

# Louisa Meredith's Idea of Home: Imagined Identity in Colonial Travel Writing

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My readers will be kind enough to imagine, if they journey with me to the end, what the other routes must be.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In 1852, a book was dedicated to “our most gracious and beloved Queen.” It professed to be a “simple chronicle of nine years passed in one of Her Majesty’s most remote colonies.”<sup>2</sup> The book was *My Home in Tasmania, During a Residence of Nine Years* and its author was Louisa Meredith, an English woman who had emigrated from Britain to the Australian colonies with her husband Charles, thirteen years earlier.<sup>3</sup> The Merediths intended to live in the colonies for five years, before returning “home” to Britain, something they never did.<sup>4</sup> Charles Meredith had lived in the Australian colonies since 1821, and when Lieutenant-Governor Arthur denied Charles a land grant in Tasmania, he moved to New South Wales (NSW). He returned to England in 1838, and sailed back to the colonies the following year, married to his cousin Louisa, who was expecting their first child.<sup>5</sup> After spending her first years as a colonist in NSW, Louisa Meredith dismissed Sydney as hot, glaring and dusty, and thought its inhabitants

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<sup>1</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania, During a Residence of Nine Years* (New York: Buncce and Brother, 1853), pp. 57-58.

<sup>2</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. vii.

<sup>3</sup> Hereafter referred to as *My Home in Tasmania*.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Grimshaw and Ann Standish, ‘Making Tasmania Home: Louisa Meredith’s Colonizing Prose’, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2007), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Sally O’Neill, ‘Meredith, Louisa Ann (1812 - 1895)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 5 (1974), p. 239.

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pretentiously imitated British social customs.<sup>6</sup> She understood emancipists to be wealthy, but lacking taste and education, and said convicts struggled with alcoholism, while the indigenous population was savage and brutal.<sup>7</sup> In short, she was unimpressed and welcomed the family's move to Tasmania in 1844. Meredith found more visual reminders of the English landscape there, and the building of new cultural institutions offered settlers uncontested areas for cultivating a replica of English society, which endeared the colony to her.<sup>8</sup>

Meredith was already a published author in England, having written a series of botanical studies. While living in NSW and Tasmania, she continued to write studies of the native flora and fauna, but also expanded her literary projects to help her family's precarious financial situation. She began to write books about her life in the colonies for readers at "home" in the United Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> In *My Home in Tasmania*, her second such work, Meredith reflected on 'this little fraction of the world,' and her writing illuminates much about British settlers' notions of identity and "home." She provides an interesting case study because of the several dichotomies embodied in her work. Meredith's self-proclaimed 'gossiping' style, with its focus on domestic details and family life, has the effect of making the female private sphere part of public discourse. She was also living in two places at once, something few historians have recognised.<sup>10</sup> Meredith referred to England as "home" until her death, and throughout her book, Australian society, culture and landscapes are implicitly, or more often explicitly, compared with Britain. And yet, the book's title talks about her *home* in Tasmania. Perhaps the fact that Meredith intended the book for a transnational audience might have led to her presenting two identities: her

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<sup>6</sup> Louisa Meredith will now be referred to as Meredith, and other family members will be indicated by their given names so as not to assert an imagined personal connection with the subject. It is also my desire not to privilege male family members by referring to them by the family name. Louisa married her cousin, and her mother's maiden name was also Meredith, giving Louisa just as much claim to the family name as her husband or father-in-law.

<sup>7</sup> See Louisa Meredith, *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales During a Residence in that Colony from 1839 to 1844* (London: John Murray, 1844).

<sup>8</sup> Grimshaw and Standish, 'Making Tasmania Home', p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Grimshaw and Standish, 'Making Tasmania Home', p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> See Kirsten McKenzie, 'Social Mobilities at the Cape of Good Hope: Lady Anne Barnard, Samuel Hudson and the opportunities of empire, c. 1797-1824' in *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire*, eds T. Ballantyne and A. Burton, (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009), p. 277.

British domestic ideal, and the adventuring colonial woman making a new home and living in a new society. A focus on how Meredith reconciled her new and old identities will distinguish this work from the existing body of historiography and challenge existing interpretations of Meredith's life.

This article will explore Meredith's imagined identity. It will examine the ideas that she, and other British settlers, carried between their old and new homes, and will contemplate how the two were reconciled, or clashed. Civility and manners will be examined as part of the colonial project, and the British attempt to diffuse 'appropriate' ideas throughout the empire will be considered as an outward manifestation of British imperial culture. Finally, in exploring the context of newly forming colonial identities, the paper will question what the concept of 'home' meant to Meredith—and to other British settlers—and how ideas they transported around the world affected their understanding of where 'home' was.

