Frontier Feminism and the Marauding White Man

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Here in Australia’, Louisa Lawson observed with characteristic matter-of-factness, ‘it is considered more a crime to steal a horse than ruin a girl’.¹ On the Darling Downs, at the turn of the century, another pioneering wife explained; ‘Women in the farming districts don’t occupy a very high place in the masculine community — being classed usually according to their degree of usefulness with other animals’.² (And thanks to Anne Maree Collins’ work on bestiality the extent of the usefulness of the other animals is only now beginning to be fully appreciated).³ Yet a third female pioneer, some twenty years later, had reason to return to the comparison of women with the ‘other animals’. Millicent Preston Stanley, the first woman to enter the New South Wales parliament, when campaigning for the establishment of a chair in obstetrics at the University of Sydney, observed that several new positions had recently been granted in veterinary science; ‘if the university is able to grant the means in the case of the horse, it should be equally able to grant “horse-rights” for women’.⁴

Frontier societies, women have long observed, enshrined masculine values and interests. In frontier societies white men roamed free, but men’s mobility seemed to spell women’s misfortune. In 1926, the British Commonwealth League, a London based feminist organisation formed to promote women’s citizenship rights, resolved that ‘it was felt necessary to stress responsibility to the wandering member of the British race, who may be without ties in a new country. For such members may work great damage to their own and to other races if they have not means of recreation or of fellowship, but live in dangerous loneliness’.⁵ In feminist discourse, mobile men were dangerous men and the wandering members of the British race — the nomad tribe, the swagmen, the men on the track — became a bunch of marauding white men. The mobility of men, that condition said to characterise the frontier and to be definitive of freedom was assumed, by men and women alike, to be inherently threatening to women. The discursive emphasis on the freedom of men in frontier societies resulted in turn in a heightened perception of women’s situation as one of isolation, vulnerability and defencelessness.

I want to explore here the ways in which the outlook of feminism in Australia, from the 1880s to the 1940s, was crucially shaped by the historical context of the frontier and to suggest that the frontier, as a conceptual and geographical space, acquires its meaning within an imperial as well as national context. I shall be arguing the importance of gender relations and the family to the imperial project in Australia and conversely the centrality of colonialism to gender politics and feminism in the settler colonies.

Nationalist writers and many historians of Australia have tended to represent the frontier experience as emblematic of the national experience. On these ‘outskirts of civilisation’ the essential meaning of what it was to be Australian was somehow distilled or laid bare — the truth of Australian life exposed. For Russel Ward it was the birthplace and forcing ground of the legendary Australian — the practical man, rough and ready, independent and anti-authoritarian, a man given to few words, but resourceful and supportive of his mates. For historians of Aboriginal dispossession, such as Henry Reynolds, it was on the frontier that the brutality and violence that characterised the settlement of Australia were most fully exposed. Feminists, too, have shared this tendency to represent the frontier experience as paradigmatic. From the 1920s especially, the marauding frontiersman began to figure in many feminist representations as the true representative of Australian masculinity, his systematic abuse of Aboriginal women suggestive of the inherent degradation that characterised free sexual relations. These otherwise divergent depictions of the frontier — the nationalist, the post-colonial and the feminist - share this assumption: that ‘on the border’, white men could ‘do as they liked’, as residents of the Port Philip district informed George Augustus Robinson. For white men, the frontier was a fantasy of freedom; for white
feminists it was a focus of fear and anxiety, a place beyond their ken, where undomesticated
men turned feral threatened, rather than secured civilisation.

Writing of the genesis of modern feminism, Maggie Humm reminds us that although
distinctive as a movement, feminism has been variously shaped by the ‘cultural, legal and
economic policies of the particular societies’ in which it was formed. ‘Feminist campaigns are
inevitably shaped by national priorities and national politics’.9 I wish to suggest that the
outlook of Australian feminism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was
shaped by the context of an imperial frontier in four main ways. First, in the context of a
British colonial settlement white women assumed a special authority as the agents of
civilisation and custodians of the race. Second, a pioneering society was a masculine society.
In these male-dominated colonies, there was a particular feminist emphasis on the need to
reform characteristically masculine behaviours (drinking, gambling and a predatory sexuality)
which seemed to flourish on the frontier, but which increasingly came to be seen as
antithetical to civilisation and women’s and children’s welfare. Third, in response to
perceptions of women’s special vulnerability in a masculinist society, there was a heavy
emphasis in Australian feminist campaigns on the need to provide ‘protection’, rather than,
say, ‘emancipation’ for women and girls. Writing about leading New South Wales feminist
Rose Scott, Judith Allen has suggested that ‘although overseas suffragists also pursued the
vote as a principal means to the end of challenging men’s sexual behaviour and power’, Scott
articulated this connection fully, clearly ‘influenced by late nineteenth century conditions in
Australia’.10 Following on from this, I would suggest, further, that it was the spectacle of
white men’s systematic sexual abuse of Aboriginal women and ‘unprotected’ white women
and girls in a male-dominated and homo-social society that confirmed twentieth century
Australian feminists in their view of sexuality as inherently degrading for women. Unlike
some of their peers in the UK and the US, it was not until the 1960s (at precisely the moment
when, coincidentally, Aboriginal women had disappeared from feminist view) that Australian
feminists began to claim rights as sexual subjects.

