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Chamier the Epicurean: The Life and Works of George Chamier (1842-1915)

Sean Roderick Sturm

The world’s a labyrinth, where misguided men
Walk up and down to find their weariness;
No sooner have we measured, with much toil,
One crooked path, in hope to gain our freedom,
But it betrays us to a new affliction.

George Chamier, The Story of a Successful Man
(VII)¹

We shall all reach the final goal soon enough, in any case;
why not take it easy, and enjoy ourselves by the way?

—George Chamier, A South-Sea Siren (113)

¹“Beaumont” (actually John Fletcher), “The Night-Walker, or, the Little Thief,” The Works of Beaumont and Fletcher, with an Introduction by George Darley, vol. 2 (1611, rev. 1640; London: Edward Moxon, 1840) 680 (IV.vi.21-25), quoted as the epigraph to chapter VII of SSM.
Abstract

George Chamier (1842-1915) was an engineer and novelist, who was born and died in England, but spent most of his life on an eccentric orbit around the outskirts of the British Empire—through New Zealand, Australia and China and back to England again. After he had established himself as an engineer in Australia, he looked back on his life in a trilogy of autoethnographical novels, which work through the problem of how an “unsettled settler” such as he might get settled in the settler colonies. *Philosopher Dick* (1890) and *A South-Sea Siren* (1895) are set in the eighteen-sixties in North Canterbury, New Zealand on a back country station and in a small town respectively; *The Story of a Successful Man* (1895) is set in the eighteen-seventies in “Marvellous Melbourne.”

This thesis, “Chamier the Epicurean,” examines Chamier’s life and (fictional) works in the light of two key questions. The first is:

How can we understand the distinctive critical perspective on life in the settler colonies in the early days of European settlement that his novels articulate?

The “outside insideness” of his position as an unsettled settler can account for the critical purchase he has on his own culture. Such a perspective is unusual in the history of local settler literature, not just because it is critical of settler society or “unsettling,” but because it is critical in an unusual way: Chamier unsettles himself by problematising his own position as a settler, thereby generating a critical autoethnography—to borrow Deborah Reed-Danahay’s definition, a critical “self (auto) ethnography” that is also “the ethnography of [his] own group,” his own ethnos (people).

And the second question that informs this thesis is:

How can we understand the relation between his life and works, given the degree to which the former seems to inform the latter?

In the novels, he makes sense of his life in hindsight as a sentimental education. He has his autoethnographical “stand-ins” take on a series of sentimental personas in the attempt to get themselves settled as they move through the Australasian colonies in an ironic appropriation of the grand narrative of settlement as a progress from frontier to town to city. To see his life in hindsight as “mapped out” in this way was a gesture of aesthetic
settlement that enabled Chamier to achieve an Epicurean equanimity he was able to find only fleetingly in the scramble of life in the settler colonies.
Above all, I need to acknowledge my wife Jacqui Anderson Sturm and our children Freya and Sasha for keeping me company on my eccentric path. I could not have completed this thesis without the confidence that they travelled beside me. I thank my parents Rod and Jennifer Sturm and Margaret Ushakoff for looking out for me personally and financially and my uncle Terry Sturm for lighting the way ahead.

I acknowledge the supervisors of my thesis, Alex Calder (the main supervisor) and Wystan Curnow (the co-supervisor), and my colleague Stephen Turner in the Department of English at the University of Auckland for their introduction to and exemplary performances of the reading of settler texts, written and visual. I have especially relied on Alex’s timely interventions in the writing process and his theoretical scepticism.

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I thank the members of the Chamier family, in particular Anthony Edward Deschamps Chamier and Jenny Chamier Grove, for furnishing me with much biographical material and allowing me to publish written and visual material from their personal collections. Their support has been indispensable. I also acknowledge the assistance of J. Kelvin Chamier, Nigel Chamier and Jonathan Warner.

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and Doug Stapleton. Major Alan Harfield (British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia), Anthony Laube (State Library of South Australia) and Carol Morgan (Institution of Civil Engineers, London) provided biographical material for other episodes of Chamier’s life.

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The initial impetus for the thesis came from discussions in 2002 with Terry Sturm and with Paul Carter and Andrew McCann at the University of Melbourne. Much of the material was first aired at Conferences of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature in Sydney (2004) and Adelaide (2005), and benefited from discussions with Lydia Wevers (Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies at Victoria University,
Wellington) and the editorship of Barbara Milech (Curtin University in Western Australia) of the Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature.

Lastly, I am indebted to Carol Franklin, whose paper at the 1994 Conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature first announced the discovery of George Chamier’s lost third novel, on which the argument of this thesis relies.

_He aha te mea nui o te ao? Māku e kī atu he tangata, he tangata!_
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59 Sample chapter heading of *Story of a Successful Man*.

60 *War and Pessimism*: front cover and spine.

**Abbreviations**

1 Texts by George Chamier (for in-text citation)
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<td><strong>AT</strong></td>
<td>Chamier on Australian Timber.</td>
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<td><strong>Capacities</strong></td>
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<td><strong>SSS</strong></td>
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<td><strong>SSS GR</strong></td>
<td>“A South-Sea Siren.” Good Reading about Many Books Mostly by Their Authors.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>UW</strong></td>
<td>The Utilisation of Water in South Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WP</strong></td>
<td>War and Pessimism, and Other Studies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 Texts by other authors (for footnote citation)

**AUP Correspondence** Auckland University Press Correspondence: “New Zealand Fiction: Series 1 . . .”

**Daniel’s letter** Daniel Chamier (VIII). “Account of my brother William’s children. . . .”

**ICE letter** Institution of Civil Engineers (Great Britain). Letter to the author (15 June 2005).

**MPICE** Institution of Civil Engineers (Great Britain). Minutes and Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers.


**PICE** Institution of Civil Engineers (Great Britain). Proceedings.

**PP SA** South Australia Parliament. Parliamentary Papers, South Australia (Bound Cumulations).
Textual Note

All references to *A South-Sea Siren* (1895) cite the more readily accessible second edition (1970). All references to *The Story of a Successful Man* (1895), which was published only in serial form, cite chapter numbers rather than page numbers for ease of reference.