

# NOTES ON THE CONTEXT OF ADA CAMBRIDGE'S *THE PERVERSITY OF HUMAN NATURE*

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Ada Cambridge's short novel *The Perversity of Human Nature* has had little critical attention as part of her considerable output of fiction, though it can be seen as a turning point in her writing career.<sup>1</sup> It shows a remarkable freedom from conventional fictional pieties and it displays the novelist's familiarity with some of the cultural debates of her day. It also makes precise references to the geographical and social features of Melbourne during the Boom years of the 1880s.

The novel first appeared in the Christmas supplement (21 December 1887) to the *Illustrated Australian News*, a monthly newspaper issued by David Syme & Co., publisher of the Melbourne daily *Age*. There it lay forgotten until 1986, when Elizabeth Morrison found it in the course of searching for fiction by 'A. C.,' Cambridge's *nom de plume* as contributor to colonial newspapers. Since Morrison's discovery, the novel has become available in several forms: Lynne Spender published a truncated version of it in her anthology of Australian nineteenth-century women's writing, thereby diminishing its satire to a more simplistic feminist narrative of a woman abandoning an unhappy marriage. The full text is available online at the SETIS webpage and has been printed in book form by various publishers.<sup>2</sup>

By the time of the publication of *The Perversity*, Cambridge was a leading Australian newspaper novelist with at least thirteen novels and numerous short pieces in major Melbourne and Sydney papers: in the weekly *Australasian* and the mostly monthly *Australasian Sketcher*, both published by the owners of the Melbourne daily *Argus*, and in the rival daily *Age*; also in the two Sydney weeklies—the *Sydney Mail* and the *Australian Town and Country Journal*—and there may be others as yet not identified. The *Australasian*, however, was her chief outlet: its editor Henry Gullett accepted her work without question and paid her well for it, until his departure in mid-1885 to join the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*.

Her relations with the new *Australasian* editor, David Watterston, were very different. 'We have hated each other from the first,' Cambridge wrote to the wife of journalist James Smith in September 1886.<sup>3</sup> She had been deeply offended by his interference with her copy and, forty years later, she recalled that this had never happened to her before.<sup>4</sup> The tampering was probably with *Against the Rules*, serialised in the *Australasian* from November 1885 to January 1886. A serious and sad novel of protest against hypocrisy and constraining conventions, it is about the romance and marriage of apparently widowed Barbara Hallam with bachelor bank manager James Lloyd, the subsequent appearance of the abusive husband alive after all, and the consequent shunning of the unintentionally bigamous couple by church, state and society. It concludes with Barbara dying in childbirth and her last words: 'Jim, this is the only way out of it.'

*The Perversity of Human Nature* also deals with inadvertent bigamy and its consequences, but in a satirical, even cavalier vein. It is possible that it was conceived and composed in reaction to the 'indignity' with which Cambridge considered Watterston treated her. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact date of its completion, though it may have been ready by the end of 1886. In early March 1886 Cambridge was hospitalised for long-postponed gynaecological surgery, which left her dangerously ill for some weeks and recuperating in Melbourne for several more (*Thirty Years*, 121-122, 132). By September she was back home in Beechworth, north-east Victoria, and 'getting stronger by degrees' although not able to work or walk much, she told Mrs Smith. Looking at her several undertakings, it is plausible that she composed the novel in late 1886, in the aftermath of her illness and when unhappy encounters with Watterston were uppermost in mind, submitted it to him unsuccessfully for Christmas 1886 publication, and in 1887 offered it successfully to David Syme & Co. when negotiating terms for *A Black Sheep*, serialised in the *Age* during 1888 and later published as the book *A Marked Man*. An alternative possibility is that later in 1887, before getting down to serious work on *A Black Sheep*, she dashed off the Christmas tale and then had it accepted for the *Illustrated Australian News*. That it is set in the seaside suburb St Kilda, from where Cambridge wrote to Smith on 4 March 1887 suggests that around this time she had an opportunity to become familiar with the area.

Rather than a story of a woman's rebellion against domesticity, *The Perversity* is a satire on the expectations of marriage and the selfishness of both practical husband and self-dramatising wife. The dreadful 'secret' of bigamy had formed the main plot crisis of popular sensation novels, such as *Lady Audley's Secret* and *East Lynne*, with the consequent shame of the revelation leading to melodramatic tragedy.<sup>5</sup> Cambridge had relied on it herself for *Against the Rules*. In *The Perversity* it is the source of ironic comedy, despite the cruel despatching of the second wife in childbirth. It appears almost as if the novelist has become tired of the cliché and is ready have fun with it. The novel's appearance as a Christmas tale also shows a level of subversion; rather than an expression of Christmas sentiment, the novel remarks that 'Christmas in these parts is seldom a complete success, under the most favorable conditions.'

