

# CAPTURED LIVES

## *Australian Captivity Narratives*



Working Papers in Australian Studies,  
Nos: 85, 86, 87

The Sir Robert Menzies Centre  
for Australian Studies

University of London



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Roslyn Poignant  
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Portrait of 'Jimmy'/Teninder/Tinendal, an unsung Aboriginal hero who died in Darmstadt, Germany, 31 May 1885, and taken by Carl Günther in Berlin. From a print in the collection of La Société de Géographie, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, and reproduced courtesy of the Société.

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### **AUSTRALIAN CAPTIVITY NARRATIVES**

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**Kate Darian-Smith  
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**Edited by Kate Darian-Smith**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Working Paper No 85:

**Kay Schaffer**      *Captivity Narratives and  
the Idea of 'Nation'*      Page 1

Working Paper No 86:

**Kate Darian-Smith**      *The White Woman of  
Gippsland: A Frontier Myth*      Page 14

Working Paper No 87:

**Roslyn Poignant**      *Captive Aboriginal Lives:  
Billy, Jenny, Little Toby  
and their Companions*      Page 35

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*CAPTIVITY NARRATIVES.  
AND THE IDEA OF 'NATION'*

**Kay Schaffer**

'Eliza, I am gone!'

Last words of Captain James Fraser to his wife, Eliza, having succumbed to spear wounds inflicted by Aborigines during his so-called 'captivity' on Fraser Island (1836)

In the North American summer of 1991 the National Museum of American Art mounted an exhibition in Washington entitled 'The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier'. One of the featured paintings, 'The Captive' painted by Irving Couse in 1892, called attention to the captivity narrative as a significant genre in American literature and art. Within the context of the exhibition this painting was seen to advance the discourses and practices of imperialism, capitalism and Christianity endemic to the modern Western nation state. The painting depicts the capture of seventeen-year-old Lorinda Bewly who in 1847 was taken captive by the Cayuse chief 'Five Crows'. A plaque which hung alongside the painting explained that this event changed American perceptions of the Indian from Noble Red Man to murderous savage within one generation of westward white expansion. It also, viewers were told, depicts white man's fears of miscegenation in the visual construction of a 'violent racial drama' while it also displays the body of the woman for the viewer's voyeuristic inspection: 'Through the fiction of the scene, what is denied to "Five Crows" becomes available to the (white) audience'<sup>1</sup>. This interpretation is hardly new. Leslie Fiedler in *Return of the Vanishing American* (1968) also makes reference to 'The Captive' as an example of how the horror of miscegenation on the frontier was symbolised for the new white settlers in America. He claims that the painting 'panders to that basic White male desire at once to relish and deplore, vicariously share and publicly condemn, the rape of the White female innocence'<sup>2</sup>.

Fiedler's dissonant reading of the myth of the American frontier passed relatively unnoticed in 1968. This is not, however, the case today. The re-interpretation of this and other icons of the American West drew a hostile response from several quarters in America. The item which attracted the most outraged attention at the exhibition, however, concerned not the white woman but the land as an object of contested possession: it was Frederick Remington's 'Fight for the Waterhole', described as a 'last stand' painting which the exhibition display said was 'about fear of the impending industrial era'. Viewers were told that the railroads and wealthy industrialists were patrons of the artists whose paintings romanticised white man's progress to civilisation at the expense of Indian life and environmental concerns — another interpretation which is hardly a revelation. This explanation, however, infuriated critics of the show flooding in to Washington to celebrate America's latest and perhaps the world's most devastating 'last stand' — the Desert Storm victory parade.

Senators, even a few who had not seen the exhibition, were 'shocked' and 'appalled'. They threatened in Congress to deny future funding to the Smithsonian Institute which sponsored the show. Historians like (the admittedly conservative) Daniel Boorstein commented that it was a 'perverse, historically inaccurate, destructive exhibit'. The *Wall Street Journal* concurred, stating that 'only in the land of the free is it possible to mount an entirely hostile ideological assault on the nation's founding and history; to recast that history in the most distorted terms — and have the taxpayers foot the bill!' When it came to laying the blame the critics found an obvious scapegoat: ageing 1960s radicals who now, as teachers and curators increasingly in charge of the nation's cultural patrimony, are perversely reshaping core American values. This paranoid cry for a return to core American values is a salient reminder that not all inhabitants of a post-colonial world are equally engaged in the struggle to come to terms with the complexities of our post-modern condition.

### *Captivity Narratives*

My interest here is with the captivity narrative as a foundational fiction for the nation, a narrative in which the figure of Woman mediates the space between civilisation and the wilderness. Captivity narratives are eminently an American genre. I will begin within that context before moving to consider the captivity narrative as it was transposed to Australia in relation to the legend of Eliza Fraser — the first white woman to encounter Aborigines and tell her tale. Richard Slotkin, in his study *Regeneration Through Violence*, maintains that the captivity narrative is the first coherent and most enduring myth-literature developed in America<sup>3</sup>. Mrs Mary Rowlandson's narrative of 1682 was the first and most popular book devoted to one captivity, in print for nearly 150 years and widely distributed in England and the colonies. In America, between 1682 and 1800 there were some 700 captivity narratives published. By the late eighteenth century 'fake' captivity narratives begin to appear in England, replete with the stylish melodramatic embellishments of the sentimental novel, which in turn were incorporated into the American versions.

According to Slotkin, the basic structure of the captivity narrative involves a man (*sic* — although he later maintains that the female captive is the archetypal form) in a happy state of innocence or complacency who is plunged into a perilous ordeal and ultimately saved<sup>4</sup>. The captivity narratives, when read through the structuring discourses of 'Nation', pit civilisation against the wilderness, white against dark-skinned peoples, coloniser against colonised, man against his physical, psychic and symbolic Others, although the meanings of those terms shift considerably over time. In each journey the narrator negotiates a double passage from old world to new imagining in and through the act of writing a (white, masculine) community of affiliation, an act, as Homi Bhabha reminds us, also at the same time 'contains moments of disavowal, displacement, exclusion and cultural contestation'<sup>5</sup>. The diverse population of indigenous peoples commonly lumped into the unified category of 'Indian' and 'Aborigine' know well the effect of these performative acts of 'Nation'.

In early Puritan narratives, the wilderness, inhabited by Indians and French Papists, was typically portrayed as the domain of sin which

tested the faith of its God-fearing victims. As settlement continued and the wilderness and its inhabitants succumbed to White Man's Ways, the 'brutal and barbarous' Indians gave way to a dying race of Noble Savage types. The narratives function to create and maintain the boundary between the evolving American nation and its Other, who threatened the illusion of national unity and cohesion. Given shifting networks of power, anyone could be Other (the English, the unruly lower classes) and in time even white female victims could 'love the enemy'<sup>6</sup>. Still, the power of the narratives as a genre to articulate in mythic terms the fear of miscegenation, or the fear not so much that women could be violated but seduced by their captors, remains an enduring characteristic. And, in the few examples where captives profess their love or admiration for the Indians, later commentators on the text label this love a perversion, or a sign of degeneration which could only be true of the lower ranks of white settler society. In the end, suggests Slotkin and Fiedler before him, what is at stake is a battle between pale and dark-skinned men<sup>7</sup>. The Woman who figures in the text is never more than a marker of exchange. She provides the context through which a rescue operation can take place. But what is being rescued is not a woman, but an idea of nation, 'the people', which both includes and excludes her as a subject/object of possession while it simultaneously displaces and calls into being the 'Indian' as a category of meaning within white culture.

Robert Berkhofer, in his study *The White Man's Indian*, surveys the captivity genre and concludes that an array of discursive traits mark the Indian through time. Indians can be both good and bad. The worst sins of the bad Indian include cannibalism and human sacrifice, followed by cruelty to the captives, brutal warfare, indolence, superstition, slavery of the native women and laziness of the men, nakedness, lechery, passion, vanity and promiscuity. The good Indian is a free man of the plains who exists in a utopian state of primitive harmony with nature. He is loyal, honest, wise in Indian lore, and above all a helper of the white destiny in America<sup>8</sup>. The identified traits fit easily into Terrie Goldie's analysis of the commodities within a semiotic economy through which colonial white discourse constructs the indigene. In his study, *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literature*, he lists the following commodities which function as textual strategies of

control: sex, violence, orality, mysticism and a prehistoric temporally<sup>9</sup>. Within the American tradition the Indian becomes the reverse or negative image of the white man through which white civilisation attempts to construct a stable identity, here in the conquest of good over evil. In Jan Mohammed's terms, what is being played out is a Manichean allegory of putative superiority of the colonial American over the supposed inferiority of the native, a duplicity which is capable of reversal<sup>10</sup>.

### *The Case of Eliza Fraser*

With the American contest in mind, I want to focus specifically on the captivity narrative of Eliza Fraser, in its American, English and Australian variants. First, some background: in 1836 Mrs Fraser with her husband, the Scottish ship's Captain James Fraser, and a crew of nineteen men were shipwrecked off the Queensland coast, landing on what is now called Fraser Island. She and six men survived for nearly six weeks, living and travelling with three different clans of the Kabi and Butchala tribes. Her husband, whose ship had run aground on several occasions before and who exhibited a morbid fear of native cannibalism, was speared by Aborigines possibly on three different occasions on the island, presumably as a consequence of not being able to carry his weight within the tribal group (that is, according to roles ascribed to men and women within the culture, to do women's work). Eliza witnessed his death, which left her alone without an assigned place in the community and vulnerable to (and also in need of the protection of ) a liaison with one of the male members of the tribe.

The event is not a captivity in the classic American sense — no one was captured nor coerced to live against their will. The white party fell upon the island after floundering for nearly six weeks at sea. They included the Captain, the first mate, several ex-convicts who signed on as crew in Sydney after the British crew of the forward journey deserted the ship and the Captain's dubious command, a West Indian manservant to Mrs Fraser, a black cook, two twelve-year-olds including the nephew of the Frasers', and Mrs Fraser. Upon arrival they were met by the island's inhabitants who faced the dilemma of how to deal with the ghostly strangers. Four of this party were eventually rescued.

Although the shipwreck took place in Australia and concerned the fate of an English crew, the first coherent narrative of the event was published in America in 1837, as a hybrid, hodge-podge variation of the American captivity narrative. Published well after the height of interest in the genre and influenced by virtually all its predecessors, it is a bit of a curiosity. Textual elements include references to the Puritan tale of religious deliverance, and the secular propaganda tract of good white hero versus the treacherous Indian, containing the familiar 'fake' English embellishments, as well as elements of the sentimental novel and the psychological thriller. Before examining the narrative as text, I will focus on the two illustrations and the preface which introduces it. The first introductory full-page illustration depicts the death of Captain Fraser. The second half-page drawing appears under a tantalising preface and carries the caption 'An Indian chief in the act of forcibly conveying Mrs Fraser to his hut or wigwam'. I suspect we are to imagine a relationship between the two events. The natives are depicted wearing full togas or skirts, ankle-high moccasins and feathered head-dresses, standing in stoical postures of a static time, fighting their rivals with tomahawks, brutalising their captives and having designs on the fully clothed, delicate white heroine of the sentimental novel as she laments the passing of her fully-clothed, handsome young Captain. In Berkhofer's terms, these are 'Bad Indians', exhibiting the worst traits of human sacrifice, cruelty to captives, brutal warfare, indolence and lechery.

The typical first person narrative, entitled 'Narrative of the Capture, Sufferings, and Miraculous Escape of Mrs Eliza Fraser' is prefaced by the following abstract of events: [after the wreck] the crew 'were driven to and thrown on an unknown island, inhabited by Savages, by whom Captain Fraser and his first mate were barbarously murdered, and Mrs Fraser . . . [was] for several weeks held in bondage, and after having been compelled to take up her abode in a wigwam and to become the adopted wife of one of the Chiefs, Mrs F. was providently rescued from her perilous situation'<sup>11</sup>. From the outset this text is stamped in the mould of the classic American captivity narrative. Here the crew, which is quickly reduced to a woman, is plunged into a perilous ordeal, from which it (but textually only she) is miraculously rescued. The text proceeds to establish Mrs Fraser's credentials as a reluctant narrator, unprepared for her performance, having had an 'indifferent education'

and deprived of the aid of her husband. But she promises a 'plain, unvarnished tale; exaggerating nothing, but recording truly and faithfully the particulars . . .' of her ordeal; an ordeal in which she moves from 'a state of content and enviable happiness, to that of inconceivable wretchedness' before being 'miraculously rescued' from her 'bondage'.

