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Kay Schaffer

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER 1

*Her Story/History: The Many Fates of  
Eliza Fraser*

*Colonialism remade the world. Neither Europe nor the Third World, neither colonizers nor colonized would have come into being without the history of colonialism . . . Colonialism continues to live on in ways that perhaps we have only begun to recognize.*

*Nicholas B. Dirks*

This is a book about a legend. The legend concerns the fate of Mrs Eliza Fraser, the wife of a Scottish ship's captain whose brig, the *Stirling Castle*, was wrecked off what is now the south-east coast of Queensland in 1836. Mrs Fraser and other survivors of the wreck spent approximately thirty days at sea and a further fifty-two days on what is now called Fraser Island and the adjoining mainland in the company of Aborigines. Eventually Mrs Fraser was rescued by a government party sent out by the Commandant of the Moreton Bay Penal Settlement. She thus became known as the first white woman to encounter Aborigines in the wild, so to speak, and to tell her (less than sympathetic) tale. Her tale enters colonial discourse not as a story of survival amongst her Aboriginal hosts but as a cruel captivity amongst savages and cannibals. Her story attracted considerable interest at the time, especially in England where she received sympathy as an innocent victim of Empire before being accused as an imposter and of perpetrating fraud, but it receives scant attention in subsequent historical texts. In contemporary Australia, however, as a twentieth-century figure of legend – as a captive victim who seduced and then betrayed her convict rescuer – Mrs Fraser has taken on mythical status as a cultural figure of some note, as anyone could attest who has read Patrick White's novel, *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), or has seen any of Sidney Nolan's paintings from his 'Mrs Fraser' series (1947–77), or has viewed the David Williamson and Tim Burstall film *Eliza Fraser* (1976).<sup>1</sup> This is one reason why Eliza Fraser is remarkable. She is one of a very few women – along with Caroline Chisholm, Daisy Bates, and Louisa Lawson – to have walk-on roles on the stage of an Australian mythology of nationhood.

Her story is legendary today; but the legend has little to do with the actual woman or the historical event. What is known of the woman and the event, however, is less significant than the representations and the fantasies which this minor colonial episode set into circulation, fantasies situated at the

borders of the Western self and its others.<sup>2</sup> For a brief while in the nineteenth century, the ‘captivity’ of Eliza Fraser amongst ‘savages and barbarous natives’ became a sensation in England. Her sad tale stirred the hearts of noble Britons who contributed generously to a subscription fund established for her welfare. That is, until the legal authorities cast doubt on the woman’s veracity; then the sensation turned to scandal. Her story circulated in the British and American press and throughout the colonial world, feeding the academic interests of natural science as well as the prurient pleasures of the mass public. At the time of its occurrence, versions of the event were framed within and contributed to the rise of imperialism, the spread of Christianity, notions of a hierarchy of racial types within the natural sciences and gender divisions within Victorian sexual politics. Controversy surrounding the event in England also contributed to the evolution of Australia as a site of colonial adventure, a remote and dangerous outpost of Empire.

Mrs Fraser was nearly forgotten in the twentieth century, until renewed interest in the 1970s produced a multitude of materials to bolster her legend throughout the post-colonial world. New historical, artistic and mass cultural representations appeared in England as well as in Australia, Canada, and South Africa, all white settler societies with a nineteenth-century British heritage. With the advent of cultural pluralism in the 1970s, a number of contemporary adaptations placed the story within a Western modernist aesthetic. In universalistic terms, Mrs Fraser became an Everyman character, testing and transgressing the physical, spiritual and ideological boundaries between white and indigenous cultures; her avatars aided modernist writers, like Michael Ondaatje in Canada, André Brink in South Africa, and Patrick White in Australia, in attempting to come to terms with their country’s racist colonial past. In nationalistic terms, the story flowed into changing ideological and political currents within Australian culture as well as that of Canada and South Africa; writers refashioned the tale into one which exposed a common humanity between colonised and colonising peoples. By the 1990s, when the story was revived again in Australia, the sureties of (male, white, Western) universal humanism had succumbed to the global challenges of post-modernism as well as local anti-colonial perspectives supported by a previously suppressed white history of Aboriginal oppression, appropriation and marginalisation. Over the 160 years or so since the event occurred, its retellings have been a locus of contested ideological representations. Circulating within both ‘high’ and popular culture, representations of the event have operated in diverse ways to differently place white women and men, convicts, ship’s officers and crew and indigenous women and men in relation to Western history and British colonial authority. Adaptations of the story have contributed to myths of national identity (as well as challenges to those myths) for a number of new settler society nations, the effects of which can be traced within international cultural politics today.