Understanding Meredith's crossing between continents and homes feeds into extensive recent research into ideas of transnationalism and networks, and to write about her experiences without acknowledging this historiography, would be naïve. Kerry Ward has suggested that "networks of empire," both discursive and material, created multiple ways for sovereignty to be exercised, and using this framework illuminates how a common heritage was created through networks of migration in particular.<sup>11</sup> This approach allows us to situate Meredith as a transnational individual, who moved physically and intellectually between NSW and Tasmania as colonies, and between the Australian colonies and Britain. Examining the networks Meredith was involved in may help understand how nineteenth-century British identity was reinforced by evoking 'home'. British colonies were not empty spaces to be made over in the coloniser's image, nor did the British metropole have a self-contained culture to project overseas.<sup>12</sup> It is more useful to understand the culture of the British Empire as being constituted of overlapping and intersecting webs, with information and

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<sup>11</sup> Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler, 'Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda', in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, eds Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 1.

ideas moving in various directions.<sup>13</sup> Linda Colley has suggested that 'British' identity was partially defined and created by Empire, and this resonates in Meredith's work, as her colonial experiences help her to delineate her British identity.<sup>14</sup> Tracing Meredith's active participation in the empire, allows us to examine historical processes and relationships without being bound by a national story.<sup>15</sup> This is important, because the systems that held the empire together were "continually fragmenting and reconstituting."<sup>16</sup>

This article will consider the networks Meredith imagined herself in, those of her audience, and the broader networks she embodied. This approach may bring new insights into the lives of white, colonial women and may contribute to the growing awareness that women, as both actors and ideological constructs, played a vital role in creating the British world and identity.<sup>17</sup> Meredith's writing threatens the stability of both British and Australian national identities. It reflects the confusion she felt about whether becoming Tasmanian could be reconciled with retaining her British identity. Her writing demonstrates the complexities of ideas of 'home,' but also shows that individual stories can explicate much about colonial life and identities.<sup>18</sup>

### **Briton, Settler, Writer, Wife: Who Was Louisa Meredith?**

*Notes and Sketches of New South Wales* (1844) was Meredith's first account of her time in Australia, and the book had been popular in Britain, in the colonies themselves, and in America. Her follow-up work, *My Home in Tasmania*, was promoted by her American publishers as useful for those

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<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Elbourne, 'Between Van Diemen's Land and the Cape Colony', in *Reading Robinson: Companion Essays to Friendly Mission*, eds Anna Johnston and Mitchell Rolls (Hobart: Quentis Publishing, 2008), p. 78.

<sup>14</sup> Linda Colley, 'Introduction', in *Rediscovering the British World*, eds Phillip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> A. Curthoys and M. Lake, 'Introduction', in *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective*, eds A. Curthoys and M. Lake, (Canberra: ANU E-Press, 2005), p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Alan Lester, 'Colonial Networks, Australian Humanitarianism and the History Wars', *Geographical Research*, vol. 44, no. 3 (2006), p. 231.

<sup>17</sup> Lisa Chilton, 'A New Class of women for the Colonies: *The Imperial Colonist* and the Construction of Empire', in *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity*, eds Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> Desley Deacon, Penny Russel and Angela Woollacott, 'Introduction', in *Transnational Lives*, eds Desley Deacon et. al. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 2, 5.

planning to visit or live in Australia because there were not “mere ‘Extracts from a Diary,’ got up for the occasion.”<sup>19</sup> *My Home in Tasmania* begins with the Meredith's departure from Sydney, saying “I felt less regret than I could have believed possible, at leaving a country which had been my home for above a year... and I parted with a stout heart, full of hopefulness.”<sup>20</sup> The book then outlines the journey to their new home, focusing on the scenery and wildlife along the way. Once the Meredith's are established in Spring Vale, she describes the work that needs to be done to build and maintain a home there. While there are chapters outlining sojourns to nearby scenic spots and towns, much of the book continues to focus on plants and animals near her home or on her domestic duties. Her book has very little in the way of personal narrative, instead, it is a reflection almost entirely on her environs and on her home, with the occasional adventurous tale of snake bites, horse theft, bushfires, or of attacks by “tribes of natives.”<sup>21</sup>

Louisa Meredith's identity is central to her understanding of home. Lambert and Lester argue that if we resist making an individual's character fundamental, and bring “the ‘background’ of a life to the surface,” we can look beyond personality, to the ideas and world surrounding them.<sup>22</sup> This may be true, but examining character, and how people understand themselves, can be equally valuable. Inga Clendinnen describes Meredith as “upper class, cool and free from the least desire to flatter the colonials.”<sup>23</sup> Whilst Meredith certainly did not restrain her criticism of her fellow colonials, she was also openly attempting to change the reputation of the colony. She criticised people in England who, “ridiculously exaggerated accounts” of conditions in the colonies, and lamented the “low mean spirit which loves to domineer over and taunt its fallen brother.”<sup>24</sup> Yes, she saw the colonies as the ‘fallen brother’, but did not dismiss this family member altogether. She was not only defending the colony, but separating herself from a portion of the population in Britain who chose to attack it. This

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<sup>19</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, ‘Preface to the American Edition’, np.

<sup>20</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, pp. 126, 142.

<sup>22</sup> D. Lambert, and A. Lester, ‘Introduction: Imperial spaces, imperial subjects,’ in *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century*, eds D. Lambert and A. Lester, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2003), p. 280.

<sup>24</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 248.

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choice needs to be highlighted in understanding that while Meredith retained her cultural attachment to her British home she was beginning to see the Australian colonies not just as British outposts, but as part of her identity.

