2. Early Perceptions of Aborigines—
Eliza Fraser’s Legacy: ‘Through a
Glass Darkly’

‘At the outset we promised to render the history subservient to the cause
of morality, and we trust that we have performed our promise.’

Illustration 1. Engraving of Eliza Fraser.


---

1 John Curtis, *Shipwreck of the Stirling Castle containing A Faithful Narrative of the Dreadful Sufferings of
the Crew, and the Cruel Murder of Captain Fraser by the Savages. Also, The Horrible Barbarity of the Cannibals
Inflicted upon The Captain’s Widow, Whose Unparalleled Sufferings are Stated by Herself, and Corroborated by
the Other Survivors. To Which is Added, The Narrative of the Wreck of the Charles Eaton, in the Same Latitude,
The role of Eliza Fraser

As the first white woman to meet Aborigines and to tell her tale, Eliza Fraser’s story was bound to have an impact. It has become a famous, archetypal encounter between a white woman and Australia’s Indigenous people and, from its earliest days, it was a powerful and influential tale that helped generate fear and prejudice about Aborigines and the frontier. Her tale of shipwreck on 21 May 1836, her 52 days with the Ka’bi people and her subsequent ‘rescue’ and return to white settlement on 22 August 1836 became so well known and so thoroughly worked over, that women writing later could not help but be influenced by it.

As an early example of colonial storytelling at work, particularly about white women and Aborigines, Eliza’s story encapsulated the dread of shipwreck and the frightening prospect of travellers falling victim to unknown, though presumably savage, peoples. This fear fostered a vigorous genre of captivity tales
during the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries, particularly in the United States of America. While usually based on fact, such narratives were written to suit a readership seeking vicarious adventure, and often contained the religious motives of the author or publisher.

Eliza’s story was so popular that her history has been refracted into a collage of tellings and re-tellings, of contradictions and conflicting interpretations, and through later appropriations into art and literature. It has been transposed from its origins as a story of survival from shipwreck to the status or myth and legend. The women who later wrote of their own encounters could not have been immune to the seduction of its sensationalism.

**Background and shipwreck**

Early biographical details of Eliza are sketchy. She was born Eliza Anne Slack, perhaps in Derbyshire, England, in about 1798. Her childhood may have been spent in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), but she lived at least part of her adult life in Stromness, on the Orkney Islands. Here in 1835 she left her 15-year-old daughter Jane, and two sons, James (11) and David (six), in the care of the Presbyterian minister and set sail for Hobart Town on the brig *Stirling Castle*. Her ailing, 56-year-old husband, James Fraser, was its captain.

On the return voyage, the *Stirling Castle* left Sydney with a crew of about 17 men; 11 or 12 new seamen had joined the ship at Sydney, where most of the former crew had deserted. On the night of 21 May 1836, while sailing along the north-eastern Australian coast, the vessel struck a coral reef. All on board took to the two lifeboats that could be saved. Both however were damaged in the attempt and badly leaking.

The survivors headed south, hoping to reach the convict settlement of Moreton Bay. Captain Fraser, Eliza, the first officer, Charles Brown, and eight crew members were in the longboat, together with as many provisions as could be salvaged. Eliza, who was heavily pregnant, gave birth in the boat some time between shipwreck and landing, to a baby who subsequently died. In the lighter pinnace were the Second Mate John Baxter (James Fraser’s cousin), the boatswain Edward Stone and the remaining five men.

---

2 Patrick White’s *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), and Sydney Nolan’s series of paintings on Eliza Fraser (1947–1978) are two examples.

For about three weeks, the two boats sailed south, stopping at islands to repair their leaking boats, and to search for water. Their own supply had been consumed in the first week. Lasting longer was a quantity of brandy and 13 gallons (60 litres) of beer. The ensuing drunkenness encouraged mutinous self-confidence in some of the crew. After one more week at sea, the castaways saw smoke, and threatened to drown Fraser if he did not ‘put in’. Although Fraser had not wanted to beach the boats unless entirely necessary, fearing that ‘the blacks would murder them all’, the boats landed.

