

From Life Lines to Life Stories

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This is partly a personal story of where journalism can lead – in my case to the writing of books. I was a journalist for many years, first with the Australian News and Information, the Commonwealth Government's overseas publicity organisation, in Melbourne and then in Canberra, then with the ABC in the press gallery in Canberra. By that time of my life my work had to fit in with babies and young children and shift work was surprisingly attractive. But in 1968 I went to work for Maxwell Newton Publications, the initial attraction being that I could work from home.

Max was a famous character in those days, the first editor of the *Australian*. After a falling out with Rupert Murdoch he began his own series of subscription newsletters in Canberra. They included at that stage *Legislative and Parliamentary Review*, *Observer*, *Tariff Week*, *Management News* and *Minerals Week*. Subscribers paid quite large sums to have these posted weekly so they could read 'inside' news, particularly aspects of economic and political news, not always covered in newspapers, TV or radio in those days.

I became editor of *Tariff Week* immediately and later edited *Parliamentary and Legislative Review* for awhile. Editing meant everything from writing the copy to the final check before printing. I had no particular knowledge of tariffs but most journalists in those days were generalists. Apart from my involvement, the complete journalistic staff at that time was Max Newton, who operated the business from his home in Deakin, Richard Farmer who occupied the house next door with the newsroom and typesetters in the lounge and a printing press in the laundry. I also lived in Deakin about a mile away and I called in daily to collect and discuss material and to hand in copy.

The Liberal Government had been in power for many years and many public servants were bored and disaffected. Canberra leaked, rather as it does now, and this is what we depended on for a lot of information.

Later Newton Publications expanded by buying up a string of country newspapers and the *Daily Commercial News*, originally a shipping paper, but which Max aspired to turn into a general financial paper. When the operation moved to Sydney, I became Canberra correspondent for the *Daily Commercial News* and some other publications, by then under the control of Cyril Wyndham. I left some time before Maxwell Newton Publications collapsed.

Then I became editor of publications for a statutory authority, the National Capital Development Commission, a very different challenge. By that time I'd reached Grade A1.

When I left full-time employment I began writing books on subjects that interested me. I'd always been interested in history so at first I researched aspects of women's history particularly their own records. Since then I've followed two strands in my writing, first, the field of women's letters and diaries and, second, the strand that grew out of my experience in journalism, the lives of women writers and journalists.

It's usually said that getting your first book published is the most difficult. I was fortunate that my

first book, *The Governesses* (1985), based on letters written by women whose migration to the colonies was financed by the London-based Female Middle Class Emigration Society, was taken by Hutchinson, later Century Hutchinson, now Random House, and my second, *A Colonial Woman* (1986) was published the following year by Allen & Unwin. This was the beginning of a long association with this publisher. *A Colonial Woman* was based on diaries kept by Mary Braidwood Mowle who lived on the Limestone Plains (later the site of Canberra) and at Eden on the far south Coast of New South Wales in the middle of the 19th century. These two books were quite successful, not so much in a financial sense as in gaining fairly wide recognition. *The Governesses* was reviewed extensively in England as well as Australia and *A Colonial Woman* went into three reprintings within six months and a paperback edition a few years later. It's just recently been republished after being out of print for 10 years.

I continued this strand of research with *Life Lines* (1992), a book of women's letters and diaries from the early years of European settlement, that I wrote with Dale Spender.

Simultaneously with these books on women's life writing, I began researching the beginning of women's journalism in this country. When I first entered journalism, it was still very much a male profession. Most women journalists employed on newspapers and periodicals were still to be found on the women's pages. When women did succeed in getting jobs as journalists, however, they were paid the same rate as men, at a time when, for instance, women teachers and public servants were paid only a percentage of male wages. These aspects and others made the beginning of women's journalism an interesting historical subject.

My initial research was published as *Pen Portraits. Women Writers and Journalists in Nineteenth Century Australia* (1988). When I began this research not a great deal had been done in this field. It involved a great deal of detective work following elusive leads, unearthing women's contributions to newspapers and periodicals, much published anonymously or under pseudonyms. In the course of this research I discovered some previously unknown or barely known early women journalists. I also documented the quite common overlap between women writing fiction and factual material.

