The Travels, Trials and Travails of the New Woman in Australasia

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This paper looks at early twentieth century representations of the Australasian new woman and her espousing of ideals of freedom and knowledge in the face of masculinist ideological constructs of respectability and suitable female roles. It also considers the travelling of ideas – often carried by women writers themselves – between Britain/the United States and Australasia, where female suffrage had been fully gained by 1908 with mixed effects for the feminist movement. Particular attention is given to between-the-wars fiction, including some novels by Jean Devanny and Eleanor Dark, that foregrounds conflicts between the legend of the bushman and emergent fighting feminism, first figured in two turn-of-the-century novels – Lane’s The Workingman’s Paradise and Franklin’s My Brilliant Career. This context gives a particular specificity to articulations of rising first wave feminism in some of its antipodean manifestations.

Keywords: new woman feminism, Australasia, early twentieth century women’s fiction.
As modernity emerged in different guises around the early twentieth century Western world, the new woman,\(^1\) (self)consciously modern and iconoclastic, also emerged. While in Australasia there were strong literary and other influences from Britain and the United States, this was a two-way traffic, and modernity 'in its local manifestations was carried between Australia and Britain, often by the new women'.\(^2\) There were many contradictions in the search for different kinds of freedoms. Centrally figured in literary representations of new women were aspects of economic relationships and gendered discourses around the body and the mind that were also discourses of power. These were also central in the ways their lives played themselves out. This paper discusses some mainly non-metropolitan fictional representations by women writers from World War One to World War Two, that is, in the period from 1914 to 1939. In the transition from the late Victorian or Edwardian New Woman to modernist (uncapitalised) new women, sometimes called flappers - women with their own incomes or at least a lower middle class positioning that allowed them to contemplate being independent agents - fin de siècle thinking about sexualities was significant, and World War One a key watershed event.

Australasian new womanist writing is not suffragist, since (white) women had won the vote around the turn of the century. By comparison, in Britain by 1918 women landowners over the age of thirty had the vote but general suffrage was not achieved until 1928, 34 years after South Australian women and twenty years after women in the state of Victoria. In 1904, Vida Goldstein told English readers 'we Australians have good reason to glory in the advance of our country, which, in granting women absolute political equality with men, has reached a position unique in the world’s history'.\(^3\) In Alice Rosman's *Miss Bryde of England*, a young British woman is influenced by 'the new ideas inculcated by her Australian cousins.'\(^4\) Antipodeans in London vaunted the advances made in 'Greater Britains beyond the seas'\(^5\) - with 'socialism and trade unionism both thriving' there, these extended beyond the area of women's political rights.\(^6\)

For many early twentieth century writers in Australasia, publishing possibilities, or even a congenial context in which to be a creative artist, seemed out of reach. Expatriation presented itself as a possibility with positive potential for the serious Australasian writer; it provided access to publishers and often a freer life, and this was the case for much of the twentieth century. London, called by Louise Mack in 1902 the 'Head Office of the Manufacture of Modernity',\(^7\) was a particular pole of attraction and (along with New York, where Christina Stead would set *Letty Fox*) the epitome of the metropolitan centre. Henry Handel Richardson wrote *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* overseas, only returning for a brief visit in 1912. Miles Franklin, following the appearance of *My Brilliant Career* in 1902, was away from 1905 until 1933. Barbara Baynton had preceded her in 1902, searching for a publisher for *Bush Studies*. Katharina Susannah Prichard was in London 1908 to 1910, and again from 1912 to 1915 as well as in the United States and Canada, but returned more quickly than many of the others. Christina Stead left Australia in the 1920s; she wrote, found a publisher for *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) in London, and stayed away for forty years. Jane Mander spent twenty years outside New Zealand, in New York and then London. Jean Devanny arrived in Sydney from Wellington in 1929, intending to go on 'Home' to try her fortune; and got to Berlin and Russia, and briefly to London in 1931, but this was a political organiser's trip with her fare paid by the Communist Party,\(^8\) and she did not return to Europe. Louise Mack was there 1901 to 1904 and 1910 to 1915, and survived by producing romance fiction.\(^9\) Barnard wanted to study at Oxford, but was prevented. Robyn Hyde died in London in 1939, not long after she arrived there.

Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas* (1938) commented upon how inadequate terminology had become for discussing the changes women were producing and experiencing in the early twentieth century:

"Feminism" we have had to destroy. "The emancipation of women" is equally inexpressive and corrupt ... None of these tags and labels express the real emotions that inspired the daughters' opposition ... because, as biography shows, that force had behind it many different emotions, and many that were contradictory.\(^10\)

In her quest for knowledge or artistic expression, the Victorian New Woman had to kill the Angel in the House; women who wanted a
profession had to go further and destroy the ‘lady’ – although often ‘when the lady was killed the woman still remained’.[11] The new woman looked different in some ways in Australasia, but one key shared feature was the experience of imperatives towards respectability. Miles Franklin recounts ironically how the reception of My Brilliant Career showed her that she had not written ‘a ladylike book I could be proud of.’[12] ‘It was still impossible in the 1930s’, Angela Woolacott suggests, ‘for a woman to survive social and sexual notoriety with her respectability intact’, especially in the “stridently masculinist culture”[13] of early twentieth century Australia. Going off to London was not necessarily depreciable; ‘white women’s desire for London was evidence of refinement and feminine respectability’[14] and, while ‘respectability was dependent upon class status as well as appearance and behaviour’, it was nonetheless the case that ‘Australians in England could trade on a certain classlessness’.[15]

The still culturally dominant influence of Britain encouraged a writing back to the former centre of the empire. But the colonial metropolis – Sydney and, to a lesser extent, Melbourne, Wellington or Auckland – was beginning to emerge, and to offer some community for writers and artists. Where those writers resident in Australia lived – whether centrally or colonially metropolitan, rural, or in between, impacted upon the tenor of their texts, as well as upon the contexts in which the new women they not infrequently depict strive to emerge. Eleanor Dark grew up in Sydney but moved to the Blue Mountains.[16] Jean Devanny worked with Dark’s aunt Marian Piddington at the beginning of the 1930s in Sydney, and Piddington, concerned about Devanny’s plans for joining the Communist Party in terms of the impact of this on her development as a writer, ‘went so far, at length, as to offer me and my family her cottage in the Blue Mountains as a home’.[17] Devanny had spent time out West as a general on a sheep station soon after arriving in Sydney, but she did not take up this offer, or move from King’s Cross for quite a while; her gradual relocation to north Queensland came about as a result of her speaking tours to the north for the Movement Against War and Fascism, as well as her difficulties with the Party leadership based in Sydney, and to a lesser extent, Melbourne. Stead’s contemporary, Dymphna Cusack, taught across New South Wales in a range of schools for nearly twenty years after she graduated from Sydney University in the mid-1920s. Prichard was mainly in Perth but, until Intimate Strangers (1937), set most of her fiction outside the cities.

Most women’s novels between 1901 and 1933, Susan Sheridan has argued, have either a ‘focus on the singularity of the individual female subject’ that seems modernist, or they are historical sagas and epics or ‘political novels about working class communities’ – the latter being ‘more compatible with current nationalist discourses’.[19] In early twentieth century Australia, Sheridan suggests, ‘a new narrative of female subjectivity, which might be named “the romance of experience”’ emerged, although these stories are not Bildungsroman because the development of the heroine is ‘more arbitrary and uncertain’.[20] Drusilla Modjeska reads Dark’s Prelude to Christopher (1934) as ‘following the faint traces of literary modernism … interior monologue, multiple subjectivity and a condensed time frame’. Franklin and Prichard are much more in thrall to nationalist narratives than either the modernist-inclining Dark or Stead, or the migrant Devanny, deracinated insofar as New Zealand differed from Australia. Prichard’s first novel, The Pioneers, primarily purports to be a redemption narrative: ‘this country has been the Redeemer and blotted out the old stain’.[21] The Pioneers was written in London within the nationalist bush history mode, for the Hodder and Stoughton empire literature prize in 1913 – in which it won the Australian section. She remembered later that she felt a compulsion to prove ‘that her writing could win some recognition in England’[22] – where in November 1902, the Review of Reviews suggested that the Australian girl could be identified by her ‘passionate Australian patriotism, her childlike enthusiasm’.[23] Franklin later hailed Prichard’s Working Bullocks (1926) as ‘the breaking of the drought’[24] for literature produced in Australia.

