

Introduction

In the words of J J Healy, ‘The destruction of the Aboriginal society went hand in hand with the formation of a European society’.¹ My aim in this book is to help write the story of Indigenous Australians into the Australian legend by resurrecting pockets of insight of Aboriginal culture before, or soon after, its subjugation and reassessment after British settlement. In doing so, I look at aspects of Indigenous social and culture life at the time of first or early contact, as represented in the reports or published memoirs of six colonial women. The book probes how the perception of Aborigines was first set down and how their character was distorted by ignorance and, sometimes, deception.

From the broader scope of my PhD thesis, ‘In the Eye of the Beholder: Representations of Australian Aborigines in the Published Works of Australian Women Writers’, I have tweaked the analysis to favour the Indigenous people’s own ‘eye’ on the white supremacists. In doing so, I have altered the emphasis from the white women’s ‘representations’ of Aborigines to highlight the strength and authority of Indigenous Australians on inland locations at first and early contact, and into the first decades of the twentieth century.

The book introduces a set of quite obscure colonial women’s writing (apart from Eliza Fraser) and interrogates them for what they reveal about the writers’ (and broader society’s) attitudes to, views on, and beliefs about Aboriginal people. The texts span the period from the 1830s to the early twentieth century and cross the colonies themselves. The selection and organisation of the six texts have enabled me to map a gradual dismantling of racial stereotypes and changing attitudes. My argument follows the line that this ‘progression’ was as much a product of the times, as it was of the force of personality of the writers and the Aboriginal women with whom they coexisted.

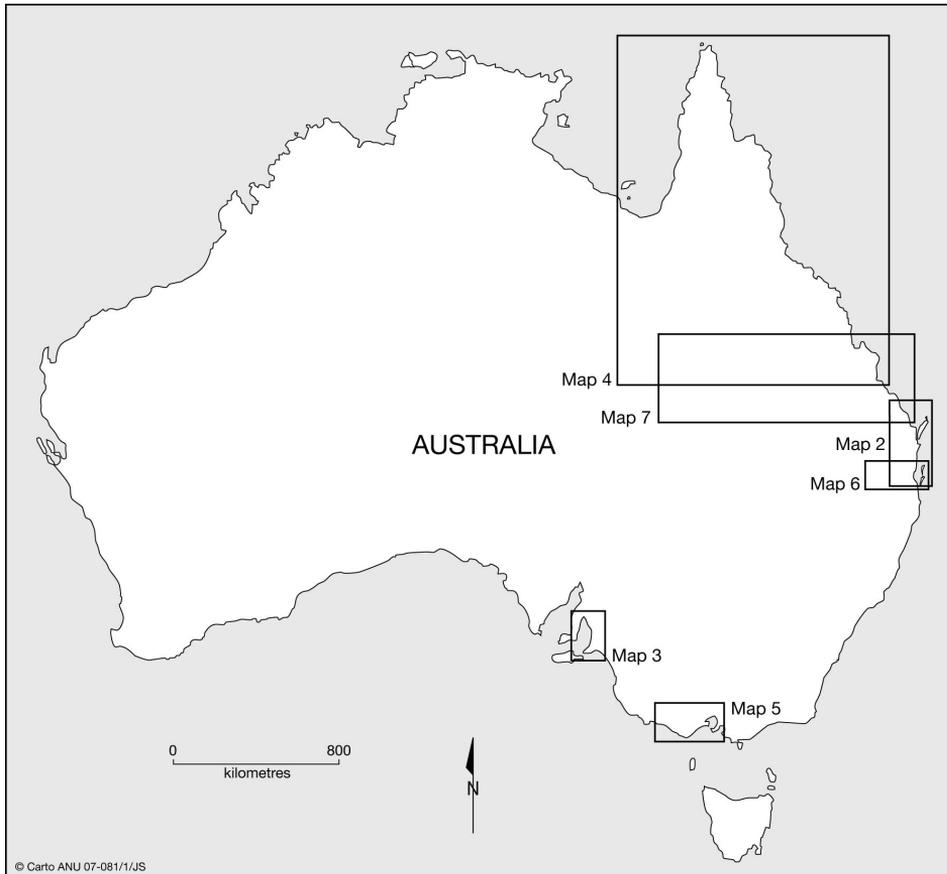
My interest in studying women on colonial frontiers² began when I was writing a Master of Arts thesis on nineteenth-century land settlement on the New South Wales southern Monaro property, Bibbenluke.³ Immersed in the life of squatters, selectors, shepherds and shearers, I itched to answer the questions: Where were the women? What were they doing? What kind of life were they living? I later found from Joy Hooton and Kay Walsh’s *Australian Autobiographical*

