

## Captivating Fictions

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### I

In August, 1893 the Launceston meeting of the Tasmanian Amateur Gardener's Association heard a paper presented by Mr Thomas Carr on 'The Wild Flowers of Tasmania'. *The Tasmanian Mail* reported him as 'giving an outline of the characteristics of the different sort of native flora, and before concluding he strongly urged upon the Committee of the City and Suburban Improvement Association the cultivation of native flora at the Cataract Gorge and Park. He said it would not only be ornamental, but would have an educational influence on the rising generation.' (*The Tasmanian Mail* 141, 841. 1893: 29)

In the nineteenth-century white Tasmanians of reasonable means could sit down on a Sunday and read *The Tasmanian Mail: A Weekly Journal of Politics, Literature, Science, Agriculture, News and Notes for Tasmania*, a publication from the Hobart Mercury office. Soon to take up Mr Carr's call to 'plant natives' in Cataract Gorge, though not quite in the way that he meant, was Mrs W.I. Thrower, whose short novel *Younâh: A Tasmanian Aboriginal Romance of the Cataract Gorge* commenced serialisation in the journal on October 14, 1893, before its publication as a separate volume in 1894. Mrs Thrower planted not indigenous plants, but indigenous peoples in the gorge in her fiction. My comparison here is not intended to be flippant or disrespectful, but to point out the ways in which the notions behind Mr Carr's paper and Mrs Thrower's novel were extremely similar, and similarly bizarre.

In the 1890s Cataract Gorge was a well-established and much visited tourist spot for Launceston and Tasmanian residents as well as interstate and overseas visitors, as it is today. Initially it was visited for its untouched picturesque beauty; a set of rapids, and two deep pools, the first and second basins, embedded in a gorge on the South Esk River, at the edge of Launceston. By the 1890s, as is clear from Mr Carr's paper, the picturesqueness had been enhanced by considerable plantings of European species, and some clearing, as well as the erection of various built structures—including the 'Crusoe Hut'. Its accessibility had been facilitated by the erection of a raised walkway along the North side. In early 1893 work commenced on a hydro-electric generating plant upstream from the Gorge (Reynolds 129). Clearly there was almost no sense in which Cataract Gorge remained a pristine site, when Mrs Thrower wrote her novel *Younâh*.

The novel, however, produces a pristine moment, in a kind of pre-lapsarian world at the very beginning of white encroachment onto Aboriginal land in Tasmania. It recounts the kidnap of a three-year-old white girl, Keitha St Clair, by a group of local Aborigines, the Pialummas. Keitha is taken in retaliation for depredations by local white settlers. There is some suggestion that Keitha be sacrificed to avenge the theft of Pialumma girls, but the chief's son, Eumarrah, becomes the child's protector. She is renamed Younâh, and brought up amongst the Pialummas. Eumarrah believes she may be useful as an intermediary between themselves and the whites in the future (Thrower 13).

When white encroachment again threatens the group Eumarrah's mother decides that they should kill Younâh. Eumarrah conceals Younâh and her best friend, Natone

but they are discovered by a couple of English squires out exploring in the Antipodean wilds. Younâh's whiteness is instantly recognised. She and Natone, who gets little choice in the matter, return with the men to 'civilisation'. Younâh is identified by her coral necklace as Keitha, lost heiress of the St Clairs. Younâh is able to rapidly and miraculously acquire language, manners and class in a few months in Australia before she is sent home to her family. In a few years she is engaged to her 'rescuer' Jack Ormond. Jack and Keitha take their Honeymoon trip to Tasmania so that Younâh/Keitha can repay Eumarrah for all his kindness, but the 'Black Wars' have been perpetrated in her absence, and she finds Eumarrah dying of consumption on Flinders Island with the remaining Tasmanian Aborigines. The novel closes with Eumarrah and his people remembered only through the tales Keitha tells her enthralled children.

*Younâh*, is an obscure but valuable text—valuable because it is a fiction about Tasmanian Aboriginal people at a time when the white population regarded them as 'extinct'; and more particularly because the Aborigines depicted are not just anonymous plot elements. A large part of the narrative is taken up with a version, however fanciful, of Tasmanian first peoples' daily life and culture. *Younâh* is also distinct because it is one of relatively few 'captivity narratives' published in nineteenth-century Australia, and because it is a novel with a local setting, by a local woman, published locally at a time when much Australian long fiction, women's and men's, was still being published in Britain.

