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The New Woman at Home and Abroad: Fiction, female identity and the British Empire

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa

Introduction: The New Woman and Empire

At the height of the British Empire, England was in the midst of major social, economic and moral upheaval. Arising from this commotion was the figure of the late Victorian and Edwardian 'New Woman.' Her appearance on the domestic front provoked further confusion and ambiguity about gender that had repercussions for empire. Building on a previous article that explored how the many vitriolic attacks on the British New Woman in the popular press and in popular and bestselling fiction were linked to anxiety about the future of the Empire, this essay examines, not the threat to nation and empire represented by the British New Woman,¹ but rather the New Woman in the colonial peripheries. It turns to two very different models of British colonialism – Ireland and Australia – and asks how differently the New Woman was presented to the general reading public at the end of the nineteenth- and beginning of the twentieth century. Was the colonial New Woman represented as less of a threat to the reading public than the British New Woman? Or vice versa? Was the presentation of an Irish and an Australian New Woman very different? Did they each signify an equally potent threat to the British Empire... or otherwise? This paper will argue that although there were important similarities in the fictional representations of each of these New Women, there were also significant differences and these differences were due, for the most part, to the respective positions of these countries on the imperial spectrum.

¹ This issue was discussed in detail in Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, 'Marie Corelli's British new woman: A threat to empire?', *The History of the Family*, 14/4 (2009) pp. 416-429.

The two societies on the periphery of the Empire that I have chosen to look at, Ireland and Australia, represent very different aspects of British imperial expansion. One was a colony in the Old World; the other in the New. One was a white society colonised in various stages: as far back as the twelfth century and then in the early seventeenth century. The latter was a colony which, by the end of the nineteenth century, had still managed to retain many aspects of ancient Gaelic culture (albeit, a culture that for the most part survived outside the Anglo-Irish urban centres). The other society, Australia, was inhabited by a black Aboriginal people whose culture was almost annihilated, certainly dominated, by the white Eurocentric culture of an incoming white settler population. This imperial process began in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. So, prior to an ongoing process of colonisation, one society was an ancient nation dealing with native clan disputes and the other was one of the world's oldest surviving civilisations. Whatever the differences, however, each of these 'races', which were viewed by the imperialists as 'inferior' or less 'civilised', found that what was culture being increasingly supplanted by a seemingly 'superior' white Anglo-Saxon culture.

According to historian of British imperialism, Anne McClintock, women (like the colonised and the working class) were viewed in Britain as inherently atavistic – as² 'the conservative repository of the national archaic'. As has been noted by numerous historians recently, the 'moral condition of the nation was believed to derive from the moral standards of women'.³ If we accept that the continued existence of the British Empire depended on the transportation of nineteenth-century, middle-class values, which in turn relied on those values remaining stable at 'home', then any challenges to traditional notions and roles of women taking place in Britain served to threaten

² Anne McClintock, "'No Longer in a Future Heaven": Gender, Race and Nationalism', in Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti & Ella Shohat (eds.), *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis, 1997) p. 93.

³ Lynda Nead, *Myths of sexuality: representations of women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 1988) p. 92.

contemporary understandings of nation and empire too. And increasingly towards the end of the nineteenth century, these challenges were embodied by the New Woman⁴

Fears about racial degeneration (brought about by falling birth rates, disease, racial mixing, war and migration, incoming and outgoing, particularly to the United States) meant that more focus was placed on women's roles as mothers – not simply of individual children – but of nations and empires.⁵ Anti-feminists argued that the New Woman, by seeming to reject motherhood, threatened the very existence of the British race. This is in spite of the fact that more and more feminist discourse, and certainly that of the New Woman, concentrated on maternal imperialism; that is to say, faith in the Empire combined with a belief in rational reproduction.⁶ The New Woman frequently championed eugenic notions about the future of the human race. Indeed, as the twentieth century approached, she used eugenics to

⁴ The New Woman was, and still is, commonly used to signify the extent of the shifts that turn-of-the-century society was experiencing regarding notions of femininity. Throughout nineteenth century England there had been so-called 'new' women — women striving for greater emancipation for their sex. What makes the 'New Woman' of the 1890s such a different phenomenon is the nature and the extent of the social change which necessitated and accompanied her emergence, and the fervour of the controversy and discussion resulting from that emergence. See: Crozier-De Rosa, 'Marie Corelli's British new woman: A threat to empire?'

⁵ The author of "The Irish Land Bill" cites a New York doctor who manages to single out one girl of the lowest type who mothers generations of unfit species. 'In the State of New York, in 1874, Dr. Harris was struck by the fact that a great number of paupers and vagrants had the same name. Upon investigation, they were all traced back to a young girl called Margaret, who belonged to the thriftless and vagrant class, and who had lived the life of a tramp many years before. This girl became the mother of a race of paupers, and her progeny has cursed the country ever since. The county records showed two hundred of her descendants to have been criminals, and seven hundred to have been idiots, drunkards, lunatics, and paupers, the cost of whom to the country must have been enormous.' Author of "The Irish Land Bill", 'What science is saying about Ireland', Earl Grey Pamphlets Collection (1881) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/60227080> Accessed: 11 June, 2009, pp.26-27. (Kingston- Upon-Hull. Sold In London By Hamilton, Adams, & Co.)

