. Heroism also underpins the only poem attributable to a non-anonymous female poet, Caroline Carleton’s ‘The Wreck of the Admella’ (1859) which appeared around three and a half months after the disaster, and also in George Angas’ ‘The Wreck of the Admella’, appearing almost a year-to-the-day of the event itself.

Although Angas’ (1822–1886) poem is typically dismissed by critics as lacking literary merit, the work enjoyed widespread popularity among the general readership. Theta’s elegiac poem, ‘In Memoriam’ is as much a lament for the death of thirty-seven year-old Captain Charles Wright Harris, former commander of the schooner Waitemata, and a passenger aboard the Admella, as it was an ode to his courage and fatal heroism:

IN MEMORIAM
Beneath the surging wave
There lie the young and brave.
God rest their souls - - and save !

One of common mould,
Like valiant knight of old,
HARRIS—the stanch and bold.

A starving band to save,
He dived beneath the wave,
And found at length—a grave !


50 Portland Guardian and Normanby General Advertiser, 19 August 1859, 3. Caroline Carleton (nee Baynes) was born in 1811 (d. 1874). Later, the Royal Geographical Society compiled a posthumous collection of Angas’ literary and artistic work. See Advertiser, 7 July 1909, 7. His nephew, one Dr E Angas Johnson, later claimed of his uncle ‘[he] was not as good a poet as he was a painter’, but other reports at the time of his death acknowledged George Angas as ‘beyond doubt, an author and an artist of no mean worth’. See Advertiser, 30 August 1913, 6. For Angas’ obituary see South Australian Register 18 October 1886, 2S.

For such brave daring done,
Let the bright setting sun
Glance o’er a trophy won.

Hoist, hoist the flag on high!
Let the death-signal fly.
Seen by each passer by.

And the red beacon’s glare,
A sad memento bear
O’er the wild breakers there.

Adelaide, August 20. Theta.53

The poem undoubtedly drew from print and telegraphic accounts lauding Harris’ heroism in diving ‘beneath the wave’ attempting to save the ‘starving band’ of Admella survivors by retrieving submerged provisions and food. The ‘grave’ alluded to in the poem represents a tragic metaphor intimating the price of Harris’ real-life efforts; death by exhaustion on the desolate deck of the Admella. Incidents in the verse replicate telegraphic and newspaper narratives glorifying Harris’ downfall as personifying the true spirit of colonial self-sacrifice:

Might not the name of that noble follow, Captain Harris (who by his exertions in diving for food lost his life) be handed down to posterity with honours equal at least to those it is intended to confer on the generous men who rescued the suffers of the wreck? … for it may be safely inferred that it was through the exertions of the brave Captain Harris so many now live to tell of his noble efforts to save the lives of others.54

Theta also drew from telegraphic accounts his recognisably ironic and tragic reference to the ‘red beacon’s flare’. The imagery alludes to the navigation lights of the P. & O. Steamer Bombay, seen by the Admella’s survivors as she passed-by the wreck unnoticed.55

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53 Advertiser 22 August 1859, page 2.
55 Register 5 August 1909, 7. P. & O.’s steamer the Bombay was one of the largest ocean-going ships afloat at the time.

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In Theta’s ‘In Memorium’, while the narrator characterises Harris as ‘One of common mould’, the verse laments and indeed glorifies the singularity of Harris’ extraordinary heroism. This instance of poetic license appears in direct response to a number of reports naturalising bravery and self-sacrifice as a ‘common’ characteristic of colonial masculinity. Those ‘on board the Admella were after all,’ claimed one report ‘but common men [my italics].’ That these men represented ‘an average extract from this community’ became a particularly salient point in emphasising a vital colonial ideology; ‘facts’ of heroism and self-sacrifice ‘makes us proud of our kindred and our nature’ and served as ‘proof that the impulses which prompted them are not confined to the men who did them’. The ‘common man’ trope thus emphasised not only an innate sense of colonial self-sacrifice as a communal given, but accentuated that this ‘common herd of humanity’ also distilled a ‘fairly representative’ quality of the ‘character and spirit’ of the colonial community itself.

The utility of the ‘common man’ trope thus appeared two-fold. The expression mobilised the broader community into identifying with an ideology eulogising acts of heroism specific to the Admella disaster. Additionally, the ‘common man’ trope underscored innate heroism and self-sacrifice as inherent expressions of collective colonial masculinity.

