

MABEL FORREST AND THE WITCH

Marie-Louise Ayres - Australian Defence Force Academy

Several years ago, I had the pleasure of researching *The Home* magazine of the 1920's, scouring it for poetry by Australian women. Two editions of this beautiful magazine included poems by Mabel Forrest, a writer of whom I had never heard, and the two poems - 'Kassaptu (the Assyrian Witch)' and 'The Burning' were very exciting 'finds'. They had an immediately apparent vigour and 'bite' and were especially interesting because they seemed to highlight my observation that the period from around 1910 to around 1925 was one in which the majority of women poets, at least, were filling their poems and their landscapes with all sorts of improbable creatures— pixies, fairies, goblins and witches. At the same time, of course, Hugh McCrae was populating a whole world with centaurs, nymphs and satyrs, McKee Wright introduced various Irish fairies into his work, and others such as Mackellar and Deamer were exploring similar territory. But as I read more of Mabel Forrest's works, I became less interested in the possibilities of a wide-ranging interest in fey mythology than I was in an apparent puzzle - how, I wondered, could somebody who had written such strong poetry, also write so many banal novels? As I ploughed through Forrest's Queensland romances, with far more dedication than pleasure, this puzzle remained. This paper is a combination of renewing our acquaintance with a once popular writer who has virtually dropped from sight, and an attempt to tease out some aspects of this problem.

Mabel Forrest was born in 1872, raised in the Darling Downs, and died in 1935, and in her day she was extremely popular. Bertram Stevens called her 'The most prolific writer of verse in the Commonwealth' (*Melbourne Herald*, 25 Oct 1919) and noted that Forrest had been published 'in every Australian newspaper and magazine in which original verse is printed', together with respectable English and American periodicals. Before her novel 'Golden Gulf' was serialised in the *Brisbane Daily* in 1932 *Aussie* reported the Agent-General, General Spencer-Brown as saying that 'M. Forrest's work was a precious diadem on the brow of Queensland.' (15 Dec 1931). Her 1924 novel *The Wild Moth* was made into the Chauvel film 'The Moth of Moonbi' in 1926 and several of her short stories were evidently translated for the European market. When she died in 1935, her death was widely reported across the nation, and a plaque honouring her memory was erected at the Town Hall in Brisbane.

Almost immediately after her death, however, Forrest seemed to disappear from literary memory. She receives a brief mention in Noel Macainsh's 1988 article 'A Fair Menace: Images of Womanhood in Early Australian Poetry' (*Westerly* 33.3 25-32), and Susan Sheridan devotes part of her chapter on 'The Romance of Experience' in *Along the Faultlines* (1995) to Forrest. Forrest's working life was meticulously documented by Gwen Fox in Honours and Masters theses at the University of Queensland in 1984 and 1986, but apart from a couple of very brief notes Fox's biographical and bibliographic findings have not seen wider publication,

and Fox herself died soon after completing her work. Fox convincingly portrays Forrest as a woman who decided to, and indeed did write 'for her bread', who wrote leaders and poems on demand for various papers for more than twenty years, and who was truly a celebrity. She documents a life stranger than fiction, and discovered enough published and unpublished works by Forrest to fill a closely typed bibliography of some thirty five pages. Like me, and with the added benefits of her impressive gathering of documentary material before her, Fox wondered how Forrest managed to be so effectively hidden from the view of Australian literary history, and I hope that in teasing out some of the contradictions apparent in her works that I may be able to partly account for this.

It was witches that first introduced me to Forrest's poetry, and it is with witches that I concern myself here. The 'witch' is a strongly recurring motif through Forrest's poetry. In her 1927 *Poems* at least 10 of her 79 poems are largely concerned with witches, although interestingly this preoccupation is not so evident in her *Alpha Centauri* published in 1909, and perhaps just before the apparent mania for European fey creatures. Several other 'witch' poems were published in *The Bulletin* and *The Lone Hand* between 1910 and 1925, and the novel *White Witches* was published as late as 1929. Witches, then, occupied Forrest for more than 20 years. Indeed, Gwen Fox managed to piece together Forrest's last known work, another 'witch' poem, written just two weeks before she attempted suicide in late 1934 (Fox 1986 xviii). In this paper, I confine my observations to only four of Forrest's witch poems (all taken from her 1927 *Poems*) and juxtapose them with three of her novels, *The Wild Moth* (1924), *Hibiscus Heart* (1927) and *White Witches* (1929), in which witch and other Celtic symbolgies appear to an increasing degree.