Contemporary sources also noted the shift in Meredith's attitude towards the colonies. In its review of *My Home in Tasmania*, Hobart's *The Courier* newspaper went so far as to describe her as a "defender of the settler."<sup>25</sup> *The Courier* was positive in its review of *My Home in Tasmania*, saying it "gives us a clear and brighter picture of Tasmania than we have before met with."<sup>26</sup> However, this article was a reprint from the *Illustrated London News*, and it contrasts with the review given by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, where the upset Meredith caused in her first Australian home was apparently not forgotten. In reviewing Meredith's earlier work, *Notes and Sketches on New South Wales*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* had challenged her blunt criticism of the ladies and gentlemen of the colony and dismissed the work as "not notes and sketches of NSW, but sketches of Mrs. Meredith's own sayings and doings."<sup>27</sup> The review concluded that the paper "cannot see what there is in it that could have induced Mr. Murray to publish it."<sup>28</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that the *Sydney Morning Herald's* review of *My Home in Tasmania* was not far removed from its review of her previous book. The newspaper this time criticised Meredith's "lofty aristocratic tone" going so far as to suggest that this tone was "to us plebeians rather amusing", and said to print further details of the book would "whirl the colony into a storm."<sup>29</sup> The contrast between her reception in NSW, and the way her work was received in England and Tasmania, may indicate a gulf in the way the empire composed itself at the frontier, and how it was refracted back home.<sup>30</sup> It is interesting in itself that the review in *The Courier* came from an English paper, while the *Sydney Morning Herald* had an openly colonial perspective. Meredith may have been more comfortable in Tasmania than in NSW, because identity in the former was less self-consciously colonial.

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<sup>25</sup> *The Courier*, 2 May 1853, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> *The Courier*, 2 May 1853, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 March 1845, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 March 1845, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> 'Review', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 May 1856, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Price, 'One Big Thing: Britain, Its Empire, and Their Imperial Culture', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 45, (2006), p. 626.

Meredith arrived in Tasmania from NSW at a time when the former had a reputation as “the gaol of the Empire.”<sup>31</sup> Free immigrant numbers had declined, further emphasising the remaining convict and emancipist element of the colony.<sup>32</sup> Yet Meredith felt that this reputation was undeserved, saying Tasmania had an “almost daring feeling of security.”<sup>33</sup> While she felt safe, whether she felt comfortable and at home there is debatable. Johnston argues that, “in an attempt to familiarise the landscape, in making gothic associations between coastlines and castles... she deploys the sublime in order to mask the actual sublimity she feels regarding the unknown country.”<sup>34</sup> However, I would argue that using familiar imagery does not mean Meredith was necessarily only making comparisons with England. She was also highlighting and valuing difference to an audience unfamiliar with her subject; she was attempting to portray Tasmania positively and to tentatively explain and understand her new identity there in a way her readers at home would understand. For example, when describing her time around Swan Fort, Meredith focused on her delight in “the fine broad sandy beach near Cambria,” because “although our wanderings have led us over the sea and near the sea perpetually, yet I had not until now enjoyed a sea-side ramble for years... Many of the shells we found were familiar to me.”<sup>35</sup>

Meredith was not alone in being unsure how to place her British identity in a foreign landscape. Kirsten McKenzie argues that Lady Anne Barnard, in the Cape Colony, situated herself in an imagined geographic and social setting as a way to reconcile her place in the colony, with her conviction that she was there as a “temporary sojourner.”<sup>36</sup> It seems that Meredith was doing much the same. She refers to her “unpretending chronicles of our Tasmanian life” towards the end of the work, noting the “perpetual enticements and beguilements [*sic*] of pleasant country

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<sup>31</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 81.

<sup>32</sup> From 1830-37, Tasmania had received sixty per cent of free British immigrants to Australian colonies, compared with just three per cent between 1838-50. See James Boyce, *Van Diemen's Land* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2008), p. 224.

<sup>33</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 81.

<sup>34</sup> Judith Johnston, ‘Louisa Anne Meredith and the Romantic Sublime in Australia’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol 21, no. 3 (1999), p. 396.

<sup>35</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 99.

<sup>36</sup> McKenzie, ‘Social Mobilities’, p. 277.

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occupation,” but always situating it as a phase or part of a broader travel narrative she shared with her husband.

Meredith was more positive about her new home than other historians have suggested. It is also clear that she based her defence of the colony on Tasmania's perceived potential to recreate a sense of England. Grimshaw and Standish argue that *My Home in Tasmania's* focus on her family's attempt to establish a settled home is a comment on the broader theme of British claims to the colony. They argue that while her actions may have taken place in the context of feminine homemaking, they were “part of the wider, masculine, colonising process,” and this seems likely.<sup>37</sup> Meredith clearly situated herself within the wider British Empire, and would have been aware of some of her transnational connections.

Networks of personal connections were significant for governance in the British colonies.<sup>38</sup> In 1844, when the Merediths lost their income derived from NSW investments due to insolvencies in Sydney, Charles was offered employment as the police magistrate in Port Sorell through the patronage of the new Lieutenant-Governor, Eardley Wilmot.<sup>39</sup> When talking of Wilmot's arrival in the colony, Meredith said that as a “lover of my native Warwickshire, (I) naturally felt more than a common interest and pleasure in welcoming one so well and deservedly esteemed at home, to our lowly abode”.<sup>40</sup> Not only does this demonstrate how important networks of communication and patronage were, it also suggests that people's reputations travelled with them, and that standards of judgment were brought from Britain to its colonies. It reinforces Laidlaw's premise that the British Empire was not composed of discrete sites to be compared and contrasted, but were rather an “interconnected whole.”<sup>41</sup>

Although she supplies cross-cultural encounters for readers, Meredith understands her own “home” in Britain as superior, and the ultimate destination in her travel narrative.<sup>42</sup> The female voice was not as

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<sup>37</sup> Grimshaw and Standish, ‘Making Tasmania Home’, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Zoe Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections, 1815-1845: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 13.

