BRITAIN'S INTELLECTUAL EMPIRE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF CULTURE: THE CASE OF MARY HOWITT AND FREDRIKA BREMER

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Across the Victorian period women writers engaged in both travel and translation. They wrote about their travels and they translated foreign language texts with which they came in contact. Both activities are suggestive of their participatory roles in the British imperial project as I will argue. Sherry Simon makes the point in *Gender and Translation. Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* that, for women, translating provided an opportunity to discover a public voice and enabled them to express certain political positions in democratic terms (2). Simon uses the phrase "literary exchange" to describe the impact of translation as connected to a sense of nation and national democratic life. My article, however, considers the possibility that *exchange* may not be the only outcome. While I would want to explore the interchanges which translation brings about, I also want to consider the extent to which translation might prove to be not limited to reciprocity alone but rather, in the form of appropriation or colonisation, might produce intellectual impacts when one culture confronts another.

While I am conscious that this is a concept around which there has been considerable debate, ideas nevertheless warrant interrogation and the best way to undertake this is to think laterally, against the grain even, and as flexibly as the very semantics of the term *translation* may allow. J. Hillis Miller claims in his chapter "Border Crossings, Translating Theory: Ruth," a discussion about the travelling of literary theory across borders which makes a particular case for literary studies and theory, that any words "in any language [. . .] may be translated [. . .] to a different context and be appropriated there for new uses" (208). With regard then to such new use, it is necessary to ask if the appropriation of ideas and cultural material via translation of literary works in particular, might not resemble a form of colonisation. Although apparently non-violent and non-aggressive, translation may only seem so because the translator can often disappear almost completely from sight. Certainly non-violence accords with the gender ideology of the period regarding women's role in society. Nevertheless, the resultant transformations have been wrested from source cultures and are, therefore, acts of appropriation. With these issues in mind I

want now to consider the social, cultural and intellectual impacts of such productions on their targeted anglolexic British audience.[1]

Sherry Simon has argued that translators "communicate, re-write, manipulate a text [. . .] to a second language public" and thus "use language as cultural intervention" (9). It is this notion of cultural intervention via transformed writing which will prove illuminating to investigate. Moreover, discussions such as Simon's liberate the critic from the more limited debate over literal versus free translation. While Samuel Johnson acknowledged in his *Idler* column for 11 August 1759, "that greater liberty was necessary to elegance, and that elegance was necessary to general reception" (215) he nevertheless still concludes, unlike Ménage, infamous for his statement that "like women, translations must be either beautiful or faithful" (qtd. In Simon 10), that praise must be reserved for the translator who can be *both* "faithful and pleasing" (217). While faithfulness in translation was still an issue for the Victorian translator, today the anxiety over faithfulness has receded and translation is the focus of a variety of theoretical interpretations.

André Lefevere, for instance, in *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* proposes the term "rewriting" to explore what I have termed transformation, explaining that rewriters who produce translations (among other literary products such as histories, reference works, anthologies and criticism) adapt or "manipulate the originals they work with to some extent, usually to make them fit in with the dominant, or one of the dominant ideological [. . .] currents of their time" (8). While manipulation as indicated here certainly accords with my own thinking about the function of translation, my preference is for the term "transformation" rather than "rewriting," because the former is predicated on the understanding that the translated text has been changed in a range of possible ways: in character, in function, in condition, in form, in nature, and embraces shifts in focus and emphasis, refashionings, alterations of intensity and meaning, even metamorphoses.

Angela Esterhammer, reviewing Antoine Berman's *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany* (1992) for the *Wordsworth Circle* journal argues of Berman's work that:

> [T]ranslation is clearly but radically defined [. . .] as the model for all forms of transmission between cultures, thus a key aspect of each culture's sense of itself, since it is Berman's belief that cultures only develop a sense of identity by testing themselves

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[1] I discovered this useful term "anglolexic" in J.L. Nelson's *London Review of Books* review of Geary's *The Myth of Nations* and understand it to mean an audience which is English-speaking with limited knowledge of other languages. I have to thank Prof Anne Pauwels for this explanation. See also my article "The Genesis and Commodification of Katherine Langloh Parker's *Australian Legendary Tales* (1896)" (*JASAL. Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 4(2005): 159-72) for further discussion of the way in which transformations might forward and consolidate imperial power.

