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"A Colonial Tale of Fact and Fiction":
Nineteenth-Century New Zealand Novels by Women

by Morag Mackay

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ABSTRACT

This thesis plots the emergence and development of the nineteenth-century New Zealand women's novel. Previously silenced in favour of a masculinist nationalist tradition, a renewed interest in our earliest literary foremothers has arisen as a result of feminism. Arguing for their acknowledgement as part of our literary history, this thesis examines the significance of these novels in the recording and formulation of a New Zealand culture and literature. The body of the thesis is constructed of three chapters, each representing a different literary form used by these novelists. The earliest is the adventure story, showcasing New Zealand's flora and fauna for the British reading public, and providing excitement in the form of the New Zealand wars, cannibalism, whaling and natural disasters. Second comes the romance, which portrays the developing colonial society and begins to define what it means to be a "New Zealander". Part B of this chapter discusses the treatment of Maori in these women's novels. It examines a group of romances with part-Maori protagonists, in which the novelists address the issue of the place of Maori in the new society. Last are the didactic novels, in which temperance, religion and women's rights are argued for. This thesis considers the characteristics of each of these forms of novel and examines the social and political contexts that gave rise to these choices. Through their novels these women communicate what it meant to be a colonial New Zealand woman - revealing their views on such issues as colonisation, relationship with Maori, the new "classless" society, marriage, and opportunities for women. They reveal a concern with the development of "the New Zealander", a New Zealand literature and culture, and evidence a developing sense of national identity.
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INTRODUCTION

When people ask the topic of my PhD thesis and I answer “Nineteenth-Century New Zealand Women Novelists”, I am usually asked whether there are any. Answering that there are twenty-one, I next meet with “Oh, Katherine Mansfield, I suppose.” I answer that Katherine Mansfield is twentieth century (and wrote short stories), and no, they probably haven’t heard of any of them. My own interest in the topic stemmed from a love of both nineteenth-century women’s novels and New Zealand literature. I began to wonder who our nineteenth-century women novelists were, and why they were not as visible in our literary history as their male counterparts. As part of my master’s degree I wrote research essays on Ellen Ellis and Edith Searle Grossmann, which served to intensify my curiosity about the genre as a whole.

A search of the critical literature for commentary on the beginnings of women’s literature in New Zealand at first reveals an assumption not too dissimilar from that of my questioners. “In literary history, colonial fiction and verse has long featured as a joke pre-history to the real thing”,1 observes James Belich, in his latest instalment of the history of New Zealand, “Visions of New Zealand as a cultural wasteland stretch back from the 1900s to the whole nineteenth century, and forward into the twentieth century. Katherine Mansfield . . . was seen as a miraculous exception”.2 The earliest reviewers either omit the first women novelists or, exhibiting a kind of literary cultural cringe, they write them off as melodramatic or “pathetic”3 and state that New Zealand “literature” as such did not develop until Jane Mander, whose The Story of a New Zealand River was published in 1920. A chronological review of the critical literature reveals the development, over time, from this attitude to a renewed interest and respect for these literary pioneers.

In his 1936 review of New Zealand literature Alan Mulgan claims “Until a few years ago there was very little New Zealand fiction worthy of the name.”4 Three years later E. M. Smith, discussing New Zealand literature from 1860 to 1938, states “The feature which is predominant throughout New Zealand literature is its seriousness of purpose. In fact, the New Zealander appears to regard a book merely as a means of stating a grievance, fighting for a cause or coating the pill of unpalatable
information.” She quotes as an example Constance Clyde’s A Pagan’s Love, which is spoilt by its “strident condemnations” and “crudity of thought and style”.

In 1947 E. H. McCormick called the pioneer novel “a crude production, the fitting expression of a primitive and unformed way of life.” He says that “the New Zealand novel was . . . in unskilful hands; it was shapeless, badly written, and saturated with . . . sentimentality” until William Satchell and Jane Mander, who were not “careful or self-conscious . . . but . . . improved greatly on the careless prose and slipshod construction of the earlier New Zealand novel.” McCormick presents a passage from The Heart of the Bush as an “awful warning” about how not to describe the bush. Twelve years later, in New Zealand Literature: A Survey, McCormick displays a more mellow opinion of the pioneer novel, saying it is “best described as source material for an historian” and noting that “[p]ride of place must be given to the feminine and domestic type.

