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## Australian Colonial Women and their autobiographies

### **Abstract**

What moves people to record things about themselves? One of the really great autobiographies written in Australia in recent times, Albert Facey's *A Fortunate Life*, begins like this:

# Australian Colonial Women and Their Autobiographies

What moves people to record things about themselves? One of the really great autobiographies written in Australia in recent times, Albert Facey's *A Fortunate Life*, begins like this:

I was born in the year 1894 at Maidstone in Victoria. My father left for Western Australia just after this, taking with him my two older brothers, Joseph and Vernon. The discovery of gold in the west had been booming and thousands believed that a fortune was to be made. At that time, there were seven children in our family: I had four brothers — Joseph, Vernon, Eric and Roy — and two sisters — Laura and Myra. My mother stayed at Maidstone with the younger children and my father arranged to send money over to support us until he could find us a home.

The tone of this clearly prefigures the book: a marvellous modesty, lucid simplicity in the telling of a story which Facey is not egotistical enough to think is special, but which he hopes will be of interest for the reverse reason, because it is characteristic. You know from the first few sentences that Facey is going to tell it straight and in sequence; he doesn't know any other way. Vincent Buckley's justly celebrated autobiographical study, *Cutting Green Hay*, sets up different expectations. 'It is a book,' he says,

about the society, the habitat constituted by human beings and their doings. The self of the narrator does not need stressing, for it can be deduced, or seen in silhouette as the falls on the places where he lived with others. I prefer also to be free of chronology and of whatever bonds are entailed by autobiography and its trendy successor, the 'memoir' ... both of them too full of obligation and temptation.

It was when I read that, in 1983, that I realised what it was that was intriguing me about certain autobiographical documents of the colonial period written by women (I'd come across some of these in the course of being interested in Louisa Lawson's unfinished autobiography). And what I realised had to do with that word 'self': that whereas both Facey

and Buckley in their very different ways are presenting the 'self' and not guarding or masking it, autobiographers like Louisa Lawson and Georgiana McCrae — grandmother of the Australian poet Hugh McCrae — seemed to be both guarded about the revelation of the true self and struggling with the sense that that self was somehow dislocated (to use the only word that seems to come near it), out of its element, without spiritual or metaphysical bearings or relevance. It struck me that this characteristic — if it was one — of colonial women's autobiographical writings might suggest that the life experiences of many colonial women were different to those of men in really crucial ways, ways which would give rise to a quite different kind of literary expression or embodiment. 'Australia,' says Judith Wright, in her memorable introduction to *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*,

has from the beginning of its short history meant something more to its new inhabitants than mere environment and mere land to be occupied, ploughed and brought into subjection. It has been the outer equivalent of an inner reality: first and persistently, the reality of exile; second, though perhaps we now tend to forget this, the reality of newness and freedom.

But what if it was different from either of those as perceived in the inner life of many colonial women? What if they sensed neither exile nor freedom but something else? Towards trying to talk about that 'something else', I want to describe, interpret and present some aspects of *Georgiana's Journal*, as it has become known; and, in less detail, some points about Louisa Lawson's unfinished autobiography.

Georgiana's *Journal*, to use the name Hugh McCrae gives it as its editor, is really quite a curious piece of work because it appears at first and maybe even second glance as attractive but rather trivial. The journal starts in September 1838, in London. In that month, Georgiana McCrae gives birth to her fourth son and, because of complications and illness that follow, she is unable to embark as planned on the voyage to Australia which she and her husband, Andrew Murison McCrae, had planned for November. He sails as arranged, she remains behind and in fact does not leave England until October 1840. Her husband, meanwhile, had settled in Melbourne which in 1840 had a population of 300 for whom there were five churches, two schools, two banks and an indeterminate number of pubs.

