

# THE SHAMING OF AUSTRALIAN CULTURE: REFRACTED SHAME IN KATHLEEN FITZPATRICK'S *SOLID BLUESTONE FOUNDATIONS*

ROSAMUND DALZIELL

In this paper I shall consider aspects of shame as a key to appreciating *Solid Bluestone Foundations and Other Memories of a Melbourne Girlhood, 1908 to 1928*, published in 1983, when Kathleen Fitzpatrick was seventy-eight. In this carefully constructed autobiographical text Fitzpatrick reflects on her early years in and around her maternal grandparents' home in Middle Park, her education at school and at Melbourne University. She concludes with an account of going 'Home' to England, two years of study at Oxford as a young woman and her return to Australia in 1928 to a temporary academic appointment at Sydney University. In appreciating *Solid Bluestone Foundations* it is useful to know that ten years after the concluding date of her autobiography Kathleen Fitzpatrick took up an appointment as a lecturer in history at Melbourne University, rising to associate professor in 1948, 'the first woman in a non-scientific field to attain this rank in an Australian university' (Davies 2). After her death in 1990, Geoffrey Blainey wrote in an obituary: 'Her autobiography, *Solid Bluestone Foundations*, will one day be ranked as one of the most perceptive of such Australian books'. Blainey described her as 'a rare sculptor with words' (*Age*, 1 Sept. 1990, 20).

Joy Hooton notes that the work successfully unites 'the achieved self and the communal past' (104). Hooton also notes that the work has received little critical attention despite sympathetic reviews. One sympathetic reviewer was Manning Clark, who wrote fulsomely of 'this magnificent book of memories of a Melbourne girlhood':

All those who have had the good fortune to hear Kathleen Fitzpatrick give a lecture on history or literature probably wondered where her charisma came from. Was it a gift from the gods? Was it the fruit of hard work? Or did it come up from inside her, as an artist's distillation of her experience of life? (*Age*, 19 Feb. 1983, 12)

In the concluding chapter of her autobiography, Kathleen Fitzpatrick summarises her academic achievement in this way:

Real scholars, I believe, are born as well as made and what was given, in my case, did not add up to the potential of a real scholar. There was, however, enough of this strange creature in me to enable me to recognise and appreciate the real thing and later to give all the furtherance in my power to those of my own students in whom I detected the rare gifts that make a true scholar. (201)

Despite a life devoted to scholarship and teaching, an impressive career by any standards, and exceptional for a female academic, her self assessment is that she is not a 'real' scholar. Instead, she interprets her career as one of nurturing the scholarship of others. Yet throughout her life she received the recognition accorded to 'real scholars' – academic appointments, publication of her books and articles, fellowships, academic honours.

As well as being a member of the Department of History at the University of Melbourne from 1930-62, becoming associate professor in 1948, Fitzpatrick was a Foundation Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and a Fellow of the Australian College of Education. She was also a Carnegie Scholar in the United States. Her publications include *Sir John Franklin in Tasmania 1837-1843* (1949); *Australian Explorers*, one of the first Australian anthologies of explorers' writings (1958); a monograph, *Martin Boyd* (1963); a history of Presbyterian Ladies College, Melbourne (1975); as well as entries for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, articles, book reviews and public lectures.

The narrative itself offers a source for this negative self-assessment in the critique of the myth of British superiority. For the autobiographical subject, it originates within the mansion with the 'solid bluestone foundations', Hughenden (named after the residence of British Prime Minister Disraeli), home of Fitzpatrick's maternal grandfather, John Buxton, who is represented as an Anglo-Australian myth-maker for the colonial family which he founded and in which he, as self-appointed patriarch was the dominant figure, demanding from all loyalty to Britain and ignoring the Irish background of his Australian-born wife Mary:

As for his wife and children and grandchildren, they were of course colonials and it was their duty to love, honour and obey the Mother Country which knew what was for their good. (32)

As one of these grandchildren, Kathleen Pitt (Fitzpatrick's maiden name) was already subject to the shame of being a colonial, even though her narrative resists the myth by pointing out satirically the inconsistencies in her grandfather's fiction of being British, on which his sense of identity depended:

Although he had left England when he was seventeen and never went back, even for a visit, Grandpa never ceased to think of himself as an Englishman who happened, for his own convenience, to be living in the colonies. (32)

Grandpa is represented as physically ill-adjusted to the Australian environment and Hughenden as a fortress against the physical reality of a land he experiences as alien, even though he has bought and sold it for profit. Only the shrubbery at Hughenden is described lovingly as 'a controlled wilderness full of sweet-smelling flowers, such as violets, jonquils, primroses and daphne' (16). When Kathleen Fitzpatrick later embraces Classicism rather than Romanticism as central to her identity, the stage has been set by the order of British Hughenden for her textually formalised rejection of the uncontrolled, the wild and the theatrical dimensions of her potential self which can nevertheless still be traced in the text.

The solid bluestone foundations and wealth of the Buxton race are founded on the business acumen and economic success of the men in the 'Firm', a family real estate agency founded in Melbourne in 1861. The family is continued and sustained by the fertility of 'Grandma' and by the domestic work and compliance of the women of the family. Hughenden is represented as the stable centre of Kathleen Fitzpatrick's childhood existence, despite the patriarchal shaming of colonials. The sociability of Hughenden is contrasted with the isolation of her own home environment due to her parents' itinerant way of life and frosty marital relationship, their frugality, emphasis on education and her mother's dislike of housekeeping and entertaining. Kathleen Fitzpatrick emphasises the solidity of Hughenden – the text's photo-documentation shows a huge, imposing, if ugly, edifice in a classical architectural style.

Despite the critique of her grandfather's delusions and dominating behaviour, Hughenden is described affectionately as a place that maintained a sense of tradition combined with the most modern comforts money could buy. The child Kathleen experiences it as child-centred and not strong on discipline, characterised by hospitality and abundance, of food, attention and possibilities for play. Yet she observes the gender-based division of labour, acknowledging that the joyful childhood experience of Hughenden rested on an orderly domestic routine, maintained by the hard physical work of Grandpa and the unmarried aunts, a routine both insisted upon and disrupted by Grandpa.

Kathleen Fitzpatrick as writer presents her grandfather as larger than life, a source of childhood stability, but in finally puncturing his grandiose fictional identity with a sharp sentence, she rejects his power to shame her as a colonial, on the grounds that he himself is inauthentic: 'Grandpa was, in short, like a stage version of an Englishman in a play written by a foreigner' (33). Elsewhere she refers to a time when she realised that Hughenden was in fact a 'complicated artefact'. But in the representation of Hughenden the shame is dissipated by the critique, and the affection remains.

Colonial and family politics are shown to be enmeshed at Hughenden, with vilification of the Irish used by Grandpa as a strategy for expressing hostility towards his wife Mary:

His politics were conservative, not to say reactionary. England was top nation and foreigners should thank heaven fasting if England conquered them and gave them decent government, and that went specially for the ungrateful Irish, a devious, shiftless lot, a perfect nuisance and quite incapable of looking after themselves. (32)

Kathleen Fitzpatrick's grandmother was an Irish-Australian, and as his daughter Gertrude, Kathleen Fitzpatrick's mother, had also married an Irish-Australian, Henry Pitt, Grandpa's attempt to shame his wife Mary by such anti-Irish tirades not only demonstrates his own problematic marriage, but also erodes Kathleen Fitzpatrick's acceptability according to the patriarchal definition of identity. Grandpa's patriarchal enterprise was as if undermined by his marriage to a Canaanite instead of a woman of Israel. Mary Buxton, Australian-born, and Catholic, resists her husband's tyranny but avoids open conflict. Maintaining the stability of home and family by diplomacy, hard work and self-control, she represents a different tradition and does not worship his idols. Similarly Kathleen Fitzpatrick's own father is anything but shiftless, being represented as a model of dogged hard work. Kathleen Fitzpatrick herself married an Irish Australian, Brian Fitzpatrick, and the failure of the marriage appears to have modified the vigour of her critique of the myth of British superiority. *Solid Bluestone Foundations* provides some evidence of attempts to cover the tracks of the more radical politics of her early adulthood. After a marriage to an Irishman of the more 'feckless' sort, the solidity of Hughenden and what it stood for invited a psychic return.