> against what is foreign and testing the Other against themselves. (233)

Esterhammer's argument accords specifically with my own approach, in particular the idea that one culture tests itself against the other culture (its sense of itself): when ideas and practices travel by the transformation process, producing in the target culture a reader ready to compare and acquire knowledge and information just as a tourist does. There is a strong linguistic and semantic connection between travel and translation which when brought together aids the understanding of the process of transformation, as transformed texts map for the reader journeys across both actual empires and imaginary ones.

My argument is built specifically around the notion of an empire that is not confined to the acquisition of territories and colonies, to the looting of treasure, to the imposition of agricultures and mining, and language and custom. The imperial imperative has broader dimensions than that, not least the need to be seen to be culturally and intellectually superior. In Edward Said's terms, writing as long ago as 1983 in "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community," this concept might be described as "the world of ideas and scholarship on the one hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military force, on the other" (136). Moreover, the British empire in the Victorian age looked back to those empires thought of as the cradles of civilisation, the Greek and Roman. Paolo Bartoloni in his essay "On Translation" asserts that:

> Translation was not a Greek issue[,] simply because Greece was the centre and engine of cultural production. By contrast, translation became a necessity for the Romans from early on. It became the inevitable passage towards cultural ascendancy and primacy. (85)

Like Samuel Johnson who makes the same point in his *Idler* column of 4 August 1759 (212), Bartoloni argues that for the Romans, translating Greek had two primary functions: it was a pedagogical tool "to learn their own language better" and allowed Roman authors to measure their skills against an acknowledged model, resulting in literary homage and artistic competition (85). He makes the further point, however, that "[o]riginality, creativity, imitation and translation" became "intricately enmeshed" (85). The engineers of the British empire had received classical educations which naturally inclined them to make the kinds of comparisons to which Bartoloni points, but more importantly I want to move his argument on a little further, to claim that in the Victorian age, translation into English generally was part of the drive towards cultural ascendancy and primacy, to use Bartoloni's terms.

Women were a part of that drive, assisting the agenda if not its primary agents. As remarked earlier, Sherry Simon in *Gender in Translation* argues that for English-

speaking women translation was "a permissible form of public expression" (2). However, she makes two further and more significant claims. Firstly, that these same women in part contributed to the translation of French, Russian and German modernist texts and "made translation an expression of their political convictions" (2). Secondly, that such literary exchange was to them "vital to the democratic life of any nation" (2). These are grand claims but certainly in my work thus far, on Sarah Austin for instance, women, through transformations from other cultures, do appear to be engaging with a politics of gender and of national identity at the very least. Women, of course, as Eileen Curran has argued in "Holding on by a Pen: The Story of a Lady/Reviewer Mary Margaret Busk (1779-1863)," were more likely to be taught the modern languages, French, Italian, German and "less likely to learn Latin and Greek; they did not have years of training in the construction of a classically turned English sentence, nor were they taught to sort out an argument's logical errors" (12). In spite of this perceived limitation, Harriet Martineau, in her *Autobiography*, claims that any facility of literary expression evidenced in her publications "has been mainly owing to my unconscious preparatory discipline; and especially in the practice of translation from various languages" (1: 123).

While acknowledging their advantage with regard to modern languages, women nevertheless often had to battle against male typesetters and editors who erroneously corrected their translations, as was the case with Mary Busk, the subject of Curran's article (13). Marysa Demoor in *Their Fair Share* argues that despite such difficulties, women rarely express anxiety about their translating practice in part because it was an "acceptable female activity" and because such work, deemed inferior, accorded precisely with the prevailing gender ideology (44-45). Demoor also points to the critical silence regarding those women whose main contribution to letters was translation (45), a silence I plan to remedy.

For my project, perhaps radically, the source text and the changes to it, fidelity or faithfulness, as must by now be apparent, are not the issues with which I want to engage. My interest rests in accessibility (Bartoloni 89) or the reception, both public and anecdotal, of a range of transformations, in the immediate timeframe of the Victorian age, and in subsequent editions in the twentieth century where relevant. In particular I focus on those transformations selected, generated and promoted by women. From such reception I anticipate determining the impact on the intellectual empire and the imperial agenda of cultural ascendancy. To test this hypothesis I plan to explore not the more obvious intellectually demanding kinds of translations by women, George Eliot's of Strauss and Feuerbach for instance, or Harriet Martineau's of Comte. Rather, in this article I will investigate the domestic novels of Swedish author Fredrika Bremer, successful transformations of which were produced for the British market, particularly in the early 1840s, by the author and journalist Mary Howitt. I will consider their impact intellectually on British domestic ideology and the politics of home, as readers, represented for the most part by reviewers, confront a cultural other. By 1856 George Eliot was claiming of