1 Healy 1978: 2.

2 Dr Gordon Briscoe has pointed out to me that ‘frontier’—an Old French-Middle English word used in the United States of America to refer to that part of the country which formed the border of its settled or ‘uninhabited’ regions—is a term inapplicable to the notion of country for Indigenous people. It has been used, however, in Australian English since 1840 to describe the edge of occupation, Arthur 2003: 33. As it has become accepted in Australian colonial histories, I have used it in this book. Tom Griffiths offers Australian alternatives, including ‘the outback’, Griffiths and Robin 1997: 10.

3 Dawson 1996.

Narratives: An Annotated Bibliography that many colonial women had recorded their experiences in rural outposts. I saw that a number had written about their contact with Aborigines, particularly with Aboriginal women. I subsequently chose six women (all British) whose narratives offered an examination of the relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous women (through the eyes of the white women). All wrote in some detail about their impressions, opinions and attitudes concerning Indigenous people.



Map 1. Location of regional maps.

Note: Map 2, Eliza Fraser; Map 3, Eliza Davies; Map 4, Emily Cowl; Map 5, Katherine Kirkland; Map 6, Mary McConnel; Map 7, Rose Scott Cowen.

Source: CartoGIS, College of Asia and the Pacific, ANU.

With the exception of Eliza Fraser—whose story I chose to examine as the iconic precursor of derogatory renditions of Indigenous Australians—these accounts of first-hand experiences on the frontiers came from previously unexamined

historical texts. These are little known works that bring to light the negotiations of place and identity in a precise socio-historical context. A strong sense of regional and individual differences emerge and offer the opportunity for a detailed history that is attentive to the concepts of faith, values, experiences and belief. Within this cadre of writers I re-examine generalisations about gender, class, race and the Australian frontiers of settlement. In addition, I have been able to look at the way that thinking about self⁴ and others was reshaped.

My selection of writers was guided by narratives that either exemplified current social and racial attitudes, or moved in perception away from these constraints. I was interested in examining the extent to which the writers adhered to racial clichés or rejected them. My method was to undertake intensive historical research that took in relevant biographical details of the writer and her family, the historical context and ‘straight’ textual readings. The biographical investigation included the writer’s social background and connections, her class position and religious views, changing literary tastes and access to education and literacy. Broader ideas about Indigenous Australians and racial hierarchies, historical contexts, such as frontier violence and its memory, phases of pastoral development and changes in land use, the expansion of settlement, legislative measures and individual characteristics and personalities—of both the writer and the Aboriginal people (especially the women, with whom close relations were formed)—were also factors and influences.

The division of the book into Adventurers and Settlers allowed me to differentiate between short-term ‘visitors’ or travellers to a frontier location, and women who settled in rural outposts. I was able to pose questions about how the timing and length of residence in Australia, and the time of writing and publishing, influenced the women’s interpretation of Indigenous people. The differences between the three ‘adventurers’ and the three ‘settlers’ pivoted on the ephemeral nature of the adventurers’ experiences with Indigenous people, compared with the settlers’ longer-term relationship with them.

