

## Reading in the Heart of the Bush

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In 1848, from her home on Cuba Street, Wellington, Mary Taylor wrote to her friend Charlotte Brontë:

I can hardly explain to you the queer feeling of living as I do in 2 places at once. One world containing books England and all the people with whom I can exchange an idea; the other all that I actually see and hear and speak to. The separation is as complete as between the things in a picture and the things in the room. The puzzle is that both move and act and [I] must say my say as one of each.<sup>1</sup>

In the rather soggy, earthquake ridden paradise of early Wellington, the new place is only tenuously real; the imaginative world of reading competes with it on equal terms. Taylor writes to Brontë, "I begin to believe in your existence much as I do in Mr Rochester's. In a believing mood I don't doubt either of them."<sup>2</sup>

The formation of colonial society involves the invention of place, and this process of invention is literary in its sources and inspiration. Late colonial New Zealand configured itself in terms of a range of literary texts, from the Romanticism of Rousseau to the Celticism of Matthew Arnold, and thus reading in the new place involved a complex and self-conscious act of re-imagining. Taylor's letter is unusual because it doesn't just tell us what she read but how she read it. Few colonial readers were as self-aware, and in general, historians of print culture work with book lists and library inventories. We know, for example, that Ensign Best in New Zealand in the late 1830s read a promiscuous mix of Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, Lamark, Byron and Maria Edgeworth, Disraeli's *Vivien Grey*, Marryat and *Tom Cringle's Log*. We do not have any clue as to how he read them:

We attempted to find a path up Mounga Totare without success and were obliged to give up the idea of reaching its summit. It is very thickly Timbered. Our new companion Mr Merrett had with him a volume of Don Juan which was a great acquisition in the evenings. From the foot of Mounga Totare we could see the hills in the neighbourhood of Rot Rua and Taupo and we should have seen Tonga Redo had not the horizon been rather obscured.<sup>3</sup>

What does this tell us? Little more than books were valued and their acquisition was random. Given this paucity, there is a temptation to shift genres, to move from the limited sources of the factual and the biographical, into fiction, where, in the colonial novel, references to reading and readers are found in sur-

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prising numbers. However, we should be aware of the implications of such a shift. As Kate Flint writes,

Only a naïve reader would believe that the representation of reading within fiction offers straightforward, empirical evidence of contemporary reading practices. Fictional depictions of what and how women and men read involve the novel's consumer in complex acts of interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

So what kind of evidence does the representation of reading within fiction offer, and how can we use it to understand the new world of colonial New Zealand? In Edith Searle Grossmann's 1910 novel *The Heart of the Bush*, reading is presented as a universal occupation, from Mrs Brandon cutting the leaves of 'the latest English novel' (289) to the Brandons' groom, who is disappointed not to be required to hold Dennis' horse "for he had got to a particularly thrilling part of *Dracula*, and was looking forward to an undisturbed hour of really enjoyable literature" (246). Kate, the Borlases' maid, writes poetry, being "of a literary turn of mind and [having] a modest pride in her own compositions, mostly poems inscribed on the margin of Mr Borlase's 'Otago Witness,' and on Emmie's best cake paper, and left artlessly about where they were likely to be discovered and appreciated" (88). The Brandons have been warned of the democratic nature of New Zealand society, to Emmeline "all vulgar, jarring, lowest middle class" (45). But the depiction of a general engagement in literature conveys significant and positive value, as in Britain where, as Helen Small argues, there was a "connection between extension of the franchise and the idea of a reading public of judgment, discernment, and disinterested understanding."<sup>5</sup> Reading, and in particular reading the correct books in the correct manner are in *The Heart of the Bush* an essential agent in manufacture of an imagined community.