56 Illustration was also reprinted in the Register 5 August 1909, 7.
57 Register 23 August 1859, 2.
58 Register 23 August 1859, 2.
59 Register 23 August 1859, 2.
Many of the Admella poets therefore subtly modified culturally-embedded Imperial traditions defining the literary genre of verse valourising bravery and heroism to better align literary codes with the acts of colonial heroism specific to the wreck of the Admella. This oscillation is clear in Angas’ ‘The Wreck of the Admella’:

Old England hath her heroes –
Her sons of bold renown –
But none were braver than the lad
Who in that surf went down.\(^{60}\)

Here, Angas appears to adjust the tradition of appraising heroism against the Imperial centre by applying a non-derivative treatment in the section of the poem that reads as an elegy to the bravery of Danish crewman Sorem Holm (Admella’s foremast hand).\(^{61}\) This destabilization quite deliberately achieves twin literary/ideological aims. On the one hand, Angas accommodates his own desire to recognise the death of a non-British subject as a courageous act of self-sacrifice in its own right:

Glory to Soren Holm!
Forgotten though he be;
The angels watch him as he died
Whilst struggling with the sea.

The name of Soren Holm
In golden letters write,
And grave it on a tablet-stone
Of marble fair and white.

Brave youth, of Denmark’s land,
In vain he hath not striven;
Though waves swept o’er his noble head,
His spirit is in Heaven.\(^{62}\)

On the other, the adjustment provides Angas as a means to effectively re-write Holm’s valour as more in keeping with validating the collective ideology of colonial masculinity emphasised in press reports of the wreck itself:

\(^{60}\) George French Angas, ‘The Wreck of the Admella,’ South Australian Register 7 August 1860, 2.
\(^{61}\) For an account of Soren Holm’s bravery and the tragedy of his death, see Argus 5 September 1859, 1S and Register 5 August 1909, 7. Holm was one of the Admella’s foremast hands. He was instrumental in the rescue of one of the Admella’s survivors, George Hills. See Advertiser 6 June 1916, 4. The award of £50 bequeathed to the relatives of Soren Holm by the Admella Shipwreck Reward and Relief Fund Committee, announced at the meeting held in the Speaker’s rooms of the House of Assembly in Adelaide on Monday 6 December 1859 was, I believe, never claimed. See Advertiser 6 December 1859, 3; Argus 2 May 1861, 3 (‘not yet claimed’); Argus 31 March 1906, 6 (‘if they could be found’).
\(^{62}\) Register 27 March 1874, 5.

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hearts beat high with excited hopes. The anxiety is intense. Suddenly the person
who had held the rope let it slip. A cry of horror arises. Their hopes are gone. It
was with a feeling of unutterable agony that they saw this brave lad [Soren Holm]
who had risked his life [*the rope given him was too short*] thus sacrificed by a
careless accident.

The tragedy of Soren Holm’s death was, for Mossman, ‘perhaps the most affecting ...
among the many painful incidents which strew the narration with mournful regret.’
Acclaimed even half a century after his actual death as ‘One of the grandest of many
examples of heroism in connection with the wreck’, the story of Soren Holm survives as a
vital narrative enforcing heroism as an innately masculine trait of the collective colonial
self. In fact, Holm’s personification as an emblematic hero in Admella poetry embodied the
potent significance of his feat as always ‘particularly mentioned in the narrative’ of the
wreck, whatever the medium.

Then out spoke Soren Holm –
‘Find me a rope,’ cried he,
‘And I will swim and gain yon boat
That’s drifting out to sea.’

This concentration on acknowledging valour and celebrating heroism in Admella poetry as a
distinct expression and innate constituent of colonial masculinity accorded with the
Australian mood in response to the wreck:

There is no established means of rewarding their daring ... Their is the deed which
society at large must reward by extraordinary modes ... When the world is wiser it
will cherish this spirit of self-sacrifice among its most heroic possessions. It will
erect monuments to a class of heroes whom it appreciates but imperfectly now, and
will canonize men whom it in nowise ranks with saints under its present creed.

Caroline Carleton’s Admella poem, ‘The Wreck of the Admella’, emerged coincidentally
with Philip Barry’s *The Wreck of the Admella: A Metrical Narrative* as a celebration of
courageous masculinity and the noble ‘common man’ colonial self. In this Carleton’s work
‘comprises a tradition of social poetry’ in the body of contemporary women’s writing
‘concerned with public issues’. Yet what makes Carleton’s poem especially significant is
the fact that while her poem deploys conventional British traditions in her treatment of

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63 Not only was the rope given to him too short, but ‘another was fastened to it’ and while ‘he reached the boat
in safety ... on hauling in the line, the bend not being securely fastened, gave way’ leaving Holm to drift out to
sea. His body was later discovered on the beach nearby the upturned life boat. *Advertiser* 3 September 1859, 3.
64 *Advertiser* 20 December 1859, 5.
65 *Advertiser* 3 September 1859, 3.
66 *Register* 5 August 1909, 7.
67 *Register* 27 March 1874, 5.
68 *Register* 18 August 1859, 6.
69 *Register* 18 August 1859, 6.

