

'I Know, but Cannot Share It':

Landscape and the Emigrant

Jessica White

The rain began as I lay with my head against his chest, late one night in September. With my poor hearing, however, I could never be sure.

'Is it raining?' I asked hopefully.

'Yeah. It's annoying.'

I laughed softly, and closed my eyes. As a child, I had loved falling asleep to the sound of rain on a corrugated iron roof. Growing up on a dry property where my father's constant checking of the gauge inflamed my anxieties, rain meant security. I imagined it seeping into the soil, swelling grains of wheat until they split open, their shafts stretching upwards to the light.

In Alex's arms, I felt as I had then, wrapped in my pea-green doona, listening to the old gum tree on the front lawn shaking the rain from its hair.

But it was time to go.

Outside in the chilly air, he put his sheepskin jacket around my shoulders and drove me across the harbour to my friend's house in North Sydney. He took my hand as we crossed the road, asking if I had remembered my earrings, which I'd left on his ironing board. They were in my pocket. I pressed the intercom to my friend's flat, and then leaned forward to kiss him. The door clicked open, and I broke away. The next day I boarded a Singapore Airlines flight to London.

Almost three years later, I still haven't seen him. All those months of tears, recrimination, waiting, passion and sex have been transmuted into writing: all I have left of him are words.

* * * * *

In England, the rain is so persistent that it can't be welcomed. There is no expectation, nor impatience for its arrival. The overcast days press down upon me, their greyness appropriate for my constant state of numbness.

'You don't understand!' I shouted to my brother, who berated me for being so despondent. In his eyes, I had always been better off without Alex. 'It feels as though he has died!'

I wonder if this state of paralysis is similar to that experienced by Georgiana Molloy when she landed on the shores of south-west Western Australia in 1829. Her husband, John Molloy, was among the first settlers of Augusta. In making her decision to marry him, she understood that she was to travel 11 000 miles to establish a home on the other side of the world. However, she could scarcely have imagined what this entailed.

Raised in a Scottish land-owning family, albeit one with finances in constant disarray, she had become accustomed to the life of a lady of leisure. Nothing in her comfortable existence prepared her for the isolation, privation and domestic drudgery that characterised her early years in Augusta and which led her to confess to Margaret Dunlop, 'I must unbosom myself to you, my dear girl, which I have never done – but this life is too much both for dear Molloy and myself.'¹

Nor could she have foreseen the grief which was to come soon after she had landed on Australian shores. She gave birth to a daughter in a tent in pouring rain, only to have the child die a few days later. 'O, I have gone through much and more than I would ever suffer anyone to do again,' she wrote to Helen Storey.²

Her despair was so overwhelming that she simply could not put it into words, for it took her three years before she could mention the event to Helen, and even then she floundered, explaining, 'language refuses to utter what I experienced when mine died in my arms in this dreary land, with no one but Molloy near me.'³ As language itself could not even be called upon to undertake its customary task of creating meaning, Georgiana attempted

to articulate her daughter's death through the wordless act of planting English flowers on the grave. The gesture was futile: "Its grave, though sodded with British clover, looks so singular and solitary in this wilderness, of which I can scarcely give you an idea".⁴ The ameliorating effects of a British plant had been overwhelmed by the strangeness of the enormous jarrah trees stretching overhead, the raucous calls of the birds in the bush and the harsh and brilliant sunlight.

Part of the difficulty of expressing herself would have lain with her vocabulary. Moulded as it was by a country of lush forests, verdant fields and low skies, Georgiana grasped for adjectives to describe the monochromatic bush of eucalyptus and spinifex. In this, she was scarcely alone. Thomas Watling, sentenced to New South Wales for fourteen years for forgery, wrote to his aunt in Dumfries in 1792, 'The air, the sky, the land are objects entirely different from all that a Briton has been accustomed to see before,'⁵ highlighting the difficulty of finding the words to describe a vision that was utterly foreign. Adding to the problems of visual translation was the way in which many Europeans had been schooled in perception. At the time when Georgiana would have been educated, in the early 19th century, the prevailing taste was for the picturesque.

