



A Glimpse into Some Women Novelists of Colonial Australia

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Abstract

Australian literature is a new area of interest in the field of world literature. It offers a unique perspective on a distinct geographic landscape, exploring themes like Aboriginality, national identity, migration, and the complexities of living in a vast continent, providing a rich cultural lens that differs from other established literary traditions while still engaging with universal human experiences. Australia has been the colony of Great Britain for more than one century. Most early writers were settlers from Great Britain. Though there has been the dominance of male colonial Australian authors like Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, Marcus Clarke, Charles Harpur, etc. Australia has also produced a number of women authors like Catherine Helen Spence, Ada Cambridge, Rosa Praed, etc. who asserted themselves as powerful literary figures in the colonial Australia. The aim of the paper is to throw some light on few women novelists of colonial Australia mentioning their important works, themes, characterizations, narrative techniques, etc.

Keywords: Colonial Australia, Women Novelists, Australian Society, Australian

Landscape, Aboriginal, etc.



Introduction

Colonial Australia was a collection of British colonies from 1788 until 1901. The colonies were established as penal settlements, and later by free settlers. The history of Australia from 1788 to 1850 covers the early British colonial period of Australia's history. This started with the arrival in 1788 of the First Fleet of British ships at Port Jackson on the lands of the New South Wales as part of the British Empire. It further covers the European scientific exploration of the continent and the establishment of the other Australian colonies that make up the modern states of Australia.

Aboriginals are the indigenous inhabitants of Australia. They had oral and pictorial form of communication. Before the arrival of Europeans, there was no written form of communication in Australia. European colonists used letters, diaries, drawings and paintings to share their stories, news, and hopes. European men and women, as soon as they arrived in New South Wales, began writing letters to those they had left behind.

At the early stage of Australian literature, it was obvious that writers who were mainly from among the British settlers would bring to their writing the values and forms of the British traditions of literature. This soon developed into a source of tension as some writers felt that the best direction for Australian literature was to follow British tradition while others felt that the two countries are different from each other and therefore, Australia should create an identity of its own as a nation and this should be well reflected in Australian literature. The first published novel in Australia was *Quintus Servinton: A Tale Founded upon Incidents of Real Occurrence* (1831) by Henry Savery, an English-born convict serving time in Hobart.

Australia has a rich history of colonial male and female writers who have inspired the writers of the later generations. Some of them are Charles Harpur (poet), Henry Lawson (short story writer), Banjo Paterson (poet), Marcus Clarke (novelist), Alexander Harris (explorer and writer), Watkin Tench (explorer and writer), Matthew Flinders (explorer), Henry Kendall (poet), Catherine Helen Spence (social reformer and writer), Ada Cambridge (novelist and poet), Rosa Praed (novelist and short story writer), Louisa Lawson (poet), etc.



A peculiarity of colonial Australian male novelists was their tendency to focus heavily on themes of the “bush” landscape, exploring the harsh realities of life in the Australian outback, often through rugged male characters, and frequently depicting the concept of “mate-ship” as a key social value, all while grappling with the complexities of colonization and their own identity as Australians within a British colonial system. They frequently used realistic style with vernacular language, often drawing from their own experiences as migrants to the country. Notable male novelists like Marcus Clarke (1886-1841), Rolf Boldrewood (1826-1915), Joseph Furphy (1843-1912), John Lang (1816-1864), etc. exemplify these traits. Marcus Clarke’s *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874) explores the brutality of convict life. Rolf Boldrewood’s *Robbery Under Arms* (1882) is a classic tale of bushrangers. Joseph Furphy’s *Such is Life* (1903) features a unique style and captures the language of everyday Australians.

Life Lines: Australian Women’s Letters and Diaries 1788-1840 by Patricia Clarke and Dale Spender is a book through which we can get information about the early women writers in Australia. The authors have classified women writers in the several groups such as convict women, forced labour, farm managers, the work of the landlord, shipboard travail, charitable works, working wives and mothers, shopkeepers, needlewomen, etc. *A Bright and Fiery Troop: Australian Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (1988) by Debra Adelaide is also a significant book which critically analyses Australian women writers of the nineteenth century. Anna Maria Bunn was the first woman novelist to have published in Australia. The novel *The Guardian: A Tale Told by an Australian* was published anonymously. Ever since this path-breaking event in 1838, women have been writing themselves into the cultural history of the nation.