<sup>39</sup> O'Neill, ‘Meredith, Louisa Ann’, p. 239.

<sup>40</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 245.

<sup>41</sup> Zoe Laidlaw, ‘Richard Bourke: Irish Liberalism Tempered by Empire’, in *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century*, eds D. Lambert and A. Lester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 113.

<sup>42</sup> Grimshaw and Standish, ‘Making Tasmania Home’, p. 4.

commonly recorded as the male voice in this period, and Fentress and Wickham argue that this is compounded by the fact that women often recorded the past through stories of male activities.<sup>43</sup> While Meredith certainly demonstrates the way her husband shaped her life, she spends considerably more time discussing the 'female sphere,' and so perhaps her voice is more easily recovered. Whilst *My Home in Tasmania* was concerned with domesticity, Meredith's education and the income she received from her writing meant that she was not a woman dependent entirely on her husband. Furthermore, Meredith asserted intellectual independence and her own intellectual identity, and had done this before her marriage.

When living in England, Meredith had written to newspapers on religious and social issues, particularly in support of the Chartists's aim of increasing the political rights and influence of the working class, and it would be naïve to assume that her book's lack of focus on political issues in the colonies was because she was not aware of them.<sup>44</sup> She was conscious of needing to present her gentility and femininity to her British audience in her travel books, in order to achieve her goal of overturning common misconceptions about the colony.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, Meredith's conviction as to the merit of her work is seen in the fact it was published at all. By contrast, Penny Russell argues that Lady Jane Franklin "lacked the confidence in her own powers of observation... to secure her word's lasting significance by publishing them."<sup>46</sup> Where Franklin was self-conscious of her "frivolous scribbling,"<sup>47</sup> Meredith was confident of the value of her intimate and informal style.<sup>48</sup> She underplayed the important financial contribution she was making to the family, saying "the care of my household and our dear children" kept her fully occupied.<sup>49</sup> When taken ill on board a ship, Meredith and the nanny of her children were unable to care for them, and so she recounts the "first essay in the nursery department" of

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<sup>43</sup> James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), p. 140.

<sup>44</sup> O'Neill, 'Meredith, Louisa Ann', p. 240.

<sup>45</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. xv.

<sup>46</sup> Penny Russell (ed.), *This Errant Lady: Jane Franklin's Overland Journey to Port Phillip and Sydney, 1839* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Russell, *This Errant Lady*, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Linda Colley, 'Introduction', in *Rediscovering the British World*, eds Phillip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 168.

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her husband and his man-servant.<sup>50</sup> The incident was observed as humorous because of its rarity. Perhaps in recording this incident and assuming modesty about her financial contribution to the family, Meredith was attempting to demonstrate her status as a 'lady' to readers. It could also have been how she understood herself.

### **Identity: 'Home' and the Lived Experience**

To appreciate how British and colonial identities developed, we must examine the networks, both material and discursive, that operated between the metropole and colonies. This approach means there is a focus on continuity and change, which avoids the traditional teleology of 'rise and fall,' and reshapes the view that the imperial centre was the driving force of the empire.<sup>51</sup> When considering the relationship between ideas brought from England and those developed in colonies, it must be remembered that these are terms that can only be understood in relation to each other.<sup>52</sup> Identity was built based on the reconciliation, or clash, of ideas and values from "home," compared to the experience of the colonies. It is not surprising that Britons viewed the colonies in the same prism as their homeland; they had no other frame of reference.<sup>53</sup> Gender relationships provide a clear demonstration of this.

Viewing gender as central to understanding processes of British colonialism is not the same as arguing that gender is, or was, universally recognisable, with the same affects in different geographical spaces.<sup>54</sup> In Meredith's book, gender is both a source of authority, and a form of social control, when it comes to manners, respectability and status. Her work reflects the fact that feminine ideals, and the valuing of domesticity and gentility, transcended geographical locations, and was intrinsic to the transference of ideas of 'home' to the colonies. The vital role played by women as the empire's 'guardians of morality' is well understood, and Levine argues that the domesticity women embodied was a 'reversed

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<sup>50</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 363.

<sup>51</sup> Ward, *Networks of Empire*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>52</sup> Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), p. 12.

<sup>53</sup> Boyce, *Van Diemen's Land*, p. 156.

<sup>54</sup> Phillipa Levine, 'Introduction: Why Gender and Empire?', in *Gender and Empire*, ed. Phillipa Levine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 2.

commodity,' that had an ordering function in the colonies, by making them appear more like "home."<sup>55</sup>

Women demonstrated their transformative power through their devotion to the home and through social conservatism, and this was physically displayed through a woman's appearance and accomplishments. Bradlow argues that colonial women were anxious to demonstrate their propriety, and uses the examples of middle-class wives at Cape Town surrounding themselves with the 'paraphernalia of gentility', which provided a physical and material base of possessions, including furnishings and clothes, to demonstrate social class and status.<sup>56</sup> Colonial women did not, however, always emulate the established behavioural codes of British ladies. Louisa Grace Ross, in the early 1860s, wrote that in the Cape Colony, women were "not given to the drudgery" of playing the piano, but preferred to dance with a "real downright unrestrained play of limbs... producing a wholesome perspiration and developing a hearty appetite for supper."<sup>57</sup> While Ross indicates that women did not always follow expected behavioural patterns in the colonies, she clearly understands what behaviour is expected and what would define femininity and in Britain. What is important here is that this association of femininity is tied to class; being a "lady" is different from being a woman.

