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## BEATRICE GRIMSHAW AND AUSTRALIA- WHITE WOMEN IN THE PACIFIC

Julie Evans

Women travellers and travel writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been the focus of feminist attention in recent years. Some of this scholarship has been directed towards retrieving the contributions of these women as active agents in their respective fields of literature, anthropology, botany etc. and has mirrored the important retrieval process which has been undertaken in many other areas of feminist scholarship. As a result, the role of women travel writers in fields of inquiry formerly recorded as male has been identified and articulated.

However, the significance of the meaning attributed to the contribution of women travel writers has been viewed by different commentators in different ways. The quest of some critics 'eager to co-opt these women for one ideological discourse or another' (Kroller 1990:88) needs to be tempered by a deeper analysis of the actual significance of their gender within colonial relationships. This is particularly so in considering the extent to which their use of gender as a tool of analysis was compromised by their dual positioning as women who were 'both subordinates in colonial hierarchies and....active agents of imperial culture in their own right' (Stoler 1991:51).

In examining the historical connections between feminism and racism in the West, Vron Ware alerts us to both the difficulty and the necessity of addressing the specific complexities of the category 'woman' in this particular context. She argues that an essential part of negotiating productive future relationships between women across cultures, class, and race, is to try to come to an understanding of the ways in which such relationships have been negotiated in the past. Women travellers and travel writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provide an obvious forum for observing and analysing such interactions.

While some of these travellers identified the 'welfare' of indigenous women as a primary focus of their activities, others travelled much more explicitly as adventurers. Some recent studies have attempted to focus on the extent to which any of them had ever determined upon or were willing or able to interrogate or escape essentially masculinist and imperialist discourses (Ware 1992, Haggis 1990, Burton 1990, Paxton 1990). These studies are of particular interest for several reasons. First, they allow an increased understanding of the historical periods themselves; second, they explore

the complexities of the negotiations of the category 'woman' with race, culture and class; and thirdly, they reflect upon the question of any individual's capacity to transgress the categories of the 'familiar and natural' (Torgovnik 1990) through which culture is constituted. The extent to which individual subjectivity is able to transgress those familiar and natural constitutive discourses has been a central concern of feminist academic debate.

It is only relatively recently, however, that the 'dangerous' familiarity of race has been identified as a more urgent concern in both feminist and other understandings of the *imperial* past and present. Within such a framework, it becomes increasingly clear that while women's travel narratives sometimes personify and articulate a woman's personal journey of liberation from patriarchal oppression back home, that 'Self-assertion in a Victorian traveller did not automatically imply that she extended the same principle to others' (Kroller 1990:89; Stevenson 1982:2). Least of all, to those indigenous women against whom the situation of white European women was so often compared.

In the context of the study of Orientalism, for example, Perera notes the practice of an 'oriental misogyny' which she defines as:

sensationalized Western representations of women's conditions in a domain demarcated as 'the Orient'. These representations of misogyny focused mainly on practices like sati, polygamy and parda that positioned 'oriental' women as passive victims of their cruel and tyrannical male masters, as against their more enlightened *idea* of gender relations supposedly existing in the West (Perera 1991:135).

Perera's book, *Reaches of Empire*, is concerned with constructions of empire and gender in what have been regarded as 'domestic' novels. She suggests that 'oriental misogyny' served not only to legitimate empire, but also as a means of interrogating the position of white women within patriarchy. In this way, she argues, the counter-discourse provided by feminist theory comes to use the vocabulary of 'oriental misogyny', thereby reflecting its grounding within the imperialist 'master' discourse.

Perera's insights into the complexities of race and gender hierarchies can be used to investigate what might be termed the *primitive* misogyny reflected in the work of Beatrice Grimshaw. Grimshaw was a prolific travel writer, columnist, publicist and novelist who wrote extensively about the Pacific at the beginning of the twentieth century. While the way she chose to live her



Beatrice Grimshaw  
Picture collection, Mitchell Library

own life represented an explicit challenge to traditional English notions of femininity, her writings clearly illustrate Kroll's argument about the ways in which the self-assertion of many women travellers did not extend to the colonised women they wrote about.

