

IN SEARCH OF THE WHITE WOMAN OF GIPPSLAND

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In 1840, there surfaced an Australian frontier legend of a mysterious white woman believed to be held captive by Aborigines in Gippsland. Gippsland was at that time a remote and largely inaccessible region for Europeans, with few settlers and no government presence. Pioneering squatter, Angus McMillan, had only recently arrived, travelling overland from the Monaro Plains in 1839 to take up land along the Tambo and Avon Rivers. McMillan was to play a key role in substantiating the white woman rumours, with the first alleged sighting of her, published in *The Sydney Herald* on 28 December 1840.

Four years previously, in 1836, Eliza Fraser's story of shipwreck; survival with Aborigines of the Kabi tribe on what is now Fraser Island; and providential "rescue" some weeks later, had captured public attention in the New South Wales colony, and as far afield as London and America. William Buckley, too, had emerged from the bush in 1835 after 32 years of living with Aborigines in the Port Phillip district. And there were numerous other contemporary accounts of escaped convicts and castaways living with Aborigines. So McMillan's claim, that a white woman was living with Aborigines in Gippsland, was plausible.

McMillan claims to have sighted the woman among a group of Aborigines fleeing after his party had disturbed their encampment. At the campsite, McMillan's party allegedly found numerous items of European clothing and articles, including a bible, a purse containing English money, a woman's thimble, a lock of brown hair, English blankets, British newspapers and life insurance papers. He also claimed they found the body of a young, fair-skinned child enclosed in kangaroo-skin bags. McMillan provides an extraordinarily detailed inventory of material evidence to support his claims of truth for the story. Indeed, the excessiveness of his description and the keen sense of audience awareness which characterises the report suggest a somewhat more contrived piece of work than the simple unmediated account it purports to be.

Rumours of the white woman revived briefly in 1843 but it was not until 1846, following a further "sighting" by a native trooper of a yellow-skinned woman with light-coloured hair that the story suddenly became big "news." She was reportedly sighted with a party of "troublesome wild blacks" who were spearing cattle on McMillan's run. George Cavanagh, editor of the *Port Phillip Herald*, was instrumental in organising a publicly funded expedition to rescue the white woman. As Chairman of the Expedition Committee, Cavanagh secured exclusive

publication rights to the search party's reports. Two search parties funded by the government followed in 1847, one of which distributed handkerchiefs and mirrors printed with messages for the woman. She was never found.

This paper represents another search for the white woman; one which does not attempt to solve, or resolve, the mystery of her existence. Instead, my focus is on her textual corporeality; the ways in which she has been constituted (from the beginning) as a *discursive* presence. I will also concentrate on her narrative functions and the representations which call her into being. For while rumour placed her and search parties sought her at the fringes of settlement, newspaper accounts and correspondence between colonial officials in Gippsland, Port Phillip and Sydney located her firmly in the context of colonial politics and governance—and of public debate.

Since McMillan's account of 1840, a substantial body of textual material on the white woman has been amassed in newspaper reports, parliamentary papers, official documents, historical analyses, poetry and fictional accounts. Collectively, this material charts the development of the white woman story from fledgling rumour to full-blown myth. Her existence, unsubstantiated and inconclusive, can only be validated textually.

In his recently published book, *The White Woman*, Liam Davison revives yet again, and reinterprets for a late twentieth century readership, the legend of the white woman of Gippsland. As the first fictional work on the white woman to receive critical acclaim, Davison's book marks the transition of the legend from regional to national attention. Its publication in paperback form, designed and marketed to attract not just scholarly attention but a wider readership, projects this previously little-known story beyond its local Gippsland context into the national arena. Davison privileges a particular reading of the material which articulates the way that this myth functions and its role in the formation of post-settlement historical consciousness and colonial politics. His critical scholarship informs and provides an authoritative foundation for his fictional interpretation of the story, which, with its substantial use of primary source material, is written as if it was a first-hand account of the 1846-47 searches for the white woman. Davison does, however, point to what remains unsaid in historical data and within his own text: "It wasn't so much lies that shaped our accounts of what went on out there," his narrator says, "as silence" (28).

