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Catherine McKinnon

**‘Is a true story always true?’: an approach to fictionalizing Matthew Flinders’
*Narrative of Tom Thumb’s cruize to Canoe Rivulet***

Abstract

First-person narrations of historical events are powerful. Yet readers, gripped by the story, often neglect to question the narrative form. What strategies guided their progression through the story? Were those strategies employed to shape their judgments about the people and events portrayed? One of the tales in the creative component of my recently completed practice-led PhD was based on Matthew Flinders’ *Narrative of Tom Thumb’s cruize to Canoe Rivulet* (Flinders 1985): a first-person account of the exploration trip Flinders, George Bass, and Bass’s servant, William Martin, took along the south coast of New South Wales. I was writing a fictional story about a historical event but how reliable was the Flinders narration? I needed to analyse the historical manuscript and decide on what to explore in my fictional retelling. This paper deconstructs *Canoe Rivulet*, hypothesises about Flinders’ rhetorical purpose, and considers the ethical dimension of the narrative act. It was only after completing this analysis that I could shape my own rhetorical purpose and begin to clarify ethical questions I might consider when writing my fictional tale.

Wayne Booth (1961), interested in the moral and ethical implications of fiction, first defined the terms reliable and unreliable narration. For Booth reliable narrators commentate by giving us factual information and by evaluating events and characters, becoming dependable guides ‘to the world of the novels in which they appear but also to the moral truths of the world outside the book’ (Booth [1961] 1983: 221). Since Booth numerous literary scholars have challenged (Rimmon-Kenan 1983; Seymour Chatman 1990), argued against (Tamar Yacobi 2001; Nünning 2005), reconsidered (Olson 2003), redefined (Cohn, 2000; Phelan and Martin, 1999), or reviewed (Shen 2010), Booth’s terms. Others (Nünning 2004; Zerweck 2001) have questioned the notion of a reliable telling. James Phelan’s theoretical work in *Living to tell about it: A rhetoric and ethics of character narration* (2005) and *Experiencing fiction: Judgments, progressions, and the rhetorical theory of narrative* (2007) refines and develops Booth’s original definitions, exploring a rhetoric and ethics of character narration. Phelan’s various theses were primarily developed for fictional narration but he laid the foundations for their use with nonfictional texts, providing me with theoretical tools useful for deconstructing *Canoe Rivulet*. In this paper I use elements of Phelan’s theory to test my own reading of the Flinders manuscript.

Flinders wrote the only account of the second Tom Thumb journey and if it represents his lived experience, it also represents certain colonial beliefs and attitudes. He was a man living in a time when the English Empire was expanding. His fortune

could be made if he became, like Captain Cook, an explorer and navigator. But were particular events missing from his tale? Essentially Flinders was writing a report-to-superiors document so it may not be surprising to learn that the narrative strategies employed persuade the reader to identify with the fears of the explorers rather than those of the Kooris they met along the way. But many historians have since retold the Flinders account as if it were the only interpretation of events, closing down the imagining of multiple readings.

This paper, hypothesizing about the rhetorical purpose and ethical underpinnings of *Canoe Rivulet* and interrogating the narrative strategies Flinders used, is part of a contemporary reinvestigation of readings and retellings of historical narratives. For authors of fictional historical narratives such a research approach may be useful when clarifying the rhetorical purpose and ethical dimensions of the tales they're telling. In my own case this theoretical enquiry was integral to my creative process, helping to shape the final fictional work.