I need here to clarify that the Indigenous Australian people who related to settler women were ‘civilised’ or ‘station’ Aborigines, as opposed to ‘wild blackfellows’ or ‘outsiders’.⁵ After colonisation, as the Aboriginal people assessed their situation, some resisted and fought for their land, and maintained that resistance; others adjusted to the prevailing white expansion by agreeing to work for the white man as a means of staying on their country. This reciprocal arrangement was sustained by the handing out of rations as the game and fruits

4 Cf. Dalziell 2002: 329, 338–339.

5 Tim Rowse, Bain Attwood and Robert Foster are among the historians who have written on this developed symbiotic relationship between Aborigines and settlers: Rowse 1998: 204; Rowse 1987: 81–99; Rowse 1986: 179; Attwood 1999: 28, 30; Foster 2000: 3; cf. also Morphy and Morphy 1984: 464, 473–474; Rowley 1971: 10–11.

of their land were replaced by livestock and planted crops. Diane Barwick found that Aboriginal women 'were invariably eager to come to the stations, and subsequently stayed even when their menfolk wandered'.⁶ Although Katherine Kirkland briefly refers to 'wild' Aborigines in the hinterland of Geelong in the 1830s, most of the references to Aboriginal people in these chapters are to 'station Aborigines'. The dependence of the settlers on Aboriginal people on pastoral properties and the use of services supplied by them significantly influenced the white women's representations.

The insights gained through the close readings of women's writing contained here resonates with important themes in Aboriginal history, such as frontier life, cross-cultural friendships, and Christianising and civilising. Violent conflicts at the frontier are either explicitly referenced (Emily Cowl, North Queensland; Rose Scott Cowen, central western Queensland) or 'hidden' (Katherine Kirkland, Western District, Victoria; Mary McConnel, south-east Queensland). These episodes or silences add to the historical interpretation of cross-cultural relations in early contact, particularly between men. The women's accounts join other contemporary texts that refer to interracial violence⁷ and add to the work of later historians who have concentrated their research on specific regions: R H W Reece (New South Wales), Michael Christie (Victoria), Neville Green (south-west Western Australia and the Kimberley), Lyndall Ryan (Tasmania), Raymond Evans (Queensland) and Noel Loos (North Queensland).⁸ Others, such as Henry Reynolds, Andrew Markus, Bain Attwood, Richard Broome and, again, Raymond Evans have applied a wider lens to conflicts on the frontiers.⁹

While the dynamics of frontier violence form a backdrop to the narratives studied, the focus is on the interracial relationships of the six women, each of whom channelled their insights on Aboriginal people into their writing. Each writer offers a different perspective, requiring a different interpretation. They thereby add to the work of historians such as Ann McGrath, Bain Attwood, Marie Fels, Bob Reece and John Mulvaney, who have explored the 'co-operative and collaborative aspects of past colonial black-white relations'.¹⁰

The analysis of these narratives also involves literary criticism and literary history. Because I had begun my studies in the English Department of the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy (before transferring to the School of History at The Australian National University), I

6 Diane Barwick 1974: 53.

7 For example, *The Way We Civilise; Black and White; The Native Police; A Series of Articles and Letters Reprinted from the Queenslander*, 1880; and George W Rusden's *History of Australia* (1883).

8 Reece 1974; Christie 1979; Green 1984, 1989, 1995; Ryan, L 1996; Evans, Saunders and Cronin 1993; Loos 1982.

9 Reynolds 1987, 1990, 1993, 1996; Markus 1974, 1994; Attwood 1999, 2003; Broome 2002 [1982], 2005, 2010; Evans 2003, 2004.

10 Russell 2001: 5.

was directed towards investigating published narratives. In drawing together this collection of texts, I have been able to plot changing literary treatments of relations between white and black women on the frontiers. The resultant interdisciplinary approach—although the crags and pitfalls were sometimes tricky to manoeuvre—has enriched the investigation, opening a wider field for further scholarly analysis and investigation. In the chapters on Eliza Davies and Emily Cowl in particular, I have situated the texts in their wider cultural context and within relevant discourses and genres, from where the representations of Aborigines can be viewed in terms of generic conventions, audience expectations and shifting racial attitudes.

