

## SEXUALITY IN UTOPIA: CATHERINE HELEN SPENCE, WILLIAM LANE AND SOCIAL DREAMING IN NINETEENTH- CENTURY AUSTRALIA

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The late nineteenth century saw an explosion of utopian fiction in the Western world, following on from the widespread popularity of the American writer, Edward Bellamy's tribute to state socialism, *Looking Backward*.<sup>1</sup> In Australia, too, the ideas contained within Bellamy's book fell on fertile ground, as Robin Gollan notes, for "in important respects Australian development was similar [...] to that of the United States" in spite of the country's status as a group of British colonies (120). While it would be difficult to call the range of Australian utopian fiction published in the late nineteenth century an "explosion," it did become a popular genre for the dissemination of socialist and anti-socialist ideas. Dystopian fiction also became popular, particularly in the form of novels about the possibility of the invasion of Australia by non-Anglo-Saxon races and nations. Unlike Britain and America, however, there was little feminist utopian fiction written in Australia, still less published, with the result that most of the utopian fiction of the time was either downright misogynistic or presented women as merely the "love-interest" and/or help-meet.

Catherine Spence and William Lane were social dreamers and writers who did not conform to this attitude towards women. In this article, I will discuss some of their attitudes to sexuality and other aspects of gender that manifest themselves in their critiques of existing society, as well as through their visions of a better alternative, as revealed in their novels *Handfasted* and *The Workingman's Paradise*. I will also draw on some of their other writings, as well as Lane's attempt to create a utopian settlement in Paraguay in the 1890s.

A brief discussion of some of the attitudes towards sexuality in late colonial Australia will help to explain the context in which Spence and Lane were writing. The close historical, cultural, social and economic ties between Britain and Australia over the one hundred years since British colonisation meant that the dominant ideologies within the Australian colonies, or, rather, among the white settlers in those colonies, were faithful to Victorian Britain in many ways. In particular, the

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<sup>1</sup> For discussions of the popularity and influence of Bellamy and *Looking Backward*, see Sylvia Bowman et al, *Edward Bellamy Abroad: An American Prophet's Influence* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962); Daphne Patai, ed., *Looking Backward, 1888-1888: Essays on Edward Bellamy* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1988).

family remained central to notions of bourgeois respectability and, increasingly, to the aspirations of the white working class. Not only did sexual respectability form the basis of a desirable way of life for the growing Australian middle-class, it was the key to ensuring that a man's possessions would be passed on only to his offspring, safeguarding the operation of the capitalist system.

What was acceptable or not acceptable in terms of sexual behaviour was defined by how it conformed to this ideology. As Jeffrey Weeks notes in *Sex, Politics and Society*, there were a range of forces that operated to define acceptability – “from ideological articulation to medical and legal practices and moral endeavour” – which intersected “at that crucial site for modern ideology, the family” (24). While recent feminist historians have done much to recover the contribution of women to Australian colonial society, causing us to revise earlier, misleading impressions of women's invisibility, the fact remains that women were generally at a distinct disadvantage within marriage and the family. The expectation by most men (and many women) that women were responsible primarily for the creation and maintenance of the family meant that sexual behaviour by women that challenged this “norm” was seen as considerably more threatening than similar behaviour by men.

There are grounds for arguing that the family became a focus for the growing debate over national identity and Australia's future in the 1890s, a debate which had a significant effect on attitudes to women. Deteriorating social and economic conditions from the beginning of the 1890s caused marriage to occur at a later age, with a decline in the birth-rate also occurring.<sup>2</sup> The belief in the sanctity of the family had merged with concern about Australia's security to produce the notion of a “white Australia.” When combined with the principles of Social Darwinism it became possible to justify “scientifically” the rejection of other races: these other (non-white) races were regarded as lower than white people on the evolutionary scale, a point that the two writers appear to differ on. As Patricia Grimshaw argues in *Creating a Nation*, it was therefore seen as white women's patriotic duty to mate with white men only (181). Adherents of this view believed that married white women had to be freed from waged labour to become mothers first and foremost, while single white women had to be protected from exploitation by employers because of the possibility of their health and fertility being diminished. This biological determinism made it even more difficult for women to escape their sexual and economic bondage.

In terms of expectations of men's roles within the family, the nomadic bushman with few ties or responsibilities who had been valorised by some groups such as the *Sydney Bulletin*, as Marilyn Lake discusses in her 1986 article, “The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculinist Context,” was losing ground.

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<sup>2</sup> Between 1881 and 1911, according to Saunders and Evans, the size of the average family decreased from seven to four children (168).

