

Tanya Dalziell, *Settler Romances and the Australian Girl*. Perth: U of Western Australia P, 2004, 178pp.

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“The Australian Girl” was a figure much discussed in the press, from the 1880s through to the 1920s. She was a focus for questions about national identity and eugenics, crossed with questions about gender and class relations specific to the New World. Was the Australian girl taller, healthier, better looking, more precocious, less socially accomplished, less marriageable (even) than her English cousin? Was she a sign of progress or cultural recidivism? What did she signify about the emergence of new national types in the settler colonies? This figure was as useful to the political rhetoric of feminist Louisa Lawson and nationalist Australian Natives Association as she was to novelists as different from one another as Rosa Praed and Miles Franklin.

Yet the novel of the period that claimed her name—Catherine Martin’s *An Australian Girl* (1890)—is not especially interested in what is distinctively Australian about the heroine, Stella Courtland. True, she has the conventional two suitors to choose between—one local, one European—and proudly claims, in the face of the nouveau-riche cultural cringers of “marvellous Melbourne” society, that she considers herself “Australian” rather than “colonial.” But unlike the media-created “Australian girl,” Catherine Martin’s twenty-four-year-old heroine is constantly seeking philosophical and spiritual answers to the great questions of life. Martin gives Stella’s wrestling with faith and doubt equal importance with her wrestling with the conflict of passion and duty in marriage—although she also mocks the excesses of missionary zeal and the marriage market. The novel, it seems to me, escapes the category of romance: Stella is more of a *Bildungsroman* heroine. Like her creator, she is formidably well read: during the course of the novel she reads and discusses, among others, Cervantes, Montaigne, Goethe, Heine, Kant, Newman, Ruskin, Darwin—and Marx. She alludes to poets ranging from Dante to George Herbert to William Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold. In 1890s Orientalist fashion she is fond of quoting from *The Arabian Nights*. As well—and this brings her into the purview of Tanya Dalziell’s study—she is interested in Aboriginal legends and artefacts.

In *Settler Romances and the Australian Girl* Dalziell’s major contribution to the cultural history of the period is her identification of the important

dialogue between ethnography and popular fiction. This dialogue frames her illuminating discussion of Rosa Praed's *Fugitive Anne* in Chapter 1; and in Chapter 3 ethnography is identified as one of the cultural conditions that produced the "sympathetic white woman," authorising her claim to knowledge of indigenous people. Dalziell demonstrates persuasively that, although Aboriginal people do not speak in their own voices, or appear in their own right, in Australian colonial fiction their shadowy presence can be discerned, and their capacity to "unsettle" colonial certainties explored. She shows how this can be done through looking obliquely at certain plot devices (such as cross-racial disguise and mimicry) and the operation of certain metaphorical oppositions (such as "savagery" and "civilisation," as discussed in Chapter 4, "Colonial Displacements"). So where an earlier feminist reading of *An Australian Girl* might have mentioned Stella's ethnographic interests only in passing, in this book they act as a pointer to the discursive figure of "sympathetic white woman," of whom Katharine Langloh Parker, and her compromised relationship to Aboriginal culture, is the paradigmatic instance.

It is also salutary to see how Dalziell's reading of an adventure romance like Praed's *Fugitive Anne*, explored by critics such as John Docker, Robert Dixon and myself in terms of gender representation and the "lost race" plot, presses so much harder on the ideological functioning of race discourse, in particular the role of racialised whiteness, and of the mimicry identified by Homi Bhabha as characteristic of colonial discourse. In its earlier Australian manifestations, the tradition of ideological cultural criticism drew on postcolonial, as well as Marxist, feminist and Foucauldian, accounts of power and ideology in discursive realms. Critics working in this tradition have considered constructions of class, nation, gender and race, sometimes separately, sometimes together. Tanya Dalziell takes up the baton of this shared enterprise, and in *Settler Romances and the Australian Girl* carries it forward into the current context of critical whiteness studies (as developed in this country by indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson and her colleagues). Thus, in four substantial chapters, she explores the ideological work done by tropes of cross-racial mimicry, gift and commodity, "sympathetic women," and colonial displacement.

Dalziell valiantly attempts to place her work within the dominant tradition of international postcolonial discourse, challenging its major debates from the point of view of settler colonies and their particular neo-colonial capitalist forms. Her most ambitious attempt to do this is in the chapter called

“Haunted Economies,” where she brings Marcel Mauss’s anthropological text, *The Gift*, into dialogue with J. D. Hennessey’s adventure romance, *An Australian Bush Track*. This encounter produces the powerful trope of a white Australia haunted by Aboriginal presence/absence, which she explores in her Conclusion, in relation to a contemporary text, Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet*. But the cost of its success, it seems to me, is to eclipse the book’s ostensible subject, the Australian Girl and the feminist questions associated with her. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for the ideological critic/juggler to keep all the balls of “race, gender, sexuality, class and colonisation” in the air at once.

The figure of the Australian Girl may have instigated, even animated, this book, but she comes and goes in its arguments. Also problematically, the book’s second subject, “settler romance,” is somewhat evanescent. Significant generic differences between the adventure romance (the texts discussed in Chapters 1 and 2) and the romance of courtship and marriage (texts featured in Chapters 3 and 4) are left unexamined. As well, in the introductory chapter, “settler romance” is used interchangeably with “popular fiction” to describe the texts under discussion, which surely raises the question of what “popular” is differentiated from. From canonical fiction? British metropolitan fiction? Realist novels? Questions of genre are important, especially to studies of ideology and discourse like this book, because genre sets limits to the ways in which a discourse (such as ethnography) can operate with authority. None of this, however, detracts from Dalziell’s significant contribution to critical whiteness studies in the Australian literary context.

Susan Sheridan, Flinders University

Settler Romances and the Australian Girl was joint winner, with Maryrose Casey’s *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre 1967-1997*, of the 2005 Walter McRae Russell Prize for Australian literary studies.