

## *Finding Eliza: Power and Colonial Storytelling*

by Larissa Behrendt

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Larissa Behrendt, distinguished Professor of Law in the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology Sydney, has extended her redoubtable talents into film-production, fiction and history. This short but punchy book begins with the variety of ways in which the story of Eliza Fraser, shipwrecked off Fraser Island near Hervey Bay in 1836, has been interpreted by many writers of many generations. Fraser's story has been conflated with popular tales of Native American and Man Friday-style savages, which served to exaggerate the supposed barbarism of her hosts and enabled subsequent writers to place her story firmly into the sensational category of female captivity narratives. In this she traverses the same ground as other writers, especially Kay Shaeffer and Veronica Brady.

A short chapter addresses the Butchulla people, amongst whom Fraser lived. The Elder Olga Miller, following an oral tradition, believes that a Clever Woman, on Fraser's unexpected arrival, marked her with white ochre which continued to protect her until her rescue. Fraser was indignant at being asked to carry out camp chores which Olga Miller interpreted as her necessary contribution to her being cared for.

From this point the book widens into a broader discussion on literature, including an analysis of Pritchard's *Coonardoo*. Many, including Manning Clark, welcomed the book demonstrating that love was possible between whites and Aborigines (as if such a proposition needed to be verified). Behrendt is a harsher critic, arguing, rightly, that the book is also an 'unacknowledged legacy of colonisation on Aboriginal women: their inability to freely consent to sexual

relations with the white men, who had the power of life and death over them, was fundamentally constrained'. She gives a series of well-known examples to demonstrate the point of 'life and death'. I'll add another, not at all well known. In October 1889, an employee of Bradshaw's Run (Northern Territory) wrote in his diary:

5 October. [1889] Found the runaway Charles Kolomboi, and Yarinbella, chained the former up all night.

Fri 6<sup>th</sup>. Ivan [Egoriffe, the station's psychopathic overseer] gave Kolomboi the father of a bumping and set him and the lubra to glory.

In Chapter Seven, Behrendt introduces Eddie Burrup and the book changes gear. As is now well known, Elizabeth Durack constructed her *nom de brush* Eddie Burrup, whose paintings first were shown in the exhibition *Native Title Now* in 1996. Her sister Mary wrote the very powerful 'Lament for the drowned country' in 1972, about the country flooded by the Ord River dam. She always made it clear that she had written it, and it was not held much against her. So what's the difference? After confessing to the fraud in 1997, Elizabeth stated that Burrup was an alter ego, the result of her own creative processes. She even developed – after the revelation – a fictitious biography of Burrup in which he accepted the British occupation as justified, and describes the whites whom he had met as benevolent. 'Barrup' thus set aside the long history outlined in the previous chapter. Behrendt concludes, 'It is impossible to view her position and claims of friendship with and endorsement by Aboriginal people without remembering the backdrop of dispossession and frontier violence. Clearly, Durack created an Aboriginal person whose views of colonisation reflected her own'.

To me the second half is the better part of the book as Behrendt considers some contemporary but analogous issues. True, Elizabeth and Mary Durack had and have many supporters. Elizabeth showed herself to be a product of a rural upbringing that recognised many Aboriginal close associates, patronising as these relationships may have been. She outed herself and seemed surprised by the commotion. Behrendt endorses the view that Durack failed to respect the very law and culture in which she claimed empathy and understanding.

From here we proceed to the US writer Marlo Morgan's fictionalised work *Mutant Message Down Under*. More offensively than Durack's Burrup, Morgan portrayed her 'good' Aborigines as unlike anyone modern, university trained or urban. Her imaginary people are spiritual, noble, traditional, real – and uniting the two traditions of noble versus animal-like savage that Behrendt has been tracking – cannibalistic! The book was a US best-seller for months. Though this fictitious tribe seems a long way from the benevolent Burrup, in one fundamental way the productions are the same: both imaginary entities accept colonisation

as inevitable and are resigned to disappearing. So a positive, 'noble' portrayal of contemporary people is as offensively dangerous as the negative one with which the Fraser story was surrounded: no resistance, no confrontation and no connection with actual people.

The dichotomy between outback nobility and urban disagreeableness lives with us still. Nugget Coombs and Billy Wentworth were two national administrators influenced by it, I believe, while Behrendt carries her argument in a legal direction to the YortaYorta case. Olney J ruled famously that 'the tide of history has indeed washed away any real acknowledgement of their traditional laws ...'. 'Traditional' people did not manage land and waters or protect sacred sites (p. 173); the YortaYorta had not maintained their legally required (but very narrowly defined) connection to land or custom. Behrendt approvingly quotes Brennan J of the High Court, that there should not be unquestioning adherence to law if it offends the 'values of justice and human rights'. Blackburn had no choice, but, runs the implication, Olney certainly did. Perceptions change. Sixteen years after the YortaYorta finding the Butchulla had their claim of native title over Fraser Island granted.

That's one logical conclusion to the book, but I would have liked the author, independent-minded and fine scholar that she is, to take the analysis a little further into what seems to be a territory studiously avoided by everyone: that sparring Indigenous factions, especially in urban lands, use those same Olney-style arguments against their protagonists; that irrespectively of how well or ill the local traditional custodians have adapted to modern life, the tide of history has washed away their claims. Their illegitimate place must, it seems, now be taken by their opponents who have moved into their country from elsewhere.

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