Here the boatswain took charge of the pinnace and set sail with six of the youngest crewmen, having exchanged Baxter for the ship’s boy, John Fraser (James Fraser’s nephew). He planned to sail and row to Moreton Bay, 300 kilometres to the south. However, the men mistakenly bypassed Moreton Bay, coming ashore at the Tweed River, in present-day northern New South Wales. From this group, there was only one survivor, who was to be picked up by a passing ship at the Macleay River and taken to Sydney.

**On Fraser Island**

The longboat with the remaining castaways sailed south for another week. On about 12 June, it came to land on Great Sandy Island (now, Fraser Island), 30 kilometres south of Sandy Cape in the vicinity of the modern site of Orchid Beach. Some time after landing (Baxter cites one day; Eliza, ten days), six of the men started to walk southwards, taking with them Fraser’s shotgun, pistol, muskets, ammunition, and some of his navigational instruments. Of this group, three arrived at Moreton Bay on 8 August 1836; one drowned while attempting to swim to the mainland; and two were rescued when Eliza was ‘rescued’. Baxter was also to be found alive and well with the Aborigines. A total of eight passengers from the *Stirling Castle* was to survive the shipwreck.

It was now impossible to launch the longboat. Alongside her unarmed male compatriots, Eliza realised that she was ‘totally defenceless’. Fraser, Eliza, Brown, Baxter, and Michael Doyle, the only crewman who had remained loyal to his captain, began their own long walk south, starving, dehydrated, wet,

---


5 Details are confusing and hard to piece together. I have attempted it by incorporating Eliza and Baxter’s first written recollections. Eliza and Baxter’s accounts differ in the timing of the parting of longboat and pinnace. Baxter reported that the pinnace was ‘taken away against the Captain’s orders’, whilst the survivors were on ‘Bunkers Islands’; Eliza’s version is that it occurred after ‘a week or ten days after leaving the Island’. As Baxter took part in the exchange of boat occupants, and as this exchange would have been difficult to perform at sea, Baxter’s report seems to be the accurate one, Dwyer and Buchanan, *Rescue of Eliza Fraser*, 1986: 33, 35.

6 ‘Mrs Fraser’s Narrative’, Dwyer and Buchanan, *Rescue of Eliza Fraser*, 1986: 35.
cold, and exhausted from lack of sleep after rowing and bailing out water from the boats. Eliza had had to cope with childbirth in a lifeboat, surrounded by men, including the crew, and the death of her child, perhaps in the water at the bottom of the boat. Despite these parlous and extraordinary circumstances, the focus of her three-month ordeal in later works is centred upon the mystique of the 52 days during which she lived amongst the Ka’bi.

The glare from the sun reflecting from the white sand is intense, even in July, and blinding for a woman from a far northern island of Scotland. It was intense enough to give Eliza severe sunburn on her shoulders where, when rescued, her ‘tender skins hung in scales’. That said, the weather can also be bleak, even ‘frostily cold’, in winter. In July, strong cool to cold winds blow, whipping up sand. There were also numerous varieties of mosquitoes, sandflies and biting March flies on the island. This is the setting on which the Eliza Fraser story has flourished.

Illustration 2. Ka’bi country: the long trek south, Fraser Island.


---

‘Cruel abuse’

While lacking the embellishments of Aboriginal barbarity found in later reconstructions, Eliza’s accounts of her experiences are replete with cultural misunderstanding. Her first account, dictated in Moreton Bay on 6 September 1836, reflected her continuing debilitated state from three months’ starvation and physical ordeals. On her return to the settlement on 22 August, she was emaciated, exhausted, weather-beaten, sunburned and disorientated. Although gently bathed, tended and nursed to a slight improvement in health by the ladies at the penal settlement, Eliza referred to Aboriginal ‘cruelty’, a term that corresponded with her indisposition from physical exposure, and exertion of a type to which a town-living woman would have been unaccustomed. This is evident in her emphasis of the forms of cruelty imposed on her, mainly the imposition of heavy manual work and the lack of protection from the elements. Weakened and ill, Eliza’s lack of stamina had made her incapable of contributing to the tribal economy, and she had suffered accordingly.