As we have it, Georgiana's journal begins in that fateful September, 1838 and runs through, very fully and completely — that is, showing a substantial record for every month — to August 1845, after which the journal continues, but more scappily and with nothing like the continu-

ity. Several things allay any initial sense we may have of triviality: first, though many entries are very brief and inconsequential there is a real sense of a life being recorded, or rather, a crucial period in a life; second, the personality of the author emerges tantalisingly and attractively though it is never foisted upon us or dwelt upon; third, there is an undercurrent that grows in the record which is somehow disturbing though very difficult to identify or keep squarely in focus. Perhaps it is a way of making all three of those observations at once to say that, while Georgiana McCrae seems intent only on recording external and often quite ephemeral facts and events, she manages nevertheless to inject a kind of problematic tinge, to adopt a detachment that often becomes fleetingly wry or ironic and to imply emphases which are easily missed first time around but which in retrospect take on some interest. To take a fairly neutral example and not by any means one which best embodies my point, here is the very first entry in the journal. It is preceded by an epigraph quotation from Samuel Butler: 'She was going to a strange country: «supposed to have been a comet dropped in the sea»' and then continues:

*Augusta Place, Clapham Road, September 1838*

It is irrevocably decided that we are to sail for Sydney per *Royal Saxon* from Gravesend November 13. Mrs Robertson's brother, Dr Johnson and his two boys are to be our fellow passengers, and, as they are residing at Gravesend, Mr McCrae will take lodgings there for two months before we sail, so that I may have the doctor to attend me in my confinement and be spared the land journey afterwards.

What is interesting here, at least in retrospect but also, I think, at first sight, is that the decision is 'irrevocable' and that it has been taken by someone but, it would appear, not necessarily by Georgiana herself. That this irrevocable decision, by its timing, potentially complicates her approaching confinement — indeed, has been arranged for almost the worst possible time as far as she is concerned — is information also drily made available to us to ponder on, but without any guiding comment. The entries for September 6th and 7th, by the way — just to follow that up — have a similar kind of subdued, withdrawn interest below the level of the innocently recording pen:

6th

Sent Jane and the boys with the greatest part of my luggage and all of their own, to the lodgings engaged at Gravesend. This to enable me to complete packing the chests of drawers for our cabin, to follow at the end of the week.

7th

Awoke at 4am, aroused Sybella, got a cup of tea, but found myself worse not better for it. Sent Sybella for Simpson and despatched him for a spring-cart to take my ... other luggage and drive me to Billingsgate in time for the first trip of the Gravesend steamboat.

Perry born at 9pm

Mr McCrae congratulated me on my speedy despatch of the packing.

These are some of the early indications — there are others — that Georgiana's attitude to the whole move is ambiguous; and that her private self will emerge in this journal only obliquely, but it will emerge.

As her journal carries the record of events through the chaos of arrival and settling down, it is only slowly that the reader, and indeed the diarist herself, realises the true enormity of the step that Georgiana has taken. Her new home, in Little Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, consists of

one tolerably large room, with four closets, *called* bedrooms, opening out of it. The walls of wood, about half an inch thick, and the ceiling of the same. The building raised on stumps about two feet from the ground, and three wooden steps like those of a bathing machine, lead up into a French window which is the front door of the dwelling. At a little distance from the back door is a kitchen hut. And for this accommodation a hundred pounds a year rent!

Beyond the house, grandly called 'Argyle Cottage', Melbourne's streets are few, unpaved, famous for their crooked, limb-endangering gutters. In winter, these streets invariably flooded: several people drowned in flash floods in the centre of the city and on another famous occasion a horse and dray were carried on a flood wave down Swanston Street and into the river. Elizabeth Street was actually a tributary of the Yarra and often unfordable and Bourke Street was so unrecognisable because of thick forest through which it meandered that a sign was erected which read 'This is Great Bourke Street East'. After a dinner at which Georgiana, as she ironically puts it, made her debut, the town's only attorney, Mr Meek, drove them home in his trap: 'a fearful experience — the horse sent at top speed through the worst country in the world. At one minute we were completely off the ground, at the next, suddenly down again — gutters three or four feet deep everywhere, jagged tree stumps interspersed with boulders.' These are the exotic differences, shocking enough at the time no doubt but the sort of thing you can joke about later! They are to be distinguished from, though of course they help contribute to, that deeper sense of difference — a feeling of dislocation as I've called it — which begins to manifest itself in the journal

not through explicit reference or documentation but rather, subliminally, by means of certain images and certain tactics in the writing. One of the images proves to be Georgiana's recurrent concern with the weather!