Reviewing, like publishing, for most of the Australasian fiction of the earlier twentieth century was based in Britain where, Sheridan argues, it tended to be placed in the category of the Empire romance, set in interesting but primitive conditions. The British reviews of Devanny’s short stories, Old Savage (1928) offer an instance of the placing of antipodean culture and society within a particular (post)coloniality. Those of her first books had seen her as rivalling ‘that absolute liberty of thought and expression possessed and exercised by
the novelists of France." Her creation in *The Butcher Shop* (1926) of a flapper character - arrived from England - was of interest to the Aberdeen Press reviewer:

The writer, however, retains her biased feminine prejudices and precipitates the final awful tragedy by the nauseous presence in the home of the lascivious Miette. Such a type of woman really does less harm amid the crowds of a sophisticated city than in an isolated corner of the Empire’s outposts.

In reviewing history, in relation to French novels of the later nineteenth century by Zola and others,

a degree of moral panic emerged from camps as diverse as workers, feminists, Catholic journalists, police bureaucrats, state censors, physicians and the emerging psychiatric community ...

At the very least, critics contended, those women readers risked being taken in by novelistic scenes of seduction that exposed them to hysteria or worse.

Devanny might have noticed that in local reviews of Jane Mander in 1923, the *Evening Post*’s London correspondent regretted ‘the combination of what one may call the “sex” novel and the New Zealand bush country as unnecessary and misleading’ and the *Dominion* considered her ‘obsessed by sex problems’. British reviews of Devanny’s first fiction would identify an emphasis upon ‘the raw’, the ‘brutal’ and ‘the unpleasant’, and a preoccupation with ‘the ardours of sex, with love as a violent passion rather than a tender one’. But they also stressed the ‘sincerity’ and truth to a (colonial) life (of instinct and passion), and saw the setting ‘in our Dominions, where life in the great lonely places is in strong contrast to the habits and morals of the civilised world’ as accounting for Devanny’s ‘understanding the primitive moods of full-blooded men and women’. Her novels were not short on scenarios of seduction, and the *Sunday Express* summed them up as ‘verbose studies in desire’. *The Glasgow Herald* had considered Devanny’s first novel, *The Butcher Shop*, ‘a failure … as a novel with a purpose – that of preaching the complete emancipation of woman in matters of sex,’ but nonetheless suggested that ‘As a strong virile drama of life in a little-known colony, it is almost a masterpiece’. Both Devanny and Mander were compared to Olive Schreiner, and Mander explicitly acknowledged her influence on *The Story of a New Zealand River* (1920).

Some specificities of the figuring of the new woman in the Australasian environment, and in the context of late colonialism, will now be looked at in some novels of Prichard, Devanny and Dark. The ‘frankest kind of fiction’ by women in Australia takes up the issues of sexuality and work and economic independence for the new woman (in both bush and urban configurations), and deploys and to some extent deconstructs the typology through which she was figured, impacted upon by issues of race and identity. Francis Adams had suggested that ‘the one powerful and unique national type’ at the end of the nineteenth century was the bushman. Lake suggests that while ‘an urban malaise … served as the springboard of the idealisation of the bush’, it was the case that “by the 1920s misogynists were in retreat … the culture had been to some degree “feminised”’. This was largely in terms of family values, however, and men being breadwinners was a large measure of their masculinity. *My Brilliant Career*’s preface by Henry Lawson acknowledged its ‘girlishness’ with some discomfort while praising its evocation of the bushman. Woollacott gives examples of the female Australian visitor being seen as a national type in London, confronting the older pastoral economy with modernity and independence in the figure of the new woman or ‘Australian girl’.

