

ONE WOMAN'S TESTIMONY: LOUISA ANNE MEREDITH'S *NOTES AND SKETCHES OF NEW SOUTH WALES*¹

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Henry Chorley, reviewing Louisa Anne Meredith's *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales* for the *London Athenaeum* in January 1845, decides that:

Woman's testimony with regard to settlement in a new country—is, ...after its kind, as valuable as Her Master's...not only may she give a charm to life in the wilderness, but a reality to distant friends, by her miniature touches of life, and descriptions of scenes overlooked by the Man in his wide range of view, and often, as to finish, not within the grasp of his more powerful but coarser hand. Thus Mrs. Meredith's book is the very thing to read with or after Mr. Rowcroft's. (Chorley 66)

Meredith's text describes New South Wales in the 1840s, in which the land itself seems, initially at least, only to be revealed in glimpses or asides in what Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes* identifies as 'Victorian discovery rhetoric' (Pratt 204). Meredith's account consists of impressions written within the first four years of her arrival in Australia. This is an important proviso—recollected accounts written many years after arrival must inevitably be affected by the knowledge acquired in the intervening years, and by the perceptions that affect memory. It is also, and more importantly, an early published account by a woman. Meredith's text provides an example of one of the ways in which the European invasion of Australia was effected through literature. It is upon her initial reaction to the landscape in particular that I will focus, while considering in broader terms the issue of women's travel accounts, including to what extent the discourse is as gendered as Chorley suggests.

Meredith's *Notes and Sketches* was also reviewed by Elizabeth Rigby for the *Quarterly Review* in 1845. Such reviews accord Meredith's account a powerful place in imperialist discourse because through them she reaches a very wide audience indeed. Elizabeth Rigby, herself a highly successful writer and journalist, mediates Meredith's text to a large potential readership, claiming in her opening remarks that women's travel writing is 'all ease, animation, vivacity, with the tact to dwell upon what you most want to know, and the sense to pass over what she does not know herself' (99), that is, trustworthy testimony. Meredith also reveals, writes Rigby, 'a scorched "ever brown" surface of a country devoid of any past or present interest, whether of an historical, poetical, pictorial or social kind' (106). This is the only reference Rigby makes to any discussion of landscape in Meredith's work.

Meredith's four-month journey to Australia was a direct voyage that made no landfall, and her first significant reference to landscape establishes a mode of discourse that will recur at various points throughout her work. She writes: 'The unknown cliffs were immediately pronounced to be the headlands of Botany Bay!—Our weary wayfaring was nearly done, the next break in the iron-bound coast that rose dark and threateningly before us would be our welcome haven, Sydney Cove!' (33). There is considerable conflict in these brief lines, the

syntactical unit 'dark and threateningly' being opposed semantically to 'welcome haven', a conflict stemming in part from her natural apprehensiveness as to exactly what the future holds for her in this distant land, after a successful early career as a professional writer and artist. Her first sight of the Botany Bay **beaks** contains other referents, however, that will also be consistently repeated throughout her text. The most dominant image her words produce is that of a castle fastness, located in the phrase 'iron-bound coast', and it appears that the only way to penetrate that fastness is an accident of nature, which reveals an open portcullis through which they may slip and so breach the land's containment, its integrity. In fact, as it turns out, the main gate is, after all, conveniently open and Meredith writes:

The entrance to Port Jackson is grand in the extreme. The high, dark cliffs we had been coasting along all morning, suddenly terminate in an abrupt precipice, called the South Head, on which stand the lighthouse and signal-station. The North Head is a similar cliff, a bare bluff promontory of dark horizontal rocks; and between these grand stupendous pillars, as through a colossal gate, we entered Port Jackson. (34)

It is difficult to gauge to what extent her descriptions are innovative or mere commonplace, arising not from a personal perception of the land as alien and resistant to intrusion, as cruel to the intruder, but rather fed by the various accounts of Australia she no doubt read before the contemplated journey. Moreover, landscape description from this period is affected by both the romantic and the earlier gothic modes of the poetry which prevailed in middle-class education at the time. The gothic castle in particular is an image which dominates a late eighteenth, early nineteenth-century literature in which the commonest recurring motif is the tomb-like incarceration of hapless women whose only recourse is a latent kind of passive resistance in which they wander helplessly from room to room. Added to this gothic tradition is Australia's role as a British prison, which must surely have played an enormous part in fostering the gothic in Meredith's imagination.