Some of the better known women writers, for instance Ada Cambridge, Tasma and Rosa Praed, achieved publication in book form without much trouble, more usually through English publishers. The lesser known discovered that the more accessible outlets for their fiction were newspapers and periodicals, particularly if they were able to satisfy the insatiable demand for serials.

It was the age of serials (the soap operas of the day). In England the next episode of Charles Dickens' latest serial was awaited eagerly. When serial reading was at its height many newspapers and periodicals ran three or four simultaneously. This was a great opportunity for Australian writers particularly for women who had few other opportunities for making money.

Through this first contact with newspapers, some women writers were also able to interest editors in factual articles. The first Australian-born woman novelist, Louisa Atkinson, started in this way. After serials published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Sydney Mail* she was able to persuade the editor, James Fairfax, to publish a series of articles, 'A Voice from the Country'. This became the first long-running newspaper series by a woman to be published in Australia. It continued, with some breaks, from 1860 to her death in 1872. Jessie Lloyd did much the same thing, writing from Coonamble twenty years later, with her series 'The Silverleaf Papers', published in the *Illustrated Sydney News* following publication of her first serial in the same work.

These and many other women like them were the forerunners of women journalists. The more fortunate

were engaged under arrangements with some continuity to do a series of articles but the majority were casual contributors with no security and were no doubt paid, as were many male contributors, at so much per line.

It's an example of the compromises women had to make to break into even the periphery of journalism. Compromises, in varying degrees, continued, as I know from my own experience. When I worked for the ABC in the 1960s, although I worked full-time during most of five or six years, I was employed as a casual throughout. This was no great hardship. Journalists were much scarcer in those days and I had no apprehension that I would be dispensed with. In fact when a permanent vacancy occurred and I was asked to apply I felt that I had more control over how and when I worked as a casual employee. Later, as I've said, it was important to me that my job with Max Newton was work I could do at home. Max had no interest in when or how work was done as long as the contents were right and the publications got out on time.

To return to the 1880s – a time when a few women began to be appointed to full-time positions on newspapers and periodicals, among them Lucy Gullett in Melbourne (later Sydney), Mary Hannay Foott in Brisbane, Ina Wildman on the *Bulletin*, Florence Baverstock the *Bulletin*, then the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and several others. There was also the great achievement of Louisa Lawson with *The Dawn*, a paper for Australian women. During its seventeen years it was remarkably successful in fighting for women's rights, as was Maybanke Wolstenholme's shorter-lived *A Woman's Voice*.

Many of these early women journalists were outstanding women of great ability who wrote widely on many subjects not only those of interest to women readers only. Unfortunately as women's pages became a feature of newspapers and periodicals, women journalists, although employed in greater numbers, were increasingly confined to the writing of superficial news, innocuous social notes and household hints. They were, as the *Bulletin* wrote, confined to 'the deadly, dreary ruck of long dress reports and the lists of those who "also ran" at miscellaneous functions'. Women journalists were not the only losers, for what they wrote tended to reinforce complacency in their women readers and to shield them from issues of some significance.

Writing *Pen Portraits* made me aware of the stories of many women writers and this led to my writing biographies of three women whose stories are tied to the development of feminism and the emergence of women from domesticity. I chose these women because their lives were important and interesting but also because there were sources for following their lives.

The first was a biography of Louisa Atkinson, *Pioneer Writer. The Life of Louisa Atkinson, Novelist, Journalist, Naturalist* (1990). Louisa Atkinson was the first Australian-born woman novelist, a noted naturalist and illustrator, and as I mentioned before, one of our earliest women journalists. Her first novel, *Gertrude, the Emigrant*, was published in 1857. Her monthly nature column, 'A Voice from the Country' began in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 1 March 1860. It was a very popular series through which readers gained a new appreciation of the native plants, birds and animals, she discovered around the Kurrajong area of the Blue Mountains and near her birthplace, Sutton Forest, on the Southern Tablelands of New South Wales. Although she had no formal scientific training, Louisa Atkinson became an expert botanist and several plants were named after her. She was well ahead of her era in advocating the preservation of native vegetation. In researching Louisa Atkinson I was fortunate to find the papers relating to a series of court cases from the 1830s in the New South Wales Archives. These papers, untouched for over 150 years, recorded the legal battle by Louisa's mother Charlotte Barton to secure custody of her children. They also contained many invaluable details of the life of Louisa's family and her childhood.

