1993

'A Most Improper Desire': Mary Gaunt's Journey to Jamaica.

Gillian Whitlock

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol15/iss3/13

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
'A Most Improper Desire': Mary Gaunt's Journey to Jamaica.

Abstract
In October 1837 the Honourable Emily Eden, described by James Morris as 'a witty and accomplished Englishwoman in her forty-first year' accompanied her brother, Lord Auckland, Governor-General of India, on an official progress up the country from Calcutta. Their journey was a six month epic that began with steamers and barges from Calcutta up the Ganges to Benares, followed by a succession of carriage, palanquin, sedan-chair, horse and elephant rides through Allahabad and Delhi to the hill station. During this progress, on October 30, 1837 to be exact, at dusk, on the banks of the Ganges, alongside some 'picturesque' ruins, with her spaniel Chance on the run, Emily Eden learned of the accession of Queen Victoria to the throne. The news brought a lump to her throat. She wrote back to her sister 'I think the young Queen a charming invention'.
GILLIAN WHITLOCK

‘A Most Improper Desire’: Mary Gaunt’s Journey to Jamaica.

In October 1837 the Honourable Emily Eden, described by James Morris as ‘a witty and accomplished Englishwoman in her forty-first year’ accompanied her brother, Lord Auckland, Governor-General of India, on an official progress up the country from Calcutta. Their journey was a six month epic that began with steamers and barges from Calcutta up the Ganges to Benares, followed by a succession of carriage, palanquin, sedan-chair, horse and elephant rides through Allahabad and Delhi to the hill station. During this progress, on October 30, 1837 to be exact, at dusk, on the banks of the Ganges, alongside some ‘picturesque’ ruins, with her spaniel Chance on the run, Emily Eden learned of the accession of Queen Victoria to the throne. The news brought a lump to her throat. She wrote back to her sister ‘I think the young Queen a charming invention’.2

Meanwhile, Anna Jameson, an English feminist, was travelling with a small party in the backwoods of Canada. In canoes the party are taken by voyageurs up the Missasagua to the Manitoolin Islands, pitching tents ‘gipsy fashion’ for a day or two. Somewhere around August 4, 1837, the party begin paddling at dawn:

There was a deep slumbrous calm all around, as if nature had not yet awoke from her night’s rest: Then the atmosphere began to kindle with gradual light: it grew brighter and brighter: towards the east, the lake and sky were intermingling in radiance; and then, just there, where they seemed flowing and glowing together like a bath of fire, we saw what seemed to us the huge black hull of a vessel, with masts and spars rising against the sky – but we knew not what to think or believe!

A reader trained to recognize literary discourse will know, of course, that such a black apparition must bring news of death, and so it does:

... we rowed up to the side, and hailed him – ‘What News?’ And the answer was that William the Fourth was dead, and that Queen Victoria reigned in his place! We sat silent, looking at each other, and even in that very moment the orb of the sun rose out of the lake, and poured its beams full in our dazzled eyes.

Tears come to Jameson’s eyes, due not to the blinding sun nor for the dead king who ‘in ripe age and in all honour was gathered to the tomb’ but for ‘that living queen, so young and fair’; ‘The idea that even here, in
this new world of woods and waters, amid these remote wilds, to her so utterly unknown, her power reaches and her sovereignty is acknowledged, filled me with compassionate awe. In Jameson's representation, the Canadian landscape is able to offer metaphorical expression for this moment of death and birth, the king is dead, long live the queen!

The juxtaposition of these two descriptions, one at sunset by the picturesque ruins on the Ganges and the other at sunrise on the Missisagua, is a place to begin some observations about writings by women travellers, their constructions of the journey, and how the awkward relations between gender and imperialism are negotiated, with varying degrees of success, in journey narratives. In each of these moments Emily Eden and Anna Jameson reassert their English subjectivity, their colonial surroundings fall-in as backdrop, functioning metaphorically to both amplify and confirm their imperialist sentiment. The accession of Victoria causes these travellers to turn toward their mecca as it were. The carefully constructed nature of travel writing is evident in both of these scenarios. The banks of the Ganges at dusk and the picturesque ruins are the appropriate setting for this momentous occasion in British history. The wilds of Lake Huron too are able to become part of a pageant of death and accession. All is subjected to the English queen and animated by her power. Contingency is part of the fiction of the travel narrative, imperialism part of its fabric. The shared conventions apparent in the representation of these two moments: the picturesque scene, the symbolism of sunrise/sunset, the proximity to water – these alert us to the construction, the invention of these symbolic moments, which are both personal and imperial rites of passage.