Most of the existent nineteenth-century Australian *fictional* Captivity Narratives produced representations of indigenous people which worked to a greater or lesser extent to displace actual Aboriginal people; not just to the degree in which any representation displaces or replaces that which it ostensibly represents or encapsulates, but through the violent rewriting of the, or an, indigenous people.<sup>1</sup> Clearly in Australia any version of the 'white captured by Aborigines' also works to obscure the facts and history of the common and systematic abduction and rape of *Aboriginal* women by white men, and the abduction of Aboriginal children by white men and women. Intimately connected to this obfuscation of atrocities, are the moves these fictions made to produce and perform a romantic history of place for the non-Aboriginal population. They might also be seen to partake of and duplicate the discourses of the growing industry of tourism, in order to map the country as both unfamiliar, exotic and unexplored, *and* as familiar, picturesque, historically inscribed, owned and available.

## II

### *Younâh* and Tasmanian Aboriginal Culture

The sources for Thrower's fiction are not clear. Some of her material presumably came from local folklore. Thrower's lifespan would overlap with those of the community on Flinders Island (Ryan 195-204), and at Oyster Cove. She almost certainly would have read in the *Tasmanian Mercury* in 1876 of the death of Truganini, and of the theft of her body (Ryan 218-220). Truganini was neither the last 'full-blood' Tasmanian Aborigine to die, nor did her death mark the end of the Tasmanian Aborigines as claimed, but the white Tasmanian community largely used her as a marker of Aboriginal pastness.

Many of the features of Thrower's representation seem completely spurious, but the novel does have a complicated relation to knowledges about the Aboriginal groups around Launceston. The land occupied by the 'Pialummas' in their seasonal migra-

tions maps vaguely onto what is known of the movements of the Panninher people of the North Midlands (Ryan 29-32, Maps 11 & 12). Certainly Thrower's representation is anachronistic and in the Whites' favour—suggesting as it does that peaceful occupation of Cataract Gorge would have been possible up until the late 1820s and the 'Black line' (Morgan 15). Thrower's flights of fancy are in fact enabled by the early dispossession and disruption in this area, which resulted in a dearth of information about the pre-invasion boundaries and culture of these people (Ryan 31).<sup>2</sup>

While the character Eumarrah coincides in age, place and authority with the historic guerilla fighter Umarrah, other names seem to have been chosen more overtly for some effect of authenticity unconnected to historical accuracy or respect for persons (Morgan 15). For instance, Younâh was the name of a child who died as a young woman sometime between 1847 and 1851. Her father was a white sealer (Ryan Appendix 3).<sup>3</sup> Considering the importance of names for the Tasmanian Aboriginal people, as noted by Thrower in Chapter 2, her theft of these names is insensitive. They do, however, work to further fracture the narrative—marking the romantic text of the found heiress with the names of dispossessed and prematurely dead female children; raising the spectre of miscegenation in Younâh's very name, while the text works so hard to obviate and obscure any such possibility, with her sparkling and unmistakable whiteness and middle-classness, with her instant removal from the Aborigines to permanent European female chaperonage as soon as she reaches puberty.

The use of Eumarrah seems to have been more self-conscious on Thrower's part. In the novel the only raid he is depicted as being involved in is the one in which Younâh is kidnapped, where the hut is burnt, but no blood is shed. Eumarrah dies in Christian resignation. No further mention is made of the other Aborigines, except that many are also dying from consumption.