Bremer's novels "[N]o one quotes them, no one alludes to them: and grave people [. . .] remember their enthusiasm for the Swedish novels among those intellectual 'wild oats' to which their mature wisdom can afford to give a pitying smile" (384). Even if the impact of Bremer's writing was short-lived, as Eliot suggests, nevertheless she acknowledges that the novels described manners that "were fresh to the English public" (384) and that they conveyed the "humour, of that easy, domestic kind which throws a pleasant light on every-day things" (385).

Back in 1842, the reviewer of "Novels" for the *Monthly Review* remarks of Bremer's *The Neighbours*, it "is, in truth, 'a story of every-day life,' – a fiction of reality, so far as we can judge of verisimilitude, and of Swedish scenes, character and incident" (513). Laurie Langbauer, in *Novels of Everyday Life. The Series in English Fiction, 1850-1930*, makes the important point that the everyday is "the very medium of culture" (15), and can represent a politics which means contestation in "the struggle to be heard rather than silenced" (18). Langbauer earlier points to yet another silence by omission, the absence of women from theories of the everyday in the work of de Certeau, Freud and Lefebvre. She argues instead for the everyday as a site of political struggle, especially for women (4-5). In considering Bremer's novels, I want to link this political concept of the everyday to both domestic ideology and the politics of home because they had their relevance with regard to empire and successful colonisation, and I will also consider the extent to which these apparently minor offerings by Bremer as transformed by Howitt (and often dismissed as minor precisely because they record the everyday) served both a nascent women's movement and the imperial project.

Between 1842 and 1850 Mary Howitt translated ten novels by Fredrika Bremer, and two novels and his children's stories by Hans Christian Andersen, along with a range of other publishing work and journalism too extensive to enumerate. In the 1850s Howitt translated three more of Bremer's novels and in the 1860s four of Bremer's travel books. Howitt may well have been the first person to render Andersen's famous fairy tales into English although I have located another version also dated 1846 translated by Caroline Peachey. However, it is the far less well-known Fredrika Bremer's work and the significance of Howitt's transformations of Bremer's novels of social and cultural domestic life in Sweden that I wish to explore here. The very titles signal the subject matter, Howitt producing *The Neighbours; a Story of Every-Day Life* (1842); *Home; or Family Cares* (1843); and *The President's Daughters* (1843) in quick succession. These early translations were received with little comment on Howitt's translating practice although in later years her work was subjected to far more severe scrutiny. In part such criticism fed into a current debate in the late 1840s about translating practice as people with better skills and training came into the field. Nevertheless Mary Howitt remains an important practitioner whose work on Scandinavian domestic texts comes at a significant moment socially and culturally for women. The *Athenaeum* reviewer of *The Home; or Family Cares* actually begins the review by celebrating

the fact that the translation is "by an English wife and English mother" and is therefore "good service done to her country" (457), taking reception of the work into the national forum and thereby, I would argue, contributing to the concept of intellectual colonisation.

Fredrika Bremer's work focuses on women, often single women, and what they do with their lives. To this end then her writing revolves around a gendered politics of home in which women's ordinary lives are privileged over other narrative forms. Her writings enabled British women readers to discover that the "Woman Question" was not an isolated circumstance within their own world, but a debate engaging minds in other countries, as Bessie Parkes's significant feminist reaction to Howitt's transformation of *The H.- Family* (1844) demonstrates. The Parkes Letters, held in the library archive of Girton College, Cambridge, provide fascinating detail. For instance, Parkes writes, in a letter to Kate Jeavons, in 1854, a decade after the novel's first publication in English: "But oh how natural Emily seems to me in the H. Family, don't you remember the admirable description of her total reluctance actually to marry, however willing to be betrothed. All very independent women must feel this at times, till – the marriage laws are altered – " (Parkes, MS. BRP VI/59/1 & 2 & 3). This particular novel had been reprinted three times by 1854. In an earlier letter to Kate Jeavons dated 8 March 1849 Parkes records having just read Bremer's *Midnight Sun* (1849) "which like all of hers is a mental tonic and a heart gladdener" (Parkes, MS BRP VI/52/1, 2 & 3).

