3. Literary Excesses—Eliza Davies: Imagination and Fabrication

‘Oh what a tangled web we weave, When first we practise to deceive!’

Illustration 4. Eliza Davies.

Source: Frontispiece, Mrs Eliza Davies, The Story of an Earnest Life: A Woman’s Adventures in Australia and in Two Voyages Around the World, Central Book Concern, Cincinnati, 1881.

1 Sir Walter Scott, Marmion, Canto VI, 17.
Map 3. Eliza Davies. South central South Australia in the vicinity of Gulf St Vincent and the lower course of the Murray River showing the route of the Sturt expedition in 1839.

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

Eliza Davies (formerly Arbuckle) was well educated, well read and well travelled. All these factors influenced the way she wrote about Indigenous Australians in her 570-page autobiography, *The Story of an Earnest Life: A Woman’s Adventures in Australia and in Two Voyages Around the World*.² Eliza met Aborigines briefly when, in 1839, aged 18 years, she joined the explorer Charles Sturt and the South Australian governor, George Gawler, for a five weeks’ tour of the lower reaches of the Murray River. At the time, she was employed by Sturt as a servant, or second nursemaid. Keen to promote inland settlement by allaying fears that

travel into the interior was unsafe for women, Sturt included his wife, Charlotte, in the group, and Gawler, his 15-year-old daughter Julia—whose participation is thought to have been the reason for the inclusion of the similarly-aged ‘servant maid’, Eliza Arbuckle.\(^3\)

Forty years after this adventure and by then living in the United States of America, Davies incorporated her long ago experience in a faraway country into her extensive life story. By the end of her life, she had established and taught in schools in two Australian colonies and in America. She had circumnavigated the globe twice—a feat she proudly proclaimed in the title of her book—lived in New South Wales on four different occasions, in South Australia three times and the United States, twice, where she published her book, and where in Lexington on 27 March 1888, she died. Her version of Australian Aborigines was written for North American readers, having absorbed over the years the racial views and interpretations of others. In presenting her tale she experimented with a variety of styles and narrative forms, involving dramatic shifts in narrative focus.

‘A wild man is a miserable animal’

A voracious reader, Eliza had read in those intervening years the current scientific works on racial theory that were to influence her depiction of Aborigines. Among these were Charles Darwin’s *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries Visited During the Voyage of H.M.S. “Beagle” Round the World*, first published in 1839, and Josiah Nott and George Gliddon, *Types of Mankind: or, Ethnological Researches, Based Upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races* (1857).

In his diary, kept while on board the *Beagle* from 1831 to 1836, Darwin had recorded that ‘A wild man is a miserable animal’. He described the people of Tierra del Fuego as ‘untamed’ savages, who were ‘wretched looking beings’ with no proper clothing, no fit language and no decent homes, writing that:

> I would not have believed how entire the difference between savage & civilized man is. – It is greater than between a wild & domesticated animal ... I believe if the world was searched, no lower grade of man could be found.\(^4\)

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3 Davies underlined this idea with her statement that: ‘Capitalists would not fear the savages when ladies had traversed the country in safety’, Davies, *The Story of an Earnest Life*, 1881: 121.

During a visit to Sydney in January 1836, Darwin met some Aborigines in the Blue Mountains on his way to Bathurst. In about 1867, Davies visited the Blue Mountains, having been inspired by Darwin’s description of the ‘Weatherboard Falls’. Darwin wrote of the Aborigines that:

They were all partly clothed, and several could speak a little English: their countenances were good-humoured and pleasant, and they appeared far from being such utterly degraded beings as they have usually been represented. In their own arts they are admirable. A cap being fixed at thirty yards distance, they transfixed it with a spear, delivered by a throwing-stick with the rapidity of an arrow from the bow of a practised archer. In tracking animals or men they show most wonderful sagacity; and I heard of several of their remarks which manifested considerable acuteness.

This was faint praise, for Darwin concluded that, ‘On the whole they appear to me to stand some few degrees higher in the scale of civilization than the Fuegians’.  

Nott and Gliddon’s *Types of Mankind* (which Davies had read after her return to the United States in 1874) promoted the idea that anatomy and physiognomy were important factors in assessing different racial groups. These elements entered Davies’ descriptions of Aborigines. One paper by Dr Samuel Morton was entitled ‘On the Size of the Brain in Various Races and Families of Man’. Another, ‘On the Origin of the Human Species’, assessed the influence of ‘climate, locality, civilization, and other physical and moral agents, acting through long periods of time’. Diagrams and sketches of a Roman head of Apollo, a ‘Negro’ and a ‘Young Chimpanzee’, placed adjacent to each other, graphically compared skull shapes, particularly of jaw and forehead. The inclusion of the chimpanzee skull plunged the comparison into the realm of hierarchical evolutionary theory. Hints of the influence of these works appear in Davies’ narrative.

Davies also replicated in her text the racial clichés of Joseph Banks. Like Banks, she extended the connection between Aborigines and beasts when she depicted Ngarrindjeri and Meru people as animal-like people with the physical skills

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of agility and speed in running. Edward Long’s descriptions of Negroes, the Hottentots of southern Africa and orang-outangs (the newly discovered ‘wild man’ or ‘missing link’) had added to current perceptions.\(^7\)

The ideas of Australian commentators also entered her prose. In *The Aborigines of Australia*, Roderick Flanagan depicts Aborigines as ‘degenerate’, cannibalistic and low in the human scale of existence, without a system of government or religion understandable by nineteenth-century British codes. Flanagan includes a description of an Indigenous ‘future wife’ being ‘carried off by her admirer by main force’,\(^8\) an episode that Davies also incorporated in her story.