Mindful of Flint's strictures that we should read fictional representations of reading in a complex manner, we should not, I think, interpret the widespread delight in literature in *The Heart of the Bush* as evidence that New Zealand was a highly literary colony. The portrayal may equally be utopian and idealised, an expression of anxiety as to whether the new world of settlement would be able to carry over the cultural capital of the old. In a contemporary story by Blanche Baughan, 'An Active Family' (1912), the narrator asks the hard-working farmer's daughter what she reads in the evenings, and she replies, "Oh, just the papers – and a fool of a yarn sometimes. We've none of us got any brains to spare," and the narrator wonders,

...whether such as Nance and her family, toiling year in, year out, were not actually, that the farm, forsooth, might prosper, being starved in brain and soul; whether in fact they could be truly said to *live* at all?<sup>6</sup>

And she goes on "Art comes at all times scantily to the backblocks; and with what hope can literature appeal to brains exhausted already by the exhaustion of the body? ... man really cannot ever live by bread alone; no, not even with the agreeable addition of roast mutton and butter!"

The heroine of *The Heart of the Bush* is Adelaide who initially seems to replicate Mary Taylor's experience of reading as dislocation. Adelaide is positioned between the reality of the New Zealand landscape in which she lives, and the imaginative world of her reading:

Aidie liked to sit in the paddocks and watch the Wainoni flowing away under the sunlight of afternoon and evening, flowing away to where the great crag hid it from sight, away in to the very midst of the Unknown and the Beyond. Like so many imaginative children in the Colonies, Adelaide was always dreaming and waiting for the unseen world, which all her reading presented to her, and which was living in the memory of her parents. Just as she never doubted that the sky and the clouds were literally heaven, so she was sure that it must be in that western vale that fairies and dragons and knights and heroes lived. She could never find them about [her home] Haeremai, and as she said to Dennis, 'they must be somewhere'. Every thing invisible, impossible and romantically unlike her home inhabited that impassable territory. (149)

At first glance this looks very like Mary Taylor's "living in 2 places at once." But there are differences. For Adelaide, "the Unknown and the Beyond" and "the unseen world" are implicitly identified with the world of her reading, the remembered world of Britain (the source of that reading), but also with the view beyond the river, behind the great crag — that is, it is at once imaginary, elsewhere, and part of the yet unknown physical landscape. All three are conflated, and resonate one with the other. Her New Zealand home Haeremai,<sup>7</sup> positioned between the cleared landscape of settlement and the romantic and exotic bush, is the place *where* she reads, and its prosaic everyday is in contrast to *what* she reads, but beyond it is a landscape she is able to invest with exoticism and significance — "fairies and dragons and knights and heroes" — by applying her literary imagination to her surroundings.

This feat of imaginative reading is uniquely hers. As befits the romantic heroine, Adelaide is the most important reader in the novel and her courtship of Dennis, the rough-hewn yet sensitive manager of her father's farm is effected by his acceptance of her reading programme. The literary template Grossmann is using here is what Patricia Menon calls of the mentor-lover<sup>8</sup> (Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester, Lucy Snowe and Paul Emmanuel, Mr Causabon and Dorothea, most of the Austen heroes and heroines). The most obvious model is Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* where, at the conclusion, the young Catherine demonstrates

the re-establishment of social order after the depredations of Heathcliff by teaching Hareton."

Adelaide's tutelage of Dennis symbolizes the control exercised by her anglophile, feminised, sentimentalised world over his local, 'natural,' 'native,' colonial world of the farm. Dennis's provincialism and pragmatism is matched by what he reads: "a great deal of poetry ... Shakespeare and Burns and other antiquated textbooks" (31) as well as works of history — "Milman's *History of Latin Christianit*" (41), "Josephus and Gibbon and Prescott and Motley" and "most of Sismondi and ... Grote." Adelaide at first despises such conservative taste, "so hopelessly out of the world and behind the times" (84). At his request she prepares a consciously modern reading programme for him, which consists of "Maeterlinck and the resuscitated Pater" and "much that is new and choice and late ... and the Twentieth Century Hellenics and Gaelic Renaissances" (131). This grouping is remarkably similar to that of the young Katherine Mansfield's borrowings from the General Assembly Library in Wellington between 1906 and 1908, where she read Maeterlinck, and talked of writing a story "in the style of Walter Pater's 'Child in the House.'"<sup>10</sup>