Biographical Note

Catherine McKinnon studied to be a writer and director at Flinders University Drama Centre and became a founding member of the Red Shed Theatre Company. Over a nine-year period she worked for the Red Shed as a writer, director, dramaturg, and co-artistic coordinator. Her plays produced at the Red Shed are *Immaculate deceptions*, *A rose by any other name*, *Road to Mindanao*, and *Eye of another*. During this time she also freelanced as a director to the State Theatre Company of SA. Her directing credits at STC include *Diving for pearls* and *Barmaids*, by Katherine Thompson, *Three birds alighting on a field*, by Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Spring awakening*, by Frank Wedekind, and *Morning sacrifice*, by Dymphna Cusack. After leaving Adelaide she undertook and completed a Masters in Creative Writing at UTS Sydney, under the supervision of novelist, Glenda Adams. She worked for April Films as article writer and documentary interviewer on *The making of jindabyne*. In 2006 she won the Penguin Women's Weekly Award for her short story *Haley and the sea*. In 2008 Penguin Viking published her novel, *The nearly happy family*. Her play *Tilt* was selected for the 2010 National Playwriting Festival in Brisbane and also for the 2011 High-Tide Genesis Research and Development Laboratory in London. *As I lay dreaming* was a finalist in the Seabold Award, had a reading at Parnassus Den, and won the Mitch Mathews 2010 Award. She has recently completed a practice-led PhD at Flinders University, is finishing work on *Storyland*, a book of tales, and beginning work on a trilogy of plays, *The hurt trilogy*, set in the Illawarra, New South Wales. She lectures at Wollongong University.

Keywords

Matthew Flinders – historical retellings – rhetorical purpose – rhetorical ethics

Introduction

Late on Thursday, 24 March 1796, three young men – second Lieutenant, Matthew Flinders (aged twenty-two); naval surgeon, George Bass (aged twenty-five); and Bass's assistant, William Martin (aged fifteen) – sailed out of Sydney Cove in a small boat named *Tom Thumb*. Their task? To find the mouth of the river that Henry Hacking, a pilot, had sighted inland. Heading south they discovered their water was polluted, had trouble landing, feared an attack by cannibals, and spent several nights sleeping on board *Thumb*. On the fourth day, still lacking fresh water, they met up and traded with two Kooris. The Kooris guided them to a stream where other locals joined. The Europeans, however, became frightened and retreated, although not without firing off a shot. On their return north they survived a fierce storm, discovered the river they'd been searching for, and named it after Hacking.

In my book of tales, *Storyland* (2011), written as part of a practice-led PhD, I became interested in fictionalising this first contact event. Flinders himself wrote two accounts of the journey. The historian, W.G. McDonald, suggests that the first version was written up sometime after 1797 (1966: 15). Titled *Narrative of Tom Thumb's cruize to Canoe Rivulet* (hereafter *Canoe Rivulet*), this version was passed down through the family until it was donated to the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich by Flinders' great granddaughter, Ann Flinders Petrie (Flinders 1985: vii). In 1985, this manuscript was edited by historian, Keith Bowden, and published by The South Eastern Historical Association. The second version appeared in the introduction to *A voyage to Terra Australis* ([1814] 1966), written after Flinders' *Investigator* explorations. This second account reflects Flinders' change in status from a young second Lieutenant to a respected Captain, explorer and navigator. In this paper I only refer to the *Canoe Rivulet* version. It's more detailed and Flinders wrote it when he was a year or two older than the fictional Flinders I wanted to create.

In the initial research stage I instinctively discounted creating a fictional Flinders narrator. My narrator would most likely be a fictional Bass or Martin, although other narrators were not excluded. But what duties and obligations did I have when fictionalising the historical events and persons – Indigenous and colonial? And how did such obligations impact on the imagined story? My research fed into contemporary Australian debates about history and fiction, and about white writers writing Indigenous characters, and this is addressed, in more detail, in my PhD thesis (2011). This paper traces my first research steps: my reading of *Canoe Rivulet*; my discovery of James Phelan's (2005 and 2007) theory of rhetorical ethics and rhetorical purpose; my decision to test his theoretical tools – created for fiction – by using them to examine the historical text and the ethical positioning and rhetorical purpose of that text. Essentially Flinders was writing a report-to-superiors document so it may not be surprising to learn that the narrative strategies employed persuade the reader to identify with the explorers' fears rather than the Kooris. As many historians have since retold the Flinders account as if it were the only interpretation of events, closing down the imagining of multiple readings, a scrutiny of the ethical dimension of the nonfiction text, as seen from a contemporary perspective, offered insights into how to shape a fictional retelling.