Her summarised observations, recorded two weeks after her return to white society, also revealed the attitudes of a middle-class white woman, who has been asked by colonial government officials to tell her story. Her complaints about being induced to become naked, to undertake daily tasks of Indigenous life, and to find and subsist on predominantly bush tucker encapsulated the affront to her respectability, as well as reflecting the repugnance felt by civilised people towards Indigenous cultures. The use of the commandant’s clerk to be her amanuensis calls into question her feelings at revealing the humiliating details of nudity and menial work. As a nineteenth-century woman who fell amongst ‘savages’, and lost her baby, husband and clothes, she would have needed to protect her virtue on her return to her own society; an aggrieved tone may have gone some way in redeeming her status. It is also possible that the male scribe may have introduced his own choice of words and suitable tone to the report. Whether the emphases came from him or Eliza, the brief account presented her ordeal in terms of racial affront with which her audience could readily identify. In addition, her self-portrayal as a victim, powerless in protecting herself and her companions, would have helped allay any hint of impropriety that might taint her respectable womanhood.

Unlike the various ‘cruelties’ that were later to pervade Eliza’s account, her first encounter with the Ka’bi was tense but peaceful. She reported that:

---

9 Alan Atkinson has pointed out how mutual misunderstandings altered the humanitarian hope of Captain Arthur Phillip that relations with the Aborigines at Port Jackson in 1788 would be peaceful, Atkinson 2004: 145–167.
Directly we landed [on Great Sandy Island] the natives came down in crowds but were prevented at first from using any violence from the sight of our firearms. We procured some fish from them in exchange for articles of wearing apparel.\(^\text{10}\)

While acknowledging that the Aborigines provided food for the starving castaways, Eliza presupposed Aboriginal violence, which she thought had been curbed only by the sight of European weaponry. A further assumption of brutality occurred during the next meeting with Indigenous people when,

The next day we met with a numerous tribe of natives who, finding us unarmed, took everything from us with the exception of the clothes on our backs, beating us severely at the least resistance; on one of these natives we observed a piece of Female dress which led us to enquire if any white people had been there before us. To which they replied by signs to the effect as far as we understood them, that a man, woman and child had been wrecked there and massacred.\(^\text{11}\)

These presuppositions of savagery set the scene for exaggerated interpretations that were to follow. After this encounter, the stranded Europeans continued their walk along the beach ‘[hastening] day and night for two days without either food or water’. On the third day, at a place thought to be in the vicinity of the present resort of Happy Valley, 50 kilometres south of Orchid Beach, they saw another group of Aborigines. Eliza described the meeting, and subsequent events, in the following manner:

we then fell in with another tribe who stripped us perfectly naked and forced us to follow them into their camp. We were now portioned off to different masters who employed us in carrying wood, water and bark, and treated us with the greatest cruelty. With the exception of a small portion of fish which we but very seldom got, all we had to subsist upon was a kind of Fern root which we were obliged to procure ourselves in the swamps.\(^\text{12}\)

Eliza was adopted into the Ka’bi; some men went with the Batjali (Butchala) people.

The formal tone of Eliza’s report suggests a reworking, this time from colloquial speech to a version of prescribed conventional language. This again raises the possibility of the role played by the transcribing clerk in transmuting Eliza’s

---

\(^{10}\) ‘Mrs Fraser’s Narrative’, Dwyer and Buchanan, *Rescue of Eliza Fraser*, 1986: 35.

\(^{11}\) ‘Mrs Fraser’s Narrative’, Dwyer and Buchanan, *Rescue of Eliza Fraser*, 1986: 36.

\(^{12}\) ‘Mrs Fraser’s Narrative’, Dwyer and Buchanan, *Rescue of Eliza Fraser*, 1986: 36.
primary account with the Ka’bi into language chosen by the scribe. Whoever was in control of the narrative style, the essence of the account is one filled with British assumptions of class and race.

