A LOST NOVEL BY GEORGE CHAMIER (1842-1915)

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GEORGE Chamier is familiar to New Zealand scholars as a 19th century novelist and essayist who satirised many cherished social and cultural obsessions of the period. Chamier's two New Zealand novels provided a fairly comprehensive picture of the life and institutions of the North Canterbury region in the 1860s and 1870s in an enjoyable narrative. The wider context includes key religious, economic, imperialist and sexual issues.

Inevitably a few early reviewers assumed Chamier's boundary-breaking novels to be a colonist's rambling reminiscences. They found them baffling, due to their lack of a conventional plot.

Chamier's works, and with them the chance to debate the significance of his contribution to the cultural heritage of Australia and New Zealand, are in danger of being lost. Sadly, although Chamier spent no more than seven years of his young manhood in New Zealand, it is only there that his name is established. He is virtually unknown in Australia where he spent the rest of his life (from 1868 to 1915). Chamier's name doesn't appear in any Australian literary reference guides, and there is only a perfunctory entry for him in the Biographical Register to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography.*

However, while New Zealand readers can now at least discover his existence, thanks to the recent publication of the Oxford and Penguin literary histories, the first really substantial reference works to appear, gaining access to the books themselves is not easy. The first hundred or so years of New Zealand's fiction is still largely inaccessible, except through specialised library collections. Despite Chamier's reputation in New Zealand, only *A South Sea Siren* has ever been reprinted there. It was reissued in 1970 in the 'New Zealand Fiction' series, a shortlived attempt by J.C. Reid and Auckland University Press to recuperate 'some of the most significant novels' of the country's literary legacy.

In New Zealand Chamier is acknowledged as 'the most significant Pioneer novelist' (*The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English* 109), one of only two to whom 'we can return with any pleasure'. He is praised for the 'sustained criticism' of his writing with its insight into colonial and ecological exploitation (*Penguin History of New Zealand Literature*).

Chamier came to Australia in his twenties, married, raised three children, and wrote all his works here. From the late 1860s he practised his profession of civil engineer in Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, and finally New South Wales, along the way becoming a consulting engineer with international clients. His third and hitherto unknown novel, *The Story of a Successful Man: An Australian Romance* which never appeared in book form due to the sudden death of its publisher and the resultant loss of the manuscript, is set in Australia. Fortunately a press copy survived.

Philosopher Dick, *A South Sea Siren* and *The Story of a Successful Man* are interesting to me because in seeking to displace some colonialist and capitalist discourses the texts are more resistant than complicit, less radically compromised than many of their contemporaries.

Chamier's fiction is also interesting because it breaks the boundaries and conventions of traditional genres, does not underwrite any single perspective, plays with fictionality and fictions, and critiques various discourses via such means as parody and intertextuality. The three novels draw attention to their own textuality and foreground writing in a variety of destabilising ways.

Philosopher Dick has many intertextual links, including to *Rasselas* and *Candide* in its problematical protagonist's search for truth, the secret of happiness, and a vocation in life. As a novel of development it also owes something to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*.

The experiences of the ironically-named Richard Raleigh (suggestive of romantic gesture, adventures in and exploitation of the new world) are deflationary, lacking the romantic aura one expects of conventional, melodramatic colonial novels. There is no false glamour, or sentimental pathos. The anecdotal material, including the boys' own stories, is also either comic or deflationary.

For Richard the colonial enterprise had promised, not glamour, but freedom from the political, religious and other ills of the Old World. He particularly rejects the nineteenth-century belief in progress, that success equals happiness, with its guiding principle, 'Does it Pay?'

