

New Worlds: *Australian Readers of the Early 1890s*

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Reading groups and literary societies have been active in Australia from at least as early as the 1820s. Initially, their main function was to allow members to share book purchases, giving them access to a communal library. At a time when there were no public libraries, and poor roads and inadequate transportation made visits to major towns a rare event, many reading societies sprang up, especially in Tasmania, or Van Diemen's Land as it was then known. By the 1880s and 90s, literary societies of a different type were flourishing in Australia, mainly in the cities. These allowed men and women to meet, often in gender segregated groups, to discuss their reading and debate topics of current interest.

The main focus of this paper is one of these later Tasmanian reading groups, the Nil Desperandum Literary Society, established in Hobart in 1889 by Teresa Hamilton, wife of the then Governor of Tasmania. With Lady Hamilton as President, this society met regularly at Government House until the Hamiltons returned to England late in 1892. It was then renamed the Hamilton Literary Society in her honour and has continued to meet in Hobart until the present day. The Hamilton Literary Society minute books, kept for the first fifty years of its existence by the original honorary secretary Ada Chapman, are now held in the Archives Office of Tasmania.¹ Apart from a gap between 1907 and 1935, caused when Miss Chapman accidentally left the minute books on a tram and could not recover them, they provide a unique window into the books and issues being discussed by women from Hobart's elite circles for over a century. I will deal here only with the early years of the Hamilton Literary Society, comparing the books and issues discussed with information about the meetings of two other Hobart reading groups of the 1890s, whose minutes are also now held by the Archives Office of Tasmania. The Itinerant Literary Society apparently broke away from the Hamilton Literary Society in 1894 though the earliest surviving minute book is for 1897-98.² It was therefore made up of women of similar social standing and educational background. The Itinerants group also survived for a very long time, the minute books running until 1991, though with even more gaps, with the minutes for 1899 to 1901 and 1907 to 1942 all missing. A group of men from a similar strata of Hobart society established a circle of the Australasian Home Reading Union in 1892 but their surviving minutes run until March 1896 only.³

As the chosen title 'Nil Desperandum' suggests — a literal translation is 'No lot

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is desperate' — Lady Hamilton's establishment of her literary society was an assertion that it was possible to be intellectually active and culturally aware, to maintain contact with the latest books and ideas, even in the outlying regions of the Empire. Her husband, Sir Robert Hamilton, had not been born into the upper classes but achieved his knighthood through excellent work as a civil servant. While under-secretary for Ireland he had become convinced of the value of Home Rule, a radical stance which led to his being removed from office and compensated with the Governorship of Tasmania. A continuing strong interest in new ideas is apparent during his time there: he encouraged the movement for Australian Federation, was supportive of the Trades Union movement and the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science and helped to found the University of Tasmania.⁴ Teresa Hamilton, his much younger second wife, clearly shared many of these interests as can be seen from some of the topics discussed at meetings of her literary society. As President, she not only chaired all meetings but also was active in suggesting topics for discussion and in participating in debates. Before signing the minutes, she made sure that meetings were reported correctly. Miss Chapman's frustration with other members' failure to prepare properly for meetings or to arrive at any definite conclusions at the end of a debate is often apparent in the minute books. Recording the meeting held on 8 October 1891 and the discussion of Robert Buchanan's novel *The Shadow of the Sword* (1876), she originally wrote that "innumerable points were raised by members. But whether owing to the difficulties of the subject or to the members not having sufficiently worked up the points there was a great want of lucidity in the argument and it closed without any very definite idea being arrived at." After reading these comments, Lady Hamilton noted in pencil: "Secretary Kindly give outline of manner in which the subject was taken and the kind of discussion that took place and mention that there were no notes."

Miss Chapman's rewritten minutes run:

At this meeting the book was discussed in three aspects. First as a novel. Secondly as a protest against war and Thirdly as to the ultimate good of such work's [sic]. Most of the members took part and no notes were allowed. This probably accounts for the secretary's difficulty in following the drift of the argument which members agreed was, that war is a necessary evil.

A.C. Honorary Secretary.

