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London women in the colonies

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Abstract

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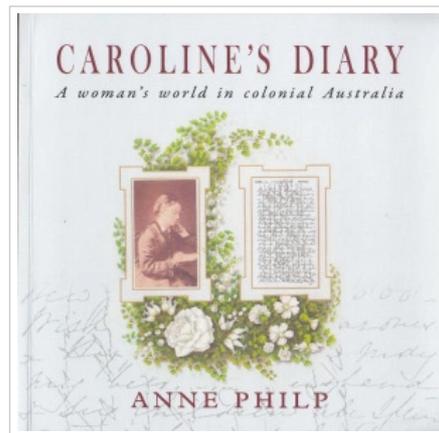
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Cover Caroline's Diary

Book Review

Anne Philp, *Caroline's Diary, A Woman's World in Colonial Australia*, Anchor Books Australia, NSW, 2015, x + 269 pages; ISBN 9780992467135.

This is a book where Anne Philp has created a narrative around the personal diaries of English woman Caroline Husband who came to New South Wales in the mid-19th century. Her father, lawyer James Husband, fell on hard times and fled his Hampstead Hill house in England with debt-collectors in pursuit, and was followed to Australia by his wife and seven children. Caroline has documented her thoughts, her experiences and her feelings of her life adventure from England to Sydney, and then the Wellington District, Armidale and finally Camden. She has provided a window into the world where imperial linkages have intersected with the life of her family, her husband, her church and her community.

Discover of diaries

Caroline's diaries were discovered by chance lying in the back of a drawer at the historic Camden property, Brownlow Hill, by Joan Downes, the wife of one of Caroline's descendants in the 1980s. The strong Camden connections are set from beginning of Caroline's story on the voyage out from England in 1852 when one shipboard companion was a Mr Downes of Brownlow Hill. In early 1883 Caroline's daughter May married Fred Downes of Brownlow Hill and had four children, one of whom gave birth to John, Joan's husband. Caroline had originally moved into the Camden District with her family and household staff in 1875 when Henry purchased the Georgian style Wivenhoe from politician Sir Charles Cowper. Using her agency Caroline quickly re-established a social network after her move from Saumarez (137) and commenced calling on the Barkers of Maryland, the Macarthurs of Camden Park, the Chisholms of Gledswood and the Downes of Brownlow Hill. Local folklore has it that the Thomas's Camden move was to ensure that Caroline's daughters were married off to appropriate Sydney bachelors.

Flippant young girl

Caroline's voice is heard in Philp's use of extensive diary extracts which are organised chronologically beginning with the 1851 Great Exhibition in London. The nineteen year old Caroline, an educated writer, is a party animal with a constant round of outings accompanied by her younger sister, Cordy, in and around London. She has a rather indulgent, flippant manner which upsets some of her elders and is reflected in her immaturity. Author Anne Philp remarks about the apparent ease 'with which the Husband girls are able to

move around unchaperoned' (18) even on visits to family relatives and friends. The whirlwind of actors in Caroline's life-story are clarified for the reader by Philp by the provision a number of appendices including Cordy's scrapbook, family trees, a list of who's who, index and images of family and houses. Caroline has used cross-writing, sometimes called cross-hatching, where she wrote across the page at 90° from earlier text in her diaries, presumably to save paper which was expensive. For the historian it makes deciphering these writings difficult and time consuming. Philps notes her 'writing became almost unreadable, particularly when she crosswrote' (103) with excitement at the impending marriage to squatter Henry Arding Thomas.

Voyage Out

The chapters mark out Caroline's life and provide an insight into how English society dealt with those who fell out and their sudden collapse of good fortune. Some fled and Caroline's voyage out to Sydney in 1852 aboard the *General Hewitt*, a former convict ship of 961 tons, under Captain Gatenby, which took four months and ten days and sailed directly from Plymouth to Sydney. *Caroline's Diary* joins around 800 other diarists' accounts of the 19th century voyages to Australia. Many were written by educated well-off women and for them writing a diary was a way of normalising the deprivations and uncertainties of the journey. (a) Although for Caroline the worst of the voyage seemed to be boredom and dull company, 'Very dull & stupid – dread the breakfasts & dinners – Mr Hay is so dull.' (46) Yet a fellow ship passenger, Catherine Roxburgh, had a rather different view of the Husband girls. She stated in a letter to her sister that they possessed 'no depth', they were 'deficient in judgement and prudence' and she described Cordelia as 'rather fond of being admired, [and] likes society'. Catherine felt that her shipmates viewed the journey out as a time to 'eat', 'drink and be merry'. (48-49) This contrasted with the early weeks of the voyage where Caroline felt that it was 'A dreadful life. No wind in our sails. The mankind exceedingly disagreeable...' (46).