From the earliest accounts, the colonial newspapers, with a vested interest in perpetuating the myth, played a central role in promoting, sensationalising and politicising rumours of the white woman's existence.¹ Using strategies of news reporting which in turn validated and called into question her existence, the white woman's plight was presented for a vicarious readership in a language of

¹ The editor of the *Port Phillip Patriot and Morning Advertiser* alludes to the role played by the *Herald* in perpetrating a hoax on the public for motives of commercial gain and in the expectation that those involved with the first expedition would attain "splendid Government appointments" (7 April 1847).

sensationalism, titillation, and moral outrage. Imposing characteristics of gentility on the white woman, the *Port Phillip Gazette* called for the government to rescue "an amiable and accomplished female . . . from the clutches of these inhuman monsters." Public interest intensified. Readers responded.

A letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* (10 October 1846), titled "Gross Inhumanity in a Christian Government" and signed "An Englishman," appealed to the public, especially to the wives, mothers and single females in the colony, to contribute towards the expense of recovering the white woman. Framed thus, within Victorian legal, moral and cultural systems, the white woman's body is presented as the site of cultural as well as physical contestation. She is one, the writer says, who is:

compelled to yield to the disgusting passions and desires of a set of black cannibals—one [who], however inclement the seasons, is wandering about the bush in a state of nudity—one, who is forced to subsist on the most loathsome food, the sight of which would make our hearts sicken . . . such is the existence at present of a Christian, a wife, a mother, an Irishwoman.

The emphatic rhetorical build-up, climaxing with the plight of an "*Irishwoman*" as an indictment of a "Christian Government" by "An *Englishman*," raises a number of questions about what is being appealed to here and what condemned. Where, for instance, might the rescue of an Irishwoman fit into the priorities of an English colonial government? Would an Englishwoman be rescued more promptly? And how useful might such a figure be in galvanising public opinion, in an otherwise uncohesive population, against the Aboriginal "other"?

Invoking Manichean dualism, the white woman is thus textualised not just as a particular Irish woman, but as a cipher for European "civilisation," in opposition to the blacks' "savagery." As such, she functions as an authorising agent for intersecting mid-nineteenth century European discourses of race, class and gender. Her representation presents the kind of "flexible *positional* superiority" that Edward Said notes of "Orientalism": one which "puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the [colonised] without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (7).

Represented as an innocent terrorised victim at the mercy of "savages," the white woman is deliberately invoked in order to mobilise anxiety about contact with the racial "other" in the increasingly contested space of frontier expansion. The explicit threat of rape and, by implication, racial contamination—a reversal of the now familiar colonial trope of colonised land as being raped, and the actual abduction and rape of black women by white men—provides an imperative to the settlers to go out and clear the land of "savages."

The white woman's imagined plight might well have been read as a cautionary tale by other women to whom "An Englishman" addresses his appeal; as

a warning not to stray beyond prescribed boundaries. The emotive tone also suggests an attempt to quash any notion that the white woman might have happily "gone native," and to counter some official ambivalence about the wisdom of sending a rescue party to retrieve her.²

Such anxieties find voice in concern with the white woman's body, particularly as the site of miscegenation and cannibalism. The topic of racial contamination is flagged in Angus McMillan's account, with his alleged discovery of the body of a male child. Dr Arbuckle (a member of McMillan's party) pronounced the child to be "beyond doubt . . . of European parents; parts of the skin [being] perfectly white, not . . . in the least discoloured". This conclusion—that a white skinned child is *prima facie* evidence of a white mother—as the *only possible* option, suggests another narrative function for the white woman: to explain away or occlude the existence of so-called "half-caste" children. It appears to be an attempt, in the face of the widespread and tacitly accepted colonial practice of sexual relations between white men and black women, to reassert Victorian moral values which were under threat in a colonial situation.