Mid nineteenth-century writings about the Australian experience tend to fall into two categories. The texts which provide extensive facts and figures, the price of wheat per bushell, the woolclip, the cost of land per acre, designed for specific economic and political ends, to encourage investment, and settlement, are one kind. I am thinking of works like James Macarthur's *New South Wales: Its Present State and Future Prospects* (1837), Peter Cunningham's *Hints to Australian Emigrants* (1841), Charles Rowcroft's *Tales of the Colonies* (1843) and Thomas Hood's *Australia and the East* (1844), which all appeared in the decade just prior to Meredith's work. Rowcroft's text is typical. He compares the wool-clip export figures of 1817 and 1843 (Rowcroft 3: 287-88) and his work contains no significant landscape description. The other kind of text, however, offers more generalised accounts of Australia, and contains a prose which tends to be more literary. Interestingly, it is this mode which is preferred by travellers and by explorers, who write up their descriptions of new terrain in the romantic mode. Thus what Chorley perceives as a gendered difference between Meredith's work and that of Rowcroft, is in fact in part the difference between what I have designated settler and travel texts, both of which are, however, colonialist.

Emma Macpherson's *My Experiences in Australia* was published in 1860, and while clearly a derivative of Meredith's work, taking its subjects and narrative order almost step by step with those of Meredith, it is a settler rather than a travel text in which Macpherson is clearly interested in her husband's investments in the country. Despite her dependence upon Meredith's work, nowhere in her text does Macpherson romanticise landscape, and the only landscape descriptions she offers are straight descriptive pieces containing no metaphorical language.

When attempting to capture the essence of the viewing moment, the writing of both men and women in travel texts is remarkably similar, even unimaginative. All are governed by a learned romanticism that enjoins upon them the need to *feel* this moment 'in the blood' and 'along the heart', to quote from Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey'. Wordsworth's 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* suggests that the language of prose might well be adapted to poetry. It is not surprising, therefore, that we should meet, not with

prose-like poetry, but with poetic prose time and time again in the generations who were the inheritors of romanticism. In the particular period of which I am writing an education in the English poets was shared by male and female alike, and criticisms and discussions of poetry in the periodical journals were as readily available to women as to men. Romanticism makes a virtue of being a poetry written in the ordinary language of ordinary people and does not assume an education in the classics, an education to which women for the most part had no access. While travel writing is a mode in which reality and truth are supposedly the predominating points of referral (Mills 9), so too did Wordsworth aim for 'little falsehood of description'. It is useful, therefore, to be aware of ways in which the travel discourse can be affected by another discourse as entrenched as romanticism, so entrenched indeed as to seem perfectly natural and yet at the same time remaining a very particular, formalised way of 'seeing'. Coleridge writes: 'From my early reading of Faery Tales, & Genii etc etc—my mind had been habituated to the Vast—and I never regarded my senses in any way as the criteria of my life. I regulated all my creeds by my conceptions not by my sight—even at that age' (Qtd in Butler 82). It is especially important to note how highly Coleridge values 'conception' in opposition to 'sight'. This is a recurring precept in both written and painted landscapes of unfamiliar terrain, in which artists in words or paint reproduce a conception of the landscape that conforms to some need or desire rather than simply sketching what they see.