Fresh commentary of colonial Sydney

Caroline's fresh commentary of colonial Sydney, a small Victorian outpost of the British Empire, through her youthful eyes is unencumbered by the town's dark history and brutal heritage. The value of the diaries are the sharp witty observations of social life and the comparisons the reader can draw between metropolitan London and young colony of Sydney. Her positive outlook on life combined with Sydney's Englishness presented a not unfamiliar place for Caroline and she soon started re-creating a life as a social butterfly. The Husband girls, Caroline, Cordy and Fanny, attracted the cream of Sydney's eligible bachelors as a string of would-be suitors. Sydney's shortage of suitable women made the family's modest lodgings at Woolloomooloo a honey pot, a coterie of potential wives. The sisters had a busy schedule of excursions, opera, theatre, balls, parties and social callings in Sydney, topped off with regular church attendances. Even later in life Caroline enjoyed a rich social life based around the church in Armidale, with constant rounds of calling, (163) playing the church harmonium and working at the church bazaar. While Henry undertook magistrate duties in Armidale and constant business and social visitors. The Thomases were leading citizens in the Armidale District reflecting their wealth and status.

Diary impulsive and frank

'Refreshingly frank' is how Anne Philp describes Caroline's comments on her 'middle-class' life, written as they were 'from a woman's point of view' (1). Caroline's diary entries are short and lively. Her thoughts are impulsive, expressive and reflect her youth and zest for life. 'We had supper and he walked home. Do like him very much.' (105) 'We had a splendid breakfast dinner & tea enjoyed ourselves extremely.' (98) Caroline provides glimpses of the rituals of middle class courtship in Victorian Sydney relatively unencumbered by chaperones or prying parents. 'J.M. spooney with me again!' (102) and around the same time in February 1856 she 'Went to the South Head & did not get home till 11 at night – enjoyed it so much.' (102)

Adventures around Sydney

Caroline's and Cordy's adventures around Sydney read like a whimsical colonial travelogue. Their were regular excursions with young men to Bondi, Coogee, Paramatta, and Manly Beach and frequent mentions of boating and yachting excursions on Sydney Harbour, cricket matches (121) and Regattas on Port Jackson (57). Sydney was like a new suitor for the Husband girls, to be wined, dined and enjoyed. Like England the girls enjoyed a considerable degree of freedom in Sydney given the strictures and formality of Victorian society, and walked considerable distances around the town – up to 16 miles (69). There is a rich sense of the landscape in Caroline's writing as it passes before her like the pages of her diaries. As her journey through life grows her commentary on her world matures with it. She has sharp observations of early townships, the trials of coach travel, and the challenges and risks encountered on the frontier. She records her movements throughout the colony, on the steamers between Sydney and Morpeth, the long overland coach journey through Bathurst into the Wellington District and her frequent trips from Maitland to Saumarez in the New England District. In 1882 even a family holiday to Manly Beach for her six children and nursemaid (235).

Women's life-writing

Caroline's Diary touches the primary discourses of the nineteenth century including imperialism, religion, the frontier, separate spheres and others, and is typical of other Victorian female diarists who explore women's emotions, privacy and domesticity.(b) Gender and the separate spheres of men and women, which are often hidden, are revealed in Caroline's subjectivity and her identity. There is Henry's public role as squatter pastoralist and public official while Caroline has her private domestic world organising her family and household. *Caroline's Diary* is typical of the genre of women's life-writing that was popular in the Victorian period in England, including Queen Victoria. Her writing gives insights into how she negotiated her space in society, her possession of knowledge, her inter-personal relationships and how her writing helped the healing process in the face of loss. Life for Caroline in colonial New South Wales provided many challenges and she used the agency she enjoyed within the strictures of society to effectively exercise her power within her domestic space. Religiosity is important to Caroline and she is a regular church goer throughout her life. Sydney's St James Church, one of the oldest in Australia, is central to her story, as it was the colony. Familial links are a constant theme, along with women's health issues, that were particularly problematic for colonial women. Historian Anne Philp has provided a view how an English

family fitted into colonial New South Wales, with its transnational linkages between the bush, provincial Sydney and metropolitan London.