During the 1980s and 1990s the literary genre investigating the lives of colonial Australian women consisted largely of the publication of letters and diaries, often presented as anthologies or accompanied by commentary. These included the works of Patricia Clarke, Dale Spender, Fiona Giles, Lynne Spender, Debra Adelaide, Elizabeth Lawson and Lucy Frost. *The Letters of Rachel Henning*, first published by *The Bulletin* in 1951–52, and *Annabella Boswell's Journal: An Account of Early Port Macquarie* (1965) were earlier publications in this genre. These studies form a foundational body of work about colonial women's experiences.

Since the 1970s historians have become aware of the need to write women, particularly Aboriginal women, into colonial rural histories. Anne Allingham regretted not adding women or Aborigines to the 'male dominant squatting record' of North Queensland.¹¹ In 1985, Marilyn Lake and Farley Kelly observed that: 'Perhaps the most consistently invisible women in conventional historical accounts ... have been Aboriginal'.¹²

Some of the historians who have addressed the subject of black-white female relationships between 1981 and 1993 are Patricia Grimshaw, Ann McGrath, Kay Saunders, Lyndall Ryan and Lyn Riddett.¹³ Historical, literary and anthropological studies, however, have tended to endorse the 'accepted versions'¹⁴ that white women were exploitative in their attitudes towards black women, or have chosen to focus on interracial female relationships which centred on shared outdoor activities, such as bush walks, Indigenous food foraging trips or swimming expeditions to the river or waterhole. Literary scholar, Helen Thomson identified this form of relationship with her comment that:

11 Allingham 1977: 221.

12 Lake and Kelly 1985: viii. Jan Pettman's study into 'intersections of race, ethnicity, class and gender' supports this statement, Pettman 1992: vii, 18.

13 Grimshaw 1981; Ryan 1986: 35–43; McGrath 1989; Saunders 1991: 157–160; Lake 1993: 377–386; Riddett 1993: 73–92.

14 Ferres 1993: 3.

[White women's] sense of sisterhood with black women, imperfect though it may be, was expressed most powerfully through a shared, benign relationship with the natural world, in contrast to the exploitative violence of men.¹⁵

In Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans' *Gender Relations in Australia* (1992), Mary Anne Jebb and Anna Haebich threw out a challenge to understand 'fully' gender relationships on the frontier; and Jackie Huggins and Thom Blake lamented the comparative lack of studies by academic historians on interracial female relationships, while citing the growing body of work of Indigenous women writing about their own experiences.¹⁶ In 2005 Anna Cole, Victoria Haskins and Fiona Paisley's *Uncommon Ground: White Women in Aboriginal History* contributed to this latter genre.¹⁷

Patricia Grimshaw and Julie Evans in 1996 wrote of the 'injustice towards Aborigines ... involved in the process of settlement', seen in the writing of Rosa Campbell Praed, Mary Bundock and Katie Langloh Parker. Within what they described as the 'fragmentary alternative readings that contested aspects of the dominant colonial discourse', Grimshaw and Evans sought and found instances of Indigenous agency and authority.¹⁸ With Ann Standish, they wrote again in 2003 about Katie Parker's work, describing it as 'some of the few available sources of understanding Aboriginal women's experiences of colonization' within 'the paucity of sources on Aborigines coexisting with colonizers in the outback'. My study transcends the 'reciprocity and negotiation' operating between Parker and the Yuwalaraay women¹⁹ to reveal the dynamics of cross-cultural associations between individuals.

Anthropologist Myrna Tonkinson in 1988 had bewailed the fact that there was 'surprisingly little detail in the literature on relationships of any kind between [black and white] women', other than those of individual settlers and an undifferentiated group of Aborigines ('natives'). She called for researchers to 'discover and explain evidence for and against relationships of sisterhood', which she defined as 'friendship based on equality' between Aboriginal and white women, particularly one-to-one relationships.²⁰

Because of an assumed imbalance of power between black and white women in colonial settings, examples of affinity and equality between individuals have been hard to find. However, the memoirs of my three 'settlers' provide examples of close black-white female connections. Specifically, the relationship between

15 Thomson 1993: 35–36. Cf. Dawson 2002.

16 Jebb and Haebich 1992: 30, 53, 56–57.

17 Cole, Haskins and Paisley 2005. Cf. also McKellar 1984; Labumore 1984; Curthoys 1993: 169–170; Nelson, Smith and Grimshaw 2002.