Grimshaw was born in Northern Ireland in 1870 and the young Beatrice took advantage of the opportunities available to the 'New Woman' of the 1890s. She partook of higher education and, in contradiction to contemporary stereotypical notions of femininity, asserted her individuality while firmly denying any ideological affinity with feminism (Gardner 1987/8:34; Laracy & Laracy:156). Grimshaw first worked as a journalist in Dublin, later moving to London where in 1902 she became responsible for organising the Cunard shipping company's literary department (Laracy & Laracy:157). The next few years were spent travelling, acting as a publicist for government and commercial interests and producing nearly thirty newspaper articles for *The Daily Graphic*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Pearson's Magazine* (Gardner:40).

1907 saw the publication of her 'impressions' of her recent travels - *In The Strange South Seas*, and *From Fiji to the Cannibal Islands* - and a novel, *Vaiti of the Islands*. A short visit to Papua, via Australia, in 1907 was to see her establish her home there for the next twenty-seven years, during which time she became a well-known figure in colonial life. In 1936 she eventually retired and moved to Bathurst, Australia. She died there in 1953, aged 83.

Grimshaw was a pivotal figure in the colonial society developing in Papua in the first quarter of the twentieth century. That period saw an increasing self-consciousness in colonial settings (Kuklick 1991:284-5). The colonisers were sufficiently numerous to become more inward-looking and were eager to create and

consume representations of themselves which conformed to metropolitan standards and identities, no matter how these may have conflicted with colonial realities.

Grimshaw's prodigious output was central to these processes in colonial Papua. She published approximately forty books in all, of which sixteen popular novels 'were set in Papua or the Mandated Territory of New Guinea, nine in the Pacific Islands, with a further ten volumes of short stories and occasional non-fiction, including Catholic mission promotion pamphlets' (Gardner 1987/8:37). *The Adorable Outcast* was a 1928 motion picture loosely based on her 1922 novel, *Conn of the Coral Seas*, many of her stories were serialised in the *Australian Women's Weekly*, while through her occasional world tours and radio broadcasts, she reached an even wider audience.

The popularity of Grimshaw's work is particularly significant in the light of Kuklick's observations concerning the importance of such contemporary representations of life in the colonies during this increasingly narcissistic period. How colonists represented themselves to themselves became as necessary to developing colonial identities as how they represented the Other. Colonials' images of themselves, and images of the Other against which their sense of self was often articulated, were eagerly consumed. Grimshaw's work was particularly popular amongst the European women living in the Solomons (Boutilier 1984:191). Newspapers were similarly significant (Thompson 1980:4-5).

Whether in the form of travel writing, journalism, the novel or short stories, it is clear that the role of popular writing was pivotal in shaping and reflecting popular colonial discourses on both Self and Other.

Grimshaw's writing is important because it was influential on several of these fronts. Against the imperialist reality of her world, (and the more pragmatic necessity of supporting herself financially), the explicitly political nature of much of her work is readily observable. While the *implicit* political nature of her work will inform the rest of the discussion in this article, the explicit politics of her role can be seen in Grimshaw's letter concerning the New Hebrides to Alfred Deakin in 1908:

....I am most anxious to be of use to the *Australian* side in any way I can. I should, however, be glad of any advice that you can give me as to the points... of importance to impress on the public mind. I am acting as occasional correspondent (by special arrangement) for *The Times*, and I have active and intelligent agents in London, also in Sydney, who place anything I may send them in the most effective manner. In fact, when I need it, I have a very satisfactory system of disseminating any desired information of impression widely through the press of the world, not necessarily under my own signature (Gardner 1987/8:48).