The novel converts Eumarrah from a freedom fighter to an 'Uncle Tom' figure. His gentleness and the representations of the Pialumma's culture to some extent dispute understandings of the Tasmanian Aborigines as mindlessly violent and without culture, but the use of *parts* of the history of Umarrah, while excluding the history of his sustained resistance, his imprisonment, and the role of George Augustus Robinson, who is not named in the novel, erases political history in favour of personal stories. On a personal level, with Eumarrah dead and the governor forbidding Aboriginal return to the Tasmanian mainland, Keitha's well-meaning scheme is pointless. This erases the political fact of genocidal policies and the failure or refusal to address the situation of the Flinders Island community. The English squirearchy are exonerated from any connection to such policies through ignorance: 'When Jack Ormond and his wife reached Hobart Town ... they learned for the first time that all the survivors of that race, to whom the land had formerly belonged, had been banished from it by the stronger one which had ousted them.' (60). The honeymoon of the English propertied classes in Tasmania takes place across the territory and via the deathbeds of the Tasmanian Aborigines, without irony.<sup>4</sup>

### III

#### *Younâh* as Tour Guide

A notable aspect of the passage from Chapter 2 (above) is the extent to which this fiction makes an argument for the discursive production of landscape, and the ways in which narratives of place forge connections and signify ownership:

Familiar to them, not alone from the associations of a lifetime spent amid these wilds, but by reason of the legends which tradition had preserved to the tribe, were every steep, tree-crowned summit, each ferny moss-carpeted glade ... (4)

This is mobilised to demonstrate Aboriginal connection to the land, but ultimately the story of *Younâh* functions in place of the tales described. Thus this story, as one which inserts the white settler into the landscape and traditions of Aboriginal land, becomes also a story of right and habitation—produces the scene as the space of white experience, white narrative and white history. The telling and retelling of the history of *Younâh*'s capture and rescue within the tale contribute to this, but the narrative itself enacts it.

Part of the way it does this is through selling Cataract Gorge to Tasmanians as a tourist site of uniqueness and naturalness. The novel peoples the Gorge with colourful indigenes at the (same) moment as it erases those occupants and turns it back into wild but available space—space which had been *both* occupied *and* untouched. It buys into the rhetoric of barbarism used one hundred years earlier to occupy the land in the first place—that it is physically but not morally occupied, 'wasteland'; available first for the settlement described, and secondly for the specular occupation encouraged. Its familiarity is repeatedly pointed out in the story, usually in contexts which highlight the historical separation which enable the romance and (perhaps) deny responsibility for the emptiness produced.

Colin and Jack are proto-tourists for nineteenth-century Cataract Gorge. As tourists, they are not responsible for the dispossession disapproved by the narrative, even while tourism is implicated in this through its interconnectedness with the entire process and economy of settlement and development. Colin and Jack's trip to Australia is a sequel or alternative to the Grand Tour. They are landed gentlemen in search of the new; they

left England behind them in a spirit of adventurous longing for 'something new under the sun'—something new to them at least, for they had used up all the resources of travel and exploration which Europe could present to them at the period of which I write, when the facilities for moving from one country to another were by no means so numerous or so convenient as they are in these Cook-tourist days. (36)

They follow Jack's sister to Australia, because, 'You see, old fellow, there is not much European ground that we have left untrodden. We have explored a goodly part of Asia, been to Egypt, and would have been certain to make for America next. We can go there some other time ...'(37)

As Dona Brown points out in relation to America: 'Tourism offered tourists satisfaction through acquisition (...the acquisition of *experiences*) emotional fulfilment through spending money. Throughout the nineteenth century the product that tourism offered most consistently was some form of antidote to industrial capitalism. [but] ...far from opposing that order, tourism was an integral part of it.' (Brown 12).

Jack and Keitha's wedding tour is similarly composed of ownership and sentimental inscription:

The settlement, which had consisted but of a few straggling, small houses ... had increased to very respectable dimensions, and there was even an hotel at which fair accommodation was to be obtained ... [They hire a boat and go] up the Gorge ... until they reached the spot where they two had first met'

Keitha sends Jack into the cave to retrieve the skeleton of her little pet albino kangaroo, which she proposes to keep as a 'relic of a faithful, although dumb friend'(60).

The touristic acts of visiting romantic spots and collecting souvenirs are the same here. It is just that such forms of tourism as ways of owning and knowing the landscape are more clearly connected to their implications and sources through the grim echo in this passage of the thieving and keeping of Tasmanian Aboriginal remains by 'scientific' whites and collectors in Australia. There might be a further level of cultural appropriation at work also: according to Ryan the Tasmanian Aborigines sometimes kept the bones of their dead as 'relics'(Ryan 184).