Cannibalism, an additional preoccupation in the early accounts, suggests both anxiety about contact with the racial "other," and about "civilisation" being swallowed up by a hostile, preternatural land. As Arens has pointed out, alleged eye-witness accounts of cannibalism in European narratives of first contact are, on close examination, rarely what they seem. Such accounts, whether anthropological, historical or anecdotal, invariably feed into discourses about racial or ethnic "otherness" which are used to facilitate and justify imperialist projects. In the white woman narratives, so-called evidence of cannibalistic practices is mediated through a young, partly-"civilised" Aboriginal boy, Jacka-wadden:

At the camp . . . we found portions of a body of a black woman, being cooked at the several fires, and some pieces from the thighs and other parts of the body, put away in some bark. The blacks were eating the flesh, and the man, through Jacka-wadden, told me that it was his gin that had died, and acknowledged having partaken of it. Jacka-wadden said it was not uncommon for the men to kill their gins and eat them.
(Windridge)

Jacka-wadden's "authentication" of the rescue party's worst fears serves a number of rhetorical purposes; as a gruesome reminder of Jacka-wadden's tribal past it provides an endorsement of the settler practice of abducting Aboriginal children from their tribes and "civilising" them. It also invests the search party's mission with a sense of urgency. And the white woman's body, as an object of contested

² Superintendent C.J. La Trobe was berated by the press for expressing the view that the white woman might have formed attachments with the Aborigines and might therefore be averse to reclamation. See, for example, "Humanitas." *Port Phillip Herald*, 10 March 1846.

possession and a tasty morsel on a tribal menu, is the site where voracious Imperialist expansion is momentarily checked by the "devouring" indigene. What needs to be "rescued," validated and recuperated is not so much an actual white woman but what she represents. This connection is made explicit with the third rescue party's retrieval of a badly-weathered figurehead from a ship—a less than life-sized bust of a woman (in some accounts a Britannia)—whom some argued *was* the mysterious white woman of Gipps Land.

Historian Kate Darian-Smith has written recently of "the centrality of the [white woman] incident to a *specific Gippsland* history of white settlement" and its place as "one of the founding myths which constitute the collective memory of modern Gippsland, and through which the unique history and identity of the region have been expressed" (16). However, ongoing interest in the myth has, until relatively recently, served to deflect discussion from the brutal realities of frontier contact for Gippsland Aborigines: massacre, dispossession and the devastation of tribal culture.³

Perhaps not uncoincidentally, rumours of the white woman emerged following the appointment in 1839 of Charles Joseph La Trobe as Superintendent of the Port Phillip District—a man reputedly concerned with protecting the rights of Aborigines. With the Cape Otway massacre a recent, embarrassing episode for the government, the search parties for the white woman were cautioned against using violent means to rescue her. The white woman incident nevertheless provided both pretext and justification for the violent "dispersal" of Aborigines, which had begun with the arrival of squatters in the area in the late 1830s,⁴ and of which the sites known locally as Boney Point, Butcher's Creek and Slaughterhouse Gully were topographical reminders. In 1843 an estimated 80 to 150 Aborigines were massacred at Warrigal Creek by a vigilante group—Angus McMillan's "Highland Brigade"—in reprisal for the murder of a white man. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, an estimated 1000 to 2000 Aborigines lived in the Gippsland region. Within twenty years fewer than 100 survived (Gardner, Watson).

In *The White Woman*, Liam Davison foregrounds this *other* story, acknowledged in official correspondence at the time but occluded in public debate. Davison's narrator reminds us that beyond the historical "facts" of Gipps Land settlement lies a story of genocide, the evidence of which inheres in the landscape. Of one massacre site, his narrator notes that there was "hardly a spot where we could put our feet without a hand or jawbone crumbling under us" (64). Davison's interpretation in turn feeds into and becomes *part of* that larger body of textual material which constitutes the "white woman myth." As such, it might in time be read as an authenticating account. Its publication also nourishes the myth by

³ Historian Peter Gardner has, since the 1970s, written of the frontier massacres and violence against the Kurnai tribe of Gippsland.

⁴ The 1861 report of the central board appointed to watch over the interests of Aborigines in the Colony of Victoria noted that the second search party for the white woman led by Walsh of the Native Police "committed awful destruction of Aboriginal life."

reinterpreting its relevance for a generation of Australian readers struggling to come to terms in the 1990s with issues of land rights and notions of belonging.