Although the narrative is critical of grandfather John Buxton's posturing 'British is best', representations of similar attitudes prevailing in the post-colonial intellectual community at Melbourne University in the 1920s are partially accepted. The narrator expresses conviction that the standard of education offered at Melbourne University was lower than that in Britain at the time, British higher education being represented in her discourse only by Oxford and Cambridge (177). That the narrative does not comment critically here indicates an internalisation of the coloniser's values, shame being indicated by an unrealistically negative assessment of the post-colonial institution. This belief in the deficiency of Australian university studies, including her own, clearly prepared the

ground for her devastating disappointment at Oxford, recounted in the final chapter.

The narrating Kathleen Fitzpatrick also accepts without question British colonisation of the English literature curriculum, which involved a substantial component of Old English as was required at Oxford, even though this ultimately determined her career as a historian rather than in English literature. Her reluctance to embark on this form of study she attributes to her own lack of ability. Nevertheless her ambivalence is such that she is prepared to be critical of the unsatisfactory appointment of an Oxford graduate to the chair of English at Melbourne in preference to Walter Murdoch, clearly identifying the ill-founded 'cultural cringe'. Yet she still partially justifies the new professor's behaviour in completely ignoring her and other honours students. This habit of mind persists when she embarks on further study in England. She repeatedly justifies the unjustifiable in the face of her own documented examples of ignorance, prejudice, poor teaching, rudeness, humiliating behaviour, careless administration, lack of pastoral care for students and inexcusable arrogance.

But as with her grandfather, her affection for Melbourne University transcends the shaming elements, and it is this institution that is represented as her Alma Mater, not Oxford, where she takes a second undergraduate degree.

In her fifth and final chapter, entitled 'Going Home', Fitzpatrick critically examines the myth of England as 'home', a myth promoted initially by her maternal grandfather, then by her restless and frustrated mother. After a satirical representation of the contrast between her mother's illusions and her own observations, together with a biting critique of English manners towards 'colonials', she gives an account of her experience of study at Oxford, after an abortive attempt at Cambridge.

On her arrival in England in 1926, she recounts her experience of being interviewed at Cambridge for a research scholarship for which she has been short-listed, at one of the women's colleges, which she chooses not to name. The experience is one of disillusionment and crushing humiliation. Her initial impression is consistent with her imagined Cambridge, 'the 'Home' of our dreams' (187), but the dream rapidly becomes a nightmare of shame. Her interviewer, a female don, whose severe appearance and manner recall all the Reverend Mothers she had known, asks her of which university she is a graduate:

I replied 'The University of Melbourne'. There was a silence and then, in that tone of ineffable upper-class British superiority I was to come to know so well, the don observed: 'Here in Cambridge, you know, we don't think much of the degrees of these American universities'. (188)

Given the power imbalance, the don is not shamed by her crass ignorance, whereas Kathleen Fitzpatrick is deeply shamed because in the don's understanding, Melbourne University, the institution cherished by her and central to her identity, does not exist. The shaming tenor is maintained throughout the interview: 'The don's questions were resumed and it became abundantly clear, from their hostile tenor, that for some unknown reason she wished to humiliate and hurt me' (188).

Kathleen Fitzpatrick decides against proceeding with this application but in withdrawing she forgoes her opportunity for a research scholarship. Backed by her family, she perseveres in her aim of studying in England and applies to Oxford where her reception is less frosty and she is accepted as a student at Somerville College. But the damage has been done. Accepting the Cambridge don's evaluation, she does not enrol for a research degree:

I had had time to reflect that, unpleasant as she had been, the Cambridge don might have been right in her evident view that I was not fit for post-graduate work. If the degrees of English universities were the only ones that really counted, then the right strategy seemed to be to equip myself with one of these but not, please God, at Cambridge. (189)

Demoted to the rank of undergraduate again, the narrative portrays her humble acceptance of this loss of status. There is no firm indication of dissent from the mature narrating self, although she notes that Rhodes Scholars, who also generally read for a second undergraduate degree at Oxford, were accorded the high status that accompanied the scholarship and access to excellent tuition and to the community of Rhodes House as well as their own college. A comparison of her experience with that recorded by Keith Hancock in *Country and Calling* highlights the extent of institutionalised sexual inequality.

