

1. Sowing the Seeds for Nineteenth-century and Early Twentieth-century Women's Writing

The British, secure in the knowledge that they belonged to the world's greatest empire, considered themselves superior to native peoples in culture and understanding. This perception was bolstered by prevailing nineteenth-century attitudes and theories.

Science and race

Scientific racial theories about the place of humans in nature proliferated during the nineteenth century. The polygenist view, espoused by the social philosopher David Hume in 1742, was that there were different species of humans, exhibiting different characteristics, but all inferior to the white race.¹ The monogenist idea was of a chain of being, linked in a one-dimensional natural progression from simplest animal to humans, originating from Aristotle's *scala naturae*. The publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, available for sale in Sydney just four months after its publication in Britain in 1859,² resolved tensions between the monogenist and polygenist interpretations of human descent by affirming human unity, yet explaining racial diversity by relegating 'savages' to 'ape' status.³

Darwin had been formulating his theories of biological adaptation during his five-years voyage on the *Beagle* to South America and the Pacific Islands, from which he returned to Britain in 1836. In the 1872 edition of his *Origin of Species*, Darwin introduced the phrase 'survival of the fittest'—a term which Social Darwinists applied to the idea of victory by the strongest (organism or race) as a necessary condition for progress. Barry Butcher suggests that Darwin formed his views of race from his 'observations and experiences' during his visit to Australia in 1836 and was influenced by the 'scientific and exploration literature' emanating from this country. At this time Darwin mooted that the 'mechanism of natural selection might apply in the case of human beings'.⁴

1 David Hume, 'Of national characters', in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, Scientia Verlag Aalen, Germany, 1964: 252, 244, 250, 249.

2 Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species By Means of Natural Selection or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, Claremont Classics, Australia, 1999 [1859]; Butcher 1999: 39.

3 Howard 1982: 10–19; Darwin 1999 [1859]: 17–25.

4 Butcher 1994: 380.

Darwin's theories were strenuously debated in the Australian colonies.⁵ Mark Francis has pointed out that their application in Australia was varied and idiosyncratic, and dependent on interpretation. Prevalent, however, was the condoning of '[c]onquest and the takeover of Aboriginal lands', based on the belief that Aborigines were at the lowest level of humankind, a 'lost cause', unable to be civilised, and their culture 'primitive and destined to disappear'.⁶ As these ideas could be applied to Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace's 1859 evolutionary theories, they were reiterated and accepted as being scientifically valid.⁷ This conveniently served the interests of British pastoralists in Australia where the acquisition of land was paramount.

Contributors to the post-Darwinian discussion in Australia were the anthropologists Lorimer Fison, Alfred William Howitt, (Sir) Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen. Evolutionary theorists Thomas Huxley, J Lubbock (Lord Avebury), E B Tylor, Sir John Evans, A L Pitt-Rivers, L H Morgan, J F McLennan, Sir James Frazer and Andrew Lang all joined the debate. Findings from anthropological fieldwork were published in works such as Fison's *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* (1880) and Spencer and Gillen's *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1904).⁸

'A book is a version of the world' (Salman Rushdie)

Because education was more freely available for girls during the nineteenth century, reading became a popular pastime for middle-class women. Unable to participate in politics, business or financial administration, and excluded from the leisure pursuits of men, such as hunting and drinking, women turned to reading books. The predominant evangelical social climate forbade theatre going, dancing, music halls or even card games, but reading was encouraged as a means (together with prayer and moral purity) of attaining spiritual fulfilment.⁹ As reading flourished in Britain, public libraries increased in number: by 1838 there were also 38 circulating commercial libraries within three Westminster parishes.¹⁰

Current scientific theories and the accounts of Englishmen observing or meeting members of the black races, and, seeming to cast them to inferior racial

5 Cf. Butcher 1988: 153–169.

6 Francis 1996: 90–105; Anderson and Perrin 2007: 26–27; Butcher 1994: 374.

7 Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace, *Evolution by Natural Selection*, Published for the XV International Congress of Zoology and The Linnean Society of London, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1958.

8 Mulvaney 1990: 24–42.

9 Altick 1957: 85, 86, 141, 99; Watt 1963: 45.

10 Brewer 1997: 177–180; Altick 1957: 217.

positions, were therefore available to the women of this book—five of whom were born in Britain, the sixth classically educated on a pastoral property in central western Queensland. In the Australian colonies, racial theories that cast Aborigines to the lowest level of humankind were reiterated and accepted as being scientifically valid.

