

# Everyday Life in Colonial History

*Australia through Women's Eyes*

By Ann Standish

Australian Scholarly Publishing, 336pp, \$39.95, 2008

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*An Everyday Transience*

By William Goldswain and William Taylor (eds)

UWA Publishing, 200pp, \$59.95, 2010

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Reviewed by Jo Chipperfield

Australian colonial production continues to provide fertile ground for critical studies, not least because there is still much to be uncovered beyond the 'official' records and canonical texts of the colonial period. These two very different books provide first-hand accounts of the century around Federation that converge on detail: the mundane, challenging, destructive, creative and often surprising activities of individuals and groups in homesteads, goldfields, towns and cities across Australia. The photography of James Dwyer and the women's writing examined by Ann Standish are shown to be, in strikingly similar ways, simultaneously records of *and contributions to* the process of creating the Australian colony and nation.

Ann Standish's *Australia through Women's Eyes* is a welcome addition to the still comparatively small body of work that, over the last 20 years, has sought to situate women's writing firmly within the great avalanche of writing that flowed from and within Australia from the moment the English arrived with the intent of settling. For reasons that feminist critics have long since made clear, the writing of men has always held pride of place both at the time of its publication and since. Standish focuses here on women's writing across almost a century, selected and compared in order to shed light on women's contributory role in what she describes as 'the colonialising project' (266). The focus is therefore on women's everyday activities, not simply in settling the land and establishing homes with their husbands and families, but also in the scientific and other observations that they wrote for home and local audiences and that made them a 'part, however modest, of claiming Australia for Britain' (11). Standish makes

a convincing case for women's writing as central to the development of the idea of Australia as a community and nation, and an enabler of the British colonial project.

Standish selects writings by sixteen women. Some wrote privately, in diaries and letters home, describing their new lives in the colonies as best they could for their readers; others wrote for wider audiences interested in travel books and tales of life in far-flung places, or for local Australian audiences. Ordered chronologically, the selections date from 1840 to 1930, a period that centres on Federation and includes the shift from convict to free settlement, from dependency to nationhood, and also the involvement of Australia in its first overseas conflicts.

The book is laid out in five chapters—beginning with the travelling and settling of the pioneers, then moving on to the descriptions of the natural environment, visits to the goldfields, visits to the cities, and then different social writings. The women are introduced with short biographies at the start of each section, and the structure gives great clarity to the thesis, organising a large amount of material in such a way that the reader never loses sight of any of the women discussed. The clarity and order of the book makes it highly readable and a useful resource. Standish's writing is refreshingly free of any glib framing in terms of women's expected position and role—which can lead to defensiveness and over-praise. Rather, the women are described plainly, on and in their own terms. Standish avoids sweeping statements, allowing each woman's account to stand on its own merits and to convey each individual experience. Individuality is the key, and gives the lie to generalisations drawn from similar accounts. Standish's incisive analyses and comparisons of writings on the same subjects by different women add much detail that is invaluable particularly in the context of broader discussions about the colonisation of Australia.

Standish begins the book with material drawn from largely private correspondence of 'pioneer women'—letters and diaries that were, literally and metaphorically, 'letters home'. These compare and contrast life in Britain with life in the colonies, and it is these accounts, the writings of these women, a long way from home and adapting to new and alien conditions, that are the most familiar kind of text associated with colonial women. Standish, however, sheds new light on them, showing that the women's sense of adventure and self-actualisation wasn't simply a personal one; it was 'integral to colonisation' (9) and inextricably linked with the adventure of 'bringing civilisation to the wilderness' (36), and the actualisation of a new nation in which their children and grandchildren would be natives. By continuing with accounts beyond 1901, Standish traces the change in the content and focus of the writing as pioneer women came to see themselves as Australian, and as women born in Australia begin writing their own accounts. She shows how their identity was informed

by and informed Australia's national project, the continuing negotiation of relationships with the 'old country' and with the old 'new world' of America, and with the ancient and emphatically different world of Indigenous peoples. Standish argues that women had an active role in creating and positioning the Australian nation, and that 'Acknowledgement of their contribution to the development of colonial discourses deepens an understanding of white women's participation in establishing Australia as a white Western dominion. It aligns these writers with their peers in New Zealand, Canada, India and elsewhere who similarly helped to normalise a white presence in other peoples' lands' (268).