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valour, the work’s climax subverts a predicable dénouement to also emphasise heroism as an innately masculine characteristic of the collective colonial self. Take, for instance, the following stanza from Carleton’s ‘The Wreck of the Admella’:

    O Britain, may the day ne’er rise  
    In which thy sons shall cease to claim  
    For noble deeds the high emprize,  
    And add fresh lustre to thy name!

Bravery is appraised here according to tenets of Imperial heroism and the credit heroic acts confer upon British national identity. The heroic deed, like the poem’s structure, returns to the lyric and elegiac traditions of the Imperial centre. Yet, the final four lines of Carleton’s poem present a counterpoint to this motif. Her dénouement interposes Australian individualism and heroism into the conventional Imperial discourse of valour. Sacrifice is memorialised here not as an act of British nationalism but as a homily celebrating Australian colonial masculinity and the preservation and futurity of an oral folkloric tradition valourising Admella heroism. The reconfiguring allows ‘social memory’ to ‘be reworked into the fabric of a nation’s founding cultural myths’.\textsuperscript{71} Carleton’s verse reveals that the real, yet ‘common’, men behind their respective feats of bravery pass from telegraphic missives into Admella poetry as heroic yet mythological beings:

    And though no proud memorial rise  
    To tell the deeds of that brave band,  
    Our sons shall hear, with glistening eyes,  
    This hero tale of Austral-land.

Carleton’s triumph in winning the Gawler Institute’s competition for a ‘Patriotic Song’ in November 1859 with her ‘Song of Australia’ was significant given the timing of the Admella disaster just three months earlier. In fact, the debate over the legitimacy of Carleton’s verse as a ‘Patriotic Song’ occurred at precisely the time Phillip Barry published his ‘attempt to rescue the “Admella poetry”’.\textsuperscript{72} The aims of the Gawler prize therefore appeared coincidental with a colonial desire to embody the outpouring of state patriotism in the wake of the Admella catastrophe with a verse form attaining particular cultural significance. Carleton’s ‘Song of Australia’ appeals to ‘deeds of heroism in the hour of peril’ which was nothing if not a direct reference to the Admella tragedy.

\textsuperscript{72} South Australian Register 23 November 1859, 3

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Leon (2009) contends that ‘Meaning given to colonial experiences were usually derived from the colonisers’ own milieu and often these meanings bore no relation to the specific realities of the colonies’. The Admella poets grappled with the problem of representation and language, particularly given their use of telegraphic reports as prime sources of imagery. Significantly, the poems narrators claim an exceptionally close proximity to the event itself that gives their voices an air of authenticity, and even perhaps credibility as testimony. In this, Admella poems evoke personal responses to the calamity of the wreck as a real-life disaster while attempting to construct ‘a discourse of the self composed to preserve and authenticate the authority of the speaking subject’. Readers of the poems however have no way of knowing if indeed the poet actually witnessed the event firsthand, or, if the poet is calling to mind an imagined scene that is purely illusory and/or fictionalised based on second or third hand accounts. It is questionable, though not impossible, that some poets did indeed witness rescue attempts, but if not firsthand, then certainly observed the communal aftershock to the wreck as it played out as a real-time tragedy in telegraphic offices around the country. In fact, Carleton not only indicates a direct experience of receiving news about

73 Register 28 December 1894, 5 & 6.
75 I could not at the point of publication determine the real name of the poets writing under the pseudonyms ‘Theta’ and ‘Coll’. However, ‘Theta’ did write poems and criticism, including regular journalistic reports, social commentaries and letters to the editor. See Advertiser 22 July 1858, 3; Hobart Mercury 4 October 1882, 3; Mercury 14 November 1900 p 6; Western Mail 18 May 1917, 43.
the disaster firsthand, but makes express reference to the significance of the telegraph in shaping the colonial mindset in response to the tragedy itself:

> What words of dire import are these
> That flash along th’ electric line?
> Why pales the cheek of him who sees
> The meaning of that quiv’ring sign?
> And why among th’ assembled crowd
> Is heard the stifled sob and shriek
> Of hearts with sudden anguish bow’d,
> And woe too great for lips to speak?77