⁶ For example, see: Cecily Devereux, 'New Woman, New World: Maternal Feminism And The New Imperialism In The White Settler Colonies', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 22/2 (1999) pp. 177-8.

argue that the very future of the race lay in recognition of the extreme importance of women's roles as 'mothers of the empire', whether in the colonies or the homeland, and in articulating the importance of woman to the imperial mission by granting her the rights to 'education, the vote, and a hand in the running of nation and empire'⁷ (Certainly these were the voiced sentiments of, among others, feminists such as Louisa Lawson in Australia, Nellie McClung in Canada, and M⁸énie Muriel Dowie in Britain.)

Britain and the New Woman

British anti-New Women novelists, such as the first modern bestseller, Marie Corelli (1855-1924), often presented the burgeoning reading public with a stereotypical, one dimensional, satirical New Woman – one who represented a danger to all that was feminine about womanhood – and all that was 'normal' and 'right' about Britain. Very briefly, Corelli's 1889 satirical novella, *My Wonderful Wife*,⁹ 'a humorous send-up of New Women and the marriage question', does just that. Corelli paints a harsh picture of Honoria Maggs, the 'heroine' of the story, who is unequivocally a New Woman. Honoria is a physically robust, non-sentimental Amazonian figure who likes to hunt, spend time in the company of 'the boys' and eats like a man. She also has a loud voice that frightens her husband as they are taking

⁷ Devereux, 'New Woman, New World: Maternal Feminism And The New Imperialism In The White Settler Colonies', p.178.

⁸ M⁸énie Muriel Dowie's 1895 New Woman novel, *Gallia*, features a heroine who rejects the man she loves for marriage with another man based on the premise that his physically superior masculine build and health will combine with her strength and health and aid the race by producing strong, 'handsome and well made' children (Dowie, M⁸énie Muriel, *Gallia* (London and Vermont, 1995) [1895]. p. 113). Gallia supports a eugenicist approach to race, going as far as promoting the rationality of hiring surrogate mothers to produce children for women who are physically weak or in some way defective (Dowie, *Gallia*, p.113). Dowie, then, was presenting an image of the New Woman who would selflessly sacrifice pleasure and fulfilment for the survival of the race – far from the image of her as an active promoter of racial degeneracy.

⁹ Annette R Federico, *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture* (Charlottesville and London, 2000) p. 110.

their wedding vows, and who, her husband informs us, he would have kissed ‘but that vile cigar stuck out of her mouth and prevented’ him. Moreover, she eventually becomes a mother who cannot cuddle her child because her manly strength means that she keeps bruising him.¹⁰

More sincere New Women novels emanating from Britain (such as that by Méné Muriel Dowie mentioned above) wrote about the subject of the New Woman and her feminist aspirations in a much more earnest manner. Moreover, this one-dimensional, satirical caricature was not how the New Woman was generally presented in fiction coming out of the colonies. Irish writer, Emily Lawless (1845-1913), and Australian author, Catherine Martin (1848-1937), presented the public with much more empathetic, much less caricatured New Women. The two colonial New Women that this paper will look at then inhabit different spectrums of colonialism. One, a ‘native’ Irish New Woman, is regarded as ‘inferior’, as an ‘other’, by virtue of the fact that she is indigenous to the country and not originally from the imperial centre – that and that she is female. The other, a white settler Australian New Woman, however, is only ‘inferior’ insofar as that she is physically distanced from the Old centre of imperial culture – that and, again, the fact that she is female.

Ireland and the New Woman

Nineteenth-century imperialist and anthropological attitudes to the Irish ‘race’ as a whole help to inform historians to what extent the Irish New Woman of this era posed a threat to the empire. The gender dimension only adds a further level of perceived ‘inferiority’ to that racial discussion. As C. L. Innes argues in her book *Woman and Nation*, Englishmen took it as their due as ‘a masculine and virile

¹⁰ Marie Corelli, ‘My Wonderful Wife’, *Cameos* (New York, 1970) [1895] p. 180; p. 182; p. 186; p. 195; p. 199. For a more detailed discussion of Marie Corelli’s approach to the British New Woman and the potential repercussions this had for empire, see: Crozier-De Rosa, ‘Marie Corelli’s British new woman: A threat to empire?’.

race' to control 'feminine' and 'childlike' races such as the Celts and the Africans. This perceived link between femininity and inferiority was irrefutable. A woman from an inferior, and therefore feminine race, could not hope to escape accusations of inferiority on multiple levels, racial and gender.