While the concept of the 'gentleman' adapted easily to colonial conditions through organisations and structures such as education and employment, the idea of the "lady," as superior to other women, did not translate as well.<sup>58</sup> Meredith said that "one crying fault" of the 'ladies' in the colonies, was that they aspired to social pretensions they did not have.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps they did not have these pretensions because the colonies provided limited social opportunities to act out or experience the performances and rituals associated with being a "lady" in Britain. Despite this, Meredith

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<sup>55</sup> Levine, 'Introduction', p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> Edna Bradlow, 'Women at the Cape in the Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century', *South African Historical Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1987), p. 59.

<sup>57</sup> Louisa Grace Ross and Sir John Robinson, 'Life at the Cape A Century Ago', in Bradlow, 'Women at the Cape' p. 54.

<sup>58</sup> See Beverley Kingston, 'The Lady and the Australian Girl: Some Thoughts on Nationalism and Class', in *Australian Women: New Feminist Perspectives*, eds N. Grieve and A. Burns, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 28 and Penny Russell, 'The Brash Colonial: Class and Compartment in Nineteenth-Century Australia', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 12 (2002), p. 443.

<sup>59</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 291.

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certainly did not suppose that English society was perfect. Indeed, she said it was not desirable for “all the bad habits of an old country (to) be scrupulously transported to a new one.”<sup>60</sup> While acknowledging that ‘society’ in Tasmania was limited, she also said that it was “essentially English,” and that she knew “of no place where greater order and decorum is observed by the motley crowds... than in this most shamefully slandered colony.”<sup>61</sup> ‘Order’ was a common theme in Meredith’s writing, and the efforts to impose it demonstrate a considerable point of difference between her old life, and her new home.

Tasmania, at least in part, deserved its reputation as a lawless, rough place. In 1847, there was one policeman for every 135 people, compared to one police officer for every 324 people in NSW; and in 1841, out of a population of c. 53,000, it is known that 8,732 ‘free’ settlers and 11,458 convicts appeared before the courts, the main charges being drunkenness, idleness and insubordination.<sup>62</sup> In many ways, it is surprising that Meredith found ‘society’ in Tasmania so much more amenable than NSW because, in 1851, three-quarters of the male population were or had been convicts, compared to just one-fifth in NSW.<sup>63</sup> Despite this, Meredith insisted that she felt comfortable in Tasmania, safer than she would have felt at “home”, where people must “garrison” their houses.<sup>64</sup> Of Hobart, she said that “not even in an English country village can a lady walk alone with less fear of harm or insult than in this capital of Van Diemen’s Land, commonly believed at home to be a moral pest-house.”<sup>65</sup>

Meredith described the “unfounded assertions” about the “moral and social condition of this colony” as “cruelly, scandalously false,” and made it clear that one of the aims of her book was to right this impression.<sup>66</sup> In her attempts to suggest that Tasmania was a safe place, she even described bushrangers there as being “respectful and humane towards females,” again, demonstrating the ways that established British gender relationships remained important markers of social order.<sup>67</sup> Meredith also

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<sup>60</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 14.

<sup>61</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 68.

<sup>62</sup> Boyce, *Van Diemen’s Land*, p. 217.

<sup>63</sup> Boyce, *Van Diemen’s Land*, pp. 224-25.

<sup>64</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 81.

<sup>65</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 35.

<sup>66</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 36.

<sup>67</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 60.

noted that “not in the most moral circles of moral England herself is a departure from the paths of propriety or virtue more determinedly or universally visited by the punishment of exclusion from society... nowhere are all particulars and incidents of person's past lives more minutely and rigidly canvassed”.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps, as Standish and Grimshaw argue, in presenting this view of the colony to her British audience, she was attempting to emphasise the civility she, and other settlers, brought to it.<sup>69</sup> Order applied not only to law and to its enforcement. As the White “mistress” of her house, Meredith's writing emphasises her desire to order and control her domestic situation. McKenzie argues that this was also the case for Lady Barnard in the Cape colony, and it is not coincidence that these two white women sought to use the domestic realm to assert control over their environment.<sup>70</sup> Russell argues that this was part of the broader Victorian emphasis on passive, modest womanhood, and that this idea was transmitted to the colonies, where women like Meredith and Barnard had to double their efforts to reconcile their domestic world with a rough convict society, or raw frontier life.<sup>71</sup> Seeing these networks of ideas moving across *space*, leads to an understanding of *place* as not just a bounded entity.<sup>72</sup> Meredith continued to attempt to reconcile her new life with her life at “home” by carrying traditions and standards across the world with her, and then acting them out in a new environment. She established her place in the home as being domestic and orderly while she sought to understand and adapt to the new physical environment she found herself in.