My next biography *Tasma* (1994) was published by Allen & Unwin. Tasma was the pseudonym of

novelist, journalist and lecturer, Jessie Couvreur. When her first novel *Uncle Piper of Piper's Hill*, set in post goldrush Melbourne, was published in London in 1889 it was hailed as the book of the season. But Tasma was also remarkable for her other careers as lecturer and journalist.

Before she left Australia to live in Europe in 1879, she'd begun contributing to annuals, newspapers and periodicals, particularly the *Australasian*. From Europe she sent a stream of articles on theatre, art, literature, politics, and social movements to the *Australasian*. Probably neither before nor since have readers in Australia had the opportunity to follow so consistently and in such depth the intellectual life of Europe as they did when reading Tasma's articles in the 1880s.

In Europe she also found another unusual career as a lecturer, a role for which there were few female models. She lectured in French all over Belgium and France, on the geography, history, industries, culture, and social progress of Australia. During a speaking tour of Belgium in 1881, as reports of her speeches appeared in the press, interest developed to a crescendo. In Antwerp, 1200 people attended her lecture and she received a telegram inviting her to an audience with King Leopold in Brussels. Her lectures were so highly regarded she was made an Officer of the Academy by the French Government, an award given rarely to foreigners and even more rarely to women.

After visiting Australia and gaining a divorce from her first husband Charles Fraser – another unusual feature of her life as in that year, 1883, only a handful of divorces were granted - she married Auguste Couvreur, a distinguished Belgian journalist and statesman who was Vice President of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives. After Couvreur's death in 1894, Tasma was appointed Brussels correspondent of the London *Times* in his place. This was an extremely prestigious, demanding and unusual position for a woman. She was so successful, Holland was added to the territory she covered.

When I was researching Tasma's biography, I went to the *Times* archives at Wapping in London and handled the old volumes where the *Times* Foreign Manager had ringed in blue pencil her almost daily dispatches, on subjects ranging from politics and education to the Congo. In the Foreign Manager's Letterbook, I also read his very demanding instructions on the subjects he wanted her to cover. Under this tutelage her dispatches became highly regarded and some of her material was used in *Times* editorials.

Now to Rosa Praed, a writer maybe unknown to many of you. Yet in her heyday in England in the 1880s and 1890s she was a famous novelist, the first Australian-born writer to achieve a significant international reputation (Webby in Praed 1997).

At the end of 1999 Melbourne University Press published my biography of Rosa Praed, *Rosa! Rosa!* The major part of this book necessarily concentrated on the two-thirds or more of her life she spent in England. But it was the first 24 years of her life in colonial Queensland that provided the inspiration for nearly half of her literary output of 45 books.

I'm now researching and writing about Rosa Praed's Queensland, the colonial world she created in her Australian novels. It's the only re-creation of nineteenth century Australian society, in such complete form and with such richness and diversity - with the possible exception of the very different world of Henry Handel Richardson's Victoria.

At the beginning of her novel, *Outlaw and Lawmaker*, Rosa Praed wrote: 'Anyone who has travelled through Australia will identify the Leich[h]ardt's Land of these pages, though in the map it is called differently...' (1893, p.1). Leichhardt's Land was the fictional colonial world she created in nearly 20 books.

Leichhardt's Town was the capital, the west was the Leura and innumerable small towns and localities had their fictional names, some very easy to identify—Kangaroo Point was Emu Point and Rockhampton was sometimes Stonehampton. All of them were recognisably Queensland in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Rosa Praed's Queensland was formed by her family background, her social conditioning as a woman, and her acute observation of political events, social conventions, the Australian landscape and race relations during the first 24 years of her life. After she left Australia in 1876, she refuelled this vision during her long novel-writing career in England, seeking and obtaining specific information from sources such as family correspondence and reminiscences, copies of Hansards, and newspapers. Her novels raise all sorts of questions about colonial society - the relationship between the sexes, the influence of British attitudes, the development of an Australian character, the impact of the landscape, frontier wars, labour conflicts, race relations, political issues, squatter society and vice-regal representatives to such specialised subjects as lost children, euthanasia, divorce, gold rushes, shipwrecks and a host of others.

