

*In the Eye of the Beholder: What Six
Nineteenth-Century Women Tell Us about
Indigenous Authority and Identity*

by Barbara Dawson

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As Barbara Dawson comes to the close of her engaging study of six colonial women's lives in contact with Indigenous Australians, she reflects that its chief revelation is 'Aborigines' help and concern for early settlers – their care and their courtesy, curiosity and comedy' (p. 153). It is her intention to 'look into and behind the "eye of the beholder"' – the epigram she chooses as her title – to discern and detect the ways Aborigines responded and adapted to the incursion of Europeans onto their country.

With steady and assiduous historicising, Dawson does successfully uncover 'pockets of insight' (p. xv) in the writings of six settler women, which unintentionally intimates that intruded peoples continued to exercise their 'cultural and territorial authority' (p. 153) in straightened circumstances, including punitive raids, shipwreck and the ensuing demands of infirm and stranded travellers, evangelising and the strictures of middle-class respectability and unremunerated labour.

Yet also in play within the intimate domains of early station homesteads were shared domestic efforts. The accounts of the six women Dawson selects proffer rich anecdotes, such as Aborigines cautioning against building on floodplains, their rescue of an abandoned white child dying of thirst in the bush, unsolicited medical care for a scurvy-afflicted bushman and many more. Indeed, Dawson

shows these women, of varying literary talents, contributed a vivid and captivating store of description and observation that, in her hands, offers much to enrich discussions of settler perception.

Dawson situates these literary treatments within the publishing market of the nineteenth century with its reliance on sensation and pandering to racial stereotypes such as cannibalism, treachery, ferocity and laziness. The generic conventions in publishing contemporaneous to each of the writers are backgrounded, be they pioneer adventure (invigorating empire from colonial outposts), seafarer adventure, survivor narratives and captivity tales, melodramatic romance literature or autobiography.

Other influences are identified, such as the discourses of scientific racism with a shift from polygenesis to evolutionary biology and its co-option into 'doomed race' theory, Christian evangelism is more prominent with some writers than others as is their respective homage to utilitarian or instructional literature. Literary themes such as miscegenation appear (though arguably that of white women is misplaced in Australia) as do colonial types including the lubra, piccaninny, King Billy and coolie, demonstrating the reliance of the authors on extant colonial literary conventions. These usages are linked to the passage of relevant acts along with snippets from other settler autobiographies. Dawson provides a helpful bibliography of other colonial women writers, which begs the question of why these six women were selected – very early and first contact seems to be the rationale.

Dawson ably confirms that 'female narratives offer another perspective on interracial relations' (p. 8). Though it would unnecessarily delimit the ambit of her analysis, it becomes clear the women's insights deepen when they write about their interactions and relations with Aboriginal women: for example, the wonderful instances of humour, exasperation, exhaustion and protection offered between Rose Cowan and Minnie on Longford station; or the Ka'bi women who rescued Eliza Fraser soon after her birth (in the bottom of a longboat taking water surrounded by a crew of men) and her inability to understand their treatment of her.

The interpretation that can be drawn from Eliza Fraser's exaggerated 'ordeal' when collocated against recent anthropological research into Ka'bi practices around, for example, birth, is revelatory, and this is where the methodology of the book reaps real dividends. As Dawson leads us through the paper trail of Frasers' distorted 'testimony' she reveals the motivations of publishers, and makes the critical point that 'Indigenous Australians were the victims of a very bad press' (p. 28). Indeed, while Dawson contextualises these sometimes little-known autobiographies within the milieu of contemporary popular works, and

the changing relation of middle-class women to literacy, more might have been made of the coincidence of colonial modernity with the industrialisation of print such as set out in the work of colonial print historian Tony Ballantyne.

In the case of the second author Eliza Davies (who twice circumnavigated the globe), textual influences are plotted before we are acquainted with her work and the details of her life. On occasion these concomitant literary references are loosely linked to the author's but we cannot always be sure if the author engaged with these works, so the links are sometimes tenuous rather than weaving a substantiated web: for instance the influence of circus impresario P. T. Barnum on Eliza Davies might be suggestive of a *zeitgeist*-like stimulus perhaps rather than direct inspiration.