By the 1890s, the increasing likelihood of marriage by men (Grimshaw 117) contributed to an alternative notion of masculinity, that of the respectable, prudent family man, which reinforced the idea of separate spheres for men and women: as Saunders and Evans note, “a ‘good woman’ existed in the shadow of her husband, bearing the children who were the future of the nation and rearing them safely to maturity. She remained economically dependent, powerless outside (and often within) the ‘sanctuary of the home’” (158). Sexual behaviour that operated outside these “norms” was seen as unnatural and deserving of society’s censure, creating a moral double standard that was insidious and all-pervading.

What was euphemistically referred to as that “Great Social Evil” – prostitution – was a good example of how the double standard operated. Male sexuality was accepted as being “hydraulic [...] and insatiable” as Susan Magarey describes it (3), making prostitution a necessary evil in the eyes of many. On the other hand, prostitutes were seen as undermining respectable society, luring young men to their ruin and spreading venereal disease (Saunders and Evans 167). As the nineteenth century progressed, more radical political views were aired, and feminism, socialism and nationalism provided alternative perceptions of prostitutes. They were seen by many social reformers as victims of the “white slave traffic” or the capitalist system and were therefore to be pitied and rescued. There were more radical feminist views being spread in Australia, too, such as those of Olive Schreiner and Mona Caird, that those women who married, not for love, but for reasons of financial stability, were prostituting themselves.

The double standard also applied to illegitimate children. With limited and not always effective access to birth control, and under increasing moral pressure to remain respectable, women had few options for dealing with illegitimate children. If infanticide or “baby farming” were rejected, the children, tainted by the concept of original sin and therefore victimised because of their parents’ (read mother’s) sins, were very poorly treated by orphanages and other institutions. In the case of single mothers, most fathers generally managed to avoid even the limited legislative requirements to support the children, so the burden of raising them was solely the mother’s.

These, then, were some of the beliefs and realities operating in Australia at the time when Catherine Spence and William Lane conceived their visions of a better alternative. As most readers will already know, Catherine Helen Spence was a Scottish emigrant who arrived in Australia at the age of fourteen with her family in 1839. She lived in South Australia and died in 1910. She was a novelist, journalist, preacher, suffragist and a feminist, as well as being a public campaigner for social and political reform. A single woman who needed an income to help support her family, she recognised the importance of financial independence for women, eventually achieving this for herself as a journalist. She was not as fortunate in gaining an income from her novels. In fact, it was not until 1984 that the views expressed in her first utopian novel, *Handfasted*, were made public, although her

realistic novels were published in her lifetime in one form or another. Submitted in 1879 for a prize offered by the Sydney Mail, *Handfasted* was rejected by the judge as “calculated to loosen the marriage tie – it was too socialistic and consequently dangerous” (Spence, *Autobiography* 63).<sup>3</sup>

William Lane’s *The Workingman’s Paradise* did not have such a delayed entry into the world as Spence’s *Handfasted*. By the time the novel was written in 1892 as a means of fund-raising for jailed strikers in Rockhampton, Lane was well-known in Australia, having arrived in Brisbane in 1885 from England via America and Canada. He was a leading proponent of the New Unionism, women’s rights, the superiority of the white race, mateship and temperance. His work in attempting to establish two utopian communities in Paraguay from 1893 – New Australia and Cosme – as “vanguards” of socialism are what he is probably best remembered for now. Lane has been lauded as a visionary and reformer who “occupied a position of leadership that has rarely been equalled in the history of Australian radicalism” (Gollan 105). Detractors such as Humphrey McQueen have referred to him as “an authoritarian racist who conceived of himself as a latter-day Messiah” (196). His own views could be contradictory and, in fact, changed dramatically during his lifetime.<sup>4</sup>

While Lane’s views in both his novel and his journalism were grounded in his belief in socialism, Spence’s were more oriented towards righting what she saw as social wrongs. And conventional party politics was not how she saw this being achieved. The cornerstone of Spence’s utopia, located in the imaginary pastoral world of Columba, somewhere in central America, is the concept of handfasting, or trial marriage, which Spence most likely read about in Sir Walter Scott’s *The Monastery*. These relationships, which lasted for a year and a day before they were either formalised in marriage, ended or continued for another year, were initiated in Spence’s novel by the one of the founders of the colony, Marguerite Keith. A group of Scottish emigrants had made their way to Columba in 1745 in the hope of finding the paradise promised by a fictional member of the earlier real-life Darien expedition, a Scottish colonial project of the late seventeenth century. The leaders of the Columban colony wanted to find a way of ensuring the physical and moral well-being of the Indian women who entered into relationships with the settlers, and a year and a day was felt to be a reasonable period of time for the women to be converted and baptised into Christianity. Marguerite’s own unhappy marriage led