These two journeys, Emily Eden along the Ganges, Anna Jameson along the Missisagua, were harbingers of more thorough penetration of the colonies by British travellers of both sexes in the period of 'high imperialism' – from mid nineteenth to early twentieth century. During Victoria's reign in particular, British women travellers captured the public imagination. As Mary Louise Pratt points out, Victoria's ascension to the throne codified what would be European woman's Imperial Quest par excellence: the Civilizing Mission. At the same time, the claustrophobia of her reign set loose another figure likely to turn up on the margins of Empire: the Spinster Adventuress. Both Chinua Achebe and Jean Rhys have satirized these travel writings as classically capturing texts. Obsessed with the journey in terms of temporal progress, they tend to legitimate journeying retrospectively in terms of cause and effect. As Jane Robinson's bibliography of women travellers attests, many of these journey narratives were by women. In the last decade or so these writings by women have been of particular interest, with a number of publishers republishing these accounts in response to a growing demand by feminist readers and historians. From the feminist perspective these journey writings tend to be read autobiographically, with the intention of recovering the lives of
exceptional women, the Spinster Adventuress in particular, who ostensibly challenged the domestic ideal of femininity by journeying out of Europe. This approach tends to obscure the place of these writings in imperial relations both then and now. Sara Mills points out that they have emerged from obscurity to become part of a 'Raj revival' in Britain during the 1980s, whereby reading of past glories and conquests compensates for present decline. Travel writings by women need to be read with both imperial and neo-imperial discourses and their circulation in past and present in mind, and with an eye to the complex intersections between gender and empire.

One such problematic intersection appears in the account of a journey to Jamaica written by the Australian writer Mary Gaunt and published in 1932. Gaunt published two volumes, some 600 pages, about her two journeys to Jamaica. Here I am going to focus on the first half dozen pages of the second of these accounts, Reflection - In Jamaica. Part of the interest of this account is that it is well past the period of high imperialism, when the genre was at its peak. Gaunt takes us almost a century beyond those moments with which I began, that is with the accession of Queen Victoria. This alerts us to the ongoing valency of the travel narrative for women writers and also to the continuing capture and colonization of space by travel writing. However travel writing requires close attention to particular historical junctures. Gaunt’s own text alerts us to the shifting relations between metropolis and colony, and the changing discursive conventions of travel writing. The era which was heralded so apocalyptically by ‘Victoria’s daughters’ had passed by the time Gaunt went to Jamaica. By the 1930s a different kind of imperial expansion and appropriation was under way.

The title ‘improper desire’ is taken from the Author’s Note which begins Gaunt’s ‘tale’ of Jamaica. As a child Gaunt was captured by journey narratives, which became precursors of her own published accounts of journeys to Jamaica, to Africa and to China in pursuit of that improper desire. The Empire had long been a site where desires and behaviours considered inappropriate at home were given free reign. Neither historians nor literary critics have paid much attention to the desire of women, proper or improper, in the empire. In a recent study, Sexuality and Empire, Ronald Hyam argues sexual dynamics crucially underpinned the British empire:

[Sex] is relevant not so much to the question why empires were set up as to how they were run. Empire provided ample opportunity for sexual indulgence throughout the nineteenth century ... assessment of the true nature of British empire and expansion needs examination of its soft underbelly.