The misapplied term, ‘masters’, for example, demonstrates a class hierarchy, unconnected with Indigenous society. The apportioning to different ‘masters’ infers that the survivors were regarded as servants. This servile position is further evoked in Eliza’s interpretation that the white interlopers were starved of food, and forced to perform menial tasks. The English Master-Servant Act of 1823 had supported and formalised the rigid class distinctions that characterised the hierarchical society of nineteenth-century Britain. To place Aborigines in the position of masters is a curious overturning of the British assumption of Indigenous people as racially inferior. In doing so, it added to the perceived ‘insult’.

Twentieth-century anthropologists, Catherine and Ronald Berndt have pointed out the differences between European and Australian Indigenous societies. They identified the cooperative nature of Aboriginal society, which they found depended on the ‘organisation of human resources’. The Berndts wrote that the autonomy of each societal group relied on the individual strengths of each person. In this grouping of ‘skilled, semi-independent operators in a co-operative network’, a lack of cooperation meant that ‘survival [was] a hazardous and chancy business’. Each individual was ‘dependant on others as those others depended on them’. The Berndts also observed that, because of ‘complex arrangements of co-operation, this balancing of tasks and responsibilities and areas of authority, were too subtle for most of the European newcomers to envisage, or grasp’.  

Both Eliza’s reports, and the commentaries and reconstructions that followed, failed to take into account her own inability to reach these Indigenous social standards.

Furthermore, on Fraser Island, different contingencies applied in midwinter from those in summer. The absorption of the Europeans into different Indigenous groups suggests that the Aborigines chose to share the burden that extra members of the group would impose on the viability of their society. On the other hand, the menial work that the adopted members were expected to perform was seen as an insult to civilised Britons, who regarded themselves as superior to black races. Later writers expanded on this apparent relegation to slave conditions to malign, judge and attack the Aborigines for their brutality and ‘cruelty’. This apparent indication of their cruel intentions was embraced as another example of the savagery of black heathens.

---

The stripping naked of Eliza was a shocking concept for nineteenth-century British readers, perhaps the more so because for them clothing codes represented class respectability and racial identity. Proper dress was tied to British ideas of ‘civilisation’, as opposed to the lack of standards of savages, who presented themselves as black, naked bodies. However, John Graham, who found Eliza and brought her to Moreton Bay, had lived for six years amongst the Ka’bi and he knew of the Aborigines’ dislike of a clothed white man. As ‘Mootemu’, Graham had taken an Indigenous ‘wife’, ‘Mamba’, whose embodied spirit he claimed for Eliza in his successful attempt to return her to white society. Graham took into account Indigenous fear of clothed Europeans by ‘throwing off [his] Trousers’ before entering the Ka’bi campsite.14

Another form of cruelty, in Eliza’s report, was the paucity of food. If, however, the Europeans were unable to support the group, even when consigned the most menial, unspecialised tasks, their demand for food, especially during exigencies of midwinter, would have seemed unworthy. Eliza’s situation created a conundrum: she was too weak to perform the arduous tasks and only food and rest could have strengthened her. Imbued with the British sense of propriety, she would not have been able to appreciate what the Aborigines expected of her. Similarly, Indigenous misunderstanding, and ignorance of her past trials, meant that the Ka’bi were likely to have goaded her to perform more efficiently. For Eliza who (unlike the Ka’bi) reported her side of the story, being assigned the demeaning tasks of a servant, and the further societal insult of disrobing in compliance with the cultural group, were perceived as emotional cruelties, in addition to the physical ones. She reported that:

> During the whole of my detention among the natives I was treated with the greatest cruelty being obliged to fetch wood and water for them and constantly beaten when incapable of carrying the heavy loads they put upon me; exposed during the night to inclemency of the weather being hardly ever allowed to enter their huts even during heaviest rain.15

Eliza, however, was expected to do no more nor less than any Aboriginal woman would do: dig roots, find food and firewood, and live a Spartan existence.16

Eliza’s complaint that the staple food was a fern root, which she had to procure for herself, with only small portions of fish granted to her, opens several lines of analysis. In the first place, her middle-class European expectation of ample food supplies, readily available to curb her hunger, collides with the Aborigines’ daily food-gathering methods. The small portion of fish allowed her also complies with Indigenous food intake, which depended on vegetables

---

16 Sinclair 1990: 77.
and fruits. John Mathew, who lived on his uncle’s station in Ka’bi country for over six consecutive years up to 1872, and who made returned visits in 1884 and 1906, knew the Ka’bi well and spoke their dialect. He wrote that, when the Ka’bi ate meat, it was a ‘rather irregular meal’.17

Illustration 3. Marshy ground on the banks of the Noosa River near Fig Tree Point, where Eliza Fraser lived with the Ka’bi people.