<sup>3</sup> For biographical information on Spence, see Susan Magarey, *Unbridling the Tongues of Women: A Biography of Catherine Helen Spence* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1985); *Catherine Helen Spence: An Autobiography* (Adelaide: W. K. Thomas, 1910); and Jeanne F. Young, *Catherine Helen Spence: A Study and an Appreciation* (Melbourne: Lothian Publishing Co. 1937).

<sup>4</sup> For biographical information on Lane see E. H. Lane, *Dawn to Dusk. Reminiscences of a Rebel* (Brisbane: William Brooks and Co., 1939); Lloyd Ross, *William Lane and the Australian Labour Movement* (Redfern: The Author, 1935); Michael Wilding, Introduction to *The Workingman’s Paradise* (Sydney: Sydney UP, 1980).

her to extend the handfasting practice to the white settlers, based on her own difficulty in escaping an oppressive husband in conventional marriage. Although she had been liberated through the convenient drowning of her strict Calvinist preacher husband when he fell overboard during the voyage to Columba, she could see the benefits of extending to the whole society the capability for men and women of ending their relationships easily after living together for a reasonable period to the whole society. She also recognised that it was not possible for everyone to remain faithful to one person forever.

The implications of handfasting are revolutionary for Columba's women. Like the novel itself, handfasting recognises equally the existence of both male and female sexuality, rather than perceiving them as two entirely different experiences or as a means of one sex exerting power over another. Both men and women could move into new relationships if a handfasting was not successful, for no premium is placed on a woman's virginity, nor is sexual passivity especially valued in a woman (Albinski 21). The sexual double standard of conventional nineteenth-century society is, if not eliminated, at least considerably weakened. What happens when dissatisfaction sets in *after* marriage is not discussed, although in her later utopian work, *A Week in the Future*, Spence makes divorce relatively easy and accessible to all.

Like Spence, Lane sees a commitment to monogamy as necessary but his predominant motivation for this was the continuation of the white "race." In *The Workingman's Paradise*, Lane recognises marriage as an iniquitous and oppressive institution for women, but of considerable benefit to men. The stereotypical bushman's life was "aimless and hopeless," according to Nellie, the female hero, "born of unnatural surroundings" (135). And Ned, the bushman-hero, foresees a future for himself "aged too soon, wifeless and childless, racked with rheumatism [...]" (50). As for women, Lane's New Order would bring women sexual autonomy because they would marry for love only; with their material needs secured, Lane argued, women would be treated "not as servants but as sisters", "equals" not slaves (cited Scates 54).

Both novels offer alternatives to the dominant views of male sexuality as hydraulic and (middle-class) female sexuality as non-existent that supposedly necessitated the existence of prostitution. In Spence's utopia, trial marriages are supposed to eliminate prostitution because men can change sexual partners merely by ending their handfasting. Nor are men forced to marry in order to have sex with their partner. With women also able to enter new relationships without social ostracism, "fallen" women do not exist as a result of their seduction and desertion. In *The Workingman's Paradise*, prostitution is a symbol of what is wrong with capitalism and what is right about socialism. Lane's depiction of the "sad sisterhood" in Sydney recalls Karl Marx's denunciation of the glut in the Australian labour market caused by the "shameless lavishing of uncultivated colonial land on aristocrats and capitalists," as well as the stream of men attracted by the gold-

diggings that led to the wanton flourishing of prostitution, as Michael Wilding notes (49). When Nellie stoops to kiss a sleeping prostitute in a Sydney park, she is declaring that socialism equals “fellowship with all who are wronged and oppressed” (105). Ned’s shame is not for himself only, but for his sex and the social order which permits such degradation of women to take place (Scates 47). This New Man rejects the idea that men need prostitutes because of their uncontrollable sexuality, an aspect of social purity Lane attempted to put into practice in the objectives of the New Australia settlement. Both writers eliminate the economic reasons for women becoming prostitutes by offering them economic independence and equality, although there is insufficient detail about how this works for it to be totally convincing.

