

# CAPTURED/CAPTIVITY NARRATIVES

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## MRS FRASER'S RAVENOUS APPETITE: EATING THE CANNIBALS FROM WITHIN<sup>1</sup>

*Gerry Turcotte*

‘And don’t, when dinner is nearly through, say “Who’s the host?” It isn’t done’.

(Cole Porter, ‘It ain’t etiquette’.)

### Menu

[Menu: ‘from the Latin *minor* or *minus*: it gives the details of the performance, as do the “minutes” of a meeting, but gives them prophetically, before eating starts’ (197).<sup>2</sup>]

**Apéritif:** [‘a *coup d’avant* or “shot before” (119).]

This paper focuses on the way the Wreck of the *Stirling Castle*—and more particularly Mrs Eliza Fraser—has been co-opted by various societies, groups and individuals, to different political ends. More exactly, I am concerned with the social conditions which operate to give this myth its specific appeal, and with the numerous transformations respective authors have made in order to use the Mrs Fraser story to speak to their times.

More than this, I would like to examine the way the trope of cannibalism has fed (off) the body of literature concerning Eliza Fraser—the feast that she has come to embody. Cannibalism—in captivity narratives—represents the distasteful and unpalatable extremes of disorder and inhumanity which cannot be stomachached by what Derrida called, the ‘Ch(i)ef’ of State, and his ‘carno-phallogocentric’ (113) appetite for control. But Mrs Fraser’s story does not go down well. In fact, it is possible to argue that she is both host and parasite—being devoured and feeding from. The more popular reading of her story, however, favours the former, and I would like here to turn the tables, as it were, and serve up a different (dis)course if I can. Despite Cole Porter’s warning, I would like to suggest that it is entirely appropriate to ask, ‘Who’s the host?’

### First (Dis)Courses

Before I do this, perhaps it is useful to review the standard fare. For the nineteenth century there has been a putative autobiographical New York edition of 1837 entitled *Narrative of the Capture, Sufferings, and Miraculous Escape of Mrs Eliza Fraser*; a doggerel retelling in an 1838 broadsheet; a children's book; and the melodramatic catechism of John Curtis which is considered an authoritative biography.<sup>3</sup> All of these reveal much about the age which produced them, and a number of studies exist placing this material in context.<sup>4</sup>

Where the tale was a bulwark for imperialism in its day, the story has also proved useful for later scrutiny of colonialism—by Patrick White and André Brink particularly—and it is interesting to see how this tale has been transformed to meet their more consciously political needs.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps what is most fascinating about the appeal of the Fraser legend is how it has crossed generic categories, as it were, luring not only historians and novelists, but also painters, poets and composers, including White, Brink, Sidney Nolan, Charles Blackman, Benjamin Britten, and Peter Sculthorpe. There has been a Japanese Noh drama made, a book-length poem by Michael Ondaatje, and a filmscript, film and novelisation of the latter by David Williamson, Tim Burstall and Kenneth Cook respectively.

Without a doubt, the Eliza Fraser story must be one of the most represented of stories—a tale of survival and suffering which has sparked world-wide attention, as this abridged list of texts suggests.

### Entrée: [“entries” to the meal proper’ (198).]

The story begins with a shipwreck. On the night of the 21 May 1836, the brig *Stirling Castle* struck part of the Great Barrier Reef. After battling to save the ship, the crew launched two small, badly damaged boats, a more seaworthy pinnace that contained part of the crew, and the other a longboat which included the ailing Captain Fraser and his wife, three trunks of her clothes, and, that essential part of all liferafts, the Captain's writing desk (Curtis 23–24).

The boats struggled together through rough seas until the pinnace finally abandoned the struggling longboat and fled into the night. The mutinous crew were later captured by Aborigines and all but one died. Eliza Fraser, who was pregnant at the time, went into premature labour and her child was born into the bottom of the water-logged boat where it drowned. It is this symbolic abortion of new life which heralds their arrival on what has come to be called Fraser Island.