A grander romantic narrative, that of revolutionary change in the individual or in their society, could also be found. Ann Ardis sees ‘a Happy Marriage of Socialism and Feminism’ in some British New Woman novels associated with ‘advanced thought’, or read as such by critics ‘for whom unconventional sexual behaviour served as a trope for radical politics’. Comradeship and support could be found in activism and organising around socialist and feminist issues, as Prichard and Devanny did, and Franklin did with Alice Henry overseas in her youth. While the Communist Party was also important in those early years in supporting radical sexual politics, its women members did not ‘regard themselves as feminists no matter how actively they were engaged in women’s politics’. 
In a post-World War One climate of ‘class tensions, economic depression and the forces of modernity’, Katie Holmes has argued, the ideology of romance in relation to the couple purported to offer ‘individual solutions to wider sociocultural problems’, although the questions of ‘how did it speak to their fears and desires, and how did it offer a means of control over their lives and their possibilities for pleasure’ required rather complicated answers. Romance, as the ideology and practice of (hetero)sexual attachment often looms large in the plotting of feminine sexuality in new woman novels. Romance, if it meant marriage, had been eschewed by many nineteenth century New Women. In William Lane’s The Workingman’s Paradise, Nellie takes Ned, the bushman and shears’ organiser, to the Strattons’ bohemian salon in Sydney and in the course of conversation asserts: ‘For me, I shall never marry. I will give my life to the movement, but I will give no other lives the pain of living’.” Connie Stratton responds that romance could change this determination: ‘You will meet him some day, Nellie’.” But Kate Stone, writing as Sydney Partridge in February 1910 suggested that marriage ‘must always be a terrible stumbling block in the way of a woman. No woman of powerful intellect should ever marry, unless she would be content to sink herself in her children’. Ann Ardis documents from the 1890s a series of British new woman novels that similarly refuse sexuality as central to a woman’s life, and demonstrate ‘the honourable nature of the New Woman’s retreat into celibacy’.

Firmly of the opinion that to attempt to be both mother and artist ‘would cause nothing but pain’ was Eleanor Dark’s father, Dowell O’Reilly. From his position in Sydney bohemia he articulated ambiguous sympathies with women’s freedom, and was given to denigrating involvement in ‘the semi-emotional movements affected by women’. Dark grew up with the ideas of both her father and her aunt Marian Piddington, a birth control pioneer, and she married a doctor in 1923; this all impacted upon aspects of her second novel, Prelude to Christopher, which Nicole Moore sees as her ‘most extended exposition of the conflicted relation between the new femininity and science, ending in madness and suicide for its woman artist heroine’. Women writers dealing with sexuality and desire in relation to the new woman see knowledge as power and are also interested in psychology; issues which are notably prominent in Prelude to Christopher.

Increasing access to birth control and safer abortion meant that ‘young white women of the inter-war period were able to be more self-consciously sexual, in fact were encouraged to be so, because the consequences of their sexuality were more readily controlled’. At the same time there was a hegemonic hostility to birth control in the wake of World War One, following massive casualties on the other side of the world. The war brought to a head fears of degeneration, and re-emphasised the role of motherhood as foundational duty to the state and race. Abortion was associated with a declining population associated with race suicide, although Devanny would turn this argument into one for women’s control of their bodies: ‘the unscientific nature of many of the methods employed constitutes at once one of the worst aspects of the tragedy of womanhood and one of the surest and quickest methods of racial destruction’. The new woman habitually makes a point of demystifying sexuality as much as possible. In her early unpublished manuscript, ‘Sex Lives of Peoples Ancient and Modern’, Devanny had suggested that the experience of what she called ‘sex delight’ was mainly restricted to women ‘either in the cultured, aesthetic and artistic classes or on the lowest level’. In the early twentieth century, as the British radical Stella Browne pointed out in 1917, respectable girls lacked ‘terms to define many of [their] sensations and experiences’. In 1927, she wrote that a woman required in a man a ‘splendid physical vitality and virility’, and this was just as necessary in a sex partner as ideal and intellectual sympathy.

The right to female sexual pleasure without pregnancy is also beginning to be advanced in some of the Australasian new woman fiction. Burke in Devanny’s Bushman Burke (1930) is shocked by Flo’s employing birth control. In Out of Such Fires (1934) this is one of the main tensions between the liberated woman, Helena, her husband, the station-owner Boy and her mother in law, and was identified by Devanny in other earlier writings as a crucial aspect of women’s independence. Mother and son are domaptic Catholics, but Helena reveals to Boy that she has an alibi for her refusal to have children – hereditary syphilis inherited from her father; and if that were not enough, she also has an alcoholic mother. Although the ‘rotten stock’
new women in it, and we do not particularly get inside Sophie's psyche.