I begin with these anecdotal reactions deliberately because Bessie Parkes is a key figure in the nascent British women's movement of the 1850s along with her close friend and collaborator Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon. They formed what might be termed a collective for women at Langham Place, London addressing women's issues and Mary Howitt, with Anna Jameson, became a key mentor to the young women involved in addressing their most absorbing topic, work opportunities for middle-class women. It is significant that Howitt offers Bessie Parkes and Barbara Bodichon the example of a woman successfully working and publishing while simultaneously running a household and bringing up her family. It is even more significant that Howitt's transformations of Bremer's novels, in the decade prior to the first viable movement towards resolving women's issues, had such an impact on one of that movement's primary instigators.

One of the earliest reviews of *The Neighbours*, the first of Bremer's novels to be offered to the British reading public, is by Christian Isobel Johnstone, editor and part-proprietor of *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, in the column "New Novels." Notably, Johnstone's review never mentions translation practice at all. Rather, the review is focussed on the idea of cultural exchange. In the final paragraph Johnstone congratulates Howitt for her "useful labours" and states her belief that British readers, "us," still have sufficient taste, nature and goodness to appreciate the work (796). Johnstone celebrates the publication above all because it is domestic, because it explores what she terms "every-day life" and "everyday men and women," or "the

true, the natural, the glowing, the tender, and really beautiful delineations of everyday middle life" (779). The everyday in this novel is also celebrated because it is not corrupted by what Johnstone terms disparagingly "French models"; and because of its unusual freedom in delineating "the inner conjugal life" (779). The "homely details" of housewifery are privileged in her account of the tale, indicating the degree to which for Johnstone this is cause for praise (781). In determining on a politics of the domestic informed by fairly recent and popularised ideas on political economy as the basis for her critique, Johnstone also has in mind the condition or state of the nation, writing:

> it is of the essence of real life among people whom we, in past times more closely resembled, and by whose example we might, perhaps, in some things profit still. If the sunshine of England's prosperity is really on the decline; if every class is waxing poorer; and if many, once comfortable, are *uneasy*, or actually impoverished, lessons of economy, of prudence and order in domestic affairs, were never more required than now. (784)

In similar vein, Samuel Laing for the *North British Review* in "Frederika [sic] Bremer's Novels" uses an extended analogy based on a market economy to introduce the Howitt translations of Bremer's novels as "food for the mind." Laing then claims:

> we cannot be blind to the fact, that the literary interests of the country have thriven remarkably well with this free trade in ideas. We produce enough for our own use and consumpt at home, import very little, and export large quantities to foreign parts in the various marketable forms of history, philosophy, political economy, poetry, and romance. (168)

Laing's words conjure very precisely the idea of an intellectual empire, in particular one based not only on an economy of agriculture and mining, but, as Laing puts it, a "free trade in ideas." He evaluates Bremer's productions as restoring the balance to the exchange of ideas, and overturning the "monopoly of the supply of the home-market," equating "our growers of poetry and romance" with "our growers of wheat and barley" (168).

Laing's closer critiques of the seven titles under review (*Life in Sweden; or the H.- Family*; *The Home; or Family Cares and Family Joys*; *The Neighbours; a Story of Every Day Life*; *The President's Daughters* and *Nina*; and *The Diary*, and *Strife and Peace*) suggest however two very specific but differing responses: first, a positive reaction to the comparatively new thinking about domestic realism in literature, and second, an opposing reaction to a prevailing anxiety about morality

which is ideologically linked to the domestic and therefore to gender. Domestic realism is celebrated as both appealing to English taste and opening up to readers "new scenes and ways of living [. . .] with a reality we can understand and enter into" (168). In this respect his criticism is not all that distanced from Johnstone's. As George Eliot will later do ("the most solid Dutch sort of realism" [385]), Laing compares such realistic scenes to the Dutch School in their attention to small detail while bemoaning Bremer's failure "to produce a grand picture" (179).

Andrew Wawn, in *The Vikings and the Victorians* notes that Samuel Laing's translation of *The Heimskringla; or, Chronicles of the Kings of Norway* (1844) "benefited from well-timed accidents of publication [. . .] a newly-translated story by Fredrika Bremer" that is, *Strife and Peace*, translated by Mary Howitt, which features Snorri's *Heimskringla*. The review in *Tait's* "urges readers to study Laing's translation before turning to the Bremer tale" (108). Not surprisingly, given *Tait's* recommendation to readers that they should consult Laing's book before reading *Strife and Peace*, Bremer's novel receives its chief accolade from Laing as a "natural and delightful Norwegian story" (178) in which the descriptions of Norwegian life and manners are so "lively and true" that they suggest "a spark of the same genius which enables Shakespeare to describe Italy so vividly" (178). In the hierarchy of praise, a comparison with Shakespeare must rank as superlative.