Many of Forrest's witch poems seem to use the witch as just another part of the fey world of fairies and pixies—in them, the witch is fanciful and decorative and does not encroach into the human world. But in the four poems under discussion here, the image of the witch is powerfully implicated in interrogations of gender, patriarchy and the domestic world. In two of the poems, 'The Burning'(61) and 'The Harrying'(91), the witch is depicted as victimised and sacrificed to the cause of maintaining the hegemony of a domestic Christian ideology. In both, the witch's sexuality is the site of her crime and punishment. In 'The Burning', which is a particularly chilling poem, the witch is burnt *because* two opposing paradigms of womanhood - the virgin and the strongly sexualised woman in touch with nature cannot be reconciled in the prevailing ideology:

For she was just a girl with little wrists -
And great Madonna eyes...Part of her crime
That she should look like Mary! her small breasts
Glimmered among her rags...

The exorcism of this powerfully disruptive figure is also the subject of 'The Harrying', set, like 'The Burning' in a specifically Anglo-Celtic context, with many references to the North Sea and other elements of that landscape. But in this poem, it is a group of 'guid wives' who are intent on harrying the witch to her death by drowning, and it is the wives' jealousy of their husbands and lovers which

drives their actions:

Had she been less fair we might let her be!

Their accusations against her all concern her disruption of hearth and domesticity, a disruption which sees their men becoming more primal, pastoral harmony disrupted and the marriage contract come under threat. Forrest is heavily ironic in her continued use of the term 'guid wives' who are quite prepared to be not so 'guid' in the protection of their position.

The witch as victim is not, however, the only way in which witches, sexuality and ideology are represented in Forrest's poetry, and 'Kassaptu'(138) in particular puts the witch into the robes of power, and figures mortal women as *her* victims. Most of Forrest's witch poems, like the two just discussed are set firmly in an Anglo-Celtic landscape and context — her witches are those of the woods and of the North Sea. Kassaptu is a more exotic witch, sitting as she does, outside the walls of Babylon, attuned to the desert landscape around her. She is fearfully observed rather than hounded, feared because of her powerful sexuality, aided by her magic, able to snare the men of mortal women, who have only their mortal charms to offer. As a witch, concerned with the business of transgression, she makes 'flowers out of clay', 'sits always in the shadow of the wall', and appears to cross firm gender boundaries with her hair 'braided like a warrior's of the race'. Men never seem to 'see the things she does at all' — the spells which she weaves to enchant them — but others can 'understand' her spell, and see that the power of the witch saps their own. It is, indeed, the maidenly speaker's 'faint heart' which understands the witch, and that maiden is, she tells us, 'languishing with fear lest [her lover] should pass this wall/Coming in his chariot . . . out of Babylon'. In this poem, the witch is not so much an intruder into domestic harmony, as she is an intruder in the erotic relationship between mortal man and mortal woman. Forrest's sympathy remains firmly with the witch and her appetites and she is quite dismissive of the faint hearted maiden.

The witch herself does not generally have a voice in these poems: she is more often observed by unsympathetic and fearful eyes. 'The Shadow of a Bee' (18), however, gives a voice to a young woman, who, in the juxtaposition of her driving sensuality, and her determination to evade the restrictions of patriarchy, seems to suggest a witch in the making:

Your pride yourself (the way some churchmen do,
Following the Book) your duty here is done,
Leaving me prone, a crushed and crumpled heap
Of penitence! A wilful, foolish child,
Feeling the rod that heals her of her shame
That she may live to holiness and turn
The wild life-forces into sacred use.

Note here the disjunction between shame and sacred, between holiness and 'wild life-forces'. The references to the rod firmly situate this poem as concerned with

patriarchy and with punishment, and more importantly with the young woman's spiritual escape from punishment. For although the apparent discourse is that of repentance and conformity, this young woman is actually pretending repentance while continuing to rebel:

Belike my heaving shoulders aped a storm
Of self-accusing, waking modesty;
But underneath my down-dropt lids I saw
A tasselled moor the summer whips to bloom;
And lovers, to each others' bodies held,
Breathing hot gorse and drunken with the sun!