After the longboat finally landed there began a series of encounters with Aborigines that saw the party progressively stripped of all their clothes and equipment, and eventually kidnapped and separated by various groups of Aborigines. In an inversion of the accepted imperial scenario of black nursemaid to white child, Mrs Fraser was used by the Aborigines to nurse a dying Aboriginal child.<sup>6</sup> She was also made to fetch firewood and gather food. When she was too slow, or collapsed, or as a spur to get her to climb trees, she was purportedly burned with firebrands, and often beaten.

In the midst of all this she came upon her husband one day, and watched as he was speared by his captors. In most accounts he died at her feet; although in Mrs Fraser's *first* telling of the story, he lingered for '8 or 9 days' (Fraser 1836).<sup>7</sup> Later versions see her actually interposing herself between captive and captor and in the more politically correct retelling by playwright David Williamson, the Captain is accidentally speared by one of his own (white) men.

Soon after, Mrs Fraser was taken to the mainland and displayed 'at a great corroboree...her unique status perhaps serving in part to protect her' (Davidson 449). Through a series of coincidences, her whereabouts were discovered and a rescue campaign mounted, led by a former convict known as John Graham. It is said that he broke into the bush camp of the Aborigines,

tricked them into releasing her, and then returned some 30 kilometres through the wilderness to the waiting soldiers hotly pursued by the enraged savages.

Despite her two months in captivity, Mrs Fraser was made to wait behind with several Aboriginal guides while Graham went on ahead to fetch a petticoat. Lieutenant Otter, the Commander of the expedition, luckily had one on hand. Once at the Moreton Bay settlement, Eliza Fraser became delusional, raved about being pregnant, and spoke of wanting to die. It was only the prospect of returning to England which lifted her spirits. Finally, in later life, she was reduced to 'showing herself in a booth in London's Hyde Park for sixpence a time' (Hassall 4).

## Second (Dis)Course

**Pièce De Résistance:** ['Nineteenth-century French *gourmands* loved to see themselves as "attacking" a particularly splendid dish, as if it were a fortress' (199).]

Given the many versions and texts alluded to already, it is possible to view Eliza Fraser herself as a text, a site or a location which individuals and even governments have attempted to appropriate, inscribe or to colonise in the same way that they have attempted to invade a particular country. In Kay Schaffer's words, all the different retellings of the Eliza Fraser tale 'mythologize the woman and place her in service to a larger cause—be it Christianity, colonialism, patriarchy, Australian nationalism, modernist humanism or the prurient interests of a modern film-viewing public' ('Australian Mythologies' 2). She goes on to argue that 'there is no "real" Eliza Fraser to recover in the annals of history—only more and more layers of motivated discourse' (3). While I agree with this idea to some extent, I also wonder whether this is not to participate in the process of ingestion—a further absorption of the Fraser host. And if it isn't to ignore an intestinal discomfort—an indigestion—which gnaws away at us; or, to put it another way, it is to fail to ask the question: who is eating whom?

Kate Darian-Smith has argued that, with the phenomenon of the White Woman of Gippsland, arguably 'the most fully documented captivity narrative of the Australian colonies', the very insubstantiality of the woman fueled on-going interest in her. As Darian-Smith puts it, 'her inconclusive and unsubstantiated presence—for she was never found—has meant that the "invisible girl" has been granted more historical and imaginative space than any flesh and blood white pioneer woman' (15). But Mrs Fraser was real—and she generated a most extraordinary 'body' of creative writing and criticism. It is intriguing to speculate on why this is so.

Perhaps the answer lies in this polymorphous body, since the site for this negotiation of viewpoint is of course Mrs Fraser's mutilated body. As Elizabeth Grosz has argued,

Michel Foucault's genealogical writings are largely responsible for questioning the presumed unity, cohesion, and ahistorical identity attributed to the human body. He demonstrates that the body, as much as other cultural objects, is the product and effect of various systems of training, discipline and construction. Bodies are not the brute effects of a pre-given nature, but are historically specific effects of forms of social and institutional production and inscription...Whatever (historical) identity the body has, this is the result of a play of forces unifying and codifying...it. These forces are never capable of completely subduing the bodies and bodily energies they thereby produce, for there is a resistance to the imposition of discipline, and a potential for revolt in the functioning of any regime of power. (x)

Eliza Fraser is very much this resisted/resisting body—a palimpsest over whose remains have been reinscribed story after story, a construction no less artificial than Frankenstein's creation, or Thomas Hobbes's 'artificial man'. I mention Hobbes here because in *Leviathan* he discusses the body politic—detailing the metaphoric breakdown of parts of the human body to

parts of the Commonwealth body. He concludes, 'the *pacts* and *covenants*, by which the parts of this body politic were at first made, set together, and united, resemble that *fiat*, or the *let us make man*, pronounced by God in the creation' (Hobbes 82). As one critic has argued, 'The artificial man' is a 'creation of "the world" of men united, thus renders itself free from the necessary but difficult dealings with both women and nature' (Gatens 80). It also separates woman from the world.