She then moves on to explore women's role in scientific discovery in Australia through the writings of women such as Marianne North, whose life and work is preserved and commemorated in the gallery at Kew Gardens that North herself established and paid for. North and others were field workers, classifying, describing and illustrating plant life and treading a fine line between demonstrating and adding to scientific knowledge while appearing not to encroach on the knowledge of men of science.

Standish then analyses women's accounts of visits to urban developments, particularly their comparisons of the new Australian cities with each other (especially the positive response to Adelaide and the wonder of Melbourne's rapid growth) and with other colonial cities. She also uncovers women's writing about the goldfields—places particularly known largely through men's writings given that they were particularly male-dominated spaces—and convincingly adds these women's voices to the established narratives of mateship, the 'fair go' and hardship that established a very particular and core Australian identity. Standish situates these women and their writings within the larger European tradition of adventure travel by women in this period. Importantly, accounts from globetrotting women provide a fascinating comparison with the local accounts, and situate the Australian urban landscape within the milieu of other colonial cities of the time. Standish follows this chapter with an analysis of accounts by two widely travelled women who visited Australia with the express purpose of social investigation. She offers valuable insights into the way Australia was viewed by outsiders and its early social concerns by comparing the writings of an American, Jessie Ackerman, who travelled as an activist of the explicitly missionary World Women's Christian Temperance Movement, and the writings of Mrs Charles Thompson, who with her husband visited as a representative of the secular British social reformist movement.

Similarly, in the final chapter, she contrasts the writings of two women with different interests in Indigenous peoples, the well-known Daisy Bates, famed for recording a valuable archive of Aboriginal oral culture, and Katie Langloh Parker, who similarly recorded Aboriginal life with a focus, not on preserving

it for posterity under the auspices of the 'dying race' theory (though she also subscribed to this), but on the lived experiences of Indigenous people under colonial 'protection'.

These writings particularly display attitudes towards Indigenous Australians that were already proving tragically catastrophic. Bates and Parker were prejudiced by ideas that either rendered Indigenous Australians a dying race that would soon no longer 'trouble' the settlers, or a dying race deserving of anthropological study and preservation. This in itself is an important challenge to the comforting idea, promoted by some scholars that Standish discusses, that colonial women were more sympathetic to Aboriginal people than their male counterparts, assumed through the recognition of shared humanity through their contact with Aboriginal women and children. While Standish concedes that there are accounts that show moments of genial contact between white and black women effected by the presence of babies and children, she also demonstrates that the language these women use to describe such encounters remains grounded in their belief in their natural superiority to a 'pitiful' race that would soon be extinct, and that they were offering a kind of palliative care. She also notes that in the majority of accounts, Aboriginal people are mentioned briefly and occasionally as a focus of fear and derision, and that even these occasional mentions vanish as the colonial project succeeds in its aim of forcing Indigenous people from the land. Katie Langloh Parker and Daisy Bates wrote about Aboriginal people directly from their unusually prolonged and deliberate interaction with them, and Standish points out that this makes a critical reading of such accounts valuable. While they shared the ideology of those who ignored or derided Indigenous Australians, they nonetheless recorded useful insights and created a valuable record, not least for the descendants of the Aboriginal people they wrote about.

What is perhaps most interesting in this study is the weaving of the personal with the political, as well as attention to how colonial women imagined their readers, even in private diaries. Standish argues that while men wrote for an assumed audience of other men—their peers—and for posterity, women wrote for other women and a general readership. Standish notes that while this leads all of them to make self-deprecating comments that allow them to find a place within the dominant discourse without seeming to challenge its accepted authority, they nonetheless make modest assertions that they are contributing to the literature and, indeed, filling gaps on 'common, every-day topics' that the dominant discourse left out (10).