The eroticism of the lovers here echoes an earlier nature based eroticism in the poem:

That bee was brown and gold,
And smelled, I knew, of heather-tops and grass,
And slow, sweet primrose honeys of the hive.
Its hairy legs at noon were gripped by flowers
In near embrace, and still it ached of them.

Two general points about this set of poems employing this 'witch' motif need to be made at this point: the first is that they are set firmly in far off landscapes; and the second is that Forrest's voice is cool, ironic and self-reflexive, contributing to the strong impressions of a purposeful undermining of the paradigms of patriarchy, domesticity and a prescribed femininity.

I turn now from a hairy legged bee to a 'wild moth', or rather to three novels which see Forrest increasingly attempting to transfer or 'graft' this Celtic mythology onto the Queensland landscape in which she sets her romances. There is an appreciable increase in the presence of this mythology and, in particular, of the incarnation of the witch over the course of these three novels. In *The Wild Moth*, published in 1924, this symbology is rather nebulous and un-named, and is subsumed into a generalised meditation on the sea, and in the heroine's constant (and, by the end, extremely irritating) self-description as a 'sea-thing' needing a 'leaf-thing' to set her course in life (58 et al). In addition, the novel includes an overt discussion on the place of Celtic mythology in the Australian bush. In *Hibiscus Heart*, published in 1927, any doubts about whether such a mythology can be grafted onto another landscape are tossed aside, and in *White Witches*, published in 1929, the witches — a number of ghost gums which appear to have a magical influence over the distinctly Celtic characters who live near them — have actually taken centre stage. A fundamental paradox may be traced in all three of these novels which see Forrest increasingly grafting or crossbreeding this Celtic mythology onto the Australian bush landscape, while at the same time betraying extreme anxiety about racial and sexual purity.

In the first two novels, representations of race and gender are linked in narratives dominated by eugenic concerns. The heroes and heroines, Tom and Dell

in *The Wild Moth*, and Ted and Miranda in *Hibiscus Heart*, are kept apart for the obligatory course of the novels by essentially eugenic concerns. In the former, Tom's overwhelming knowledge of what is repeatedly referred to as 'the dead hand' — the hand of Dell's father, 'Black Ferris', shot by Tom as he drunkenly tries to kill Dell — forms the obstacle. The situation is resolved, very obviously, by the revelation that Black Ferris was not Dell's biological father. The discovery that Dell's mother had transgressed with an Irish artist simultaneously explains and removes various anxieties within the novel. Not least of these is Tom's fears as to the kind of genetic contamination that Black Ferris may have passed onto his supposed daughter. This fear is largely implied, probably because Black Ferris' violence towards his 'daughter' gives every appearance of involving the unspeakable taboo of incest.

In *Hibiscus Heart*, a similar anxiety about 'genetic' weakness is also the 'problem' of the novel, and is resolved through the course of true love, although not quite so melodramatically. And in this novel, Forrest puts her words and anxieties into the mouth of the wise and bush-hardened Dr Sutherland, investing them with a considerable degree of institutional and pseudo-scientific, as well as folk power. Dr Sutherland appears to have remarkable powers of observation and diagnosis, pronouncing upon the appearance of the hero, Ted:

Looks like a nervy bloke to me ... jumpy...like a chap who doesn't sleep over-well...something overstrung...quivering nostrils...though he has a clean eye - appears to my professional gaze the outcome of strained conditions, an unhappy marriage...an inharmonious mating...I believe in natural selection. If everyone married for love, real true mateship, cutting out the lust of the eye, the lure of propinquity, the in-love-with-love young blood, we should have less hysteria, brighter eyes, better blood, better morals, finer brains... (159).

And indeed, the good doctor's worries are, it seems, well founded. Although working as a mere station hand, Ted, as the romance genre of the time demanded, comes of 'Good' although compromised 'Stock'. We learn that his father was an educated but cold clergyman and that his mother was a woman who left her husband for her lover, attempting unsuccessfully to take the young Ted with her. As a result of this 'inharmonious mating', Ted, or, as he becomes through the novel, Edward, is a binge drinker, who wipes himself out for days at a time on bad booze. The course of the novel is about *his* attempts to overcome his demon and *her* efforts to come to terms with a less than perfect lover. Dr Sutherland's 'medical' pronouncements on Ted are validated by the novel's events, and there is no sense of any irony on Forrest's part - the good doctor transparently speaks with Forrest's own voice.