Like the young Mansfield, Adelaide is terrified of seeming old-fashioned and 'Victorian,' an epithet she associates with sentimentality, gush, "out-of-date three volume novels" (60), and "copy-book maxims" (61). However, although Dennis is willing to read what she tells him to, and to update his reading, she finds their physical surroundings militate against modern literature:

... she began to feel that there was nothing in nor out of fashion in the Bush, nothing new and nothing old, but all things changeless and tideless, as all things were in the days of Sappho and Theocritus, of Surrey and of Sidney, and of Wordsworth and Tennyson, immortal, like old folk songs and legends and ballads, and like love and home, and toil and the fruitful earth. She read to him from Malory and Tennyson, and often laid the book down on her knee, and in her own words raised up scenes that now had changed into visions for her, and that were a thousand times more strange and enchanting in this rude solitude than they had ever been while her bodily eyes looked on them. She talked of lone Tintagel and of Bude, of Lyonesse, the 'land of old upheaven from the abyss.' (131)

Unlike Mary Taylor's experience of dislocation, the "rude solitude" of Adelaide's surroundings does not just contrast with the exoticism of her reading, but enhances it, making it "a thousand times more strange and enchanting." Reading it is suggested is more potent when its sources and its explanatory context are elsewhere, and the "bodily eye" can be a distraction rather than an advantage. Adelaide's separation from the sources of her reading enhance the imaginative reach

of that experience. Appropriate reading in the colonies, then, is seen as necessarily outside fashion (rather than unfashionable), very much a 'natural' rather than acculturated activity. The texts Adelaide cites are "like love and home, and toil and the fruitful earth" — that is, they are not consciously, culturally produced artifacts, but intrinsic, given. And they are spiritually charged, as the reference 'scenes that now had changed into visions for her' suggests.

Adelaide's revised reading list for Dennis is not in fact "changeless and tideless." It is Victorian: translations of Sappho<sup>11</sup> and Theocritus were common nineteenth-century poetic currency, indeed both poets were more or less invented by their Victorian translators. As Yopi Prins has argued, Henry Wharton and Michael Field's renditions of Sappho went well beyond scholarly translation, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Oscar Wilde reconfigured Theocritus to their own ends.<sup>12</sup> The "old folk songs and legends and ballads" Adelaide cites were the stock in trade of Romanticism, sources for Wordsworth and Tennyson's works, while Malory was the central text of Victorian medievalism.<sup>13</sup> These are the key texts of nineteenth-century literary nostalgia, counter to and flight from modernity. But in the colonial setting, these works have a further resonance. Colonial readers are nostalgically linked to both the past depicted in the works, and the 'Home,' Britain, from whence they came. They are aware of the way they are separated from "lone Tintagel" and "Lyonnesse" — not just by time but also by physical distance, in the same way that England, home and beauty are also both far away, and of the personal past which is, as the earlier quotation put it, "living in the memory of her parents." The fading of the home country into memory, so that it is located not in the physical world but wholly in the imaginary past, is a common colonial topos. In his 1896 poem 'A Colonist in his Garden,' William Pember Reeves writes,

Gone is my England, long ago,  
Leaving me tender joys,  
Sweet, fragrant, happy-breathing names  
Of wrinkled men and grey-haired dames,  
To me still girls and boys.

With these in youth let memory stray  
In pleasance green, where stern today  
Works Fancy no mischance.  
Dear pleasance — let no light invade  
Revealing ravage Time has made  
Amid thy dim romance!<sup>14</sup>

Both Grossmann and Reeves see this process as advantageous. For Adelaide, memories of the actual settings of the romance world she describes to Dennis are not nearly as important as visions "a thousand times more strange and enchanting in this rude solitude than they had ever been while her bodily eyes looked on them," which neutralise the effect of Reeves' "stern today."