Initial research and Phelan's rhetorical poetics

Wayne Booth (1961), interested in the moral and ethical implications of fiction, first defined the terms reliable and unreliable narration. For Booth, reliable narrators commentate, giving us factual information and evaluating events and characters, thereby becoming dependable guides 'to the world of the novels in which they appear but also to the moral truths of the world outside the book' (Booth [1961] 1983: 221). Booth suggests that unlike reliable narration, unreliable narration asks a reader to infer something about the characters or narrative from what is *not* said (158-9). For Booth unreliable narration is a strategy used by the author to develop a clandestine communication with the reader (304). From a Boothian perspective absolute reliability always belonged with the author (175). Since Booth, numerous literary scholars have challenged (Rimmon-Kenan 1983; Seymour Chatman 1990), argued against (Tamar Yacobi 2001; Nünning 2005), reconsidered (Olson 2003), redefined (Cohn 2000; Phelan and Martin 1999), or reviewed (Shen 2010) Booth's terms. Others (Nünning 2004; Zerweck 2001) have questioned the notion of a reliable telling. James Phelan's theoretical work in *Living to tell about it: A rhetoric and ethics of character narration* (2005) and *Experiencing fiction: judgments, progressions, and the rhetorical theory of narrative* (2007) refines and develops Booth's original definitions, exploring a rhetoric and ethics of character narration. Phelan's project in *Experiencing fiction* is to construct a rhetorical poetics: a flexible theory that works from observation and experience (effects) and reasons back to the cause. He proposes a feedback loop between author, text and reader (4). Phelan describes the rhetorical act as 'somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened' (2007: 3). Rhetorical purpose is a crucial component of his theory. In fiction he postulates a double purpose: the narrator's purpose in relating her tale to the narratee, the author's purpose in communicating with the authorial audience (3-4). In nonfictional narrative Phelan suggests the doubling effect could be said to depend on 'the extent to which the author signals her difference from or similarity to the "I" who tells the story' (4). For Phelan 'individual narratives explicitly or more often implicitly establish their own ethical standards in order to guide their audiences to particular ethical judgments' (10). He acknowledges that from an ethical standpoint different readers may evaluate the same narrative differently (13). He suggests, however, that they can experience a text in similar ways (x). His view is that a reader's understanding of narrative form evolves through observations and judgments made while reading, particularly the progressive interpretative, ethical and aesthetic judgments made about narrators, characters and authors (3). For Phelan a critical reader can reconstruct the narrative, analyse the narrative progression and specific narration techniques, assess the ethical principles inherent in character action, and determine the ethical position of the rhetorical act (13). Although Phelan's theories were primarily developed for fictional narration, he laid the foundations for their use with nonfictional texts. If I assumed that the 'I' in *Canoe Rivulet* was created to give the illusion that it was close to the author 'Flinders' then I might assume that the rhetorical purpose was similar for the implied author and narrator. I decided to test aspects of Phelan's theory on my own responses to *Canoe Rivulet*.

Canoe Rivulet

Paul Brunton, who edited *Matthew Flinders: Personal letters from an extraordinary life* (2002: 10), says:

Two overriding concerns run through Flinders' life from beginning to end and are reflected throughout the letters. The first is his search for economic security. The second is his dedication to hydrography in the hope that some day his name might be placed alongside that of the immortal Cook.

Matthew Flinders wanted to be rich, or at least comfortable, and famous.