True to Goldie's semiotic categories, the natives are marked by their violence, their physicality and their orality. The men are described as 'lazy' or 'naturally very indolent', the squaws are 'savage monsters' who nonetheless 'perform the most laborious duties . . . cheerfully . . . without complaint or murmur'. [*I wonder if Henry Lawson read this tale before beginning 'The Drover's Wife'?*] All natives yell, whoop and howl. Unlike the classic captive narrative, however, this one revolves around the death of Captain Fraser (or his 'savage/brutal murder' at the hands of 'remorseless demons', to be true to the text). The moment of the Captain's death produces a climax in the text which plunges Eliza, the heroine, into chaos. Threats of sexual violation follow, signalled by a crisis of narrative address: 'Alas, it is impossible to reflect on what I endured . . . to imagine the shock of horrors to come . . . The reader cannot have any idea of the horrors I suffered', and more horrors still . . . until, finally, Eliza is rescued 'not from the devouring jaws of a ravenous lion, but from the hands of a savage ruffian, far more to be dreaded!' And the readers can stop biting their nails.

What place(s) can we assign to this debases instance of a worn-out genre within the American tradition? By the end of the eighteenth century the popularity of captivity narratives was in decline. But in the decade of the 1830s-40s they experienced a revival in America. Samuel Drake of Boston began a series of reprints in the 1820s which continued until the 1860s. Generally these anthologies collected the more popular narratives from earlier times, although a few sensational accounts, like that of Mrs Fraser, began to appear as well. In 1832 *Indian Biography* was published, followed by *The Old Indian Chronicle* (1836), *Indian Captives* (1839) and *Tragedies of the Wilderness* (1846). Prefaces typically stressed the historical accuracy of the accounts which were said to feed the ethnographic interest of scientists and historians. Remember that Darwin's voyage of the *Beagle* took place from 1831 to 1836. The Indian was falling prey to the gaze of the



naturalist as an object of scientific enquiry. In the prefatory words of one 'scholar': 'the philosopher who speaks with delight, of the original simplicity, and primitive interest of mankind, may here learn, that man uncivilised and barbarous, is even worse than the most ferocious wolf or panther of the forest'<sup>12</sup>. And besides the scientific interest, giant railroad systems were established in the 1830s in America leading to the decade of the 1840s when 2,800 miles of track were set down — heading South and West into the interior, into Indian territory.

Eliza Fraser's tale became one of many discursive moments through which the physical, psychic, sexual and symbolic boundaries of the greedy nation were being maintained and extended. And beyond nation, there was the Empire to consider. If the American publication was first, it was swiftly followed by a repetitious performance in the English colonial journal *Tales of Travellers* (Sept. 1837) which also featured a line drawing of 'The murder of Captain Fraser', this time at the hands of two naked, dark-skinned natives while a pale-skinned and semi-naked, head-dressed Eliza attempts to intervene as the couple stands before a suggestively threatening fire. Mrs Fraser's official biographer also includes a drawing of the Captain's death in his text, *The Wreck of the Stirling Castle* (1838). These iconographic representations suggest two different renditions of the captain's death, which are picked up in the reports and cited and contradictory accounts by Mrs Fraser herself. [*Women are such unreliable narrators. Eliza was no exception*].

The narrative as a colonial text of Empire turns on the key event of the Captain's death. Within the text, this act plunges the white community into chaos, another murder occurs and Mrs Fraser swoons into insensibility. Within the larger social order this transgression of the 'natural' law, which is also the Father's Law, produces a crisis for imperialism. Mrs Fraser's subsequent (phallic) vulnerability sets up the context for another rescue operation, this time not in a battle for the American West as Nation but for the farther flung field of Empire. Narrative unity returns along with social control through the agency of Empire, or more specifically 'a party comprised of thirteen, resolute young men, under command of Lieut. Otter'. At the same time broadsheets announce the event to a reputedly eager English public

and a woman, purporting to be the real Eliza, tells her tale at a side show in Hyde Park.

John Curtis' history *The Wreck of the Stirling Castle* (1838) becomes the official English account of the event. It was commissioned as a defense and apology for Mrs Fraser after it became known that her appeals for charity upon her arrival back in London contained certain inaccuracies, and to save the Lord Mayor, who had opened a subscription campaign, from political embarrassment. Curtis' book is a polysemic text of Empire, the features of which I have examined elsewhere<sup>13</sup>. The main text attempts to reconstruct events which occurred on Fraser Island by telling Eliza's story through a series of divergent voices. At the same time extensive footnotes create for the reader a subtext through which Curtis addresses the fields of navigation, emigration, and the legal system as well as presenting a wealth of anthropological, geological and scientific information. Within these two textual spaces there is a negotiation between doubt and certainty, between what was reputed to be Eliza's dubious story of captivity and the verities of scientific truth.

The text utilises a number of narrative modes including direct address, debate, description, exhortation, the scientific treatise, the diary and the epistolary novel. It also succumbs to a series of narrative crises. Promises of new disclosures and proofs concerning Mrs Fraser's veracity and innocence of wrongdoing are subverted constantly by tangential textual delays which occur in the footnotes and all but take over the page. These diversions occur particularly before the disclosure of possible evidence of rape or cannibalism, hinted at but never quite proven. An irony here is that the scientific verities are wildly inaccurate. Curtis' description of Fraser Island Aborigines, for example, was lifted from an 1827 ethnography of Port Jackson Aborigines in New South Wales; his descriptions and illustrations of ritual cannibalism and other burial practices are derived from sailors' tales of the South Pacific possibly brought back by Captain Greene, Eliza's new husband, who captained whaling vessels around the coast of New Zealand and wrote sensational traveller's tales for the colonial magazines. The text is connected to Empire in diverse ways. Curtis relates in the preface that his aims are: to justify Mrs Fraser's cause; to tell the story of the wreck, captivity and rescue; to encourage

missionary work among the natives; to promote emigration; and to enhance anthropological and geographic knowledge<sup>14</sup>.

This text contributed to the rapid extension of racial colonialism and the fatal imposition of Christianity through the mission movement in Australia, a movement which later in the century virtually wiped out the native population of Fraser Island. The text was published in 1838, a year after the founding of the British and Foreign Aboriginal Protection Society and the same year as the Sydney-based Aboriginal Protection Society came into existence, a society which established the term by which native peoples would be uniformly categorised as 'Aborigines' and through which their affairs would be managed<sup>15</sup>. Captain Fraser's dying words — 'Eliza, I am gone' — may have reflected the passing of one of Empire's most inept patrons, but his death ushered in the extension of Empire to the southern antipodes and presaged the passing of an era which would not come again.

The tale, within an Australian context, passes eventually beyond its colonial variants and into a national mythology. I have discussed this dimension of the story elsewhere<sup>16</sup>, but I will refer briefly to it here. In the 20th century the Eliza Fraser story has been taken up by a number of Australia's foremost artists, including Sidney Nolan in the Mrs Fraser series of paintings begun in 1947, Patrick White in *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976) and David Williamson in the comic farce film *Eliza Fraser* (1976), as well as by the composer Peter Sculthorpe and librettist Barbara Blackman, and most recently by the documentary filmmaker Gillian Coote, whose film *Island of Lies* was screened in the the 1991 ABC *True Stories* series. In all but Coote's reconstruction, although wildly variant from one another, the point on which the Australian narratives turn is not that of Mrs Fraser's captivity and perilous ordeal, nor the death of Captain Fraser, but on her rescue — and a rescue not at the hands of Lieutenant Otter and his official government party but at the hands of bush-wise convicts. There are two contenders for the role of rescuer. Each has been constructed within a nationalist discourse of post-colonial Australia. One is the rakish, troublesome, escapee English convict, David Bracefell; the other the courageous, decent, but cunning volunteer Irish convict, John Graham. Within an Australian mythology of Nation, the story pits the convict underdog against the British oppressor, into whose service he is necessarily pressed through

the figure of Eliza. In the white, male Australian versions the Captain is an inept fool, Eliza a liar, seductress and betrayer of her rescuer, and the convict a hero.

No twentieth century Australian version takes up the voice or position of the Aboriginal native whose place and space is, after all, the displaced site of cultural contestation which this event also signifies within an Australian context. Only Andre Brink's South African novel, *An Instant in the Wind* (1976), attempts an oppositional re-construction of events through the stance of a black rescuer within a South African context. In the male Australian instances both the woman and the aboriginal natives exist as categories of otherness filled in by as they reiteratively construct the narratives of nation. Eliza Fraser has a voice, although through it her readers register not the woman but a surfeit of femininity (Woman as liar, seducer, betrayer of men). The Aborigines remain absent from the drama, which is still a battle between men in which women exist not as subjects but as objects of exchange. The recent accounts, which seem to contest cultural authority on behalf of the convicts, women and native peoples, at the same time discursively maintain dominant power relationships in their various constructions of class, gender and race.

There are aspects of the American captivity narrative which do not translate well into the Australian setting. The Eliza Fraser story demands other frames of reference within an Australian tradition and these demands mark several alterations for the genre. The captivity narrative makes no sense in Australia. New inhabitants were not taken captive. Convicts escaped *to* rather than *from* the bush. For them the bush was not a howling, alien wilderness but a place of freedom and salvation from the brutalities of convict life. The battle for the land/identity was fought in ideological terms both against the British parent culture with its imperialistic practices, and against the Aborigines. In terms of national identity several shifts take place. On the one hand, the historical Eliza is aligned (with her inept husband) to an affiliation with a despised British culture. But on the other hand, as in the American versions, she takes on the attributes of the symbolic Woman as other, a sexual object of exchange between men, aligned to nature and the instincts. She is made to stand for both the (masculine) British Empire and (feminine) vulnerability. In both cultures, however,

the place of the native inhabitant, whether American Indian or Australian Aborigine, is displaced and disavowed on a white man's mythical landscape of progressive survival. What marks the story as a foundational fiction in Australia is the convict hero as nation builder.

In the late twentieth century the ex-convict's status as Australian native son is undermined as other stories are told from feminist, aboriginal and post-colonial perspectives. These competing stories, to return to one of Homi Bhabha's beginnings<sup>17</sup>, disseminate notions of time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation state. Despite recent calls in America and Australia for 'core national values', narratives, like this one, lead away from the notion of the nation-as-one and open up other possibilities of other narratives of 'the people' and their differences, of people no longer contained nor willing to be constrained by national discourses nor the 'teleology of progress'<sup>18</sup>.

- 1 Martin Walker, 'Westward Oh!', *Guardian Weekly*, June 30, 1991, pp. 25-26.
- 2 Leslie Fiedler, *Return of the Vanishing American*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1968, p. 93.
- 3 Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860*, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973, pp. 94-5.
- 4 This same formula, he suggests, attends conversion and emigration narratives as well as the later black slave narratives.
- 5 Homi Bhabha, 'Introduction: Narrating the Nation' In Homi Bhabha (ed.) *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 5.
- 6 See Slotkin, *op. cit.*, pp. 247-59 and also Robert Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*, New York: Knopf, 1978, pp. 71-111.
- 7 See Fiedler and note his 'racial' miscegeny: 'Between them . . . women and Indians make for us a second, home grown definition of what we consider the Real West, the West of the West, as it were; a place to which male Americans flee from their own women into the arms of Indian males, but which those white women, in their inexorable advance from coast to coast, destroy.' p. 53.
- 8 Berkhofer, *White Man's Indian*, pp. 28-30.
- 9 Terrie Goldie, *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literatures*, Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989, p. 17.
- 10 Abdul R. Jan Mohammed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonial Literature', *Critical Inquiry* 12, 1 (1985), p. 63.
- 11 *Narrative of the Capture, Sufferings, and Miraculous Escape of Mrs Eliza Fraser*, New York: Charles Webb and Sons, 1837, p. 1.