The qualities of this style, as formalised by Uvedal Price in *Essays on the Picturesque*, were 'the two opposite qualities of roughness, and of sudden variation, joined to that of irregularity.'⁶ Monotony was equated with tedium, and thus the Australian bush offered little for the viewer who had been schooled to appreciate variation. Price was of the opinion that a 'neat post and rail, regularly continued round a field, and seen without any interruption, is one of the most unpicturesque, as being one of the most uniform of all boundaries,'⁷ and the bush seemed similarly uninspiring to Georgiana. In a letter to her sister written two-and-a-half years after her arrival, she railed against the 'unbounded limits' of the bush which had failed to rouse her:

This is certainly a beautiful place — but were it not for domestic charms the eye of the emigrant would soon weary of the unbounded limits of thickly clothed dark green forests where nothing can be described to feast the imagination.⁸

Through the phrase ‘the eye of the emigrant’, Georgiana draws attention to the act of perceiving, indicating that hers was a vision that had been constructed in another country, for another landscape. That vision, seeking peaks and tumbling ruins, instead found a uniformity that did little to inspire. Watling was in agreement on this matter of monotony:

The landscape painter, may in vain seek here for that beauty which arises from happy-opposed off-scapes. Bold rising hills, or azure distances would be a kind of phaenomena. The principle traits of the country are extensive woods, spread over a little-varied plain.⁹

The limitations of his and Georgiana’s perspectives were replicated in their language: the terminology of the ‘bush’ had not yet entered their lexicon, as indicated by their use of the English terms ‘forest’ and ‘woods’. Hampered thus by a vocabulary that had been developed for a vastly different landscape, it is little wonder that Georgiana claimed that ‘nothing can be described’ and that, yearning for the familiar, she could only find solace in ‘domestic charms’ — those imports used to imitate a home and garden as they appeared in England.

* * * * *

As I write of Georgiana’s impressions of Australia, I am reminded of an exercise a teacher once set our class: write of the same landscape, once from the point of view of a person who had recently fallen in love, and then again from the point of view of a person who had recently ended a relationship with their lover. Obviously, the rationale was that the emotion would colour the perception of one’s surroundings.

Were I to look back through my journals of the first year I passed in London, I would find them filled with dismayed descriptions of the ugly

buildings, blackened by pollution and acid rain, the unfriendly people with their dark clothes and unsmiling faces, the lack of sunlight, the relentless cold. My scrawl would have satisfied the second part of the exercise many times over, for I had left behind the only man I had ever loved and there was nothing I could have liked about London.

Similarly, as Georgiana's arrival had coincided with a loss, it was understandable that she should have viewed her surroundings with a disparaging air upon arrival and for the years afterwards when she and her husband struggled to establish themselves. How, then, could one account for her sudden efflorescence after the death of her second child, and only son? Instead of turning her against the country even more, as one might expect, it led her further into the bush. The catalyst for this transformation was Captain James Mangles.

* * * * *

Mangles became acquainted with Georgiana through his cousin Ellen Stirling, the wife of the governor of Perth. A retired naval officer living in England, he visited Perth in 1831 and, after meeting various people in the colony, requested that they collect specimens and seeds for him. Georgiana, who was known to Ellen Stirling, was added to this network in 1836. On learning that she had an enthusiasm for flowers and gardening, Mangles sent Georgiana a box of seeds, asking that she take the seeds for herself, fill the box with Australian specimens and return it to him in England.

Arriving in the midst of Georgiana's hectic life, Mangles's request was given a polite and almost noncommittal response. Georgiana mentioned repeatedly her lack of time and warned that:

as all my former pursuits have necessarily been thrown aside (by the peremptory demand of my personal attention to my children and domestic drudgery), I feel that it will be long ere I can make any adequate return in Australian productions.¹⁰

She added that her brother George ‘was anxious to employ [her] as a collector also’ and that she was unable to grant his request as her time was ‘so much infringed on’.¹¹ Mangles might well have suffered a similar fate as George and become sidelined in Georgiana’s busy life, had it not been for the death of her son.

Soon after she received Mangles’s first letter in 1837, the child fell into a well and drowned. Where her previous child’s death was tied to all that was hateful about her new surroundings, this death led her into a growing intimacy with the landscape. For there was a direct link between the processes of grieving and collecting, as she wrote to Mangles, “Since my dear Boy’s death, my leisure has been much extended and I have, up to the present time, daily employed it in your service.”¹²

As Georgiana walked through the bush, the memories of her son’s smiles and golden hair would have been layered against the crinkly bark of a *casuarina*, the sound of his bell – tied to his waist in case he became lost in the bush – woven among the harsh cries of magpies. It was as though, because she had buried her child in the Australian soil and because that soil was responsible for the unbearably soft *acacia* that bloomed in spring, the *clematis* that wended delicately over shrubs and fallen logs, or the crops of *asteracae* that dusted the red soil like snow, she could not help but come to love it.