Hyam’s study is useful in that it brings desire onto the stage of imperial studies; however it does so in only a very limited way. He examines how, in colonial space, libertarian and perverse practices flourished even as the
The image here is a powerful one, the travel book a kind of illicit knowledge hidden in the rituals of music practice, then the very explicit opposition of travel and marriage, the former unwomanly and associated by Gaunt with the 'wild' and the independent, with unpredictability, action and an outdoor life. A series of oppositions organize this fantasy of escape: the discipline and docility of practising scales, the acquiring of appropriate feminine and domestic skills, finds its antithesis in the dream of adventure and travel outside of the civilized world. Her 'improper desire' is for liberty but not (recalling Hyam's remarks on sexuality and empire) libertarianism. However Gaunt is being no less perverse in her pursuit of improper desire for, as Jonathan Dollimore points out in his recent study of sexual dissidence, the essence of perversion is the abandonment of the aim of reproduction and the pursuit of pleasure as an aim independent of it. Gaunt, no less than the sexual opportunists Hyam uncovers, found in the empire the opportunity to escape femininity and compulsory heterosexuality.

The hero of the adventure narrative for this Australian girl is Captain Speke (described elsewhere as "a right good, jolly, resolute fellow" who seldom read a book). Gaunt says: 'I cannot hear his name mentioned even now without a thrill, as if he belonged to me, though I never got nearer to him than those stolen readings.' Captain Speke, who wrote about the Nile, is the interloper on the music rack. Gaunt aspires to the social purity movement promoted sexual restraint in Britain. Yet his probings of this 'soft underbelly' are flawed by the reduction of sexuality and empire to 'the attitudes and activities of the men who ran the empire'. Women receive little attention in Hyam's study. To consider Mary Gaunt's 'improper desire' we need to map more widely the dimensions of the empire as an erotic field, a site where fantasies could be indulged. In this case, we turn to elements which Hyam dismisses as unreliable, hysterical and immature: namely women, feminist studies and literary evidence.

Gaunt's association of travel and improper desire comes in the Author's Note to her book of travel Reflection – In Jamaica (1932). She recalls her childhood in Ballarat, Victoria, when she was an avid reader of travel books:

When I was a little girl a volume telling of the discovery of the Victoria Nyanza was in the book case beside which I was condemned to practise music three hours daily. I propped the book on the music rack and endeavoured to absorb it while playing my scales. The lure of the unknown was irresistible.... I can find it in my heart now to pity the child who had all her natural desires so strangled.... There was always in me a desire for independence considered by mothers in my youth very unwomanly and likely to spoil my chance of marrying. I wanted to travel, a most improper desire for a young lady I was often told.... I wanted to see how other people managed in the wilds. Civilized travelling didn't interest me in those days.

The image here is a powerful one, the travel book a kind of illicit knowledge hidden in the rituals of music practice, then the very explicit opposition of travel and marriage, the former unwomanly and associated by Gaunt with the 'wild' and the independent, with unpredictability, action and an outdoor life. A series of oppositions organize this fantasy of escape: the discipline and docility of practising scales, the acquiring of appropriate feminine and domestic skills, finds its antithesis in the dream of adventure and travel outside of the civilized world. Her 'improper desire' is for liberty but not (recalling Hyam's remarks on sexuality and empire) libertarianism. However Gaunt is being no less perverse in her pursuit of improper desire for, as Jonathan Dollimore points out in his recent study of sexual dissidence, the essence of perversion is the abandonment of the aim of reproduction and the pursuit of pleasure as an aim independent of it. Gaunt, no less than the sexual opportunists Hyam uncovers, found in the empire the opportunity to escape femininity and compulsory heterosexuality.

The hero of the adventure narrative for this Australian girl is Captain Speke (described elsewhere as "a right good, jolly, resolute fellow" who seldom read a book). Gaunt says: 'I cannot hear his name mentioned even now without a thrill, as if he belonged to me, though I never got nearer to him than those stolen readings.' Captain Speke, who wrote about the Nile, is the interloper on the music rack. Gaunt aspires to the
masculine attributes which Speke represents: adventure, freedom, agency, independence, the master of the 'wilds'. Yet she does not aspire to speak as Speke does: '...truth compels me to state his book was dull, leaving out a great many things I wanted to know.'\textsuperscript{14} In some ways, then, Speke is a prisoner of a tradition Gaunt wants to evade; as a traveller he takes himself very seriously; he seldom condescended to tell of trivial daily happenings, 'he always took care to remember the character that men, long before his time, had bestowed upon the country he was exploring'. Speke, then, is both an innovator and a conformist. As narrator, Gaunt prefices her tale of Jamaica with a statement of intention to speak differently, to write about 'trivial things', to capture the 'life of the peoples'. The narrator is seeking a compromise: her journey will allow her to write with the authority and independence she attributes to Captain Speke, but she will attempt to see with her own eyes, rather than re-establish the character bestowed by her predecessors.