Two nineteenth-century crazes may have skewed Davies’ interpretation of Indigenous people. The first was the popular ‘science’ of phrenology, founded by the German, F J Gall, and introduced to English-speaking readers by George Combe in *Elements of Phrenology* (1824) and *The Constitution of Men* (1828). Phrenology, as seen in Nott and Gliddon’s *Types of Mankind*, relied on the theory that specific parts of the brain were responsible for particular moral and intellectual characteristics; and the shape of a person’s skull was assumed to be associated with certain racial attributes. It was often invoked to cast Aborigines into an inferior social and racial position. Australian commentator J O Balfour had decreed that Aborigines’ heads were ‘all much larger behind than in front [and] are certainly not such as a phrenologist would admire’. He loathed their ‘low ... almost ... the no forehead ... the shaggy eyebrows protruding over and almost hiding the small keen eyes – the flabby nose ... the thick lips and the snow-like teeth, common to cannibals’. Even Godfrey Mundy, more sympathetic towards Aborigines than Balfour, felt that the ‘Australian cranium is exceedingly ill-shaped – the animal bumps largely preponderating over the intellectual’.\(^9\)

The travelling circuses of American showman and entrepreneur Phineas Taylor Barnum were also hugely popular in the nineteenth century. As proprietor of the American Museum of Natural History in New York from 1841, P T Barnum...
presented to the public ‘living curiosities’, including a ‘mermaid’. Capitalising on the current curiosity about native peoples, he also exhibited ‘freaks of nature’ from around the world. Within this display mentality, Indigenous people were viewed, like the eighteenth-century Negro, as fascinating (so-called) ‘missing links’. The height of Barnum’s success coincided with the time that Davies was living in the United States.10

‘A sad and lonely ... childhood’

With a large reading repertoire, Davies was particularly devoted to nineteenth-century melodramatic romantic literature. This was characterised by pathetic accidents or occurrences, reliance on cliché, and shallow and exaggerated emotion from which the author extorted more feeling than a situation warranted. Popular themes were unrequited love, true love involving a disharmony of race or class, conflict between ideals and circumstances, and forced captivity and providential escape from the clutches of unsuitable suitors, evil doers (or savage heathens). Sympathetically drawn women were often the heroines. Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre (1847), which included enforced captivity, and Emily Bronte’s Wuthering Heights (1847)11 are well-known examples.

Even from the first pages of Eliza’s story, melodrama intrudes. Depicting herself as a somewhat lost soul (although not later, after she found the Lord), she was born Eliza Arbuckle at Paisley, a town 11 kilometres west of Glasgow, Scotland, and baptised on 11 February 1821 in the parish of Renfrew. After her father’s death and her mother’s precipitate remarriage, Eliza was sent to school at an early age. Feeling unloved and rejected by her mother, she described her childhood as ‘sad and lonely’. Her happiest days were spent on visits to the home of her nanny, Maggie Campbell, in the mountains of the Western Highlands. The sights and sounds of the Scottish Highlands and the myths and legends told to her by Maggie enriched her interest in Scottish history, and English and Scottish literature. After her nanny’s death, feeling ‘as much alone in my thoughts as was Robinson Crusoe on his island’, she turned to reading for comfort. Soon ‘charmed’ by romantic novels, particularly those of Sir Walter Scott, she wrote that ‘every one of Scott’s heroines I admired and tried to imitate’.12

In her autobiography, Davies adopted the literary style of the romantic novels that she so admired. Charles Dickens’ Oliver Twist (1838), Nicholas Nickleby (1839) and The Old Curiosity Shop (1841) are examples of early nineteenth-century novels that contain sentimentality or excessive emotionalism, with a heightened

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12 Davies, Story of an Earnest Life, 1881: 50, 27.
sensibility to human suffering. In order to find a market, writers conformed to the rigid, moral expectation of public taste, ruled by evangelicalism. To instruct, while offering ‘wholesome’ and religiously pure topics, therefore remained strict literary requirements.

### Christian Evangelism

The other great influence in Eliza Davies’ life was her religion. It underlay all parts of her narrative and geared her life’s choices and direction. During her unhappy childhood she had turned for comfort ‘from [her] earthly to [her] heavenly parent’. A member of the Scottish Baptist Church in Paisley, Eliza decided to emigrate with a family from her church. She wished to escape her mother, who planned to marry her to a much older man. Aged 17, she left Greenock for New South Wales on 24 August 1838. The strength of her Christian commitment from this early age is seen in her elected choice of ‘religion’. Out of the 253 mainly Protestant passengers on board the barque, Portland, which sailed into Port Jackson in December 1838, Eliza was the only person who chose ‘Dissent’ as her religion.

After the exploratory expedition in South Australia, Charlotte Sturt had determined, against Eliza’s will, that in 1840 she marry William Davies, a man who turned out to be violent and abusive. Eliza left him in 1842 and returned to Sydney. In 1847 she went back to Scotland with the family that employed her, expecting to stay for two years. It was there, however, that her vocation as a devout member of the Church of Christ was established and her life’s direction forever changed.

