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Genteel pursuits in the bush: Colonial gentlewomen's appreciation of rural Australia in the mid-19th century

The writing of nineteenth-century Australian history is deeply concerned with the notion of settlers' relationship with the land. It is a widely held myth that the early colonists did not like Australia and perceived it as a hostile and alien land (Rickard 1996:41). It is often claimed that it was only by the end of the nineteenth century that the settlers learnt to appreciate the strange and peculiar beauty of Australia. At least this is how the Heidelberg School of artists and the writers associated with the *Bulletin* came to be interpreted. A number of scholars have questioned the validity of this argument and drawn attention to the variety of ways the bush was described in nineteenth-century non-fictional writing (see for example Frost 1975:185-205, Rolls 1993:162). What these critics neglected, however, was the comparative study of male and female responses. While some female examples do occur in critical writing they are there only to support general arguments. Very few critical analyses have been written about the female perception of the environment in the nineteenth century (see for example Bird 1989:20-35, White 1991:113-126).

In this paper I will seek to analyse how genteel women responded to rural Australia in the period between the 1840s and 1870s. In particular, I intend to investigate what activities were pursued by British genteel women in the Australian bush. Scholars have paid scarce attention to the depiction of colonial gentlewomen's recreational activities in rural areas (see for example Perkin 1993:93-112, Cumes 1979:240-247, Isaacs 1990:225-238). I will argue that there is a unique feminine attitude to the recreational and social aspects of the Australian bush as presented in gentlewomen's life-writings, such as memoirs, travel narratives, letters and diaries. Comparison between male and female experiences will be drawn in order to find out the

distinctive nature of the female attitude towards rural pastimes.

In examining the recreational and social aspects of genteel women's rural lives I will be focusing on those areas in the country that were commonly referred to as the bush. The word *bush* acquired a special meaning in the colonial context. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following definition for this word:

Woodland, country more or less covered with natural wood: applied to the uncleared or untilled districts in the British Colonies which are still in a state of nature, or largely so, even though not wooded; and by extension to the country as opposed to the towns.

The bush was an area that had different impacts on different people. There were areas that the Europeans found beautiful and others made little impression on them. It is this changing aspect of the land that Mary McConnel recorded on her journey from Brisbane to Cressbrook Station in 1849:

we had a few, a very few, miles of pretty country [...], but soon there was a sad change, when we reached what was called in irony "Bullock's Delight". It was a terrible piece of country. (1905:17)

The bush was not only judged by its aesthetic qualities but also by the many possibilities it offered for entertainment and relaxation. Activities such as taking a stroll, going for a ride, fishing and bathing were not considered as sport in the modern sense of the word. Recreational activities nonetheless provided plenty of exercise for genteel women. The bush also offered an excellent setting for social gatherings such as picnic parties and hunting expeditions. The warmer climate enabled the colonists to enjoy a more out-of-doors lifestyle than they did in Britain.

The favourable climate

While a number of English people left for Australia in search of a healthier climate, the bright Australian sun and the long hot spells did not appeal to many colonists straightaway - they needed time to get acclimatised. At the beginning Rachel Henning disliked sunny days because there were too many of them. She much preferred the cool autumnal days because they reminded her of England. She told her

brother-in-law Mr Boyce in a letter from Appin, New South Wales on 29 March 1855 that

I like this autumn weather, for it feels like England. [...] I was tired of the perpetual glare of sunshine. Fine days here bring me no pleasure as they do in England: they are too hot and too numerous, and besides, you cannot enjoy them by taking nice walks. (Adams 1963:27)

Rachel Henning found the summer heat unsuitable for outdoor activities. Her opinion was to change, however. Twelve years later she rejoiced in the salubrious climate:

I wish I could send you a little of our sunshine. England is a far better country than this in many respects, but there is nothing like the bright warm Australian climate for comfort and also, I think, for cheerfulness. It is difficult to be out of spirits when the warm sun is shining. (Adams 1963:235)

It took some time before Rachel could accept the Australian climate and adjusted her new lifestyle to it.

In their writings many colonial men made reference to the climate, too. Unlike Canada and the northern states of America there was no harsh winter in Australia and thus the settlers could continue working in the open air all throughout the year. Bob Reece argues that the salubrious climate was appreciated by many men because it was advantageous for economic considerations. (Reece 1988:9) Edward Wilson, who visited the Moreton Bay settlement in the 1850s, pointed out that "the climate of Moreton Bay is favourable to vegetable, and other forms of animal life as it seems to be to man." (1859:21)

Gentility in the bush

Gentlewomen in colonial Australia did not make any comments on the economic consequences of the climate because they were not supposed to pay attention to such worldly affairs. Their lives revolved around family and the home. Genteel women's responsibilities were defined inside the home from where they were expected to derive self-fulfilment while remaining largely ignorant about the events of the outside world. Men, in contrast, performed public functions and were expected to play an active role in worldly events. This separation of the two genders on the basis of their expected realms of influence is

known as "separate spheres". (Rowley 1993:185)