However, the development of the notion of an Australian identity from 1872 and the founding of the Australian Natives Association and pioneer clubs helps to explain the appetite for colonial adventure that some authors, particularly Emily Cowl, gratified. Dawson persistently pursues what might have shaped the women's racial perceptions. But she also asks how the women's expectations about race were 'mollified and modified' (p. xxiii), particularly through close contact and everyday relations. The survival of geographically isolated white women such as Katherine Kirkland depended on the women she lived among, as Dawson deduces from her accounts of Aboriginal women's harvesting, along with her introduction of bush tucker into her cooking, adopting Indigenous systems into her own domesticity.

As far as is plausible, given the partisan colonial archive, Dawson aims to shift the emphasis from the textual description of these six white women to the Aboriginal people they encountered, lived with and were aided by in these far-flung scenarios of first and early contact. At times her intention is hobbled by the limits of the archive. Dawson's reading of some Kurtjar men's theft of Emily Cowl's clothing near Normanton as adolescent high jinks from which we can infer humour is creative and plausible, although clothing could also become valuable objects for bartering. Reading between the lines, or 'against the grain', gleaned hints of Indigenous responses can be fraught and hazards extrapolation, however, Dawson is too attentive to historical contingencies to make unwarranted interpretations.

Her book is therefore an eye-opener on settler women's dependence on the knowledge and skills of Aboriginal people and the contribution Aborigines made to the development of, for instance, the prospering pastoral economy in Australia – despite their negligible remuneration. The intimate relations forged through working together on these properties, lopsided as claims to home might be, furnish grounds for focusing on women's interracial relations on the frontier and rural outposts. The working relationship between the last author, the astute

and irreverent Rose Cowan, and her 'beloved Minnie' shows the intervention of colonial women's writing into a canon dominated by men and affords glimpses into Aboriginal women's resistance and guidance. It suggests a kind of coexistence (p. 97), for all its asymmetries, so unprecedented Dawson asks whether the conventions were in place by which these women could express these connections.

Needless to say, these were still profoundly inequitable relations and Dawson is attentive to the imbalances intrinsic to settler dependence on largely unremunerated Aboriginal labour. She notes the pact struck on stations where custodians exchanged labour for continued occupation of their country and the maintenance of ceremony and law to pass on to children. Noting the ways Aboriginal labourers resisted unfair demands, Dawson writes, 'The white women, however, upheld the class difference between themselves and the Indigenous women, allowing them into their homes – if at all – only to fulfil their roles as domestic servants' (p. 148). It was the nature of the work they did together, however, that sometimes forged enduring bonds, despite the lopsided exchange of knowledge, workload, guidance and protection. Dawson described the connections with requisite caution as the 'toleration of difference' rather than friendship, where shared goals shaped 'reciprocal services'.

The intrinsic value in drawing together this resource of little-known works is fulfilled in this intriguing study. These 'life stories' are 'presented as historical occurrences' not just by the authors themselves but through Dawson's agile sifting of the inherently performative nature of autobiography from the contingencies and demands of colonial print markets.

Illustrated with helpful maps and the author's own photographs of the homesteads and buildings still standing, this book offers fresh insights into people living traditionally before disease and violence decimated populations. Yet the accounts are undoubtedly 'veiled' in that the women rarely betrayed their menfolk's violence. This creates an intriguing disconnect, for instance, between Rose Cowan's sympathy for Minnie's family's flight from a series of punitive raids and her own relatives' involvement in other retributive attacks. For all these gaps and silences, Dawson sets out to show that Indigenous authority and cultural identity can be gleaned in these women's writings. The words of Long Kitty reverberate: she told her very paternalistic (and evangelical) mistress Mary McConnel, 'all this yarmen (land) belonging to me' (p. 117).

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