- 12 Roy Harvey Pearce, 'The Significances of the Captivity Narrative', *American Literature* 19 (1947-48), p. 18.
- 13 Kay Schaffer, 'Eliza Fraser: Trial By Media', *Antipodes Winter*, 1991.
- 14 John Curtis, *The Wreck of the 'Stirling Castle'*, London: George Virtue, 1838, preface.
- 15 John Stratton, 'A Question of Origins', *Arena* 89, p. 134.
- 16 Kay Schaffer, 'The Eliza Fraser Story: Constructions of Race, Class and Gender', *Hecate* 17, 2 (Spring, 1991).
- 17 Bhabha, 'Dissemi-Nation: time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation', *Narrating the Nation*, p. 291.
- 18 Bhabha, 'Dissemi-Nation', p. 302.

*CAPTURING THE WHITE WOMAN OF  
GIPPSLAND:  
A FRONTIER MYTH*

Kate Darian-Smith

During 1962, the newly opened television station at Traralgon, a town in the Gippsland region of south-eastern Australia, broadcast a five minute programme every Sunday night called 'Gippsland's Path of Time'. This was regional television produced entirely for a local audience, and one of the first episodes was devoted to 'The White Woman Story'. Mr W C Cuthill, ex-Traralgon resident and magistrate, and an active amateur historian, explained:

. . . the story starts like this. It was in 1843 that a boat party of five men . . . were exploring the south shore of Lake King. They saw a lot of wild natives on the shore, and, all of a sudden, there was a commotion. Over the top of a sand dune they saw the upper half of the body of a white woman who was trying to press forward to them and who was forcibly being held back by the Aborigines . . . the hostile attitude of the natives prevented the party of five from doing anything about it. Well, they worked it out that she must have been one of the women who had left Sydney on the schooner 'Sarah' for Melbourne in 1837. The ship was never heard of again except for some letters carved on a tree on Cherry Tree Flat.<sup>1</sup>

Cuthill described Gippsland in the 1840s as a place with 'no government' but just 'a few settlers and 1,800 blacks.' It was here, on what he portrayed as an inhospitable and hostile frontier, that a white female was supposedly held in captivity by local Aborigines, and where attempts by colonists to rescue her in 1846 and 1847 proved futile. Cuthill was emphatic about her existence, and told his viewers,

**KATE DARIAN-SMITH: THE 'WHITE WOMAN'**

'it was not until later years that this romantic story about the White Woman being a myth and just a ship's figurehead was invented.'

Since the 1840s, the legend of the The White Woman of Gippsland has been articulated through rumour, folklore, and oral tradition. I have commenced this paper with Cuthill's 1962 version, not because it is the most recent re-telling of the story, but because it provides an example of the centrality of the incident to a *specific Gippsland history* of white settlement. The new medium of television created an opportunity for Cuthill, the local 'expert' on the White Woman, to reinforce and authorize a narrative which would have been known, at least in some form, to many of his audience. His frequent and careful references to local geographical sites and to identities associated with the region's initial white settlement served to tie the 'romantic story' spatially and historically to Gippsland.

The White Woman — or more correctly, the phenomenon of the White Woman — is possibly the most fully documented captivity narrative of the Australian colonies, and can be traced through expedition journals, parliamentary papers and official correspondence. Indeed, her inconclusive and unsubstantiated presence — for she was never found — has meant that the 'invisible girl' has been granted more historical and imaginative space than any flesh and blood white pioneer woman of Gippsland or indeed elsewhere in colonial Australia. Yet, today the incident is little known outside Gippsland. It has not attracted the literary, artistic and academic interest showered in recent decades on Australia's best-known (and real) white female captive, Eliza Fraser, nor has it achieved the status of the Fraser tale as a representative national narrative, tied to the idea of nation<sup>2</sup>.

During the 1846 and 1847, however, the early Port Phillip newspapers, particularly the *Port Phillip Herald*, were dominated by details of the sightings of the White Woman and the expeditions in her pursuit, and she was important enough to command special editions. Sydney and London newspapers reported the events in Gippsland, and the incident was discussed extensively in the NSW Legislative Assembly. By the 1870s, the White Woman had been the subject of two full-length novels, at least one serialized novella, and numerous poems. In 1888,

however, 'Garryowen', in *The Chronicles of Early Melbourne* was to write that the 'harrowing tale' was now 'utterly forgotten'<sup>3</sup>. This was not quite the case. Throughout the late nineteenth and during the twentieth century, the White Woman story surfaced spasmodically — and more and more fancifully — as a 'strange but true' tale of Empire in publications circulated in Britain, the United States and Australia.

But it is at a regional level that the White Woman tale has endured. Gippsland was relatively isolated until the early twentieth century, which probably contributed to the formation of a self-conscious and strong sense of regional identity among its inhabitants. In addition, there has been, and still is, an active group of local historical societies and historians (such as Cuthill) in the area. The White Woman has become a part of local folklore, the substance of oral and written pioneer reminiscences, and it has been articulated, albeit in a very different form, through the oral tradition of the Gippsland Aboriginal community. The White Woman narrative is one of the founding myths which constitute the collective memory of modern Gippsland, and through which the unique history and identity of the region have been expressed.

Cuthill and many others have laboured to determine whether or not the White Woman actually existed. This does not seem to me the historical question that should be asked. Rather, I am concerned with the ways in which the narrative functioned on the Gippsland frontier, and how the settlers constructed their world and their actions within the wider processes of imperialism. Certainly, the words 'white' and 'woman' were a powerful combination in the colonial imagination, fusing together European ideas of civilization, gender and race. By 1846, the culmination of rumours that a white female was detained against her will by the Gippsland Aborigines, the Kurnai, created a sense of communal hysteria. The White Woman was a potent symbol for the citizens of Port Phillip and the settlers of Gippsland. She encapsulated the basic fears underlying the experiences of travel to and colonization of an alien land: shipwreck, enslavement and possibly death at the hands of 'barbarous savages', miscegenation, and severance from and loss of Christian, European culture. She was to be mobilized by

the white settlers of the region to further their conquest of the land and its peoples.

#### *Captivity Tales*

By the 1840s, stories of captive Europeans, both male and female, held against their will by 'savages' were a well-known, well-worn and formulaic genre in Western literary tradition. Survival tales of shipwrecks, of castaways and — in a particular inland form associated with colonial settlement — of captives, dated from the first wave of European expansion at the end of the fifteenth century, and maintained their popularity throughout the following centuries. The North American settler experience produced hundreds of published accounts of such captivities; narratives of a physically and culturally contested frontier, and of the chasm between the places and the peoples of European civilization and the unknown wilderness. Captivity and survival literature, as Mary Louise Pratt has argued, provided a 'safe' context for exploring taboo themes associated with sexuality and slavery on the frontier: Europeans enslaved by non-Europeans, transracial sexual relations, and the integration of Europeans into non-European cultures. These tales were always told from the viewpoint of the European, and always resulted with the return and reinstatement of the captive into his or her own white society<sup>4</sup>.

In the imaginative construction of a generic frontier, captivity by non-Europeans was one of the dangers besetting white colonists. But the North American versions of captivity narratives could not be simply grafted onto the Australian settler experience. In an Australian context, captivity tales were initially concerned with the rescue, rather than forcible abduction, of white settlers by Aboriginal peoples. Runaway convicts and bushrangers needed the aid of Aboriginal groups to maintain their freedom from the fetters of white society; victims of shipwreck depended on Aboriginal assistance for their survival<sup>5</sup>.

In all accounts, Gippsland's White Woman came from the sea<sup>6</sup>. She was claimed to be the sole surviving passenger of the *Britannia*, or the

*Brittomart* or the *Sarah* or the *Yarra Yarra* or various other vessels wrecked in the late 1830s off the south-eastern shore of Victoria, where turbulent currents ran down into Bass Strait. This origin provided a plausible explanation for the presence of an European woman in a district sparsely populated by white males, let alone white females. White settlement in the Australian colonies clung to the rim of the continent, along the coast, and Gippsland as a region was particularly dependent on the sea because of its geographical inaccessibility. Moreover, in Australia people were believed to disappear: into the bush and the vast unknown interior, as well as into the sea.

Navigational errors, inadequate cartography, and stormy weather all contributed to the high incidence of shipwreck in Australia. Vessels were lost during the three month journey from Britain and the shorter hauls between colonial ports. The experiences of maritime travel were shaped by a real apprehension of disaster at sea. This preoccupation is well illustrated in the first children's book published in Australia, *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* (1841), which took the form of instructive conversations about distinctive colonial life. The book repeatedly refers to shipwreck, from casual mention of the loss of possessions 'on their way out', to a bedtime story about the wreck of the *Stirling Castle* in 1836 and the survival of the captain's wife, Eliza Fraser, and male crew members<sup>7</sup>.

The chances of castaways being restored to European society were remote, but nevertheless possible, and the events in Gippsland are chronologically flanked by two such examples. The first of these was Eliza Fraser, and indeed her tale may have been well known in Port Phillip. The second occurred in 1849, near Cape York, when the survey vessel *Rattlesnake* discovered Barbara Thompson, who had been shipwrecked in Torres Strait five years previously<sup>8</sup>. In both cases, Europeans had survived because they had depended upon, and received, Aboriginal help in locating food and water; and Thompson, for instance, was integrated into the social structure of the Kaurareg people. Once castaways re-established contact with white society, however, the Aborigines were conceptualized not as friendly rescuers but as hostile captors, and whites not as recipients of their help but as prisoners. The *Rattlesnake* expedition thus 'rescued'

Barbara Thompson, although it was the Kaurareg who brought her down to the beach and 'gave her back' to the white survey party.

The White Woman of Gippsland myth, like other captivity narratives, could only function symbolically on the fringes of European settlement, in the 'contact zones' of contested social and cultural space<sup>9</sup>. Gippsland in the early 1840s was such a place, with its rugged territory, dense rainforests and small, scattered white population. During the 1830s a natural barrier of swamps and forests prohibited squatters from moving east from Port Phillip into Gippsland, so white settlers moved into the district from either the sea or overland from the Monaro district to the north. In 1839 Angus McMillan explored eastern Gippsland, opening a track from Orneo to Port Albert in 1841 which linked the hinterland to the sea; Paul Strezelecki also surveyed the region. But squatters moved in relatively slowly. By 1844 there were just 40 stations supporting 327 Europeans, 20,000 cattle and 62,000 sheep<sup>10</sup>. There was no government representative until the Crown's Land Commissioner, Charles Tyers, arrived in 1843. To enforce order on the frontier, Tyers was allocated a native police force, and police stations were set up at Sale and at his residence at Eagle Point, near the mouth of the Mitchell River.

Among the early white settlers of Gippsland were a predominance of Highland Scots. For explorer and squatter Angus McMillan the region was, despite its official name honouring NSW Governor George Gipps, 'Caledonia Australis', a haven for his countrymen emigrating in search of land. The Scottish fraternity, as Don Watson has argued, formed a particularly cohesive group among the white settlers. For them, the White Woman was always a Scotswoman and indeed, it could be argued that she owed her very 'existence' to Angus McMillan.

