

***Venus in Transit: Australia's Women Travellers, 1788-1930*, edited by Douglas R. G. Sellick. North Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2003. 364, 9 illustrations. ABN 78-910-098-021. \$24.95 (paper).**

Emigration from the British Isles is perhaps the defining characteristic of Australia's history. From the earliest explorations of James Cook and Matthew Flinders and the transportation of tens of thousands of convicts to penal colonies, to the mass immigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Australia was progressively built by new arrivals from the mother country. Douglas Sellick's *Venus in Transit: Australia's Women Travellers 1788-1930* tells the tale of one group of such arrivals whose story is sometimes overlooked. As a frontier nation, Australia's history has often been defined in masculine terms, a narrative of physical fortitude, endurance, and, ultimately, conquest. These themes have their place, but alongside and intertwined with them are women's narratives, as mothers to and daughters of a growing nation, as members of local and national economies and societies, and as explorers and travellers. It is this last theme which Sellick takes as his own. An anthology of women's travel writing about Australia, *Venus in Transit* presents excerpts from the writing of twenty separate women, some Australian, some British visitors, covering the period from the country's founding in 1788 to the more arbitrary date of 1930. The entries stretch from the anonymous "Two Convicts" who recount their experience of transportation, to the famous Amy Johnson, whose solo flight from London to Darwin garnered headlines around the world. The anthology as a whole stands as an excellent document of women's progressive, though partial, emancipation through the first third of the twentieth century.

Women's travel narratives have not escaped the attention of scholars, with work by Angela Woolacott and Deborah Oxley notable among recent studies. *Venus in Transit*, however, is the first substantial edited collection of such travel narratives. Authors such as Patricia Clarke and Dale Spender have mined similar terrain, but the historical breadth of Sellick's selections set his work apart. Most of the entries are travel journals or diaries, though some of the women wrote for a public audience. The diary as a literary form gave women space for internal resistance to patriarchal or class norms and dominant social mores (Holmes 4). Part reportage, part forum for self-analysis, diaries and journals provided an independent forum often not available elsewhere, even for wealthy women such as Lady Anna Brassey, wife of the Governor of Victoria and advocate for the St. John Ambulance Association, and Lady Ida Poore, who lived at Admiralty House in Sydney from 1908-1911.

Sellick's subjects paint a kaleidoscopic picture of life in early Australia through their writing. Rosamond and Florence Hill, sisters who sailed to Australia to visit relatives in 1873, show how the age of the steamer and the new Suez Canal (built in 1869) made travel faster and comparatively more comfortable. This also allowed mail, and thus communication, to move more quickly, a theme of many of

the later-nineteenth century excerpts. Flora Shaw, the future Lady Lugard, details the environmental degradation wrought by colonialism. Mary Ann Parker, the wife of a Royal Navy Commander in the late eighteenth century, articulates the emotional pain of leaving behind family in England. Katherine Kirkland, one of the first women to settle "up country," describes how the masculine nature of that life made relating to women difficult: "I really felt at a loss upon what subjects to converse upon with ladies as I had been so long accustomed to gentlemen's society, and in the bush, had heard little spoken of but sheep or cattle, horses, or of building huts" (58).

Part of the allure of travel writing is the sense of exoticism it invokes in the reader. This sentiment is especially evident in the intrepid Rosita Forbes's depiction of Papua New Guinea, written two years before it was to become an Australian mandate under the Versailles Treaty (1919): "there were alligators, which the natives like to eat, in the rivers, and orange and white orchids hanging in clumps from dripping tree branches" (240). The English opera singer and writer Emily Soldene was taken with the brilliant flora: "I began to understand that Botany Bay meant flowers, not convicts" (130).

The hardships of colonial travel do not go unreported. The Hills recount patriarchal disdain: "one of our captains, in his consideration for 'the sex', laid it down as an axiom that 'no woman ought ever to go to sea'" (110). Lady Brassey describes the harshness of frontier settlement life, from strange social customs to poor sewage and water infrastructure. Sea-sickness is a common foe whether one left port by sloop, steamer, or yacht. Ironically, however, it is the most technologically advanced voyage, Johnson's trans-world flight, which was most dangerous. Bedevilled by faulty equipment and ever-low petrol supplies, crash-landing on a football pitch in Rangoon, and braving driving rain over the Sea of Java, it is a testament to her fortitude that Johnson ever arrived in Darwin at all.

The anthology format has its drawbacks. While there is some social variety amongst the authors, most are aristocrats who travelled in some comfort. Exceptions include the delightful "Martha," who answered a newspaper ad to travel to Australia, left with nary anything to her name, and eventually secured service in several large houses. The women are also all white. Sellick does not shy away from material which presents a frank picture of exploitative relations with Aborigines. Rosalie Hare, young wife to a ship's captain, wrote in 1828 that "[t]he natives are terrible robbers and do all the mischief they can to the settlers" (47). "We have to lament that our own countrymen consider the massacre of these people an honour" (48). Anti-Asian Australian immigration legislation and the concept of "White Australia" are not broached, however. This is especially notable as Sellick uses a quote from Lord Curzon in his introduction to establish the masculine and patriarchal nature of British imperialism – an equal assessment of the notion of whiteness, particularly its explicit Australian variant, is warranted. One also wonders at the impact of the public writings amongst the excerpts on their intended audiences. To what degree were these journalists writing to satisfy an audience?

A more detailed introduction might also help. How, for instance, were the excerpts chosen? Does the author have an organising principle, or was the collection dictated by the availability of sources? How do the excerpts reflect changing developments in Australia's history? The introduction consists mainly of excerpts from the excerpts, with limited exegesis of their import or provenance. A further quibble: page numbers for each excerpt would greatly aid those interested in reading the original sources, especially for those entries where ellipses indicate the author has compiled the excerpt from multiple places in the original text.

Venus in Transit is a valuable introductory source for those interested in travel, women's place in early Australian history, and the country's material culture. Sellick's subjects speak to themes in imperial and colonial history, provide nourishment for students of comparative frontier history, and shed further light on the history of relations between whites and Aborigines. Sellick's work is instructive above all in what it does not do. He is not an intrusive editor, restricting himself to minimal factual addendums in the text itself. His subjects are not thrown up as "case studies" illuminating a specific theoretical position, nor are they treated as archetypes or exemplars. While further introductory exegesis would strengthen the work, the documents are ultimately left to speak for themselves. This mark is the standard of any good anthology, amongst whose ranks *Venus in Transit* must now be included.

Daniel Gorman

Works Cited

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It has been almost twenty years since Dorothy Mermin's significant grouping of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti.¹ Mermin's

¹ "The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet," *Critical Inquiry*. 13.1 (1986): 64-80.