From the pulpit of her Baptist church in Paisley in August 1847, Davies heard the missionary message of the Reverend Alexander Campbell, who was visiting from the United States. A former Scot, in 1826 Campbell had preached his new Bible-based doctrine to the congregation of the Cincinnati Sycamore Street Baptist Church. In response, nearly the entire new and flourishing congregation

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14 Dissenters, who included Wesleyan Methodists, some Presbyterians, the Independents, Congregationalists, Baptists and Quakers were nonconforming Christians who sought their own direct relationship with God, outside and at variance with the established tenets of the accepted state religion of the Church of England. They were particularly strict in their practices and in their moralising attitudes, Gunson 1978: ix; Young 1953: 4, 8; Bolt 1971: 209; *Sydney Herald*, 24 December 1838: 2–3; *Index to Passengers to Sydney 1838–1842*, Habart Samuel – Justus John, Archives Authority of New South Wales, AO Reel 4; *Immigration Agents’ Immigration Lists, April 1838–November 1841: Assisted Immigration*, NLA mfm N229, Archives Authority of NSW, Reel No. 2134.
15 Copy of certificate of marriage to William Davies on 17 April 1840, in Ward 1994: 43.
joined with Campbell to form the ‘Disciple’ society (later the Church of Christ).  

In 1847, Davies was similarly moved. Although planning to remain in Scotland for two years, inspired and encouraged by Campbell she sailed for America after only three months, arriving in the United States in November 1847.

Living first with the Campbell family in Bethany, West Virginia, Davies then worked until 1853 as associate principal and assistant matron at the Kentucky Female Orphan School in Midway. She afterwards privately taught the children of the Kentucky evangelist, John Gano. In 1857, at the request of her half-sister, who lived in Sydney, she sailed again for New South Wales. Her proselytising mission, strengthened and focused during ten years in the United States, now went hand-in-hand with her vocation as a teacher.

Although originally hoping to open an orphans’ school along similar lines to the Female Orphan School in Kentucky, Davies travelled 120 kilometres south of Sydney to Kiama where, in 1858, she established a school at Mount Pleasant for the children of workers on the pastoral property, ‘Omega Retreat’. Davies coined this school ‘Hurricane Hill’, because of the winds, rains and storms that beset the wooden slab schoolhouse in 1860. Her main mission in Kiama had been to introduce to the residents of Kiama the American revised version of the Bible’s New Testament.

In 1861, Davies sailed for South Australia, apparently seeking out Christian companionship in Adelaide, where a Church of Christ community had developed around New Zealand immigrant, Thomas Magarey. Alarmed to hear that her husband was still alive (although having bigamously remarried), she successfully filed for divorce, then fled back to what she described as ‘the crime-stained’ colony of New South Wales. Although craving the camaraderie of her American Christian friends, Davies’ return to Kentucky had been prevented by the commencement of hostilities in the American Civil War of 1861 to 1865.

Davies again turned to teaching, establishing the Bethany School in the undeveloped bush of North Sydney. The site is now Willoughby Public School. In 1862 North Sydney was a ‘destitute and wicked’ place, where the ‘people are so wicked, and the young people perishing for instruction, and plenty of wild children there’. Davies described the adults as ‘low, ignorant,
vicious and drunken, living by stealing. They were liars and swearers; the fear of God was not before their eyes, nor did they regard the laws of man’. Davies taught the children of this rough, criminal class of ‘reprobates’ from June 1862 to December 1869, introducing to them ‘hymn singing, Bible reading and prayer meetings’. Bethany National School became a public school on 1 January 1867 after the passing of the Public Schools Act, 1866 (NSW), when William Wilkins was secretary of the Board of National Education and Henry Parkes was president of the New South Wales Council of Education.20

Sailing once more for Adelaide, Davies’ final teaching position was at the Bowden Public School in the suburb of Hindmarsh, where she taught poor children of all denominations.21 The philanthropist, George Fife Angas, who is said to have contributed £10,000 a year to religious and educational causes during his last years,22 converted a granary into a schoolhouse and provided a house for her use on the site of a former flour mill, owned by Thomas Magarey, who also provided financial support. In December 1872, the South Australian Advertiser reported that the ‘behaviour of the scholars, and their attainments in general knowledge reflected great credit upon Mrs Davies, the Superintendent of the school’.23 Davies then returned briefly to New South Wales before sailing for the United States on 9 May 1874.

Story of an Earnest Life was published in Cincinnati, a city that was a centre for the Churches of Christ. In 1881 it boasted 210 churches of various denominations, for a population of 255,000.24 Davies’ story fitted the evangelical genre that flourished at the time. Among the Central Book Concern’s other evangelical works were Joseph Martin’s The Voice of the Seven Thunders: Or Lectures on the Apocalypse (1870) and T S Arthur’s fictional evangelical book, Woman to the Rescue: A Story of the New Crusade (1874).