As I examined *Canoe Rivulet* I bore Flinders' particular circumstances in mind. Although the *Tom Thumb* journeys were small forays along the Australian coast, they were official trips sanctioned by William Waterhouse, commander of the *Reliance*, and Governor Hunter. On official voyages it was common practice for officers and midshipmen to keep a journal and naval procedure to collect them at the end. But what were the format conventions of such documents? Anthony J. Brown and Gillian Dooley, in their introduction to *Matthew Flinders: Private journal* (2005: xxiii), detail the difference between a log and a journal. A log is a:

watch-to-watch record, signed by the officer on watch, of wind and sea conditions, the ship's courses and speeds, unusual events, and of punishments, deaths and so on. The falsification of any of these details is a crime. An officer's journal, by contrast, is less formal, providing his personal impressions of events on board, his observations on the running of the ship (and at times on his fellow officers), in addition to course and meteorological details. It remains, nevertheless, an official document and may be claimed by the Admiralty.

The tone of the Flinders manuscript, a balance between formality and engagement, suggests the official journal purpose outlined by Brown and Dooley. The narrative, written as a day-by-day document, creates the perception of truthful reportage. Flinders' descriptions of wind patterns, currents, tides, confirms his nautical expertise and suggests he believed his narrative might be of use to navigators and explorers.

Flinders would have been familiar with acclaim gained from publishing exploration narratives. He presumably had read about Cook's ocean voyages. Watkin Tench's *1788* ([1798] 2000) was published before Flinders left for Australia. Flinders was in Port Jackson with Judge Advocate David Collins when Collins was writing *An account of the English colony in New South Wales* ([1798] 1971). Did Flinders harbour any notion that a well-written narrative might lead to promotion and fame? Certainly in 1796 Hunter and Waterhouse were both in a position to promote Flinders. And *Canoe Rivulet*, with its life-threatening events, is an exciting read. A clue lies in the opening paragraphs. Flinders describes the limited extent of exploration in the colony, and finishes by stating:

the coast was [largely un]known except from captain [*sic*] Cooks [*sic*] chart and description. Thus the particular knowledge of the coast was confined to ten or twelve miles on the south side of Port Jackson, and to fifteen or twenty on the north side, in September 1795 (1985: 1).

As Hunter and Waterhouse were aware of such facts, Flinders is presumably speaking to an uninformed authorial audience, suggesting he may have had a wider reading public in mind.

In *Canoe Rivulet* there are narrative gaps and stylistic choices that encourage the reader to view the journey in particular ways. For example, Flinders uses the first person plural pronoun ‘we’ when he refers to nearly all decisions taken. Although this is not uncommon in journals of the period when referring to general decisions, such as pulling into a bay, Flinders uses it almost exclusively, creating the impression that all decisions were harmoniously agreed upon. When events don’t go to plan, Flinders rarely attributes human error, especially his error, as the cause. For instance, when the three overshoot the mark of their intended location, Flinders says it’s due to strong currents, not navigational error. He reports their contaminated water supply but doesn’t reveal whose mistake this was. When *Tom Thumb* is dumped on the beach he blames the light weight of their stone anchor and an unfortunate wave, not an error of anchoring too close to the wave break. The decision to launch the boat and raft goods back to it, rather than pack it on the beach (despite this taking five hours), is outlined as a sensible plan given the rumour that cannibals reside in the area. (It could have been that launching from the beach, weighed down by heavier provisions, may have been difficult, but this isn’t commented on.) These small elisions downplay ‘cause’ and shift the focus onto action and effect. The reader is encouraged to see the natural elements as unpredictable with the explorers simply acting in response.

Narrators have, according to Phelan, ‘three main functions – reporting, interpreting and evaluating’ (2007: 12). As I read *Canoe Rivulet* I noticed that Flinders reports, but only occasionally interprets and evaluates. Reporting his trade with the two Kooris, he keeps his description brief: ‘there were only two natives, who had no other arms than fish gigs’ (6). He called them ‘Our friends’ (6), and said they were from ‘Broken and Botany Bays’ (6). After trading, the explorers leave, but later, meet the Kooris again. Flinders cuts their hair. The first barbering incident was presumably amicable as it led to the two men acting as guides. Flinders, however, delays reporting it until the *Canoe Rivulet* section of the narrative where the explorers and their guides meet with a group of Elouera men. By delayed disclosure, Flinders keeps any interpretation of the Kooris behaviour to a minimum until he introduces his suspicion of them:

On asking the two natives for water, they told us we must go up to the lake for it, pointing to a large piece of water from which the rivulet seemed to take its rise; but on being told that we could not now go, and again desired to get us water, they found some within a few yards. This circumstance made us suspect that they had a wish, if not an intention, of detaining us: and on reflection, their previous conversation in the boat evidently tended to the same purpose (9).

