I don’t know that there can be a much happier life than that of a squatter, if the man be fairly prosperous, and have natural attributes for country occupations. He should be able to ride and shoot – and to sit in a buggy all day without inconvenience. He should be social – for he must entertain often and be entertained by other squatters; but he must be indifferent to society, for he will live away from towns and be often alone with his family. He must be able to command men, and must do so in a frank and easy fashion – not arrogating to himself any great superiority, but with full power to let those around him know that he is master. He must prefer plenty to luxury, and be content to have things around him a little rough. He must be able to brave troubles – for a squatter has many troubles. If a man have these gifts, and be young and energetic when he begins the work, he will not have chosen badly in becoming a squatter.

(Anthony Trollope, *Australia*)

Throughout the nineteenth century, young men of genteel background and public school education left Britain to seek wealth and opportunity in the colonies, including Queensland and British Columbia. Although differing somewhat from the qualities desirable in a gentleman at home, the social skills, mastery and energy of Trollope’s idealised squatter can be encapsulated in the word ‘gentleman’. In mid-nineteenth-century British Columbia and Queensland ‘emigrant gentlemen’, the scions of the aristocracy and ambitious middle-class men, formed a frontier elite. They were pulled to British Columbia by gold and adventure, and
to Queensland by the lure of land, and pushed from Britain by the constraints of patrimony and the lack of opportunity. Many young men of the upper and middle classes discovered that the emerging professions were overcrowded. These and younger sons who would not inherit any significant portion of their families’ wealth had to look elsewhere for a livelihood and the best outlets available (considering their class and status) were the colonies.

George Carrington found that despite a degree from Oxford he was not really qualified for anything much, and emigration seemed the only option for the independently minded gentleman:

When I left Oxford... the only chance of employment which I saw before me for some time to come, was that of being an usher or undermaster in a school. This was a course which my soul abhorred; the restraint and dependent position seemed too ghastly... I thus, knowing nothing about colonial life, and very little about any other, with no idea of any kind of work, and with about as much fitness for living in a colony as for living on the moon, turned my thoughts to emigration. I believe I had a floating notion of making my fortune in a general way, without very much exertion.¹

Like George Carrington, Patrick Leslie could not bear the thought of being dependent upon others, to the extent that despite failing once as a pastoralist he set out for a second attempt:

I really cannot believe that I ever thought of setting down in Scotland upon some £100 pr an [sic] factor to anyone but I was perfectly bedevilled and my mind upset in every way and I cannot now be too thankful that I had sufficient sense left to prompt me to come here again. I wish nothing more than to go on quietly here and work out an independence and my brothers will without doubt do as well as men could wish here.²

These passages highlight the importance of ‘independence’ in achieving manly status. Both Carrington and Leslie yearned for independence. For Carrington the thought of working for someone else was abhorrent and ‘ghastly’; for Leslie it was almost inconceivable.

In Britain the hegemonic masculine ideal rested on a shaky base. The country experienced frequent economic uncertainty in the early decades of the nineteenth century. In a society where masculine