The Ngarrindjeri and Meru

The day that Davies arrived at Sydney on board the Portland on 18 December 1838 was significant in Australian history. Seven white men—Davies nominates the number as eight—were hanged for their part in killing 28 Aboriginal men, women and children in the Myall Creek massacre. By decrying the murders,
Davies appears to sympathise with the Aborigines, unlike many New South Wales pastoralists, who penned their angry reactions over several months in the pages of the Sydney Herald. Davies’ first-hand account reads:

A famous day in the annals of crime was this day, in which we anchored in Port Jackson. A fearful tragedy was being enacted in the city about the time we were throwing out our anchor. Eight young men were thrust out of this world into eternity from the gallows. These men had made a quarrel with the blacks at Miall [sic] Creek, and had killed twenty-eight of them; for which barbarous crime they did not long escape the fearful doom that befell them. They hung all day for their own crimes, and as a warning for others to beware of committing such outrages.25

Her representation of Aborigines on her inland trip takes a different approach. In the 48 pages that record her travels with Charles Sturt and Governor Gawler from 22 November to 28 December 1839 and her experiences with the Ngarrindjeri and the Meru people, Davies adopts a narrative style laced with racial clichés and the literary devices of a melodrama. She sets the scene from the first words of her account, informing her readers that:

Captain Sturt told me that I was to take up my quarters at Government House until [the exploratory group] returned. At this arrangement I demurred.

“What! do you object to going to Government House?” I was asked.

“No,” I said; “but I would much rather go with you.”

“What! go among the savages and be killed and eaten by them? You would be a tempting little morsel for them.”

This was rather startling to be sure; but then I said:

“Captain Sturt, if you take me I know that you will take care of me, and not let them kill or eat me. I have faith in your protecting care, and I have no personal fear.”

“Well said, brave little girl; you shall go, as you are so courageous.”26

The expeditionary group comprised 20 to 30 people and included the colonial marine surveyor in the Department of the Surveyor General, Gawler’s assistant—private secretary, the superintendent of police, aides to Gawler, and Henry Guy Bryan, a house guest of the Gawler family. Inland from the Great Bend of


the Murray River (near the present town of Morgan), Bryan was to disappear without trace, while exploring the country with about five other men from the group.

The tourists first travelled overland from Adelaide to Currency Creek, which enters Lake Alexandrina, south-east of Adelaide. Governor Gawler, Charlotte Sturt, Julia Gawler and Davies went aboard one of the three whaleboats and entered the lake via the Goolwa Channel, in preparation for proceeding up the Murray. Despite her lowly position within vice-regal company, Davies proclaimed in her autobiography that she was the first white woman on the Murray River, because she was ‘the width of myself nearer to the bows of the boat’ than Mrs Sturt or Miss Gawler. Amid episodes that seem to be pure fiction, this configuration may be verified.27

Illustration 5. Eliza Davies in boat, Ngarrindjeri family left foreground.

Source: John Michael Skipper, ‘Extreme point at the junction of the Murray with Lake Alexandrina. Victoria the Lake in the distance. Expedition going up the River, December 1839’, PRG 50/34/6, Papers of Lieutenant-Colonel George Gawler, State Library of South Australia. With permission of Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority.

27 Charlotte Sturt and Julia Gawler ‘sat with their backs to the stern of the boat’; Gawler and Davies ‘sat opposite to each other at the side of it’, Davies, Story of an Earnest Life, 1881: 128. The configuration (although a little different) of the three women in the watercolour, ‘Extreme point at the junction of the Murray with Lake Alexandrina. Victoria the Lake in the distance. Expedition going up the River, December 1839’, (see illustration) may support Davies’ claim. The work is also reproduced in Charles Sturt, Mount Bryan Expedition 1839, Sullivan’s Cove, Adelaide, 1982, frontispiece.
Going along with them were two Aboriginal men, the Raminyeri (Ra:Mindjeri) man ‘Encounter Bay Bob’, and Tom, who would act as the colonists’ interpreters. Tom was a Porta’ulun man from Pomanda Point, to the north of Lake Alexandrina. Bob was the colonists’ main interpreter; Tom joined the group to act as interpreter between Bob and the northern clans of the Jarildekald (Jeraldkeld), the Ngaralta, the Nganguruku and the Ngaiawang, the latter two being small Meru clans. The language groups of the Jarildekald, Ngaralta, Porta’ulun and Warki were collectively known as the Narrinyeri (Ngarrindjeri).28

According to Davies, the Ngarrindjeri men had gathered to offer ceremonial welcome to the exploratory group onto their land. She wrote that, when she first saw the large group, she was filled with ‘terror and horror’ at the sight of ‘painted savages, armed with spears, waddies and towerangs’. Davies shares with the reader that she ‘screamed and cowered down in the boat’. Hinting already at providential escape, she is ‘saved’ by two ‘young gentlemen’, who take her hands with the words, ‘Come, we will guard you’. When she landed,

the yell that escaped from the throats of these nude savages was so terrific that my flying feet hardly ... touched the ground till I reached Captain Sturt’s side. The savages were still yelling and beating on their towerangs with waddies. I had never seen savages, and their yells frightened me.

Sturt is said to have consoled her with the words,

Eliza, you have nothing to fear from these savages, they will not hurt you; they have given you a right royal welcome. You are the first white creature with petticoats they ever saw.29

Sturt and George and Julia Gawler kept accounts of their experiences—reports against which Davies’ exaggerated prose can be assessed. Julia Gawler kept to factual points, while Sturt and Gawler cast an optimistic gaze over the Aborigines, perhaps in the hope of encouraging inland settlement. Sturt recorded that the Ngarrindjeri welcomed Encounter Bay Bob ‘in the most cordial manner’ and wrote of them that:

They were fine men all of them, with a good and almost European expression of countenance. They were extremely curious and unintentionally though perseveringly troublesome for some time. On the whole, however, they behaved extremely well.30

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29 Davies, Story of an Earnest Life, 1881: 129. A towerang was a small bark shield.
30 ‘Captain Sturt’s Report’, in Sturt 1982: 21. Sturt had reason to think kindly of the Indigenous people. In December 1828, Aborigines had assisted his progress along the Macquarie River in New South Wales. In 1830, he wrote of his ‘friendly relations’ with the Aborigines that had acted as emissaries between one tribal group and the next to smooth his passage along the Murray River, Flannery 1998: 10; Mrs Napier George Sturt, Life
Julia Gawler, whom Davies presents as having landed before the arrival of the large Indigenous group, merely noted in her diary: ‘Saw some natives, and one of the men started a kangaroo, but it hopped off, and we saw no more of it’.  