In the *Penguin History of New Zealand Literature* Patrick Evans speculates that with *Philosopher Dick* and *A South Sea Siren*, the 'volumes of a trilogy began to be published'. 'The lack of a third title', he claims,

> suggests the principal limitation of Chamier's trilogy: he seems to have been unaware that he was writing one . . . Raleigh spends most of the first novel hidden away in a shepherd's hut in revulsion from the ruck of colonial life and stewing over the great abstracts of the age. In the second novel solitude forces him . . . into the small North Canterbury town nearby, where he can stew over the great abstracts in company . . . A third novel seems promised, one that explores the theme of urban responsibility; but Chamier yielded instead to the temptation to write a treatise on drains. (59-60)

This is a reference to one of several technical papers presented by Chamier, a good joke which Evans wasn't tempted to spoil by recalling Chamier's subsequent publication of his collection of essays on philosophical and literary themes, *War and Pessimism* (1911).

Evans seems wistful for closure here, but one of the attractive features of Chamier's two New Zealand novels is their lack of closure, inviting reader participation. Will Richard marry Alice, and on what terms? What sort of legislator will Seymour be? What sort of New Zealand will emerge? And, above all, how will that huge absence in the novel, the Maori people, be served by Richard's proposed vocation of journalism? Early in *Philosopher Dick* we are told that he had come to the colony 'when the Maoris were on the warpath'. Nothing of significance is said about the people of the land until the conclusion, where with surprise we hear of Richard's intention to write a series of leading articles on 'The Native Question'. Is the relationship of Richard and his object of knowledge (the Maori people) going to replicate colonialism, that is, is it going to be one of power and domination? An appropriation of voice after the appropriation of land and agency? Or will his writing at least be counter-discursive, in line with much of his thinking so far? However, the odd thing is that Chamier did write his next novel on urban responsibility.

It was probably in Adelaide that Chamier wrote *The Story of a Successful Man: An Australian Romance* (1893?). This very readable (and perennially topical) novel fills a significant gap in our literature. Judith Woodward (1975) notes the 'conspicuous absence of the 'city' as a dominant subject or theme', finding it ironic that 'very little literature

produced in the 1890s seems to have dealt directly with' the 'general economic collapse . . . and the consequent economic depression' centred so heavily on Melbourne.

Chamier's novel is a valuable lost fictionalisation of 'Marvellous Melbourne' circa 1860 to 1890 'when Melbourne was flashy and Sydney was slow' (Serle), and of the widespread economic disaster consequent on the hectic times and dangerous entrepreneurs (cf Victoria, and West Australia a hundred years on). Previously only memoirs (such as George Meudell's *The Pleasant Life of a Spendthrift*, and Ada Cambridge's *Thirty Years in Australia*) and histories (Michael Cannon's *The Land Boomers*, Graeme Davison's *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne*, and A.G. Serle's *The Rush to be Rich)* have provided such a detailed version of a period usually only glanced upon in fiction. It was a time when, in Michael Cannon's words, 'the big speculators were selling to the middle speculators, the middle speculators were selling to the small speculators, and madness was in the air' (97).

Chamier satirises people, events and values associated with Victoria's land and railway boom and bust, a period of suburban sprawl, wild speculation in land and building, shady business dealings, and banking and investment practices, of fortunes made and modest savings lost. A time too of political deadlock and intrigue, of widespread patronage, bribery and corruption. The novel called up recent and notorious events, and its characters bore resemblances to living people.

'One of the remarkable things about Melbourne', Laurie Clancy said in *The Imagined City: Melbourne in the Mind of its Writers* is that:

> until recently it had no definite literature of its own: nineteenth-century Melbourne is usually mentioned only in passing, or in a glowing chapter on the progress made in such short time. There is a lack of writing about the suburban sprawl.

Chamier's Melbourne novel, a deconstruction of the very notion of 'progress' (as well as 'success' and the 'smart man') which constituted one of the dominant ideologies of the time, necessarily includes the suburban sprawl.

If *Philosopher Dick* and *A South Sea Siren* saw the colonial project in terms of self-serving and exploitative materialism, the pragmatic working out of the nineteenth-century belief in 'Progress' and the ideology of individualism to the exclusion of Richard's idealistic notions and the conscious or unconscious obliteration from most of the text of the indigenous people, *The Story of a Successful Man*, with its ironical subtitle, *An Australian Romance*, represents colonialism taken to its logical capitalist and individualist extreme in 'Marvellous Melbourne', a ready-made concrete symbol.