It is at this point that I would like to introduce another element into this study: a consideration of the extent to which the establishment of white female identity in Grimshaw's writing can be viewed as a metaphor for the establishment of a white Australian identity in the Pacific region. For, like Stoler's European women in the colonies, Australia occupied an ambiguous position as both subordinate in colonial hierarchies and as active agent of imperial culture in its own right. Grimshaw's travel writing in, for example, *From Fiji to the Cannibal Islands*, can be read as a reflection not only of a white, European, and middle class perspective, but also as a metaphor for Australia's developing sense of national identity.

Grimshaw can be shown to have many formal links with Australia both acting on behalf of Australian political and economic interests in Melanesia and in coming to identify herself increasingly as 'Australian' (Gardner 1987/8). But it is within the actual text of her work that Grimshaw assumes an even closer affinity with developing notions of 'Australian' national identity within the region. I have argued elsewhere (Evans 1993) that despite her avowed anti-feminist stance, Beatrice Grimshaw's novels actively assert and contest the position of white women within her own patriarchal culture.

While very much a part of imperialist discourse, Grimshaw's position as both female and Irish (and increasingly as 'Australian') and her straddling of the positions of coloniser and colonised, make her a compelling study. In asserting an imperialist ideology which is fundamentally patriarchal she both asserts and contests her own status as colonised - as woman, as Irish and as Australian. Her contestation of prevailing notions of femininity, particularly within the confines of marriage, pervades her novels and is at times surprisingly explicit in its subversiveness. In the novels, however, ultimately her 'feminist' discourse surrenders to the patriarchal discourse on ROMANTIC LOVE and once her independent, feisty woman hero meets her ideal man she quite happily and willingly submits to the inferior status accorded to her future life. True love makes submission and inferiority worthwhile.

While it is unclear how contemporary commercial constraints may have influenced the plots of her novels, the antinomy within her texts seems to reflect the antinomy within her own subject positions. Although rumoured to have been engaged at one time, Grimshaw never married, she clearly lived a life of adventure and some daring. She flouted the conventions of the day, she was articulate and confident in her opinions. While both her life and her works challenge the patriarchal mould of the typical woman her biographers record her as seeing herself as explicitly anti-feminist (Gardner 1977; Laracy & Laracy 1977) and despite her colonial sympathies, her adventures are clearly framed in support of the imperialist project.

Clearly Grimshaw's 'feminism' as expressed in the text of her novels is problematic. Not only does it ultimately assume the acceptable and safe interrogation of patriarchy so common in Mills and Boon publications (and indeed, some of her early novels were published by Mills and Boon), but more importantly, her interrogation of women's position is explicitly contingent upon a notion of woman = white woman (Harraway 1992:93). Her blindness to any notions of a sisterhood, or even the possibility of shared experience of women cross-culturally is firmly embedded in her complicity in the imperial (and patriarchal) project. Her sense of self as white and British (=European=Australian) and ultimately as female, white and British depends upon, amongst other things, a notion of an Other as inferior. And for Grimshaw, the notion of Other is not a textured one which might have held the possibility of 'escaping' her imperialist subjectivity and exploring a common womanhood. Unlike some of the women travellers of her time who openly, if not unproblematically, asserted their allegiance with a notion of womanhood other than white womanhood (Ware 1992), Grimshaw was never in danger of being 'disloyal to civilisation' (Rich 1979:306) in such a way.

Her travel writing, no less than her novels, reveals her complicity in the imperialist task of representing the indigenous population as inferior. Not only her own but Australia's sense of identity is established against the representation of the inferiority of both neighbouring and domestic indigenous cultures. In terms of using gender as a tool of analysis, the assertion of indigenous women's position within indigenous cultures is primarily used as a further indication of both the superiority of white culture in general and of white women in particular.

Australia's role as coloniser, of both her own indigenous population and of parts of Melanesia, has been reflected in a range of discourses. Beatrice Grimshaw's *From Fiji to the Cannibal Islands* is a pertinent illustration of such a colonising stance reflected in popular discourse and begins to express a distinctively Australian, as opposed to European, discourse on the primitive. As such, a study of Grimshaw's texts, including both her travel writing and her fiction, adds to the existing literature on the extent to which whiteness, Europeaness and masculinity have informed Australian discourses on national identity (cf. Thompson 1980, Lake 1986, White 1981, Beckett 1988).