Governor Gawler, while acknowledging the part played by white overlanders in inciting racial conflict, concluded that the ‘natives are neither a ferocious nor a warlike race. Europeans, reasonably armed, cool and cautious, have little to fear from the worst of them in the worst situations’. He expressed a high opinion of the Indigenous people he met, recording that they were:

lively, intelligent, good-tempered people – full of the general native sense of propriety – doubtful of the disposition of Europeans, of the extent of the powers of their warlike weapons, and consequently often timid.  

They behaved ill on one occasion only, and the cause of their misconduct was injudicious treatment on our part. Some of them exhibiting great curiosity and intelligence were admitted freely among the luggage and allowed to handle different articles. The consequence was, that in the evening they were lurking about the camp, and a coat and some other trifling things disappeared. After this event the principle was acted on of not throwing temptation in their way or of admitting them to undue familiarity, and no men could have behaved better or have appeared more grateful for the presents they received.

Davies expounded on the Aborigines’ curiosity, mentioned by Sturt and Gawler. While depicting the Ngarrindjeri as ‘wild men of the woods’ and the ‘fiercest savages that roamed the forests’—images that bespoke her American readership—she nevertheless also described the men as seated on the ground, watching with interest as Sturt showed them his watch, a box of matches and the use of the European fishing line and hook.

Davies, however, spent many more words in drawing a picture of an Aborigine (the ‘chief’ of the tribe) with a ‘demon-like ferocious countenance’. In her description, phrenology, racial clichés and melodrama converge. She wrote that:

On a rock above me sat, in solitary grandeur, a grim savage, with a shirt on and a white cockatoo’s feather in his hair. He sat aloof, alike from his own tribe and the white invaders, watching with scowling brow and

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malignant eye their every act ... He had coarse, frizzy black hair, not wool, standing away from his head like a sombrero or mop; his forehead was so low that his hair and eyebrows nearly met, his head receded from front to back, so that his head behind was enormous in size; his eyes were large, black, deep-set, glittering and fierce, and overhung by beetling, shaggy brows; his nose large and flat; his mouth huge, with gleaming teeth; his lips thick and hanging ... he was a picture of ugliness that fascinated me, but when he moved his great glittering orbs from one side to the other ... and moved his thick lips, I felt sick, as if he were about to tear me to pieces and eat me.

She assumed the man's moral depravity with the rhetorical question: ‘Who knows what his dark mind was cogitating, when he sat alone in his ugliness on the rock?’.

‘Spell-bound with horror ... at the disgusting scene’

Like many other visitors to the Australian colonies, Davies incorporated a description of a corroboree into her writing. Her account combines factual details with subjective expressions of disgust and horror.

Without understanding the importance of reciprocity in Aboriginal life, Davies nevertheless understood and acknowledged the concept. She wrote that:

No doubt music hath charms to soothe the savage. One of our party had a flute, and after frightening these fierce denizens of the woods, excited their curiosity, and finally quieted and subdued their excitement, and they were seemingly charmed listeners to the dulcet strains.

The savages had been well entertained by the whites, and they returned the civility by showing us their war-dance.

However, ignorant of Indigenous ceremony, Davies assumed that ‘war’ was the essence of the entertainment. She adopted corresponding language and tone to describe what she saw as a dance of savages:

There were two parties of savages, one painted white, the other red. They were nude, with long white or red stripes down their arms and legs and across their ribs: their faces and heads painted with white and red
ochre, were hideous. Spears, waddies and towerangs were their weapons (a waddy is a knotted club about twenty-four inches long; a towerang is a small bark shield). In this terrific garb the men were arranged on either side of the fires. One of each party advanced, a red one and a white one, toward each other, struck waddies, sang and gesticulated, and kept time to the music made on the skins. Another pair advanced, struck and crossed spears, then struck the towerangs. Another pair advanced and another, till all had entered the lists. Then was pandemonium let loose; nothing could be more horrible. The glittering eyes rolled around, showing little but the whites; their huge mouths were wide open, and their teeth were gleaming, and their big red tongues were hanging out. Their disgusting, hideous gestures; their skeleton-like bodies leaping over and around the fires with their terrific yells, are things never to be forgotten ... When they had finished their horrible fiendish dance, they marched up with the measured tramp of the warrior.\footnote{Davies, \textit{Story of an Earnest Life}, 1881: 131–132.}