Yet Speke himself is not well suited to serve as the epitome of the Victorian explorer and traveller; he too is ambiguously placed in terms of imperial rhetoric. His writings are ostensibly part of what Pratt refers to as 'the monarch of all I survey' tradition developed in particular by the British explorers who looked for the source of the Nile in the 1860s. These writings produced for the home audience the peak moments when geographical 'discoveries' were 'won' for England. Robert Burton is of course the best known 'monarch' of this tradition. Pratt reads his description and discovery of Lake Tanganyika as a classic example of the genre, where the heroic explorer achieves mastery by seeing all that is spread before him and expressing it in terms that establishes absolutely the supremacy of his vantage point and the authority of his presence. Captain Speke was alongside Burton on the expedition to Lake Tanganyika. However he had been blinded by fever and was therefore at the crucial moment of discovery unable in a literal way to discover anything.

Later Speke returned to Africa to prove his contention that the source of the Nile was to be found in Lake Victoria N'yanza, a source of dispute with his mentor Burton which resulted in an acrimonious dispute which was terminated by Speke's apparent suicide. It was this second expedition which produced the text Gaunt probably hid amongst the sheets of music: \textit{Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile} (1863). It was Speke's fate to be blinded by circumstance again, for at the crucial moment when he describes the scene of the discovery he fails to attain the authoritative perspective, his view is interrupted:

\begin{quote}
We were well rewarded; for the 'stones' as the Waganda call the falls, was by far the most interesting sight I had seen in Africa. Everybody ran to see them at once, though the march had been long and fatiguing, and even my sketch book was called into play. Though beautiful, the scene was not exactly what I had expected: for the broad surface of the lake was shut out from view by a spur of hill, and the falls, about 12 feet deep, and 400-500 feet broad, were broken by rocks.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}
Pratt’s interpretation of this passage stresses the breakdown of the ‘monarch of all I survey’ tradition in Speke’s discourse. Only the seeing, and the writing of the seeing, can fully constitute the discovery Speke seeks, yet he is not fully sighted and unable to represent fully the moment of discovery. ‘Locked into the rhetoric, and locked at the same time into a public Oedipian battle with Burton, Speke displays his failure here even as he claims the achievement’; aestheticization is reduced to the mundane categories of the interesting and attractive, the sublime heights of Burton’s representation elude Speke. Gaunt is quite right to suggest that the monarch-of-all-I-survey genre was not available to her, it is a masculine discourse of discovery. It is ironic that her choice as an embodiment of that tradition is also placed somewhat ambiguously; the commanding view escaped Speke.

The note which places journey writing as an improper desire for a woman precedes Gaunt’s narrative of her Jamaican journey. How does it relate to it? The Australian girl at the piano is, after all, by the time she goes to Jamaica, a seasoned traveller, respected author, an aged widow. There have been significant changes in discourses of femininity and imperialism between the putative origins in the author’s childhood and the account of this journey; there can be no seamless connection between these two moments. Yet this reminiscence stands at the beginning of the Jamaican journey as an organizing fantasy in much the same way that the news of Victoria’s death constructs the Canadian landscape and river passage in Anna Jameson’s narrative. It pre-scripts Jamaica as wild and Mary Gaunt as a daring adventurer and a writer determined to avoid the dull. It determines that Jamaica will outrage the values which imprison the girl at the keyboard.