The 'aboriginal Celt', the 'real aboriginal Irishman of the west and of the south' of the country, was viewed, according to contemporary imperialist and anthropological thought, as lowly and inferior. The Irish, it was claimed, had 'the unfortunate habit of being content to live on in a state of semi-barbarism', of rejecting 'the comforts and decencies of civilisation' and, worse than that, of being 'apt to regard and treat as enemies all who urge them to such exertion'.¹² One reason for this continuing state of semi-barbarism, or as one article unequivocally states, 'one great cause of Irish barbarism', given the country's position as a British colony for the previous two centuries, was that, in a 'storm-tossed island difficult of access in the Atlantic', they suffered isolation 'from the civilised part of the world'.¹³ The land and climate in the West particularly was too harsh for any incoming settlers to want to occupy and so the native inhabitants were not sufficiently exposed to 'civilising' influence.

As with any 'inferior' 'race', including the Australian Aboriginal people, the Irish were seen to be in great need of guidance and governance. Resisting this governance caused some British commentators to claim that the Irish, then, were in many ways to be considered even more 'savage' than the 'African negro'.¹⁴ The writer continues: 'In one respect some negro tribes are superior to the Irish,

¹¹ C. L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935* (Hempstead, Hertfordshire, 1993) p. 9.

¹² Henry George Grey, 'Ireland And The Empire,' Earl Grey Pamphlets Collection, (1883). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/60226912> Accessed: 10 June, 2009, p. 4. [Reprinted from the *Nineteenth Century*, September 1883.]

¹³ Author of "The Irish Land Bill", 'What science is saying about Ireland'.

¹⁴ Author of "The Irish Land Bill", 'What science is saying about Ireland'.

inasmuch as they know that it is good for them to be coerced.¹⁵ Nature, religion and the influential area of eugenics are called into play to support this:

It also shows by history that God's way of dealing with such savage peoples has always been for them to be supplanted by or rendered subject to superior ones who are more fit to survive, and that any one who quarrels with this system of nature quarrels with the stern but undoubted laws of God, which ordain that the weak and the vicious must make way for the strong and virtuous, and that deterioration of the human race must be the consequence of these laws not being carried out.¹⁶

Given the threat posed to the continued development of the wider British race, to human progress itself, by the supposed 'barbarism' of the colonised Irish, what then of an Irish woman? More than this, what of an Irish woman who is presented to the reading public (Anglo-Irish as well as English and others) as a frustrated, independent New Woman?

Emily Lawless's *Grania*

Born in County Kildare, Ireland, daughter of the third Lord Cloncurry, the Anglo-Irish Emily Lawless wrote her New Woman novel, *Grania: The Story Of An Island*, in 1892.¹⁷ According to her biographer Heidi Hannon, Lawless's books (a mixture of novels, histories and biographies) reached 'audiences throughout most of the English-

¹⁵ Author of "The Irish Land Bill", 'What science is saying about Ireland'.

¹⁶ Author of "The Irish Land Bill", 'What science is saying about Ireland'.

¹⁷ Heather Edwards, 'The Irish New Woman and Emily Lawless's *Grania: The Story of an Island*: a congenial geography', *ELT*, 51/ 4 (2008) p. 423.

speaking world’.¹⁸ Her books also spoke, necessarily so, to a diverse ‘home’ audience in that the Irish and British reading public was made up of a mixture of groups all with differing cultural, religious and political assumptions: Catholic and Protestant; Irish,¹⁹ Anglo-Irish, and English; male and female.

At the time that Lawless wrote *Grania*, in the final decade of the nineteenth century, and then further into the early decades of the twentieth century, Ireland witnessed not only a feminist civil rights campaign, in common with many other ‘western’ countries²⁰ at the time including Britain, but also an intense political nationalist struggle. These two movements were not always separate, although there were many passionate debates about which cause was to receive priority attention – nationalism or feminism – assuming, as many did, that they could not advance one cause without²¹ hampering the progress of the other. Nevertheless, while differing in opinion as to the varying extents that either British imperialism in Ireland or Irish national chauvinism were responsible for the subjugation of women in Ireland, a considerable number of women (whether ‘Irish’ or ‘Anglo-Irish’)²² did participate in nationalist and feminist struggles.

Grania O’Malley, protagonist of Lawless’s New Woman novel, lives with her sister, Honor, on one of the most notoriously rugged and barren Aran Islands, off the west coast of Ireland. Cut off from most of the world, including mainland Ireland itself, Grania speaks only

¹⁸ Heidi Hansson, *Emily Lawless, 1845-1913: Writing the Interspace* (Cork, 2007) pp. 2-3, cited in Heather Edwards, ‘The Irish New Woman and Emily Lawless’s *Grania: The Story of an Island*: a congenial geography’, p.423.