Other books, however, were also available. History and travel books were popular, particularly tales of seafarers and their adventurous voyages. Into this category sneaked Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, a book that challenged *Pilgrim's Progress* as the British public's most popular book. James Cook's *Voyages* joined these two to become in 1849 the trio of the most frequently borrowed books from English public libraries.¹¹

William Dampier's *A New Voyage Round the World*, published in 1699, was an early best-seller, as were his later books, *Voyages and Descriptions* (1699), which dealt with his second voyage to the western Australian coast, and *A Voyage to New Holland* (in two parts, 1703 and 1709). Dampier's description of Aboriginal people from his first visit in January 1688—thought to be the Bardi people from the area around Derby, Western Australia—set the scene for later depictions of 'savages' or 'odd' people in outlandish places, including Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Because Dampier was an eyewitness, his 'factual' accounts replaced earlier vague and fantastical ideas of the sort reproduced onto navigational maps of the Southern Seas. His account described the Aborigines as:

the miserabest People in the World ... [differing] but little from Brutes. They are tall, strait-bodied [sic], and thin, with small long Limbs. They have great Heads, round Foreheads, and great Brows. Their Eye-lids are always half closed to keep the Flies out of their Eyes ... They have great Bottle-Noses, pretty full Lips and wide Mouths. The two Fore-teeth of their Upper-jaw are wanting in all of them, Men and Women, old and young ... They are long-visaged, and of a very unpleasing Aspect, having no one graceful Feature in their Faces. Their Hair is black, short and curl'd, like that of the Negroes ... The Colour of their Skins, both of their faces and the rest of their Body, is Coal-black, like that of the Negroes of *Guinea*.¹²

A study by Diana and Michael Preston of the unpublished draft of *A New Voyage* has identified differences between Dampier's journal notes and the final publication. Consistent with his recognised objective style of observation, Dampier in his journal described the Aborigines as being 'of good stature but

11 Williams 1961: 158–159; Altick 1957: 258, 126, 220.

12 William Dampier, *A New Voyage Round the World*, Adam and Charles Black, London, 1937 [1697]: 312–313 (italics in original). A version can be found in Flannery 1998: 8.

very thin and lean', a condition which he attributed to 'want of food'. Their hair was 'matted-up like a negroe's' for 'want of combs'. The Prestons suggest that the inclusions of the emotive expressions 'Brutes' and 'unpleasing Aspect', which were not recorded in Dampier's journal, may have been included either by Dampier or his publisher to embellish the truth by sensationally augmenting the idea of Indigenous 'savagery', in the interest of an increased readership.¹³ The inclusion of racial stereotypes to sell books is evident in some of the autobiographies dealt with in this book.

James Cook's 1770 interpretation of Australia's Indigenous people followed Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Enlightenment concept of the 'noble savage'. Cook adopted the notion that noble savages lived a virtuous and happy life in harmony with natural laws. He wrote that the Aborigines were 'far more happier than we Europeans', living tranquilly without unnecessary possessions or the struggle of class hierarchy, in a temperate climate with unspoiled air.¹⁴

Joseph Banks' assessment, on the other hand, bears the strong influence of Dampier. In the *Endeavour Journal*,¹⁵ Banks assessed Aborigines as subjects to be analysed and categorised. Recently elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, he published his journal from the *Endeavour* voyage with Cook soon after his return to England in 1771, motivated by the growing utilitarian impulse for the 'advancement of useful knowledge'.¹⁶ Deferring to Dampier's descriptions as a yardstick by which to assess Indigenous skin colour, Banks wrote that he saw through his binoculars, '5 people who appeard [sic] ... to be enormously black: so far did the prejudices which we had built on Dampiers [sic] account influence us that we fancied we could see their Colour when we could scarce distinguish whether or not they were men'. Subsequent entries strove to qualify and refine Dampier's observations, while continuing to underline Aboriginal differences in skin colour, habits and behaviour from civilised, refined white men.¹⁷

Banks' depiction included moral judgements. He stressed the primitive nature of Aborigines, describing them as 'coverd [sic] with their filth which I beleive [sic] they never wash of'. He stated that the dirt on their bodies seemed 'to have stuck to their hides from the day of their birth without their once having attempted

13 Preston and Preston 2004: 175.

14 Harrison 1998: 193–194; Smith 1985: 86, 87, 102, 169. In accordance with nineteenth-century patriarchal values, noble savagery usually applied to Aboriginal males who encapsulated the English Victorian value of 'manliness' in their tall, straight, healthy bodies, masculine energy and physical power, Reader 1974: 188; Gibson 1984: 183.

15 J C Beaglehole (ed.), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks 1768–1771*, Volume II, The Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales in association with Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1962.