In characterising the distinctiveness of the Australian version of frontier feminism, I want to
suggest that the crucial conceptual dynamic underpinning the Australian feminist project in
the early twentieth century was what I have called elsewhere feminists’ sense of ‘double
difference’ — their construction of a new world identity and politics marked by difference
from and temporal advancement beyond, both the ‘feudal’ oppressions of the European old
world and the ‘primitivism’ of the stone age culture of Aboriginal Australians.11 Australian
feminists saw themselves as nation builders, consciously engaged in the project of fashioning
a new order of protectionist state.

Nineteenth century colonial discourses which drew distinctions between primitive/barbarous
societies and civilised/Christian ones allocated a special place to white women as the bearers
of culture, morality and order. As the Canadian historian of the backwoods of British
Columbia, Adele Perry has observed, in such a world quite ordinary white women were
assigned an awesome responsibility as the most civilised representatives of the civilised
race.12 They were also agents of the ‘governing race’, as delegates to the British
Commonwealth League noted.13 This positioning was the source of their authority as activist
reformers and feminists, authorised and enjoined to take their mission of purity out into the
world. The imposition of ‘purity’ could be seen as especially important in the Australian
colonies, given the possibilities of contamination from the convict legacy and the existence,
and in some parts of Australia, the close proximity, of indigenous societies.

This meant that white women had a special responsibility as exemplars of civilised standards:
drinking and sexual promiscuity were regarded as especially heinous offences in women.
Thus it was decreed that ‘sexual lapses of women must ever be held more deplorable than
those of a man simply because the offence in the woman’s case causes more harm within her
environment and more rapid and permanent injury to her own more delicate moral and
intellectual fibre'. This tyrannical double standard was enshrined in law and became a major focus of feminist reform — not in the direction of claiming increased sexual liberties for women, as would be the case in the 1960s, but in demanding that men, too, discipline and control themselves — that they literally live up to the 'civilised' standards that they invoked to justify their political power.

In this colonial, nation building context, women assumed a particular responsibility to reform men's behaviours to bring them into line with more 'civilised' standards. As New South Wales feminist, Rose Scott, explained 'licensed or unlicensed vice can only mean evil, and ... a really great nation can only be built by inculcating the virtues of self-control and purity. This was an urgent task in frontier societies, where the predominance of single, mobile men fostered a strong homo-social national culture, sustained by bonds of mateship between men, casual sex with animals, other men, indigenous and other 'unprotected' women and girls, as well as the dissolute practices of gambling and drinking. As I noted some ten years ago now, in a masculinist context which in Australia saw the elevation of these practices to the status of a national culture, women's mission of respectability could acquire a particularly subversive, threatening dimension. It was one thing for women to attempt to work changes on men in private, wooing them from public house to private home, with their own good housekeeping as envisaged by the Queenslander, for instance:

Bright, educated, companionable, capable women will make cheerful, economical homes, keep the men from gambling and other bad habits, render embezzlement and speculation unnecessary and generally purify life. That is provided they are thoroughly good. This crowns all. The exercise of private influence was woman's prerogative. It was quite another matter for women to attempt to lay down the law, but feminists embarked on public campaigns to do just that, seeking to outlaw drinking and to restrict men's sexual access to women and girls. Temperance reform assumed a particularly important place in the politics of frontier feminism.

The preoccupation with men's behaviour also led to a particular concern to protect Australian boys from the models of manhood around them. Whereas the difficult position of daughters attracted the attention of English feminists, as Barbara Caine has noted, Australian feminists worried about the vulnerability of their sons. 'Is it not a painful fact to contemplate', asked Louisa Lawson, 'that according to present conditions it can be looked upon as a miracle should a boy reach man's estate and escape the contaminations of vice which daily example makes him familiar with from boyhood. To be able to smoke, swear, drink and gamble like a man is the Alpha and Omega of his infantile dreams'. Rose Scott also deplored the fact that 'boys are taught by public opinion that it is manly to know life! To drink, to gamble and to be immoral'. Australian boys had 'as great a right to be safeguarded for purity and self-control' as did girls, declared 'Irven' in Labor Call over twenty years later.