18 Grimshaw and Evans 1996: 81, 95.

19 Evans, Grimshaw and Standish 2003: 18, 31–32.

20 Tonkinson 1988: 39.

Rose Scott Cowen, the sixth of my selected writers, and an Indigenous woman, 'Minnie', (albeit in the early years of the twentieth century) conforms to Sandra Lynch's defined characteristics of the necessary conditions and pleasures of friendship as 'toleration of difference' and '[s]hared activity, similarity of interest and of values and reciprocal services'.²¹ This key example of interracial female friendship helps remedy the previous deficiency.

Kay Saunders' complaint in 1991 was that 'no real understanding of the complexity of Australian history can emerge until question of the interrelationship of race, class, gender and region are systematically addressed', because '[u]ntil then all women will remain white and Black women will exist on the margins'.²² This book goes some way in filling this gap.

The analyses of these six women writers contribute to the debate about history and fiction that has taken place between historians, literary scholars and creative writers. As Inga Clendinnen observes, it is necessary for writers dealing with the past to 'get inside episodes' in order 'to understand our subjects' changing motivations and moods in their changing contexts'.²³ This is no easy matter. Tom Griffiths, Kate Grenville, Alex Miller and Mark McKenna have all grappled with the question of how historians and creative writers can access the past through different forms of evidence, and how they can present their interpretations of past happenings through forms of representation, including writing.

Another consideration in play in my chosen narratives is the role of memory and its manipulation, a device investigated by Paula Hamilton. Robert Foster, Rick Hosking and Amanda Nettelbeck have discussed it in relation to the creation of silences that transformed the killing of Aborigines into benign—or comparatively innocent—encounters.²⁴ In my selected texts, the time that lapsed between experience and publication influenced the women's representations, which were presented to fit changing social and racial attitudes and therefore audience expectation. Again, the role of storytelling—in Ann Curthoys' words, 'history's divided identity'²⁵—also forms part of this debate. As 'life stories', presented as historical occurrences, these writings require a textual reading of their literary representations within the historical analysis.

While 'place' was not a criterion in my selection of the works, it was an important feature in the women's narratives. Five of them—the exception being Eliza

21 Lynch 2005: 76–77.

22 Saunders 1991: 160.

23 Clendinnen 2003: 287.

24 Hamilton 1994: 12; Foster, Hosking and Nettelbeck 2001: 1–2, 139; cf. also Richards 1925: 104, 106; Murphy 1986.

25 Curthoys 1997: 222. Cf. also, Curthoys and McGrath 2000: 1–13, 45–53; and Gunson 2002: 224–225. Many settler and Indigenous histories rely on reminiscences and storytelling as tools to evaluate and elucidate the past, cf., for example, Attwood and Magowan 2001.

Fraser, whose focus was on her own sad plight—wrote about their surroundings. The representation of landscape in four of the writers contained literary tropes that informed and reflected their racial perceptions. Rose Cowen, the only Australian-born writer, was the exception. As the women's attitudes to the Australian landscape were associated with their attitudes towards Aborigines, Cowen's Australian birth and her love for the Australian countryside seemed to be allied to her different perspective of Indigenous people.

These texts are examples of 'women's' evidence that can add to and enrich the ever emerging picture of life on the Australian frontier. They help break 'the great silence about Australian colonialism'²⁶ to offer new reinterpretations of frontier relationships. Except for Eliza Fraser, the women were writing for women, who made up a large percentage of the reading public. They write about their hardships and their coping strategies; they reflect women's interests and present the context of their life from a woman's viewpoint. The writers divulge small, private details of their everyday lives that, in the case of the settlers, included the intricate exchanges that take place between women, often recorded by way of reproduced dialogue. As the three chosen settlers were isolated from their white contemporaries, the women they drew close to were the Aborigines.