Furthermore, it is unclear whether the food supply for Eliza was the same for the European men. In colonial texts that refer to the social treatment of Aboriginal women, British writers often refer to the women having only occasional access to meat. Eliza’s need for food and rest to recover from her debilitation after her various ordeals would have further compounded her plaintive account. Notwithstanding an attempt to analyse the reasons behind her report, the difficulty remains in explaining a text that may rely as much on the scribe as on Eliza’s rendition for the terms and attitudes expressed. Nevertheless,

the reference to the emotive word, ‘cruelty’, in Eliza’s account has become the foundation stone for the Eliza Fraser ‘industry’ in which commentators around the world, including in Britain, North America and Australia, were to reconstruct and reinterpret Eliza’s experiences within the context of the ‘savage’ treatment of a helpless white female.

Eliza’s second complaint about lack of protection from the weather also needs to be taken into context. Firstly, Ka’bi dwellings were simple and small. Mathew stated that:

The ordinary style of house was a mere bark shelter. Three or four sheets of bark were set obliquely with the lower ends in a semicircle, on the ground, and the upper ends, overlapping, gathered together and supported by light saplings. This sufficed for a family ... each [dwelling] had its own small fire in front. ... Grass was strewn on the floor for a bed. If rain threatened, a rut was dug round the back of the humpy to serve as a drain. The warriors’ spears were stuck in the ground, ready to hand, at the side of the rude shelter.¹⁸

Secondly, Eliza’s position in the tribe was ambiguous. Who should take her in? Was she expected to fall back on her own devices and make her own shelter? As the Ka’bi considered white people to be ‘ghosts from the world of Spirits’,¹⁹ her physical needs may have been unrecognised. Did she in fact need shelter? If the Ka’bi did perceive her as a living, human form, they were unlikely to have seen settlers’ dwellings, and therefore been unable to understand her needs. Perhaps, if she had complained, she might have been seen as ungrateful. She appears to have been left in an unresolved position, sometimes gaining shelter and sometimes, not.

Mathew described the Ka’bi as a lithe, fit people, with ‘elastic tread and graceful bearing’. The men were fairly short (about 166 cm) and, in proportion, the women ‘rather tall’. The people were:

light in the bone. The lower part of the limbs was usually fine. The thighs, much more rarely the calves of the legs, were well developed. The muscles of the back and breast were often prominent. In walking, the head was thrown well back.²⁰

---

¹⁸ Mathew 1910: 84.
²⁰ Mathew 1910: 73.
An ‘eight years’ resident’ of Queensland, writing in 1876, similarly stated that the Aborigines of the area were ‘a fine race of men ... finely-formed and well-developed [with] a dignity of gesture, a firmness of tread, a litheness and gracefulness of motion’. He noted that their ‘strength is very considerable’. 21

Compared with these strong, energetic people, with a physique suited to walking, Eliza, already weakened, would have proved a liability to the Ka’bi as they moved through their marshy country, gathering wood and searching for the plants on which they subsisted.

**Death of James Fraser and Charles Brown**

Eliza also offered details of the deaths of her husband and of Charles Brown, both of whom were unable to keep up with the needs of the group, and who were to die during their time amongst the Ka’bi. In her initial account, she states that:

> In consequence of [the] hardships [of lack of food and heavy work] my husband soon became so much weakened as to be totally incapable of doing the work that was required of him, and being on one occasion unable through debility to carry a large log of wood one of the natives threw a spear at him which entered his shoulder a little below the blade-bone. Of this event he never recovered and being soon after seized with a spitting of blood he gradually pined away until his death which took place eight or nine days afterwards ... When he died they dragged him away by the legs and buried him. 22