A peculiarity of colonial Australian women novelists was their tendency to often write about the experiences of women within the harsh realities of the colonial landscape, including themes of isolation, social constraints, and the challenges of establishing a life in a new, often unforgiving environment. They often incorporate perspectives on domesticity, family dynamics, and the impact of colonization on Aboriginal communities. Sometimes they subtly critique societal norms through their female characters.



Some prominent features of colonial Australian women novelists are explained below:

- **Focus on women's lives:** Their works often centred on the everyday experiences of women in colonial Australia, providing insights into their struggles and triumphs in a male-dominated society.
- **Landscape as a character:** The harsh Australian landscape, including the outback and bush, was frequently depicted as a significant character, reflecting the challenges and isolation faced by women.
- **Social commentary:** While seemingly domestic, their writing often contained subtle critiques of societal norms and power dynamics, particularly regarding gender roles and class structures.
- **Limited opportunities:** Due to the social constraints of the time, female writers often had limited access to publication, leading to a smaller body of work as compared to their male counterparts.

Main Thrust

There is a galaxy of women novelists in colonial Australia who have contributed in their own way to the Australian literature through their different themes, characterizations, narrative techniques, etc. They laid the foundation for upcoming generations of Australian writers. The chief colonial Australian women novelists are Anna Maria Bunn (1808-1889), Louisa Anne Meredith (1812-1895), Catherine Helen Spence (1825-1910), Ada Cambridge (1844-1926), Catherine Edith Macauley Martin (1848-1937), Jessie Catherine Couvreur (1848-1897), Rosa Campbell Praed (1851-1935), Barbara Baynton (1857-1929), etc.

Catherine Helen Spence (1825-1910) was a Scottish-born Australian author. In 1839, she emigrated to South Australia at the age of fourteen with her family. She is known as the first Australian woman who wrote Australian novels in the sense that her writing focused on Australia rather than on the mother country. Her books described local conditions



as well as the European origins of her characters. She managed to blend the two worlds, while most other colonials looked back to England for their inspiration. She is credited as the first woman novelist in Australia to portray antipodean issues with the publication of her first novel, *Clara Morison: A Tale of South Australia During the Gold Fever* (1854). Her other novels include *Tender and True: A Colonial Tale* (1856), *Mr. Hogarth's Will* (1865) originally serialised *Uphill Work* in the (Adelaide) *Weekly Mail*, *The Author's Daughter* (1868) originally serialised as *Hugh Lindsay's Guest* in the (Adelaide) *Observer*, etc. Spence's novels often focused on women's rights, social justice, plight of the poor, etc. She wrote about women's dependent status, the need for divorce law reform, and the right of illegitimate children to legal recognition. She was passionate about education and value of progress. Her novel *A Week in the Future* (1889) envisions a socialist-feminist utopia. Spence's works also included journalism, pamphlets, and social activism. She was a leader in the fight for women's rights in Australia. She was in the vanguard of first-wave feminism seeking equality of opportunity for Australian women. She was called the "Greatest Australian Woman" by Miles Franklin and by the age of eighty, dubbed as the "Grand Old Woman of Australia".

Ada Cambridge (1844-1926) was an English-born Australian writer. She sailed for Australia in 1870 after getting married. She wrote more than twenty-five novels, three volumes of poetry and two autobiographical works. Many of her novels were serialised in Australian newspaper but never published in book form. Her novels explore the themes of social class, gender roles, and women's choices. She also addresses issues of race, marriage, and the changing nature of Australian society. It was not until 1890, with the publication of *A Marked Man*, that her fame as writer was established. However, despite regular good reviews, there were many who discounted her because she did not write in the literary tradition of the time, one that was largely non-urban and masculine, that focused on survival against the harsh environment. While Cambridge's first writings were religious in nature, she moved on to tackle more controversial subjects, particularly relating to women and their relationships. She shocked her husband by writing of her experience of religious doubt and marital trials. Some of her other noteworthy novels are *The Two Surplices* (1865), *A Mere*



Chance (1880), *A Marriage Ceremony* (1884), *A Black Sheep* (1889), *A Woman's Friendship* (1889), *The Making of Rachel Rowe* (1914), etc.