The metaphor of the unified body is crucial for the imperial construction of identity and government. It elides the possibility of difference, and empowers the imperialist process by eschewing the distraction of multiple purpose: 'The metaphor functions to restrict our political vocabulary to one voice only: a voice that can speak of only *one* body, *one* reason, and *one* ethic' (81).

Not surprisingly, then, much of the outrage over Mrs Fraser's treatment stems from a perception of that unitary individual, metonymically the 'mother of the nation', being fragmented—dismembered—by an unspeakable rift in the fabric of empire. If Eliza Fraser was instantly famous it was initially due to the very thought of a 'proper' English woman, wrapped by cannibals in the wilderness of the antipodes, and all the imagined indignities which she must have suffered. As one critic put it,

Eliza Fraser not only represented the values that customarily placed women on pedestals as creatures of unblemished virtue; [but also] in her person Christian civilization had been most exposed to savagery. Hers was the soft underbelly of imperialism, most vulnerable to spiteful attack from natives too ignorant to realize that they must give way to the new order. (Davidson 450–51)

Richard Slotkin, in an important study of captivity narratives in seventeenth-century American literature, defines the archetypal narrative as one which features 'a single individual, usually a woman' who 'stands passively under the strokes of evil, awaiting rescue by the grace of God' (94). He goes on to argue in terms which are useful here given my shifting play with the idea of food and cannibalism:

The sufferer represents the whole, chastened body of Puritan society, and the temporary bondage of the captive to the Indian is a dual paradigm—of the bondage of the soul to the flesh and to the temptations arising from original sin, and of the self-exile of the English Israel from England. In the Indian's devilish clutches, the captive had to meet and reject the temptation of Indian marriage and/or the Indian's 'cannibal' Eucharist. To partake of the Indian's love or his equivalent of bread and wine was to debase, to un-English the very soul. (Slotkin 94–95)

Mrs Fraser is very much a symbol of the Old World, and of everything that was genteel and valued there. And her experiences at the hands of the Natives—both real and imagined—became a symbol of all that *wasn't* civilised in the world. More importantly, it became evidence of the *potential* of New World inhabitants to threaten civilisation generally. It was not unheard of, therefore, for white settlers in Australia to justify particular Aboriginal massacres by excusing it through Eliza Fraser. Jim Davidson makes the point, in fact, that settlers even began to manufacture further sightings of captive white women, 'justifying a number of punitive expeditions. Almost certainly the "woman" they held was nothing more than a ship's figurehead, used as a centrepiece for corroborees' (451).

If Mrs Fraser was the embodiment of spuriously homogeneous British/civilised values, her aggressors necessarily became generic savages. This is most clearly evidenced by both the terminology and iconography that attend the tale. In the New York edition (1837) Eliza Fraser is somehow transported to the United States, and the blacks are transformed into Native Indians. Mrs Fraser speaks of the 'squaws' who collect her, and of the 'frightful looking Indians' and their horrid 'Chief'. In many of the illustrations the Aborigines are rendered as

Indians complete with North American headdress, costumes and tomahawks. In the frontispiece from the same edition, the gloss reads: 'An Indian Chief in the act of forcibly conveying Mrs. Fraser to his hut or wigwam'.

In the woodblock illustration which accompanied one example of Fraser-related doggerel verse there is an even more elaborated story told. Not only have the 'savages' become a fusion of indigenous racial identities—North American headdresses and tomahawks, Islander features, body ornaments and boats, and so forth, a process which reduplicates the actual obliteration of cultural specificity which is a trademark of imperial readings of the indigene—but also Mrs Fraser and her defenceless babe have somehow multiplied (Alexander 15).