*Sightings, Searchings*

Rumours of a European held in captivity by Gippsland Aborigines began circulating in 1840, as settlers and their stock began acquiring runs in the region. On 28 December, the *Sydney Herald* published a lengthy letter from 'Agustus McMillan of Gippsland or South Caledonia'. McMillan reported that his party of four whites had startled a group of about 25 Aborigines, 'chiefly women' near Corner Inlet. They discovered numerous items of European origin in the abandoned Aboriginal camp: adult and children's clothing, linen, blankets, tools, bottles and medicines, cooking utensils, a musket, newspapers from London, Glasgow and Aberdeen dated 1837, a bible printed in Edinburgh, and documents relating to life insurance. A dead male child of about two years was found in kangaroo skin bags. Dr Arbuckle, one of McMillan's companions, claimed that in his professional opinion this was the child of 'European parents; parts of the skin were perfectly white, not being in the least discoloured.' Then McMillan saw *her*:

We observed the men with shipped spears driving before them the women, one of whom we noticed constantly looking behind her, at us, a circumstance which did not strike us much at the time, but on examining the marks and figures about the largest of the native huts we were immediately impressed with the belief that the unfortunate female is a European — a captive of these ruthless savages.<sup>11</sup>

The imagery McMillan employed in this first recorded sighting of the White Woman was an emotive one. He deliberately contrasted the 'primitivism' of the Aboriginal camp with the goods of European culture. Life insurance policies, the bible and clothing of quality were the trappings of a provident, literate and respectable family, that was, by implication, Scottish. Although McMillan concluded that a 'dreadful massacre' of Europeans by Aborigines had occurred, it was his description of the fleeing white captive that was to be persistently re-articulated and elaborated on the frontier.

McMillan's letter was re-published in the *Port Phillip Patriot and Morning Advertiser* in early 1841. The newspaper took it seriously

enough to advocate government investigation<sup>12</sup>. Nothing further was reported until November 1843, when the *Patriot's* rival, the *Port Phillip Herald*, published an anonymous letter explaining why a station near the Glengarry (La Trobe) River bore the romantic name of 'The Heart'. According to the correspondent, when the station was first surveyed, whites observed a group of Aborigines fleeing from their camp, the men driving before them 'a white person, male or female, probably the latter'. European goods, including clothing and a prayer book, were discovered, and on the ground, formed by a sharp instrument, was the enormous outline of a heart. Since this incident, the letter continued, '... there are not wanting men who affirm they have seen a white person, male or female, amongst the natives, who when observed drove the white person before them'<sup>13</sup>.

But it was not until 1845 that these rumours and whisperings suddenly intensified, and were regularly reported in the Melbourne papers. From this point onwards, there was no ambiguity about the sex of the European captive; she was consistently female. In March 1845, a White Woman was seen roaming the 'Weimira', hundreds of kilometres north-west of Gippsland. A settler claimed he had discovered the name of a female carved on several trees, and that three half-caste children, supposedly hers, were found in an Aboriginal camp<sup>14</sup>. Although the White Woman was initially seen in the Portland, Wimmera and Gippsland districts, by the middle of 1846 her appearances were confined solely to Gippsland. Throughout 1846 and 1847, white shepherds, stockmen, and settlers, usually when they were alone, stumbled across her with surprising regularity. There was little variation in the description of each sighting: as the White Woman was pushed and dragged away by the Aborigines she looked beseechingly towards her white observers, as if asking for help.

By 1846, the frequency and the regular publication of the sightings led to a campaign, instigated by the *Port Phillip Herald*, requesting government action. When this was not forthcoming, the *Herald* stated that as 'neither government, nor Police, nor Black Protectors showed any sympathy for her plight' it was the duty of private citizens to act<sup>15</sup>. A public meeting was convened on 2 September 1846 at Melbourne's Royal Hotel to determine the appointment and provisioning of a private

rescue expedition; at this stage, due to the conflicting and multiplying reports, it was believed that there were *two* white women detained by the Aborigines<sup>16</sup>. The *Port Phillip Herald's* editor, George Cavenagh, was elected Chairman of the Expedition Committee, which continued to demand government assistance. On 22 September, the matter was raised in the NSW Legislative Council, and it was revealed that the Superintendent of Port Phillip, Charles La Trobe, and Tyers had been corresponding about the rumoured sightings for some months. While initially sceptical, Tyers claimed that he had gathered further evidence of her existence from members of the Native Police and from a young Aboriginal boy, Jacka-wadden, who lived at McMillan's station after being 'separated' from his family<sup>17</sup>. Tyers had already despatched a party of Border and Native police, under Sergeant William Walsh, to search for the white captive. This party had hounded several groups of Kurnai for some weeks, but had found no sign of her<sup>18</sup>.

Government support for a further expedition was withheld, but on 20 October 1846 a private expedition set off from Melbourne to Corner Inlet, where six years earlier the White Woman had first been seen by McMillan. This expedition was funded entirely from subscriptions raised from the residents of Melbourne, and special attempts had been made to secure donations from the small female population of the town. It was led by Christian De Villiers, an ex-trooper, and James Warman, and they were accompanied by three other whites and nine 'trustworthy' Aborigines<sup>19</sup>. De Villiers and Warman had been instructed to proceed with caution, employing force only as a last resort in case the Kurnai retaliated by harming or even killing their captive<sup>20</sup>. From Corner Inlet, the party set about exploring the Gippsland lakes. By December the White Woman was still elusive, although the expedition had discovered carvings on cherry-wood, believed to be those of a shipwrecked person<sup>21</sup>.

By publishing regular despatches from De Villiers and Warman, and having exclusive rights to Warman's journals, the *Port Phillip Herald*, which had invested heavily in the expedition, kept the hunt for the White Woman firmly in the public mind. By the end of 1846, however, Tyers, with the support of McMillan, decided to send a second, and official, search party. William Dana, the younger brother of Captain

Henry Dana, head of the Port Phillip Native Police, led this expedition. He commanded a group of about 25 Native troopers, some of whom had recently been involved in a massacre of Cape Otway Aborigines to the west of Melbourne<sup>22</sup>. The private and official expeditions were thus competing to be the first to locate the White Woman, and as they came into contact relations grew strained between them. As Christmas approached, both expeditions headed towards the Snowy River country in search of a chief named Bunjaleene who was believed to hold the White Woman in his possession.

When De Villiers and Warman's party had entered the Gippsland lakes, they found 'a great many skulls and human bones, which were remains of Worrigals who had been shot.' Then on 19 December, Warman came across signs that Dana's party had recently killed a number of Aborigines; he discovered corpses bearing signs of gunshot, and an Aboriginal man and woman, whom he had seen earlier in Dana's camp, handcuffed and wandering around the bush. De Villiers and Warman reported the massacre to Tyers, who was forced to withdraw Dana's party. But De Villiers and Warman were also forced to return to Melbourne when Tyers refused to provide them with further provisions.

In Melbourne, the methods of the private and official expeditions, and their combined lack of success in locating the White Woman, were discussed at great length in the press. But despite their general disagreement, members of both parties repeatedly claimed that they were convinced that the White Woman did exist, and that they had been very close to re-capturing her. Hysteria about her plight continued at a fevered pitch. As one settler wrote: 'I suppose if a person were to say in Melbourne that there were no white woman at all, he would be considered insane or put down as an unfeeling monster'<sup>23</sup>.

While Tyers personally now had doubts about the existence of a white captive, he nevertheless despatched a third expedition, larger than the previous two, and placed under the command of Captain Windredge of the Gippsland Border Police. Bunjaleene was eventually located, and spoke of a shipwreck<sup>24</sup>. But he failed to produce the White Woman,



bringing forward one of his wives who was from the Port Phillip, rather than the Gippsland, region. At this point, Tyers entered into a 'written' agreement with Bunjaleene, who surrendered his wives and children as hostages while he led the expedition to the Snowy Mountains. It was now believed by the whites that Bunjaleene's brother held the White Woman captive<sup>25</sup>. With the onset of winter, the search was abandoned.

In desperation, the white expedition escorted Bunjaleene, his two wives, Mumbalk and Parley, and Parley's two sons, to the Native Police station at Narre Warren, about twenty miles from Melbourne. La Trobe admitted Bunjaleene could not be detained 'by legal forms', although he could 'justly be charged with holding a European female as his Captive, as it may be presumed, against her will'<sup>26</sup>. Bunjaleene and his family were held as hostages, to be released when Bunjaleene's brother surrendered the White Woman. Mumbalk died in captivity; Parley and her sons were taken to Melbourne; and on 22 November 1848 Bunjaleene himself died. All hands at the Native Police station were mustered to attend his burial<sup>27</sup>.

At the time of Bunjaleene's death, the White Woman had already been officially laid to rest twelve months earlier, and the colonists of Port Phillip had lost interest in her tale. The body of a woman and child had been found at Jemmy's Point, only a few miles from Tyers' residence. McMillan presided over the hasty inquest, while his friend Dr Arbuckle gave a professional opinion that the remains were those of a European female and a half-caste child. The explanation that the White Woman had been murdered by Bunjaleene's brother in a fit of jealousy was put forward<sup>28</sup>. While there were some doubts as to the accuracy of the autopsy, the *Port Phillip Herald* was satisfied that the discovery of a body confirmed that the White Woman had been real, and not an elaborate hoax as it had been recently suggested.

It was a neat ending to a incident that had cost considerable private and public expense, and had proved to be an embarrassment for the colonial administration. Both La Trobe and Tyers were particularly keen to let the White Woman fade away, and while sightings occurred spasmodically, they soon ceased. Although John MacLeod went

searching for the White Woman along the Snowy in 1848, the prime aim of his expedition was to locate suitable grazing country<sup>29</sup>. He was not the only one who, in seeking her, was also surveying the terrain. The two surviving journals of the expeditions are filled with descriptions of the land and its possibilities for pastoral use. The publication of Warman's journals in the *Port Phillip Herald* no doubt alerted intending settlers to the rich land of the Gippsland region, and his descriptions of the Kurnai as a people now weakened by disease and European dispossession probably assured them that the Aborigines were dying out and would pose little threat to new settlers.

#### *Race Relations*

During the 1840s, the White Woman myth had one very obvious function. The belief that the Kurnai refused to relinquish their white captive served to confirm and accentuate existing European perceptions that Aborigines were archetypal savages. The searches for the White Woman provided a justification for the practice of driving Aborigines further from white settlement or simply killing them. Warman noted, for instance, that Dana's party of Native Police had 'rushed' an Aboriginal camp when they observed two Aborigines dragging what was presumed to be a white woman wrapped in a possum cloak<sup>30</sup>.

In May 1846, as rumours of sightings of the White Woman were gradually building up, the *Port Phillip Herald* printed a communication from Port Albert, which in its entirety stated:

The blacks have been very troublesome of late, and about a fortnight since speared cattle within twelve miles of the port. Mr McMillan has captured the child of a young lady, of whom the black's stole away some year's since, and for whom there is a reward of £1,000<sup>31</sup>.

The link between cattle-spearing, the captivity of the White Woman and the high reward for her return, and the influential personage of McMillan was not accidental. During 1846 and 1847 settlers

increasingly claimed that Aborigines were attacking cattle to express their anger at demands that the White Woman be returned<sup>32</sup>.

Relations between the Kurnai and the white settlers in Gippsland were violent to a degree not encountered by Europeans until they moved into northern Queensland and the Kimberleys. During 1843, for example, four white shepherds were killed. Whites retaliated with at least two massacres in 1840 and 1841: Aborigines were driven to the mouth of Lake Wellington and shot at a place known as Boney Point, and were also killed at a place known, for a time, as Butcher's Creek<sup>33</sup>. In 1843, when Aborigines speared Ronald Macalister, nephew of the powerful Scottish squatter Lachlan Macalister, an organized party, known as the Highland Brigade, or McMillan's Highland Brigade, slaughtered between 60 to 150 Aborigines at Warrigal Creek. According to historian Don Watson, 'Everyone in Gippsland knew of the massacre, and it has remained part of folk memory'<sup>34</sup>.