This study examines the Eliza Fraser story not so much as an historical event but as foundational fiction aligned with the maintenance of a colonial empire and, later, with the makings and remakings of the Australian nation. The event has generated an abundance of both popular and intellectual knowledge which circulated together to produce, maintain, contest and uphold various representations of difference. Focusing on the nineteenth century, I will attend to a variety of texts which reproduce materials related to the event in a variety of colonial genres – including Mrs Fraser’s first-person accounts, government documents, histories, a sensationalised captivity narrative, ballads, handbills, and newspaper reports. Turning to the twentieth century, I will detail the ways in which the story enters contemporary culture through art, drama, opera, film and television documentaries, as well as popular and literary prose accounts. The analysis aims to study the work of representation: to examine the position(s) in the narratives of Mrs Fraser and of other speakers, writers and commentators; to examine the ways in which she is constructed as a victim and/or survivor of native savagery; to ask how her story gains authority through the testimonies of the speakers, their investments in the social institutions and practices as well as the cultural attitudes and beliefs of the time; and to read the documents to examine the ways in which different forms of narrative contribute differently to colonial constructions of ‘race’,<sup>3</sup> gender and class divisions and hierarchies. The study examines how the texts have been read and received, not only at the time of the event but also by later readers – including historians, painters, novelists and film-makers, as well as their critics and commentators – as representations which uphold or resist conflicting notions of colonial or national authority in different historical contexts. It examines the ways in which Aboriginal readings of the story can subvert white notions of cultural identity, power and representation. The approach assumes that there is no guarantee of knowledge beyond the textual representations of the event. The event, through narration, becomes placed in a number of fields of meaning. For the most part, the fields in which the Eliza Fraser story has circulated have been enmeshed within Western, rationalist, imperial and nationalist discourses of history.<sup>4</sup> But each of these is a site of contestation; all are challenged by Aboriginal perspectives – no meaning is fixed. There is no ‘real’ which is accessible outside its representations.

### **The Eliza Fraser Story: A Reconstruction**

First, a reconstruction of events related to the shipwreck of the *Stirling Castle*, is offered here. It serves to establish a ground on which it is possible to speak about and also contest the story, and to create for myself and the reader a point of reference/departure.

In 1836, Eliza Fraser, the English wife of an ailing Scottish ship's captain, James Fraser, accompanied her husband on what was to prove to be a fatal voyage to the antipodes. The couple left behind them a teenage daughter and two younger sons in the Orkney Islands off the north coast of Scotland, in the care of the Presbyterian Minister at Stromness. Their brig, the *Stirling Castle*, was a merchant ship which carried goods and emigrant passengers from England to the colonies. On this voyage, which carried goods and three emigrant families to Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania), it had a crew of nineteen men in addition to the Captain and his wife. The crew included two of the Captain's nephews, one its second mate and the other a twelve-year-old boy, as well as two 'men of colour' – a 'negro' cook and 'mulatto' steward from South America. From the outset, the voyage was eventful. First, the brig suffered damage as a result of a collision shortly after casting off, necessitating a return to harbour and a three-day delay to the departure. This event, traditionally taken as a bad omen by sailors, coupled with the knowledge of the Captain's ill health and his prior record of having commanded a ship on a voyage to the antipodes four years earlier which had been wrecked, did nothing to instil confidence in the crew, a number of whom signed off when the vessel reached port in Sydney. This change of circumstance required that the Captain take on new crew, unfamiliar with his command, for the return voyage. Then, en route from Sydney to Singapore, the vessel went aground on shoals some 800 kilometres off the present Queensland coast and was dismantled in a violent storm. The survivors set off in two leaky lifeboats, bailing water, battling sharks and storms. They voyaged through treacherous seas for more than four weeks, surviving without food or water for much of the time. The stronger and more stropky crew on the more reliable pinnace mutinied, heading south. The abandoned members of the longboat included a frenzied Captain Fraser, weakened by illness, and his pregnant wife; they eventually landed on what is now called (after the Captain) Fraser Island, but only after the crew threatened to 'draw lots' if the Captain, who feared native violence and cannibalism, did not pull ashore. Mrs Fraser and seven members of the crew eventually survived the ordeal.

