AUSTRALIA VICTRIX: FRANCIS ADAMS AND *THE MELBOURNIANS* (1892), A ROMANCE OF NATIONALISM

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In an odd little paragraph published just after the death of Francis Adams, the Sydney *Bulletin* revealed that his mother was: "a writer of girly-girly novels of the *Family Herald* school" (14 Oct 1893: 10). Bertha Leith-Adams was indeed a popular novelist, but these allegedly "girly-girly" novels frequently drew on her life as an army wife, with characters and locations set in military posts. While the novels are mostly structured in the familiar subscription-library triple decker format, the treatment of love and social status includes attention to social problems, such as the difficulties of marriage in *Bonnie Kate* (1891). Bertha Leith-Adams may have been more genteel than her de-hyphenated socialist son Francis Adams, but there is a serious vein of social criticism in her work that is too readily dismissed by the *Bulletin* – just as there are traces of the silver-spoon romance in several of her son's novels. These two writers have more in common than one would think from reading the comments of his Australian literary and journalistic colleagues, but it was all too easy for the *Bulletin* to construct an exaggerated, binary opposition on the basis of their differences in gender, class and attitude to empire.[1]

This paper is not about the work of Bertha Leith-Adams, although that would be a worthwhile enterprise, but about the challenge posed by her son's work to gendered constructions of literary genre in Australian literature, both in the 1890s and to some extent throughout the following hundred years of literary history and criticism. The problem seems to be, as it so often is, that the theoretical construction of masculine and feminine traits to identify distinct generic characteristics tends to be automatically aligned with male and female authors. On the one hand, the masculinist *Bulletin* indulged in clumsy literary commentary on the strength of the author's sex; on the other, the necessary work of recuperating the work of women writers who suffered at the hands of such masculinist criticism has perpetuated a discourse which assumes generic differences on the basis of gender. Interestingly, the genre of romance fiction makes a gendered reading particularly problematic when approached from a postcolonial perspective, one which acknowledges that writers of the late nineteenth century in Britain and the Australian colonies were as likely to be negotiating boundaries of national and cultural identity as those of gender.

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[1] The comparison of Bertha Leith-Adams and Francis Adams by other Australian writers (Sydney Jephcott and James Brunton Stephens) is discussed in Tasker, *Struggle and Storm* 39-40.

The *Bulletin* of the late 1880s and 1890s consistently expressed a preference for masculine realism over feminised romance ("girly girly novels"), with the latter category tending to conflate the otherwise gendered sub-genres of "adventure romance" (masculine) and "society romance" (feminine). This broader opposition, which would relegate a "colonial" novel such as *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn* to the wrong side of the equation, was constructed by radical writers, and expressed by Joseph Furphy in his description of *Such is Life*: "Temper, democratic; bias, offensively Australian." In *Along the Faultlines*, Susan Sheridan reversed that formula to illustrate what masculinist writers and critics thought was wrong with most romance writing in nineteenth-century Australia: "Temper, aristocratic, bias offensively British." She points out that this also tended to translate, both for some writers of the time and subsequently for the radical nationalist tradition-makers of the 1950s, into the "less political and more cultural" terms of literary criticism: "Temper, romantic; bias, offensively feminine" (Sheridan 28).

In *Writing the Colonial Adventure*, Robert Dixon takes up the realism versus romance debate to argue that the relationship between romance and realism in the context of Australian literature was quite differently aligned than in Victorian British literature, and he puts this down to "fractures in imperial ideology around the concept of nation" (Dixon 6). In Australia, "adventure/romance [such as Henry Kingsley's *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*] came to be placed in opposition to literary nationalism, and therefore aligned with the feminine, while realism came to be seen as masculine and egalitarian," with, in radical circles at least, Australian nationalism being incompatible with the celebration of empire. Dixon points out that this was "the reverse of the British situation, where 'King Romance' was defiantly masculine and patriotic," and uncomplicatedly imperial (Dixon 7).