Another manifestation of the sexual double standard, the illegitimate child, does not exist in Columba, for the children of handfasting are equal in status to those born within marriage. In the event of the end of a handfasting, the partner who does not request the termination of the relationship claims the right to any children. The children do not increase the likelihood of poverty and ostracism for the parent who rears them because there is no poverty in Columba and no social stigma associated with this transgression against respectability. If neither partner wants to rear the offspring, the children are designated as “God’s bairns” and brought up by the state. They are highly educated – in fact, they are the only citizens of Columba taught to read and write – and enter the élite professions of teaching, medicine, public service, religion and justice. Contrary to being treated as society’s outcasts, they are placed in positions of authority over the other citizens. With parents knowing this, infanticide, baby-farming and abortion do not exist.

Innocence is also defined differently in a world without the sexual and moral double standard. Spence’s rebellious female hero, Liliard Abercrombie, has a desire for knowledge that can never be satisfied by the limited perfection of Columba but, unlike her biblical predecessor, Liliard’s actual loss of innocence occurs in New York when she learns about prostitution in a chapter entitled “Knowledge of Good and Evil”: as Nan Bowman Albinski observes, “the true loss of innocence is not sexuality expressed with love, but the moral corruption of commercialized sexuality” (22). Interestingly, Liliard’s quest reveals a paradox common to many utopias throughout history. In a society with no conflict or sadness or want, how is human nature to achieve its maximum potential? It is logical, therefore, that she leaves Columba with the Australian male hero, Hugh Keith, to explore the outside world.

Like Spence, Lane draws on the Edenic myth but, instead of the two working-class protagonists of *The Workingman’s Paradise* leaving paradise to make their wandering and solitary way in the real world, they live in a hellish, depression-bound Sydney where women are tired, weary souls, victims of men who have been brutalised and numbed by the capitalist system. Both Nellie and Ned end up in search of a new paradise, a place where men can redeem themselves from their

“fallen” state to which competition and injustice have brought them, prefiguring the establishment of New Australia. Indeed, Lane planned to write a sequel to *The Workingman's Paradise* called *In New Australia: Being Nellie Lawton's Diary of a Happier Life*. Unfortunately, like the settlements themselves, Lane's second novel did not live up to expectations – he only completed a few chapters which Mary Gilmore described as “thin and indicative of [his] low state of health [...]” (cited Wilding 61).

Lane, in his characterisation of the working class, represents them in a way that is consistent with the anxiety of *fin-de-siècle* Western society about gender roles, national identity and class relations that recent books like *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* have discussed. Men's drunkenness and brutalisation, brought on by the effects of capitalist industrialisation, have not only made men “unmanly,” as well as providing the threat of an Australia filled with “round-cheeked, bland-faced Chinamen” (9), but they have also affected the lives of women who are forced to bring children into a world full of misery. So much for the real world. What about utopia?

The real world of 1890s Australia might turn women into baby-producing machines, leading women to protest against “compulsory motherhood,” but motherhood is still “woman's highest joy,” as Nellie says, when women have a choice: “Why should we be mothers, unless it pleases us to be mothers?” she asks (78). Nellie's position is that women should be free to find their own sphere, rather than having it defined for them by men, that society would be a far better place if women were no longer “degraded into machines” but were treated as “human beings with souls” (77). Ned regards it as pointless to suggest to Nellie after she rejects his marriage proposal on the grounds that she is unable to bring children into this misery-racked world that they marry and not have children, for, in utopia, motherhood will assume its rightful importance; marriage without children is not to be contemplated. Nellie, as the ideal, morally superior woman, will fight for unionism and socialism because she loves “whatever strikes at things that are” and hates “everything that helps maintain them. And that is how we all really feel who feel at all, it is the mother in us, the source of everything that is good [...]” (173). Lane seems to be depicting her here as a mother figure, albeit a mother without children. And considering that her powerful character dwindles away towards the end of the book as Ned assumes his role as leader of the Australian working man, it is possible that Nellie is assuming the role of a “real-life” nineteenth century mother, rather than the activist she has been.

The concern with race identity that Lane incorporated into his view of motherhood is surprisingly absent in *Handfasted*, which appears to accept with equanimity the notion of inter-race marriage and breeding. While Spence admitted to being “a little ashamed of being so narrow in my views on the coloured question” in her autobiography (73) after meeting Harriet Tubman, a Black American civil rights activist, and the family of William Lloyd Garrison during her trip to America