A version of Brown’s death, which Eliza initially stated she did not witness, appeared in a second, sensational account, published in the *Sydney Gazette* on 18 October 1836. This report, presented to the public after Eliza’s arrival in Sydney, relied on melodramatic ‘quoted’ dialogue and emotive language to lure the eye of the reader. In describing Brown’s death, it introduced the popular trope of cannibalism, which had been developed by Daniel Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). The newspaper account reads:

> In eight days from this brutal affair [Captain Fraser’s death] the same cannibals also killed Mr Brown, the chief officer, by holding firebrands

---

21 *The Queen of the Colonies; or, Queensland As I Know It. By An Eight Years’ Resident*, Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, London, 1876: 308, 309.

to his legs, and so burning him upwards! The cause of their destroying Mr B., was in consequence of his showing some signs of dissatisfaction in the death of his Captain.23

In later reconstructions, the descriptive ‘cannibal’ becomes synonymous with ‘Aborigine’. This version had already introduced a motive for the killing.

The report in *Bell’s Weekly Messenger* by Lieutenant Otter (who had led the rescue party) gives another interpretation. He states impassively that the sores on Brown’s legs caused him to lie in a helpless state on the ground, and he therefore ‘starved to death’.24

Recent research into the increasingly distorted representations of the ‘Eliza Fraser Saga’ has offered explanations of the Aborigines’ actions. Elaine Brown, in *Cooloola Coast*, points out that Eliza not only indicated that the Ka’bi acted kindly towards Brown in the days before he died, but also offered extra fish to Fraser on the eve of his death—an action which Eliza regarded as treachery. Brown also suggests that the application of heat to ulcers on Charles Brown’s legs and back was to treat his condition, and not to harm or torment him.25

Instead of the exaggerated reconstructions that depicted the deaths of these men to incorporate torture, torment and murder, Mathew presents a contrary picture of the Ka’bi. He contended that, ‘On the whole, I would say they were a good-natured, kind and gentle people’. Robert Darge, one of the men who chose to walk to Moreton Bay but who later stayed with Aborigines, also reported that: ‘I cannot call them a cruel people’. Nor did Hobhouse, Wheeler and Ginsberg find any evidence of brutal tendencies in their study for London University’s School of Economics and Political Science. Based on secondary sources, their statistical appraisal indicated that quarrels amongst the Ka’bi were settled ‘by a duel of endurance’. The authors did not ‘hear of homicide, and enter them only upon the more doubtful list’. John Graham also reported the Ka’bi’s timidity, and fear of the white man.26

---

23 *Sydney Gazette*, 18 October 1836: 3. This account was reproduced in *The Edinburgh Evening Courant*, 27 March 1837: 4.
24 *Bell’s Weekly Messenger*, 17 September 1837: 3.
In the light of these testimonials, a new interpretation of the behaviour of the Indigenous women, when they first met Eliza, can be mooted. Eliza’s second account of her experiences, published in the *Sydney Gazette*, October 1836, states that:

Captain Fraser suggested giving themselves up quietly to the natives, as they were entirely defenceless, and, of course, already in their power. They had scarcely time to make the suggestions when several tribes came down upon them, one of whom immediately captured Captain Fraser, another tribe took Mr Brown, and a third Mr Baxter. The natives would not allow Mrs F. to go with either [sic] of them, and left her alone upon a sandy beach the whole of the day; and the next morning a number of old women came down to the beach, with some children – they gave Mrs Fraser to understand, that she must go with them and carry one of the children upon her shoulders, which Mrs Fraser of necessity complied with. Mrs Fraser states that she travelled many miles into the bush with these women and the child, and was frequently exhausted upon the road.  

Knowledge of Indigenous culture can now explain Eliza’s treatment at the hands of the Ka’bi women. Forced to remain behind on the beach when the men were led away by Aboriginal men, she had to wait until the women came to accept her next day. She had also been prevented from any contact with either her husband or Brown for at least three weeks, up to the time of Fraser’s death. Elaine Brown’s research into Ka’bi cultural practices has led her to believe that, during menstruation and after childbirth, Indigenous women remained separated from the men. When taken in by the Aborigines on about 26 June, only about one month had elapsed since Eliza had given birth. The stripping of Eliza’s clothes would have revealed her physical state. By the time Graham reached her on 17 August, however, Eliza had joined the whole group, indicating that, about 11 weeks after childbirth, she was again socially acceptable in mixed company.