For Tasmania, more intensively than for other colonies in the 1890s, tourism was becoming a potentially vital industry. The Van Diemen's Land Bank collapsed in August 1891 and prefaced a major economic depression in the colony, by some accounts more severe than that on the mainland (Reynolds 133, 135). Thrower appears to have had a strong interest in promoting the Cataract Gorge and environs as a specular site; a destination for local tourists, but more importantly, those further afield. Thrower Street in Launceston runs parallel to Basin Road, the road leading down to the South side of the Gorge. The land belonged to William Ignatius Thrower, husband of Mrs W.I. Thrower. For whatever economic purpose the land adjoining the Basin might have been used, the other property owned by the Throwers in Launceston would clearly have benefited from any touristic side effects of Mrs Thrower's romantic fictional exercise: it was Thrower's Court House Hotel.

It is seldom that fiction so clearly displays its use-value—the hotel with 'fair accommodation' may be the Thrower's own. It is surely not just the case that Thrower's novel is trash fiction, or glorified advertising, but rather that the bare bones and implied use of national fictions is a little more evident in this as a raw product. Captivity narratives, romance fictions and Lemurian novels open up and make the country available in a new way. The trope of the white lost, stolen, captive who disappears in the landscape is used in a project of inserting the figure of the white into the landscape. Younāh is kept with the intention of making her into an intercessor for the Aboriginal people, but of course in her textual use she becomes an intercessor between the white reader/Tasmanian/Australian and the native landscape. In this configuration it is not just the represented Aborigines who displace the original Tasmanians and their descendants' rights, but the native landscape.

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Thomas Carr's call for the planting of natives in Cataract Gorge seems to have been part of a popular movement to re-authenticate the environment, to restore what had been lost and make it available for the specular pleasure of those inheriting that loss. Mrs Thrower installs in the Gorge a dispossessed and fantasised indigenous population, who are replaced only to be dispossessed again in the space of the novel. The novel inevitably has to reiterate their doom to legitimate the colonial adventure it is proposing, yet it has to reinvolve them to re/make it adventurous. Such a project inevitably disintegrates under the pressure of its own contradictory discourses. Unlike introduced plants, Anglo settlers have entirely refused any idea of sharing or coexistence, much as in the present day the Howard government seems incapable of comprehending, explaining or tolerating the notion that pastoral leases can co-exist with native title on Mainland Australia. Thrower's indigenous plantings are ghosts whose removal forms the romance of her tale, and the attraction of her vacated site, but her placement of them reveals a different sort of haunting.

## Notes

- 1 For discussion of the White Woman tales, see Julie Carr unpublished PhD, La Trobe University. The European-victim narratives—which include Rosa Praed's *Fugitive Anne* (1902) and *Outlaw and Lawmaker* (1893), Ernest Favenc's *The Secret of the Australian Desert* (1895), as well as a number inspired by the White Woman of Gippsland—work in similar ways and have some very similar elements.
- 2 Thrower would have had many sources available to her in the 1890s. Both James Fenton's *The Jubilee History of Tasmania* Melbourne: Wells & Leavitt, 1888, and his *Bush Life in Tasmania* London & Aylesbury: Hazell, Watson & Viney, 1891 were available; H. Ling Roth's *The Aborigines of Tasmania* was published in 1890. She might also have consulted James Bonwick's *The Last of the Tasmanians* (1870).
- 3 Pillah, the name of Younâh's female protector in the novel, was one of the names of a young girl who died in 1837 at the age of 11. She was from the Pieman River area [Paternidic], on the North West coast of Tasmania.
- 4 The character who might be seen to disrupt this happy closure is Natone. From being Younâh's friend and equal by the time they reach England Natone has become Younâh's servant. But on their return to Tasmania she does not rejoin her people and their implied fate, but returns to England. Natone disappears out of the narrative at this juncture—the un-narratable subaltern perhaps (Gayatri Spivak. 'Three Women's Texts and the Discourse of Imperialism' *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985) 243–261) but also some suggestion of the surviving community of Tasmanian Aborigines, uncontained, though not unaffected, by such narratives.

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