Of their arrival at the entrance to Port Phillip Bay, after months at sea, Georgiana writes: 'As we were trying to enter the heads of Port Phillip, we encountered a fierce gale from the north west. Sky as black as ink.' No doubt it was — it often is over Melbourne's grey, oily looking bay — and there is no further significance to the observation. In retrospect though, it turns out to be a peculiarly apposite way for her to characterise her first glimpse of the new homeland, because more and more, as the autobiographical record proceeds, Georgiana uses a comment on the weather to intimate a state of mind or an atmosphere which she either refuses to recognise outright herself or which, for the sake of loyalty to her husband's enterprises in the new colony, she will not commit baldly to paper, however clearly it may exist in her own consciousness. Her comments on the weather gradually accumulate, they nag at our attention, and they begin to have a force in the account beyond their status as simple observations. References to fine weather, we gradually realise, are rare; references to tumultuous, or oppressive weather, to livid or black skies, to terrifying thunder and heart-stopping lightning, proliferate. Partly, this is simply realism: it is Melbourne we're talking about, after all, and Georgiana McCrae might well be the first person ever to record that Melbourne is the only place in the world where you get the four seasons in the one day: 'Sept. 5, 1844. Cold heavy rain, succeeded by sultry heat; and then thunder ... with frost in the evening. The weather of four seasons in twelve hours!' But more seriously, any attentive reader sees as page follows page that there is a message in these images of rough or oppressive or terrifying weather: it is a message which the autobiographer herself is only half willing to admit, hence its revelation obliquely by way of images that are on the face of it innocent enough. Here is an example which seems to me in any case a fine and moving passage, but also one in which interspersed references to what were undoubtedly *real* weather conditions current at the time, are made to serve as signs of profounder and more complex emotional reactions than the surface of the record is willing to admit to:

April 1st

Heavy rain and wintry sky. This morning, because Lizzie had given Mr McLure the purse she had netted for him (his old one being useless), Mr McCrae took it into his head that this token is proof that poor Lizzie wishes to delude his tutor into the toils of matrimony. 'This,' he said, 'would deprive us of his services, as he might easily establish a school.' Nothing could be further from the girl's mind. I had given Lizzie

the purse-silk, and out of sheer good nature she had worked it for the safety of Mr McLure's silver.

After breakfast, Lizzie was told to get all her traps ready to be sent in by the dray tomorrow as she had better go out to her mother and uncle at 'La Rose'. Lizzie was dumfounded ... and I could not tell her why.

April 2nd

I sent ... poor Lizzie's trousseau by the dray; Lizzie herself rode in it as far as the top of Great Bourke Street. With her, I have lost my right hand helper and companion, while she, by her own wish, would much rather stay here than at 'La Rose'.

April 5th

Farquhar not at all well. Heavy rain and a gale of wind at night.

April 6th

A tempestuous morning.

April 11th

Cold and rainy. Baby very cross, and no Lizzie to carry her about and amuse her...

April 13th

Dr Thomas came. Willie fell over this morning while he was playing with my bunch of watch trinkets and broke my small black-water marble heart, made for me in 1826 by Jamie Robertson as a keepsake of Gordon Castle. *Tout passe, tout casse, tout lasse...*

This is a marvellously effective passage; it is also absolutely typical of her in a number of ways. First, the use of the weather, which I've mentioned. There are more trenchant examples of that elsewhere in the autobiography, but here, wintriness, dullness, coldness are observations which, by their placement and emphasis, overflow into the human conflict barely hinted at. Not to mention the ambiguous 'A tempestuous morning'. But there are other tactics here which are worth noticing. For example, the use of the passive to muffle the fact that a decision of which she deeply disapproves, was actually made by her husband and remained uninfluenced by herself. And again, the withdrawal into French by way of a kind of sad summary, more revealing than anything so far hinted at. In moments of stress — a stress which, as in the passage quoted, we can only just glimpse — she frequently reverts to French: the French phrase is almost always used as a climactic statement; it is always dramatic, even romantic; and it usually is more revealing, simply because it's *there*, than the normal journal text. Remember Alice in Boyd's *The Cardboard Crown*, recording the most revealing and crucial of her diary entries in French.

The escape into French is one aspect of Georgiana's reticence. She often records incidents or observations that seem to cry out for a comment from her, but she offers nothing. For example: at a time when

they were in terrible financial difficulties — ‘August 12th Letter from Sydney saying the clerkship Mr McCrae applied for was already disposed of’. We know, from the context of that part of her account, that this would have been a devastating disappointment; but she makes no comment. At a less important level: ‘Lyon Campbell’s three boys and the two Montgomerys came to spend the day. While I was sketching the house from the west end, Mrs Lyon came and carried off her boys *sans façon*.’ The half-ironic, half-amused French phrase is the nearest we get to any enlightening comment on Mrs Lyon’s odd behaviour.

