

Conclusion

This book offers a fresh perspective in the debate on settler perceptions of Indigenous Australians. Specifically, it explores the influences of publishers' requirements and reader expectations on the way Aborigines were represented in published works. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the study, its literary representations take the place of more 'straightforward' historical accounts. The writer's need to entertain her audience, as well as to 'educate' them, often led her to incorporate the traits and language of popular literary trends. Two of these were English Victorian romantic fiction, and the 'ripping yarn' adventure narrative, popular from the late nineteenth century. The incorporation of these literary genres often resulted in conflicting messages, and a confused and ambivalent rendition of Aborigines. These accounts are therefore rich sources for interpretation.

The study is situated within the dynamics of frontier life and their impact on the viewpoints and characters of those involved. The masks worn by some of the women hide their own opinions of Aboriginal people, including their empathy towards them. The extent to which the authors presented their writing to accommodate reader acceptance, taste and enjoyment, and their expectation to be 'informed' and entertained slanted their approach. By investigating the considerations of author and publisher, the study contributes to an understanding of the reason why perceptions of Aborigines persisted over time.

In the nineteenth century, racial attitudes and ignorance of native peoples fostered the distorted representations that Europeans made of Aborigines. Eliza Fraser was a forerunner in the accepted trend that was to follow. She became a puppet in the hands of those who wished to fabricate the image of Indigenous people for their own ends, not the least motivator being the need to proselytise in the name of evangelical Christianity.

A similar story surrounds the writing of Eliza Davies. Davies had seen and met members of the Ngarrindjeri and Meru people and her ambivalent views in *The Story of an Earnest Life* reveal the tension between her knowledge, born of experience, and her publisher's expectation of sales, generated by a perceived public demand for sensationalism. Nineteenth-century publishers may well have had a lot to answer for!

Emily Cowl joined the sensationalism bandwagon. She offered denigrating views of the Kurtjar people in some humorous or thrilling stories, aimed at enlivening a public talk and amusing her audience. These were presented as factual experiences in the guise of 'informing'. She was on steady ground because her

interpretation conformed to nineteenth-century racial attitudes and confirmed the probable prejudice of her audience. Wherever her intentions were cast, her stories reveal Indigenous authority and sense of fun.

The narratives that tell us most about the fine qualities of Indigenous humanity belong to the three settler women, who closely knew individual Indigenous people. The writings of Katherine Kirkland, Mary McConnel and Rose Scott Cowen contradict the slanted views of the Eliza Fraser chroniclers, Eliza Davies and Emily Cowl. Katherine Kirkland, however, constrained by the novelty of recording close interracial connection, seemed unable to write openly about Moner balug women's help to her during her first months of settlement. Instead, she gave only hints of aspects of Wathaurong integrity in her record of settler life.

Mary McConnel was more forthcoming in her portrayal of the Dungibara people on Cressbrook. She individualised by name some of the women, men and children and offered specific details that built up a picture of the character and personality of each person. These portrayals emanated from direct Indigenous-settler transactions. Mary, however, remains the focal figure, who recorded the Aborigines' response to her motivations for change. She offers no information outside the reaction of the Aboriginal people to the settler group.

Rose Scott Cowen moved away from the idea of projecting a persona, the owner of which espoused a particular agendum. Her genuine personality emerges as she recalls her life 'as it was'. She similarly portrays candidly the personality and character of various Indigenous people whom she met in outback Queensland. Instead of stereotypical views associated with Aborigines, evident in the writing of the five previous women, Rose provides a frank representation of fully drawn, readily identifiable individuals.

Her vast experience of life in western Queensland enabled her to appreciate and applaud the character of the Indigenous people she knew in the Channel Country. The publication of her book in the mid-twentieth century facilitated the freedom to depict these people faithfully and honestly. She goes past portrayals purely of settler-Indigenous interactions to include aspects of Indigenous agency in their private lives, independent of settler cognisance, authority or control.

Historical discussion on interracial relationship or female friendship on the Australian frontier has focused on the white man or woman's interpretation. I have tried to look into and behind the 'eye of the beholder' to glean from white women's writing the lives, reactions and adaptations of Aboriginal people after white settlers infiltrated their lands. These women suggested other interpretations of Aboriginal people and their communities that contemporary representations might not have normally allowed. The crux of this work is the

revelation of the Aborigines' help and concern for early settlers—their care and their courtesy, curiosity and comedy. The study provides evidence that, above all, the Aboriginal people held fast to their identity in the exercising of their cultural and territorial authority.

Having been replaced on their land, subjected to violence and categorised as 'inferior' by white observers, Indigenous Australians are only recently receiving recognition of their strength and heritage. Perhaps this book can contribute to the life stories from Aboriginal women, who are now working to transform public perceptions of the past.

Because of the confined scope of this project—limited as it is to five fresh case histories—further historical studies dealing with cross-cultural attitudes are needed in order to widen the perspective offered here. For example, what evidence can be found of people who formed close ties with the Aborigines in the early colonial period and who projected humanitarian views towards them? We know that Edward Curr and Robert Christison are two such people.¹ But are there also instances of racist clichés persisting in writing from the twentieth century, even of women who have lived their entire lives in Australia? Did some rural women in the early twentieth century maintain dogmatic racism in their representation of Indigenous Australians? My work presents five case studies against which further investigations can be compared, contrasted and tested.

However, if this book has achieved its aim, even to a small degree, readers of the twenty-first century can, I hope, look beyond the racial stereotypes of our own time, and see every person, of whatever race or background, for the qualities that lie within, and not merely judge a person by the circumstances of his or her life.

1 Curr 2001 [1883]; Bennett 1927.

This text taken from *In the Eye of the Beholder: What Six Nineteenth-century Women Tell Us About Indigenous Authority and Identity*, by Barbara Dawson, published 2014 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.