Both Dixon and Sheridan are careful not to over-simplify the relationship between gender and genre; indeed, Dixon's careful teasing out of the relationships between race, class and gender in late nineteenth-century romances is central to his argument (Dixon 4). But the kind of overview study entailed in *Writing the Colonial Adventure* means that the book is chiefly concerned with male writers of adventure stories, with Rosa Praed as an exception to demonstrate the rule. Susan Sheridan's study is explicitly, and for excellent reasons, concerned with the development of a women's literary tradition in Australia.

Although both acknowledge that "women's fiction was not exclusively produced by women nor exclusively read by them" (Sheridan 16) and that women writers could and did work within and against the conventions of adventure romance (Dixon 13), their work highlights a demarcation of genres by gender that leaves Adams stranded somewhere in between. Not only is he a male writer writing novels of domestic romance (including one of the most optimistic New Woman novels of the mid-1890s, *Lady Lovan*), he is also an English writer who strongly approved of what he saw as the newly emerging Australian national identity and culture. As a novelist, poet, and social analyst who wrote for both Australian and British markets,

whose ideas and literary repertoire were formed by both, and who engaged in debates about realism that took place in Australia but drew heavily on British writing, Adams is hard to locate within the literary traditions that have received the most critical attention.[2]

Simultaneously published in 1892 in English and colonial editions, *The Melbournians* deals in detail with local Australian politics while also addressing concerns about Australia's future in relation to Britain. It appeared at a time when novels about Australia were popular in both markets. Indeed, William Sharp, reviewing Tasma's *A Knight of the White Feather* for the London *Academy*, complained: "The colonial novel is fast becoming as wearisome as the political or Irish-historical novel [...]" (31 Dec. 1892: 604; quoted Harris 176).

Adams finished *The Melbournians* after leaving Australia in 1890, and the discussions of local politics look back to early 1888, when Sir Thomas McIlwraith made his electoral comeback in Queensland on the platforms of Protection and Nationalism, before the depression and industrial turmoil of the early 1890s. Adams had been heavily involved as a journalist in McIlwraith's 1888 campaign, and he dedicated *The Melbournians* to Sir Thomas McIlwraith, "Great and generous as a politician, as a man warm-hearted and sincere." Although committed to the Australian labour movement, Adams had found ways of reconciling his hero-worship of McIlwraith with the latter's role in breaking the Great Strike of 1891.[3] His fulsome praise of McIlwraith in 1892 evoked a sour response from the *Bulletin*: "Francis had better return, for it is evident he is out of touch with Australian sentiment" (24 Dec. 1892: 10). Nonetheless, the fall from grace of an individual politician is incidental to this romance of nationalism, and the message of the novel is quite clear: "Australia for the Australians." This is the motto of its hero and heroine, whose democratic radicalism is contrasted with the more genteel values of Anglo-Australian "loyalty", the basis of the "Imperial Federation" that Adams so vehemently opposed in his non-fictional writing.[4]

In *The Melbournians* Adams incorporates his topical political material into a fictional structure that owes more to the conventions of so-called female (or

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2 The binary opposition of romance/realism established by the masculinist realists of the *Bulletin* in the 1890s and after has been questioned by a number of other critics (see Giles, "Romance: An Embarrassing Subject" for an overview of the debate to 1988). The issue of masculinism in the *Bulletin* has been the subject of some debate since Marilyn Lake's *Australian Historical Studies* article in 1986; here, I use it with respect to the ethos of the journal, rather than assuming masculinism as a set of generic and ideological positions shared equally by all contributors to the *Bulletin*.

3 See Francis Adams, "The Labour Movement in Australia," *Fortnightly Review* 1 Aug. 1892: 181-95; and my discussion of the problematic relation between his socialist principles and support of McIlwraith in *Struggle and Storm*, ch. 10.