After Lady Hamilton's departure the minutes tend to be briefer and critical comments by Miss Chapman appear more frequently. It is obvious that she put much more effort into the Society, not only in keeping the minutes but in giving

papers more frequently than others. It is also obvious that her views on most matters were highly conservative — in a debate on the value of women's suffrage, she was one of the members who opposed this concept — which may have contributed to the tension apparent in her relationship with Lady Hamilton. On the other hand, Ada Chapman had a much greater interest in local issues than any other member of the group. She often presented papers on aspects of Tasmanian history and was a great fan of the poet Adam Lindsay Gordon, giving several papers on his work over the years.

In setting up her literary society, Teresa Hamilton aimed to encourage writing as well as reading. Members were required to present at least one original paper on a subject of their choice each year, with membership limited to 25 to allow for this. They were also required "to study the subject given in order to discuss the paper" when it was read at their fortnightly meetings. While papers given during Lady Hamilton's Presidency generally dealt with an historical figure or a particular author or work, current issues and ideas were frequently discussed. The meeting held on 11 September 1890, for example, dealt with the very current issue of "Strikes," a major strike involving transport workers, miners and shearers having begun the previous month, issuing in a period of intense industrial unrest across Australia. Miss Chapman noted:

By special request Miss Walker, Honorary Member, read a paper in favour of unions and Miss Dickson and Mrs Jamieson followed on the same side. Miss Mault, Mrs Stourton, Miss Belstead, Miss Weston, Miss Dobson and Miss Stephens read papers on the rise of unionism and on the side of the employers. Mrs Montgomery, Miss Evans and Miss Chapman also spoke and a brisk debate ensued but ended without much result.

While it is not surprising to see such a weight of opinion on the side of the employers, that the issue was discussed at all indicates the willingness of members to engage with current issues as well as the mix of opinions present within this group.

As theatre historian Veronica Kelly has noted recently, the perception of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australia as culturally isolated because of its distance from Europe certainly did not apply to the areas of commercial theatre and popular entertainment. And there is an unexpected link between Australian commercial theatre and its apparent antithesis in the plays of Henrik Ibsen. A contract to tour Australia and New Zealand for the then leading theatrical firm of J C Williamsons provided the funds for Janet Achurch and Charles Charrington to hire the Novelty Theatre in London for one week in June 1889, when they presented the first English production of any of Ibsen's plays, *A Doll's House*. Fol-

Following the scandalous success of this production, the Charringtons tried unsuccessfully to get out of their Australasian tour. So the second English language production of *A Doll's House* took place at the Princess Theatre in Melbourne on 14 September 1889 again accompanied by a media frenzy.⁵ It is in this context that one can understand the initially surprising interest of Lady Hamilton's group of elite and mainly conservative Hobart ladies in the work of Ibsen. At their fifth meeting, on 12 September 1889, two days before the Melbourne performance, a paper on "Phrases of life at the foot of a French castle" was followed by "a short discussion . . . on Ibsen, the Norwegian poet and dramatist." Two months later, the tenth meeting, for 28 November 1889, focussed entirely on the life and work of Ibsen.

Miss Stephens read a short account of Henrik Ibsen's life which account was continued by Mrs Cox, who also read an Essay on his works especially the "Doll's House". Miss Hudspeth gave an epitome and criticism of "The Pillars of Society" "Ghosts" and "An Enemy of Society". Miss Maxwell read the plot of the Dolls House and extracts from the Spectator and Argus. Mrs Jamieson read a short paper on the tendency of Ibsen's writing. A discussion followed those who took part being Mrs Stourton, Miss Maxwell, Miss Mault, Miss Dobson, Miss May Butler, Miss Oakley, Miss Belstead, Miss Weston and Miss Chapman. The President gave a short address on Ibsen's plays and their tendency after which the meeting terminated.