However, in terms that uncannily echo encounters with tales and legends from the various colonies, Bremer's works are condemned as lacking "that tone of pure moral feeling which runs through all our novels" (169). In this aspect, Laing inevitably tests this revealed Swedish other against his sense of a superior English self throughout his review. In determining that Swedish society lacks a high moral tone, he bases this opinion on what he deems unsuitable love stories. He implies that for the Victorians, "Cupid [. . .] has recovered his eye-sight" (179). His statement is based on the perceived superiority of the British political and social system as:

> the natural effect of our free social institutions, in which every man has objects to attain, duties as a citizen of the community to perform, influence, character, independence to acquire, [. . .]. Reason and judgment predominate, and keep all the passions in their proper subordinate places, because reason, judgment, self-command, and moral restraint are daily and hourly exercised and strengthened in the ordinary run of life among all classes in our social state. (179)

This is opposed to a blanket condemnation of what he terms "Continental governments" in which phrases such as "moral idleness," "objectless existence," "functionary system" and "social evil" are tossed into a mix which results in a situation where "the petty decorations and titles gratifying to a childish personal vanity, stand in the place of the more important duties, interests, and objects which

occupy men with us" (179). While Johnstone reads Bremer's work as an opportunity to rethink the functioning of all the domestic relations and more importantly, how to write about them with "freedom" (779), a word she repeats several times, Laing's review, which had begun so promisingly by recognising such rethinking, ends with a long diatribe against the failure of Swedish society to observe the Sabbath and attacks on what he terms that country's "political profligacy" (182). Laing's perception of an England that has resisted and overcome civil and religious oppression and whose politicians are, he claims, guided by the public good rather than personal aggrandisement, suggests he has in mind Britain as a model colonial power. This is confirmed by his concluding quibble over Mary Howitt's use of the word "Excellence" as a title when he invites her to "call at the Foreign or Colonial Office [where] she will hear of His Excellency at many a court or colony, who has no claims to excellence" (183).

My last critique is from the *Monthly Review* where it is announced that "everybody reads Miss Bremer's works" (189). The particular novels under review are again the domestic ones, *New Sketches of Every-day Life*; *A Diary* and *Strife and Peace*. This anonymous critic addresses the poor financial returns for those who undertake translation and cites Goethe as claiming that translation is "the great intellectual traffic of the human race" (190).[2] The point is a vital one and reveals a powerful awareness in Victorian Britain of a sense of intellectual exchange. For this critic what distinguishes Bremer is that she is a "truly national writer" (198) who celebrates the customs and traditions of her country. And for a colonial power any reinforcement of the national ideal as revealed by custom and tradition confirms that power's fitness for the imperial project, and its ability to carry on the intellectual traffic between nation states. More importantly, however, is the way in which for this reviewer, as for Johnstone of *Tait's Magazine*, nation and home are brought together, confirming the equation of the domestic ideal with the national ideal.

Not long after these various reviews appeared, the magisterial *Quarterly* carried an extended discussion of Mary Howitt's translation of Hans Christian Andersen's *Improvisatore*. Full of praise for Howitt's Bremer translations – which it is said reveal considerable skill and judgment and "might be read through as an original" (499) – the unknown reviewer likens translating practice to "the effect eloquently attributed by Canning to steam-power – that of 'creating unexpected neighbourhoods, and new combinations of social relation'" (498). Canning's rail travel metaphor links neatly to Goethe's notion of "intellectual traffic." The targetted British readership finds itself journeying into an "unexpected neighbourhood" via Bremer's Swedish novels and the result of that journey is the

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[2] Possibly from Goethe's *Weltliteratur* (1827). See Fritz Strich, *Goethe and World Literature*, who paraphrases the quotation but does not give the source: "[translation] is an intellectual barter, a traffic in ideas between peoples, a literary market to which the nations bring their intellectual treasures for exchange." Strich adds: "To illustrate his idea Goethe himself uses such images taken from the world of trade and commerce" (5).

eventual transformation of domestic ideology through confrontation with that cultural other.

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