Concluding his brief account of castaway James Murrells’s (also spelled Morrill) return to Australian settler society in 1863 after living with Aborigines for 17 years, popular colonial chronicler James Bonwick notes that this man’s insight into Aboriginal life rendered him surprisingly ineffectual as a mediating influence between Aboriginal Australians and British colonial settlers. Bonwick writes, “The blacks mistrust the deserter of their camp fires; and the whites threaten him already with deadly hostility for supposed confederation with the natives to the injury of the flocks.” Bonwick admits his regret over the failed connection. Nevertheless, first-hand accounts of lost-and-found travelers like Murrells become, despite their failure at promoting cultural negotiation, the basis for Bonwick’s subsequent ethnographic account of Aboriginal manners and customs. For Bonwick, the preservation of such ethnographic insights offers a response to what was believed to be the imminent disappearance of Aboriginal peoples.

In another account of Murrells’s failure as a mediator, an 1870 article in the Sydney Empire ends by noting, “It is a great pity that the experience and intelligence of this man were not made available, as he was anxiously desirous that they should be, for the purpose...
of bringing about a better understanding between the frontier settlers and their men and the aboriginal tribes.” Such an understanding might, this report suggests, have intervened on the “the wanton and cruel attacks upon the blacks by the Native Police.” Written seven years after Murrell’s 1863 return to settler society and five years after his death, this report contends that Murrell’s advocacy of making Aboriginal rights visible “gained him few friends and many enemies.” Following this opening statement on failure, the writer moves on to the tale of shipwreck and the plight of the survivors, omitting any further description of Murrell’s 17 years living among Aborigines. This posthumous report recognizes lost opportunities, but ultimately it sidesteps that topic as it foregrounds lost sailors and castaways for readers desiring a good story.2 During his years among the Aborigines, Murrell had gained an extraordinary knowledge of Australian flora and fauna, geographical routes, and Aboriginal culture. As such, he should have been an excellent source for cultural insight. This chapter questions why Murrell seems to be recalled often as the man who failed at mediating between frontier settlers and Australian Aborigines and thus explores the cultural and literary contexts in which his narrative was produced.

Murrell’s story belongs, in part, with those colonial accounts in the mid-nineteenth century that seem typically to hover at the frontier of settlement and wilderness or at the boundary between “us and them.” This active state of inhabiting liminal space between home and away becomes a feature of a complex and brutal negotiation of national identity for British colonial settlers. Speaking of exile and nationalism, Edward Said suggests that they are constituting oppositions as “All nationalisms [...] develop from a condition of estrangement.” In Britain’s settler colonies, this connection between exile and nationalism became multilayered as emigrants exiled from their homeland, voluntarily or by compulsion, clung to the places from which they (were) cast away, while also claiming another geographical place both as a new, other world and as an extension of home. In the process of their exile, colonial emigrants, as is well known, displaced indigenous inhabitants causing another trend of exile. Within this multilayered space of exclusion and re-association, the colonial settler inhabited what Said suggests is “the perilous territory of not-belonging” that lies “just beyond the frontier between ‘us’ and the ‘outsiders.’”3 In this dangerous place, the usual organizing effects of borders don’t apply and established hierarchies are unstable. Here, in this imagined and geographically-real, in-between space of not quite home and not quite exile, colonial Australian writers, like Bonwick, show both fascination