On the island, the crew met up with several groups of indigenous peoples belonging to perhaps three clans with distinct territorial affiliations and speaking two related languages.<sup>5</sup> The shipwreck survivors straggled south along the beach in small groups, bartering clothes and navigational instruments for food with various small bands of 'natives'<sup>6</sup> for a few days, before being 'captured' and assigned to different family groups and subjected to native custom. Initially, until the local women came for her, Mrs Fraser was completely abandoned. In both physical and psychological terms, her suffering was great. Already in a weakened and sunburnt condition, she was stripped naked, separated from her husband and crew, and given a sickly, lice-infected child to nurse. In addition, she was forced with firebrands to

climb trees in search of honey, taught to search swamps and lagoons for fern roots and water lilies, made to fetch water and carry wood, and only permitted to sleep outside the native shelters, even during heavy rain. Before arriving on the island she is reputed to have given birth in the brackish, knee-deep water of the longboat, four days out to sea, to a child which drowned; she had been separated from her young nephew, John, who had been pressed into service on the pinnace when it separated from the longboat and who subsequently was drowned while collecting oysters for the starving crew. While 'in captivity',<sup>7</sup> she witnessed the spearing and death of her husband and the miserable sufferings of several other crew members, before being rescued during a corroboree by the convict John Graham. She may have suffered sexual abuse, as well, leading to severe mental derangement, although the nature of her sexual encounters is shrouded in uncertainty.

Although Graham is the rescuer of record, he may have been assisted by another escaped convict, David Bracefell, the rescuer of legend. Graham had volunteered his services to the official government party, hoping for a pardon in return for his co-operation. Prior to 1836, he had escaped from the penal colony and had lived as a 'white blackfellow' for six years, during which time he 'married' a native woman and adapted well to tribal life, coming to know the land, language and customs, before returning to serve out what he mistakenly hoped would be the final months of his sentence. Bracefell had escaped the settlement on several occasions and was 'at large' at the time of the shipwreck. When he was returned to civilisation in 1842, after the penal colony had been disbanded, he alleged that he had rescued 'the lady', and walked her back to Moreton Bay. But, complaining of his treatment, she had betrayed him at the edge of civilisation, breaking her promise to intercede on his behalf for a pardon. The official report, however, names Graham alone, who is said to have claimed Eliza from the 'hostile natives' by representing her as the ghost of his dead wife. She had spent fifty-two days in their company.

Descriptions of Mrs Fraser at the time of her rescue reveal something of her suffering. Lieutenant Otter, who waited with clothing at a pre-arranged spot on the beach after Graham negotiated with the natives for her release, described her thus:

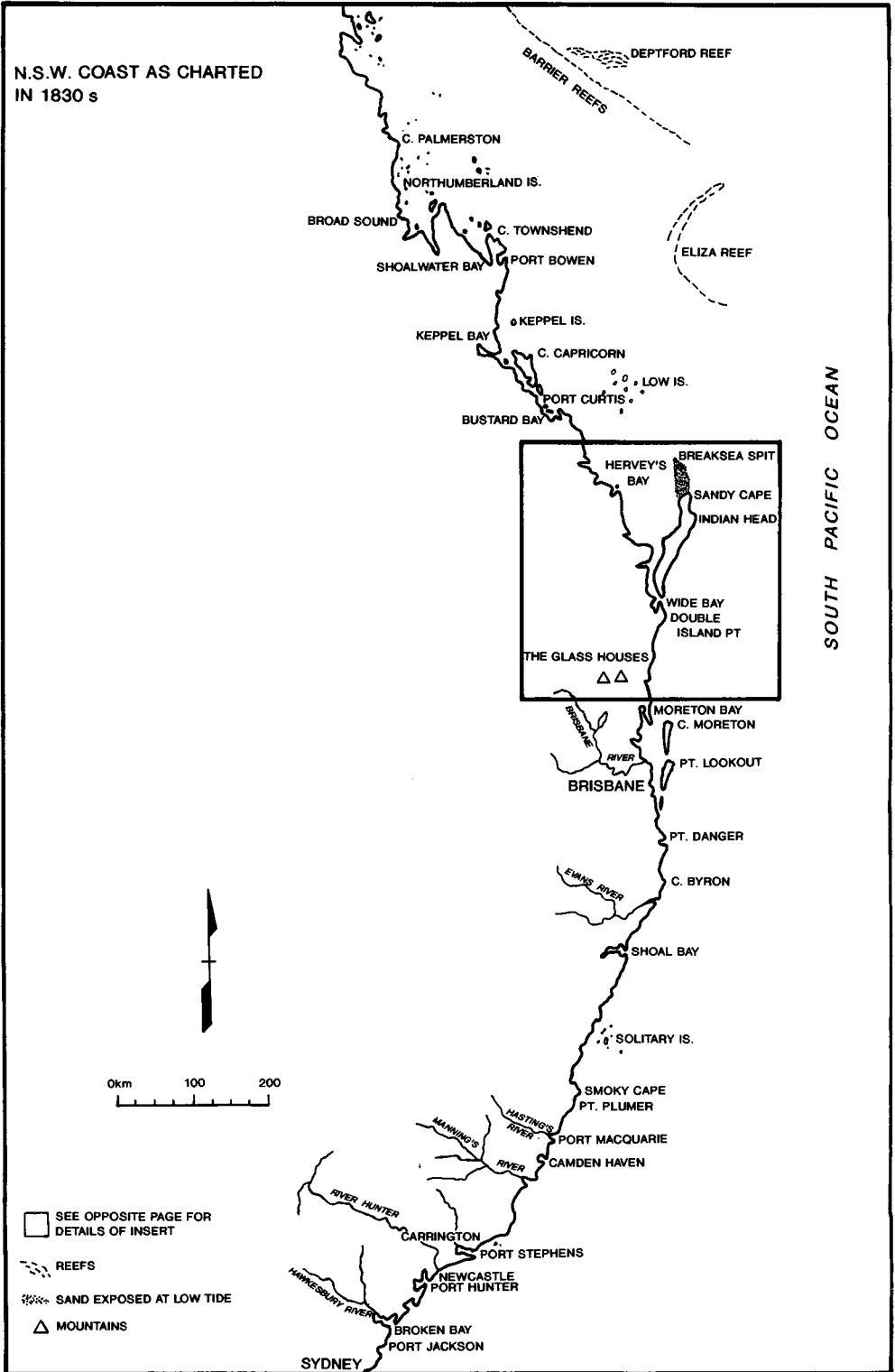
You never saw such an object. Although only thirty-eight years of age, she looked like an old woman of seventy, perfectly black, and dreadfully crippled from the

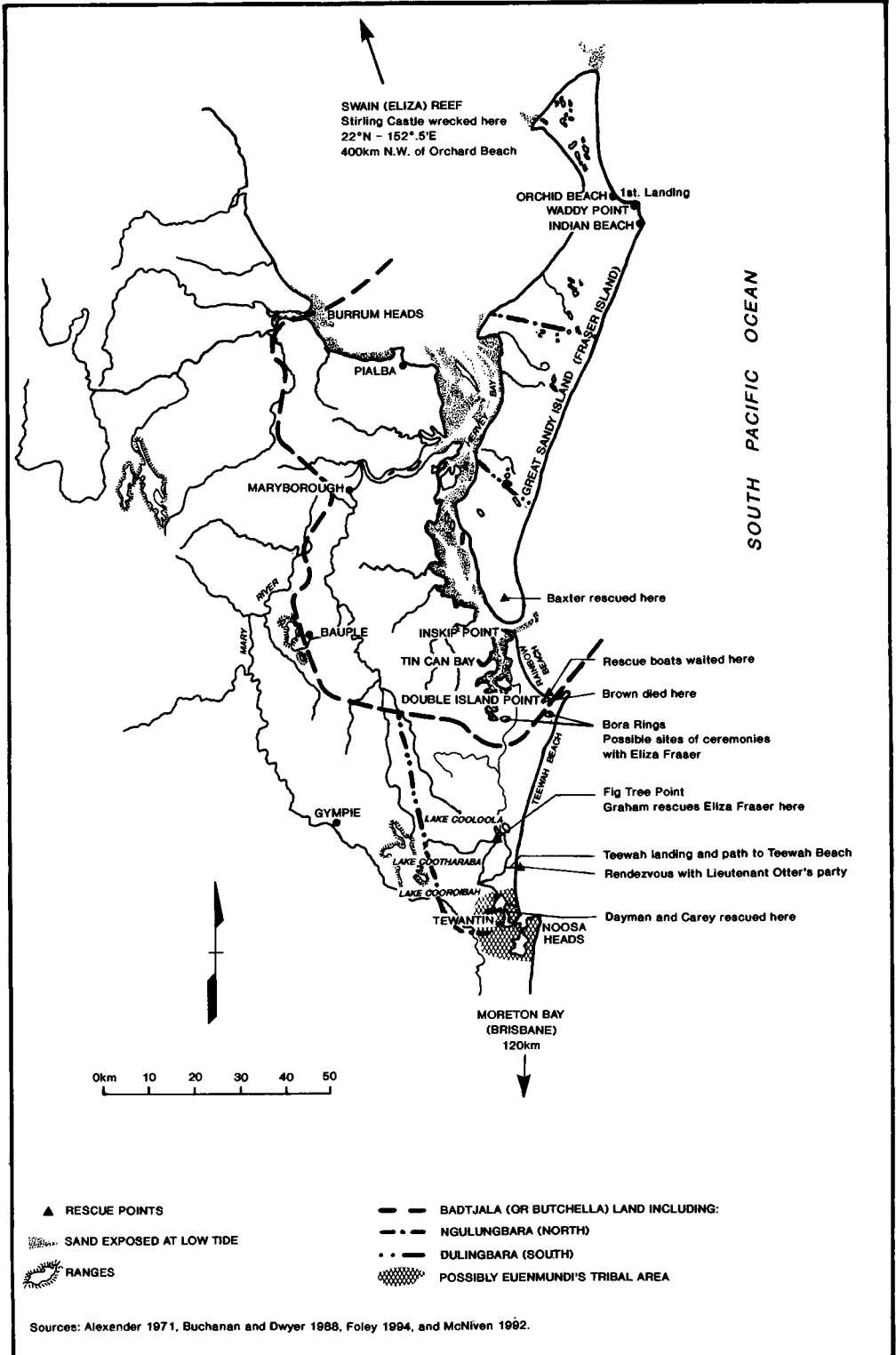
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**Map 1** The New South Wales coast, 1830s. The boxed area corresponds to the area shown in Map 2.