The process of internalising the values of the shaming culture extends to her Australian accent. Unlike Keith Hancock, who vigorously defends the Australian accent, Kathleen Fitzpatrick apparently changed her accent to resemble that of the admired Miss Penrose, Principal of Somerville (1983, 189). Geoffrey Blainey comments in his obituary on Fitzpatrick's 'fastidious, measured pronunciation of every word'. Her voice was closer to an educated English than Australian voice: the kind of voice that was often associated in Australia with the taking of airs' (Blainey 49-51).

The remainder of her account of her Oxford experience is a blend of criticism and justification. Lonely and homesick, she excuses the unfriendly behaviour of her British fellow students. Experiencing poor teaching, she blames herself for not profiting more from the excellence of the system:

There is probably no better system of university tuition than that practised in Oxford in my day ... but its efficacy depended on the quality of the participants. I was, once again, dogged by that absence of good teaching which I was not intellectually strong enough to overcome. (206-7)

She also battles gender shame in both specific instances and in the institutionalisation of disadvantage. Poor health, unhappiness and excessive work sap her intellectual and physical energy with the result that the first class honours degree she hoped for eludes her and the second class degree she is awarded represents failure in her terms. What remained with her was what she called a sense of guilt (although here I would read 'shame', as there is no moral transgression involved) about her failure to develop a 'tender regard' for Oxford (206):

... in later years, I was to listen almost with envy to male colleagues who, like me, had taken their first degrees in Australia and their second in Oxford and who looked back with evident nostalgia, which I could not share, to their blissful days in the Paradise Lost of Oxford. I too had been in Arcadia but I did not long to return and felt guilty of my failure to respond appropriately to a great opportunity by being in fact rather unhappy while there. (203)

Her willingness to accept in her late seventies the judgement of 'second-rate' that she considered her Oxford degree to be when awarded in her early twenties, is evidence that the marks of shame were never entirely erased from her self-perception. When shamed in Britain by authentic British men and women rather than her phoney British grandfather, the shame persisted, to the exclusion of almost all possibility of affection and with permanent damage to self-regard.

One of the signifiers of shame is denial or forgetting, which may show forth in a text as a significant *aporia*. Underlying the shaming experience of the voyage to Britain construed as 'home' and of academic study at Oxford, is Kathleen Fitzpatrick's conspicuous omission from her autobiography of any discussion of her relationship with her former husband, Brian Fitzpatrick, the man whose surname she continued to use as her own. The effacement of Brian Fitzpatrick suggests a powerful desire to suppress a life experience too painful to explore in the narrative. Brian Fitzpatrick, described by Stuart Macintyre as a 'civil libertarian and freelance radical historian' (17) is mentioned only once in the autobiography, as follows:

I found time to contribute to the *Melbourne University Magazine* and the student newspaper *Farrago*, which first appeared while I was a student, having been founded by Bob Fraser and Brian Fitzpatrick, to whom I was later to be briefly and unhappily married. (176)

Brian Fitzpatrick sailed for England only three months after Kathleen (Pitt). Yet *Solid Bluestone Foundations* includes no mention of Brian's presence in England, although Don Watson states in his biography of Brian Fitzpatrick: 'The two had been friends since their undergraduate days. They had been in constant contact in England, where she was at Oxford' (45). The dispirited, disappointed Oxford undergraduate portrayed in the narrative gives no indication of having any resource of love or encouragement, apart from a brief mention of two female friends.