The novel gently satirises Lexie's insistence on living out Aesthetic principles in the Melbourne suburbs, making comedy from the contrast between her minimalist artistic taste and Mabel's more conventional Victorian clutter (though Mabel has more of the physical appearance of a Pre-Raphaelite beauty). All of the novel's references to the Aesthetic Movement show Cambridge's familiarity with its milieu. In London, Lexie 'slums' with her friend, Emily Price, in the East End of London; she meets Robert Brown at the Grosvenor Gallery which opened in London in 1877, exhibiting the work of Aesthetic Movement artists such as Edward Burne-Jones. In Chapter II, Emily's cousin, Joe, tells Lexie that Emily has taken up painting and aspires to being like Mrs. Butler and the Montalbas, probably a reference to Mildred Anne Butler, a famous watercolourist at the time, and the four Montalba sisters, two of whom (Clara and Henrietta) exhibited at the Royal Academy and the Grosvenor Gallery. Robert, too, has pretensions to 'artistic' taste, suggesting that Melbourne was not so far from the centre of artistic debate. Certainly, the author was able to keep up with contemporary London fashion.

Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*, another satire on the Aesthetic Movement, was performed in Sydney within months of its London premiere in 1881, but the Australian colonies, unlike America, did not need a special tour by Oscar Wilde to inform audiences about the targets of its satire. Cambridge probably saw a production during its Australian tour. She, too, felt that she could trust her audience to appreciate her references to Lexie's draped Greek or 'greeny-bluey' coloured dresses and the tasteful, uncluttered interiors of the Nest. William Frith's 1883 painting 'A Private View at the Royal Academy' satirises the contrast between women in reformed dress and more conventionally corseted and bustled women; the woman on the right of the painting near the brown-suited Oscar Wilde wears an Aesthetic costume with a flowing Liberty silk drapery while the two women and the child on the left are in more modest reform dress.



William Frith 'A Private View at the Royal Academy, 1883  
[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7f/Frith\\_A\\_Private\\_View.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7f/Frith_A_Private_View.jpg)

Modern viewers may miss the significance of the earthy colours worn by the Aesthetes, with brown, green, yellow and pink clothes, and the occasional flower, distinguishing them. Despite her interest in dress reform, Cambridge, like Frith, found it a subject for satire, and she was to make it one of Margaret's causes in *A Woman's Friendship* (an *Age* serial in 1889).

The novel also delights in the topography of St Kilda in the 1880s, before its decline into a vulgar place of mass entertainment, after the arrival of the cable tram line in 1891. The Nest was probably newly-built in the 1880s before people of fashion retreated to Toorak and South

Yarra. Lexie likes to walk on the Red Bluff to the east of the beach, where her shawl is found. This bluff was excavated by the end of the decade to fill the Elwood swamp and now remains only as the flattened Point Ormond.



Elizabeth Parsons (1831-1897) 'Point Ormond (Red Bluff) St Kilda' 1881

The Esplanade Hotel, a new and fashionable hotel in the 1880s, becomes the scene for the confrontation between Robert's two wives. In the 1890s the Hotel began a steady decline into the twentieth century until its current revival of fame as the setting for the television show, 'Rockwiz.'



View of St Kilda Pier and the Esplanade Hotel 1889

So, *The Perversity of Human Nature* records a precise moment in Melbourne's urban history before the end of the Land Boom, when St Kilda was fashionable, when sail was still an alternative to steam from the port at Sandridge (now Port Melbourne), when the Aesthetic Movement was most influential and some Melbourne women dared to follow the dictates of William Morris about dress and interior design.



While much is supposition, it is clear that *The Perversity of Human Nature* marks a break in Cambridge's literary production. Mocking restrictive and hypocritical conventions in life and literature, it is a provoking end to the decade-long run of newspaper novels that began with *Up the Murray* in 1875 and which are mainly about the making of marriages, suitable and otherwise. It is also a prelude to the full flowering of her literary talent in *A Black Sheep/A Marked Man* and *A Woman's Friendship*, achievements that were followed by the London publication of fourteen bestselling novels. The 1887 'Christmas tale' can be interpreted as a manifesto of intent that from 1888 onwards she would be as outspoken in her literary creations as required for them to express life as she truly saw it.

### Works Cited

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\_\_\_\_\_. *Thirty Years in Australia*. Ed. Margaret Bradstock and Louise Wakeling. Sydney: Sydney U P, 2006 (first published 1903).

<sup>1</sup> Biographers Margaret Bradstock and Louise Wakeling give the novel passing mention in notes: (*Rattling the Orthodoxies: A Life of Ada Cambridge*, Ringwood, Vic, Penguin, 1991, pp. 233, 277); Audrey Tate discusses it as a 'light tale. . . competently crafted,' with touches of irony but which 'falls into melodrama' (*Ada Cambridge: Her Life and Work 1844-1926*, Carlton, Vic., Melbourne University Press, 1991, pp. 149-150).

<sup>2</sup> A dramatic adaptation by Susan Lever was read at the Queenscliff ASAL conference in October 2013 ([https://www.academia.edu/5013265/Dramatic\\_adaptation\\_of\\_The\\_Perversity\\_of\\_Human\\_Nature\\_by\\_Ada\\_Cambridge](https://www.academia.edu/5013265/Dramatic_adaptation_of_The_Perversity_of_Human_Nature_by_Ada_Cambridge)).

<sup>3</sup> Ada Cambridge to Eliza Smith, 1 September 1886, James Smith Papers, MS 212/3, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

<sup>4</sup> Ada Cambridge to George Robertson, 25 December 1924, Angus & Robertson Correspondence, MS 314/20, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Susan K. Martin for this observation, and to Ken Stewart for noting performances of *Patience*.