in 1893, there is in *Handfasted* nothing of William Lane's refusal to permit the crossing of the "Colour Line" in his utopian adventures in Paraguay. The shortage of Scottish women in the new colony of Columba led to a pragmatic recognition of the likelihood of sexual fraternisation between the Indian women and the white men. The introduction of the practice of handfasting, the attempts at assimilation of the Indian women or, if that was not possible, an honourable separation, were at least somewhat enlightened for the time, if patronising and imperialistic. There is also in the tone of voice of the narrator an admiration for the descendants of mixed-race relationships: in fact, there is a positive eugenic spin to the way in which these Columbans are perceived (86). Their racial heritage and their environment have produced a happy, healthy population consistent with Spence's later belief in the idea of "Scientific Meliorism," an alternative to the view of many feminists (and Lane) of "social purity" as the means of achieving an improved society. The concept of scientific meliorism is described in Jane Hume Clapperton's book, *Scientific Meliorism and the Evolution of Happiness*, and was the basis for many of the ideas in Spence's later utopian text, *A Week in the Future*. It derived from "the moral ideas of George Eliot, the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin and the philosophical beliefs of Herbert Spencer" (Ljungdahl 9) and "stressed that gradual evolution and adaptation of a superior race could be achieved by changing the moral nature of society through a scientific knowledge of heredity, education and environment" (Ljungdahl 12).

Lane's views on the issue are little touched on in *The Workingman's Paradise*, although his arguments about motherhood and marriage formed a part of the wider discourse on sexuality and racial purity. His feminism, like that of many of the first wave feminists, extended only to white women. Where Spence's isolated Scottish colony accepts miscegenation between settlers and Indian women, one of the conditions of joining Lane's New Australia venture, apart from teetotalism, was that there be no sexual fraternisation between the native women and the white colonisers in spite of the considerable gender imbalance within the Paraguayan settlement. His practical utopia that was supposed to act as the "vanguard" of socialism reflected the widespread anxiety in Australia about the survival of the white race but was also an extension of his own paranoia about other races. Like others, he accepted the pseudo-scientific rationale provided by Social Darwinism that justified the eugenic idea of selective breeding. The aversion to non-Anglo-Saxon-Celtic people is not as conspicuous in *The Workingman's Paradise* as it is in some of Lane's other writings such as his editorials and articles in *The Boomerang*,<sup>5</sup> but it is certainly there, as is the notion of white women as race-mothers. He believed that all white Australians had a responsibility to their race, but particularly women, so that when the baby of a working-class family dies in *The Workingman's Paradise*, the narrator reflects on

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<sup>5</sup> See *The Boomerang*, 11 Feb. 1888. p. 10, as well as his serialised fiction "White or Yellow", 18 Feb. 1888 to 5 May 1888.



the quality of the child's mothering: the healthy motherhood necessary to reproduce the race has been destroyed by poverty and misery, causing women to produce babies with "only a flickering, half-lighted life," with blood "thin with the woman's own weariness and vitiate from its drunken sire" (133).

Lane's social blueprint is not quite a utopia in the sense of that "speaking picture of a just, prosperous and ideal society" that Sir Philip Sidney saw as the defining quality of Thomas More's *Utopia*, but it does express a vision of Lane's ideal society, as well as including a powerful critique of nineteenth-century capitalist-industrialist Australia. This vision includes women as equal political and economic partners with men, even if his vision became somewhat diminished in later years. Lane, like many other readers in Western societies, was attracted to the utopia of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. Unlike *Looking Backward* and William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, however, *The Workingman's Paradise* does articulate a clear departure from the status quo where women's rights are concerned, and shows the possibility of women's freedom being achieved with the advent of socialism. There remains the association of women with "love, sympathy and motherhood" that reveals Lane's New Order is still at one with the ideology of the "real" world (Pfaelzer 327).

Spence, on the other hand, imagines a geographically isolated world that exists in the nineteenth century but one in which there is no sexual double standard. Columba has had to adopt ways of living that solve their unique problems, so that the history of sexual relations over the previous one hundred years is imagined away. For the protagonist, Hugh Keith, and the reader, the present "real" world becomes defamiliarised, exposing the flaws and contradictions evident in the dominant ideology concerning gender relations. If it had been published in the nineteenth century, it is possible that *Handfasted* would have served as one of the "thought-provoking catalysts whose value is in their shock effect on readers" that Peter Ruppert sees as the function of utopias (xiii). From a twenty-first century point of view, it is not radical: it does not depart from the heterosexual, monogamous model, for example, but, by removing the burden of sexual guilt from women, as Helen Thomson argues, Spence "frees them from the curse they [have] borne since Eve's acceptance of the apple from the serpent [...] branded the female as the cause of the Fall" (378). It was a brave and iconoclastic book that, I believe, puts Spence at the forefront of nineteenth-century Australian feminism.

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