Kathleen Fitzpatrick's attribution of her development of political consciousness to her Oxford experience, a strategy that enabled her to gain some objectivity in interpreting her difficulties there, may give some indication of the presence of Brian Fitzpatrick in her life at that time, but Kathleen Fitzpatrick expresses responsibility for her own critical observations, and does not attribute her views to the influence of friends, as she does in relation to the University of Melbourne Labor club, where she appears to underplay the extent of her involvement. Moreover, as Watson's biography makes clear, Brian Fitzpatrick and his male contemporaries received much support from women in radical politics, but never accorded them significant leadership roles. Kathleen Fitzpatrick's most deeply felt experiences of injustice were related to gender inequities, to which Brian Fitzpatrick was unlikely to be sensitive.

To suggest that a failed marriage might be a source of personal shame is hardly a radical assumption. Yet this dimension of the subject's experience is excluded from the autobiographical narrative, whereas other sources of shame are fully explored.

Watson's biography of Brian Fitzpatrick sheds far more light on the difficulties of the marriage. Brian Fitzpatrick as a radical had a public life that was well-known in Melbourne, but equally well-known was a reputation for public drunkenness and for frequenting prostitutes. The cut-off date for the narrative in *Solid Bluestone Foundations* is 1928, four years before the author's marriage. Only a brief allusion is made to her professional difficulties of the decade that followed, and her marriage is not mentioned apart from the half sentence quoted above. But the narrative as a whole is shaped by a teleology of the two goals of security and independence. Additional comment on her marriage is contained in her autobiographical reflection in 'A Cloistered Life', in which she writes of her appointment as a history lecturer at Melbourne University, ending the decade of struggle:

I had now realised my heart's desire, an ideal occupation and independence, for four hundred a year, my new salary, was affluence for a single woman, which I was resolved to remain'. (130)

In the epilogue to her biography of Sir John Franklin, Kathleen Fitzpatrick writes with sympathetic understanding of the effects that shame may have on a personality:

Those who have suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune know that with them there always comes a deeper but invisible wound to the self-confidence, so that the sufferer asks himself: Are they not right, after all, who loosed these blows upon me? So there arises a longing for reassurance, which some objective mark of success can give. (374)

The 'solid bluestone foundations' of the text are undermined by shame, so that a successful academic career and public recognition are not sufficiently reassuring to heal the wounded self-confidence of either the narrated or the narrating self. The narrating Kathleen Fitzpatrick is often self-deprecatory about her intellectual ability and concludes her autobiography with a 'resigned' acceptance that she is not a 'real' scholar. The myth of British superiority within her family and Alma Mater, Melbourne University, together with her grandfather's prejudice against the Irish struck at the roots of her identity as a so-called 'colonial', socially and intellectually, rendering her more vulnerable to the inequities of her Oxford experience, particularly those related to gender. Her unsuccessful marriage to Brian Fitzpatrick led her to modify retrospectively and textually her political activism and to seek refuge in the psychic structures of Hughenden, or at least those aspects she could still accept, rebuilding it in her autobiography.

#### WORKS CITED

- Blainey, G. Obituary of Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Proceedings of the Australian Academy of the Humanities*, Vol. 15. NSW: Southwood Press, 1991.
- Davies, Susan. 'Kathleen Fitzpatrick'. *Australian History: Discipline and Profession*. Eds. Stuart Macintyre and Julian Thomas. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press (forthcoming).
- Fitzpatrick, Kathleen. *Sir John Franklin in Tasmania 1837-1843*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1949.
- Fitzpatrick, Kathleen. 'A cloistered life'. *The Half-Open Door: Sixteen Modern Australian Women Look at Professional Life and Achievement*. Eds. P. Grimshaw and L. Strahan. Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1982.
- Fitzpatrick, Kathleen. *Solid Bluestone Foundations and Other Memories of a Melbourne Girlhood*. Melbourne: Macmillan, 1983.
- Hancock, W.K. *Country and Calling*. London: Faber and Faber, 1954.
- Hooton, Joy. *Stories of Herself When Young: Autobiographies of Childhood by Australian Women*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press Australia, 1990.
- Macintyre, Stuart. 'History, the University and the Nation', Trevor Reese Memorial Lecture, given at the University of Melbourne, 28 April, 1992.
- Watson, Don. *Brian Fitzpatrick: A Radical Life*. Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1979.