As their ship sails up the harbour Meredith, in a panoramic conunentary, momentarily abandons the poetic to note 'the pretty shrubs' growing down to the water's edge and to comment with obvious surprise, 'they were really green, a thing I had not dared to expect' (34), suggesting that preconceptions and misconceptions of an empty ever-brownness were fed by travel accounts of Australia. Meredith notes, almost with relief, the 'white villas and handsome cottages' that remind her comfortingly of a 'fashionable English watering-place'. Yet when she catches sight of the quarantine ground and the tombstones of those 'unhappy exiles...whose golden dreams of the far-sought land of promise lead but to a lone and desolate grave on its storm-beaten shore' (34), the vision is a jarring one and again the sense of conflict and anxiety is strong. A sudden rainbow which clothes the whole scene dispels her sense of doom, however, and as the ship nears the town itself she writes: 'several rocky islets appeared, some rising like ruined forts and castles' (35). Annette Kolodny in *The Land Before Her* identifies from the private diaries of women settlers in America a real fear of the wilderness with its 'oppressive forests and towering rock formations' (Kolodny 47) and Meredith's prose translates a similar fear into a literary trope. Her use of the romantic mode seems to suggest that this is an important way in which Meredith can control what she sees around her, framed as in a picture or a poem, and if the actual castles and forts of a civilised European landscape are absent from the scene, nevertheless those she conjures from the Australian landscape in her imagination help to Europeanise and by extension civilise and control what appears to her to be a threateningly unoccupied, uncrowded locale.

Mary Louise Pratt in her article 'Scratches on the Face of the Country' recalls that it is conventional for 'romantic prospect poems to move from description into reverie' and notes that in exploration writing the convention of reverie 'often very specifically projects the civilizing mission onto the scene' (Pratt 126). Pratt quotes from Richard Burton's declaration that the view 'wants but a little of the neatness and finish of Art' from his *The Lake Regions of Central Africa* (1860), and points out that his reverie contains only traces of people, not the people themselves (Pratt 126). Meredith's reverie, which follows on from that return to romantic mode I have just noted, remarks the clarity of the Australian landscape deeming the peculiar light unsuitable for artistic representation, and like Burton sees traces of people but not the people themselves (Meredith 35). Invoking the *romantic mode* appears to be a practice that seeks to dispel difference and uniqueness by locating and describing the unfamiliar in terms of the poetic or literary familiar, and thus effectively to take possession.

Travelling across the Blue Mountains to Bathurst is a further encounter for Meredith, this time with the continent's inner wall, its redoubt, the aptly named 'Great Dividing Range', where a 'huge barrier of rocks seemed to close up the onward path', where 'grotesque rocks

rose up here and there like fantastic ruins' and where the Vale of Clwydd is protected by a long rugged range of 'fortress-like and frowning walls' (Meredith 74). Meredith's romanticism intensifies in response to the mountains themselves, a version of that famous romantic travel trope, crossing the Alps, indeed her prose at times recalls Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Describing a range of cliffs known as 'Hassan's Walls', she makes specific allusion to gothic and romantic poetic traditions:

their summits, broken and fissured in various fantastic forms, exactly resemble a ruined castle crowning the brow of the sheer precipice, with here and there a stunted tree or graceful shrub growing from crevices in the dark rock. Had I been travelling in an old country, I should at once have decided that these were truly the ruins of some mighty mountain-fortress of former days; loop-holes, arches, battlements, and buttresses were, as it seemed, so clearly remaining, and extending far along the airy heights of these genii-haunted crags...I thought of the mysterious castle of St. John, with its wizard transformations, and of how much romance would attach to these fantastic crags in a romantic or legendary country; but the existence of poetry or imagination in New South Wales is what none who know and have felt the leaden influence of its ledger and day-book kind of atmosphere would believe it guilty of suffering. (Meredith 79-80).

In a footnote Meredith quotes from Walter Scott's 'Bridal of Triernain', giving this poem as the source for her reference to the 'mysterious castle of St. John' and in doing so points impeccably to the British gothic tradition from which romanticism sprang. Moreover, as the painter in words of the landscape, her offering of its literary equivalent, Scott's poem, reorders what she sees as art and not merely as land worth so much per acre.