For Carlton, the mechanised instrument of the telegraph succeeds in articulating a degree of grief that debilitates the speaking subject. In this, Carlton both spoke to and contested the claim of one report, that; Admella “‘poetry’… altogether lack (sic) the startling vigour, the deep pathos, and the stirring appeals’ of telegraphic accounts.78 Poetry as a form clearly provided Admella poets a viable means of expressing grief, evoking a rousing sense of heroism, and interweaving information relayed via telegraphic narratives to communicate powerful sentiments of valour in the rescue of survivors, as we see interwoven in Angas’ verse:

> To east and west the tidings fly,
> Borne on the flashing wire;
> And distant cities hear the cry
> From that far reef of agony
> And burning words of fire
> Wake to the rescue all the land
> To save them ere they die;
> And many a noble bend,
> With stout resolve and purpose high,
> Go forth to save them, or – to die!79

Acclaimed in 1859 as ‘one of the most terrible maritime disasters on record’, the wreck of the Admella became the benchmark measuring tragedy itself.80 Accounts of the Burke and Wills tragedy a mere two years after the Admella catastrophe inspired the following social commentary in 1861; ‘Nothing since the wreck of the Admella has cast such a gloom here.’81 Indeed, the wreck of the SS Gothenburg off the South Australian coast in 1875 inspired similar comparisons.82 While accounts 67 years after the wreck claimed it as ‘the most appalling wreck in the annals of South Australian history,’83 more recent reports claim the

77 Register 11 August 1860, 3.
78 Register 24 August 1859, 2.
80 E. H. Derrington, Station Master, Moreton Bay Courier 31 Aug 1859, 4.
81 Hawke’s Bay Herald Volume 5, Issue 236, 10 December 1861, 5.
82 Register 27 March 1875, 4.
83 Border Watch 7 August 1926, 2.

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*Admella* tragedy ‘has become one of the outstanding features of Australian history’, while another report published almost half a century after the incident distinguished ‘the classic’ importance of “‘The Story of the *Admella*’” thus; ‘Time will never stale the anguish, the hurrah, or the heroic kick that is in it’.  

‘In the poem of the Ship-wreck,’ the poet Byron wondered; ‘is it the storm or the ship which most interests?’ While the *Admella* poems in many ways offer ambivalent responses to his conclusion; ‘Both much undoubtedly’, their significance as a collection responsive to the *Admella* tragedy as a real-life event seemingly accorded with Byron’s final observation ‘but without the vessel, what should we care for the tempest?’ Admella poems map George Landow’s contention that ‘existentially and culturally, the crisis of the shipwreck and death at sea is a metaphor for the human voyage through life, and stands at its centre’. This mapping also achieves a particular literary end; it prevents the *Admella* poems from ‘sinking’ into what Byron describes as ‘mere descriptive poetry’. In fact *Admella* poems document that as an event, the wreck of the *SS Admella* became a catalyst precipitating unprecedented cultural change binding colonials together in various narratives – telegraphic, poetic, folkloric – expressing cultural validation and idealising manifestations of an innately heroic colonial self; ‘The sterling heroes of the land/Who come, with glorious purpose high/Resolved to do or die’.  

*Admella* poems to this day mark ‘the human voyage’ survivors and the greater community, then as now, navigated in the aftermath of this event. Poetic imagery drew on telegraphic accounts to ‘carry the reader as it were to the scene of the [*Admella*] wreck itself’. Even today, these visions of the wreck inspire coalesces between the past and present expressions of communal commemoration. Telegraphic accounts in part recreated the disaster and brought the drama ‘as [if] it were face to face with us in this room, till we [begin] at last to feel as though we stood on the beach witnessing’. This technology also inspired *Admella* poets to take up in their own way the Register’s declaration respecting ‘the brave fellows who imperilled their own lives to save the rescued twenty-two.’ ‘Something should be done’ claimed the reporter ‘to compensate them for the risks they incurred ; and something to keep their glorious example before the public eye as a perpetual stimulus to like

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91 *Register* 23 August 1859, 3
92 *Register* 16 August 1859.

heroism’. Yet the Admella poets also took up what Captain James Fawthorpe, the commander of the Portland lifeboat, memorialised as his own self-avowed mission; ‘The bravery of that boat’s crew cannot be too highly eulogised, and my pen shall add a testimony to men noble and daring in thus risking their lives for their fellow men’.

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93 Register 16 August 1859.