Jessie Catherine Couvreur (1848-1897) is a prominent woman novelist of colonial Australia. She arrived in Tasmania with her family in 1852 when she was only four years old. She used the pen name **Tasma**. Her novels explore themes like the challenges faced by women in colonial Australian society, particularly regarding marriage and societal expectations, the complexities of female desire, the harsh realities of life in the Australian bush, and the clash between European values and Australian landscape. Tasma, like Rosa Praed, drew heavily on her unhappy marriage to describe young women struggling to escape from a husband who is often a drunkard, a gambler, a dunce, a coward, emotionally unstable, prone to insanity, dishonest and occasionally effeminate. Her novels often have strong female protagonists who overcome these difficult circumstances with a sense of agency, even within the constraints of her time. Tasma uses her heroines to argue against the institution of marriage, and to discuss the possibility of Free Love. These are almost constant themes in early Australian women's fiction, constantly overlooked. *Uncle Piper of Piper's Hill* (1889) is the best-known novel of Tasma. *A Sydney Sovereign* (1890), *In Her Earliest Youth* (1890). *A Knight of the White Feather* (1892), *The Penance of Portia James* (1891), *Not Counting the Cost* (1895), etc. are her other notable novels.

Catherine Edith Macaulay Martin (1848-1947) was an Australian novelist and poet. She published her work anonymously or under pseudonyms **M.C.**, **Mrs Alick MacLeod** and **Ishbel**. She was born in Scotland and emigrated to South Australia in 1855 and shortly after moved to Naracoorte where many Scottish farmers had settled. Despite being ahead of her time in her understated approach to the usual themes of bush life and her sceptical view of married life, anticipating Henry Handel Richardson and Barbara Baynton, Martin's work has often been dismissed as "conventional nineteenth-century romance". In 1890, she published under the name Ishbel, *An Australian Girl*, which was well received in Australia and reprinted twice the following year. It has much of the flavour of George Eliot with its theme of personal loss leading to a kind of awakening in religious humanism, written by a woman of thoughtful and philosophic mind. Under the pseudonym Mrs Alick Macleod, Martin



published another novel *The Silent Sea* (1892), which drew upon her experience living in a mining town. She published under her own name, *The Incredible Journey* (1923) which was written very effectively from an Aboriginal woman's point of view about a mother's desert journey to recover her son, taken by a white man. *The Moated Grange: An Original Tale* (1877) and *The Old Roof Tree* (1906) are her other novels. She was never as well-known as she deserved to be, partly because almost all her work was published anonymously or under a pseudonym.

Rosa Campbell Praed (1851-1935) has been described as the first Australian novelist to achieve a significant international reputation. She wrote novels, short stories, poetries, etc. Praed never lost her interest in her native country and though most of her life was passed in England, a large proportion of her novels were based on her Australian experiences. Her early exposure to the social and political life of Queensland is reflected in her work. It also reflects her unhappy experience of marriage. Her novels repeatedly explore the theme of intelligent women trapped in marriages with insensitive and sometimes violent husbands. Her other novels dealt with the occult, with spiritualism, or with abnormal states of mind. She was interested in the psychological problems of her characters. Her character-drawing is good although her women are better than her men. She had sense of humour. Dale Spender argues that Praed "made a virtue of being Australian", and gave her English audience novels that were "racy, exotic, and on the provocative fringes of polite Victorian fiction". Spender also says that her writing was "extraordinary" at the time not only for her inclusion of Aboriginals as characters in her novels but for "eloquently pleading their case for justice and dignity". Praed also documents in her novels "a female perspective on the Australian bush", demonstrating her conviction that women could not achieve "a decent life". She created "realistic characters" through which she generalised about the experiences of women in the bush. Through her novels, Praed comments "about the human condition and the organisation of society". *An Australian Heroine* (1880), *Nadine: The Study of a Woman* (1882), *Moloch: A Story of Sacrifice* (1883), *Miss Jacobsen's Chance* (1886), *The Mystery Woman* (1913), *Sister Sorrow* (1916), etc. are her notable novels.



Conclusion

Colonial Australian women novelists occupy a special place in Australian literature. They provided a unique perspective on the settler experience by writing about the realities of women's lives in a new, often harsh environment and challenging societal norms. They challenged the male perspective. They paved the way for future generations of female Australian writers by demonstrating that women could have a voice in literature, particularly within a predominantly masculine narrative of colonial Australia. Their works often explored themes of gender, class, and the complexities of colonial life, contributing to a richer understanding of Australian history and identity. Despite their significant contributions, many colonial Australian women novelists remain less recognized as compared to their male counterparts. Their works also serve as valuable historical documents, offering insights into the social and cultural realities of colonial Australia. Their contribution helped shape the development of Australian literature by expanding the range of voices and perspectives represented.

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