Genteel women came from a common social background and shared a set of norms and rules that shaped their lifestyles. These ideals of "ladylike behaviour" were often referred to as "terms of gentility". (Rees 1977:10) Those women who aspired to these genteel ideals led a secluded life that disavowed taking an active part in any profession or trade. But gentlewomen were not completely without work in the sense that they had certain tasks and activities to perform. The term *accomplishment* was used to describe the kind of activities that filled the greater part of gentlewomen's daily lives. Genteel women were encouraged to pursue some accomplishments that included needlework, sketching, watercolour painting, music and flower arrangement. In addition to these genteel pursuits the rest of their time was occupied supervising the household staff, doing charity work and making social visits. Their activities were limited to these polite accomplishments because contemporary opinion held that female brains were not capable of intellectual work. (Altick 1974:51-54)

This study is embedded in Victorian theories of domestic ideology and gentility. Domestic ideology prescribed different spheres of interest for men and women. While men were to dominate the public world, women were to devote their entire lives to the private world of home and family. Notions of gentility influenced the way of life and thinking of many women throughout the nineteenth century. The colonial experiences of female settlers will be measured against these Victorian ideals.

Recreational activities in the bush

Emma Macpherson noted the importance of leisure hours in the life of gentlewomen in the bush. Her short experience of bush life in the late 1850s in Keera in New South Wales showed her the value of recreational activities after a hard day's work.

Not that I mean to assert that existence in the bush is wholly void of its pleasures, for, independently of the happiness always following duties well filled, there is an intense appreciation of the hour or two's

leisure, which those who have the whole day at their command can hardly understand. The evening ride over hill and dale, the strolls by the banks of the river, the perusal of some new book – which like angels’ visits, come few and far between – are indeed sources of great enjoyment. (1860:200)

Recreational activities not only provided entertainment and relaxation but they also served to reinforce genteel values. Such pursuits emphasised the adoption of a British genteel lifestyle in colonial Australia. By listing her walks along the riverbanks as one of her main amusements Emma Macpherson wished to conform to ideas about gentility. Starting a new life in the Antipodes occasionally presented challenges to the colonists. At home genteel women were discouraged from active involvement in the housework. In the Australian bush, however, gentlewomen were often required to perform unladylike tasks. Emma Macpherson applied the word *duty* to describe physical work in and around the home. She therefore used her recollections to reaffirm her identity as genteel.

Apart from walkers, the bush was also a favourite area with horse riders. Riding was very popular among gentlewomen and therefore several colonial ladies recounted the pleasure horse-riding gave them during their life in the bush. Harriett Daly enjoyed riding in the vicinity of Palmerston in the early 1870s. She recalled in her recollections that

we were able to make up riding parties, and to explore more fully the country about Palmerston. These rides were the greatest joy of our lives. After a hard day’s work it was pleasant to mount our horses, ride out of camp, and along the bridle tracks. (1984:57-58)

Harriett Daly found these country excursions a liberating experience. Marion Amies notes that riding was a necessary skill in the bush for colonial ladies. While in general it was considered a form of exercise and displayed the rider’s social status, horse riding had more practical implications in Australia. It was a crucial skill for those women who lived on isolated stations. The ability to ride secured them a link with the outside world. Those who could not ride were deprived of independence and social contact. Among other things they could not go visiting or even to church. (1988:553)

Lakes and rivers were also made use of for recreational purposes. Bathing and fishing were two other popular pastimes colonial women could indulge in. Mary Spencer took great delight not only in her walks but also in bathing during her short stay in Victoria in 1854. She noted in her diary that she often went bathing with Emily Josephine Clarke, the young daughter of her niece, when she was staying at the Junction north of Wangaratta. She wrote on 10 February 1855 that

we frequently walk to the banks of the Murray where we bathe almost daily – no fear of being seen except by cockatoos, magpies or crows. We bathe in a kind of creek, formed by the windings of the river where there is a firm bed of sand. (Cooper 1981:51)

In the nineteenth century women and men swam separately.

Fishing was another popular pastime and quite a few colonial women recorded their fishing excursions. Elizabeth Ramsay-Laye was particularly fond of fishing. In her reminiscences she vividly described several occasions when she practised this pastime during the 1850s. She once went fishing in a creek near Castlemaine, Victoria and succeeded in catching a crawfish. (Ramsay-Laye 1861:44-45)

Social activities in the bush

Going for a walk in the bush not only supplied women with much needed recreation but it was also an excellent opportunity both to socialise with others and to get to know the area. Louisa Clifton often noted in her diary how large the party was with whom she went strolling at Australind during 1841. (Frost 1984:75) It must have been entertaining to take a walk in the company of other people but at the same time it was also a necessary precaution against losing one's way in the bush. Such incidents were often fatal and emphasised settlers' lack of familiarity with the surrounding environment.