The myth of 'Marvellous Melbourne' was powerful and exclusionary, it occluded the unscrupulous nature of much financial dealing (railways; land; buildings; public service; banks; building societies; politics and patronage) as well as the range of victims of this new form of 'Gold Rush'. It was an extension of the colonial idea – new land equalled a new opportunity – for a self-serving power struggle. It also involved rivalry and emulation of the Imperial centre.

The novel, a first-person narrative, purports to be a 'memoir' of Fred Power, a millionaire entrepreneur, written by Tim, a self-styled 'mere chronicler of the facts', who has known him since their school days. Fred had emigrated because 'the old world was played out'. His aims, having missed the gold, were speculation and enterprise. The novel concludes on a lengthy fake newspaper obituary, an excellent representation of official discourse in the genre of (hypocritical) eulogy, which, among other things, unpacks such terms as 'enterprise', 'patriotic', 'philanthropist', and 'public benefactor'.

The Story of a Successful Man engages with the discourses which produce such texts

as the colonial memoir, certain kinds of newspaper reportage and official obituary, glowing advertisements for subdivisions, each of which articulates a different 'Australia', and underwrites the worship of money elevated to a virtue.

The ideological function of the genre of memoir of a millionaire businessman such as Fred Power, belongs to capitalism linked in this case to colonialism. It exists to assert the social value, and moral rightness of his activities where wealth equals merit. Such a memoir would typically sketch out his education, early training, career moves, business coups, marriage, honours, membership of power groups (Parliament, Clubs, Knighthood etc), his acts of philanthropy, and his death. A nineteenth-century Australian example might also typically require 'recognition' from Europe, a validation of the subject's worth by the 'mother country' as well as conspicuous consumption at home, his daughter married to a title, his son to inherit the business or achieve honour in some other field. *The Story of a Successful Man* both uses and disrupts this pattern disturbing the conventional values of the genre. Fred Power is an out and out crook, but working within the law, and the dominant ideology of 'success'. He believed in the Scotch adage: 'Make money; honestly if you can, but make money!', any means justified his ends.

The direct link between money and official greatness/goodness is vividly symbolised by two separate publications which appeared in 1888 at the height of the Boom. A subscription of six guineas for its two volumes got you an entry in a publication called *Victoria and its Metropolis*, a compendium of 6,000 biographies compiled by Alexander Sutherland – the concluding Obituary from *The Story of a Successful Man* epitomises the sort of adulatory account one would have found in this biographical encyclopaedia. For the price of ten guineas you could see your name in a grander publication called *Australian Representative Men*. These two publications, however, equally symbolise the attitude of the successful men who appeared there, to their moral and financial obligations in general. In *The Rush to be Rich*, Geoffrey Serle writes: in 1889 'the courts were cluttered with cases against those who had not paid up' (285).

Against Fred Power the text places Tim, the naive, fairly conventional, sometimes platitudinous narrator. Tim had emigrated expecting

> to meet with quite another order of things with boundless vistas of opportunity, freedom, and adventure, instead . . . [he found] all the concomitants of the most advanced 'development' – the 'master' in 'bell topper', the wigged lawyer, the advertising quack, and the hangman. (9)

'In Australia, in those days, I found that Money was the god, and the "smart man" his prophet' (14-15).

Other competing voices and viewpoints, notably those of Joe Spice and Tim's wife, are also used. Although some of Tim's values are obviously endorsed against those of Fred, it is not possible to see him as hero to Fred's antihero, due to his often self-contradictory position especially on marriage laws and divorce – and his ambivalent even complicit role. In part at least, Tim represents the official discourse of the times, on marriage, family, the cult of Home, which are his defence against his own compromised position, located as he is within that ideology. The worst excesses of the speculators involved *suburban* land. The Land Boomers cynically played on the ideology of 'home' and 'family' in particular to entrap buyers. The greatest victims of their swindles were the middle class, the thrifty, the saving (cf late 1980s in Australia when the high interest rates, recession and consequent unemployment – due to the collapse of the stock market/ Bond etc – reduced the size of the middle class).