In the travelogue, Grimshaw begins by firmly establishing the distance between the Old World and the New. She demonstrates her ambiguous position as both coloniser and colonised by valorising the New World in terms of its freshness and difference, while elsewhere claiming other differences as evidence of the superiority of the Old (=British=European=White=Australian). We hear of, for example, '...sparkling Melbourne...Sydney, bright and eager and curiously young (where have all the greybeards hidden

themselves? or are they all at home in the old grey lands that suit their wearied souls?'(p.10). And also of

the connecting link between Eastern and Western Pacific. East of Fiji, life is one long lotus-eating dream, stirred only by the occasional parties of pleasure, feasting, lovemaking, dancing, and a very little cultivating work. Music is the soul of the people, beauty of face and movement is much more the rule than the exception, and friendliness to strangers is carried almost to excess. *Westward of the Fijis lie the dark, wicked cannibal groups of the Solomons, Banks and New Hebrides, where life is more like a nightmare than a dream, murder stalks openly in broad daylight, the people are nearer to monkeys than to human beings in aspect, and music and dancing are little practised, and in the rudest possible state.* (p.14- my italics)

This Polynesian/Melanesian distinction has been identified in several recent works<sup>1</sup> and is clearly reflected in Grimshaw's texts, in both her novels and her travel writing. Such distinctions served to reinforce both social Darwinist notions of white superiority, and the prevailing aesthetic which saw those nearest to the pinnacle of whiteness as possessing the greatest possibility of 'beauty'. Those further down the scale, darker and more 'primitive', had no place in the aesthetic hierarchy apart from providing a position against which others could claim *their* beauty.

The civilising influence of the whites could be measured against this same social Darwinist scale. Hence those people who had been able to overcome their cannibal past became increasingly acceptable. The Fijian, for example, once 'the most determined cannibal known to savage history', eventually became a member of a country 'advancing rapidly towards a better state of civilization....due to the untiring efforts of the missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, and the influence of the whites themselves...' (p.16), while the cause of law and order in the islands benefitted much, 'since the strong hand of British authority has extended its powers so far' (p.19).

Such acceptability, however, in no way extended to equality and a little later in the travelogue, Beatrice Grimshaw hastens to add that:

the Fijian's civilization is only varnish-deep. Cannibalism has been abandoned, cruelty and torture given up, an ample amount of clothing universally adopted, yet the Fijian of 1905, freed from the white control and example that have moulded all his life, would spring back like an unstrung bow to the thoughts and ways of his fathers. This is a truth doubted by no man who knows the inner life of Fiji (p.39).

All of which is a considerable contrast to her 1911 description of Rossel Island natives in her novel, *When The Red Gods Call*, as 'talk[ing] now in a hideous tongue, like the snappings and snarlings of dogs, quite unlike anything I had ever heard before' (p.94).

It was not just the people but the landscape itself which could evoke the evil inherent in the primitiveness of the country, in its unexplored, unfamiliar, non-Europeanised and, above all, unfamiliar state. Again, the association of blackness with evil, and whiteness with purity, is paramount:

The black, monstrous peaks gloomed about us, sinister, strange and evil in the grey-green dusk; the ten-foot reed grass waved its melancholy heads above us like funeral plumes; my three wild-eyed Fijians tramped silently in the rear. Among these very peaks, and in this valley that we were traversing, countless murders and ambushes had taken place, and cannibal feasts had been held, in the stormy 'seventies'.

And further, '...no white woman had ever before ventured through these regions alone...' (p.41).