Unfortunately there is no indication of what the ladies thought about any of these plays but that they were reading them, or at least reading about them, at all, is a sign of Ibsen's great notoriety at this time. The reviews of the Melbourne and London productions of *A Doll's House* had generally been unfavourable: the *Argus's* review on 16 September 1889 had been typical in rejecting the play's "lame and incompetent conclusion." And on 21 September 1889, the same paper had complained that Ibsen "has a rather distressing way of presenting a difficulty, without suggesting any means of getting out of it." But there were also many letters to the editor supporting Ibsen and praising him for making people think and talk about important social issues.⁶

During Lady Hamilton's time as President, most of the other literary papers read by members discussed standard English authors like Tennyson, Browning, Goldsmith and Thackeray. But George Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways* (1885) was the topic for 26 March 1891, with Lady Hamilton reading a paper that was obviously in favour of Meredith since the minutes record that "Mrs Jamieson also had a paper on the opposite side and pointing out the obscurity of Meredith's style." Another member read a parody of the novel from *Punch*, suggesting that

most did not share Lady Hamilton's taste. A few months later, on 14 May 1891, Mrs Jamieson, clearly one of the more active members, read a long paper on another recent literary sensation, the diary kept by the young Russian Marie Bashkirtseff, first published in English in 1890.

Like most Australian readers of the 1890s, members of the Nil Desperandum society were not especially interested in Australian literature. On 13 August 1891 at a special meeting called to decide on papers for the annual Anniversary Meeting of the society to which guests were invited, it was initially agreed that everyone should discuss "the power and influence of the poets of Australia on its people" in comparison with the power and influence in England of Tennyson, Browning or any other two English nineteenth-century poets. But it seems not all members felt capable of discussing poetry, let alone Australian poetry, so eventually "everyone was requested to choose their own subject." The list of subjects chosen for the papers given on 26 August is revealing in showing the wide range of interests among this small group of upper class women. While some spoke on such innocuous topics as "Half Hour in My Garden" and "From London to Melbourne," others ranged from "Chaucer's Minor Poems" to "Trade Unions" (Mrs Jamieson again!). Miss Chapman, clearly the source of the poetry topic pronounced too hard, spoke on "Adam Lindsay Gordon." Perhaps as a sop to her, other members read various poems by Gordon, at that time by far the best-known Australian poet. There had, in fact, been earlier discussions of Gordon, with Miss Chapman presenting a paper on him on 16 July 1891, followed by a short discussion. Lady Hamilton, who had taken part in the discussion, also read an essay on Gordon at the following meeting on 10 September, together with an essay by Robert Buchanan on Browning's *The Ring and the Book*. A further paper on Adam Lindsay Gordon was given on 16 December 1892, this time by Miss Bisdee, a corresponding member of the Society, while on 2 June 1893, the discussion focussed on "Minor Australian Poets":

Mrs Morton had the leading paper for the afternoon . . . Those on whom she chiefly dwelt were Kendall and Jennings Carmichael. Papers on different poets were also read by Miss Belstead, Miss Wayne and Miss Manning, also different poems illustrating the work of the poets mentioned. Those taking part in the debate were Miss Hogg, Miss Wayne, Miss Hudspeth, Mrs Morton, Miss Belstead, Mrs Harold Wright and Miss Chapman. After an animated discussion the debate closed.

Although one again regrets the lack of detail about the other poets discussed, it is significant that there was "animated discussion" on Australian poetry, something of a rarity at meetings according to the minutes. The inclusion of a little-

known woman poet, Grace Jennings Carmichael from Gippsland in Victoria, is also interesting. As her collection of poems was not published until 1895, Mrs Morton was presumably relying on work published in newspapers and periodicals or perhaps on personal knowledge of the author.

In 1892 at a meeting in Hobart of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the Australasian Home Reading Union had been established to encourage the reading habit and direct it towards more educational ends, that is, away from so-called "trashy novels."⁷ Given Sir Robert Hamilton's involvement with the AAAS, and especially this Hobart meeting, it is not surprising to find the new Home Reading Union also discussed at length by Lady Hamilton's ladies. At their meeting for 3 February 1892, they decided to "form a circle consisting of members of the Reading Class and a few others to the number of twelve." As a pamphlet on the Reading Union now bound into the Society's minute book shows, its suggested courses of reading, devised by professors from the University of Sydney, were much more conventionally canonical and much less topical than the subjects usually discussed by the ladies of the Literary Society, who continued with their regular meetings. In "English Literature," for example, members of the Reading Union were offered the choice of a modern or an Elizabethan course. In the modern course, there was a further choice between detailed studies of the work of Scott or George Eliot or the essays of Macaulay, Ruskin and Carlyle.