How does the narrator translate these intentions into her Jamaican tale? Let me continue to focus on the first few pages of this narrative and consider just a page or two beyond the Author’s Note I have discussed above. The narrator arrives by ship and disembarks at dusk. She travels with a female companion by car along a Jamaican road. Her first impressions of Jamaica and its peoples are from this vantage point; passers-by appear as moving pictures framed by darkness against an archetypally tropical background of palms, hibiscus:

To me those pictures, coming one by one and ever changing, spoke always of the past. I saw the slaves moving down those excellent roads which were only tracks between the sugar canes in the past days; I saw them trembling, frightened, inducted into their new quarters; appraised by the planter as good or bad beasts; settling into their new place, and – though they knew it not themselves – biding their time. I saw them attracting the white man by the youthful charms of their women, bearing his children, stalwart sons and beautiful daughters; holding him; serving him; debasing him; themselves suffering cruelly; yet after all attaining to a power and place they never could have known if they had not been sold into exile.
I thought of slave ships, the long Middle Passage, the degrading sale; the tramp to the new home, and the cruel 'seasoning' which to many meant death – And then my companion spoke. I saw with something of a shock that her thoughts were not a bit what mine were.

'I should have thought' said she, 'that all these people we meet on the road would have been singing.'

Both of these women travellers impose their romantic visions upon the Jamaican landscape and community. When reading passages like this, the force of Jamaica Kincaid's 'writing back' and dismantling of this voyeurism in her novel *A Small Place* can be a saving grace: '...pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that ... it will never occur to you that the people who inhabit the place in which you have just paused cannot stand you, that behind their closed doors they laugh at your strangeness.'

Kincaid satirizes so well the scene I have just quoted from Gaunt, where the two women arrive in Jamaica firmly trussed up in orientalist ways of seeing: one looks out of the vehicle and sees the seductive slave, Jamaicans as hostage to the past; the other seeks the musical negro, the Jamaican as hostage to the music hall. The narrator of Gaunt's journey will continue to slip back into a highly romanticized past throughout the narrative, going back to 'the wilds', to another century. She consistently represents Jamaica as a prisoner of its history, beyond time and change. For her, in Jamaica, gentlemen in wigs and buckled shoes always enter the picture to help cast the narrator in that role she desires: as an adventurer in another age. This passage represents a monarchic female voice, a voice that asserts its own kind of mastery even as it denies power and domination. Gaunt is typical of women travellers in that she is so conscious of her persona, and quite deliberately constructs a speaking voice, she foregrounds the workings of her subjectivity. However the eyes of the European female are none the less imperial for all that. Her description of the arrival in Jamaica has all the markings of writings from the 'contact zone', that region of colonial encounters where subjects of vastly different historical and geographic locations intersect. The narrator's response to this is the classic imperial strategy of looking out passively to possess all she can see.

Travel writing has been characterized as unstable, heterogenous discourse, marked by gaps and absences. This is especially clear in *Reflection* – *In Jamaica*, where passages such as I quoted from above, infected by discourses of romance and adventure, jostle alongside observations about the status of women, the law courts, high rates of illegitimacy, tropical fruits, and the encroaching tourist trade. In places the narrator identifies herself as 'colonial born' and identifies with the Jamaican view of life, in opposition to the English. Elsewhere generalizations based on race emphasize the narrator's difference and Britishness. And all this with the expressed intention 'of capturing the life of the peoples', of writing 'a tale of what the ordinary tourist may see if he keeps his eyes open and go
seeking’. There is a chasm between the Author’s Note and the following text or, rather, there is a discursive battle in which the female author struggles for legitimacy and authority.

Elsewhere, at the beginning of her book *A Woman in China*, Gaunt places herself quite differently, although still using the terms of imperial discourse. There she represents herself as an Australian, identifying as an eccentric stranger, alien to the English women who surround her: ‘they literally draw their skirts around them so they should not touch mine and be contaminated as I passed.’ As a colonial subject herself, Gaunt’s access to ‘imperial eyes’ is ambivalent, and she is able to revel in a sense of difference from the English.

What are we to make of all this? In her recent study of women’s travel writing Sara Mills argues that women writers have negotiated different textual constraints to their male counterparts. Certainly they tend to negotiate their speaking voice in the text very openly and directly. The narrator of Gaunt’s Author’s Note is quite self-conscious of this; recall her diffident approach to her ‘hero’ Captain Speke. She desires his independence, his mobility, but she does not aspire to write as he does, for he ‘leaves out a great many things I wanted to know’. For reasons of gender and origins she does not aspire to the masculine English identity of Speke and his kind. What she is trying to do is project an Australian woman’s point of view which arises in independence and adventurousness; she is trying to appropriate those attributes coded masculine which are celebrated in travel and explorer writings above all – a pursuit of ‘womanspeke’!