What is at work here is a retreat to predetermined images of the indigene, constructed through what Simon Ryan has called a long-standing 'European archive of fears, superstitions and mysteries' (71), best summed up by one of the epigraphs in the Curtis edition: 'White man fear, black man near' (103), or represented in this statement by the Member of Parliament for Geraldton in 1892: 'It will be a happy day for Western Australia and Australia at large when the natives and kangaroos disappear' (Quoted in Hasluck). If Mrs Fraser is constructed as the embodiment of womanhood by an imperial Frankenstein, then the indigenous figure that is created is one, in Ryan's terms, 'whose essential features are always already known: the savage is treacherous, backward and inherently inclined towards cannibalism. The various stereotypical categories work together to ensure containment of the indigene in the semiotic field' constructed for them (71).

Although the imperial method is capable of great subtlety, it is also remarkably blunt. When it signals its displeasure, it resorts to a series of longstanding tropes to identify and label the *other* that threatens it. There is no more vicious an accusation than cannibalism, which, for Western cultures, was the ultimate signifier of Evil, an incontrovertible indicator of the absence of civilised values.<sup>8</sup> As Curtis put it, 'there is great reason to believe [that cannibalism] has been a general custom among all nations in the early stages of civilization', and goes on to add, 'even among our run-away convicts or bush-rangers, we have reason to believe that cannibalism is by no means rare'. Or my favourite part: 'it still exists in its full force in New Zealand' (107–08). Such values, needless to say, had to be eradicated. Hence, when the convict John Graham wrote his report to the authorities in the hopes of having his sentence commuted, he found it necessary to increase the number of 'Canniballs' that threatened him from 400 to 700 within the course of the same petition.<sup>9</sup>

The incredible irony in all of this, is that the only actual proven evidence of cannibalism was not performed by indigenous people, but was recorded by the mutinous crew, a fact which was conveniently forgotten or ignored because it didn't suit the propaganda, although Mrs Fraser is on record as saying that the whites she met were worse than the blacks. Even Alexander, the author of the first modern history of the Fraser story, begins by ridiculing the claims of cannibalism, but then seems to fault them only for their exaggerated quality: 'Baxter's vivid story of the eating of James Major, or at least Curtis's interpretation of it, seems overimaginative or naïve. Had the aborigines made a meal of Major it is highly unlikely that they would have done the job incompletely, wasting such an important piece of protein' (114).<sup>10</sup> Which seems an appropriate time to go on to dessert.

**Dessert:** ['de-served' (199).]

I began by suggesting that the notion of the unified body was a convenient masculine/imperialist construct, although I also hinted that Mrs Fraser decidedly resisted such labelling. I would like to end on this point which returns a measure of power to her. In virtually every telling of the tale—critical and creative—Mrs Fraser is rendered as victim, and is used representatively to express the grievance of Imperial goodness undermined by the

baseness of the savage instinct. One would think that to represent such virtue one would have to be blameless. Indeed, as Robert Dixon has argued about the quest for the White Woman of Gippsland, there was a problem with the moral justification of such an expedition: 'justice depended upon men acting in defence of a virtuous woman, and it was possible that the White Woman had by now lost her virtue' (49).

But Mrs Fraser's crime is much greater than that of the symbolically named White Woman's. Mrs Fraser, it seems, does not play her role with expected or appropriate decorum, and as a result is effectively punished for her transgressions. For one thing, Mrs Fraser does not remain a grieving widow, but secretly marries the Captain of the ship meant to return her to England. For another, she misrepresents herself, pretending still to be a widow, maintains that she is destitute, and most shocking of all, constructs increasingly elaborate and even contradictory tales of her experience, going so far as to suggest that the Aborigines that captured her had blue hair growing, like epaulets, out of their shoulders.

In her perhaps unwitting refusal to be co-opted into the role of Mother England, or to conform to any of the available stereotypes ascribed to her, Mrs Fraser in fact exposes the unreliability of colonial and patriarchal authority. Certainly, she is the preeminent source of knowledge about her own tale, despite the many orators who seek to interpret for her. No one manipulates the stories as much as Mrs Fraser, who 'neglects' to mention until the second version of her tale that she was pregnant at the time; who varies the account of her husband's death, or the length of time she was left alone on Fraser Island. In short, she assumes the right to embellish her tale, to seize the 'word', which, as earlier suggested, is denied women within the definition of the body politic.