How true was this portrayal of colonial Queensland, influenced, as it was, by her social position as the daughter of a squatter and conservative Cabinet Minister, and limited by the fact that she lived in Australia for less than one-third of her life? When the Premier, Sir Arthur Palmer, read what is sometimes taken as a portrayal of himself in Rosa Praed's early novel, *Policy and Passion* (1881), he was astonished. He wrote telling her he had asked himself where 'on Earth' had Rosie Prior 'learned all these things?' Where indeed? Although she wrote fiction, Rosa Praed had all the instincts of a journalist. As a young woman when her father was Postmaster-General in Arthur Palmer's ministries, she'd spent hours in the parliamentary gallery listening to debates, storing up this knowledge of Queensland politics. She reinforced this with news she received in family letters particularly, in the early years, from her step-mother Nora Murray-Prior, who passed on the latest political news and social gossip, as well as specific information Rosa requested. All this supplemented her own experiences - as a child at Hawkwood in the Burnett district, as a young girl at Maroon and Rathdowney in the south-east border ranges, and as a young married woman on a cattle station on Curtis Island.

As decades went by and she remained in England, the political dynamics of colonial society changed but she was able to portray some of the changes in politics and society, even to write about events and places she'd only heard about, by using information from her family supplemented by other sources.

After I leave this conference I'm going to visit (with Ann Nugent who is also at this conference and who was born at Winton) some stations, including Aberfoyle and Bulliwallah. Rosa Praed used these stations as settings for some of her most successful novels. These include *Mrs Tregaskiss* (1895), *Opal Fire* (1910) and *Lady Bridget in the Never-Never Land* (1915). Her sister Lizzie Jardine lived at Aberfoyle station north of Aramac and south of Torrens Creek and her brother, Tom Murray-Prior, east over the Great Dividing Range at Bulliwallah, between Clermont and Charters Towers. Other brothers worked at these properties at various times.

In novels and short stories set in this area of huge distances and frequent drought, that she named the Leura, Rosa Praed raised many subjects important in the history of Queensland - for example, the 1890s shearers strikes, Aboriginal/European conflicts, children lost in the bush, gold rushes and tropical illnesses.

During the 1880s and 1890s Rosa received a stream of news from these stations, particularly during the period of the great shearers' strikes from Aberfoyle. Although Aberfoyle was not a major squatter centre - it was run mainly as a cattle station - Jack Jardine was prominent in supporting Sydney Fraser, manager of

the huge Bowen Downs station near Aramac. The strike news Rosa received was all from the squatters' side - the burning of woolsheds, killing of livestock, the cutting of fences, train derailments, firing of paddocks, attacks on non-unionists, the arrival of the police, militia and special constables, and the culminating gaoling of union leaders - but she also made at least a gesture in attempting to understand the shearers' views by requesting a copy of the *Worker*. Overall, she conveys in a dramatic way at least some aspects of this defining event in Australian history.

If she'd lived in Australia perhaps she would have placed more importance on what the shearers were fighting for. In England she'd developed a reputation for her extraordinary ability to catch, in fact to help to create, the mood of the moment as she's done in *The Bond of Wedlock* in demonstrating the need for reform of the marriage laws and in *Affinities* (1885) where she'd portrayed the first wave of interest in theosophy.

Between Aberfoyle and Bulliwallah lies Lake Buchanan, the scene of several tragedies of lost children in her novels and short stories. Peter Pierce has described Australia as 'The Country of Lost Children' (1999). For Rosa Praed, her fictional Leura was the country of lost children. She heard about Lake Buchanan from her brother Morres Murray-Prior who described a trip he made on horseback from Aberfoyle to Bulliwallah skirting the Lake. She also had from her sister Lizzie Morres's involvement in the true story of the child of a fencer on Uanda, a neighbouring station to Aberfoyle, lost in the bush and eventually found dead. She set several tragedies of lost children in this area, including the loss of the child 'Ning' in *Mrs Tregaskiss* near the shore of the Lake. She also set a very disturbing short story about the loss of two abused children on this Lake.