The critical recognition Davison's book received in the months following publication also marks its status as a "literary" text and places the white woman's story in the company of a number of other literary works about *male* "white blackfellows"⁵ all published in the 1990s by prominent Australian authors: David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, Rodney Hall's *The Second Bridegroom* and Barry Hill's *Ghosting William Buckley*. Their stories provide revisionist readings of our national myths of peaceable settlement. The focus of these stories are nineteenth-century Europeans who lived, or were thought to have lived, in the bush with Aborigines. For twentieth-century readers, these fictional constructs of nineteenth-century characters provide an alternative perspective to the historical accounts which have in part formed our understanding of the colonising process. In drawing attention within their works to the ways in which the stories of their characters are made into texts, these authors remind us that the production of what is privileged as "history" is problematic. Hall, for instance, has his unnamed narrator (a convicted forger) write his "own" story as a series of letters to an idealised, absent woman who doesn't read the letters but forwards them to the colonial administrators as part of her appeal for increased military presence in the area. Malouf's and Hill's characters, who have virtually lost their native tongue, have their stories written for them, although they participate to some extent in the telling. In all cases, their stories, whether written down accurately or not, enter "history."

Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*, a 1977 re-telling of the story of Eliza Fraser, anticipates these more recent works, although its concerns are somewhat different. Unlike Davison's elusive white woman, Patrick White's Eliza Fraser character—Ellen Gluyas—has a robust corporeal presence in the narrative and is a more complex and transgressive figure than the female characters presented by Malouf, Hall or Davison. Although White presents Ellen in essentialist terms—as body/sexuality/superstition/deception—she resists simplistic readings. She partakes of a cannibal feast, supplanting the solemn ritual of Christian communion with a primitive spirituality. She eschews conventions of Victorian prudery in favour of an uninhibited sexual coupling with Jack Chance, her convict rescuer. And although she chooses to return and be reassimilated into "civilisation"—initially the Moreton Bay convict settlement, later the Imperial centre, London—she does so from a position of increased critical awareness.

In contrast, Davison's white woman, though ostensibly the subject of her narratives, remains a silent and elusive figure unable to participate in the construction or telling of her own story. We know of her only through the narrator's recollections, from a vantage point of several decades, of the 1846-47 searches for her. She is, Davison suggests, an *idea*, called into existence out of the

⁵ The term "white blackfellows" is used by Barrett (1948).

desires and needs of men: "You see why we had to find her? Why we had to believe? Which story would you prefer to hear; the virtuous woman lost in the bush, held by savages against her will, *left to undergo a fate worse than death itself* unless we rescue her. Or the other one about ourselves? . . . You see what we'd have to face without her?" (37). This echoes views, held from the earliest days of settlement, that "until the whole country was settled and the natives civilised, there would always be a mysterious [white] woman living with the natives" (JAF).

In the early historical accounts the white woman's discursive functions are complex and manifold. She is, on one level, a trope for colonisation; foreshadowing the practices of appropriation, which settlement is poised to enact, by inscribing the landscape across which she moves with European symbols and meanings; an imperialist project such as Gayatri Spivak describes as the "worlding of a world on a supposedly unscripted territory" (1). A region of Gippsland, The Heart, is supposedly so named because of a sign the white woman is said to have made in that place; the figure of a heart of large dimensions cut into the turf. The heart, an incongruously romantic symbol to attribute to a woman supposedly held captive in the rugged bush of Gippsland, serves to eroticise the landscape and reaffirm the woman's role as romantic heroine and the search for her as a chivalric quest.

Davison, however, relocates both this symbol and the white woman, not within the literary tradition of the sentimental novel, but within a colonial narrative—a "down-under" version of *Heart of Darkness*. Like Conrad's Marlow, Davison's narrator, compulsively retelling his account of the search for the woman, confronts the "horror" both at the heart of the colonial project, "civilisation," and within himself. As "the happy band of bold adventurers" (140) pursue the object of their quest up the river into a vast, impenetrable and brooding landscape, beyond the last outposts of "civilisation," she increasingly becomes a locus for unspeakable knowledge and self-revelation. He confronts the unspeakable—expressed in terms of anxiety about the female body and ambivalence about sexual possession—at the place where the white woman was said to have given birth:

It's not what we wanted to find, you see. Not like that. It's not how she was meant to be. Holding a child perhaps—swaddling clothes and a shining babe in arms—or else standing flat-bellied before us, all intact. . . . And the blood! You see how it altered things. How she could never be the same again? It was as though we'd stumbled across something we should have known all along but didn't want to see, some undeniable truth about ourselves, and everything was changed because of it. (132)

Having experienced these horrors, *could* the white woman come back? Would she want to? What would the ladies of Port Phillip make of her? Davison's narrator imagines the scene:

What a prize she'd be! To have her sitting there, poor girl, sipping tea. Saved from a dreadful fate by their own generosity. Even before we'd left, they'd started to make their plans: the guest lists, the subjects to be cautiously avoided. They'd staked their claims, and who could argue that they had a right to her after all the years of isolation they'd endured themselves, removed from the centres of civilisation? No doubt they saw themselves in her. (13)

In creating the voice of the female colony, Davison draws attention to another conspicuous area of silence in the historical material: the almost complete absence of women's voices. The white woman and her narratives are almost exclusively male constructs⁶ and their focus, though ostensibly the white woman, is more closely concerned with male endeavour. Like "the intended" in *Heart of Darkness*, the white woman provides a pretext for the male enterprise of colonial activity but is excluded/protected from knowledge of that activity. Davison echoes what he imagines to be the other women's anxieties, not only about how the white woman will fit back into female society in the tiny colony, but also their own fears about how they may be received when they return to that larger civilised world of British society. Thus he offers one possible scenario for her return. Another is suggested in the historical material: "After many years . . . [the white woman] was recovered though unfortunately in an idiotic state, and unable to utter a single word of her native language, or understand any question put to her, therefore no tidings of the fate of her ship companions could be elicited" (Melbournite 1874).

Either way, both writers suggest that for the white woman, irrevocably changed by her experience, return is possible only on certain terms. She has to maintain her silence or be a party to the fictions that have been constructed around her in her absence. No doubt Eliza Fraser experienced similar restrictions. Her story was appropriated in 1838 by her London biographer, John Curtis, and turned into a myth of Empire. Perhaps she was complicit in the process. But the final glimpse we get of Eliza, peddling her increasingly exaggerated story around the streets of London, effectively silences her while Curtis's version becomes the authenticating account (Dwyer and Buchanan 20).

In taking its place with *Remembering Babylon*, *The Second Bridegroom* and *A Fringe of Leaves* as a late-twentieth-century national narrative, Davison's *The White Woman* brings into focus the ways in which *white women* are positioned in these retellings of settlement stories. In so doing, it intersects with wider debates

⁶ Exceptions are Howitt, Mary (1897) and Gaunt, Mary (1916).

about the ways in which traditional definitions of "history" have tended to marginalise or stifle the voices of non-dominant groups. A related, but differently-focused debate concerns the ways in which women's experience is framed in media representations, particularly those invoking stereotypes based on oppositional terms. Whether she existed or not, the white woman has, like Eliza Fraser, been commodified from the beginning for consumption by a voracious readership, and her story has been appropriated to serve numerous vested interests.

Why is it that in the wake of two decades of feminist influence, contemporary male Australian writers—Malouf, Hall, Davison—present such ambivalent white female characters: either silent, submissive and unapproachably chaste or, the opposite side of the coin, demonised? Malouf's Janet McIvor, a nun, retreats from the world into a cloistered and strangely sterile space within the convent's walls. Hall's representation of the settler's wife, Mrs Atholl, emerges in the final chapter of the novel not as the idealised woman of the narrator's imagination, but its reverse—a perversely "masculinised" woman who ruins any chance that might have existed for peaceable settlement.

Obeyesekere maintains that "myths are bound by time and context and reflect controversies or 'debates' of the period in which they were written." What might it mean, then, that in these recent works *male* white blackfellow figures feed into revisionist myths of reconciliation, but white women are disengaged from the process? Will these ambivalent females eclipse the more robust Eliza Fraser as the model of 90s womanhood in emerging national narratives? Davison's perpetuation of the white woman as silent and idealised—despite its ironic intent—suggests a desire for regression in a feminist age, to the woman who won't, or can't, speak her mind.

To date, the white woman myth appears to have attracted little attention from feminist scholars. Darian-Smith acknowledges that the white woman's "inconclusive and unsubstantiated presence . . . has meant that the 'invisible girl' has been granted more historical and imaginative space than any flesh and blood white pioneer woman" (20). This observation raises a number of questions which Darian-Smith does not take up; questions which are particularly relevant now, as Davison's novel projects the myth to national and possibly international attention. What, for instance, is the relationship between the textually constructed character and the cultural context within which she is produced? And who gets to have a voice in emerging national narratives?



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