The circle of the Australasian Home Reading Union formed on 30 April 1892 by a group of men associated in various ways with the Friends' School in Hobart initially embarked on a course of reading of English essayists, which included Lamb, De Quincey, Arnold, Lowell and Emerson as well as the authors mentioned above. They began by discussing, on 7 May, Frederic Harrison's essay "The Choice of Books," from his *The Choice of Books and other Literary Pieces* (1886), which was unanimously condemned, especially with respect to his "depreciation of modern work," including even Tennyson and George Eliot, and his recommendation on the other hand of "unwise and unprofitable reading: as for example, Boccaccio and some of the Italian poets, the novels of Defoe and Fielding." Discussion of essays by Carlyle, Arnold, Emerson and Ruskin occupied the group's fortnightly meetings for the remainder of 1892. They then seem to have decided to dispense with the curriculum provided by the Reading Union, discussing "Our Favourite Poets" in January and February 1893 before embarking on a course of reading of Shakespeare, based on "the list of Shakespeare's plays adopted by the Hobart Shakespeare Society." There were few surprises among the favourite poets, with Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, Tennyson and Browning being chosen. W. H. Dawson, however, chose the much less known American John Greenleaf Whittier, ex-

plaining his choice at some length "in carefully thought and heartfelt words: He dwelt on Whittier's simplicity, faith, tolerance and wide 'humanness': but . . . especially on old associations and on the peace and restfulness that the reading of Whittier's poems brought to him." Andrew Inglis Clark's choice of Walt Whitman proved more controversial with another member, F.J. Young, who favoured Browning, reading a long paper attacking Whitman's

claims to be considered a poet, owing to his lack of *form*, but claiming for him the higher position of *prophet*. After some discussion, A. I. Clark admitted that Walt Whitman had written a great deal that was not poetry, but he gave us several specimens which (as he claimed) justified Whitman's being ranked amongst the poets of the day.

Clark had a long-standing interest in Whitman, and it was the prophetic dimension to *Leaves of Grass* that he valued most; it is difficult to overstate the influence of Whitman on Clark's political thought.⁸

After spending March to August 1893 discussing four plays by Shakespeare, the reading group had clearly had their fill of literature, with nearly all the rest of the fifty-three meetings recorded until the minute book ends on 24 March 1895 being devoted to current economic issues such as "Free Trade" or questions of ethics and religion. A discussion of "Style" in one of the last recorded meetings, 10 March 1895, however, contains the very pertinent observation that the so-called obscurity of great writers such as Carlyle, Browning, Meredith and Whitman is more probably

in us (the readers) rather than in them. New ideas and modes of thought call for new vehicles of expression, and time alone can reveal to us the reason and justification of their styles. Already we understand Carlyle and Browning to a great extent: someday we shall understand Whitman and Meredith.

As Martyn Lyons notes in his discussion of the Australasian Home Reading Union, the waning of initial enthusiasm for AHRU courses seen in this Tasmanian circle of readers was all too typical. By 1893, the AHRU had over two thousand members in Australia and New Zealand but a rapid decline followed and the movement was all but over by 1898.⁹ A poem written by one of the members as a souvenir for the 1896 season of the Itinerant Literary Society indicates that this Hobart reading group also began as a circle of the AHRU:

We first as a circle in embryo grew,
Passed our chrysalis state in the A. H. R. U.;
But in time, as the butterfly burst from the grub,
From the circle evolved the Itinerant Club.

Whether this was the AHRU circle originally established from members of the Hamilton Literary Society or not, some of the Itinerant ladies were originally part of that group and the range of topics discussed in the first years for which there are minutes, beginning with the meeting of 22 April 1897, was a similar mix of the literary, the historical and the current. Again, as with the other two groups discussed, along with the expected canonical English writers like Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, Thackeray and Browning, one finds an awareness of newer and more controversial figures. On 4 May 1897, for example, an essay on Ibsen was read, together with an essay on "Northern Poets" from Edmund Gosse's book *Northern Studies* (1890). A fortnight later there was discussion of the work of Whitman, focussing on "whether his poetry appeals to the cultivated or to the uncultivated, and whether after all he is not greater as a prose writer than as a poet." The last point was similar to one raised by the male group during their discussion of Whitman a few years earlier. On 24 August, Miss Walch, presumably related to the leading Hobart bookseller of that name, read a very wide-ranging paper on "The Evolution of the Heroine in Fiction," going back to Richardson's *Clarissa* and forward to such recent writers as Olive Schreiner and Kipling: "the point chiefly dwelt upon being that authors of the present day make their characters more lifelike and less ideally bad or good than in the past."