And indeed their writings do just that—Standish's immensely readable, perceptive and erudite book is a long-needed restitution of this fascinating body of work that will be useful to scholars and students of Australian studies, critical history, colonial and post colonial literature and, indeed, late nineteenth

and early twentieth-century women's writing. There is a sense that this study is the distillation of a far wider range of available material, and that this is an excellent new foray into women's writing and hidden or forgotten colonial narratives of a scope not seen since the early 1990s. Standish argues correctly that the 1980s scholarship on the writing of 'pioneer' and travelling women celebrated a 'breaking the bonds' angle, in the mould of self-actualisation and female independence that grew out of 1960s and 1970s feminism, and which missed entirely the fact that upper-class, white British women abroad in the Empire were both products and promulgators of British colonialism.

Standish navigates questions of gender, imperialism, colonialism and voice, carefully deconstructing and producing precise arguments that rise well above the all-too-common equations of gender and sex, assertions about 'male' and 'female' writing, and assumptions about the motivations, quality, purpose and impact of men's and women's writing. She presents the writers as individuals with their own motivations for travelling, writing, emigrating and being active in their chosen fields, while identifying the commonalities that speak to the experiences of women abroad in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century.

Her central thesis, however, is that it is not enough to reclaim these writings as a 'hidden' part of colonial history, postcolonial writing or even as part of a 'canon' of women's literature, it is actually vital to a full understanding of colonialism to include and examine women's writing as an essential and integral part of the imperialist project, validating British presence in Australia. Standish argues that their constant comparing and contrasting of Britain with Australia wasn't simply a familiarising technique aimed at reader understanding, but that it also had the reciprocal effect of assimilating Australia into the conception and reality of the British Empire. She notes too that women were in every sense the 'civilizing influence' on the bush, a role they undertook consciously and with a conviction of its rightness and necessity. She points out that pioneer women were perceived, and often perceived themselves, as the foil against which the male work of creating Australia could develop: while the bush may have been central to a certain type of Australian masculinity—the stoical, free ranging and heroic men that populated the early literature of Australia—women were central to the domestication of a life in the bush that had to be 'cleared and replaced with homesteads and farm buildings, livestock and crops' if the Australian colonial project was to succeed (26).

Turning to *An Everyday Transience*, this book also deals with everyday detail, and presents its material in and on its own terms. The editors, Philip Goldswain and William Taylor, note in their introduction that there has been no scholarly work specifically on the Western Australian photographer J. J. Dwyer (4), though his work has been used and reproduced. This book attempts to bridge

several genres—it is in format a sizeable coffee-table book that allows the images to be reproduced at a respectable size, but includes scholarly and creative texts that are as much an invitation as a beginning for studies of the Dwyer collection.

Dwyer's photographs of the Western Australian goldfields, and in particular Kalgoorlie, date from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They offer a fascinating insight into both the histories of mining towns that still thrive in WA, and towns that shared the same hopeful beginnings and bore all the usual hallmarks of a town with a future—hotels, banks, recreational facilities, churches, stores and the investment in rail and other infrastructure—and yet which had only a brief existence and were dismantled as the disappointed residents moved on to new 'finds'. The book's title, then, refers not only to the transience of photography, a medium which captures a moment that instantly becomes the past and which itself is subject to the ravages of time and perishability, but also the peculiar transience of unsuccessful pioneer towns. Appearing as permanent as any other, these abortive settlements did not simply crumble over time, forgotten ghost towns weathering away in the WA desert; they were purposefully taken down by their builders, their component parts used to construct other settlements as if they were nothing but the temporary canvas tents of the travelling circus. It's a little-known backdrop to the standard histories of the cities and towns that still exist today.