Davies provided stereotypical descriptions common to the accounts of other observers in other places. Harriet (Mrs Dominic) Daly and Margaret Elizabeth Leigh Child-Villiers Jersey (The Dowager Countess of Jersey) both used the clichés of wildness and savagery. Daly, who was a short-term resident of Palmerston (Darwin) in the early 1870s, described a ‘weird’ scene resembling an ‘uneearthly demoniacal orgie’ and feathered headdresses of ‘true barbaric fashion’. The Countess of Jersey, who visited Port Darwin in 1893, depicted a ‘scene [which] might have come out of the infernal regions or of a Witches’ Walpurgis Night’.\footnote{Mrs Dominic Daly, \textit{Digging, Squatting and Pioneering Life in the Northern Territory of South Australia}, Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, London, 1887: 71–72; Margaret Elizabeth Leigh Child-Villiers Jersey (The Dowager Countess of Jersey), \textit{Fifty-one Years of Victorian Life}, John Murray, London, 1922: 326.}

The latter part of Davies’ account suggests plagiarism in the replication of the language and tone used in Thomas Mitchell’s description of a corroboree, observed, like Davies, during the 1830s. Mitchell, who explored the Murray and Darling Rivers in 1835 and 1836, recorded Aborigines’, hideous crouching postures, measured gestures, and low jumps, all to the tune of a wild song, with the fiendish glare of their countenances, at all times black, but now all eyes and teeth, seemed a fitter spectacle for Pandemonium ...\footnote{Thomas Livingston Mitchell, \textit{Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia: with Descriptions of the Recently Explored Region of Australia Felix and of the Present Colony of New South Wales}, Volume 1, Second edition, T & W Boone, London, 1839: 247–248, in Ryan, S 1996: 141.}
True to the demands of a melodrama, Davies expressed her feelings of being ‘spell-bound with horror [as she looked] at the disgusting scene’.  

Davies nominated the scene of the corroboree to introduce the popular nineteenth-century literary theme of miscegenation. The idea of a sexual relationship between a white woman and a black man had previously become part of the American version of Eliza Fraser’s story. The popular nineteenth-century American novelist James Fenimore Cooper had developed the topic in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). Davies claimed that, during her travels on three continents, she received many proposals of ‘marriage’, three of them during the course of the inland tour. On the dark night of the corroboree, however, with the assembled groups—both black and white—gathered closely together, Davies ‘felt something grip [her] foot with a tight grasp [whereby she] screamed and staggered back’. She saw a ‘hideous’, ‘wriggling animal’ scurrying away and realised that it was the black interpreter, Tom. Was he perhaps checking if Eliza had legs under her petticoats?

Davies extended this episode, perhaps to bring in her representation of Indigenous courtship practices. She described how, on the day after the corroboree, Tom stealthily, and with waddy in hand, crept towards the unsuspecting Davies, bent on hitting her on the head and abducting her as his ‘lubra’. This depicted brush with death was again providentially circumvented when Governor Gawler intervened to warn her.

Feeding the category confusion in current racial debates, expressed by Darwin and Banks, and manipulated by Barnum, as to whether Indigenous people belonged to the supposed lowest form of humans or were at the highest level of apes, Davies included animalistic terms when she described Aborigines. In another of her idiosyncratic episodes, not mentioned by Julia, Sturt or Gawler, she noted that some Aboriginal women were,

uncouth looking creatures. They were hidden away in a nook in one of the cliffs, jabbering at a great rate, just like monkeys, which they very much resembled. They were hideously disgusting. We were afraid of them at first, but they did not offer to hurt us. I patted one of the monkey-like babies, and gained the favour of the mother right away. She grinned, and went through some antics, which were not the most graceful.

Davies referred to the associated ideas of physiognomy and racial hierarchy to compare the physical attributes of Tom (‘the ugliest savage of the tribe save its

chief, who was monstrous’\textsuperscript{42}) and Henry Bryan. Bryan’s idealised image, as fated victim of the ‘wilderness’, shines in contrast to the depiction of treacherous savagery inherent in Tom’s black and ugly body:

Here were two men between whom a greater contrast could hardly be presented. In their physical appearance they were as distant as the poles, both had black hair, black eyes and white teeth. Tom with beetling brows, deep-set, restless, crafty eyes, his black hair red with ochre, and teeth a great mouthful; and though he donned his four shirts after his descent from the tree, he looked every inch a hideous savage. Bryan with black hair waving over a broad, white, intellectual brow, nose slightly Roman, mouth well-formed and fascinating when wreathed in a smile, beautiful white teeth, eyes large, lustrous, speaking, sparkling, seemed to look into you while looking at you; a square chin, a tall, well-formed, athletic figure, handsome and noble ... handsome, hapless, gentlemanly young Bryan.\textsuperscript{43}

‘Providential escape’

When given an opportunity to highlight the Aborigines’ curiosity, cooperation and sense of fun, Davies instead manipulated a possible first-hand experience with Aborigines into a scene of ‘captivity’ and providential escape. Here she again follows James Fenimore Cooper, who threaded the excitements of captivity and escape into his novels, which he set within the solitude and danger of the American frontier.\textsuperscript{44} By transposing into the minds of the Aborigines her own interpretation of intent, Davies clearly enters the realm of historical fiction.\textsuperscript{45}