Most Australian fiction of the period couldn't or wouldn't articulate the struggles for

power which actually take place under colonialism/capitalism. Chamier shows how discourses are mobilised to serve various individual and group interests. Through Tim and Fred the text foregrounds some of the ways in which subjectivity is discursively constructed. The hegemonic force of the concept of the 'smart man' becoming the self-made/successful man, and ultimately the Representative Man, also settles a blindness on what is marginalised by it. However *The Story of a Successful Man* draws attention to both Colonialism's/Capitalism's power base as well as its excluded others in detailing Power's self-aggrandising charitable endowments. Here we find included as beneficiaries all the institutionalised bases of society, producers or products of the official discourses, the church, universities, institutes for the disabled, the arts and sport etc. In addition Fred 'gave liberally for the cause of morality' as well as furthering empire by erecting public statues and financing expeditions, and he donated money towards the 'conversion of the aborigines' – Aboriginal people in Victoria already largely deprived of land, voice and agency by the colonisers, now had to be homogenised and controlled by means of the Christian religion.

Fred's philanthropy was 'strictly business' however. Excluded from his munificence was everyone robbed of agency and of voice in the profit struggle resultant upon colonisation, 'the sick, the poor, the widow, the orphan, private distress did not touch him at all'.

In this text patriarchal marriage is part of the critique of capitalism, Fred's wife is colonised too. Fred marries for use – regular meals, the use of his wife's name to conceal financial holdings and investment activities, and for an heir to inherit the money. His self-serving view of marriage is set against Tim's which is founded on mutual 'affinity'.

Tim's life might be seen as representing the banal ideal of middle-class *Gemutlichkeit* except that it is never very secure; he suffers several harsh setbacks, his occupation is uncongenial, and through his legal work conveyancing for Fred's corrupt projects, he is also part of the very system which he despises and which the text exposes so savagely. In 1870 Marcus Clarke asked: 'What should we do with our boys?' And answered: make a Swindler of him, give him a knowledge of law and experience in commerce and 'he will in five or six years accumulate an honourable fortune' (qtd. in Davison 3).

Tim's situation is deeply at odds with the text's deconstruction of the law. Tim, therefore, represents the ambivalent ambiguous position people are forced to occupy, an excellent example of interpellation. After a few years he had escaped from Fred's office to work for the Public Service, but ten years later became an innocent victim of the infamous 'Black Wednesday' dismissals. After this he is fortunate, at his age, to be offered a partnership in Fred's firm – although only under cynically exploitative terms. There is a deep split between Tim's personal values and his work situation. No split exists for Fred Powers, who is equally self-interested at home and in his entrepreneurial activities.

This textual strategy reveals the corruption of 'innocent' citizens, showing there is no outside position. Naive, ingenuous Tim, a pawn in Fred's activities is expendable in the wider politics, both Fred's and the colony's. The text invites, even compels, the reader to acknowledge the deeply ambivalent position of 'good' men. None of the male characters can be taken as unequivocally embodying the positive values in the text.

Our discourse of the nineteenth century is dependent upon what has been preserved. And this is partly a result of ideological/political forces: who controls publishing and the curriculum, who gets academic jobs and funding. And partly it is accidental: if *Philosopher Dick* was in print, if Chamier's publisher of *The Story of a Successful Man* hadn't died. . . .

The texts that have been preserved reflect the forces within publishing and teaching

and the changing nature of the questions that interest us. We are no longer as interested in endorsing/ formulating a central mythology as earlier generations of Australians were (the texts of outblokery etc). Our interests now are more in how we tell stories, within which social contexts they have significance, and how our narratives and narrative conventions determine and are determined by our emotional/political/social and economic transactions. These seem to be the kinds of questions that very much interested Chamier too. Chamier's texts, then, are overdue for reassessment, not just for how they will enlarge the existing field of nineteenth-century Australian literature or lead us to reassess it, but for our shared interests in textuality and the politics of narrative.

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