The Davins’ 1956 survey of the New Zealand novel declares:

. . . the few novels of the nineteenth century in New Zealand. . . . either played a game of “let’s pretend” and behaved as if the new country were essentially the same as the old or else they were clumsy tales which looked only for what was obvious in the new and made no attempt at deeper exploration.

The Davins say that at the end of the century some writers began to interpret the world around them. They identify Grossmann as possibly the best of these novelists, but accuse her of using “the novel as a political or moral platform instead of grasping that it is first of all an art to which dogma and propaganda are fatal” and of choking her characters with her message. The Davins credit Satchell and Mander with being the country’s first considerable novelists.

Ten years later, in 1966, Joan Stevens’s The New Zealand Novel 1860-1965 was published. Stevens mentions fourteen of the nineteenth-century women novelists, in the most comprehensive survey to that date. Acknowledging the difficulty in accessing this early fiction, she provides plot summaries for many of the novels.

Stevens defines four stages in the development of New Zealand fiction: recording, exploiting, preaching and interpreting, saying: “The true business of the novel, in its maturity, is surely the last - to interpret something to somebody. Our writers did not reach this stage until after the turn of the century.” According to Stevens, the recording novel is based upon letters, memoirs or handbook information, and the exploiting novel is based upon the same but also contains sensational events and exploits the New Zealand setting or Maori people. Stevens claims the recording and exploiting novels were the dominant types of fiction from 1860 to 1890. She says the writers possessed “only the most elementary techniques, imported from the Victorian tradition”, so the resulting novels exhibit “an uneasy marriage of fact and fiction, of documentary handbook and elaborate plot.”

The preaching and interpreting novels began in the 1890s, the post-pioneer period, according to Stevens. She describes the preaching novels as those which attempt to instruct their readers, and
includes the temperance and women's rights novels. The interpreting novels, she says, attempt to evaluate and describe colonial society and "to depict the thoughts and actions of characters representative of real life." Stevens' categories and her relating of them to stages of development in colonial society are apt and pertinent, and there is some overlap between them and the categories I construct in this thesis. Despite considering these early novels worthy of this long overdue attention, in describing them Stevens' tone is often derogatory. She rounds off her survey with the comment that although Edith Searle Grossmann (1863-1931) is worth reading for historical reasons, no novelist is worth reading in their own right until William Satchell, whose The Greenstone Door was published in 1914.

Peter Alcock's 1978 article "The Writing of Women in New Zealand" declares that "The first woman's title of interest is Edith Searle Grossmann's The Heart of the Bush (1910)", but concludes that Grossmann is one of "history's victims" and that it is not until Robin Hyde that New Zealand women achieve "range and depth".

The approach of the centenary of women's suffrage sparked a new interest in these novels, particularly by women, as is reflected by a marked increase in the amount of critical material published and the more serious consideration afforded to these novelists. In 1989 Heather Roberts published Where Did She Come From? New Zealand Women Novelists 1862-1987, which retraces the literary heritage of New Zealand women. Roberts is motivated by the belief that "much of what women write is deliberately suppressed by people who consider that the experiences women write about are unimportant and irrelevant." She finds value in these novelists because of their contribution to the literary tradition and because "they provide us with an interpretation of women's history in this country".

In the same year appeared In Deadly Earnest: A Collection of Fiction by New Zealand Women 1870s-1890s, selected and introduced by Trudie McNaughton. McNaughton has chosen excerpts from the fiction of some of these women and supplemented them with brief biographies, in an attempt to make this literature accessible to the public.

The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English, edited by Terry Sturm, appeared in 1991. An extremely comprehensive history, it mentions almost all of these early women novelists in the chapters "The Novel", Children's Literature" or "Popular Fiction". The contributors present reasonably balanced criticism of a representative selection of the novels.

Roger Robinson and Nelson Wattie produced The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature in 1998. It includes fewer of the early women novelists than does The Oxford History, but the contributors are often enthusiasts - presenting much useful information and constructive criticism of the literature.