¹⁹ C. L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935*, p. 28.

²⁰ C. L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935*, p. 5.

²¹ For a more detailed discussion of this powerful area of historical debate see many of the fascinating essays included in Kathryn Kirkpatrick (ed.), *Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 2000), as well as C. L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935*.

²² See: Kathryn Kirkpatrick, ‘Introduction’, in Kathryn Kirkpatrick (ed), *Border Crossing*, pp. 1-12.

Gaelic. (Indeed, it does not occur to her until much later in the novel that there might be other languages spoken in the world other than Irish and English.)

Grania exhibits a wide range of typical New Woman traits, though these are traits that have adjusted to her Irish rural environment. She is fiercely Gaelic (Irish but with more loyalty to the islands – her main sphere of influence – than to the mainland); ‘handsome’; strong, indeed, more physically robust even than most men on the island; hard-working; naturally intuitive and therefore in tune with the land; not religious in the conventional sense (religious belief is ‘utterly foreign and alien to her’ which is in direct contrast to her sister who would rather a monastic life and disdains marriage and sex); fiercely independent; fiercely proud; passionately loving and passionately sexual (if also quite naive about character); and, most of all relevance when referring to the New Woman, alienated from those around her and increasingly frustrated with her lot in life, more particularly as this concerns love.²³

The islanders certainly look on Grania as different or misplaced; as ‘a wild queer girl, and a bold one too’. In a conversation with her aunt, Mrs Flanagan, one of the local women, Rosha, comments:

I tell you there is no end to the queerness, and to the bold things she does be doing. It is well known to all Inishmaan, yes and to Aranmore, too, that she goes out to the fishing just like a man, so she does, just like a man, catching the plaice and the mullets, and the conger eels, and many another fish beside I shouldn't wonder; and if that is not a very bold thing for a young girl to do, then I do not know what a bold thing is, although I

²³ Emily Lawless, *Grania. The Story Of An Island*, 1892 [Electronic Editions, 2000 Michael Sundermeier, editor]
<http://mockingbird.creighton.edu/english/micsun/IrishResources/grania/grancont.htm>.

am your own niece, Mrs. O'Flanagan. But that is only the half of it. She has no fear of anything, not of anything at all, I tell you, neither upon the earth nor under it either—God keep us from speaking of harm, amen! She will as soon cross a fairies' ring as not! just the same and sooner, and it is not two months, or barely three at the most, that I saw her with my own eyes walk past a red jackass on the road, and it braying hard enough to split at the time, and not crossing herself, no, nor a bend of the head, nor spitting even! It is the truth I am telling you, Mrs. O'Flanagan, ma'am, though you may not choose to believe me, the truth and no lie!²⁴

By rejecting the customs of the island, customs that straddle Catholicism and pagan superstition, Grania marks herself out as different.

However, and certainly contrary to much of the contemporaneous anthropological thought, Grania does not view belonging to the Irish 'race' as limiting. Indeed, along with her independence of character and physical robustness, this national identity is the main source of her self-worth and self-understanding. So whereas the weak, lazy, attractive Murdough Blake, Grania's love interest, is continually distracted with the idea of fleeing the islands to go to the New World in America (though he considers this impossible, not simply because he has no money or motivation, but because he too only speaks Gaelic), Grania maintains an enduring tie with Ireland and reacts angrily at the thought of dreaming of leaving it. Weakness or inferiority in this fictional New Woman's eyes lies with idle and unproductive thoughts of a never-to-be life lived elsewhere, not with the act of embracing Irishness and recognising in that sense of belonging an irrevocable feeling of pride.

²⁴ Emily Lawless, *Grania. The Story Of An Island*, 1892, Part 2, Chapter 6.

Lawless's novel ends with Grania's death. After the true nature of her lover is revealed, that is Murdough's moral weakness, selfishness and laziness, Grania, disappointed in love, drowns while trying to find a priest for her dying sister. In her life, her New Woman traits are a positive influence. Her 'manliness' in the form of physical robustness and health is a benefit in the harsh terrain in which she lives and works. Like most 'typical' British New Women, and contrary to anti-feminist rhetoric, her belief in sexual difference is affirmed – even to her ultimate detriment. Her spirituality is confirmed and demonstrated, not through the more conventional pathway of conventional religious observation, but rather through her intimate connection with nature – with the land. However, this Irish New Woman's story does not end victorious. Her surroundings defeat her.