It is useful to engage albeit briefly in what Nancy Miller calls ‘over-reading’, to read *Reflection – In Jamaica* in terms of narrative strategies in Gaunt’s earlier fictions. In her recent study of Gaunt’s novel *Kirkham’s Find*, Pamela Murray argues that Gaunt uses the romance plot in this text to blur and alter or occupy a space between the oppositional structures which operate under the heading of masculinity and femininity, to reduce their status as defining norms and expose them as constructions in the politics of gender. As we have seen, Gaunt begins her Jamaica tale with an Author’s Note which accentuates these divisions in a childhood memory where the girl at the keyboard is opposed to Captain Speke. The heroine of *Kirkham’s Find*, like the narrator of *Reflection – In Jamaica* aspires to challenge the social construction of gender. In the course of *Kirkham’s Find* we find an articulate and able personification of Gaunt’s new woman – one who will not accept her socially defined role of passivity and acceptance but trespasses on and commandeers for herself the ‘male’ nationalistic character components of realism, independence, originality, vigour, action, adaptability, solitude and an outdoor life. Phoebe’s quest has led her to a new definition of Woman based on a female gaze and female desire.
Murray's feminist reading of *Kirkham's Find* highlights the subversive use of romance to dismantle the binary oppositions of gender politics. In a quite different genre, the literature of travel, the narrator of *Reflection - In Jamaica* has as her 'improper desire' the renegotiation of gender roles her romantic heroine achieves in *Kirkham's Find*.

It is the implication of this journey narrative in gender politics which requires the narrator to represent Jamaica in terms which allow her some access to the role of adventurer hero. Jamaica must display the lure of the unknown, the wild, the uncivilized to enable the narrator's fantasy. Yet other cultural baggage comes on board as the narrator becomes the imperial adventurer: fears and fantasies about the tropics and 'the dark people' resurface here; the landscape and its peoples are colonized, albeit by another who is colonial-born. *Reflection - In Jamaica* demonstrates quite explicitly how the adventure travel narrative has as part of its assemblage a series of discourses about race, colony and empire which are not ruptured by gender politics alone. Seeking to renegotiate textual constraints around issues of gender, to challenge the discourses of femininity, in this case leads to reaffirmation of discourses of imperialism. Strategies that work with some sophistication in a romance novel, like *Kirkham's Find*, come horribly unstuck in a different generic framework – travel writing.

The conclusion of Gaunt's journey narrative places it quite self-consciously at the end of a tradition. The narrator observes the encroaching tourist, the luxurious hotels which are beginning to appear on the shores of Jamaica. The tourist represents the predictable to she who desires 'the wilds': 'The tourist clamours for luxury. The result of luxury is commonplaceneness. Romance departs. Perhaps it is just as well. For romance is seldom romantic to the people who live in it.' The denizens of Jamaica may well be relieved to escape the confines of their role in the romantic journey – although they fared little better as attractions on Cook's Tours. These final observations mark Gaunt's travel writings as part of a different historical juncture in travel writing to that which was heralded by Victoria's accession. Like Beatrice Grimshaw, Gaunt is critical of tourism yet writing in the twentieth century at a time when the explorer and adventurer are replaced by the tourist, the entrepreneur and Cook's Tours. Grimshaw recognized the realities of this and wrote quite specifically for the tourist market even as she despised it in, for example, *In the Strange South Seas* (1907). Gaunt's writing too 'packaged' Jamaica for a metropolitan readership which was at the same time a rapidly expanding market in which travel was a desirable commodity.

The discourses of romance served women writers well as a means of renegotiating gender roles. Gaunt's novels are good examples of how this can be done. However the Jamaica journey I have been discussing here demonstrates that the female narrator appropriates masculinist discourses at her peril. Gaunt's Jamaica, like the India through which Emily Eden
progresses and the backwoods in which Anna Jameson rambles, is the stage for a journey which delivers the Other to Europe all over again.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 21.
4. Ibid., p. 261.
5. Ibid., p. 262.