My 'primary' sources, then, are the autobiographical works of women, who wrote about—or, in the case of Eliza Fraser, recited—their colonial experiences of Aborigines. Although four of my authors published their work long after their frontier experiences, three of them (Eliza Davies, Emily Cowl and Mary McConnel) depended on diary notes to which they referred either directly or indirectly; McConnel reproduced entries from her diary into her text. Two others, Eliza Fraser and Katherine Kirkland, recorded their experiences soon after the events they discuss—Katherine Kirkland's letters to her mother are thought to have been her primary source. While not referring to the use of notes, the sixth woman, Rose Cowen, who lived most of her life in outback Queensland, has dipped into a wellspring of information about people and places that she knew well.

A short précis of the current colonial racial attitudes and the nineteenth-century utilitarian urge to 'educate' precedes the study. It involves discussion of the influences during the nineteenth century of the Enlightenment idea of 'man's place in nature', of evangelical Christianity and the role of underlying notions of race based on scientific theories. All these aspects inform the women's works in some way. Chapter 1 discusses this conceptual base, from which the women have translated their experiences into textual form.

26 Evans, Grimshaw and Standish 2003: 31–32. Anthropologist W E H Stanner first coined the term 'The Great Australian Silence' when he used it as the title of his second 1968 ABC Boyer Lecture.

In Chapter 2, the well-known story of Eliza Fraser and her iconic captivity tale act as the precursor to the analysis of the following five texts. Shipwrecked in 1836 off the now Queensland coast, she was rescued and supported by the Ka'bi people of Fraser Island, until found and returned to white settlement. Recent scholarship has identified Aboriginal behaviour and motives towards the survivors as benign—even succouring—but seen by a white, middle-class woman in 1836 as 'cruel'.

The Eliza Fraser saga has a lot to account for, notwithstanding that it was a product of its time. It was a story far too exciting, and with far too many opportunities to extrapolate, than one that might explore a truth, or merely present facts. When Eliza Fraser gave her report on her 52 days spent with the Ka'bi people of Fraser Island and the nearby mainland, she opened a can of worms. On 6 September 1836, after two weeks of recovery from debilitation and exposure, she dictated an account of her ordeal to a clerk of Foster Fyans, captain of the 4th Regiment and commandant at Moreton Bay. She was still exhausted, frail and disoriented, and she could not have known the influence her words would have on later commentators. Relatively balanced and reasonable compared with subsequent interpretations, her story was soon embellished and distorted, to be aided and abetted by Eliza herself.

Eliza's initial report reflected the misunderstandings that abound when individuals from different races meet for the first time. This was particularly the case when British people first encountered the indigenous inhabitants of the Australian continent. In Eliza Fraser's case, extenuating circumstances, even at the time she told her tale, heightened her distress and increased her complaints that she sustained 'cruel abuse' at the hands of Aborigines.

The five women, who later presented for publication reminiscences of their experiences with Indigenous Australians, grappled with the dichotomy of stereotypical notions of Aboriginal 'savages' of the sort that Eliza Fraser's story fed upon, and the reality of kindly, cooperative and helpful co-inhabitants of the land on which they lived. Racial attitudes were mollified and modified on closer contact with Aboriginal people.

Chapter 3 looks at the work of Eliza Davies (formerly Arbuckle), who published in 1881, *The Story of an Earnest Life: A Woman's Adventures in Australia and in Two Voyages Around the World*. A clever and enterprising woman, Davies had her eye on producing an exciting story involving ugly savages. Emigrating from Scotland in 1838, she moved to South Australia where, as the servant of the explorer Charles Sturt's family—a position heavily disguised in her book—she accompanied Sturt and the South Australian governor, George Gawler, on an exploration of the Murray River in November to December 1839. In the chapter covering this adventure, she describes Aborigines as bestial and malignant.