In 1998 Stuart Murray published Never a Soul at Home: New Zealand Literary Nationalism and the 1930s, in which he attributes the devaluing of New Zealand women's literature which occurred in the 1930s to the creation of a national identity which favoured masculinist values. The emerging nationalist
paradigm in literature “stressed the centrality of male capability” and celebrated the “gruff, singular male identity” that came to be epitomized by Alan Mulgan’s 1939 novel, Man Alone. Murray sees the misogyny apparent in 1930s literature and literary criticism as emerging from “the national need to administer difference through strong oppositionality, and the continual fear of parallel and alternative narratives that might exist.” He notes that “these alternatives were often those of women.” A group of male writers of the time was “both nervous and scornful of the extent to which women had dominated the previous decades of New Zealand writing”, and rejected what was considered to be the female/colonial tradition, with its “slavish devotion to the modes and models of a genteel Englishness” and its identification of England as “Home”. (Murray draws attention to the fact that, keen as it was to establish its literature as independent of Britain, New Zealand’s move towards “a sheltered, backblocks nationalism” was mirrored in British literature by escapist dreams and fears of the collapse of civilization. He concludes that “the explicit statement of cultural distinction can be drawn back into the very structures from which it seeks to disassociate itself.”)

Mary Paul’s 1999 book Her Side of the Story: Readings of Mander, Mansfield and Hyde highlights how past interpretations of these writers’ works have been significant in creating New Zealand’s view of its literature and culture. Paul offers a variety of contemporary interpretations of selected works by Mander, Mansfield and Hyde, reminding the reader that interpretation is a process which can never be completed. Paul credits the “restoration” of Hyde, which occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, to a new feminist consciousness, but points out the dangers of the tendency for feminist identity politics to “cause a swing from marginalisation to adulation - from one extreme to another - in the reception of a woman writer.” Noting that it is no longer necessary to argue for the importance of Hyde’s work, Paul attempts to transcend the dialectic with a reading of Hyde’s work in which she looks “more closely at the writing in its original social and political context.”

This thesis calls for the restoration of our earliest women novelists. None of them has Hyde’s literary skill, so there is no danger of the excesses of adulation here, but Paul’s approach - studying the writing in its original social and political context - is the one I have chosen to take towards these novels, in order to examine their significance in the recording, interpretation and formulation of a New Zealand culture and literature.

The notions of “value” exhibited by the earlier critics with regard to these novels are productions of a masculinist nationalist literary criticism which mediates the world through men’s eyes and marginalises women’s interests and concerns. This has led to a bias towards male experiences and values in our literary history and the exclusion of women’s views and values from the literary canon. Their utilisation of British literary forms meant these early women’s novels were considered hybrids between British and New Zealand forms. This was seen to be irrelevant to New Zealand’s emerging nationalism, so these novels were disregarded in favour of more “authentic” New Zealand writing. New
Zealand's national identity is constructed from representations of its society in literature, and this earliest era has previously been interpreted from a less than representative body of texts.

The passage of time and the effects of feminism have produced a new interest in and respect for the pioneers of New Zealand women's literature. The suppression of the feminine half of our early literature means the resulting reality is distorted, and it is time to right the balance. Novels can be valued for more than the patriarchal definition of literary merit. As Clara Cheeseman wrote, the novels of her time "may serve to show future generations how the men and women of our day acted and spoke." Women's literature provides us with a fuller and richer understanding of New Zealand's colonial culture (a significant number of our first women novelists claim an element of "truth" to their novels through their subtitles. The title of this thesis, "A Colonial Tale of Fact and Fiction", is one of the subtitles of Rachael MacPherson's effort *The Mystery of the Forecastle; Or, A Restless Heart: A Colonial Tale of Fact and Fiction*. Other forms of this factual assertion are: *A True Story of Domestic Life at Home and in the Bush*, and *A Story of New Zealand Life*, which is frequently used). These novels communicate what it meant to be a woman in New Zealand at that time, and reveal women's interpretations of society, class, culture, nationalism, feminism and race.