In these passages, Grimshaw assumes the traditionally male role of explorer. Indeed, she felt 'absolutely inflated with pride, and felt that Stanley, Burton and Speke were not to be named with myself' (p.33). She assumed also the characteristic masculine tropes of arrival narratives which utilise the language of sexual penetration which Kroller finds so startling, considering that women travel writers so often went abroad to escape the demands of their families regarding gender roles and marriage. Grimshaw clearly establishes herself in this vein. She revelled in

the first day in a foreign port....the first night in the tropics under the silvered palms and the purple, warm-breasted sky -....the whole responsibility of the expedition lying upon one's own single pair of shoulders....such first times possess a freshness and a keen delight of their own, as perfect as first love itself (p.34).

There are endless other examples of typically imperialist discourse in *From Fiji to the Cannibal Islands*, often directed towards articulating 'what value the country still might be to possible settlers' (p.31). But I want to concentrate on Grimshaw's use of 'primitive misogyny' in establishing the sense of self for her white, British/European, and colonial audiences. Grimshaw explicitly uses her perception of the plight of indigenous women as further evidence of the inferiority of primitive races, mirroring the common nineteenth and even twentieth century view that the status of women will be secondary to that of men in every society, and that therefore, the low status of the women reflects the low status of the society in general (Evans-Pritchard 1965).

It is not often that the Fijian woman gets a chance of making herself prominent, or getting the best of anything; she is simply a drudge and a slave, as a rule, eating the leavings of the men, doing all the hardest of the work, and pushed into a corner at once, if such a rarity as a white visitor passes through, because it is not modest for her to talk to, or even look at, strange men, also because she is a dog, a slave, and does not count (p.44).

Far from empathising with their inferior position, Grimshaw goes on to claim:

One young woman, shoe-brush haired, wild-eyed and long of tooth, caressed my arm in a passion of delight, even going so far as to set her teeth gently in the flesh, and exclaim longingly, 'Vinaka na kakana!' (what good food). I knew that she was too young to have been a cannibal, and that her exclamation was only a compliment - somewhat left-handed, it is true - to my British skin; but the remark was interesting as an unconscious outbreak of heredity. The young lady's parents, a fine old couple residing in the next house, had, without any doubt at all, enjoyed many a hearty meal of human limbs, in the good old days, when the forearm was always considered the choicest and tenderest bit (p.44).

Moving on to the New Hebrides, Grimshaw discovers 'ugly creatures with flat, savage features and unkempt hair...silent, sullen, ugly...gorilla-like creatures' (p.138) who are 'almost devoid of gratitude, almost bare of natural affection; ready to avenge the smallest slight by a bloody murder, but too cowardly to meet an enemy face to face' (p.139). She goes on to repeat extracts from her letters printed in *The Sydney Morning Herald* among which are her perceptions of the women of the New Hebrides:

The New Hebridean wife is very hard worked, and not too kindly treated, but she has one source of satisfaction, as a rule, - the price that was paid for her. 'I cost twelve pigs,' Mrs. Frizzyhead No.1 boasts to Mrs. Frizzyhead No. 4, who is a new acquisition, and inclined to be cheeky No. 4, who is painting her forehead jet black with burnt cocoanut, and drawing a line of red ochre down her nose, pauses in her toilet to say contemptuously, 'I cost fifteen!' Mrs. Flatface, the sole joy of old Mr. Flatface, from the bush, here chips in: 'I cost twenty, and two of them were big, as big as a whaleboat from the steamer'!

The Frizzyhead ladies subside, and wait till they can catch young Mrs. Blackleg coming up from the yam plantations, with a baby in her arms and a hundredweight of yams on her back, to revenge themselves by telling her that she only cost ten pigs, and is a low creature anyhow (p.159).

Later on, Grimshaw describes the women of Malekula as 'bent and misshapen with the enormous loads they are obliged to carry, and their expression is, if possible, more degraded than that of the men. Pleasure of any kind is a thing unknown to them' (pp.177-8). Grimshaw gives one of these women a pink ribbon which she ties around her neck and a 'sort of sacred joy seemed to overflow her whole countenance, and lift her far above the things of common earth. She seemed to feel ennobled and exalted by this wonderful thing that had happened. That she should have had something given to her - she, a woman! - and that it should be this marvellous piece of loveliness, this nameless thing of beauty!' (p.178).