Grania's New Woman story represents that of a nation, long colonised, whose ancient culture and sense of national identity runs the risk of dying out – as the New Woman herself does. Grania's eventual demise foreshadows the eventual rise of Irish nationalism – to the detriment of the Irish feminist movement. As James Murphy, in his essay on gender and nationalism in fiction, argues by the early twentieth century the voices of those women writers, Catholic and Protestant, who had played a substantial role in the realm of the arts in the later decades of the nineteenth century, largely fell silent:

It was no accident that this silencing coincided with the political triumph and emerging stability of nationalist Ireland, in which lower middle class tenant farmers had become the owners of their land. It was a society in which for the most part women were denied independence and articulation, whether through the

mores of rural society or through male projections of the idealized woman as the icon of the nation.²⁵

The Irish New Woman, at a time when the nation was gradually embracing a form of nationalism that would eventually lead to separation from Britain (at least for 26 of the 32 Irish counties), represented more of an immediate threat to Irish nationalist identity than to the future of the British empire. Although, of course, the very potent survival of Grania's Irishness as a racial and cultural identity distinct from that of Britishness (in the face of centuries of British occupation) is seen as a threat to the future of the British empire in Ireland.

Moreover, numerous Anglo-Irish writers, like John Milton Synge and Emily Lawless,²⁶ may well have 'celebrated the peasantry as the location of true 'Irishness''. However, unlike many co-writers of the time, these two writers did not equate celebration with idealisation – Lawless was aware of the reality of the often insurmountable conditions for women in rural Ireland.

Australia, Catherine Martin and the New Woman

Stella Courtland, the protagonist of Catherine Martin's 1890 Australian New Woman novel, *An Australian Girl*, is closer in 'status' and 'origin' to the creator of Grania O'Malley, Emily Lawless, than to Grania herself. Stella Courtland, the protagonist, has many traits in common with Grania O'Malley, although her life is viewed against a very different backdrop. Catherine Martin migrated to Australia from the Isle of Skye in the 1850s. Like Lawless in Ireland, Martin formed

²⁵ James H Murphy, "'Things Which Seem to you Unfeminine': Gender and Nationalism in the Fiction of Some Upper Middle Class Catholic Women Novelists, 1880-1910", in Kirkpatrick (ed.), *Border Crossings*, pp. 58-78, p. 77.

²⁶ C. L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society, 1880-1935*, p. 52.

part of the ruling class in Australia. Her character, Stella, did the same. Therefore, whereas Grania as the Irish New Woman represented an old race in an old world, Stella as the Australian New Woman represented a new race in a new world. From the point of view of empire at the end of the nineteenth century, the Australian New Woman represented a threat to the British Empire because she signified the emergence of a modern, new racial and cultural identity, that of Australianness, one distinct from (though still partially related to) Britishness.

In their 'Introduction' to a collection of essays on imperial careering in the nineteenth century, David Lambert and Alan Lester argue that the first waves of British emigrants to the New World initially reacted to their new position and environment by reinventing themselves as 'various kinds of colonial Britons'.²⁷ However, by the late nineteenth century, Lambert and Lester continue, most of the descendants of these early settlers had 'constructed new national identities – for example as Australians, South Africans, Canadians or New Zealanders – that were distanced both metaphorically and literally from Britain itself'.²⁸ Imperial culture in the peripheries of the empire then, far from being stable, was contested and therefore in a continual state of flux, of reformulation. So too, it follows, was the nature of the relationship between the metropolitan centre and these colonial peripheries.²⁹ Catherine Martin's 1890 novel supports this validity of this assertion as her protagonist, Stella Courtland, increasingly moves away from a Euro-centred understanding of Australia to a continual, proud reassertion of the uniqueness of an emerging (white) Australian identity. The 'empire' does not construct Australian identity. Rather, those who live there, those who have moved, or whose families have moved, from the metropolitan centre to this 'new' world have been instrumental in constructing this new national identity, in this move

²⁷ David Lambert & Alan Lester (eds), *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2006) p. 1.

²⁸ Lambert & Lester (eds), *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire*, p. 1.

²⁹ Lambert & Lester (eds), *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire*, pp. 7-8.

away from the British centre. (Of course, these settlers, female and male, were therefore also complicit in the negative aspects of that ‘new’ nation building, in the shaping of a national identity that excluded non-whites.)³⁰

This emergence of a new national identity also drew on perceptions of gender. Sharyn Pearce in her study of first-wave journalism and the ‘Australian girl’ notes that as soon ‘as the local white girl, rather than the transplanted British girl, became the norm, writers began to treat her as a national “type” worthy of analysis and examination.’³¹ Pearce goes on to argue that this analysis of the Australian girl, indeed vesting in her the hope and potential of an emerging new nation, intensified after Federation, 1901.³² However, defining the Australian girl was a contentious exercise. Whereas some writers, mostly male, imagined the Australian girl as an image of beauty destined solely for marriage; others saw her as a girl healthy, robust and ‘tomboyish’, both in appearance and nature, but with a ‘poor complexion and freckles’; still others endowed her with typically male virtues – ‘a “real good pal”’ – moulded by her environment and most at home living in the country (a far cry from “the typical assertive American and the vapid English girl”³³). All were non-intellectual, however, and destined to become ‘good’ Australian housewives.³⁴

Understandably, the often harsh and unyielding physical environment is often depicted as a major determinant of Australian character, male

³⁰ There is little space to discuss such an important and contentious area of historical debate here. It suffices simply to mention this debate. For those who are interested in pursuing this further see, among many others, Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath & Marian Quartly (eds), *Creating a Nation, 1788-1990* (Ringwood, Victoria) 1994.