Women's experiences communicate a different side of life - the domestic world. The novels convey women's efforts to sustain their families and their problems with servants and household economics, as well as expressing personal concerns such as marital problems and the desire for artistic expression and spiritual fulfillment. In some cases they convey the attempts of Pakeha women to exist alongside another oppressed group - Maori - and to negotiate a place for them in society or, more commonly, in order to justify their own position as colonisers, they completely ignore their existence.

While they were later denigrated for their use of existing fictional forms (in particular the much maligned melodrama which was considered to belong to an inferior genre), these colonial women novelists in fact show resourcefulness in the ways they adapted literary genres to the antipodean setting. They produced the bulk of the country's fiction, and their work reveals the nature of popular taste - some of these novelists sold a considerable number of books, received good reviews, and were expected to be enduring figures in New Zealand's literary history. One example is Anne Glenny Wilson who, unheard of now, wrote novels and poetry which were well received both in New Zealand and in Britain. A reviewer from the *European Mail* said "New Zealanders may feel justly proud of her as a permanent, if not a blazing, star in the ever-widening firmament of Australasian song."

These novels are the closest we can come to knowing how life was actually lived by our colonial foremothers. Their domestic and social information contributes to making these novels informative, enjoyable and entertaining. Reinstated at the beginning of the literary timeline, these women's novels are beginning to be valued for the complementary contribution women's fiction makes to women's history - providing a snapshot of the interests, concerns and desires of our literary ancestors, and a voice for these women. Through their novels, this thesis seeks to uncover and analyse evidence of these
writers’ attitudes to issues such as the presence of interaction with Maori, their relationship with the land, English notions of “Class” and “Society”, women’s roles and spheres, the opportunities available to women, the construction of “the woman writer” and how New Zealand eventually became home.

**Distant Homes: Or the Graham Family in New Zealand** (1862) is generally regarded as the first New Zealand novel by a woman, despite the fact that its author, Isabella Aylmer, never even visited New Zealand. At the beginning of a study such as this it is necessary to determine what exactly is to be considered a New Zealand novel. Joan Stevens confronts this issue in *The New Zealand Novel 1860-1965*:

**WHAT IS A NEW ZEALAND NOVEL?** The first question is, what exactly are we to regard as a “New Zealand novel”? Is it a novel set in New Zealand, no matter what it is about? Is it a novel published in New Zealand? . . .

It is worth while deciding upon a definition because this makes us consider what we hope to find in a New Zealand novel. It is not enough for the purposes of this book that a novelist lives here; a “New Zealand novel” will be taken to be one which is related to this country, or to its people, or to the experience of life as human beings meet it in these islands.38

Joan Stevens’ definition is logical, and my own definition concurs with it, with the minor difference that I include the overseas novels of the New Zealand novelists Edith Searle Grossmann and Louisa Baker. (Despite her definition, Stevens does include Grossmann’s novels which are set in Australia in her discussion.)

Another grey area is occupied by Aylmer’s *Distant Homes* and Emilia Marryat’s *Amongst the Maoris*, which are included in Betty Gilderdale’s chapter “Children’s Fiction” in the *Oxford History* (while they are both treated as adult novels by other critics). I include *Distant Homes* and *Amongst the Maoris* in this study precisely because they are novels, which qualifies them for inclusion.

The subject of this thesis is loosely nineteenth-century New Zealand women’s novels, but rather than imposing a cut-off date of 1900, I have looked to the novels for a natural division around the turn of the century. I have included those novelists who began publishing in the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth. Two sole works published in 1905 have also been included, as in each case they mark the end of a largely nineteenth-century concern. I do not include in this study the novels of G.B. Lancaster, whose first novel was published in 1905.

Locating copies of these novels was time consuming, expensive and often frustrating. Not one of them is in print. Only a few are held at public libraries, and if published before 1900 they are not available for loan. Enrolled university students can access glass cases or interloan some of these novels but the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, which holds the most comprehensive collection of these novels, will not interloan pre-1900 publications (although it has made microfiche copies of several of these novels, which it will lend). In several cases a microfiche in America is the only publicly
held copy of a novel. The only copy of Annabella Forbes' *Helena* which The University of Auckland Library could track down is held by Hackney Borough Library, London, whose copy is ex-South Africa Public Library. Perhaps the longest search was for Lady Campbell's three-volume *Martin Tobin*, in the absence of Lady Campbell's full name. An equivalent situation in Australia has been remedied in the last couple of decades by a reclamation of their early women novelists and the republication of novels by writers such as Rosa Praed, Ada Cambridge, Catherine Helen Spence, "Tasma" and Catherine Martin.