16 Jeremy Bentham introduced this concept into British mainstream thinking in 1789 with the publication of *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Moyal 1993: 10; Gascoigne 1994: 8–9.

17 Beaglehole 1962, Vol. II: 50, 55, 58.

to remove it', thereby relegating Aboriginal people to an unenlightened and degraded status. Unable to detect any form of agricultural cultivation, he cast them to a rank 'little superior to that of monkies [sic]'.¹⁸

Banks perceived Indigenous painted bodies and the 'uncouth' bone 'as thick as a mans [sic] finger and 5 or 6 inches long' through the nose as signifiers of savage aggression, underlining this image with a reference to their brandishing spears and boomerangs at the Europeans in what Banks interpreted as a menacing act.¹⁹ On his return to England, his racially slanted observations were readily accepted by the scientific community, and were freely available to the female reading population.

Like the women in this book, Watkin Tench discovered that an initial impression of Aborigines could change on closer acquaintance. A captain-lieutenant in the marines and official scribe of the first four years of British settlement at Port Jackson, Tench shows how an intimate understanding of Aboriginal individuals can change racial attitudes. In *Sydney's First Four Years: A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay* (1789),²⁰ he reiterated the derogatory racial attitudes of Dampier and Banks; disparaged Indigenous workmanship, except their skill in weaving—a trait which became stereotypically associated with Aborigines in the works of later colonial observers; criticised Aboriginal houses as 'rude in construction' and their canoes as being 'as despicable as their huts'. By implication, he deemed Aborigines to be unintelligent because they had no comprehension of 'the use or benefit of cloathing [sic]', despite the fact that he had seen them 'shivering, and huddling themselves up in heaps in their huts, or the caverns of rocks, until a fire can be kindled'.²¹

Well-educated and living some time in France, Tench rejected Rousseau's noble savage imagery, writing that:

Notwithstanding the disregard they have invariably shewn for all the finery we could deck them with, they are fond of adorning themselves with scars, which increase their natural hideousness. It is hardly possible to see any thing in human shape more ugly, than one of these savages thus scarified, and further ornamented with a fish bone struck through the gristle of the nose. The custom of daubing themselves with white

18 Beaglehole 1962, Vol. II: 112, 123–124.

19 Beaglehole 1962, Vol. II: 91, 92–93, 53.

20 Tench's journals have been published in, Captain Watkin Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years: A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay and A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson 1788–1791*, introduced and annotated by L F Fitzhardinge, Library of Australian History in association with the Royal Australian Historical Society, Sydney, 1979.

21 Tench 1979: 47, 48.

earth is also frequent among both sexes: but, unlike the inhabitants of the islands in the Pacific Ocean, they reject the beautiful feathers which the birds of their country afford.²²

In *A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson* (1793), however, Tench's closer knowledge of the Darug²³ people had changed his attitude to expose an appreciation of the universal human need for body decoration. He wrote:

Unsatisfied ... with natural beauty, like the people of all other countries, [the Darug] strive by adscititious [supplementary] embellishments to heighten attraction, and often with as little success. Hence the naked savage of New South Wales, pierces the septum of his nose, through which he runs a stick or a bone; and scarifies his body, the charms of which increase in proportion to the number and the magnitude of seams, by which it is distinguished. The operation is performed by making two longitudinal incisions, with a sharpened shell, and afterwards pinching up with the nails the intermediate space of skin and flesh, which thereby becomes considerably elevated, and forms a prominence as thick as a man's finger. No doubt but pain must be severely felt, until the wound be healed. But the love of ornament defies weaker considerations: and no English beau can bear more stoutly the extraction of his teeth, to make room for a fresh set from a chimney sweeper; or a fair one suffer her tender ears to be perforated, with more heroism, than the grisly nymphs, on the banks of Port Jackson, submit their sable shoulders to the remorseless lancet.²⁴

Tench's description of Arabanoo, a young Darug man who had been forcibly captured during the first years of colonisation, demonstrated his growing understanding of Aboriginal individuality. He depicted not only the physical beauty of Arabanoo's robust body but also his 'gentleness and humanity', his 'vivacity and good humour' and his disgust at the inhumane practice of flogging. His appraisal of Arabanoo's physical and moral strength, his fine character and demeanour, complied with the nineteenth-century esteemed ideals of 'manliness and sensibility'.²⁵

Women, as readers, had access to all these published theories and opinions. Unlike Hume, who had not seen Indigenous Australians, and Darwin, who had only superficial contact with them, women who lived among Aborigines over varying periods of time, could add to the accounts of previous writers with their own representations of Aborigines.

