

***The Anthology of Colonial Australian Romance Fiction.* Ed. Ken Gelder & Rachael Weaver.**

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This new anthology follows two others by the same editors dealing with colonial Australian Gothic fiction and crime fiction respectively. The genre it represents was far and away the most popular with colonial Australian writers and, one assumes, readers. In the 1980s, at the height of the interest in work by women writers, I edited with a New Zealand colleague, Lydia Wevers, two anthologies of stories by Australian and New Zealand women. To find material for the first volume, which spanned much the same timeframe as Gelder and Weaver's, we trawled through the columns of many then little-read newspapers and magazines. With very few exceptions, such as the detective stories of Mary Fortune, we found that women were writing love stories, hence our choice of the title *Happy Endings*, from a story by Rosa Praed called 'A Happy Ending'. Hence, too, our decision to call the second volume, covering the 1930s to the 1980s, *Goodbye to Romance*, to signal the rejection of the romance genre by most of the writers included in it.

Gelder and Weaver were, of course, not restricted to stories by women, though more women than men are represented in their anthology. Of the 18 stories they have chosen, half were written by women, seven by men and two are anonymous, though their content and the pen names used suggest that one was probably by a man and the other by a woman. In the case of some of the stories by men, too, one might quarrel with their classification under the romance genre, or at least want to argue for a distinction between 'adventure romance' and 'domestic romance'. In adventure romance, predominantly written by men, the story centres on the adventures of the male characters and the love interest is secondary, as for example in Rolf Boldrewood's *Robbery Under Arms*. In domestic romance, predominantly written by women, the story centres on female characters, and especially on their success or failure in marrying the right man. Gelder and Weaver ignore this distinction, claiming in their introduction that, although works by men have been included in the anthology, 'The central figure of the romance, however, is invariably the woman, or, in the case of many colonial Australian stories, the girl'(1). This definition does not hold true for several of the stories they have chosen. J S Borlase's 'Twelve Miles Broad', for example, has a male narrator and the central interest of this story is not whether or not he will get his girl, but whether they will be able to escape from a bushfire set by a vindictive tramp. Although one of a number of stories in the anthology sourced from the *Australian Journal*, 'Twelve Miles Broad' bears many signs of originally being written for an English audience, such as its Christmas setting and the detailed description of what the narrator is wearing. Since Borlase had returned to England well before the 1885 date given for this story, it was clearly reprinted from elsewhere.

While the two stories by Henry Lawson included in the anthology are not adventure romances of this type, and were intended for an Australian audience, the central figures are still male rather than female. Both stories, despite their titles, also seem to deliberately work against the conventions of the love story and could be termed anti-romances. The very short 'A Love Story', published in the *Bulletin* in 1893, but not included in *While the Billy Boils*, is an interesting off-cut from 'The Union Buries Its Dead'. As two travellers sit around a campfire, waiting for their billy to boil, one tells his mate about another man 'reported to have been

drowned while trying to swim his horses across a billabong'. After his girl had broken and mended her heart, he turned up alive: 'married her, and broke her heart for certain. And she died.' (144) Here it seems that the speaker is at least still mourning his lost love but Brook, the central character in 'An Unfinished Love Story', is much more cynical in his seduction and abandonment of Lizzie, 'a short, plain, thin girl of nineteen' (146). Brook, as Lawson tells us, 'had been fifteen years in cities' and soon escapes from the bush once more: 'They say that Lizzie broke her heart that year, but, then, the world does not believe in such things nowadays.' (149)

The world-weary cynicism and distrust of emotion that Lawson points to at the end of this story is central to Tasma's 'Barren Love', one of the best stories written in Australia during the nineteenth century. Its quality is even more surprising given that, although Gelder and Weaver date it from its appearance in Tasma's 1890 collection *A Sydney Sovereign*, it was first published in 1877 and was her first publication. That this story has not become as well known as several of her other stories can partly be explained by its length, partly by its more limited Australian content. Like several other stories chosen by Gelder and Weaver, it centres on the long sea voyage to Australia and the opportunities this provided for romance and seduction. (As a modern take on this topic, Annamarie Jagose's *Slow Water* (2003) is highly recommended.) Although the woman in Tasma's story is just as in need of male support as the seduced wife in 'Hal's' 1866 'The Desolate Homestead', the central male character here, referred to chiefly as 'the cynic', does not attempt a seduction but provides material comfort for her during the voyage and ensures that she not only survives the final shipwreck but does so as a wealthy woman. Gelder and Weaver's introduction refers to the protagonist of 'Barren Love' as 'a cynical man' and fails to place the story in its post-Darwinian historical context. The cynic is introduced to us as a scientific materialist: 'On principle, he was antagonistic to love, the mere display of which would have been nauseous if it had not been so ludicrous!' (47) But the cynic is as unable to control his emotions as he is his body, suffering from sea sickness as well as love sickness, and continually being subject to Tasma's ironic gaze. Her focus here on characterisation rather than plot as the driver of the narrative is one of the things that distinguishes this story from others in the anthology.

By the 1890s, when most of the chosen stories were written, women were being portrayed more positively or, at least, as no longer so dependent on male protection. In another shipboard story, Francis Adams' 'Miss Jackson', it seems that the seduced woman gets her revenge by pushing her seducer overboard! And in Mrs Mannington Caffyn's 'Victims of Circe' it is a woman who is the seducer, though she in turn is thwarted by an older woman of the world who is more than a match for her. Other stories, as the editors note, feature that distinctive figure of the decade, the Australian girl. In Ada Cambridge's 'A Sweet Day' the heroine's insistence on working at her beehives, along with her other good qualities, wins the love of a visiting English lord. In E W Hornung's 'The Larrikin of Diamond Creek', the poverty-stricken bush girl takes the more radical step of pretending to be a bushranger but again succeeds in winning the heart of a visiting English clergyman – this is a nice addition to the better-known stories of cross-dressing women from this period. Francis Adams' 'A Bush Girl' again gives us the Australian girl from the point of view of a visiting Englishman but this time without the happy ending. Jack Reid is initially very critical of Elsie Nowell who has taken an equally radical step, crossing class rather than gender lines to work as a servant after her father has lost all his money. He finds her 'far too independent and argumentative' to fit his conservative notions of how women should behave but of course still falls in love with

her. There are some interesting anticipations of *My Brilliant Career*: Elsie strikes Jack with a whip when he insults her and at the end of the story prefers to accept another job as a maid rather than his proposal of marriage. Her denunciation of him is more than worthy of Sybylla: ““ You insulted me once and I struck you. Do you know you’ve just insulted me again? Your wife? Marry you? Go home with you to your wretched, slavish England? Why, I tell you I’d *scorn* to be your wife! I’d die rather! It makes me sick to *think* of it!”” (111). Did Miles Franklin read this story before writing her novel?

While a more extended introduction would have been welcome, *The Anthology of Colonial Australian Romance Fiction* does bring many now mostly forgotten writers and their stories back into print. Between them, they provide new insights into life in nineteenth-century Australia, with the changing representation of women being especially highlighted.

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