Perhaps, in carefully tearing away the flowers from their stems and picking tiny seeds from dried specimens, she felt she was touching some part of her son. And in writing of her ‘prevailing passion for Flowers’¹³ to Mangles, she was conveying her love for her dead son.

* * * * *

There is, in Georgiana’s letters, a distinct shift between those she wrote to her family and those that she wrote to Mangles. Where the former listed a litany of complaints about domestic labour and tiredness, her letters to

Mangles were filled with an astonishing breadth of detail about the plants she noticed and collected. For example:

I beheld a Tree of great beauty ... the flowers are of the finest white, and fall in long tresses from the stem, some of its pendulous blossoms, are from three, to five, fingers in length, and these wave in the breeze like Snow wreaths; they are of such a downy white feathery appearance, and emit a most delicious perfume, resembling the bitter almond, and like all human or rather mortal delicacies, how quick these lovely flowers fall from the stalk on being collected.¹⁴

Far from her previous dismissal of the landscape as monotonous, this extract reveals intimate observations of the colour, size and scent of a particular plant. More than this, it casts the tree in a gently poetic light; indeed, it would not be out of place in the first part of my teacher's exercise, where one renders a scene with the tinted glasses of endearment. The care and beauty in Georgiana's description of the tree indicated that she had a strong affection for the land.

As this tenderness had sprung from a buried child, it makes sense that, in writing of the landscape with such care, she was expressing her love for that child. For writing is a means of resuscitation, of recovering – however momentarily – something that has died. This is a concept – illuminated cleverly by Derrida in his exegesis on Plato's *pharmakon* – to which I have returned repeatedly in my research and fiction. As someone haunted by memory, nostalgia, homesickness and loss, it offers a key to my compulsion to write.

The concept of the *pharmakon* is located in Plato's *Phaedrus*. It is drawn from a conversation between Theuth, the god of writing, and Thamus, an Egyptian king. Theuth brought to Thamus the invention of writing, arguing that it would 'make the Egyptians wiser and improve their memory; what I have discovered is an elixir of memory and wisdom.'¹⁵ However, Thamus argued that it was not a wonderful idea at all, but a poison. He countered:

your invention will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it, through lack of practise at using their memory, as through reliance on writing they are reminded from outside by alien marks, not from inside, themselves by themselves.¹⁶

Derrida deconstructs this conversation in *Dissemination*. He outlines Plato's ambivalence about writing, which occurs because, when writing describes a memory, it can only provide a replica of that memory. There is no possible way it can capture the pure memory, or *mneme*, as it exists in the mind. This process by which this memory is recalled – termed *hypomnesia* – poisons the *mneme*, because it captures it through an imperfect form: that is, writing. Thus, as Derrida points out, 'it goes without saying that the god of writing must also be the god of death. We should not forget that, in the *Phaedrus*, another thing held against the invention of the *pharmakon* is that it substitutes the breathless sign for the living voice.'¹⁷ Writing and death, he suggests, go hand-in-hand.

Yet writing and life remain inextricably bound also. Whenever we write, we bring an image or a memory to life, and as we are writing we are living that and all else ceases to exist. It is when we stop writing that we are confronted with death and the realisation that memory is but a poor substitute for what we have lost.

In my journals, I wrote obsessively of Alex, for writing seemed one means, however poor, of having him close by again. I recalled the hard arch of his back, his thin wrists, the taste of his mouth, the shine in his eyes as he teased me. I also wrote continually to him from England, for it felt that as long as I was writing to him, our relationship remained alive. With this understanding in mind, it has occurred to me that Georgiana too, in writing so sensuously of the natural world that surrounded her, was evoking her memories of the child that ran among, and was eventually buried beneath, the tall jarrah trees. Writing allowed both of us, for a brief moment, to hold again what we had lost.

