
Barbara Dawson review of Stephen Foster, *Zoffany's Daughter: Love and Treachery on a Small Island*

(Canberra, ACT: South Solitary Press, 2017), 152 pp., PB \$29.95,
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From the outset, the reader of *Zoffany's Daughter* is intrigued. The contents list, which seems to channel Plato or William Hazlitt, prepares him or her for the dialectical nature of the treatise that follows. There are questions. But do we find answers?

The clever choice of the title immediately alerts us to the patriarchal (and misogynist?) society in which the story is set. The first page of text—a newspaper report from the London *Morning Chronicle*, October 1825—tells us, but does not inform us, of the protagonist's true identity. She is Mrs Horne, 'wife of the Rev. Mr. Horne of Chiswick' and daughter of 'the celebrated Zoffany, the painter'. No hints, yet, although we have already learned of her husband and father's occupational status and, where applicable, title. The society in which she dwells, however, is well spelled out. It comprises a small group of people, contained—geographically and numerically—on the small island of Guernsey, one of the Channel Islands, with legal connections to both Britain and Normandy.

By birth and marriage, this person is a 'lady'. She has two daughters, again, both unnamed. One is 18 years old and 'very fine and accomplished', as befits young ladies of that time. Jane Austen's Regency period is over but, in less than 12 years, the Victorian era would dawn. Mr and Mrs Horne's other daughter was a 10-year-old child. Mrs Horne may well have been 'exemplary in her conduct as a mother', but her outward expression of her maternal love in her endeavour to maintain her attachment to her children had transformed her, by the end of the newspaper report, to 'this strange and dauntless woman' (pp. 1–2). Directly and subconsciously, the reported details reflect and assume the paternalistic foundations, not only of Guernsey society, but also, as Stephen Foster will point out, its legal statutes and their interpretation.

Having introduced the other main players, the author immediately sets the scene for modern readers. The lady, now 'woman', is Cecilia, her husband is 'Thomas', and the children who are pertinent to this tale are 'Clementina' and the younger one, 'Laura'. We are now led on an intriguing investigation. Clementina is the chosen storyteller for the hidden historical details and narrative additions that cry out to be heard.

It was a chance finding of the newspaper clipping in a Scottish family's archive that led Foster on his quest to find out more. Such is the mind of the inquisitive historian. By asking questions such as 'what happened next?' and 'why was this so?', he leads us on his quest to unravel past deeds and to explore the permutations, complications and outcomes. The reader is immediately pulled into the unfolding drama.

After 22 years of marriage and seven surviving children, Cecilia and Thomas separated. This followed 'unfortunate disputes', which were exacerbated by the opinions and emotions of members on both sides of the married couple. All these 'injudicious intruders' were said to have had 'violent tempers' (p. 10). Cecilia was able to take with her two of her three daughters, and Thomas Snr was to provide her with £300 annually for the following three years. She and the girls seemed to have subsequently moved to France, then Jersey and, in mid-1825, to Guernsey.

Versed in his research of time, place and circumstances, Foster now concocts diary entries to tell the proceeding story of Cecilia and her daughters, through the pen of Clementina. Much of this commentary is a conduit to describe the town of St Peter Port, recount some Guernsey folklore and introduce subsidiary characters. Foster has had some fun here, with his zest for storytelling, his wit and 'winks' and his splashes of irony.

At the end of only about six weeks on the island, Cecilia realises that Thomas Horne, with his friend (and brother-in-law), and his son Thomas, has arrived to try to persuade her to return with him to England. Foster depicts Zoffany's daughter as sassy and resolute, despite her predicament; he also gives a light plug to feminism by allowing Cecilia to demand for Clementina's equal right to remain in the room, like her brother, during a discussion on the women's future.

Foster has dug and delved into the intricacies of British custody laws—and their application to Guernsey—with which Cecilia has to wrangle. At a court hearing to resolve the custody of the younger daughter, Cecilia loses to her husband the right to keep Laura with her. Instead of acceding to the court's demands, Cecilia—with the help of her enigmatic 'friend', Jean de Jersey—has her daughter ferreted out of her lodgings to a hiding place in the home of M de Campourcy, 'a man of the strictest honour and respectability' (p. 51). Cecilia, on the other hand, goes to prison. This term is extended when another court hearing fails to exonerate her.