By 1846 and 1847, when the rescue expeditions for the White Woman were mounted, most of the Kurnai had retreated to the higher and less accessible land of the Snowy. The humanitarian Warman recorded that they were reluctant to show themselves in open ground, and were terrified by the sound of gunshot<sup>35</sup>. He was appalled at the evidence he saw in Gippsland of the settlers' massacre of the Aborigines, and regarded the Kurnai as a 'fine race':

It is a great pity that powder and ball seem to be their fate, as the settlers think no more of them than they do of eating their dinners, and from what we can learn some fearful slaughters have taken place . . .<sup>36</sup>

His criticism of the settlers' conduct was detailed in length in his journal and letters, both of which were published in the *Port Phillip Herald*, along with his complaints about the brutality of William Dana and the Native Police. Not surprisingly, the settlers of Gippsland were incensed at Warman's allegations. They organized a public meeting in Port Albert in protest and placed advertisements in the Melbourne newspapers claiming they were innocent<sup>37</sup>. Warman's charges were serious, for in 1838 white men had been hung for killing 28 Aborigines at Myall Creek. The settlers, McMillan among them, wanted Warman

out of Gippsland. They were only prepared to support and participate in expeditions for the White Woman which were under the command of their 'own men' such as Walsh, and were comprised of the Native Police, which they considered their 'own' force.

While the private expedition of De Villiers and Warman was instructed to secure the White Woman through friendship with the Kurnai, the government expeditions adopted a more forceful approach. Both parties relied heavily on evidence given by the Kurnai as to the White Woman's activities. This was usually obtained by interrogation and through interpreters, including Native Police or the young boy, Jackawadden, who accompanied the government expeditions. The Kurnai said that the White Woman hummed a tune that resembled the 100th Psalm; that she cried when she saw marks cut on a tree by the whites; that she read a letter from De Villiers and wept. Tyers, who admitted that it was possible mistakes had arisen when collecting evidence from the 'wild blacks', nevertheless dismissed Aboriginal claims that there was no White Woman<sup>38</sup>. When Bunjaleene said he did not know her whereabouts, he was accused of lying. After months of violent threats and physical restraint, Bunjaleene became, according to an expedition journal, 'down-hearted and frightened' when he was told '. . . that the White people are Comming [sic] from Melbourne to Shoot the blacks on the Islands and in the Mountains and that we are to bring him to Melbourne there to be hanged . . .'<sup>39</sup>

The only confirmed captives, in the end, were Bunjaleene and his family. Tyers, always conservative with his figures, was to estimate that no less than fifty Aborigines were killed during the expeditions for the White Woman<sup>40</sup>. Other estimates have placed Aboriginal deaths in the hundreds. Certainly, the searches did bring more Kurnai into contact with the settlers, and particularly with the government<sup>41</sup>. And while the White Woman narrative is associated with the pioneer history and the violence of the Gippsland frontier, there are contesting versions of her story. Gippsland Aborigines today generally accept that there were several white women who lived with the Kurnai at various times in the nineteenth century. According to Phillip Pepper, they remember Lohan-tuka as a legend of 'a big pale coloured woman with long

flowing red hair who lived by herself. She came out of her cave to frighten the people and little children'<sup>42</sup>.

*Who was She?*

The myth of the White Woman of Gippsland also functioned as a symbolic narrative of colonization by positioning its characters — who were both black and white, male and female — within a structured hierarchy of race and gender. The 'order of civilization' was displaced when a Christian white female was placed in sexual servitude to a heathen black male. This incited fevered and emotional public indignation, and also accounted for the erotic titillation inherent in many of the descriptions of the White Woman's plight (and which may have incidentally boosted newspaper circulation). The scenario was hardly novel: sex and slavery were at the core of the classic captivity narrative. Many of the elaborations of the White Woman story, such as the carvings on the trees and the gouging of the heart-shape on the ground, were probably adaptations from other known folktales and captivity accounts; in the novel *The Heart* (1860), written by Robert Russell who had resided in Gippsland during the 1840s, Scottish folklore was even intertwined into the story<sup>43</sup>. But the colonial fear of shipwreck, and the large number of vessels that had disappeared along the Gippsland coast, added a special dimension to the reported sightings. Rumours that a white female was living with the Aborigines offered a glimmer of hope that one of the several female victims of shipwreck had survived.

During 1846, there were various attempts to re-open investigations into wrecks along the Gippsland coast, and to identify the White Woman as one of the many recorded women who had been lost. Appeals were made to the relatives and friends of these women to donate to the private expedition. In March, John Lord, a merchant of Sydney, offered a reward for the recovery of his eldest daughter, shipwrecked on the *Brittomart* in 1839<sup>44</sup>. In August, John Macdonald, of the Scottish Chiefs public house, claimed her identity was that of Ann McPherson, a passenger of the *Britannia*, wrecked on the Ninety Mile Beach<sup>45</sup>. By

September, it was reported that the name 'Anne Macpherson' had been carved on several trees in a part of the country not previously visited by Europeans<sup>46</sup>. Then an 'Englishman' identified the White Woman as a Mrs Capel, an Irish passenger on the ill-fated *Britannia*, with her pregnancy at the time 'explaining' glimpses of fair-skinned children in Aboriginal camps<sup>47</sup>. If the captive could not be conclusively identified, she could be described. William Lonsdale, La Trobe's second in command, had no name but 'information' that she was 'in her mid twenties, with light brown hair, now cropped, and when shipwrecked was wearing a silk dress of quality, thin slippers and a boa'<sup>48</sup>. The Native Police reported only a physical type, not unlike some of the missing women, in their descriptions of sightings of a 'yellow woman with red hair'<sup>49</sup>.

But it was her very anonymity which engaged the colonial imagination. As the 'White Woman' — and from the start this title was always capitalized — the supposed captive was transformed into a symbol of white, European womanhood. She could be the mother, daughter or wife of all white settlers, taking on the various identities and ethnicities ascribed to her. For the Scottish settlers, at least, she was always a Scotswoman. So strong was this assumption that the De Villiers and Warman party carried handkerchiefs bearing the following message in English and, on the reverse, in Gaelic:

WHITE WOMAN! — There are fourteen armed men, partly White and partly Black, in search of you. Be cautious; and rush to them when you see them near you. Be particularly on the look out every dawn of morning, for it is then that the party are in hopes of rescuing you. The white settlement is towards the setting sun.<sup>50</sup>

By March 1847, when the third expedition departed from Melbourne, messages on the back of mirrors were written only in English, and were more forceful. Now the party was 'determined' to rescue her, and asked for co-operation from her Aboriginal captors: 'White Woman! . . . Inform the person who detains you, as well as his tribe, that he and they will be handsomely rewarded if they give you up peaceably; but if they persist in detaining you they will be severely punished . . .'<sup>51</sup>

Whether Scottish or English, the White Woman was always believed to be both respectable and literate. Her class and her education emphasized the extent of her suffering while enslaved by the Aborigines. As the victim of shipwreck, it was probable she had witnessed the death, possibly at the hands of the Aborigines, of her family and fellow crew members. The treatment of women within a society was regarded as one of the markers of civilization, and the assumption that within Aboriginal society women were drudges (a charge levelled against the Scots Highlanders by the English) meant her life would be intolerable. Rumours that she had borne between two and five children while in captivity added to the horror of her existence. She was, in one fairly typical account:

. . . one, who is compelled to yield to the disgusting passions and desires of a set of black cannibals — one, however inclement the seasons, is wandering around the bush in a state of nudity — one, who is forced to subsist on the most loathsome food, the sight of which would make our hearts sicken, because it is a well known fact that the coolies, or men, keep the best part of all animals for their own eating, only giving their loubbras, or women, the entrails . . .<sup>52</sup>

Several poems were composed to portray the depravity of her life (. . . 'Had all my early days been pass'd in crimes too dark to tell,/ This fearful fate is unsurpass'd — a living death and hell . . .')<sup>53</sup>. When LaTrobe suggested that the White Woman may have formed ties with the Aborigines and been 'indifferent or averse to reclamation by those of her own race' this was greeted with anger by the citizens of Port Phillip<sup>54</sup>. Narratives of captivity, such as the White Woman story, did provide the space to suggest the possibility of sexual relations — and even love — between those of different races; a theme that since the late eighteenth century had been explored in sentimental fiction and sensationalised travel writing as both a reality and fantasy of European imperial expansion<sup>55</sup>. Nevertheless, the insurmountable gulf between Aboriginal and European society was summed up succinctly in the words of the 'real' white woman, Barbara Thompson. When asked in 1849 whether she wished to return to Sydney or remain with the Kaurareg, Thompson replied, 'I am a Christian'; a response that so

impressed Oswald Brierly with its simplicity that he recorded it twice, in different versions, in his journal<sup>56</sup>.

### *Conclusion*

Watson has suggested that by the late 1840s the White Woman mythology had lost its potency as white female settlers arrived in Gippsland in greater numbers to join male relatives; that once European women, the signifiers of civilization, appeared in person, there was no need to invent them. McMillan had signalled to other Scottish settlers that the White Woman had been formally buried. In any case, the swift changes on the frontier, as more land was cleared, more stock and settlers moved in, and the Kurnai were rapidly reduced, hardly made the myth, in practical terms, a viable one. If there had been a white female living with the Aborigines, she would have had ample opportunity to 'show herself' to the European settlers.

While a real white woman was never recovered from the Kurnai, a representation of a woman — a ship's figurehead — eventually was. The conflation of a real woman with a figurative woman, which, even more symbolically, was at times believed to be a Britannia, has become a central element in the myth. The assumption by the white settlers that the Kurnai valued their white captive so highly that they were prepared to face death rather than relinquish her, also meant that the settlers assumed the Aborigines would value — and worship — a wooden figure of an European woman. In 1847 Tyers reported that the figurehead of a vessel in which the White Woman was wrecked was 'in the possession of the blacks, and treated as an idol, forming the centre around which they danced their most solemn corroborees'<sup>57</sup>. The figurehead, when it was eventually recovered, was disappointingly small and battered<sup>58</sup>.

Underlying the White Woman myth was the colonial fear of shipwreck, but the mythology also operated as a narrative of imperial expansion. In the battle for control of land and subjugation of Aborigines, the White Woman symbolized European civilization pitted against the

wilderness, and the inhabitants of that wilderness. In 1945, Sidney Nolan, who was later to immortalize Eliza Fraser's captivity story in a series of paintings, produced one of the rare creative responses to the legend in recent decades. His painting 'Gippsland Incident' depicts a man holding an axe in one hand and the severed head of a woman in the other. Nolan claimed the painting was based on a 'true event': 'A man struck a tree with an axe and he found embedded in it the figurehead of a ship that had been wrecked on the Gippsland coast. The figurehead had floated up. But when he hit the tree, he decapitated the woman. I inscribed the tree with a heart, a rather menacing arrow . . .'<sup>59</sup> The carving on the tree, the figurehead, and the pioneer with his axe clearing the land for pastoral use are all well-known components of the myth, but in this representation it is a white male who destroys the symbol of (white) womanhood. Nolan's interpretation, and the incorporation of the White Woman tale into the oral tradition of today's Gippsland Aborigines, point to alternative and contested meanings of the myth — meanings which are tied to the contact history of Gippsland, and to the issues of race, gender, land and power on the frontier.

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- <sup>50</sup> The Gaelic version was addressed to 'ANNAI'; CGS, Monash University, Gippsland.
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- <sup>52</sup> *Port Phillip Herald*, 10 Sept 1846.
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- <sup>54</sup> *Port Phillip Herald*, 25 Nov 1846; see in PP.
- <sup>55</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, pp. 86-107.
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- <sup>57</sup> *Melbourne Argus*, 7 May 1847.
- <sup>58</sup> La Trobe to Colonial Secretary, 9 June 1847; 47/590; PRO, Melb.
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CAPTIVE ABORIGINAL LIVES: BILLY, JENNY,  
LITTLE TOBY AND THEIR COMPANIONS

Roslyn Poignant

An important aspect of the recovery of details of the lives of a number of Aboriginal people made captive in the late nineteenth century and removed overseas has been the search for and analysis of visual, particularly photographic sources. Although this material cannot be included in this overview of the subject, I have selected a key photograph of three Australian Aborigines, which is one of a set in the collection of the Royal Anthropological Institute, taken by Prince Roland Bonaparte and given by him to the Institute in December 1885<sup>1</sup>. I propose to begin with a *reading* of it.