Immorality was thought to accompany the nomadic lifestyle of frontiersmen. Unsettled men posed a particular sexual threat to the women and girls who shared their terrain. Cases such as the following were widely reported in colonial newspapers. In 1871 twelve year old Ammelie Weise was sent to the head station at Hirst Vale near Dalby, to collect food supplies. When she returned some hours later, her dress was torn and she was crying. The girl explained to her mother that a shearer temporarily in the area had followed her from the station and demanded a kiss. She refused, the man told her that he would 'see about that' and forced her to the ground and assaulted her. Feminist campaigns aimed at curbing this freedom of men to do as they pleased, that condition which was seen as definitive of life on the frontier.

In this scenario, the key to the consolidation of colonies into nations was the settlement and domestication of a mobile and dangerous manhood. Feminists were emboldened to attempt a transformation of the free-wheeling, independent lone hand into a responsible, caring, temperate, chaste, self-controlled, considerate, selfless domestic man. Needless to say, their
intentions met with considerable resistance. 'Am I likely to get married?', wrote George Underwood, a young selector in south west Queensland to his family, 'Yes, just as I am to produce a pair of wings and fly. I am a real bachelor just now. I look for myself; wash my own clothes, in short am my own housekeeper'. Or in the words of Randolph Bedford's father, who encouraged him to 'go bush': You're me all over again, lad. There's only one thing that will tie you down, and that's responsibility. A wife and children will put the hobbles on you. You'll look over the fence at the horses who are going somewhere; but you'll have to stay in the paddock. Again, the colonial tendency to identify with the horses.

In the metropolis, in England, in the nineteenth century, surplus women — also called redundant women - were deemed to constitute a major social problem. The difficulty of their existence — their lack of opportunity — became a major preoccupation of English feminists, who put much time and energy into reforms such as promoting access to education, which would enable single women to live independent lives. As Barbara Caine has written, for Victorian feminists in England, 'the plight of single women was of the utmost importance'. In frontier societies such as Australia there was a surplus of men, but they were not, of course, conceived of as redundant or superfluous. They were for feminists, however, a problem. The situation in Queensland, deemed by commentators to be 'the most Australian' of all the colonies, was especially marked: at the turn of the century there were 171 males for every 100 females. The preponderance of men had important social consequences, notably a very high marriage rate for women. In all the Australian colonies marriage was the common condition of women over a certain age and the nature of marriage and the condition of married women became major concerns of Australian feminists. Frontier feminism tended to be more concerned with the condition of mothers and wives than the tribulations of spinsters. For several decades, feminists in Australia focussed on attempts to elevate the marriage relationship — lifting it from being a species of prostitution to a 'sweet companionship' and by the twentieth century, attempting to end the 'sex — slavery' of the wife through the introduction of motherhood endowment.

Because of the perceived vulnerability of women and girls on the frontier, feminist campaigns concentrated on providing 'protection'. Colonial settlements were, in effect, extensive white men's protectorates, purporting to provide protection to those groups most vulnerable to white men's own depredations — Aborigines, Chinese, women and girls. But who would protect these groups from their protectors? Men were allegedly women's natural protectors — thus one Queensland politician was moved to remark of his colony in the 1860s: 'women are in a more defenceless position than at home, from our limited population and scattered habitations and consequently they are very liable to violence in the absence of their natural protectors'. In such a construction of the problem, the subjects actually perpetrating the violence were rendered anonymous, but as the American feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman was moved to comment: 'As a matter of fact, the thing a woman is most afraid to meet on a street is her natural protector.'

Nineteenth century feminist activism in Australia was animated by the conviction that men had failed in their ordained role as protectors — women themselves would henceforth take responsibility for this task, authorised by their status as mothers. As Louisa Lawson argued: 'If we are responsible for our children, give us the power and sacredness of the ballot and we will lift ourselves and our brothers to a higher civilisation'. This political mobilisation of the identity of mother to promote a form of maternal government was a crucial dimension of the concomitant decline in the importance in the role of the helpmate/wife, who was increasingly conceptualised as a mere creature of sex.