Lucy Gray's journal recorded two years of station life in Hughenden on the Flinders River in northern Queensland in the late 1860s. Her husband was often away working on the cattle station and Lucy regularly spent her time in the bush on her own. One day she recalled that she found herself lost in the bush but luckily, her ordeal did not last long. She had the presence of mind to retrace her steps to the

familiar path. Eventually, she reached a place that she knew well where she met her husband and his workmates. But rather than admitting the agonies she went through, Lucy decided not to let the others know what had happened to her. She admitted in her diary that “they were surprised to see me out there at that time. Of course I did not tell them that I had lost my way.” (1964:18). By not disclosing the details of her risky stroll in the bush Lucy Gray wished to retain her right to solitary walks. Had she described her struggle to find the way back she might have been discouraged from further explorations of the surrounding environment. Her strong defence of this pastime proves genteel women’s insistence on rambles in the country. Lucy Gray was willing to overcome her fears so that she could devote her idle hours to this genteel activity.

Rambling in the bush was equally amusing for men. Edward Curr, for example, loved exploring unknown territory in Victoria “for a little change of life” in the 1840s. (Curr 2001:406) As a man, however, he was more mobile and could venture into farther places than most women. For Edward Curr walking in the bush implied not only a form of recreation and the act of observing nature but it also freed him from the drudgery of everyday station life. It was in a way an escape for him.

Another common recreational pastime was hunting. Tom Griffiths argues that

in the imperial culture, hunting was an elite sporting and intellectual pursuit, class-conscious and recreational: it was a quest for sport, science and trophies, a “refined” hunting and gathering (1996:12).

When English people settled in the colonies they also transplanted the tradition of hunting. Hunting in Australia, though, took a slightly different form. Traditionally, fox was the chief prey of the hunters but this species was not to be found in Australia. Since the chasing of native animals, such as wallabies and dingoes, was seen as an undignifying pastime (Rolls 1997:41) foxes were introduced in 1845 to recreate the English environment. (West 2010:127)

Elizabeth Ramsay-Laye recorded a period in the 1850s when the

hunting of kangaroos enjoyed wide popularity. She was once invited for a visit to Mr G.'s property on the banks of the Yarra River. They saw some kangaroos on the hills that tempted their party for a hunt. So the following morning they took a dog with them and left for the bush in search of kangaroos. They saw several mobs but in the end killed only one kangaroo. Elizabeth boasted of her achievement in her narrative: "I am proud to say I was in at the death, and a more exciting run it would have been impossible to have had". (1861:147) Elizabeth considered this sport the most enjoyable outdoor amusement she had in the colony. Her reasons were as follows:

it combined so much the exhilarating gallop on a good horse, and lovely scenery to admire when slowly riding, and so many new and interesting objects to attract the attention, with the wild excitement of following the graceful animals as they started off with such tremendous leaps as must be witnessed to be believed. (1861:187)

Besides the excitement of the chase the surrounding natural environment could also be appreciated during the ride.

Kangaroo hunting was also popular among men. But men pursued this activity not only for recreation and fun, but also for necessity. For James Hamilton the killing of kangaroos was a part of his job. He was a pioneer Victorian settler and he recorded in his narrative that while he was shepherding at Bringalbert, later known as Uram Uram Springs, in the 1850s he had to kill a great many kangaroos. In one particular year he killed as many as two thousand of them. He admitted that kangaroo hunting was not a "wanton sport" but a necessity because they ate too much grass. He pointed out that "as we were paying a big rent to the Government, [...] we could not afford to feed kangaroos" (Hamilton 1923:22).

In addition to hunting parties, the picnic was another great social occasion in a rural environment. Both city-dwellers and small town residents enjoyed this form of entertainment. It was also English in its origins and was a "characteristic nineteenth-century institution." (Carter 1987:156) Ada Cambridge recalled that "picnics were our joy, also our forte" near Ballarat where they lived at the end of the 1870s. She was at that time enjoying a busy social life as the wife of the local parson. Ada also thought that the surrounding country was particularly

appealing to picnic parties (1903:137).

David Mackenzie devoted a whole chapter to "Bush Amusements" (2009:99-105) in his book entitled *Ten years in Australia*. He summarised the various options by writing that "the chief amusement you may freely enjoy in the bush are the following: fishing, hunting, shooting, riding, and reading." (2009:99) He then went on to describe each of these activities in detail. Refraining from adding any personal remarks he only noted that "in the bush we spend an active life, and enjoy the opportunity of blending the agreeable with the useful" (2009:104). After all it was men's responsibility to care for their family and for this reason idleness was not a desirable thing.

Conclusion

I have argued that the favourable climate of the Australian seaboard was not only an attraction for settlers and visitors seeking good health but it enabled colonial gentlewomen to participate in a great variety of outdoor activities. The bush provided space for recreational activities such as walking, bathing, fishing and riding. Informal social gatherings such as picnics and hunting expeditions also took place there. These pastimes enabled genteel women to feel at home in their new environment. Furthermore, these recreational activities affirmed colonial women's gentility.

Colonial men also took advantage of these recreational activities and accompanied their womenfolk on their walks or rides and they also participated in picnic parties and hunts. These activities must have provided a great means of relaxation after a hard day's work on the station. Gentlewomen also needed a rest but, as I pointed out, they tended to use these outdoor activities to affirm their gentility. Their walks and rides were therefore more than simple recreational and social activities.

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