Frequently a reading may be sparked by an intersection between the point of gaze of the onlooker and that of the photographer, but it may also involve a degree of identification with the subject — a circumstance which is more likely to occur in this instance if the viewer is Aboriginal. A reading also changes over time. When I first saw these photographs they were uncaptioned, and the people photographed were unidentified. However, it was evident that they were the same three people, Billy, Jenny and Little Toby, who, two years later, were exhibited at a meeting of the Royal Anthropological Institute<sup>2</sup>. Bonaparte's primary motive for both taking and presenting this set of photographs to the Institute and other European anthropological societies would have been to capture for the archive examples of what was considered to be a rare and vanishing type — some even believed species — of humankind. Yet this stereotypic framing is disrupted by the disturbing aura of this image; an interaction seems to have taken place between the photographer and the photographed which returns something of 'subject' to the 'object' of the photographer's camera and his gaze.



'Billy, Jenny and Little Toby', photograph taken by Prince Roland Bonaparte, and presented by him to the Royal Anthropological Institute in December 1885.

(Royal Anthropological Institute, Photographic Collection, Ref. No. 2100)

In the context of this paper a reading is also a narrative device and I am assuming that 'the story' behind this image is still not widely known, and that the latter's haunting quality will not only engage your sensibilities, as mine were on first sight of it, but also raise questions about these people who were the objects of Western scientific and popular curiosity. Who were they, and what was it like for them?

In this print, their Aboriginality combined with their troubled appearance, and their dress, all speak of dislocation. Their fringed cow-hide costumes mark them as show-people, and the clutch of boomerangs, loosely held, signifies the transformation of their hunting implements into props for performance. When it is realised that the historical moment of this photograph was November 1885, it is understandable that their expressions suggest a mix of despair and anger. For at the same time as Billy, Jenny and little Toby were being compelled to enact the role of savage *other* at the Folies Bergère, Jenny's husband was dying in a Paris hospital.

These Aborigines are displaced people standing in a European garden, probably the Jardin d'Acclimatation in Paris, where, from the 1870s, human exhibits supplemented the display of exotic plants and animals<sup>3</sup>. Therefore the sense of dislocation the image conveys relates not only to personal lives, but it also reflects an aspect of the disorientation of the emerging modern world. For the West's appropriation of the spaces of the new worlds through the processes of colonisation, and its absorption of savage *otherness*, was all part of the living fermentation that produced modernity. The content of the photograph does not allude solely either to what purported to be scientific, or to popular culture; it alerts the viewer to the interpenetration of the two.

The point in the photograph to which one's eye is drawn with a horrible fascination is the stuffed pug-dog in the foreground. Emblematic of death and embalment it offers an absurd and cruel commentary on the Aborigines' predicament, which, for the present-day beholder, includes their incarceration in simulacrum in the archive. In an already ambiguous image the dog is the *punctum* (to use Barthes' terminology)<sup>4</sup> which invites you *not* to believe your eyes, but to ask questions. The Aborigines' return of gaze challenged me to attempt to

disentangle the narrative of their actual and personal lives from their entrapment in a series of representations of European *otherness* and, in the course of the search, the story of their literal captivity emerged. It transpires that by 1885 these three were the only survivors of a group of nine Aborigines from North Queensland who had been abducted and removed overseas in 1883 by the impressario Robert A. Cunningham, an agent for Barnum and Bailey.

The exhibition of humans from the margins of the known world has a long history. The third century mosaic pavements of Piazza Armerina, Sicily, depict a caged man brought back from Africa to be shown to the Roman world. From the late eighteenth century, however, the manner and *locus* of that display became progressively more structured and institutionalised. The presentation of a systematised view of the world, formulated by a positivist Science, with its land-forms and life-forms — including mankind and his products, arts and intellectual achievements — became enmeshed in a new construction of 'the world as picture'<sup>5</sup>. In the course of nineteenth century there was a shift in regard for savagery from the *noble* to the *ignoble* end of the spectrum — perhaps beginning with the exhibition of Saartje, who was known as the Hottentot Venus. An object of both pity and derision, after her death in 1815 she was dissected by the French naturalist, Cuvier. By mid-century the extermination of colonised peoples was rationalised as an inevitable consequence of their presumed racial inferiority, and the growing contempt for the *savage* was given popular currency by Charles Dickens, in his description of the exhibition of 'Pygmy Earthmen' at the Westminster Aquarium in *Household Words*<sup>6</sup>. As the century advanced, Barnum in America and others, such as Hagenbeck in Germany, institutionalised the display of indigenous peoples who were 'doomed to disappear', and men like the recruiter/impressario Cunningham were the suppliers who made it possible.

The Bonaparte portrait — the point from which I started my search — was for these Aborigines an ending (in a figurative, if not also a literal sense): it recorded a final appearance on the stage of the spectacle of the world as it was configured in the fairgrounds, circuses, exhibition halls, theatres and museum spaces of metropolitan North America and Europe towards the end of the nineteenth century. The German composite noun, *Völkerschauen*, best describes the way in which

troupes of indigenous peoples like these were toured. The places of performance, however, I have designated *the show-space*. This is meant to be more than a convenient collective noun, for it identifies this space as a site of significance, a chronotope or time/space zone — a term which, according to Clifford (following Bakhtin), denotes 'a fictional setting where historically specific relations of power become visible and certain stories can "take place"'<sup>7</sup>. In this case, the removal of these Aborigines and their transformation into show-people was a part of the larger process of emptying the land in preparation for its exploitation by the white settlers, and an outcome of the imbalance of power between coloniser and colonised. This world-wide dispersal of peoples as a consequence of European imperial enterprise meant that fragments of traditional lifeways from the exotic margins (as well as from rural areas) became embedded in the matrix of urban modernity. Within this cultural space the local and global dimensions of the narrative were encompassed. Also within it, popular culture and science, particularly the new Science of Man — Anthropology — colluded in the objectification, commodification and consumption of *other*. The metropolitan appetite for the exotic was insatiable.

While this account of Aboriginal lives made captive focuses on the decade which marked the confident high-point in the colonial enterprise, it is important not to lose sight of the long history of this practice. The seizing of indigenous people to act as hostages, guides and servants was a frequent occurrence in exploration and settlement of empire, and from the first days of European presence in Australia both this activity and the abduction of Aboriginal children into service was commonplace. Many of these captives, like the young girl, Araboo, who was acquired by the Rev. Richard Johnson in July 1789, and others who were euphemistically said to have 'come in', like Bennelong who accompanied Governor Phillip to England in 1792 — and lived to return home — are known by name and are a part of white Australian histories. The stories of others, such as Bennelong's companion Yemmurawannie who died abroad, are short and obscure, and in the course of the following century, as the genocidal assault intensified, the fate of most of its victims is lost in anonymity. The members of the Aboriginal cricket team of 1865 who were voluntary travellers overseas are known, but the identities of Aborigines who were pressed into joining the pearling fleets or seized and exhibited



abroad are part of the suppressed history of the frontier<sup>8</sup>.

If the Bonaparte photograph alerted me to the existence of a narrative the first problem was how to recover it, because the action which powered the narrative had performed an objectifying function by which existential beings had been transformed into *other*. It has been quite difficult to assemble the scattered fragments of the simplest details of the lives of Billy, Jenny, little Toby and their companions, from a range of sources, popular and scientific, written and visual, and the most comprehensive account, recorded in Brussels by E. Houzé and V. Jacques in May 1884, will be referred to in more detail later. The accompanying table (on the following page) assembles the various names by which the nine Aborigines in Cunningham's 1883 troupe were known, and the principal sources from which this information has been derived. Among these people (as with other Aboriginal tribes) there was a certain reluctance to 'telling their names'<sup>9</sup> and some of those on this list were possibly the names of local groups.

Briefly, their ages ranged from seven to forty or fifty years. With the exception of Billy and Bob who were from Hinchinbrook Island, the majority of the group were from Palm Islands and called themselves *Borkoman*<sup>10</sup>. Both groups spoke distinct, though related, languages: the former spoke Biyay (of the Wargamay language family) and the latter, Manbara<sup>11</sup>. Jenny, who was Toby's wife and little Toby's mother, was also said to have spoken a different language, and indeed it may have been a different dialect, but she certainly spoke a deferential or avoidance language. This was noted in her conversations with Sussy, and suggests that they may have stood in potential or actual parent-in-law/child-in-law relationship to each other. Sussy was the wife of Tambo, one of the two men who died in America, and apparently she also stood in the right marriage relationship to Jimmy — but the other aspects of the group's relationships remain elusive.

I have included in the table two other groups who were toured in the same period and with whom they were sometimes confused. There was an earlier group of three from Fraser Island who were recorded on tour in Germany in 1883<sup>12</sup>. And in 1892 Cunningham returned to the Townsville district and, in spite of his notoriety, was permitted to take away with him eight more Aborigines described by A. Meston as 'town

TABLE OF NAMES:  
3 GROUPS OF CAPTIVE ABORIGINES TOURED IN 1880s

In Europe 1883  
(from Fraser Island, Queensland)

Alfred (Turano) (m) 22 yrs; Bonny (m) 18 yrs; Susanne (f) 15 yrs; Source: Virchow

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1883-1887?

(\* — from Hinchinbrook Island, the others from Palm Islands, North Queensland)  
Names and Ages Listed by Source

Cunningham's <i>Orinben</i>	Houzé & Jacques (Belgium)	Virchow (Germany)
Dianarah	✓ Tambo? <sup>21</sup> (40yrs)	
Wangong	Tambo?	
Corgarah	Toby/Wangong? (40-50yrs)	Toby/Koddigandal/ Kutiegandal (40yrs)
Yorembera	Jenny/Yarembera (30-40yrs)	Jenny/Yemberi/ Yorembera (20yrs)
Telegorah	Little Toby/ Kottiganden (7-8yrs)	Telegorah (7yrs) <i>Jenni</i>
Tagarah	Sussy/Tagara (18-20yrs)	Tagarah (Princess) 16-18yrs
Tinendal	Jimmy/Tinendal (25-30yrs)	James/Teninder/Tininder/ Tinendal (20yrs)
*Orininben	Bob/Oritchnenben (20-25yrs)	Orininben/Orininden (20yrs)
*Warchsinbin	Billy/Warutch <sup>5</sup> <i>enben</i> (30-35yrs)	Warrisimbol/Warchsinbin (28yrs)

note: Wangong and Yorembera resemble the names of local groups.

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1892-1896?

(from Townsville [one said to be 'Borgaman'])

Harry Mathews, King Bill, Dick Elliot, Tommy Landerson, Bill and his wife Jennye, William and his wife Tottie. Source: *San Francisco Chronicle* November 1892

3 survivors Berlin 1896: Dilgorru (King Bill); Maturra (William); Dagorri (Jenny)  
Source: Virchow

blacks', one of whom was a 'Boorgaman'<sup>13</sup>. According to a report in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (September 1892) they were Harry Mathews, King Bill, Dick Elliott, Tommy Landerson, Bill and Jennye, and William and Tottie, three of whom — Dilgorru (King Bell), Matura (William) and Dagorri (Jenny) — survived to be interviewed in Berlin in 1896<sup>14</sup>.

The following reconstruction of the events involving the 1883 group, Billy, Jenny, little Toby and their companions, has been dealt with under three headings: *the capture*, which discusses events in Australia; *the construction of savage other or the making of the professional Aboriginal performer*, which deals with their journeyings in North America and Europe; and a final part concerning *the apotheosis of Billy, the Australian*, at the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1889. Within this framework I seek to trace what befell this particular troupe of Aboriginals, and to foreground the process by which identities were subsumed in performance and real and captive Aboriginal lives were written out of history. Before I proceed, however, I want to refer to another methodological issue.