The protection of women and girls demanded a number of reforms: temperance, raising the age of consent, opposition to contagious diseases legislation, custody rights for mothers, the appointment of women to a range of public offices — as gaol warders, doctors, factory inspectors, police officers — so that women need never fall into men's hands. By the 1920s
and 1930s, feminist activists attempting to reform the conditions of indigenous women and children in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, demanded the appointment of women protectors to Aboriginal administration, because they would better defend their 'less favoured sisters' from the marauding white man. Returning from a trip to northern Australia in the early 1930s, Mary Bennett reported 'the worst thing I have seen is the attitude of the average white man to native women — the attitude not of the mean whites but of the overwhelming majority of white men'. 'Wherever there is a white man's camp there is a need for protection for these girls', said Bennett, 'it is the average ordinary white man who is to blame for this trouble'. On the frontier, the true nature of the average, ordinary white man was laid bare.

The consequences of white men's uncontrolled behaviour on the frontier were seen to be most destructive in the area of sexual relations — for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women. Louisa Lawson wrote about the degrading position of white women forced to endure their husbands' sexual relations with Aboriginal women. In a preface to her poem 'The Squatter's Wife', Lawson referred to the actual case of a 'beautiful and gifted girl', who had married a squatter only to find on her arrival at his property that there were two bark huts — one for herself and the other for 'her husband's black mistress and family'. For the white woman, men's lusts rendered the frontier a place of loneliness and debasement. Lawson addressed the squatter's wife in these terms:

Lonely hut on barren creek,
Where the rotting sheep-yards reek,
Far away from kith and kin,
None save thee and native gin
Many a weary mile within —
Alice Gertler

The legendary freedom of the frontiersman was re-conceptualised by Lawson, in racist terms, as an especially base form of licentiousness:

Bound to one who loves thee not,
Drunken off-spring of a sot;
Even now at wayside inn
Riots he in drink and sin,
Mating with a half-caste gin —
Alice Gertler

Whereas Lawson's depiction of the white man's sexual relations with Aboriginal women focused on the degradation visited upon the white woman, twentieth century feminists increasingly expressed outrage at the abuse of Aboriginal women themselves.

By the 1920s a number of feminists came to see white men's sexual abuse of indigenous women as paradigmatic of uncontrolled masculinity. To these feminists the large increase in the mixed descent population between the wars — the 'half-caste problem' — provided dramatic evidence of the extent of white men's depredations. Feminists such as Bennett, Edith Jones, Bessie Rischbieth, Ruby Rich and Constance Cooke organised national and international campaigns to draw attention to the trafficking in Aboriginal women and girls. They also argued that men's uncontrollable lusts were undermining the moral authority of White Australia, of the new nation in the Pacific. 'I cannot see how white supremacy can last out this decade even', despaired Bennett in the 1930s, 'I mean white supremacy is in the most imminent danger and everybody is blind. In my view, our only chance of survival is to put our 'spiritual' house in order and to do it mighty quick'. In losing sexual control, the white man would lose political control.

What was to be done? Mary Bennett was clear and insistent in language that echoed Rose Scott's claims of some forty years before. She spoke of 'the loving protection needed by these girls and women, native and half-caste, in the state of transition from native culture to white civilisation and the shielding from the terrible crop of evils that have sprung up in this
The borderland of transition. This space — the borderlands — emblematic of Australia at large — was an anarchic and unstable space of transition where the freedom of the white man had led to the systematic degradation of women and girls.

Feminism on the frontier was authorised by colonial discourses that positioned white women as the moral guardians of civilisation. But I would want to emphasise that feminism was not contained by colonial discourses: feminism was complicit in the paternalism of the imperial project, but it also challenged some of its most fundamental assumptions, notably that women should occupy a familial dependent status in the colonies and new nation and that 'unprotected' women were fair game. By the 1920s and 1930s, major feminist organisations such as the Australian Federation of Women Voters, the Women's Service Guilds in Western Australia and the Women's Non-Party Association of South Australia were demanding a place in the new nation for both black and white women as independent citizens.

In place of the controlled interbreeding between 'half-castes' and whites — 'the absorption of the blacks by the whites', that is, the union of white men and 'half-caste' women, envisaged by government officials, Mary Bennett embarked on schemes to render Aboriginal women independent and self-supporting in their communities. She personally taught them weaving and craft skills with this intention. Bennett described her work to Bessie Rischbieth in these terms:

The money thus earned goes back to the workers. It is enough that the women and the girls can be self-supporting and are self-supporting. Economic dependence is the root of all evil. The half-caste problem also results very largely from the same cause — their dependence. The evils of the patriarchal system have become commercialised, the unfortunate women having acquired value as merchandise from white settlement ... And so, though all the hunting grounds have been taken up as sheep stations, and the native culture has been completely destroyed. There has been an extraordinary recrudescence of polygamy for prostitution....But the women intrinsically are fine and ready for a position of respect and independence. This is why I have asked that they shall be permitted to invoke and obtain the protection of the law of the land ... Bennett's appeal to 'the protection of the law of the land' is important here. It speaks to an historic convergence of forces that came to shape and define the Australian feminist investment in a protectionist nation state. The stress on the necessity of women's protection in a frontier masculinist society coincided with a nationalist commitment to building a new order of nation state, which would produce, in the words of Bessie Rischbieth, 'the sort of civilisation women of all countries dream about' The defining elements of this new order were nicely captured in Lilian Locke-Burns' celebration of the Labor government's introduction of a maternity allowance in 1912:

In no other part of the civilised world as far as one can ascertain, is so much being done by the State in the way of providing for mothers and children as in the Australian Commonwealth. And yet how far we are still from a proper realisation of the value of a child as an asset of the State, and how little we realise the true position of the mothers of the community would occupy in a properly organised social system, where the economic independence of women was fully recognised and assured. In Great Britain and some other countries which lay claim to some share in democratic reforms, the mothers are only protected (if protection it may be called) under some form of social insurance. In the American states also very little has been done so far in this direction beyond some attention to delinquent children and the usual institutional efforts that we find in most countries which have evolved beyond the barbaric stage. Neither in England nor America do we hear of any such humanitarian provision as the Australian maternity allowance. This tribute is interesting, both in its identification of the new world civilised nation's mission as the protection of women and its definition of that mission as the responsibility of the state. For Australian women citizens, the state was envisaged as a powerful beneficial force, enabling them to resolve the seeming contradiction posed by their twin ideals of 'protection' and 'independence'. Feminists enlisted the state as a crucial ally, able to provide the protection
that would make possible women's independence from men. Arguing that their sex was more nurturing, loving and peace-loving than men, feminists endorsed the idea of a separate maternal citizenship for women, who were excused and excluded from the work of national self-defence abroad and enjoined to seek the protection and support of male relatives at home. Paradoxically, then, feminists contributed to the processes whereby women in the new nation were locked into the status of the protected sex and arguably into a psychology of helplessness and defencelessness that continues to pose a major dilemma for feminists today. The protected ones could not know real freedom. Moreover, as the inheritors of frontier feminism, Australian women still confront the contradictions posed by living in a strongly masculinist culture (which has just proclaimed Anzac Day to be the national day of remembrance), which has yet institutionalised the power of a protectionist femocracy.

Notes
1 Louisa Lawson, 'First public speech', 13 June, 1891, Lawson Family Papers, Mitchell library. MS A, 1898.
3 Anne Maree Collins, 'Woman or Beast? Bestiality in Queensland, 1870-1949' Hecate, 17, 1, 1991. Men charged with bestiality said they had made 'use of the (animal) as if it were a woman'. p. 38.
8 Ibid., p. 52.
13 British Commonwealth League report op. cit.
15 Quoted in Allen op.cit., p. 134.
17 Quoted in Spearitt op.cit., p. 39.
19 Louisa Lawson, 'First public speech', op.cit.
20 Rose Scott, 'Womanhood Suffrage' speech notes, March 1898, Rose Scott papers ML MS 38/38.
21 'Irven', 'Sex Hygiene', Labor Call, 19 June 1919.
22 Quoted in Spearitt op.cit., p. 31.
23 Ibid., p. 25.
25 Caine op.cit., p. 36.
27 Spearitt op.cit., p. 30.
29 Lawson, 'First public speech' op.cit.
31 Mary Bennett, reported in West Australian and Daily Mail. Rischbieth papers, NLA 2004/12/351.
32 Louisa Lawson, 'Scrapbook' vol.1, Lawson papers, Mitchell library, MS A 1895.
33 Fiona Paisley, "Don't Tell England!" Women of Empire Campaign to Change Aboriginal Policy in Australia Between the Wars', Lilith 8, Summer, 1993.
34 Mary Bennett to Bessie Rischbieth, 6 November 1934, Rischbieth papers, NLA 2004/12/64.
35 Mary Bennett to Bessie Rischbieth, April 1932, Rischbieth papers, NLA 2004/12/23.
36 Ibid.
37 Bessie Rischbieth to Carrie Chapman Catt, 24 November 1924, Rischbieth papers, NLA 2004/7/62.
38 Lilian Locke-Burns, 'State Provision for Mother and Child', Labor Call, 26 June 1919.

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