Place in an important theme in Meredith's work, and her focus on her ‘place’ being the home is central to understanding how she imagined her identity. Russell and Pesman argue that women “construed communities of belonging,” by understanding their connection to place through relationships with the men they loved.<sup>73</sup> I would argue that Meredith, while certainly devoted to her husband, understood place not through the man she professed to love, but through the *home* she did love, both in Britain and in the colonies, which the networks she was linked to reinforced. It is worth noting that Meredith was not entirely bound by her

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<sup>68</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 36.

<sup>69</sup> Grimshaw and Standish, ‘Making Tasmania Home’, p. 15.

<sup>70</sup> McKenzie, ‘Social Mobilities’, p. 284.

<sup>71</sup> Russell, *This Errant Lady*, p. 11.

<sup>72</sup> Lambert and Lester, ‘Introduction’, p. 13.

<sup>73</sup> Deacon et. al., ‘Introduction’, p. 9.

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gender to the domestic sphere. Her writing had a financial imperative, and she was an amateur naturalist, a common pursuit of genteel English people. She wrote of new plants she found, noting their scientific name and the source she had found the information in.<sup>74</sup> Meredith commended the efforts of John Franklin, Lieutenant-Governor of Tasmania—along with Lady Jane, his wife—in promoting to the “unambitious multitude,” “science, literature, or art.”<sup>75</sup>

Perhaps Meredith could also be considered as operating in what Laidlaw terms the “scientific network,” as she actively received information before passing on her knowledge to new audiences.<sup>76</sup> For example, in Richmond, Meredith met the police magistrate who was also a geologist, and reported on his collection before noting his intentions to send it on to the British Museum or the Geological Society.<sup>77</sup> She even went as far as to compare cider made from Tasmanian apples to English cider, concluding that, “from the remarks on cider-making in ‘London’s Encyclopaedia of Agriculture,’ I conceive that our Tasmanian cider is fermented too much.”<sup>78</sup> Her intellectual curiosity and focus on her physical environment mark her work. They emphasise her attempts to understand her identity as a woman, a settler, a Briton, a coloniser, and an intellectual. What is important here, is that she placed herself, as an individual, at the centre of her travel narrative, and used her writing to imagine a new identity for herself.

Meredith did spend considerable time discussing the making and running of her household. She considered the main problems in “colonial housewifery” to originate with servants, particularly convict women, and their tendency to drink.<sup>79</sup> Meredith did not address even these problems at length, saying “as I dislike hearing my neighbours’ long narratives of their domestics’ delinquencies, I shall not inflict a very minute detail of my individual sufferings upon my own kind friends.”<sup>80</sup> The perceived lack of competence among servants, and the feeling that they could not be trusted, meant that women such as Meredith placed increased importance on their

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<sup>74</sup> See Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 237.

<sup>75</sup> See Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 30.

<sup>76</sup> Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections*, p. 32.

<sup>77</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, pp. 46-7.

<sup>78</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, pp. 71-2.

<sup>79</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, pp. 113, 330.

<sup>80</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 113.

own role in raising the family.<sup>81</sup> Threats to the replication of a metropolitan home also came from other sources. Meredith frequently talked of *nature* encroaching on the domestic sphere, but suggested that 'the bush' could be tamed and kept in line by hard work. She emphasised this need for control when describing a situation where she found her child playing with a snake, saying she simply "ordered the unwelcome guest to be summarily despatched."<sup>82</sup> Her quiet authority indicates her confidence that she *belonged* in this new environment, in a way that the snake did not. Meredith also frequently speaks of either her or her husband's attempts to improve and 'civilise' their home and grounds. They did this by having a garden and orchard with "fruits and flowers cultivated in England," and by recreating the "sights and sounds that tell of the Old World and its good old ways".<sup>83</sup> She said that by the summer for 1843-44 her new home had achieved a "tolerably civilised aspect."<sup>84</sup> Again, the physical environment is to be observed, ordered, and controlled as a way of expressing her identity.

While Meredith was literally building a colonial home, she, and other settlers, were also constructing a British transnational character by applying what they considered to be vital 'British' ideas, to what they found in the colonies. British identity became enmeshed with ideas about respectability, the two being seen as synonymous. Robert Ross describes this phenomenon as "an insidious, because totally informal, expression of cultural imperialism."<sup>85</sup> Concerns with respectability were also a reflection of the fact that middle-class sensibilities were not just being imported, but also made in the colonies.<sup>86</sup> The way Meredith uses the concept of 'home' as a point of comparison, makes us question whether it was a genuine expression of longing, or if maintaining a 'British' identity, and appealing to British audiences, required reference to 'home.' It appears that 'home' was no longer a physical place, but a source of values and a point reference for understanding and imagining a new life. While settlers like Meredith

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<sup>81</sup> McKenzie, 'Social Mobilities', p. 11.

<sup>82</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 126.

<sup>83</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 70.

<sup>84</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 243.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony: 1750-1870, A Tragedy of Manners* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 5.

<sup>86</sup> Ann Stoler, 'Cultivating Bourgeois Bodies and Racial Selves', in Catherine Hall (ed.), *Cultures of Empire, A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 90.

saw themselves as bringing British 'civilisation' to the colonies, they were in fact building on discourse and networks established by earlier colonisers. The networks of information Meredith relied on in constructing her identity were reciprocal, as will be demonstrated below.