This second report also refers to the task of caring for an Aboriginal infant, which, in Eliza’s post-partum state, most probably involved breast-feeding, a detail not mentioned either by Eliza nor by the male authors of the nineteenth-century reconstructed narratives. The Ka’bi, however, sending not only their women, but also a child to Eliza, appeared to be aware of her potential usefulness to the group. Eliza’s further complaints of having salt sand thrown over her, and

---


of having her body rubbed with charcoal, grease, resin and leaves are processes now known to be forms of cleansing, and of the Aborigines’ means of protecting themselves from the elements.  

Reconstructing the story

The marketability of such a sensational story plunged Eliza into early deception as she sought to exaggerate her tale for financial gain. In Sydney she had already received £400 from a sympathetic and curious public, concerned about her welfare. On 3 February 1837, she married another ship captain Alexander John Greene and, after her return to Britain on his ship Mediterranean Packet, she and her husband capitalised on the publicity surrounding Eliza as a survivor of an extraordinary experience.

Falsely pleading a demoralised state of widowhood, destitution and cruel abuse, Eliza was assisted by the Lord Mayor of London, who organised a subscription campaign that resulted in the donation of £50 for Eliza, and £482 for her surviving children. Greene has been suspected as the instigator of further commercial manipulation by possibly parading Eliza as an attraction, along with an embellished story, for 6d a look in London streets. The sensational message promoted and extended in each re-telling was of the cruelty of the barbaric savages and the ‘miraculous’ salvation of the civilised white woman.

Further distorted accounts quickly followed, feeding the folklore of ‘savage’ and ‘cruel’ Aborigines. By 1840, a plethora of pamphlets, chapbooks, broadsheets and monographs had been published on the theme of Eliza Fraser. In the first children’s book to be published in Australia, A Mother’s Offering to her Children (1841), the author Charlotte Barton includes the story of Eliza Fraser’s plight, in which Aboriginal ‘monsters’ capture her and treat her with ‘wanton barbarities’.

One pamphlet, designed for the North American market, was Narrative of the Capture, Sufferings, and Miraculous Escape of Mrs Eliza Fraser, published in

---

29 Sydney Gazette, 1 February 1838: 2; also recorded in Dwyer and Buchanan, Rescue of Eliza Fraser, 1986: 43–44; Brown 2000: 107.
30 In about 1837, Henry Russell saw a woman in a London street, purporting to be Eliza, Henry Stuart Russell, The Genesis of Queensland, Vintage Books, Toowoomba, 1989 [1888]: 250. It may, however, have been one of the many ‘Eliza’ impostors who capitalised on her story.
New York, in 1837. This version included an account, typically in the first person and reputedly submitted by Eliza in Liverpool, England, on 2 July 1837. According to Kay Schaffer, who has extensively analysed and assessed the various versions of Eliza’s story, this North American text joins the classic American captivity genre in which the myth involved European colonists versus the Indians.

In a society strongly influenced by Christian evangelism, these discourses were presented as Puritan tales of religious deliverance, replete with the literary devices of melodrama, and the narrative elements of the sentimental novel and the psychological thriller. They followed early Puritan narratives in which the wilderness, inhabited by savage natives, was typically portrayed as the domain of sin, which tested the faith of its God-fearing victims. The recurrent miraculous escape becomes analogous with redemptive salvation. Intrinsic to the tales was the secular propaganda tract of good, white hero versus the treacherous, black native.

The 1837 pamphlet is full of North American terms and illustrations. Aborigines wear full togas or skirts, ankle-high moccasins and feathered headdresses. Their weapons are bows and arrows or the tomahawks of American Indians. They live in conical wigwams, surrounded by northern hemisphere trees. Indigenous women are called ‘squaws’ and their society has a chief—a societal structure characteristic of American Indians, but not known as a usual part of Australian Aboriginal culture. The idea of miscegenation is introduced, providing a touch of intrigue and titillation, as James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) had done. An honour duel adds heroic tension to the plot.