What can one conclude from this brief survey of three Hobart reading groups of the 1890s? First, and not surprisingly, there is no discussion of the really popular novels of the period. None of the top twelve authors featured in the Brancepeth Farm Library catalogue of 1895, for example, gets a mention.¹⁰ This is not to imply that members of the three groups did not read such fiction. On 29 September 1893, eleven members of the Hamilton Literary Society gave papers on the topic "Can we afford to read trashy literature?" Although the minutes record "considerable variety of idea and expression," the general view was "that there was no danger of trashy literature harming any cultivated mind, and certainly no danger for the members of the Hamilton Literary Society."

This view was of course directly counter to that held by the founders of the Australasian Home Reading Union. Their over-prescriptive and paternal attitude to reading had been shared by the founders of Mechanics' Institutes earlier in the nineteenth century, as seen in their attempts to keep novels out of their libraries. Their failure in the face of readers' overwhelming demand for fiction might have sounded a warning to the founders of the AHRU. In the 19th century as today, those reading groups that thrived and survived did so because their reading was directed by the interests of members rather than an external syllabus. As with today's groups, too, one sees that, despite coming from shared economic and class backgrounds, individual members of the reading groups discussed here differed

widely not only in literary tastes but in their political and social views. While predominantly conservative, they were open to the discussion of controversial issues, books and authors and contained members prepared to put the case for radical authors like Ibsen and Whitman. It is also noticeable that there are many overlaps between the authors and topics discussed by the male group and the two female groups, though the only woman author mentioned in the minutes for the male group was George Eliot and this group also did not discuss any topics with obvious Australian reference. Members were, however, strongly interested in American writers as well as English ones, again showing the need for a detailed examination of literary links between America and Australia during the 19th century.

Finally, it is also apparent from this brief survey that many Australian readers, even in cultural outposts such as Hobart, were very keen to keep up with the latest literary sensations and controversies. In the case of Ibsen, of course, there was the added fact of the plays being performed locally to much media attention. But members of these groups were also eagerly reading English and American periodicals, as one sees from titles recorded in the minutes, as well as Melbourne papers like the *Age*, the *Argus* and the *Australasian*. They may have been living at the end of the earth but they remained keenly aware of the new books and ideas circulating during the last decade of the 19th century, even if they found many of them confusing or repugnant.

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Endnotes

¹ Hamilton Literary Society, Archives Office of Tasmania, NS 106/1-2.

² Itinerants Literary Society, Archives Office of Tasmania, NS331/1-3.

³ Australasian Home Reading Union, Archives Office of Tasmania, NS256/1.

⁴ Richard Refshauge, 'Sir Robert George Crookshank Hamilton (1836-95),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v. 4 (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1972), 331-2.

⁵ Deborah Campbell, 'A Doll's House: The Colonial Response,' in Susan Dermody, John Docker and Drusilla Modjeska, (eds.), *Nellie Melba, Ginger Meggs and Friends. Essays in Australian Cultural History* (Malmesbury, Vic.: Kibble Books, 1982), 192-3.

⁶ Campbell, 196-7.

⁷ Martyn Lyons, 'Reading Models and Reading Communities. Case-study: The Australasian Home Reading Union, 1892-97,' in (Martyn Lyons and John Arnold, eds.), *A History of the Book in Australia, 1891-1945: A National Culture in a Colonised Market* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001), 386.

⁸ See Richard Ely, ed., *A Living Force: Andrew Inglis Clark and the Ideal of Commonwealth* (Hobart, Tas.: Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, 2001), *passim*.

⁹ Lyons, 387-8.

¹⁰ See list in Lydia Wevers, 'Reading on the Farm: A Study of the Brancepeth Farm Library,' in *Books & Empire: Special Issue of the Bulletin of the Bibliographical Society of Australia & New Zealand*, v.28 (2004), 190.