³¹ Sharyn Pearce, ““The best career is matrimony””: first-wave journalism and the “Australian girl””, *Hecate*, 18/2 (Oct 1992) pp. 64.

³² Pearce, ““The best career is matrimony””, pp. 64.

³³ For a more detailed discussion of the many definitions of ‘Australian girl’ see: Sharyn Pearce, ““The best career is matrimony””, pp. 64.

³⁴ Sharyn Pearce, ““The best career is matrimony””, pp. 64.

and female. Whether shaping the nature of the work-sharing, toiling pioneer woman or that of the turn-of-the-century Australian girl roaming the countryside, free and unrestrained, the land offers new possibilities for a definition, or redefinition, of womanhood than does the more urban and seemingly static environment of the middle-class English girl.³⁵ However, this notion of a life lived on the land also limits the roles offered to Australian women – those lacking the opportunities for education and employment available to women in the larger and more cosmopolitan centres of ‘old’ Europe. It also places the burden, or the honour, of saving the British or European ‘race’ through the provision of a robust and healthy form of reproduction, and in doing so appeases many of the eugenics concerns of many in the ‘old’ world.

Lawless’s novel subscribed to these eugenic notions. In the matter of physical and moral health, the ‘old’ world is pitted against the ‘new’. In an introspective moment, for example, Stella Courtland ponders the ‘men delicately nurtured in the old homes of the Old World, as well as the luxurious ones of the New, and in the end going completely under, in the rough, wild manner of the veriest waifs’.³⁶ This contrast between the Old World and the New marks the whole novel. Stella and her eventual husband, Ted, the ‘natural’ Australians in the novel (as opposed to those born in Europe), both deplore the idea of the country that they were born in as existing only in relation to the motherland and oppose the attachment that some in the New World have to Old World conventions and their unquestioning following of English fashions and fads.³⁷ Although the ‘Mother Country’ still exerted a good deal of influence on the colonies and both domains had aims and ways of thinking in common, in many ways the crowded cities of the Old World were associated with physical weakness, even

³⁵ Pearce, “‘The best career is matrimony’”, pp. 64.

³⁶ Catherine Martin, *An Australian Girl* (Oxford, 1999) [1890] p. 57.

³⁷ See, for example: Martin, *An Australian Girl*, 1890, p. 43-4.

degeneration and decay³⁸ In light of this, physical fitness, whatever the gender, added to a newly emerging national Australian identity, one coloured by eugenic notions of racial rejuvenation.

The dominance of British culture was also challenged in a less obvious manner than that of colonial eugenicists. Women who pushed for what they believed were the benefits of modernity, for example for material independence, intellectual autonomy and an independent national identity, among others, necessarily rejected the previously dominant place of British culture in the colonial peripheries. These women also threatened the legitimacy, or relevancy, of British middle-class notions of respectability and separate gender spheres in this new world (just as agitation on the part of their counterparts in Britain was threatening the transference to the colonies of the supposedly stable class and gender notions upon which the nature of the empire depended).

The 1880s and 1890s in Australia were a time of contest and activism. For the most part these protests or disputes revolved around two main issues: 'the social question' which centred on inequality within the labour market; and, 'the woman question' which addressed the degree to which all women were 'denied access to a secure share of the family's resources, to control of their sexuality and childbearing, and to social power'³⁹. Of course, this 'questioning of social transformations' was not confined to Australia. As Patricia Grimshaw argues, and as has been argued earlier in this paper, this questioning of social, economic and political values 'was taking place with varying degrees of intensity in industrialising western nations of the north', with the British experience holding an pre-eminent place in Australia given the degree to which 'white Australia' stemmed from,

³⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the novel's attitude towards the Old World and the New World, see: Amanda Nettelbeck, 'Introduction', in Martin, *An Australian Girl*, pp. i-xxxi.

³⁹ Patricia Grimshaw, *et. al.*, *Creating a Nation, 1788-1990*, p.155.

and continued to stem from, Britain and Ireland.⁴⁰ In addition, many British newspapers and journals, carrying current British ideas or debates, continued to be read in the far reaches of the colonies.⁴¹ Those Australian colonialists who were interested in these issues, then, explored social and political questions common to many 'western' nations while adapting their importance and relevancy to the experiences of white Australian colonists. This led to differing experiences of feminist need and activism between the metropolitan centre and the colonial peripheries. As Grimshaw again contends the plight of the middle-class feminist in the colonies was, in many ways, even more potent than those of her peers in Britain because if, as was commonly asserted, the colonies were seen to be more liberal and to display less of the rigid class divisions than the 'Mother' country, then 'this only made the anomalies in [colonial] middle-class women's lives more glaringly apparent'.⁴² It was into this environment that Catherine Martin introduced her New Woman novel, *An Australian Girl* in 1890.