4 Adams condemns Imperial Federation in passing throughout *The Australians* (1893); see also *Struggle and Storm* 133-36.

"society") romance than to the heroic romances or adventure romances conventionally associated with male novelists in Australia, or even to the early modernist revisions of the romance genre being used to explore the "woman question." A novel earns the "romance" label if it includes an idealised love story and conventional characters, and if it is addressed to a popular audience, the novel-reading public (Sheridan 27). In Australian novels, the demarcation of genres is also affected by the location of the fictional world in town or country. Elsewhere, Adams does write about bushrangers, station life and frontier adventures, but apart from a spot of rabbit-shooting, *The Melbournians* is confined to the mostly urban, domestic world of middle-class romance. Again, in another novel, *Lady Lovan*, Adams begins in drawing-room romance mode in order to subvert such fictional representations of love and marriage; his heroine, a "new woman" of developed intellect and high principles, rejects the middle-class model of family life and leaves her philandering husband to make her own way in the world as an independent woman. In *The Melbournians*, however, Adams sticks with the romance formula in which the happy ending consists of the lovers' recognition and pledging of mutual love.

Given that Adams was connected to the *Bulletin* and its circle of writers, that he shared the nationalist politics espoused by that literary circle, and that he was a champion of realism in fiction, it may seem odd that his fictional work does not align itself with the categories defined by that literary movement as nationalist/masculine realism, as set against conventional colonial feminine romance. Why did he write novels about young women, with domestic settings and very little plot apart from the love stories? Were they simply "pot-boilers," or was Adams deploying popular genres to promulgate his vision of society?

The narrative of *The Melbournians* does explain characters in terms of their social, cultural and political affiliations, and locate them in the context of local/colonial politics, but, for the most part, ideas about imperialism, Imperial Federation, and the desirability of independence for the Australian colonies, are presented more dramatically though their speech and actions. While Adams's romance lacks some of the more melodramatic apparatus of sensation and Gothic fiction (for example an inheritance plot; stark moral distinctions between heroism and villainy; the peril of the heroine), he does follow many conventions of romance: a pair of sisters who are different from each other, with the plain one acting as both foil and cheer leader for the pretty, wilful, charming one; a dead father and an inadequate mother ensuring that the heroine has no appropriate guardian; an "other woman" who is a rival for the love of the hero; and of course the central structure of the love story, the heroine's need to choose between two men and what they represent.

No novel can be completely reduced to a set of conventions, and the conventions of realism and romance are in any case far from fixed. The reception of *The Melbournians* suggests that it could be read as either scurrilous realism or vacuous romance. None of the reviewers particularly liked it. While the Melbourne

newspapers, the *Age* and the *Argus*, found it morally offensive, politically disloyal and inaccurate in its descriptions of Melbourne society, the *Athenaeum* dismissed it simply as an inferior piece of writing:

> Mr. Adams has written better books than *The Melbournians* (Eden Remington), we therefore can advise him to try his hand again. Were our knowledge of his merits confined to what we can derive from *The Melbournians*, we might hesitate to do so. Love-making in both hemispheres is very similar. Shooting rabbits and spraining ankles in their burrows are scarcely sufficient to create any essential novelty in the pastime. We doubt whether even Australian patriotism ever induced a "currency lass" to jilt an English lord for a sub-editor.[5]

Unwilling to allow for an implausible plot, or unhappy to see an able (male) writer indulging in such an "inferior" style of fiction, this reviewer reflects an emphatic distinction between popular fiction and "good novels" that was being established by the end of the nineteenth century.[6] But romance and popular fiction might also mean different things in London and Melbourne, and by 1892, the question of realism was being hotly debated by writers and critics in England and Australia, with some confusion between moral and aesthetic criteria and values.[7]

Francis Adams did not write realism as opposed to romance, or vice versa, but a kind of popular fiction that combines elements of domestic realism and escapist romance. In *The Melbournians*, then, we find both social analysis of Melbourne and a conventional romance plot with rival suitors, one an Australian-born radical journalist and the other a visiting English aristocrat, vying for the hand of a feisty young heroine.