### **Race and Difference: The 'Other'**

Questions about race were integral to the British colonial project. They were extremely significant in forming 'British' and 'colonial' identities, through the construction of the "other," as a way to define, in a different environment from home, what it meant to be British.<sup>87</sup> According to Stoler, colonial authority was in fact based on the false premise that Europeans in the colonies were a separate and easily identified group, and that the boundaries between them and 'others' was obvious.<sup>88</sup> While British settlers understood that they were bringing notions of civilisation from their homeland to the empire's frontier, what they knew of racial difference came from previous transnational experiences.<sup>89</sup> British settlers and policy makers were responding to prior contact with other racial groups, be they Irish, Jamaican, San or Aboriginal Australian. Ideas of difference originated in the colonies, before being formalised at home, where they were disseminated, and taken again to the colonies.

Cooper and Stoler argue that the most basic tension of empire lies in the fact that the 'otherness' of colonial persons was not inherent or stable, and difference had to be consistently defined and maintained.<sup>90</sup> Individuals were not just *responding* to 'natural' ideas of difference, whether in terms of race, class or sex. They were also *constructing* themselves against these differences.<sup>91</sup> This was not only true in the Australian colonies. Lester argues that although British settlers faced

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<sup>87</sup> Deacon et. al., 'Introduction', p. 8.

<sup>88</sup> Ann Stoler, 'Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia', in *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*, Micaela di Leonardo (ed.), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 52.

<sup>89</sup> Patricia Grimshaw, 'Faith, Missionary Life, and the Family,' in *Gender and Empire*, Phillipa Levine (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 264.

<sup>90</sup> Cooper and Stoler, '*Between Metropole and Colony*', p. 7.

<sup>91</sup> Joanna De Groot, "'Sex" and "Race": The Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century', in *Cultures of Empire, A Reader*, ed. Catherine Hall (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 3, 9 and Stoler, 'Carnal Knowledge', p. 51.

different circumstances in different locations, they still “co-constructed a particular, trans-imperial discourse of colonialism.”<sup>92</sup>

Settlers occupy a contested place in historiography, one that needs further exploration. As demonstrated above, women in particular were understood, as Adele Perry puts it, as having a “literally pregnant” imperial mission.<sup>93</sup> This mission was particularly important when it came to racial hierarchies. Women occupied a “doubled space” as colonisers. In their quest to create new “homes”, women alienated indigenous people from *their* homes. However, women were also colonised, because they remained restricted by their homeland’s laws and social customs.<sup>94</sup> Women and their families were thus an important part of the “civilising mission,”<sup>95</sup> and considering women and race in the same framework allows us to understand how different racial systems interacted across national borders in everyday life.<sup>96</sup>

Meredith was unequivocally clear about her feelings towards indigenous Australians, saying, “the people themselves were the lowest of the human species.”<sup>97</sup> She was a firm supporter of George Augustus Robinson’s work as Chief Protector of Aborigines, and commended him because he had “saved the lives of thousands of defenceless persons, and restored prosperity.”<sup>98</sup> When discussing frontier conflict she said that early settlers were “country gentlemen... (not) disposed to commence hostilities,” and so placed blame with the ‘other.’<sup>99</sup> Having little contact with

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<sup>92</sup> Alan Lester, ‘British Settler Discourse and the Circuits of Empire’, *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 54 (2002), p. 25.

<sup>93</sup> Adele Perry, ‘Interlocuting Empire: Colonial womanhood, settle identity, and France Herring’ in *Rediscovering the British World*, eds Phillip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), p. 195.

<sup>94</sup> Perry, ‘Interlocuting Empire’, p. 195.

<sup>95</sup> Patricia Grimshaw, ‘The Fabrication of White Homemaking: Louisa Meredith in Colonial Tasmania’ in *Re-orienting Whiteness: Transnational Perspectives on the History of an Identity*, eds Leigh Boucher, Jane Carey, and Katherine Ellinghaus (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 264.

<sup>96</sup> Martha Hodes, ‘A Story With an Argument: Writing the Transnational Life of a Sea Captain’s Wife’, in *Transnational Lives*, eds Desley Deacon et. al. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 22.

<sup>97</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 103.

<sup>98</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 154. It is possible that Meredith would not have looked so kindly on Mr Robinson had she known that he had accused her brother-in-law of kidnapping and trading Aboriginal women, and her father-in-law of ill treating natives. See Grimshaw and Standish, ‘Making Tasmania Home’, p. 13.

<sup>99</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 137.

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Aboriginal people herself, she relied on her husband's accounts which she retold to her readers. The stories she chose to recount reveal much about how she differentiated herself from the indigenous people. She suggests that frontier violence began after "the cruel murder of a white woman."<sup>100</sup> She then recounted a husband finding his "young wife, pierced with many spears... a little beyond lay the old woman Mortimer, her head cloven in two with an axe. Near the hut he found his eldest girl, her head beaten to pieces."<sup>101</sup> Another story again told of a husband returning home to find his family destroyed, saying Mr Hooper's wife and eight children had been murdered and "as usual... they had cruelly mutilated their helpless victims."<sup>102</sup>

These stories are significant because how a society treats women and children was often seen as a marker of its degree of civilisation.<sup>103</sup> In choosing to present these narratives, and through frequent use of terms such as "savages,"<sup>104</sup> Meredith was highlighting her disapproval of the 'other,' and reinforcing her own status and respectability through them. Meredith's writing was part of a wider imperial discourse, the inherent objective of which was to legitimise European invasion and settlement of Aboriginal land.<sup>105</sup> The fact that she could traverse the colony searching for, and creating, a new home was because of earlier frontier violence.<sup>106</sup>

**"Anything which speaks to me of *Home*, is a royal road to my favour."<sup>107</sup>**

When decorating and designing the several residences the Meredith family lived in, Louisa Meredith imposed "the British aesthetic that made it home to her."<sup>108</sup> She used the understandings of her identity brought from Britain, to form her colonial self and was not the only one to do so. Rosalie Hare, the wife of *The Caroline's* captain, stopped in Tasmania *en route* from

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<sup>100</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 138.