Dark's first novel *Slow Dawning* was published in 1932, but written in the 1920s. It deconstructs the romance narrative, and 'sex, maternity and birth control appear as the social plots by which the rational woman's dilemma is traced'. Slow Dawning's heroine, Valerie, is motivated by 'ambition, worship of beauty, desire to love'. She feels a part of the 'army of women' that, if she does not act in accordance with her own ethic, she has 'deserted'. She mows her own lawn, whistling while she works. She can in fact whistle the whole of the Wandering Minstrel for her colleague Heriot so he can learn the tune, and she can tinker with her car engine. Val is committed to knowledge, but aware that 'to the masses, a working knowledge of one's own body was “not nice” ... men and women produced unwanted children and more unwanted children in poverty and filth, through prudish ignorance or sheer callous indifference.' In the small provincial town of Kawarra, 'quite a store of damning legends' accumulate about her. She is still 'in love' with her early suitor Jim Hunter, who has married another, and when this resurfaces 'she understood his passion and had no fear of it' since 'she feared nothing but ignorance and needed nothing that a man could give but love'. Jim thinks 'a woman was a woman' - but he calls Valerie an angel. She will not, however, become one in his house; this romance is deconstructed and refused, even though Jim's wife Kitty obligingly dies. Val realises that he is 'strictly average', and determines to marry Heriot. The plot has remarkable similarities to Devanny's *Poor Swine*, set in New Zealand and written in 1931, although the man with whom Lilian runs away is rather more of a cad. Along with the early pathbreakers, Jane Mander and Robyn Hyde, Devanny's earlier novels often featured a new woman, trapped in or resisting marriage and notions of women as the property of a man.

New women, then, have their own ethic by which they live, and this is often foregrounded in the novels by encounters with less liberated 'doubles'. Devanny's *Bushman Burke* (1930) reworks Prichard's *Working Bullocks* (1926). The latter was read by Pat Buckridge in 1985 as 'an unguided experiment in committed literature' - that is to say, an attempt at a socialist novel before Zhdanov prescribed its form in 1934. Buckridge discusses 'romance' as one generic mode of the novel,
but places the romance narrative within structures of desire for socialism. Tessa’s new woman’s story of her romance with Red Burke is, for the country girl Deb, ‘like one of the stories she had read in illustrated fashion journals the mill manager’s wife and Mrs Airey lent her mother sometimes. They had nothing to do with life’.

In *Bushman Burke*, Devanny draws an urban flapper in Wellington who follows a bushman to the bush and, in this novel, Flo’s feminism is subsumed in acquiescence to Burke’s bushmanism; Flo (like Lenore Divine, who marries a Maori) seems to be moving into the situation which trapped Margaret in Devanny’s first published novel, *The Butcher Shop*, except that unlike her they are sexually ‘awakened’ and supposedly will live happily ever after in consummation bliss. Flo’s set in Wellington is associated with ‘the vilest muck’, and other unmentionable things. Burke’s disgust includes a dislike for ‘erotic fiction’ (although the writers in this category are not specified):

He knew there was nothing to talk of between them. All Flo’s talk was of dresses and her set’s doings and its scandals and the latest erotic novel... what he found to say of erotic novels would never keep Flo at his side. All they could do together was dance.

Flo’s double/opposite is a ‘pure’ young country school teacher called Mary, who dresses plainly, is at home in the New Zealand bush, but from whom, nonetheless, Flo eventually wins Burke back. This doubling is a reversal of the Deb/Tessa coupling in Prichard’s *Working Bullocks* (1929), which has Deb the rural worker as its heroine and condemns the ‘town’ new woman as oversexed and corrupt. Flo, indeed, ‘educates’ Mary, and does this by introducing her to the delights of erotic writing: she ‘interested Mary greatly in expounding her knowledge of erotic fiction and of various literary personalities’. The bushman is not created uncritically; Flo’s response to his enthusiasm for a boxing match is: ‘This fool Burke thinks me a terribly cold, adroit modern, yet I am sickened by brutality and he loves it... Cock-fights. Bull-fights. Dog-fights. And men-fights’ (and this scene may owe something to the almost nightmarish dog fight in *Working Bullocks*). ‘I just don’t understand your class that’s all’, is one of Burke’s first reactions to Flo; counterposed to the city, the country is the traditional answer to urban dissoluteness: ‘what they need is to be dumped down in the bush for a year or two’.