Set for the most part in regional South Australia, this novel follows the story of Stella Courtland, a young woman who proudly asserts her Australianness, as well as the benefits of her keen intellect and her thirst for knowledge. In addition to reading and discussing the works of numerous German philosophers, Stella spends a great deal of time outdoors, riding horses, watching the habits of animals and insects and eating fruit straight from trees and vines.⁴³ Although not as phenomenally popular as most of Marie Corelli's novels, *An Australian Girl* was considered 'widely read at the time,' particularly

⁴⁰ Patricia Grimshaw, *et. al.*, *Creating a Nation, 1788-1990*, p.155.

⁴¹ Patricia Grimshaw, *et. al.*, *Creating a Nation, 1788-1990*, p.155.

⁴² For a much more detailed discussion of 'the woman question' in Australian society than is possible here see: Patricia Grimshaw, *et. al.*, *Creating a Nation, 1788-1990*, p.170.

⁴³ Martin, *An Australian Girl*, 1999 [1890], p. 72; p. 74.

among the ‘circles of the Intelligentsia’ and it did go into three editions within four years’

The recently-asked question of how Catherine Martin managed to attain an education worthy of the intellectual content of her novels is also apt when referring to her New Woman protagonist, Stella Courtland.⁴⁵ In 1866, Martin, her widowed mother and some of her family moved to Mount Gambier, South Australia, to establish a ladies’ school, in the hope that this endeavour would soon support them financially (given the death of their father in the previous decade).⁴⁶ As Margaret Allen enquires:

How did Catherine Martin become an intellectual, with great independence of mind? How did this daughter of a poor crofter family make herself into an intellect in an apparently unlikely colonial environment? ... how it was possible for Catherine Martin, the daughter of a poor crofter emigrant, to grow up to write in her novel, *An Australian Girl*, of her heroine Stella Courtland who can playfully yet persuasively (and boastfully) say, ‘I

⁴⁴ Jeanne F. Young, *Catherine Helen Spence: A Study and An Appreciation* (Melbourne, 1937) p. 63, quoted in Margaret Allen, ‘She Seems to Have Composed Her Own Life: Thinking about Catherine Martin’, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 19/43, (March 2004) pp. 29-42, p. 29. The first edition was published anonymously in London in three volumes; the second was published in London in one volume in 1891; and then the third, in 1894, was published as an Australian edition (Nettelbeck, ‘Introduction’, in Martin, *An Australian Girl*, pp.vii-xxxii, pxii). Margaret Allen quotes the critic Patchett Martin claimed that the book was widely recognized adding the comment that the ‘clever novel is now receiving in the higher social and literary circles of London’. Patchett Martin, Arthur, *Literary Opinion and Illustrated Review of English and Foreign Literature*, VII (66), quoted in Allen, ‘She Seems to Have Composed Her Own Life’, p. 29.

⁴⁵ This question is asked by Margaret Allen in her essay, Allen, ‘She Seems to Have Composed Her Own Life’.

⁴⁶ Allen, ‘She Seems to Have Composed Her Own Life’, p.33. Allen continues: ‘Mount Gambier, a town of some 2,000 people, was then the social, commercial and administrative centre of a prosperous agricultural and pastoral district, having two newspapers, a number of banks and businesses, many schools and churches and a variety of other social and cultural institutions.’

know Kant too, very well; and it is a great consolation, for when the hairdresser comes to dress my hair for a ball I pass the time by remembering bits out of the “Kritik of Pure Reason”.⁴⁷

Like Martin, Stella benefited from her immediate surroundings, from the books, society and the intellectual discussions available to a young woman growing up in a racially and culturally and intellectually diverse, Australian environment. Mount Gambier, despite being classified as ‘provincial’, never mind Australian, exhibited much in the way of artistic and cultural diversity.⁴⁸ Writer and character, then, also benefited from the learning derived from an ‘immediate environment’ where ‘people from different cultural groups with different histories—Scots, English, Irish, Germans and Aboriginal Buandig people—interacted’.⁴⁹ This ‘learning’ was further built on when Martin moved to the colonial capital, South Australia’s Adelaide, when she was 30 years old to earn her living writing and undertaking employment in the area of government administration – testimony to Martin’s New Woman status,⁵⁰ whatever that of her fictional characters:

⁴⁷ Allen, ‘She Seems to Have Composed Her Own Life’, p.30, quoting Catherine Martin, *An Australian Girl*, vol. 1, (London, 1890) p. 104.