Furthermore, the text implies a forced capture and imprisonment. This argues directly against Eliza’s statement in the *Sydney Gazette* in October 1836 that, when the Aborigines first approached the survivors on the beach, Captain Fraser ‘suggested giving themselves up quietly to the natives, as they were entirely defenceless’. The fictitious nature of this version can be seen in the contradiction within the pamphlet, where Eliza ‘stated’ that, ‘my husband suggested the propriety of our quietly surrendering ourselves prisoners to them, as we possessed not a single weapon with which to defend ourselves’.

Throughout the American text, Eliza is attributed with the faith that God would rescue her from brutal captivity. She makes daily prayerful supplication for

---

deliverance and serves as a testimony to God’s miraculous intervention on behalf of the pious.\textsuperscript{36} This version of events extended the derogation of Australian Aborigines to North American readers.

### John Curtis’ version

The next year, in 1838, the London newspaperman and court reporter John Curtis wrote the official English account of Eliza Fraser’s ‘ordeal’, \textit{Shipwreck of the Stirling Castle containing A Faithful Narrative of the Dreadful Sufferings of the Crew, and the Cruel Murder of Captain Fraser by the Savages. Also, The Horrible Barbarity of the Cannibals Inflicted upon The Captain’s Widow, Whose Unparalleled Sufferings are Stated by Herself, and Corroborated by the Other Survivors}. Curtis had been commissioned to write the account as a defence and apology for Eliza, and as a justification of her cause, after her deception resulted in considerable charitable contributions being made to her. Its political aim was to save from embarrassment the Lord Mayor of London, who had opened the subscription campaign. Although Curtis attended the inquiry which investigated Eliza’s claims of destitution, and from which he gained first-hand information from Eliza, Baxter and Darge, his written version of events was dependent on the message he aimed to transmit. Out of Eliza’s reports, and Baxter and Darge’s testimonials, this armchair theorist created a 270-page narrative.

In his representation of Aborigines, Curtis relied heavily on the established literature that depicted their primitive behaviour and ‘fiendish cruelty’. Another layer to his work, however, was to convey a moral lesson to civilised Englishmen and, further, to encourage missionary work among the pagan Aborigines. His book was published one year after the founding of the British and Foreign Aboriginal Protection Society, and coincided with the establishment of the Aboriginal Protection Society in Sydney. Within the same volume is found the \textit{Narrative of the Melancholy Wreck of the Charles Eaton}, the publication of which had been made possible by the ‘kindness of the highly-respected Secretary of the London Missionary Society’. His stated confident aim was ‘to render the history subservient to the cause of morality, and we trust that we have performed our promise.’\textsuperscript{37}

Curtis used Biblical quotations to gear his evangelical message. Quoting incongruent references from the Old Testament, Curtis extrapolated that Aboriginal men are ‘blood-thirsty and wicked ... whose tender mercies are

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{36} Narrative of the Capture, 1837: 22, 19.
\end{flushleft}
In the Eye of the Beholder
cruelty, and whose habitations are polluted with blood’. He wrote that they are ‘demons in human form [who] employed every method which they could devise, to torture and annoy their miserable captives’. Indigenous women were ‘heartless brutes’ with ‘fierce, shrill yells’. He quoted Eliza as asserting that Aborigines ‘all delight in cruelty’. His religious tone in the text is emphasised by exhortations and supplications to God from the suffering protagonists.

Curtis’s contribution to the Eliza Fraser saga was his production of an exaggerated sham. Once again, and not for the last time, Indigenous Australians were the victims of a very bad press.

---

38 Curtis 1838: 82–83; Proverbs XII, 10: ‘A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast: but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel’; Lamentations IV, 14: ‘They have wandered as blind men in the streets, they have polluted themselves with blood, so that men could not touch their garments’, Old Testament, King James version.

39 Curtis 1838: 78, 143, 156.