Davies writes that, during an evening stroll, she and Julia encountered 20 ‘nude savages’, who gathered around the girls. Davies called this ‘an ambush’. Resorting to the kind of language characteristic of survival literature, she used emotive words to build tension—fear from descriptors of ugly ‘savages’ and the threat of cannibalism; sexual titillation with the picture of nudity and the prospect of a fate ‘a thousand times worse than death’. Her introductory statement of the men as ‘glistening in grease and war paint, and armed with war weapons’ succinctly introduced both prospects.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{42} Davies, \textit{Story of an Earnest Life}, 1881: 134.
\textsuperscript{43} Davies, \textit{Story of an Earnest Life}, 1881: 145–146.
\textsuperscript{44} Cf. \textit{The Pioneers} (1823), a part of James Fenimore Cooper, \textit{The Leatherstocking Saga}. Cooper was an influential writer whose literary career spanned the years from 1820 to 1850. His novels ran to many editions and reached a wide readership, being translated from the English versions into French and Italian.
\textsuperscript{45} Inga Clendinnen argues that, in representing the past, it is impossible to understand or empathise with actions, thoughts or intent, Clendinnen 2006: 19–28.
\textsuperscript{46} Davies, \textit{Story of an Earnest Life}, 1881: 138–139.
The protagonist of a melodrama must share her feelings. Davies felt ‘faint and sick’ at the ‘hideous sight’ of the naked men. Instead of running away, she gained inspiration from the source of salvation available to other maidens, whose adventures grace the pages of captivity narratives. For miraculous intervention, she appealed to God: ‘in that moment of utter helplessness and terror, I remembered that I had a Father in heaven, Almighty to save, whose arm could shield us’. In the same way as John Curtis reported Eliza Fraser’s pleas for salvation, Davies prays, and receives, God’s redemptive grace:

In a moment I felt that whatever befell us we were in His hands who doeth all things well. As I looked at the grinning, painted savages, I felt horrified at our helpless state, but I knew that if God did not permit these monsters to harm us, a hair of our head would not be injured, but if God allowed them to kill us, we were still in his hands. I felt secure under His protecting care. I then had no fear, though we were only two helpless girls completely in the power of these painted demons. I felt also that God was very near to protect His poor helpless children.47

Davies’s sexually-charged images of Aboriginal masculinity and her melodramatic asides suggest potential physical and sexual brutality as if, ‘Life and death were in the balance’. Like a damsel in distress, she fears the (unspoken) worst:

Thoughts as quick as lightning flashes passed through my brain; first I feared being killed and eaten; then, O horror! I thought they might not kill us, but what would be a thousand times worse than death, they might carry us away and hide us.48

The portrayal of suspense and horror vie oddly with Davies’s account of what appeared in her narrative to be a group of innocuous, curious and good-natured Aborigines. She described how:

one of these panther-like monsters came close up to me (they had never seen any creatures like us before, and their curiosity was excited) and took my hand, pushed up my sleeve, and put his great horny hand and arm close to mine. His touch made my flesh creep. He then pushed my bonnet from my face, and put his face close to mine, and looked at my neck. The close proximity of his great jaws and gleaming teeth made me shiver, but when he pulled the dress off my feet to look at them, I gave him a push which drove him from me staggering to a distance, and he nearly fell. This made all the uncouth savages relax and yell

47 Davies, *Story of an Earnest Life*, 1881: 139.
48 Davies, *Story of an Earnest Life*, 1881: 139. Davies’ melodramatic devices would have been familiar to readers of Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740).
most hideously. While Julia and myself were being examined by two of these horrid men, all the others were grinning and looking on deeply interested in the investigation.49

Davies was brave enough to interact with the compliant Aborigines, when she demonstrated the use of scissors. The men sat on the ground with ‘quiet expectancy’ and assented as Davies cut their beards and hair from their heads. Taking the hair as ‘a trophy’ and ‘a memento of our providential escape’, the girls bounded ‘like two hunted kangaroos’ back to the camp.

In keeping with the theme of captivity narratives, providential escape was equated with salvation. Davies therefore wrote that:

> We had just had an escape from death with all its torturing details, and, oh, worse than death with all its horrors ... Life, death, eternity, bodily pain, and worse than all these, ten times told, were all presented to our senses ... My heart was full to overflowing with gratitude for our preservation. I thought of my orphaned state, and what would have become of me in the wilds of this great land, if I had not a kind, heavenly Father to protect me. O God, my refuge and defense in a perilous hour! I cried unto the Lord, and he heard my heart’s cry, and saved me. It is a good thing to trust the Lord.50

Davies made sure that she incorporated the concepts of ugliness, heathenism and the perceived low racial status of Aborigines, writing that these men were:

> the worst looking of all the hideous savages of the Murray, or even of the earth. They belong to the lowest types of humanity. They have no idea of an overruling providence.51

Her choice of ‘panther-like’ to describe the Ngarrindjeri conveniently placed the scene in an American landscape.

Julia Gawler made no reference to this episode. Two days earlier, however, she had dispassionately recorded: ‘Saw plenty of natives in the camp. Very harmless and quiet’. Several days later, she wrote: ‘Plenty of natives, very good tempered men showed their astonishment at every[thing] they saw by calling out “yar”’.52 Perhaps by publisher’s demands, Davies had been encouraged to resort to melodrama in order to erase the favourable depiction of ‘grinning’, friendly Aboriginal people.