*'Captives of the Archives'; 'Captives of Discourse'*

I am uncomfortably aware that these three headings continue to categorise Aboriginals, if not as objects, at least as victims. But in the same way as Aboriginal resistance has been written back into history, it is possible to locate some positive elements in the stark choices which the 'dispersed' Aboriginals had to make between imminent murder or going away with a seemingly powerful white protector. For those members of the several groups for whom there may have been an element of choice, their departure with Cunningham for an unknown world was a courageous step. The difficulty is to find a way of telling — to achieve a reach of the imagination — that restores the existential dimension to these people's lives.

This search for a way of telling was raised as early as 1884 by a contributor to *The Queenslander*<sup>15</sup> who speculated about the different ways in which a future novelist and historian would 'treat of Aboriginals'

whom he saw as doomed to extinction. He did not foresee that for the Aboriginal peoples the period of demographic and cultural crisis would be followed by one of political and social reconstitution in which they make their own voices heard. Today not only the relative merits of writing in fictional or factual mode are under discussion, but also the issues of accessibility to the archives and interpretation of them. The questions are: what can be salvaged from the archives and narratives of the dominant culture — and from indigenous memory — and whose story is it anyway?

Indeed this paper itself could be seen as a continuation of non-Aboriginal appropriation of Aboriginal narratives; a 'captured discourse' which is perpetuated because Aboriginal people remain — in Henrietta Fourmiles' words — 'captives of the archives' and are not their own 'history-tellers'<sup>16</sup>. This argument has particular relevance to this paper because there is an extensive literature on the anthropology of world fairs, museums and exhibitions in which, although it focuses on the way in which living persons were (and sometimes still are) 'displayed as if they were objects'<sup>17</sup>, its overall self-reflexivity is almost entirely directed at the exploration of alterity in relation to the Western psyche. It is hardly concerned with the indigenous existential-being-that-is-other. A rare exception is Ken Harper's book, *Give me my father's body: the life of Minik the New York Eskimo* (1989)<sup>18</sup>.

Therefore I accept the Aboriginal assertion that the hegemony of the dominant culture continues to make them captives of the archives and of discourse. According to Mudrooroo Narogin, what is at stake is nothing less than the psychological well-being and self-image of 'Aboriginal-being-in-Australia'<sup>19</sup>. This is fragile ground to intrude upon, but I would argue that the reclaiming of this suppressed history is urgent for all of us, and that in reconstituting a shared past there is not only room but a necessity for a plurality of histories. There is also a sense in which archives are not a source, but the product of research; frequently they are formed in the process of ferretting out evidence on the margins of history.

*The Capture*

One version of the group's capture is supplied by Cunningham himself in the pamphlet he produced in American and English editions and at least in one translation (German) where he describes its members as 'the most interesting people that have ever been seen in a civilised country'. He offers an account of 'a few of my difficulties in obtaining them' as a measure of the authenticity of his rare and savage charges. He describes how, in early 1883, his first attempts to acquire 'five fine specimens' in Port Darwin were thwarted by the local Police Inspector who told 'the blacks they would never return, which utterly scared them, and they immediately fled to the bush.' Next he chartered a cutter from Townsville, endured hardships at sea, paddled up creeks in canoes, 'and attempted to offer the creatures on shore all inducements such as tobacco, red handkerchiefs etc', but with no success. 'At last,' he states blandly, 'I succeeded in getting those that now accompany me'<sup>20</sup>. What were the details of their capture which he was so reluctant to recount?

For the answer we would need to take a brief look at the frontier era in North Queensland from 1860 to the end of the century. Broadly speaking it consisted of a number of overlapping frontiers of which the most relevant to our story is the sea-coast frontier in the vicinity of Cardwell (established 1864) and Townsville, including the adjacent offshore islands of Hinchinbrook and Palm Islands. Early in March 1872, as a reprisal against the murder of some of the castaways of the brig *Maria*, wrecked on Bramble reef a few weeks earlier, Hinchinbrook Island was 'cleared' of all but a handful of Aborigines by Sub-Inspector Johnstone and his troopers. According to eye-witnesses, a small girl of about seven — one of two children who survived — was publicly raped<sup>21</sup>. The depredations against the peoples of what are today island holiday resorts continued into the next decade, when the decoying and outright kidnapping for the bêche-de-mer and pearling industries of the northern waters was at its height.

The taking up of land in North Queensland had been quickly followed by the railway and the telegraph, and the frontier expansion took place under the public gaze. The murder, rape, and ill-treatment of the Aborigines was widely reported not only in the newspapers of the

southern states but also in the local town papers. For instance, an incident such as the Hinchinbrook massacre can be followed in letters of protest in the press, through Parliamentary debates and special enquiries. In the same letter quoted above, Charles Heydon wrote '... a system of slavery far more atrocious and degrading, and a system of native slaughter far more merciless and complete, are in daily operation in the British Colony of Queensland.' In 1880 *The Bulletin*'s front page article was headed 'The White Man gave them lead' which claimed that 'there is hardly a man in North Queensland whose motto is not: "See a nigger and 'pot' him"'. Three years later an article in the same vein, headed 'A War of Extermination', went on to assert that 'the savage dies out sooner through civilisation and conversion than by the more straightforward method of lead and rum'. It was a very public frontier.

Even official British opinion condemned the settler society, and in a report of 1883 advised against entrusting the control of 'the large numbers of black populations' of New Guinea to Queensland on the grounds that

it is impossible to converse with any average Queensland colonist, to read their newspapers, or the speeches of their legislators, without perceiving that even among the most enlightened and humane of their number, the native is regarded simply as an encumbrance on the soil, as being destitute of rights, and as existing only on sufferance for which he should be grateful.<sup>22</sup>

The effects of the brutal kidnappings for the pearling fleets cannot be contested<sup>23</sup> and there is one particular incident which took place in February 1882 that I would argue has direct relevance for this narrative. It was officially recorded by B. Fahey, the sub-collector of Customs at Cooktown, and it concerned a public rape of ten year old girl. She was one of a group of eighteen Aborigines of both sexes, ranging in age from nine to forty years, who had been procured 'in suspicious circumstances' from Hinchinbrook Island, Dunk Island, and the vicinity of Johnstone River in what was euphemistically called a recruiting drive. Fahey wrote that they were then divided into two groups of nine, of mixed sexes, 'after the manner of sheep . . . without reference to the inclinations or feelings naturally induced by the filial or friendly instincts

of the parties concerned, some of whom, I know, manifested a strong aversion to their separation.' 24

The girl was returned to Hinchinbrook and thereby probably once more separated from her kin. The rest were recruited into the pearling fleet, where (since the Act of 1880) the usual 'contract' of employment was for a year. To date it has not been possible to establish if any of these people were amongst those taken by Cunningham in the following year, 1883, but according to the Houzé & Jacques interview, Tambo — who was at first 'the only one who understood and spoke English' — and his wife Sussy 'had been in relationship with the English and the American fishermen who frequented the Coral Sea and the Torres Straits' 25.

If this was not the certain history of this group, it was the pattern: Aborigines of different language groups, who were sometimes strangers or even enemies, were thrown together, arbitrarily separated from their own kin, and forced by circumstance or coercion to adopt new survival strategies by working for the white man. In the case of this group, it is possible to piece together that Toby was only accompanied by one of his wives, Jenny, and their child, little Toby; both Bob and Billy had also left behind two wives and one child; Jimmy had left a wife and two children. Sussy had no children by Tambo, but he had been a man in his forties and probably had children by his second wife 26. Cunningham arrived in Sydney with his group in February 1883 and on Sunday 18 February two of them tried to make their escape. They were found, 'utterly wild', wandering in the bush near Manly, one naked, and the other wearing only a shirt, and when a Constable Leplaw tried to arrest them he was stabbed in the hand. They were gaoled at Darlinghurst until they were brought before the magistrate on the following day.

When it was discovered that these two, who were now referred to as Billy and Jimmy, belonged to a larger group, who were lodged 'in a room at the rear of the Carlton Club Hotel' by Cunningham preparatory 'to 'being taken to America as a speculation' it created a furore 27. 'It will never do', trumpeted the *Evening News*, 'to have Sydney made the entrepôt of a kidnapping trade' 28. Questions were asked in Parliament, a report was called for, telegrams were exchanged with the

\* TAMBO'S MUMMIFIED BODY FOUND AFTER PAPER WAR  
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Queensland Police Department and Billy was released into Cunningham's charge.

It was all over in a few days. First it was asserted that, on information from Queensland, 'the natives were aware of the nature of the agreement they had entered into with Cunningham . . . [and] the intervention of the government of New South Wales, therefore was not necessary' 29. On the following day, the charge against Jimmy was dropped because, it was said, nobody could be found 'to interpret the language spoken by the accused' 30. Thus matters were neatly brought to a conclusion before the departure of the next boat for San Francisco via Auckland and ~~Apia~~ Honolulu.

Apparently it was not so easy for Cunningham to recruit his second troupe when he returned in 1892, because according to Meston: 'The government stopped them here until Mr Cunningham gave them a bond of £500 guaranteeing their return to Queensland.' This lot were what Meston referred to as 'tame blacks who spoke English', and he considered that Cunningham would 'do no good with blacks of that type' 31.

'Tame blacks' were, of course, people who had been displaced from their own territories. A.J. Vogan, an artist and newspaper correspondent, wrote extensively on the way in which the Aborigines were recruited to implement this policy of dispersal, and used his novel, *The Black Police*, published in 1890, to draw attention to 'some of the obscurer portions of Australia's shadow side' as he had witnessed them in Queensland in the 1880s 32. In his correspondence with the Aboriginal Protection Society he stated that he chose fiction in order 'to command a larger and more sympathetic audience.' The work belonged to the genre of romantic novel, rather than social realist fiction. Perhaps his most enduring contribution to the discourse was the frontispiece captioned 'Queensland Squatters "Dispersing" Aborigines', which was widely used contemporarily and thereafter. Similarly it is his description of the Black Police which is most often quoted. He found that his critics treated his statements 'as either wilful fabrications, or as artistic embellishments' and 'that my old profession of special reporter is closed to me in consequence . . . without prospect of doing the unfortunate natives any good' 33. His was a minority view

and the next stage in the settlement process brought into play what Bernard Smith has called 'the mechanisms of forgetfulness'<sup>34</sup>.

For settler Australia, the potent narrative of the frontier belongs to the captivity genre, which drew on such true stories as the shipwreck of Mrs Frazer and Barbara Thompson in Queensland, and mythical tales such as the White Woman of Gippsland in Victoria. As Kay Schaffer has argued, what was at stake was possession of the land itself<sup>35</sup>. The woman's rescue from the blacks symbolised the land's rescue from savagery. The idea of Australian Nation denied a place to the original inhabitants.

Contiguous with Cunningham's removal of the Queenslanders from Australia, accounts designed to attract new migrants to that state made this point quite explicitly. In 1886 — even before the killing had ceased — Alfred Hull hardly mentioned the previous occupants of the coastal district north of Cardwell which he described as being, until recently, a natural wilderness, which 'life, energy, and busy trade, have changed . . . into the home of the refined and cultivated race for whom it was no doubt created.' He foresaw that within ten years the axeman:

will have changed this wild face of nature to waving cane and cornfields; . . . and in the place of stillness which reigned there so short a time ago, there will be the sound of church bells, music, song. And this country is open to the working man — these scrubs teeming with fruit, the woods with game of every description, and the rivers full of fish; the earth only awaiting the hand of the cultivator, to produce liberally everything he requires, not only to sustain life but to enrich it. Surely there is room here for the poor starving families at home in the old country. Room!<sup>36</sup>

*The Construction of Savage Other: The Making of the Professional Aboriginal Performer*

By early March, Cunningham's captive band were being initiated as performers in Auckland, with a display of boomerang-throwing. And soon they found themselves thrust into the limelight of Barnum, Bailey and Hutchinson's Greatest Show on Earth, in which they toured North America during the tenting season. Then in the winter they were displayed 'in the all the principal museums with unbounded success'<sup>37</sup>.

This mix of public performance and ethnographic display was to be the pattern of all future engagements of the little company.