A second barbering event, involving the larger Elouera group, occurred at *Canoe Rivulet*. Flinders reports this using phrases such as ‘the wild stare of their eyes’(9), ‘their rough, savage countenance’ (9) and employing the word ‘violent’ (10), increasing the reader’s sense that the Kooris were dangerous.

To contemplate events from an Indigenous perspective was not unheard of among colonial writers. Watkin Tench, in 1788 ([1789] 2000), often, as Inga Clendinnen confirms in *Dancing with strangers* (2003), sought to see things from the Indigenous perspective: ‘What made Tench incomparable among good observers is that he treated each encounter with the strangers as a detective story: “This is what they did. What

might they have meant by doing that?’ (59). At the stream the Kooris kept insisting the Europeans go up to the lagoon. Flinders suggests their insistence was sinister. But was this the only possible interpretation? On the sail to Canoe Rivulet the two guides spoke about white men and women living at the stream. Flinders, indicating his disbelief, reports he was ‘amused’ (1985: 8). But by 1796 some escaped convicts were living with Indigenous people. Collins reports that in February 1796, ‘two white men (Wilson and Knight) had been frequently seen with the natives in their excursions’ ([1798]1971: 458). When I interviewed Jade Kennedy, Illawarra commentator, he proposed another explanation. The water in the stream, mixed with seawater, was no doubt brackish (Interview 2009: 12). The Kooris may have wanted to take the explorers to the lagoon for fresh water. Barbara Nicholson, Illawarra poet and Aboriginal elder, offered more suggestions: ‘There may have been a ceremony. [...] Or it may have been that the route that Bass and Flinders wanted to take was crossing a women’s site [...] there may have been some initiation ceremony going on’ (Interview 2010: 7). Illawarra activist, Roy (Dootch) Kennedy, suggested that the Kooris may have been trying to bring the Europeans ‘back to the main camp [...] to meet people of substantial rank’ (2–3). If Flinders considered any of these explanations, or contemplated the possibility of a misunderstanding between the Kooris and Europeans, it’s not articulated in his manuscript.

Describing his retreat from the stream, Flinders reports that the Kooris were ‘shouting and singing’ (1985: 10) as they ‘dragged’ (10) the boat along, but interprets this as suspicious. He then states:

Whilst we got down to the entrance, as fast as possible, they stood looking at each other, as if doubtful whether to detain us by force; and there is much reason to think, that they suffered us to get away, only because they had not agreed upon any plan of action: assisted, perhaps, by the extreme fear they seemed to be under of our harmless fire-arms (1985: 10).

But were the Kooris incapable of realising they could overcome the muskets if they chose? Would it have been easier to kill the Europeans at the lagoon? Among such a large group of Kooris surely many were expert at throwing spears. Roy (Dootch) Kennedy says that if the Kooris intended to kill and the Europeans ‘were outnumbered they would have been slaughtered on the spot’ (2010: 2).