Meredith's description is echoed by the explorer and surveyor Thomas Livingstone Mitchell in his *Journal of an Expedition into the Interior of Tropical Australia*, published in 1848, four years after Meredith's work first appeared:

The hills overhanging it surpassed any I had ever seen in picturesque outline. Some resembled gothic cathedrals in ruins; others forts; other masses were perforated, and being mixed and contrasted with the flowing outlines of evergreen woods, and having a fine stream in the foreground, gave a charming appearance to the whole country. It was a discovery worthy of the toils of a pilgrimage. Those beautiful recesses of unpeopled earth could no longer remain unknown. (Mitchell 224-25).

I noted only one other instance in which Mitchell likens the landscape to European ruins in this work, and none at all in an earlier publication of 1839, *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia*. In the Preface to the later work, Mitchell writes that in Australia:

the philosopher may look for facts; the painter and the poet for original studies and ideas; the naturalist for additional knowledge; and the historian might begin at the beginning. The traveller there seeks in vain for the remains of cities, temples, or towers. (*Journal* v).

Meredith's repetitions suggest she is indeed vainly seeking in the landscape for signs of European occupation that will normalise the landscape for her.

Like Meredith, Mitchell footnotes his description with some lines he attributes to the poet Allan Cunningham: 'His soul naturally delighted in scenes of savage magnificence and ruined grandeur; his spirit loved to stray in lonely glens, and gaze on mouldering castles' (Mitchell 224), words that seem to echo Meredith's historicising impulse. The lines Meredith chooses from Scott also suggest an historically 'unpeopled' scene:

But the grey walls no banners crown'd;
Upon the watch-tower's airy round
No warder stood his horn to sound;
No guard beside the bridge was found;
And where the Gothic gateway frown'd,
Glance'd neither bill nor bow.

Unpeopled that is except for the narrators. Both Meredith and Mitchell are forcibly present in the scenes they describe. Meredith projects herself back into Europe and affirms her imaginative capabilities when, inspired by the landscape, she 'thought of the mysterious castle', the subject of the poem. But she does not exult in the landscape before her, rather her reverie serves to remind her that she is both physically and intellectually isolated. For Mitchell the landscape is unsurpassed, the most picturesque 'I had ever seen', an identical pleasure to a landscape he spies in 1839, of a 'land so inviting, and still without inhabitants!' (*Three Expeditions* 2: 159). By painting themselves into the landscapes they evoke, both take possession of them but in different ways. One reviewer praised Mitchell for his feeling for the beauty of natural scenery (*Gentleman's Magazine* 630), but ends the notice by pointing out that the principal force of Mitchell's descriptions rests in the similarity discovered in this new tract of territory to 'our own land'. The final sentence of the review reads: 'The explorers found extensive downs, rich meadows and rivers, and abundance of wood' (my emphases; 631).

In the landscape descriptions of explorers and travellers in occupied areas of Africa, Mary Louise Pratt notes that narrators are often self-effacing, 'unheroic' and 'without ego' ('Scratches' 124). This has the effect of making the narrators 'invisible, passive, and personally innocent conduits for information' ('Scratches' 126). If Meredith and Mitchell write themselves into the landscape, if as narrators they do not feel the necessity to be self-effacing, invisible, or passive, wherein lies the difference? Meredith's is a self-protective impulse, whereas Mitchell, while appreciating the picturesqueness of the scenes he describes, envisions the flocks and herds to come, and himself the 'harbinger of many changes' (*Three Expeditions* 2: 159).

When Meredith notes the lack of poetry and imagination in the colonisers of New South Wales, her comment is most probably the source of Elizabeth Rigby's statement in her review of Meredith's book that New South Wales is devoid of any interest 'whether of an historical, poetical, pictorial or social kind' (Rigby 106), a statement Rigby has linked to the physical landscape rather than to the social one Meredith is actually describing. She might see and respond intellectually and aesthetically to the countryside, tracing fondly her literary allusions, but the only books that interest her fellow colonisers are ledgers and bookkeeper's daily records. Meredith reads the physical landscape in the only way she knows, drawing literary comparisons with the long-familiar works of her educated life, even drawing herself into this composite landscape, and yet insisting upon her own social and intellectual isolation as she does so. While Mitchell's is a discourse of acquisition, Meredith's is one of dislocation.

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Note

- 1 This paper extends one I have recently had published in *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*.