Even more obvious in these novels is Forrest's reinforcement of the prevailing view that mixing of the races brings about degradation, an anxious paradigm traced very extensively by Robert Dixon in the adventure romances in the period just prior to this one in *Writing the Colonial Adventure*. Forrest employs her own authorial voice to make pronouncements such as:

In his native state the aboriginal is both simple-hearted and truthful. It is only where he touches the white that he deteriorates (*The Wild Moth* 128),

but she also uses authority figure to reinforce this view. In *The Wild Moth*, the venerable Father James — not, we are told, a ‘narrow churchman’ — maintains that ‘The native is dying out, as the less always fails in the grip of the stronger’, and Dr Sutherland, of course, also has something to say:

I reckon it was some of the rotten whites taking up with the lubras that first brought the disease amongst them. Only today Jimmy asked me to look at one of his great-grandchildren ... Bone rot...hopeless (254-5).

Note here the echo between ‘rotten whites’ and ‘bone rot’, betraying the anxiety that it is not only ‘the lesser’ being degraded by contact, but also ‘the stronger’.

This anxiety about race, and of course the linked anxiety about gender, finds its most extreme expression, as Sheridan notes (64), in the figure of the ‘half-caste’ ‘loose’ woman in the text, a figure who is never named — she has to remain unspeakable. She exists, moreover in a ‘hierarchy’ of anxieties in which her racial mix between aboriginal and white blood places her lower than if she had been Eurasian, or even a mix of black African and white parentage. This unfortunate woman, who is figured for the most part as a site in which uncontrollable female sexuality erupts, develops an obsession with Tom. Her fixation with his fair skin and fair hair is in direct contrast with her obsessive horror of coming into contact with the black side of her ancestry. She also represents the fear of contamination of white by black blood. Although pure-of-heart Dell repudiates those who try to suggest that by caring for the ‘half-caste’ in her own home she will contaminate herself, it is, nevertheless, essential that the threat of contamination must be removed from the narrative. This occurs when the ‘half-caste’, dressed in a ridiculous blue riding costume, drowns while trying to leave the white world and simultaneously avoid the black world. There is, literally, no place for her at the conclusion of this narrative.

It is important to note that there is no real place for aborigines in these narratives. Although Forrest advances the view that ‘pure’ aborigines are simple and good — perhaps even noble innocents — they do not appear in the texts, and seem to be unrepresentable. In *Hibiscus Heart*, Dr Sutherland speaks approvingly of ‘King Jimmy’, but their meeting is only reported. In *The Wild Moth*, the ‘pure’ blacks are supposed to be camped very close to Dell’s house (safely enclosed with fence and domestic garden), but although we ‘hear’ the tribe, we never see them. The single exception is Dell’s servant, Josephine, a full blooded aborigine who has taken on white ways. Josephine is consistently portrayed as friendly, but child-like, simple, and unable to undertake mathematical problems or remember instructions. It is Josephine who calls her own cousin, the ‘half-caste’, ‘black rubbish’. This absence of credible aboriginal characters from the texts is mirrored by an absence of any sense of an authentic aboriginal mythology, or any attempt to look at the ‘native’ mythologising of the landscape. In *The Wild Moth* indeed,

the 'dibble-dibble' Josephine insists she has seen at full moon, turns out to be Tom, watching over his estranged lover by night.

This effective removal of aboriginal physicality and spirituality from the texts clears a space for the importation of Forrest's preferred Anglo-Celtic caste. There are, however, some moments of contestation within at least the first of the three novels. Father James, the kindly Irish priest, instructs Dell in the ways of Irish fairies — 'phookas' and 'corrigaums' — and is also instrumental in uniting Dell with her true Irish heritage. But he also discourses on the question of how easily systems of mythology may be translated into a new idiom:

But ye must be born among the raths and hawthorns to fully catch the spirit of the Irish folk-lore. We can't import our hobgoblins and "hungry grass", our ghosts and our fairy rings to your big, practical, unbelieving Australia (236).