22 Tench 1979: 47, xxi, xvi.

23 I have adopted the name for the language group, used by Attenbrow 2002.

24 Tench 1979: 277.

25 Vance 1985: 1, 8; Tench 1979: 139, 143, 142, 145.

Evangelical Christianity

By far the most influential book to the reading female population was the Bible. The Puritan aspect of religion had been fundamental to middle-class values since the seventeenth century. During the nineteenth century there was a resurgence of evangelical Christianity. Hugely popular were religious tracts, books on spiritual guidance and assurance, moralistic tales, autobiographies and didactic fiction. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* were two of the most read books, introduced to children as part of their regular Sunday devotions.

Forming the basis of nineteenth-century English morality, evangelicalism exerted an overriding influence on social and cultural values. It also promoted the idea of an 'elect people', justifying the accumulation of imperial wealth and power. Urged on by the creeds of industrialisation and progress, this perception was a principal element in imperial expansion, which encouraged attitudes of racial superiority, backed by cultural arrogance.

As the evangelistic urge to extend the Christian empire spread across the world during the first half of the nineteenth century, belief in God's call for 'improvement' encouraged the idea that racial differences in standards of civility and morality could be eradicated through the power of Christianity. Evangelists believed that by instruction and example 'uncivilised' people, who were different from the English in appearance, values, culture and behaviour, could be raised from ignorance to a level approximating (although probably never quite achieving) the superior status of English society and culture. The aim of civilising and 'cultivating' pagan savages was to be realised by the redeeming of their heathen souls through God's saving grace.²⁶

Middle-class respectability

Another strong influence on nineteenth-century British women and their identity was the overriding power of the concept of 'class'. In Britain, genteel women differentiated themselves from the dissolute and irresponsible aristocracy and the feckless and irreligious urban poor. The middle class was usually defined as comprising property-owning groups engaged in manufacturing, trade and the professions. It was different from the aristocracy and gentry by virtue of active participation in the productive economy, and from the working class by abstention from manual wage labour.²⁷

26 Cf. Marty 1970: 78–88.

27 Gunn 2000: 14–15.

A British woman's identity was determined and judged by the way she looked and acted within class expectations. Respectable middle-class women adopted a form of genteel culture, described by Linda Young as 'a rigid structure of explicit and implicit rules'.²⁸ Nineteenth-century perceptions of respectable womanhood involved decorous appearance and the 'civilised' behaviour of modesty, sobriety and adherence to strict Christian moral values. In extreme form, the adoption of Puritan sexual mores could result in undue propriety or prudery. Earnestness, 'duty', hard work, tidiness, thrift and respect for the law were esteemed attributes.²⁹ These qualities were transposed even to the slab hut on remote colonial outposts. Because of the expected demands of gentility to maintain a respectable household, women strove to define the ideals of gentility by neatness, orderliness and cleanliness. Penny Russell has termed this behaviour the 'genteel performance'.³⁰ All the women writers in this book were (or espoused to be) members of the British middle class. Their core middle-class values slanted the way they viewed Aborigines.

Clothing was integral to maintaining a respectable appearance, serving to maintain a middle-class woman's position within the English class system. A 'refined' appearance not only identified her own status but also allowed her to identify other women of her class. It also nominated by implication her possession of the middle-class virtue, 'morality'. The stark difference between white, ornately clothed, controlled, Christian, civilised women and their binary opposite—black, naked, 'uncontrolled', heathen natives—fed into British racial assumptions that encouraged the stereotypical depiction of Aborigines as 'savage', 'ugly' and 'depraved'. Conversely, when Aborigines first clapped eyes on the over-dressed white women, their astonishment and curiosity often spilled over into hilarity or a quirky sense of fun.

Within the dynamics of the male power structure at the frontier, the investigation of the following female narratives offers another perspective on interracial relations. Despite the constraints on them of the middle-class code of respectability and the nineteenth-century's racial and religious concepts, the women began to replace racial clichés and stereotypes, and the literary imperatives to conform to an accepted view that editors and publishers often expected. As they grew to know Indigenous people as individuals, they revealed in their writing aspects of Indigenous humanity, agency and authority.

28 Young 2003: 189. Young explains that, behind this facade, there was a fluidity that enabled aspirants to join the middle class.

29 Samuel Smiles extolled middle-class virtues in his numerous publications, e.g., *Self-Help: With Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance* (1859), *Character* (1871), *Duty: With Illustrations of Courage, Patience and Endurance* (1880), *Thrift* (1875). By 1953, *Self-Help* had been reprinted 71 times.

30 Russell 1994: 58–59. Cf. also, Russell 2010: 26.

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