As a result, her biographers are forced repeatedly to account for her lapses. In the 1837 New York edition, a postscript informs the reader that the pregnancy is 'one important fact relating to the extreme sufferings of Mrs Fraser, which, probably through modesty she has failed to mention' (21). One broadsheet account is prefaced with the phrase about the lady who was held by natives 'and who experienced at their hands, all, and far more than she is here supposed to describe' ('A Fragment' 284). Curtis positively raptures himself in his efforts to account for the variant tales. Lengthy digressions and frequent footnotes reassure the reader that the tale is not only plausible, but also that it has been crossed-checked against other expert witnesses and that the whole 'harmonizes together' (v). But his 'loyalty' to Mrs Fraser's credibility is not as altruistic as it may seem. In fact, Curtis had completed much of his manuscript when allegations of wrong-doing were suddenly raised against her. And there was also the little matter of the Lord Mayor of London who had been 'taken in' by her scam, and the newspaper which had supported his campaign—the same newspaper that Curtis represented. He had no choice but to champion her cause.

Repeatedly—and paradoxically—throughout the retellings of this story, the predominantly male historiographers bemoan her inconsistency and lament her silence—particularly on the issue of whether or not she was raped by the Aborigines. Curtis makes a great play of knowing but of being unable to speak what he knows:

The unfortunate lady attempted to cast a veil over part of her sufferings, which in truth were the most revolting of all...but the same delicacy which restrained her tongue, restrains our pen from describing them. The mere conception of the pangs she must have endured, both bodily and mentally, strikes us with amazement that human nature could exist under them, and almost freezes our blood. (149)

Michael Alexander responds to such prurience with palpable frustration:

It is clear that she had some unpleasant experiences, but her inconsistency and natural reticence in recounting them has led to a lack of credible information on the subject...John Curtis...is aggravatingly unspecific about her sexual adventures,

confining himself to such unsubstantiated statements as 'We have in our possession facts connected with the brutal treatment of this helpless woman, which, if we dared to publish them, would excite an involuntary shudder of horror and disgust in every well-regulated mind. (68)<sup>11</sup>

It is perhaps because of the inconsistency—or unreliability—of the narrator that she is refigured in that other available stereotype, the shrew or harridan—and even as an hysterical madwoman. Later historians go to great pains to point out that she abandoned her three children in order to accompany her husband on the voyage to New South Wales; newspaper reports revel in the fact that she alone received the monies raised for her in Sydney, and that she was seen parading in fine clothes in Liverpool, despite having appealed that morning to the authorities on the grounds that she was destitute. When her attempt failed there, she moved on to London and its Lord Mayor.

Mrs Fraser, in slipping from the pedestal of respectability, is punished for her transgressions by having her body dissected for the titillation of both Victorian and later audiences.<sup>12</sup> But, as I've argued elsewhere, an equally brutal response has been to displace her from her own narrative and to make it instead the story of male heroism. The story, in other words, becomes centred on the convict rescuer, or on Lieutenant Otter.<sup>13</sup> In this scenario, Mrs Fraser becomes an embellishment to the tale—necessary, like the Holy Grail perhaps, as the *reason* for the story, but certainly not of any quintessential 'value'. Textual elisions take on a variety of forms. In Ondaatje's *the man with seven toes* she is displaced both in the title (it is the man who names the tale) and in the narrative. Potter, Ondaatje's convict, like Graham or Bracefell, takes over the centre of the story so that it becomes an account of dubious or exaggerated heroism enacted through rape and subterfuge—supplanting the courage and tenacity of the female figure.

In most accounts, when Mrs Fraser does manage to speak she is either ignored, or she is called mad, selfish, unmotherly. She must, in other words, be silenced. But silence, as one critic has argued, 'still takes place, and hence, like sound, has presence' (Koh 2). And the contortions of 'biographers' to accommodate her shifting 'facts' suggest how significant her putative silence has been.