Beatrice Grimshaw's account of these women clearly reflects her primary identity as imperialist. She refers

to her sense of responsibility for the colonised early in the travelogue as 'the white man's burden (or, in this case, the white woman's)' (p.65) and such is the extent of the significance of her own gender in her writing that her femaleness becomes simply a more biologically accurate adjective to use when describing the person who is employing the imperialist gaze.

Apart from her view of women as passive victims of cruel and tyrannical men, her seeming preoccupation with the sensational reinforces the 'primitive misogyny' foregrounded in Perera's use of the term 'oriental misogyny'. In highlighting the practices of cannibalism and polygamy, as well as the women's 'degraded condition' and the cruelty of the menfolk, Grimshaw not only uses the vocabulary of primitive misogyny but also fulfills the role ascribed to travellers' accounts by Kuklick. 'If (nonspecialist readers) wished to be entertained as well as to be reassured of the merits of their own way of life, they might prefer to turn to travellers' accounts. These offered thrilling reports of explorers' physical heroism in the wilds of the Empire - and represented a form of pornography that could be openly admitted to polite households, describing behaviour forbidden in Western society with a *particularity of detail*'.

The imperial gaze reflected in travelogues such as *From Fiji to the Cannibal Islands* and in many of the novels, short stories and newspaper articles she produced, places Grimshaw firmly in the camp of the colonisers. Her interest in representing the position of women in indigenous societies lies in the extent to which their perceived inferior position *vis à vis* their menfolk serves to reinforce notions of white =British=Australian superiority. Her equation of Australia=British is fundamentally unquestioned in the text. Although she may consider Australia as purely colonial (p.122), in the imperial hierarchy she nevertheless sees Australia as representing civilisation. In relation to the Tanna people she states, 'Whatever they may have gathered of civilization in Australia stays with them but a little while after they leave' (p.206); and later, that:

I wished most earnestly, that I could see the strong hand of Great Britain or her Colonies grasp the bridle of this wretched country (New Hebrides), as unfit to be left to its own guidance as any runaway horse, and pull it firmly and determinedly into the road of civilization and law-abiding peace. The missionaries have done what they can; but the hand of a strong Government could do much more (p.220).

Furthermore, 'nothing British is ever wrong; and therefore, if an Australian - or any Australian - had dropped from heaven at that moment, he would, like a certain famous cocoa, have been extremely grateful and comforting' (p.222).

Grimshaw's travel writing in *From Fiji To The Cannibal Islands* is an important and illuminating study. When positioned against her novels in which the predicament

of white women within traditional western patriarchal marriages is so finely interrogated, Grimshaw's travel writing reveals her incapacity (and unwillingness?) to escape the masculinist and imperialist discourses when speaking of indigenous women. Furthermore, her constitution of Australian identity within the text as superior=white=British=European against the untextured primitive Other, reflects many of the discourses shaping emerging national identities at the time. Beatrice Grimshaw's texts are by no means an isolated example of a specifically Australian primitivist discourse. White Australian constructions of Aboriginality have largely been expressed within such a framework and the role of literature has been significant in both constituting and reflecting popular and 'official' discourses (Beckett 1988; Healy 1978).

The extent to which Australia's dual positioning in the imperial/colonial paradigm mirrors Grimshaw's own dual positioning as imperial/colonial and patriarchal/'feminist' may be useful in understanding how the intersection of various discourses has shaped both individual and national consciousness. By analysing the past with a view to understanding the ways in which such discourses have intersected to shape the present, we may come to a clearer understanding of how the oppression of others can be identified and addressed.

Furthermore, such a project may serve to remind us as scholars, as individuals, as white feminists, and as Australians, of the dangers of the 'familiar and natural'. The ways in which we, like many of the women travellers and others we write about, might continue to work from a standpoint with which we are so familiar that we become blind to the discourses of oppression they might hold.

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- 1 See, for example, Liz Branigan's article in this volume.