<sup>101</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 149.

<sup>102</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 150.

<sup>103</sup> Catherine Hall, Phillipa Wilson and Kathleen Wilson, 'Introduction: Why Gender and Empire?', in *Gender and Empire*, ed. Phillipa Levine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 6.

<sup>104</sup> For example, Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 146.

<sup>105</sup> Grimshaw and Standish, 'Making Tasmania Home', pp. 7, 11.

<sup>106</sup> Grimshaw and Standish, 'Making Tasmania Home', pp. 7, 11.

<sup>107</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 219.

<sup>108</sup> Grimshaw and Standish, 'Making Tasmania Home', p. 8.

Cape Town to Batavia in 1828. Upon arrival she described the disappointment of the disembarking emigrants, saying “their minds, like the minds of most settlers, had been paining fancy visions.”<sup>109</sup> These ‘visions’ are evidence of the information networks running through the British Empire, and responses to them form part of the spinning of new webs and circuits of knowledge. Imaginations of place are important in helping form identity.<sup>110</sup> While continually referring to Britain as ‘home,’ and holding it up as an ideal, Meredith also defended her new home, and delighted that the values and traditions she considered important were esteemed there. After a visit to Hobart, she commented that “Tasmanian society is, I rejoice to say, so essentially English, that a chronicle of my pleasant sojourn in our antipodeans metropolis,” was much the same as she would have written after visit to a city at ‘home.’<sup>111</sup>

Tasmania was viewed in a particularly favourable light because Meredith considered it to be “so much more English” than NSW, and found that she could “fancy myself some degrees nearer home.”<sup>112</sup> It would seem that much of her acceptance of her new home was done sub-consciously. In the early stages of the book, Meredith commented on the oddity of having Christmas in summer, saying that “although not the real, proper, genuine *original* Christmas to me, it was a very bright and pleasant parody upon it.”<sup>113</sup> Her condescending tone belies the importance she placed on experiencing rituals of ‘home’ in the colonies. Later in the book, when the family resided in Spring Vale, Christmas was noted only in passing as bringing “warm sunny weather.”<sup>114</sup> It seems she maintained her British identity, while building a Tasmanian one. This was not unusual, but at the time, it would not have been understood this way. John Henderson spent 1829-30 in Tasmania, and found it “extraordinary that the removal of a native of England from his own country to another, peopled by British subjects, should occasion an alteration in his natural disposition.”<sup>115</sup> It is ironic that alterations of disposition, such as Meredith accepting Tasmania

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<sup>109</sup> Ida Lee (ed.), *The Voyage of the Caroline From England to Van Diemen's Land and Batavia in 1827-28 by Rosalie Hare* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1927), p. 33.

<sup>110</sup> Lambert and Lester, ‘Introduction’, p. 15.

<sup>111</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 328.

<sup>112</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 36.

<sup>113</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 77.

<sup>114</sup> Louisa Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, p. 207.

<sup>115</sup> Boyce, *Van Diemen's Land*, p. 126.

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as home, were based on points of similarity, whereas confrontation with the 'other,' confirmed pre-conceived ideas. 'Home' became a powerful way of remembering and comparing Meredith's old and new lives.

### **Conclusion**

Louisa Meredith has one of the few clear female voices that we can recover from this period. The fact that she put her work in the public domain makes her writing markedly different from the private musings of other colonial woman. Her work demonstrates the fact that family, gender, intimacy and respectability were key social structures, and that ideas about them were transported around the globe. Studying the way she respected and promoted her new home also reveals that while England was certainly looked on favourably, many historians have been too quick to focus on Meredith and other colonial women as having stagnant identities. As Zoe Laidlaw has said of her work on Richard Bourke, taking a transnational approach reveals how "identity was articulated and altered across time and difference."<sup>116</sup> In this case, not only does it reveal Meredith's changing identity and the way 'home' was constructed, transnationalism also allows Meredith's writings and life to be separated from the Tasmanian, or even Australian, story, something which has yet to be achieved.

Above all, Meredith's writing demonstrates that while individuals understood their identity through empire, these very people were forming the broader British imperial identity.<sup>117</sup> Meredith's travel writing was an attempt to establish boundaries. She looked to create distance between herself and 'the other', between herself and 'the uncivilised', and between her life at home and her life in the colonies. It is the negotiation of these boundaries, which were sometimes physical, though were often intellectual, that reveals the powerful place imagination plays in constructing identity. For Louisa Meredith, her identity was constructed around her home and this article has shown that her "home" was not just one place—it was her understanding of herself.

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<sup>116</sup> Laidlaw, *Imperial Careering*, p. 143.

<sup>117</sup> Lambert and Lester, 'Introduction', p. 1.