Mrs Fraser is in fact punished for controlling effectively—and variably—her own story; for resisting interpellation into the imperial narrative. She is condemned for attempting to occupy several roles, and to conform to none. In refusing her place within the imperial, masculine text, Mrs Fraser interrupts the seamlessness and authority of that narrative. In the end, the master narrative—not the Aborigines—has little choice but to take her dismembered, mutilated body/language, and re-member it according to its own design, so that it becomes a tale 'about regulating race, class, and gender relations, and...about maintaining the dominant ideologies of colonialism, Christianity, and Victorian morality' ('Eliza Fraser's Trial by Media' 118).

**Digestif:** ['the drink called the *digestif*...also has a comforting sound and reputation, and marks the meal's end' (120).]

Eliza Fraser, therefore, was and has been useful as a sexual and a moral fable. Her story was a way of proving the moral superiority of Whites, the barbarity of Blacks and it was a convenient way of pawning soft porn in a Victorian style—while at the same time offering a cautionary tale to all those women out there who might be struggling with the contradiction between duty and indulgence. And it is this process of re-inscription which is signalled by the reference to cannibalism in the title of this paper. My use of the term applies specifically not to Mrs Fraser nor the Aborigines, but to the critical practice which feeds on her. *We* are the

cannibals, devouring Mrs Fraser's body politic. But I would like to think that she is biting back!

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### Ingredients

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#### Notes

- 1 I would like to thank the Australian Academy of the Humanities for a Travel Grant which assisted in the research for this paper.
- 2 **HORS D'OEUVRES**: ['placed literally "outside" the main "works": *hors d'oeuvres* stood spatially apart, not temporally first as they do today' (198).] See, Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, 1991. All definitions following the section titles are taken from this edition.
- 3 This is, of course, an abbreviated list. For those mentioned above see, respectively: Anon. 1837; Anon. 1838; Anon., 1841 (signed 'by a lady long resident in New South Wales', and with a chapter entitled 'Loss of the Stirling Castle'); Curtis 1838.
- 4 See in particular Schaffer's articles: 1989, 1991 and 1993. See also Ryan, 1983, and Davidson, 1990. Michael Alexander's problematic study is also of interest, 1971.
- 5 For an excellent study of White's *A Fringe of Leaves* and Brink's *An Instant in the Wind* see Hassall, 1987.
- 6 See Anon. 1837, and the reference to 'one of the most deformed, and ugly looking brats' which she was forced to nurse (7).
- 7 This is from Mrs Fraser's own hand written 'testimonial' in the Public Archives of New South Wales. See Fraser, 1836.
- 8 It was also much more. For an excellent account of how cannibalism was used as a justification for slavery see Zogbaum, 1994.
- 9 See Graham, 1836, and his letter pleading for leniency.
- 10 And in an appendix called 'Aboriginal method of preparing dead bodies' Alexander writes, 'A detailed description of their principles and processes has been given', in the unfortunately entitled book, *Cookland*. That the section refers to burial procedures is distorted by the earlier lurid emphasis on cannibalism.
- 11 The italics are mine. 'Adventures' seems to be an unusual and trivialising term to use

- here, although it is consistent with Alexander's 'sexualising' of the story.
- 12 Critics have been obsessed with the physicality of the character. In the movie version starring Susannah York, Eliza is transformed into a female Tom Jones; and Alexander's *Mrs Fraser on the Fatal Shore* was re-issued with a busty Susannah York look-alike on the cover. What is most obvious about this sexual reading of the myth is how the 'sexual' aspect is a result of the incredibly over-charged imaginations of the particular male critics themselves. As Schaffer has suggested, Michael Alexander, for example, paints a picture of Fraser as a bad wife and mother and then spends a great deal of time suggesting that if she was raped, Mrs Fraser pretty much asked for it. A contemporary sketch, he says, reveals that Mrs Fraser was a 'handsome dark-haired lady whose strong features and mobile mouth suggest contradiction between duty and indulgence' ('Australian Mythologies' 8). The old 'She said no but meant yes', routine.
- 13 See 'Michael Ondaatje's Barbarous Truth: Mrs Fraser and *the man with seven toes*', in the Proceedings from 'La création biographique: colloque international interdisciplinaire', Rennes, 24 May 1995. Forthcoming.