This reticence, re-enforced by watchful and cryptic interpolations in French, builds up as the journal proceeds. As Marjorie Barnard says, ‘Lonely women have something to guard,’ and Georgiana’s guardedness becomes, like her carefully orchestrated references to the weather, a focus of our attention and a shaper of expectations. Every now and then, we get a clearer sight of the tension that seems to underlie her often extremely innocent-sounding record. It might come as a straight, brief revelation: ‘Head very bad: the result of perpetual worry.’ Or, a loaded, selective reference placed without comment or preamble: ‘Sunday 29th: Sermon: «In the latter days, perilous time shall come.»’ This submerged tension builds finally, in the very last pages of the autobiographical journal, to an uncharacteristic but totally unambiguous outburst: ‘I am most unhappy.... The last six months of suspense, worry, hurry, delays, packing and unpacking, detention in town, and now this scattered way of living in huts till the completion of our house has worn me out.’

I want to fill in one more corner of this picture before making some general and concluding observations. There is another recurrent though characteristically very subdued strain in Georgiana McCrae’s journal-autobiography — namely, an ever-present hope of return to Scotland, return home. It’s ever-present not explicitly — there aren’t in fact all that many references to it — but again, atmospherically: when she *does* mention possibilities of returning home, it is with such seriousness and hope that her desire subsequently pervades the whole account. At one point, when their fortunes are seriously flagging, it looks likely they will give up and go home. Georgiana remarks: ‘Felt thankful at the prospect of returning home, even on small means, as the boys’ prospects in the old country should be greatly superior to any that may offer for them here. Hope on ... hope ever.’ But some months later: ‘Mr McCrae, in a desponding mood, tells me (what I had a suspicion of two days ago) that, after all my outlay and preparations, our prospect of leaving Australia Felix is becoming day by day more indistinct.’ This is incidentally, another marvellous example of reticence, the absence of comment. This

news was undoubtedly a crippling blow, but she says nothing at all of that kind, unless in the use of the relatively unusual *Australia Felix* we see just the ghost of an irony! Thereafter, the hoped-for return becomes more and more a dream. On April 25, 1844, she quotes the lines

Pilgrim be patient: yet once more  
Shall you retrace the watery way  
And end your days on Britain's shore.

[This] 'shall I trust prove true'. But years later, she added to that entry the words: 'For many years, I believed the ... verse *would* be prophetic; but now — *qu'importe?*' In a letter to a friend in 1852, she concedes sadly, 'Those who can do so are arranging for their immediate return to the old country: as for myself, without Aladdin's Lamp, I can never see Scotland again.' And she never did.

Georgiana McCrae emerges from her autobiographical journal in several guises: it is obvious that she is a very lonely woman; surrounded by people and family but nevertheless lonely. She is dutiful and submissive but perceives clearly the injustices that this causes her; even in her diary though, she won't state such intuitions baldly — they remain the subject of hints, evocative images and snippets of French. She undoubtedly feels displaced, capable of coping under harrowing conditions in the colony, but longing to see home again and to stay there. Above all, though, she conveys a sense of something that runs deeper than displacement — what I have called *dislocation*: which is to say that she seems to perceive no secure place for herself in the events and developments going on round her; she does not *belong*. Now, of course, this would be powerfully contributed to by exile, but I think a major contributor also was the fact that she was constantly involved in activities which were the results of decisions in which she took no part and could take no part. I began by quoting her remark that 'It is irrevocably decided ... we are to sail for Sydney'. The passive voice and the subsequent context strongly hint that it is neither her decision nor one which greatly appeals to her. Her account is full of such moments, moments when important decisions, uninfluenced by her, nevertheless affect her significantly. For example: when they are leaving Melbourne to go bush:

If I had a free choice in this matter, I should remain at 'Mayfield' until the house is sold or let. There is a living to be had here through my art of miniature painting, for which I already have several orders in hand, but dare not oppose the family wishes that 'money must not be made in that way'!

Two deep grievances surface here: she has no say in a move which will cause her great upset and discomfort (it duly did); and her individual talent, recognised and in demand, must be stifled, again as the result of a decision in which she has no part. On another occasion she refers to this same matter, deftly indicating with more precision the source of the interdict (and incidentally, providing us with another excellent combined example of her evocative use of remarks on the weather and her habit of resounding non-comment): ‘April 6th A dark morning.... Lucia returned with a note from Mrs Howitt to say she «regrets exceedingly Mr McCrae’s opposition to my wish to employ my professional talent to profit».’