In her study of the nineteenth-century woman reader, Kate Flint discusses the fictional representation of reading, arguing that its key functions were recognition and collaboration. The reader recognises familiar texts being used by the author, which offers the reader what Flint calls "membership of a community sharing knowledge and expectations."<sup>15</sup> The fictional world is constructed in terms of these literary allusions, which the reader must identify; and the fictional characters are given reading choices within the text, which the reader must interpret. These activities contribute to a reading process which is complex and interactive rather than passive and receptive, and, as Flint puts it, "adds to the reader's sense of participation in the construction of meaning."<sup>16</sup>

The fictional representation of reading, playful self-referentiality, was an early part of the novel. In Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), the informed reader knows that Mrs Morland is old fashioned because she reads *Sir Charles Grandison*, that John Thorpe is racy and unreliable because he reads *The Monk*, and that Isabella and Catherine will become friends because they are both engrossed in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, but also that their friendship will not be as satisfactory as that between Catherine and Eleanor who reads *Udolpho* but also works of history. But reading in *Northanger Abbey* has a further function. Austen is conveying a new world, the world of the modern; her novel is set in the new, unstable and shifting world of Bath rather than the traditional setting of the small village Catherine grew up in. The novels within the novel function as conduct books, needed by the characters as guidance in a social and cultural setting where the old rules are no longer relevant. Find the appropriate conduct book — as the sophisticated Eleanor and her brother Henry have done — and you will negotiate the modern. Get it slightly wrong, as Catherine initially does, or very wrong, as Isabella does, and you will become a casualty.

Such purposeful reading is symptomatic of the nineteenth-century reading public, bent on self-improvement, and is reflected in the proliferation of hugely successful books of advice, from Noah Porter's 1871 *Books and Reading: What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?* to Arnold Bennett's 1909 *Literary Taste: How to Form it; with Detailed Instructions for Collecting a Complete Library of English Literature* and in organizations like the Australasian Home Reading Union, which offered programmes for reading groups.<sup>17</sup> And this process of literary guidance is even more important in colonial society, where cultural formation has both a high

priority and is subject to extreme anxiety. In Grossmann's novel, it is important not just for Adelaide and Denis's relationship that he submits to her reading programme; it matters for the kind of society *The Heart of the Bush* is envisaging. Dennis's choices, the old-fashioned and pragmatic, must give way — not perhaps to the modern, but to the 'literary' and the 'canonical' new concepts which convey a sense of a literature whose qualities of greatness are seen to transcend mere fashion, and whose Romantic orientation fits with settler ideas of their rightful place in a Romantically conceived landscape.

Janice Radway talks about the way in which the professionalisation of the study of English in late nineteenth-century universities in the United States and Britain and its empire involved a split between those who followed the scientifically based German analytical philological model, and those who espoused an Arnoldian project which "elevated and revered [a] new, high literature as a repository of true human experience and spiritual values."<sup>18</sup> Edith Searle Grossmann was one of the first women graduates of Canterbury College, a student and later friend of its founding professor of English John Macmillan Brown.<sup>19</sup> Macmillan Brown was the proponent of this Arnoldian ethos in New Zealand, and Adelaide's ambitions for Dennis are in keeping with Macmillan Brown's combination of pragmatism and literary uplift, consciously nationalist but at the same time strongly provincial in its anxious gaze back to the centre.