In Dark’s *Return to Coolami* (1936) a type of bush redemption narrative is again enacted, but in it, Modjeska suggests, Dark retreats ‘from her flirtation with formal self-consciousness and the intense anxieties of subjectivity’ and ‘a jaunty journey and love’s happy outcome replace psychosis, eugenics and suicide’. The city woman, Susan moves from ‘futility towards usefulness’, and the new woman strand is shortchanged. While she is authorially described as possessing ‘courage’ and a ‘heroic honesty’, she also has ‘the rather pathetic worldly half-knowledge of the pretty flapper’. For Burt ‘she was playing the game rigidly in accordance with some rules which rightly or wrongly she believed to be fair’. Her politics are undeveloped, ‘her theories had failed her’; in the main, these concern birth control knowledge and ideas about women’s sexual independence: ‘she didn’t care what had happened, her theories were good theories, and if the world wouldn’t allow them to work then the world was wrong and stupid – and unfair’. Romantic love is not deconstructed as in Dark’s first novel, in fact it seems to conquer all: in relation to Jim to whom she has become illegitimately pregnant ‘she hadn’t ever pretended she was going to love him some day as he loved her’, and ‘she went on not being in love with him’, but she tells Burt his brother, whom she marries, ‘I’ve been in love with you for months’. Susan also meditates upon the couple ‘with their souls or spirits in fusion... create a mysterious but far from illusory power called love’ even if they could not ‘create by a mental fusion anything whatever’?

Susan’s sister in law, Margery, meditating on war is the closest the text comes to a feminism of any radicality.

In depicting new women, then, Devanny asks to be read as the most consistently subversive of the novelists, and the most unwilling to maintain the construct of the masculineist virtues and values of the bushman against challenges. Critiques of patriarchal sexual politics from the standpoint of the new woman that might be read in some of these texts are further complicated by class, generation, and country/city divides. The degree to which a ‘bold imagining of an alternative future’ for new women was possible in Australasian women’s texts of this time was influenced by many factors.
NOTES

1. In much of the scholarship, the uncapsitalised ‘new women’ signifies early twentieth century women seeking various kinds of liberation, and I have followed this usage.


4. ‘Miss Byrd of England’: Miss Rosman’s First Novel.’ *British Australasian*, 8 April 1915, p.17. Rosman was particularly popular in the United States, where, by 1933, there was ‘no other Australian novelist so widely known and appreciated’ (Phyllis, ‘In the Looking Glass.’ *British Australian and New Zealander*, 15 June 1933, p. 10. Both quoted in Woollacott, p.51.

5. Quoted in Woollacott, p.119.


15. Ibid., p.7.

16. Ibid., p.60.


20. Sheridan, p. 52.
47 Holmes, p. 5.
48 JD/MSS/38/1. James Cook University Library.
49 Ibid.
51 (New York: Macauley, 1934).
52 Point of Departure, p.119.
55 Ibid., p.116.
56 Lomond quoted in Sheridan, p. 57.
58 Ibid., p.171.
59 Moore, p.19.
60 Eleanor Dark, Slow Downings (London: Long, 1932), p.34.
61 Ibid., p.167.
62 Ibid., p.170.
63 Ibid., p.182.
64 Ibid., p.125.
65 Ibid., p.35.
66 Ibid., p.201.
67 Ibid., p.175.
68 Ibid., p.288.
69 Pat Buckridge, 'Katherine Susannah Prichard and the Literary Dynamics of Political Commitment' in Carole Ferrier (ed.), Gender, Politics and Fiction: Twentieth Century Australian Women's Novels (St Lucia, Qld: University of Qld Press, 1985), p.86.
72 Ibid., pp.117, 120.