The hero David Stuart had appeared before, in Adams's earlier crime novel, the "realistic and sensational" *Madeline Brown's Murderer* (1887). In that novel, Stuart was an amateur sleuth investigating the sexual assault and murder of an

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5 *Athenaeum*, "Our Library Table." no. 3393 (5 Nov. 1892): 628; for the Melbourne reviews, see the *Age* 31 Dec. 1892: 8, *Argus*, 31 Dec. 1892: 4.

6 For a good summary of the denigration of "lady novelists" and the disowning of romantic traditions in Australia, see Sheridan (37); significant discussions of the construction of popular fiction by modernist as well as masculinist critics include Gaye Tuchman, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change* (New York: Routledge, 1989), and Terry Lovell, *Consuming Fiction* (London: Verso, 1987). Laurie Langbauer's study *Woman and Romance: The Consolations of Gender in the English Novel* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1990) is also cited by Sheridan (40) as arguing that the category of "romance" was constructed as the other to the "novel," with commercial value and literary value being allocated accordingly.

7 Francis Adams's contribution to the debate on realism may be found in his article "Apropos of Mr R. L. Stevenson: A Protest," *Centennial* 2.10 (May 1890): 762-65. See also Tasker, *Struggle and Storm* 95-97.

actress he had chastely worshipped. He survived the dramatic climax of that novel to reappear in *The Melbournians*, older and wiser, but still a figure of youthful Australian manliness and democratic zeal. He is an Australian-born journalist, radical in his political principles and interested in running for parliament, when he meets young Susie McGhie. Susie is a bright, ambitious Australian girl; a Melbournian, finding her way in society and sorting out her attitudes to Australia and England. As in other late nineteenth-century colonial romances, Susie must choose between Australian and English suitors, but in Adams's novel the political or nationalist implications of her choice are explicit.

It is worth noting that her choice of suitor is not as clear-cut as it might be, since the English aristocrat, Lord Morecamb, is by no means your standard blockhead "new chum" or jaded aristocratic cad; the romance of *The Melbournians* is perhaps tempered by a more realistic attempt to negotiate the cultural differences between Britain and Australia. Adams is interested in giving an assessment of the state of the aristocracy through his character, not simply in demonising him. Morecamb is not only urbane and intelligent, but broad-minded enough to accept Susie's political commitment to democracy. However, Susie realises that although she is fascinated by his conversation, and moved to admire his cultural refinement, she isn't much interested in Lord Morecamb for his own sake:

> He had profited by the love-emotion aroused by another man, and speaking there as the interpreter of the cultured civilisation she had so longed for, had been invested by the ideality of that life, not by the magic spell of her fluttering heart. [...] [nonetheless]. She was playing with fire, and was not strong enough to refrain from the entrancing danger. (123-24)

Through a series of misunderstandings, the man she had first been attracted to (David Stuart) leaves the coast clear for his aristocratic rival, whom Susie eventually agrees to marry. This engagement takes place off-stage; it is not very convincing, and the reader knows it is unlikely to last. What brings Susie to her senses and causes her to break off the misguided engagement to Lord Morecamb is nothing less than a news bulletin, announcing that a prominent nationalist politician has won the Queensland election. She promptly ditches Morecamb, accepts Stuart after tearfully confessing her mercenary folly, and promises fulsomely to love him and Australia for ever:

> "Oh," she said, "and now I am so happy, and it can never tempt or trouble me anymore! I will never go to England again, or want to see it or live in it; but here is my home, and the land I love, and the people I love, and the man I love!"

"Darling, darling!" he murmured.