* * * * *

Unlike Georgiana, I have experienced no renaissance, only a grudging acceptance of the stubborn city in which I live. I have remained unattached for my time in London, too absorbed in grief to look for another man and then, when the ache finally subsided, too overwhelmed with work. But even if I did fall in love, I've often thought, I couldn't stay in England. Craving light, open spaces and blue skies, I remain, like the homesick Dorothea Mackellar whose family owned properties not far from ours, a stranger to England. As she wrote in her slightly overblown, but moving, poem, *My Country*: 'I know, but cannot share it/My love is otherwise.'

Although Mackellar's unabashed expression of her love for Australia in this poem sometimes makes me cringe, there are lines in it that bring tears to my eyes, such as: 'then the grey clouds gather,/And we can bless again/The drumming of an army,/The steady soaking rain.' They remind me of a quality of the Australian landscape that I could never find in England: the expectation of rain in a parched country, and the relief, like a long sigh, when it comes.

This is why I think, as I sit on a friend's rooftop terrace in Bath and gaze at the church spires lit by the setting sun, I don't feel as though I belong here, even after three years. The land doesn't stretch out, but is constantly interrupted by hedges, rows of houses and laneways. There is nowhere for the eye to *rest*. Price valorised the drama of the picturesque but I, raised in a region characterised by weather forecasters as the 'Northwest Slopes and Plains,' and where I could stand at one end of a paddock and fail to see where it ended, find it irritating.

What is it, then, that binds us so closely to a country and makes the eye adapt to it so that, in seeing the land we love, we feel completely at ease? From my reading of Georgiana, it appears that it cannot be pinned to either the birth or death of a child, as her reactions were shaped by circumstance, be it her arrival at Augusta or the reception of Mangles's letters. However,

there is certainly something to be said for the mingling of one's surroundings with the emotion caused by intense bodily experiences.

As a child whose weekends and long holidays were passed exploring the scrub at the top of the extinct volcano on our property, stomping through high Scotch thistles, or climbing in ti-trees and shaking the pollen from their creamy flowers, it seemed there was little distinction between myself and my surroundings. The happiness and entertainment which I derived from that hot, dry country could not be divorced from the land itself.

Later, as an adult living in Sydney, I found the city resonated with desire in a way that London has never done. Hyde Park in London may be beautifully austere in winter, its long grass inviting in summer, but it has nothing of the eroticism of its Antipodean counterpart. As this was where Alex and I had lain on our lunch breaks, even the burr-infested brown grass, sparse trees and the glare of summer light seemed to vibrate with sensuality. Likewise, London's Kensington is crammed with attractive shops and people, but the Kensington where I lived in Sydney and where Alex came to stay, with its dull brick buildings and staid air of a country town, holds far more significance.

To encapsulate this entwining of landscape, bodies and immense emotion, I must turn once more to Mackellar's poem, and to her line 'Core of my heart, my country.' For ultimately it is the substances of the heart – childbirth and sex, grief and longing, death and passion – and not of the intellect, which bind an emigrant to a country and convert the writing of sorrow into the writing of love.

-
- ¹ Cited in A Hasluck, *Georgiana Molloy: Portrait with Background* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2002), 134.
- ² Cited in Hasluck, 99.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Cited in Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific* (New Haven, (Conn.): Yale, 1985), 14.
- ⁶ Uvedale Price, *Essays on the Picturesque as compared with the Sublime and Beautiful; and, on the use of studying pictures for the purpose of improving real landscape*. Vol 1 (London: J Mawman, 1810), 50-51
- ⁷ Price, 56.
- ⁸ Cited in Hasluck, 129.
- ⁹ Thomas Watling. Letters from an exile at Botany Bay to his aunt in Dumfries; giving a particular account of the settlement of New South Wales, with the Customs and Manners of the inhabitants. (Penrith, 1792), 9.
- ¹⁰ Georgiana Molloy to Captain Mangles, 21st March 1837, Letter books 1825-1845 (manuscript), Batty Library, MN479A/1-2, 67-69.
- ¹¹ Molloy to Mangles, 21 March 1837.
- ¹² Molloy to Mangles, 25th January 1838.
- ¹³ Molloy to Mangles, 31st Jan 1840
- ¹⁴ Molloy to Mangles, 14th March 1840
- ¹⁵ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. C. J. Rowe (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1986), 123.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 91.