In this decade it was in the circus, and more particularly Barnum's realisation of it, that the show-space found expression in the spectacle. The essence of the circus was a Grand Parade of the animals and a great variety of humankind, led by a Beauty Queen, who was sometimes described as the Circassian Princess, rescued from the Infidel. (This ideal type of pure white Causasian appeared on the scene soon after the Crimean War; she was usually enacted by a girl from the slums of New York.) Together these star performers represented Tamed Nature, Savagery, and the Captive Maiden with her attendant company of jugglers, clowns and trick performers. The show itself was marked by simultaneity of action, both in the three circus rings and the surrounding side-shows of 'Living Curiosities' and marvels. The success of the operation depended on capturing the attention of a whole community; a cast of thousands, seen by tens of thousands, very often in the course of a single day. Advance notice in the form of handbills and giant posters summoned the crowd. The show was highly mobile, being transported in specially designed railway carriages, which enabled it to plan routes which took in the largest and most profitable towns.

In Toronto, for instance, Billy and his companions were displayed in the company of the major attraction, Jumbo, the elephant, together with 'Bushmen', 'Zulus', 'Nubians', 'Sioux Indian savages', and 'other weird representatives of the human family, all of whom are genuine' — or so the public was assured<sup>38</sup>. Not so the 'Fijian Cannibals' whom Barnum had toured in 1872, one of whom was a woman from Virginia. Others of the so-called savages, such as the pygmy-earthmen, had histories of abduction similar to Cunningham's group, and survived to travel the circuit for years.

The promotional pamphlet of 1872, *The History of P.T. Barnum's Cannibals*, established a genre which certainly served as a close model for Cunningham's visual and textual presentation of the 'Australian Boomerang Throwers' in his own 1884 pamphlet. The defining indicators of savagery were body mutilation such as tattooing, cannibalism and the practice of infanticide, but (in the context of the

show-space particularly) the culturally and geographically marginalised peoples were also likened to the physically marginalised. Cunningham's savages were presented as 'distorted in human form', ranting (ie unstable), and lacking proper speech. These characteristics were sometimes regarded as indicators of 'beastliness' in the literal sense. Thus these pamphlets, handbills, and the shows themselves, were a popular reflection of a range of scientific and fringe-scientific debates, concerning evolution, polygenesis versus monogenesis, hierarchy of race, and even inter-species miscegenation.

Up to date I have found very little evidence of how the Australian group made out in this closed community of circus performers in America. In Europe, Cunningham operated as an independent entrepreneur, and presented his group in a variety of venues including Folies-Bergère in Paris, Castan's ~~Opticon~~ Opticon in Berlin, and Hagenbeck's Zoo, Hamburg. Broadly speaking, there were differences between the American and European show-space. In America the performance was absorbed into spectacle, a spectacle in which the onlookers were also absorbed. In Europe, as might be expected in the metropoli of colonial powers, the engagement was of a different order; the encounter was between civilised self and savage other, as is suggested by an newspaper illustration of the bushmen, displayed at the Royal Aquarium in 1884, in which apparent proximity between performers and onlookers suggests a close involvement <sup>39</sup>. In Europe the absorption into spectacle took place within the show-space of the world fair or exposition, as I have discussed below.

In a photograph taken of the Aboriginal company at Crystal Palace in ~~March~~ <sup>APRIL</sup> 1884, however, their representation as savages is subverted. Dressed for the show, they are relaxed, and appear to be seasoned, if perhaps a little disgruntled, performers. Something of the way in which they achieved this adjustment, and sustained themselves from the depths of their own culture can be abstracted from between the lines of the detailed report on physical characteristics, bodily measurement and cultural practices, by which positivist science attempted to contain and explain them.

*In the Anthropological Laboratory*

The seven remaining Aborigines spent about a month in Brussels, in regular contact with the anthropologists, Houzé and Jacques, during which time a degree of trust was established. It was fourteen months since they had left Australia and they all spoke English 'quite fluently', though in a patois, which the scientists considered to be as 'near to English as spoken by uneducated Irish'. And as soon as they realised the Europeans wanted instruction in their languages, it was they who determined the teaching methods, by use of gesture and the spontaneous naming of things about them.<sup>40</sup>

'When we did not understand after two, three or four times,' noted the scientists, 'they would bend towards us and would repeat the word several times quietly in the ear. We quote this as proof of their intelligence and as a way of their reasoning.'<sup>41</sup> The group thought likewise about the scientists — according to Roth's ethnographic record of practices in their home-place in Queensland, the Aborigines also regarded the ear as the site of intelligence.

There is plenty of evidence that they clung to their own cultural practices, both in their conduct towards each other, and in their attempts to deal with the trauma of Tambo's death in America, on which occasion they folded his body in the customary manner before they could be stopped. On another occasion, however, Billy appears both to be testing the efficacy of Aboriginal practices and also trying to bridge a cultural gap. In Pittsburgh a child had died in the hotel where they were staying, and he persuaded the parents he could bring him back. He breathed air into the child's mouth, and flapped his limbs. Then he blew and spat into a small box, declaring that he had trapped the 'bad spirit'. He lay down and guarded the child until the next day. When he saw that nothing had changed, he threw the box out of the window.<sup>42</sup>

A picture emerges of a group of Aborigines who are dignified in deportment, confident in performance of new skills as well as traditional ones, and are proud of their dress and ornamentation, as instanced by the response of Jimmy who, when asked by a lady why he passed a stick through his nose, countered: 'But why do you have holes in the ears?'<sup>43</sup>

Once they continued their journeyings, however, the events to which they were exposed relentlessly marked them as victims. In Belgium, physical examinations established that almost all of them were suffering from lung infections. Three more of the party died during the year spent in Germany: Bob in Chemnitz, Sussy somewhere as yet unlocated, and Jimmy — who was the clown of the group, and always thinking up new gestures and positions during the measuring sessions — died in Darmstadt on 31 May 1885. Six months later when Toby died in a Paris hospital, Topinard regretted that he had failed to obtain his body for the Broca Museum. He had also failed to grasp the traumatised state of the survivors; he considered Billy to be cold, and self-absorbed, and Jenny to be not stupefied, but stupid. Even so, he wrote: 'Her husband's death here in Paris, Mr Cunningham assures me, has not affected her. I am not convinced. There is a kind of sadness in her which could be related to that'<sup>44</sup>.

Billy, Jenny and little Toby can be tracked across Europe — from Vienna to Glasgow, and from Rome back to London. In the course of these perambulations Cunningham collected from the leading anthropologists of Europe 'certificates as to their being the true type of the race they are said to represent'<sup>45</sup>. These scientists' letters of authentication — so useful to the showman in his trade — were also accepted as guarantees of authenticity by other scientists. R. Virchow defended the public display and was explicit about the link between it and the anthropologist. He went on to urge 'for deeper questions to be put concerning the Australian Aborigine in order to inform the wider public'.<sup>46</sup>

According to the scientists, Billy and his companions were positively scared of their master, and only out of his presence did they behave with assurance. Then they were even prepared to complain bitterly about his failure to pay them. Even Cunningham's professional colleagues judged him harshly. Exactly translated, his fellow showman, Carl Hagenbeck, declared: 'This Cunningham is a big shit'<sup>47</sup>. The Aborigines' usefulness to Cunningham was almost over. By 1889 they were no longer with him and he was touring a Samoan troupe; when he abandoned them in New York, a newspaper raised a public subscription for their repatriation. In 1891 he toured a Black American Minstrel Show in Europe. The incentive for his return to

Queensland in 1892 was the impending World Fair in Chicago the following year.

Thrust into the modern industrialised world with its reorganisation of time and space and specialisation of labour, the group's specialisation was to be professional Aborigines: they were forced to mime an imagined savagery, under the gaze of the new urban classes. For Jimmy, final confirmation of his status appeared on his death certificate where his occupation was set down as 'Australian Savage' in the Cunningham Company.

In the course of my continued search for Billy, Jenny and Little Toby, or even for what happened to their bones and bodies, I turned to the The Universal Exposition of 1889 in Paris.

#### *The Apotheosis of Billy — The Australian*

In an elegant essay on the Eiffel Tower, Barthes writes: 'The Tower looks at Paris' — in such a way that it transforms it into a 'kind of nature' — 'a new nature that is human space' — a 'passive overview' which offers itself for decipherment, which, he suggests, is what each onlooker reconstitutes in her memory as she looks, and as she imagines a history<sup>48</sup>. Among the histories he considers, surprisingly, he neglects the constructed world that filled the show-space at the Tower's base on the occasion of its inauguration in 1889. The mix of peoples and cultures to be found there, and their commodification, prefigured the new brew of the twentieth century — and the way into this spectacle of the world was by the moving walkway.

So multilayered is the symbolism embedded in this constructed world of the Paris Exposition that there are several possible starting points to unravel its meaning. The relevant one for my argument is the Palace of the Liberal Arts which contained four pavilions devoted to Anthropology and related subjects. Surrounding the Palace were the streets containing the Pavilions of various nations, and the reconstructed streets from the colonial towns of North Africa, and the Far East. Then, according to a popular account

in the back settlement behind all the gorgeous finery of the pagodas and palaces . . . the ingenious French have established colonies of savages whom they are attempting to civilise. They are the genuine article and no mistake, living and working and amusing themselves as they and their kinsfolk do in their own country<sup>49</sup>.

At night there were performances of eastern dancers and African drummers, and after the show — according to the cartoonist — the onlookers and the performers drifted away together<sup>50</sup>.

Anthropology, which was acclaimed as the modern French Science, was a main focus for the exhibition, the lay-out of which is well documented by plans and photographs. If one entered the section devoted to Anthropology at the entrance of the Pavillon nearest the Seine, one came first to the statue of the Great Buddha of Nara, from Japan, which was the meeting point for anthropologists while the exposition was in progress. To the left were the casts of two Bushmen (who had been exhibited as living people in 1884 in London). Enclosed within the pavilion in a central court were tableaux depicting stone tool makers, grain growers, builders, paper makers, metalworkers, arranged around a central tableaux of Lapps. This visualisation lent authority to a conjectural evolutionary history of mankind<sup>51</sup>.

The eight entrances to these diverse internal spaces were flanked by pairs of decorative panels depicting a selection of racial types, one pair of which represented Esther the Hottentot, and Billy the Australian — with his dog — the latter painting being based on Bonaparte's photograph. As recorded photographically, the chamber immediately within was concerned with the comparative anatomy of man and animals. On either side of a figure of Western man with his musculature and nervous system exposed stood skeletons of a Gorilla and an Orang Otang, the whole forming an extraordinary visualisation of contemporary evolutionary views.

The panels themselves probably no longer exist, and the faded photographic record is therefore the end point of a series of representations. Billy's containment within them is analogous to his entrapment in western anthropological discourse. This fugitive image

stands as a metaphor for the way in which he and his companions were written out of history, and the lifeless painting it reproduces totally lacks the disruptive power of the original Bonaparte photograph.

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\* **Dedication:** This paper is dedicated to 'Jimmy'/Teninder/Tinendal, an unsung Aboriginal hero who died in Darmstadt, Germany, May 31st 1885. The cover picture is his portrait, taken by Carl Günther in Berlin, from a print in the collection of La Société de Géographie, lodged in Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. By courtesy of the Société.

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During the academic year the Centre runs weekly Australian Studies seminars. These are presented by visiting Australian scholars, for whom the Centre provides a research base, as well as British and European scholars with specialisations in Australian Studies. Selected papers from the series are published as *Working Papers in Australian Studies*.

Regular conferences are convened by the Centre, focusing both on research undertaken by its own staff and work it may have encouraged or commissioned. The conferences cover a broad spectrum of issues of interest to Australia and have normally addressed historical, cultural, economic and environmental subjects. The Centre has an extensive publications programme and conference proceedings are generally published; see list of publications in print on the back of this booklet.

Four scholarship and fellowship programmes are administered by the Centre. These include Visiting Fellowships to assist British Academics to undertake research in Australia, the Northcote Scholarships, and the Bicentennial Fellowships and Scholarships Scheme to enable Australians and Britons to visit the other country for research purposes.