⁴⁸ Allen continues: ‘Indeed, Mount Gambier offered a number of avenues for self- education. The Mount Gambier Institute had been established in 1862. By early in 1867 its library contained over 700 volumes and by 1875 there were 1,910 volumes—works of history, geography and religion as well as of fiction, which an eager reader could consume in the Reading Room or in her own home.’ Allen again writes: ‘Certainly there were a considerable number of educated Germans in and around Mount Gambier in these years’ with whom Martin had formed friendships and through whom she was introduced to German literature and philosophy. See: Allen ‘She Seems to Have Composed Her Own Life’, p. 2, and 22 May 1867, p. 2; C.J. Maslen, *A History of the Mount Gambier Institute* (Mount Gambier, 1981) p. 6.

⁴⁹ Allen, ‘She Seems to Have Composed Her Own Life’, p. 35.

⁵⁰ ‘In late 1876, when she was almost 30, Catherine left her home and family in Mount Gambier and moved to the colonial capital, South Australia’s Adelaide. For most women of that age, leaving home meant moving to a marital home. The records available tell us little of her love life or, as the literary critic Carolyn Heilbrun puts it, her ‘struggle with the inevitable conflict between the destiny of being unambiguously a woman’ and her

The New World, Australia or otherwise, was viewed by many, including many feminist eugenicists, as a site for the rejuvenation of the race. Cecily Devereux, in her article on Maternal Feminism and New Imperialism, remarks that within white settler colonies there existed the notion that ‘virgin soil’ and a healthy climate brought forth ‘a new and stronger race’.⁵¹ Certainly the heroine of Martin’s New Woman novel thinks along these lines. What is particularly significant, then, about Marie Corelli’s discussion of physical appearance and physical robustness (as previously discussed) is that far from being viewed as regressive (and therefore as a danger to the character of the Empire), as it is in her novels, a robust healthiness in the New Woman living in the wide open, rugged terrain of the ‘New World’ was seen as a positive, progressive trait that ensured the perpetuation of the race (as it certainly was in reality for the woman living in the far west of Ireland).

Like Grania, and despite being a New Woman, Martin’s protagonist is still a strong proponent of sexual difference. In this respect Martin is similar to Corelli (and Lawless). However, she does not feel that she has to portray ‘true’ women as physically ‘delicate’ in the way Corelli does. Again, physical robustness is a positive attribute here, adding to a woman’s sense of freedom, rather than restraining it. Colonies lack many of the opportunities available to the New Woman in the more established cities of the ‘Old World,’ the freedom to roam unrestrained,⁵² then, is something of a compensation for this.

Like the Irish New Woman novel, *An Australian Girl* ends with disappointment. However, whereas Grania dies, Stella survives. However, similarly disappointed in love (in that she does not marry

‘desire, or fate, to be something else’. She desired to support herself by writing. ‘Catherine and Fred Martin married some 13 years later. By delaying her marriage she made it less likely that she would have children and thus a ‘normal woman’s life’. See: Allen, ‘She Seems to Have Composed Her Own Life’, p.38 citing Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman’s Life* (London, 1989) p. 95; p. 38.

⁵¹ Devereux, ‘New Woman, New World’, p. 179.

⁵² Nettleback, ‘Introduction,’ in Martin, *An Australian Girl*, p. xxiii.

the intellectual Englishman but rather the earthly Australian) Stella has the opportunity of throwing herself, satisfyingly, into works of good (in this case, helping poor incoming migrants) and therefore assuming the mantle of the 'mother of the Empire'.

Conclusion

So, like the Australian New Woman, Stella, the Irish New Woman, Grania's 'manliness' in the form of physical sturdiness and robust healthiness is a benefit in the harsh and rugged terrain in which she lives. Like Stella, her belief in sexual difference is affirmed, though, ultimately, she does not benefit from this belief. Like Stella, Grania is intimately in touch with her natural surroundings. However, whereas Stella, disappointed in love, is given the opportunity of devoting herself to works of charity; Grania, disappointed in love, drowns. Whereas Stella's New Woman story represents the positive future of life within a newly emerging national identity – that of white Australia; Grania's represents that of a nation struggling to assert its nationalism in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

The British New Woman threatened the Empire because she represented 'modernity' and a move away from the middle-class family values on which the imperial mission rested. The white Australian New Woman threatened the nature of the British Empire because she represented the newly independent colony breaking away from the 'Mother Country'. However, the Irish New Woman represented, not modernity as such (there was little about the Aran Islands that could have been said to have been 'modern'), but rather female independence combined with an inherent Irish nationalism. Her independence and unwillingness to conform to Murdough's, the island's, and even Ireland's prescribed physical, emotional and moral standards for women, threatened the continuing existence of a patriarchal Ireland, ever important in the face of a renewed nationalist struggle. Paradoxically, her status as an independent, inherently Irish New Woman also challenged the legitimacy of the ongoing presence of the British Empire in Ireland.