Silences and interruptions

The diaries also have silences and interruptions that in their own way have as much to say as Caroline's extensive diary notes. Silence and knowledge re-enforce each other. These speak to the hardships and challenges that women faced on the colonial frontier where life was precarious, male dominated and sometimes violent. Henry's close affection for his 'city-bred' wife and her welfare indicate a depth of feeling not often found in colonial narratives. Her diaries provide a clear picture of the dangers faced during pregnancy and birth, the trials of the chronic illness of her husband and the death of her sister, Cordy at age 23, during the Siege of Lucknow in India in 1858 (149). The family regularly returned to Sydney during Caroline's confinements, a privilege working class women in rural New South Wales did not have or could afford. Rural patriarchy is clearly demonstrated in the moves that Henry forced on Caroline and her growing family, often at short notice, when he sells the family pastoral holdings. Caroline is moved to Saumarez Station at Armidale with a three-month old baby and a young nursemaid Ellen. Henry then moved the family again to the grand home of Wivenhoe, near Camden New South Wales.

A lack of communication

Communication, or the lack of it, were a constant of theme of colonial existence at a time when there was no Facebook or Instagram. During the colonial period the thirst for knowledge about family and friends was no less intense or urgent than it is today. Caroline's writing demonstrated the hunger by all for news from home and elsewhere including England, Sydney and her sister in India. Caroline and her family had to wait months for any news of the fate of her sister after the Siege of Lucknow during the 1857 Indian Rebellion (149). Distance was relative and the country and city divide was as large a psychological divide as the gap between London and Sydney. The actors in Caroline's story were eager for news, any news, of family and friends about births, deaths, marriages and other celebrations. Visits to town from the pastoral station, whether Sydney or Armidale, to catch up on business, news, and gossip were just as important as news from England or India. Isolation was the curse of the bush, and could be particularly burdensome on young city born women with small children. 'Very miserable. Got up early in the hopes dear Henry would come but he didn't.' (113).

Service and governesses

Domestic service was the most common form of employment for single working class women for decades during the 19th century. Caroline grew up in a household with domestic staff and on the voyage out: 'Very uncomfortable without a servant' (52) After Caroline was married had certain expectations about her own household staff. At Wivenhoe Caroline engaged three live-in staff and a children's nursemaid and her daughters were educated at home by a governess. The diaries illustrate how she negotiated hiring governesses for her own children as well as other household staff, including nursemaids and general servants. Caroline provides commentary on how her mother hired servants from amongst the Irish immigrant girls who arrived at Hyde Park Barracks in the 1850s (71). Caroline's story even explores the experiences the **colonial governess** because of her family's poor financial standing on arrival in Sydney in 1852. Caroline's had a short and unsuccessful engagement as a governess for Reverend WM Cowper, colonial born and Oxford educated, at Stroud in northern New South Wales, the settlement for the Australian Agricultural Company.

Settler colonialism

It is an interesting question to ask how this diary is placed in relation to the current debate around settler colonialism. On another level the diaries can be read as an exposition of the story of a settler society where the Indigenous Australians have disappeared from the landscape. There is a fleeting mention of Caroline and Henry attending a 'corrobbero' (117) at Buckinbah in the Wellington District, like attending an English country fair. By the 1850s the 'black problem' had been resolved and squatters wives like Caroline had little if any interaction with Aborigines, even in rural areas. The dispossession of territory underwrote the type of rural capitalism practiced by the Thomases at Buckinbah in the Wellington District, at Saumarez in the New England and Wivenhoe at Camden. The diaries give hints of the issues surrounding squatting and raising sheep without fences. At Buckinbah in 1856 there were thirteen outstations with shepherds in charge (113) that had to be re-supplied with lambing and station work (114). Shepherd supervised flocks of a thousand without a horse. The owner on his horse would search for lost sheep and much time was spent looking for stray sheep (117). Much the same routine existed at Saumarez in 1858. By the time the Thomas's turn up at Wivenhoe pastoralism is regulated by fences.

Fresh view of her world

Caroline's Diary provides fresh view on the colonial world of New South Wales from the eyes of an English woman that contrasts with the dark tales of death and misery of frontier violence, or the hagiographic views of the explorers, pioneers and nationalism. The story weaves through the ins and outs of the daily goings on for the rural elite, while providing an exploration of life between the city and country giving intimate personal details of family life. Women's diaries from the Camden District are rare and this type of exposition is even less common. This is a valuable addition to these types of works and in the process *Caroline's Diary* has created a great read for any fan of colonial stories.

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