The explorers anchored at the stream entrance and waited for the tide to change. Dilba, one of the two men they’d traded with, stood on a nearby point, continually calling out, requesting they ‘go up to the lagoon’ (12). Flinders reports Dilba was constantly told they’d return at sunset, if the surf ‘did not abate’ (12). At sunset some Kooris began to wade out. Flinders shot at them. He reports the action but does not consider whether the Kooris were wading out to help or hinder. Instead, he adds a footnote: ‘*Dilba was the principal person concerned in spearing the chief mate and carpenter of the ship, Sydney Cove, about twelve months afterwards, for which he was sought after to be shot by Mr. Bass and others’ (12). But does the later action necessarily account for the earlier? By small elisions, delaying information, and suggesting malicious intent, Flinders closes down alternate readings of the meeting

that might include cross-cultural misunderstandings. From a contemporary perspective the underlying ethical dimension of *Canoe Rivulet* appears deficient.

Many historians have faithfully recounted the Flinders narrative. Miriam Estensen in *The life of Matthew Flinders* (2003) says of the incident:

Now escape seemed imperative. The Aborigines were insisting forcefully that they continue up to the lagoon. Their two guides were the most vehement, and their earlier promises of women and food now seemed sinister (58).

Keith Bowden, introducing *Canoe Rivulet*, states: 'Picture the dilemma of the young explorers when they were trying to escape from the aborigines at Canoe Rivulet, the estuary of Lake Illawarra, when four aborigines jumped into their boat' (1985: x). Tim Flannery, introducing *Terra Australis*, says: 'The explorers were now in the company of Aborigines (one of whom was later accused of killing a castaway) who were trying to lure them into a narrow part of an estuary' (2000: xi). The tone of the Flinders story – the sense that his narration is reliable – is embodied by Estensen's use of 'sinister', by Bowden's use of 'escape', and by Flannery's use of the word 'lure'. The result leaves the reader with the sense that the Flinders interpretation is the only interpretation. Small details add to a larger cultural picture and while it could be argued that these examples do not misrepresent, but only represent one viewpoint, this viewpoint, considered reliable, has closed down other interpretations.

Conclusion

Matthew Flinders lived when the English Empire was expanding. His fortune could be made if he became, like Captain Cook, an explorer and navigator. If Flinders was to be offered further exploration tasks, it was no doubt necessary to create the impression that he handled the unfolding events and exchanges with the Kooris appropriately. The chosen narrative strategies and various narrative elisions downplay 'cause' and focus on action and reaction. The reader is persuaded to identify with the Europeans' fears, not the Kooris. The explorers are depicted as defending their lives from unpredictable natural elements and threatening natives. It's probable that Flinders' need to impress those higher up in the naval ranks (for promotion purposes) helped shape his rhetorical purpose. It's not surprising then that the ethical dimension of the narrative act favours an imperialist perspective, limiting reflection on cultural differences and diminishing a reader's potential to imagine other interpretations.

The narrative gaps in *Canoe Rivulet* provided me with an opportunity to explore what else might have occurred. Phelan's theory helped me deconstruct the Flinders narrative and raised questions about the rhetorical purpose and ethical principles underpinning my own fictional narration. One ethical obligation I thought I had was to make the uncertainties of the journey vivid by *not* providing an imagined stable narrative. I wanted to allow the reader to imagine multiple perspectives around the single incident. It became clear that unreliable narration, which encourages the reader to imagine the story *not* told by the narrator, could be a useful narrative strategy. If a reader of a fictional unreliable narration asks what might be the tale not told, they might also ask, why is the narrator telling this tale in this way? Thus, highlighting cause over effect. The Flinders narration represents his lived experience but the interpretation of any event alters with different tellers. Inga Clendinnen, in *The history*

question (2006), says ‘there is always one counter-story, and usually several, and in a democracy you will probably get to hear them’ (3). There are no other written witness narratives describing this first contact event but perhaps the notion that there is ever a single perspective on a ‘true’ story could still be challenged. In ‘Will Martin’ (McKinnon 2011) my narrator is an English servant, but by using unreliable narration I could ask the authorial audience to imagine that other perspectives existed, even though they may not be understood and have historically been silenced. When I wrote ‘Will Martin’ I didn’t want to diminish or alter the historical narrative, but wanted to explore, through a fictional tale, what was unknown in that narrative. Indicating uncertainty became a key narrative strategy.

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