Dwyer was an itinerant photographer, one of many who captured the Australian colonisers for their own posterity, for their communication with their families back home—be that overseas or in other parts of Australia—and simply to record, in the new and fashionable medium of photography, scenes that they were well aware were of historical significance. Like the women of Standish's book, their reasons for making the records they did were personal, commercial and contributory to the growing body of knowledge that Australian colonisation was generating, as well as to the project of colonisation itself. The presence of both photographers and the photographed recorded and confirmed the legitimacy of colonisation, stating irrefutably 'we are here, we are building our homes, we are the rightful owner-occupiers of this land'.

Dwyer's photographs were published in the goldfields newspapers, and he took photographs for mining companies and private individuals (3). He photographed the mine workings and the industrial activity around them, photographs that show technical skill in lighting and composition that echo the European and American celebration of mechanisation that would later reach its zenith with photographers such as Wolfgang Sievers. He also photographed the towns as they sprang up, and these are compared in the first two essays, by Geoffrey London and Philip Goldswain, with the urban photography projects of Europe and America. Four of the seven authors are staff of the Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Visual Arts at the University of Western Australia; the others are



an NLA archivist who provides essential contextualisation of the photographs in terms of their production, their preservation and their accessibility, a goldfields researcher and documentary-writer (Barry Strickland), and Australian writer Joan London. London's short story, 'The Photographer' is reproduced here, along with an exploration by Clarissa Ball (Dean of the aforementioned Faculty) of the same images London drew on for inspiration in her story. These latter four focus on photographs that document the commerce of the towns and the daily activity of the townspeople, as individuals sitting for formal portraits, groups at leisure and work, and as crowds gathering on momentous occasions. It is these photographs that contain some of the real surprises—an image of a man on roller-skates, dressed as a butterfly; a group of men at the local baths, unabashedly naked; Dyer himself in a crumpled white suit and pith helmet, cigarette posed between his fingers trailing a vertical line of smoke to the level of his waxed moustache.

Like the accounts in *Australia through Women's Eyes*, Dwyer's photographs are accounts of colonial people and their activities, requiring a critical examination of their representation of the colonialist project. The book does make accessible a tantalising glimpse of the Dwyer collection, presented with a select and diverse group of interpretive essays, but while the book is multi-disciplinary it is not interdisciplinary. In the first essay there are moments where it sounds like a tourist history, uncritically narrating a white progress view without critical reflection in a way that seems somewhat dated. The documentary nature of Dwyer's photography is very apparent, and in the images of industry and commerce there is some repetition. Elsewhere however, there are commentaries on people other than the European majority—Japanese sex slaves and their pimps are mentioned briefly by Barry Strickland, as is the multiculturalism of the goldfields and the White Australia policy that sought to eradicate this, right from Federation. Clarissa Ball's essay suggests that prostitutes were financially independent and notes that they are now a celebrated part of modern Kalgoorlie's historical tourist trade; one can only assume that these were white European sex workers, which suggests some interesting research areas on how racial hierarchies were enacted in all strata of life, and indeed on how prostitution can be something a town is proud of—as long as it's the prostitution of the past.

All in all, this book responds to the problem of compiling a representative account of this vast collection and all the interpretive avenues it offers, by making a creatively free-ranging, eclectic window into it. It suggests rather than argues, expands rather than prescribes, and stands as an open invitation to scholars in every discipline to mine this archive. The essays are suitably different, in that each builds a more detailed picture of Dwyer and Kalgoorlie,

focusing on different, often contradictory aspects without attempting an artificial homogeneity—as Barry Strickland states of the collection itself, it has ‘surprising and pleasing eclecticism, both in subject and in composition’ (126).

*An Everyday Transience* works well as an introduction to Dwyer’s photography and an invitation for further study to researchers in a wide range of disciplines, and particularly to interdisciplinary researchers. *Australia through Women’s Eyes* is certainly a must-read for students and researchers in a similarly wide range of areas, particularly women’s history, Australian history and transnationalism. Both these works are valuable contributions to the discourse of Australia’s colonial past, presenting their material in accessible ways that should both add to the resources available to researchers and invite further critical study.

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