The plot thickens when the seemingly affable and obliging M de Jersey is revealed to be a rotter. His deeds and motives have not been purely philanthropic, but are now seen to have been a means to press his success in his matrimonial designs on Clementina.

Released from gaol, Cecilia and a Guernsey resident, Mr Brock, go to Laura's hideaway. In trying to physically remove Laura, an altercation takes place. Here the author has been able to turn to documentary evidence from the oral (Cecilia's) and written testimonies in the following court proceedings, reported in no less than five newspapers. The unreliability of oral testimony is no better evidenced than in these various recordings of the same interactions that occurred at M de Campourcy's home on 18 November 1825; Cecilia, Louis-Prudent de Campourcy, Jean de Jersey and John Brock all give differing versions of the scene from their own recollections or point of view. In the light of these discrepancies, is the assumptive filling-in of Foster's interspersing commentary in this tale so radically subversive?

Foster's précis on microhistory reflects his interest and ability to think 'outside the box' and gives courage to historians, perhaps unschooled in traditional methods, to follow their own leads and depths of analysis. For this forensic historical search, who were the author's intended readers? As well as providing a fascinating story from the past—one that would immediately engage an educated lay public—this history gives a boost to ongoing discussions by academic historians as to where the discipline of history writing could be heading.

Perhaps, here, the argument for the now apparently defunct psychohistory could make a play. The narrative hinges on the initial intemperate behaviour of the married couple. Instead of considered resolution, marital disruption increased, apparently aided and abetted by relatives of similar propensity for strident, perhaps violent, interference. Angry dispositions fuelled fierce reaction. Within the narrative, Cecilia is shown to be reckless, but also resolute. Conciliation did not seem part of her personality. Rather than being 'determined' and 'defiant of convention' (p. 135), could Cecilia's behaviour be assessed as stubborn and foolhardy? And did her stubbornness reflect her personality, rather than her values or her grievances? Mary Nicholls's *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry on Cecilia's brother, Thomas Horne, reveals a similar 'recklessness' and degree of instability in his behaviour. Perhaps Laura inherited the same genes? This may seem to be drawing a long bow, but the implication of personality or character on events can sometimes enter the analysis of historical action. Because Clementina is largely the invention of the author, she shows no such traits—always the voice of reason and explication.

Foster takes us on a narrative journey, fleshed out, along the way, with biographical details and issues such as custody rights and religious sectarianism. In his last chapter, 'On History & Fiction', he justifies the course he has chosen to take, particularly in the moments when he comes to crossroads or impediments in the story. To infuse literary tension, he has allowed some of the elements of intrigue and suspense characteristic of novels to form part of the narrative basis of Cecilia's dilemma. His visit to Guernsey provided him with a greater awareness of sense of 'place' and the inclusion of reproductions of maps and lithographs from the Priaulx Library, St Peter Port, Guernsey, has enriched the finished work.

Published by South Solitary Press, Canberra, and also by Blue Ormer Publishing, Cookham, United Kingdom, the book's glossy cover features one of Zoffany's paintings. The font and the textual presentation are clear and the endnotes are refreshingly well spaced. A nice editorial touch is the leaving of the right margin of Clementina's diary entries unjustified.

Stephen Foster's journey as a historian has been marked by innovation. His past publications include *Australia 1788–1988—A Bicentennial History* (an executive editor, 1987); *The Making of the Australian National University: 1946–1996* (co-authorship, 1996), which was described as 'a model university history'; *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience* (coeditor, 2003); and *A Private Empire* (2010). In 1988 he had proposed to the director of the Research School of Social Sciences, ANU, the development of an Australian Biographical Computer Database (to be placed on disc), to further the reach of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* to interested consumers of history. Later, his CD-ROM, 'One Destiny! The Federation Story' (1997), and his work as content development and technology manager at the National Museum of Australia to oversee 'the latest technical display wizardry' (*Canberra Times*, 3 February 2000), fed and extended his interest in visual methods of historical interpretation and outreach.

In *Zoffany's Daughter*, the author's interest in visual portrayal continues; biographical and historical evidence from artistic representations, including paintings, complements his documentary approach. Clementina's diary as a visual aid to the inner eye might be seen as his latest, successful, innovation to this genre. Perhaps we should await a version of *Zoffany's Daughter* on YouTube!

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