Reading in *The Heart of the Bush* is thus programmatic and purposeful. It may exploit the dissonance of place but, unlike the instability of Mary Taylor's reading of *Jane Eyre*, Adelaide is able to negotiate the gap between what and where she reads. Reading, in this novel as elsewhere in colonial fiction, stands for an inclusively democratic society, natural occupancy of its members, reflected in and inspired by what are presented as timeless literary works. But paradoxically, in the work of a New Zealand writer who in fact was herself part of a local literary world with a network of novelists, poets, essayists and literary critics, reading comes from elsewhere: the only New Zealand writer in the heart of the bush is the Borlase's maid, Kate, writing poems on newspaper margins and cake papers.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Mary Taylor, *Friend of Charlotte Brontë: Letters from New Zealand and elsewhere*, ed. Joan Stevens (Dunedin: Auckland University Press and Oxford University Press, 1972), 77. See Jane Stafford, "'Remote must be the shores": Mary Taylor, Charlotte Brontë and the Colonial Experience', *Journal of New Zealand Literature* no. 10 (1992), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Stevens, 73.

<sup>3</sup> *The Journal of Ensign Best 1837-1843* ed. Nancy Taylor (Wellington: R.E. Owen, Government Printer, 1966), 300.

<sup>4</sup> Kate Flint, 'Women, men and the reading of *Vanity Fair*' in *The Practice and Representation of Reading*, eds. James Raven, Helen Small and Naomi Tadmor (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 246.

<sup>5</sup> Helen Small, 'A pulse of 124: Charles Dickens and a pathology of the mid-Victorian reading public' in *Practice and Representation of Reading*, 267.

<sup>6</sup> Blanche Baughan, 'An Active Family,' *Brown Bread*, 139.

<sup>7</sup> There are ironic resonances of the Maori word for welcome in a landscape cleared of actual Maori.

<sup>8</sup> See Patricia Menon, *Austen, Eliot, Charlotte Brontë and the Mentor Lover* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Menon's mentors are all male – she does not discuss Catherine and Hareton.

<sup>9</sup> "His honest warm and intelligent nature shook off rapidly the clouds of ignorance and degradation in which it had been bred; and Catherine's sincere commendations acted as a spur to his industry. His brightening mind brightened his features and added spirit and nobility to his aspect." Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (London: Smith and Elder, 1904), 334.

<sup>10</sup> Grossman had taught at Wellington Girls' College from 1885 until 1890; Katherine Mansfield was a pupil there in 1897.

<sup>11</sup> 'Michael Field' (Katherine Harris Bradley and Edith Emma Cooper), *Long Ago* (1889); the authors were influenced by Henry Wharton's translations in 1885. See Yopi Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). The National Library of New Zealand's collection has three of Field's works, *Stephanie: A Trialogue* (E. Mathews and J. Lane, 1892), *Tragic Mary* (London: G. Bell and Son, 1890) and *Selections of the Poetry of Michael Field* (London: London Poetry Bookshop, 1923).

<sup>12</sup> The first sonnet of Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) begins 'I thought once how Theocritus had sung/ Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years...' Oscar Wilde's 'Theocritus: A Villanelle' (1881) concludes 'Slim Lacon keeps a goat for thee,/ For thee the jocund shepherds wait,/ O singer of Persephone!/ Dost thou remember Sicily?' proving conclusively that New Zealand poets of this period do not have a monopoly on bad writing.

<sup>13</sup> Adelaide and Dennis as children have read Walter Scott, 83.

<sup>14</sup> William Pember Reeves, 'A Colonist in his Garden' (1896), *The Oxford Anthology of New Zealand Poetry*, eds. Jenny Bornholdt, Greg O'Brien and Mark Williams (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1996), 497.

<sup>15</sup> Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 258.

<sup>16</sup> Kate Flint, 'Women, men and the reading of *Vanity Fair*', 254.

<sup>17</sup> New York: Scribner's, 1871; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909.

<sup>18</sup> Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book of the Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle Class Desire* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 141.

<sup>19</sup> Grossmann was the author of a biography of Macmillan Brown's wife, *The Life of Helen Macmillan Brown, the First Woman to Graduate with Honours at a British University* (Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1905).