Another subject which appears in Rosa Praed's novel *Opal Fire* and which I'm researching in this area is the incidence and treatment of leprosy. Although comparatively rare, leprosy caused great paranoia in 19th century Queensland, particularly its association with the arrival of Chinese in large numbers during the Palmer River gold rushes. These goldrushes and the loss of the passenger ship, the *Quetta*, are other issues that feature in another of Rosa Praed's novels.

Rosa Praed's writing on Aboriginal people and events on the Aboriginal/European frontier is an important aspect of her autobiographical and fictional writing. As a child she'd lived at Hawkwood station in the same general area as Hornet Bank where, in 1857, Aboriginal people killed eleven Europeans. Rosa's father, Thomas Lodge Murray-Prior, organised the early retaliation against the Yiman people, later taken over by the Native Police, which resulted in their virtual elimination. Some estimates are of 500 killed.

Twenty-five years after this event, Rosa asked her father to write down his reminiscences of his early life, particularly his memories of Aboriginal people. He held views typical of an early pioneer, a coloniser, who saw nothing wrong, in fact virtue, in taking the land that had been occupied by Aboriginal people for countless centuries and in attempting to 'tame' the wild or Myall blacks, at the same time acting in a what he considered a kindly, paternalistic way to 'station' blacks.

Rosa Praed used this material in her autobiographical writing and she made incidental use of it in several novels. But her attitude to Aboriginal people, partly because of her own childhood friendships with Aboriginal children, partly through the influence of theosophy, and partly through radical attitudes which influenced her in England, evolved away from her father's views. By the time she published her novel, *Lady Bridget in the Never-Never Land* (1915), she articulated, through her main character, views on Aboriginal

people very different from the coloniser's views of her father.

When she first meets the outback squatter Colin McKeith at a Government House dinner Lady Bridget O'Hara asks (during a conversation that is remarkable for its topicality nearly a century later):

'What do the Blacks do now to you people to make you treat them unkindly?'

'...to us squatters you mean?' Colin [asks]. 'Why they begin by spearing our cattle and then they take to spearing ourselves.'

'Did they ever spear you?' she asked.

'...I owe that to a spear through my thigh one night that the Blacks rushed my camp when I was asleep. And I'd given their gins rations that very morning.'

'And then?' Lady Bridget's voice was tense.

'Oh then – after they'd murdered a white man or two, the rest of us whites – there wasn't more than a handful of us at that time up on the Leura – banded together and drove them off into the back country. We had a dangerous job with those Blacks until King Mograbar was shot down.'

'King Mograbar! How cruelly unjust. It was his country you were *stealing*.' She accentuated the last word with bitter scorn.

'Well! If you come to that, I suppose Captain Cook was stealing when he hoisted the British flag in Botany Bay,' said McKeith.

'And if he hadn't, what about the glorious British record, and the March of Civilisation?' put in Vereker Wells.

Bridget shot a scathing glance at the aide de camp.

'I don't admire your glorious British record, I think it's nothing but a record of robbery, murder and cruelty, beginning with Ireland and ending with South Africa.'

I've touched on just a few aspects of Rosa Praed's Queensland novels and not at all on the major theme of all her novels - relationships between the sexes and the reality and disillusion of marriage. Her colonial world is limited, in the sense that it's a middle-class, squatter world, in which, for instance, workers appear as 'characters' rather than as central figures. Nevertheless, in her novels and autobiographies, there's a great panorama of colonial life. Her books are a remarkable treasure, a representation of colonial life in Queensland more encompassing than any other single source.

The research and writing I do now may seem a long way to stray from day-to-day journalism. I believe that journalistic skills – the inquiring and curious mind which every journalist develops, the ability to recognise a good story, the conciseness of expression – are a great asset in the sort of research and writing I now do.

Notes

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