> "And I will try to help you to work for it, and make it free and great; for I do love it, and am proud of it, and would lay down my life for it by your side so proudly, so joyously – for Australia, and democracy, and those who toil and suffer and are robbed, that they may win their rights and be free and happy! Do not smile at me – do not make fun of me!" (297)

(Stuart is not inclined to laugh at her, for all the reader may be.)

The romance plot, then, is explicitly presented as a romance of origins in which the protagonist must "overcome both internal and external obstacles" in pursuit of her ideal (Giles 224-5). The "twist" in *The Melbournians* is that she does this in order to find not only her true life partner but also her political and social identity as an Australian patriot.

Nineteenth-century literary romance in both England and Australia often sets up a choice between suitors, with different moral or social values associated with each of the options.[8] The "choice of suitor" plot was commonly used in Australian novels to explore the growing sense of difference between Britain and Australia. Susan Sheridan gives the example of Rosa Praed, whose heroines,

> daughters of the squattocracy usually having to choose between a local and an English suitor, represent the ruling-class dilemma of whether to identify with British or colonial culture. (6)

As Fiona Giles points out, the process of distinguishing and learning to appreciate the differences between colonial and imperial men could enable a heroine to find her place in the social and cultural order (225). And despite the conventional wisdom about the conventional Anglophilia of female colonial romance writers, the emerging nationalism of the 1880s and 1890s can be seen in the work of other women novelists. Margaret Harris, for instance, contradicts the myth about women romance writers being uncritically "colonial," in arguing that Tasma's *Not Counting the Cost* (1895) "is radical in its bold use of romance conventions to make a nationalist statement so extreme as to be chauvinist" (180). Adams is clearly not alone in his political use of the romance plot, nor was it a peculiarly masculine practice.

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[8] In *Aurora Leigh*, for example, Romney Leigh has the choice of potential wives from the working class and the aristocracy, before he finds his true match in his cousin Aurora. Following Arthur Hugh Clough in her use of this plot, Barrett Browning associates the "choice of suitors" motif with the issue of social class, and the confirmation of social and class affiliations through marriage.

The allegorical deployment of love interests slips easily into the conventional love story of the popular novel. Despite the triumphant union of Susie McGhie and David Stuart at the end of *The Melbournians*, Adams also incorporates some elements of the emerging New Woman genre, or more precisely the "problem of marriage" novel. The morality of marriage and sexual regimentation is questioned on several counts, and Australia is shown to have a social system less punitive than the British. Susie herself is technically illegitimate, because her mother had been rescued from a brutal marriage by the man she then lived with, had children with, and eventually married. This had not prevented the husband from pursuing a successful career in politics (albeit as a radical) – something the novel shows would have been impossible for an English politician. The past does not haunt Susie, except when she goes to England. Even in England, the novel shows most right-minded people taking the side of an injured wife rather than condemning her for living in sin. Adams's views outside of fiction are clearly parallel to these – in *The Australians*, for instance, he praises Australian girls for their freedom from the "rococo" notions of marriage espoused by the English, and the equal footing they share with their partners (152).

A slightly idiosyncratic element in the romance of *The Melbournians* is the treatment of the heroine as an emblem of radical nationalism. The initial description of her is typical of Francis Adams's ideals of an emerging Australian character, while it may also remind us of descriptions of Australian womanhood by writers such as Praed and the feminist journalist Louisa Lawson:

> It would have been hard to have found a more charming type of Australian girlhood than Susie [...]. Medium sized, with the lovely lines of budding womanhood somewhat more marked than twenty years give to her English sister, yet clean-limbed and full of vigour, clear-skinned, clear-eyed, frank, healthy-minded, courageous – as able to take care of herself in town as in country – loving saddle and waxed dancing floor with an impartial passion, quick-tempered and resolute, with the tinge of youth and the flush of genius on her cheeks [...]. (16-17)

She is not just a currency lass, an Australian girl of a slightly higher social class, or an example of the antipodean woman of advanced ideas; she becomes,both to the reader and to her Australian suitor, an allegorical figure of radical revolt, as the following scene halfway through the novel makes clear. Having cornered some rabbits, Susie takes the rifle from her male companion and proceeds to shoot them:

> They paced up the platform together, and he counted the rabbits that lay dead or kicking convulsively in the last agony. There were six [...]. "But the one on the top," said Susie, "I think I hit him."