She inadvertently, however, also depicts the cordial welcoming, reciprocity, curiosity and humour of the Ngarrindjeri and Meru people. Elsewhere in her text, she presented a dispassionate, sympathetic and realistic view of Indigenous Australians. A devoted reader of the works of Sir Walter Scott, she may well have applied the words from Scott's *Marmion* to her own writing: 'Oh what a tangled web we weave, When first we practise to deceive!'

Chapter 4 deals with Mrs T Holder (Emily) Cowl, who lived in the frontier town of Normanton near the Gulf of Carpentaria from August 1871 to March 1875, while her husband was setting up the Normanton telegraph station. Initially telling her tale to the members of a Pioneers Club in Brisbane, she published her two lectures in about 1912 as *Some of My Experiences during a voyage to the Gulf of Carpentaria and three years' residence at Normanton in the early Seventies*. As a town-dweller, Emily did not forge a close connection with the Kurtjar people and expressed an antagonism towards them, conforming to the expectations of her audience. Seemingly hoping to entertain, she concocted a boys' own annual, 'ripping yarn' style of narrative to describe the sort of escapade, popular in adventure narratives from the late nineteenth century. In it the Kurtjar were posed as the dangerous enemy. Emily, however, also included in her text the Aborigines' ingenuity and their humorous reactions to the white interlopers.

In Chapter 5, I look at the work of Katherine Kirkland, whose 'Life in the Bush' was first published in serialised form in 1842, in Britain. Writing of the same period as Eliza Davies, Katherine settled from 1839 to 1841 on a pastoral property in what is now the Western District of Victoria. Unlike Davies, she published her memoirs soon after her colonial experiences. Hiding behind her authorial title—'a Lady'—Katherine was wary of divulging how close she had come to the Indigenous owners of her land, or of how much the Aboriginal women had helped her in the first months of settlement. Before she could plant a vegetable garden or form a dairy, Katherine had to somehow provide sustaining food for her husband, her brother and up to four workers, as they built huts and established a sheep station. She also had a two-year-old daughter and was in the early months of pregnancy. Although Katherine tried hard to maintain her silences, glimpses of the help she received from the Moner balug women peep through. She also recorded valuable insights into the culture and character of the Wathaurong people before their rapid demise in the wake of settler incursion.

The reminiscences of Mary McConnel, another settler woman, fill the pages of Chapter 6. Mary's aim is to Christianise and civilise the Dungibara people, who shared the land where David McConnel had established his Cressbrook estate. As the wife of a wealthy pastoralist, who in 1841 had become the first settler in the upper Brisbane River valley, Mary's sense of superiority is firmly in place.

Yet she generously replicated the words of some of the Dungibara women when they proudly voiced their ownership of the land, or seemingly mocked the white woman's strange customs.

Chapter 7 deals with the only one of the six women that was Australian-born. Rose Scott Cowen (born Hamilton) grew up on the central western Queensland property, Tambo. After her marriage in 1900, she lived for 11 years in the Channel Country in far western Queensland. Writing later than the other women, and less bound by British middle-class conventions, Rose Cowen spoke openly of Indigenous morality, integrity, dignity and kindness.

A note on referencing. For ease of reference the works of the six women authors are placed separately in Appendix A. Similarly, Appendix B holds works of other Australian women mentioned in the text. The bibliography contains all other references cited in the work. Footnotes are set out with the first citation of a reference in full for works held in the appendices and also for archival and primary references. Subsequent citations are abbreviated to author date with references in the appendices including an abbreviated title. Secondary references are cited as author date.

Finally, a word about my own interpretative stance: As E D Hirsch observed, 'Every act of interpretation involves ... at least two perspectives, that of the author and that of the interpreter'.²⁷ The most significant influences of which I am conscious are my regret, as a non-Indigenous woman, for violence against Aborigines during the nineteenth century; and my recognition of the essential equality of all people whatever their race or social class.

27 Hirsch 1988: 262.

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.