Georgiana is just aware enough, we would say today just liberated enough, to recognise the impositions being made upon her; but she could not, understandably, act upon this awareness and she could only externalise it — and then only obliquely — in an autobiographical journal. Her problem is thus larger than displacement or exile; it is the suspicion that she is at the mercy of events and not relevant to them, in the wrong place at the wrong time; dislocated.

Very briefly, Louisa Lawson’s unfinished autobiography makes an interesting sort of test case. Because Louisa, of course, was not an emigrant, she was native born. Yet her account of her own life, at least as it was until she was in her mid thirties, has elements exactly similar to those I’ve pointed out in Georgiana’s Journal. Louisa too felt at the mercy of events, somehow irrelevant, without a personal destiny; she too felt she had talents which should have been allowed scope and use and not have been subject to the will and decisions of others (she was a magnificent singer but her mother steadfastly stood in the way of European training, being opposed to any public career for her children). Louisa too was profoundly unhappy much of the time, emotionally exhausted by events that she was simply supposed to endure silently and never influence.

Now while this *of course* doesn’t prove anything and isn’t supposed to, it does become more interesting and somewhat more persuasive when I add that this same strain surfaces often in the autobiographical writings, fragments and letters of Australian colonial women. (Ada Cambridge provides only one of several interesting examples.) And that adds up to at least a credible, even a quite strong suggestion, that the life experiences of many colonial women *were* more suffused with a sense of irrelevance, of waste, of powerlessness and of being at the mercy of events — more suffused with those sorts of intuitions than with a sense of exile or the oppression of loneliness, important though both those were. When, in 1888,

Louisa Lawson launched *The Dawn*, the first woman's journal in the country, she was inundated with correspondence from women who wanted to establish greater control over their own lives — by gaining a measure of financial independence, or by education, or by self-sufficiency or etc. *The Dawn's* campaign for the vote was of course central to such aspirations, but its even longer term preoccupation was with marriage and divorce law reform and, above all, a whole range of stratagems whereby women might begin to control and direct their personal destinies. The overwhelmingly enthusiastic response to these emphases by *The Dawn's* readers is evidence that it was tapping into a rich source of lively concern and continued interest among the nation's women.

Exile, envisaged in one form or another, is a preoccupation in the work of Marcus Clarke, Rolf Boldrewood, Christopher Brennan, Hugh McCrae himself — even, in a mild and conveniently remediable form, in Kingsley's *Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn*. It is not the central concern in the works of Catherine Helen Spence, in Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* or in Barbara Baynton's *Bush Studies*. All of those works are concerned with, among other things, locating fictional heroines meaningfully in a world in which they had little real power and no credible sense of personal destiny unless they actively set about remedying their own sense of dis-location, their own profound worries about role and potential. And therein lies something like the beginnings of a case for a partially separate literary history for women in the colonial period — a separation which might more interestingly explain the emergence on the one hand, of a kind of 'sport' like the young Miles Franklin and the fierce, briefly flowering passionate utterance of Barbara Baynton (not to mention the failure of both of them ever to follow up on those first successes), and, on the other hand, an official literature as it were, in which women play a subsidiary part and are often idealised and in which there is a continuing preoccupation with the question of what and where is *home*. The separation no doubt merges in the new century, when *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, written of course by a woman, though an expatriate woman, and the novels of Martin Boyd give very heavy weight to the presence of a sense of exile in the Australian psyche. But even at that, it strikes me that there are important differences of emphasis and perspective — differences connected to ideas I've been canvassing here — to be found in women writers like Katherine Susannah Prichard, Eleanor Dark, especially Marjorie Barnard, as against many of their male contemporaries.

Of course, great writers always smash theories to pieces. It is another way of coming across the truly revolutionary nature of the work of

Lawson and Furphy, to note that they easily encompass the two strands of this theoretical dual development. For, though in his decline Lawson did idealise his women characters pathetically, did he not at his best portray women in a state of dislocation — women like the drover's wife and Mrs Spicer battling desperately to inject *meaning* into their lives, to re-connect themselves with remembered values, rituals and structures? And might it not also be the case, as Julian Croft has recently argued, that the true and serious 'heroes' of Furphy's three novels are Molly Cooper, Kate Vanderdecken and Mrs Falkland-Pritchard?