> Stuart climbed up, and after looking about a little, found the rabbit bundled up dead in a bush, and taking it by the ears, flung it down on to the grass by Susie, who still stood with her gun at easy rest, a thin trail of smoke oozing up from the muzzle.
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> She looked very fine like that, he thought, calm and suppressed, though the blood seemed to come and go eagerly on her cheeks, and her dilating nostrils showed crimson, while a keen and even cruel light played in her eyes and upon her firm, fixed lips.
>
> He came down almost laughing. "Australia Victrix!" he said. "They are seven."
>
> The idea had indeed flashed over him for the moment as he stood above her there that she was the very type of her land – the free, virginal land – fair, intelligent and fierce. Perhaps, if the need were, she might shoot other things than rabbits, and stand with that lovely and defiant courage in other places than the platforms of her native hills. (139-41)

This scene follows closely on the lovers' conversation about the birth of an Australian nation. Susie had asked "and so you think we have stirring times coming?" Stuart replies:

> Stirring times – possibly. It is hard to tell. Protection may give us our nationality without a struggle. England may not consider it worth her while to try and keep us if we have gradually blocked out all her trade, especially if the American market is opened to her [...]. But it will be strange if Pallas Athene is born without armour and war cry. (136)

His choice of Pallas Athene as the mythical emblem for Australia echoes Adams's desire elsewhere to see Australia as the Athens of the Southern hemisphere, but it is also particularly apposite to his vision of Susie herself as a fierce, virginal representative of Australia Victrix.

Susie may be virginal, but she is not sexless or unconscious of the sexual aspect of marriage. Her repentance at the end includes accusing herself of having been willing to prostitute herself in marriage – again, a critique of marriage and class that Adams shares with other radicals, both male and female (George Bernard Shaw, Mona Caird, for example). But for the purposes of this symbolic representation it is important that her youth, energy and even her sensuousness should be fresh and uncorrupted, as she represents a new nation about to be born. The cruelty in her shooting of the rabbits means that the suppressed knowledge of the cruelty of the white race in subjugating the indigenous population is not far from

the surface, but it is as carefully unspoken in this novel as it is in most other domestic romances. The outdoor setting, and the association between guns and politics, make a change from the sitting rooms and gardens in which most of the novel is set.

In *The Melbournians*, then, Francis Adams both uses and departs from conventions of popular romance in order to convey a set of political aspirations, and a strong dose of social critique directed largely at the middle class. I am conscious here of an echo from Susan Sheridan's argument that late nineteenth-century Australian women romance writers challenged masculinist literary orthodoxies by working "within and against the narrative conventions of popular narrative fiction" (Sheridan 57), and it may be that Adams as a male writer occupies a similar position to that of, say, Rosa Campbell Praed. Both write novels that challenge such conventions of gender and genre – but in so doing, are they transgressing boundaries in a way that is in itself performative, making a point? or does our reading of their fiction simply draw our attention to the constructed nature of such boundaries? The question is difficult, and must depend to some extent on notions of readership and reception.

If there is a gender agenda in this novel, I would argue that it is an attempt to radicalise a readership conventionally thought of (by writers, critics, historians) as both female and Anglo-Australian. Instead of dismissing women and/or romance readers as "natural Tories," as many of his colleagues on the *Bulletin* did, Adams was always more inclined to see them as potential comrades, fellow fighters in the war against injustice. This is a novel that both embodies and promulgates the romance of nationalism, and, against the prevailing habits of masculine radical cliques, gives it a feminine generic form.

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