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49 Davies, Story of an Earnest Life, 1881: 139–140.
50 Davies, Story of an Earnest Life, 1881: 141–142.
51 Davies, Story of an Earnest Life, 1881: 142.
Davies’ publication in the United States meant that her rendition fitted a current genre of North American captivity narratives, written by women. Western expansion across the United States, particularly after the 1862 Homestead Act, which encouraged and formalised the process of settlement, stimulated stories of the ‘wild west’. Hardship, endurance and threat of or actual attack by the Indians became the stuff of folklore. Appealing to her American readers, Davies taps into women’s fear of Indian attack at the frontier with her similarly frightening textual pictures of Aborigines. Glenda Riley found that American frontierswomen from 1825 to 1915 portrayed, like Davies, racial biases and distorted perceptions in their interpretations of Native Americans. Riley also found that works that included inferences of sexual mistreatment appealed to a wide market from the time that they first appeared in the American colonial period. The Indian Wars waged in Oregon from 1855 to 1858, during the time of Davies’ first period of residence in America, were seen as an example of the so-called inferior race striking out in a deadly fashion against white settlers and their families. Rumours and fears of Indian attack in the state of Iowa continued well into the 1870s—the period during which Davies took up permanent residence in the United States.\(^{53}\)

**Qualified appreciation**

While Davies acknowledged some exceptional Indigenous skills, her praise was expressed in racial terms. Bob and Tom were not only expert language interpreters, they were also indispensable trackers, particularly in their exhaustive searches for Bryan. Davies, however, qualified her report by degrading their ability to ‘follow a trail over a naked rock’ to the level of animal attributes, describing Bob and Tom as having ‘the instinct of hounds’, ‘the sight of a grayhound, and the scent of a bloodhound’. This stereotype pandered to the expectation of her readers. George Gawler, on the other hand, refers succinctly and objectively, in a letter to his brother-in-law Henry Cox on 20 December 1839, to being led by ‘a very intelligent native’.\(^{54}\)

The Aboriginal men generously shared their knowledge of country. Davies accepted unquestioningly their assistance in finding food during the first stages of the return overland trip to Adelaide, when provisions and water were almost exhausted. Bob identified for the tourists the edible quandong fruit. However, when admiring Tom’s ‘marvelous’ agility at tree climbing, Davies stated that

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53 Riley 1984: xv, 81, 39–40; Riley 1988: 10; Jeffrey 1979: 55. Davies’ writing was also typical of the nineteenth-century tradition of travel writing, Pratt 1992: 86.
54 Davies, *Story of an Earnest Life*, 1881: 151, 152; Letter from George Gawler to (his brother-in-law) Henry Cox, 20 December 1839, D 3063(L), State Library of South Australia, re the death of Henry Bryan, the son of Rev’d Guy Bryan, Rector of Woodham Walter, in Essex.
this skill was ‘the agility of an Australian Black’—a reference perhaps aimed to remind readers of the hypothesised link between humans and apes. Both Bob and Tom climbed trees and caught birds for classification by the zoologist, John Gould, and for preservation by a taxidermist, Mr Strange, both of whom had temporarily joined the group for these purposes. Davies’ perfunctory reference to Bob and Tom exposes the previously undervalued or unknown Aboriginal role in early Australian natural science, within the more general sphere of Indigenous people’s integral part in advancing modern Australia.

In applauding the ingenuity of boomerang throwing, Davies was following an accepted ethnographic inclusion in colonial works. Giving credit where it was due, however, she wrote that:

The dexterity and precision with which [the boomerang] is thrown by these Blacks is a marvel to the whites. They hurl it so as to strike the object at a distance of over one hundred yards, and it can be thrown so as to return to the thrower. They can make it describe a circle round a tree and strike a looker-on. This singular, simple-looking weapon is found only among the Australians, and it has excited the wonder of all Europeans. It is no less strange than true, that white men have never learned to make or throw the boomerang, though they have made the attempt.

Davies chose to remain ambivalent about the subject of cannibalism. She mooted the possibility that Bryan’s ‘grave was in the stomachs of the savages’, yet her rational voice qualified that idea. She observed that:

Some authors say that the Australian blacks are not cannibals. I believe they were, in the days I speak of, not from actual observation, but from reading and hearing so much of the practice of cannibalism.

The apparent hardship endured on the tour’s last days evoked for Davies images of civilisation and Christianity, centring on the colonists’ code of a ‘high and holy purpose of worshipping the true God’, compared with those of the ‘pagan’ Aborigines. She developed the common nineteenth-century idea of ‘wilderness’ as an uncivilised, empty environment when she referred to ‘the solitude of these spots [in inland Australia] forsaken and alone in their sterility, and weird in their silence’. In language reminiscent of John Curtis’ account of Eliza Fraser, Davies

observed of the trip that, ‘We were far away from the habitations of civilized men, in the midst of a wilderness, where the savage roamed in ignorance and moral debasement’. 58

In the 40 years that had elapsed between Davies’ experiences and her published version, the social and political constraints that had informed the contemporary accounts of 1839 no longer applied. The fading memories of the Indigenous inhabitants, who had subsequently been subdued or displaced, allowed Davies to weave into her story an exciting account of these formerly ‘fierce’ Aborigines. For her northern American readers, the veracity of her interpretation of events long past was essentially irrelevant. The free play of Davies’ imagination, alongside details that formed the structural background of her life story, resulted in textual ambivalence, in which a factual account of Aborigines vied with a distorted depiction, heavily reliant of literary tropes. Perhaps Eliza Davies had adopted her own ending to the lines in Scott’s Lay of the Last Minstrel, which reads: ‘I cannot tell how the truth may be / I say the tale as ’twas said to me’.

Under her penmanship, her South Australian story could well be summed up with the words:

‘I cannot tell how the truth may be / I say the tale as ’twas [told by] me’

58 Davies, Story of an Earnest Life, 1881: 137, 146.