When I read the New Zealand novels, it was quickly apparent that they assumed three main forms. First come what I have termed the "Adventure Stories", four novels (one encompassing three volumes) written mainly by British immigrants or visitors to New Zealand, which encompass Stevens's recording and some of her exploiting novels. The adventure stories were usually published in England and written for the English reading public, describing the new country and its inhabitants to people back "Home". Information from travel guides is inserted into an often sensational plot. The tales encompass the dangers of settler life, long journeys through the bush, weird and wonderful flora, fauna and the habits of the natives. The politics of settlement and the New Zealand Wars provide much fact-based opportunity for thrilling yarns. The content of the adventure stories receives primary emphasis rather than the method of expression.

Next comes "The Romance", novels produced by the embryonic settler society, which correlate with Stevens’s interpreting and the remainder of her exploiting novels. These eleven novels appeared during the period 1874-1905. Excitement at the strange new land having abated, developing society receives attention, as does the constitution of New Zealanders and a New Zealand way of life. The form of the romance was imported from England, but it began to communicate peculiarly New Zealand concerns. These include the necessary modification of traditional class rules in a country where, through necessity, gentlemen undertook physical work and ladies performed housework in the mornings and received visitors in the afternoons. There is discussion about the degree of physical activity and level of colloquial speech that can be enjoyed by colonial women without it seeming improper, and the issue of the place of Maori in nineteenth-century New Zealand society. During this time novels begin to be published in New Zealand and aimed at a New Zealand audience. First generation colonials begin writing, providing a different view both of "Home" and Australasia, and marking the beginnings of a specifically Australasian woman’s novel.

Finally there are the "Didactic Novels", twenty-nine novels published between 1882 and 1910 - Stevens’s preaching novels. Along with a new country came the expectation of a society improved upon the one left behind. Women's often outspoken arguments for the improvement of women's lives sometimes make an uneasy marriage with plot, as temperance, religion and women's rights are tackled. The temperance novels are aimed at a New Zealand audience, but the feminist ones are more pandemic in their intended audience.
This thesis plots the emergence and development of the nineteenth-century New Zealand women’s novel. The lack of availability of these novels means few are familiar with these works so, like Stevens, I provide plot summaries. Due to the unequal proportions of novels in the three genres, the four novels in “Adventure Stories” are analysed in more detail than the eleven novels in “The Romance”, or the twenty-nine in “Didactic Novels”.

In the course of my research I have found biographical information for some of these novelists, but in many cases no record of their lives has as yet come to light. In a case such as Lady Martin’s, we know nothing of her life, how long she lived in New Zealand or, in fact, whether she ever set foot here at all. Seemingly at the other end of the scale, the researcher of Ellen Ellis is blessed with a biography. However, written by a family member and not referenced, the picture presented of Ellis could be unreliable. I hope future researchers will be able to fill in some of these gaps.

The focus of this thesis is novels, but some of these women also wrote in other forms. For instance Anne Glenny Wilson, as previously mentioned, was an accomplished poet as well as novelist. Many of Wilson’s letters also survive in the biography of her husband, a minor political figure. Clara Cheeseman wrote short stories and literary essays, as well as a three-volume novel. Where this additional material is available I have drawn upon it when to do so enriches a study of the novels.

The analysis I apply to the novels in this thesis does not heavily utilise literary theory, this will be a subsequent step for future researchers. It has seemed appropriate, in the first comprehensive study of this genre, to focus on a reclamation and consolidation of the work as a whole. My theoretical approach is along new historicist lines, as I attempt to analyse the novels in the light of contemporary history and politics (particularly relevant when approaching historically and culturally sensitive topics such as the relationships between the races and the sexes). I do, in addition, employ post-colonial and feminist theory to formulate interpretations where this has proven to be helpful.
Endnotes for Introduction

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