And he further problematises the issue by discussing Africa:

I am after doubting myself if you can permanently plant the white man in a black man's country (237).

There is, however, no sense in which Father James, or Tom, or Dell see themselves as inhabiting a black man's country — with the black men so effectively removed from the text, Forrest's Queensland becomes 'terra nullius'.

In *Hibiscus Heart*, Forrest seems to have cast aside any doubts about whether Anglo-Celtic mythology may be grafted onto this 'empty' land. The novel is prefaced with a poem of the same name (8), which quite explicitly details the transfer of this mysticism to the setting of the novel. Addressed to the 'sea-wind', the poem declaims:

For you blow from the shores of the singing isles
You have carried their rhythms thro' careless miles
...
Oh! wind of the world apart!
You have trodden the trail of the Thousand Ways,
Of the star-white night - of the sun-lit days

To the red hibiscus heart!

The wind has become a disembodied colonising force, carrying primal rhythms rather than words, old ways to a new land. There is, however, no suggestion that if it is dangerous for mis-matched lovers or mis-matched races to mix, that it might also be inappropriate for an Anglo-Celtic mythology which derives from the 'singing isles' to land themselves on the Queensland bushland coast. This is because Forrest essentialises Nature, and because she treats Celtic mythologies, here at least, as though they are universal, not constructed, and therefore not socialised. They come, transparently, 'from a world apart'. Forrest

seems determined to naturalise this mythology, so that the hibiscus are like 'fairy gramophone horns' (10) and are located in 'a faery glade' (25).

References to witches are scattered through the book, and indeed play an important symbolic role in the centre of the book, when Miranda must overcome her inexplicable fear of The Mountain. This mountain waits 'for its will to be served' (107), is 'untamed' and 'unconquerable' (108), and holds for Miranda a 'curious, almost repulsive attraction — mingled with fear' (109). When she thinks of The Mountain she can 'smell crushed fern...bruised leaves...hear the witches laughing down the wind...' (109). It does not take an intimate knowledge of Freud to see that The Mountain and its witches represent the fears of the unconscious, and especially sexual fears. And indeed, much of the problem and the resolution of this novel revolves around this mountain: it should come as no surprise that when the lovers eventually overcome their obstacle, there is only one place for their honeymoon. Their tent on The Mountain, we are told, will be lined with fragrant blossoms.

White Witches brings this crossbreeding of the Australian landscape and Celtic mythology still further. As mentioned earlier, the witches are now actually nine gum trees which exert both good and evil influences over the lives of the characters around them. And those characters are firmly Celtic — this is the tale of Maeve and Stuart Jackson, their daughter Synfyne and her necessarily troubled route to happiness with Irishman Liam M'Pherris. Synfyne repeatedly refers to her mother Maeve as being, literally, a fairy, while Synfyne calls herself 'the child of the White Witches' which have been intimately connected with her birth. Anxiety about race is much less obvious in this book and is, indeed, displaced away from the central characters, leaving a narrative of almost 'pure' celtic-ness. And is it to further bury anxieties, the powerful white witches are eventually domesticated by having Synfyne literally build her house from them. The witches and Celtic mythology are firmly Synfyne's spiritual home, but she has also tamed their strength, their otherness and their power by subsuming them to the domestic economy.

Ultimately, Mabel Forrest is, for me, a disappointment. The power which seemed so evident in 'Kassaptu' and 'The Burning', with their questioning of gender roles, is not explored by Forrest in her novels, and indeed, her popular novels can be seen as reinforcing the very patriarchal paradigms, the restriction of women's desire and subjectivity which the 'witch' poems seem to interrogate and unsettle. It is, I believe, interesting that Forrest appears to have been able to interrogate these issues in some of her poetry — so long as it was set firmly elsewhere and elsewhere — either in Babylon, or the witch burning centuries in England. But even though she uses her own poetry to provide epigrams for her romances, and returns frequently to the sorts of imagery she employs in her poetry, thus seeming to provide bridges between one sort of writing and another, her novels, set in her local times and places, do not unsettle in the same way as does her poetry. And that, for me, raises the question, a question I am in no position to pronounce about, of the ways in which gender, race and colonial ideologies may be inflected differently in the different genres in this 'in between'

period of the 1920s.

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