**Map 2** Location of principal events relating to the shipwreck of the *Stirling Castle*.

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sufferings she had undergone. I went to meet her, and she caught my hand, burst into tears, and sunk down quite exhausted. She was a mere skeleton, the skin literally hanging upon her bones, whilst her legs were a mass of sores, where the savages had tortured her with firebrands.<sup>8</sup>

After the rescue, Mrs Fraser was taken back to Moreton Bay, where she excited considerable curiosity. There she and other survivors were interviewed by the Commandant who filed several statements and an official report. The local women residents nursed her back to health before she departed for Sydney. In Sydney she attracted more notice, giving several interviews to the press about her experiences before meeting Captain Alexander Greene of the *Mediterranean Packet*. Eliza married Captain Greene seven months after the death of her husband and accompanied him back to England. Greene seems to have had an ambivalent relationship to Eliza, perhaps viewing her as a winning ticket to a lucrative new life. The citizens of the new colony had donated two trunks of clothing and four hundred pounds to her welfare prior to her departure. Yet, on arrival in England, she appealed to the authorities (first in Liverpool and then in London) for funds, representing herself as 'Mrs Fraser', a poor widow woman without a farthing. She also gave further interviews to the press, some say at the contrivance of her 'Svengali' husband, which by now had taken on a wildly exaggerated air.

Soon after her arrival in England, sensational stories of her captivity began to appear in the London papers, and they were quickly taken up and circulated through the American and colonial press. A subscription fund was set up by the Lord Mayor of London; it attracted some five hundred pounds before news reached the city that her claims were somewhat inflated. She was accused of being an ingenious imposter and of perpetrating fraud. A Commission of Inquiry followed, after which the Lord Mayor, embarrassed in the midst of an election campaign, transferred the money collected by subscription to a trust fund for her three children, then under guardianship of the Minister at Stromness. Details of the inquiry were reported daily in the press and later resulted in the publication of the first 'official' history of the event, *The Shipwreck of the Stirling Castle* (1838), which was written by John Curtis, a court reporter for *The Times*. About this time, a woman representing herself as Eliza appeared as a sideshow attraction in Hyde Park, telling her tale of barbarous treatment and miraculous escape. Admission sixpence. This sideshow Eliza is the last sighting history records of the woman who was already passing into myth.

The story I have just told needs to be contested and deconstructed. It represents a culling of facts based on the rules of logic and evidence which attend the discipline of history. In relating the story as a historical event, I stand in for a supposedly neutral, objective (masculine) authority within a Eurocent-



ric, humanistic philosophical tradition. My account attempts to outline uncontested details of the event taken from official records, extant letters and subsequent histories. It focuses on Eliza Fraser's ordeal, and purports not to speak on behalf of anyone in particular. But this is impossible. The story, like all historical narratives, is itself a fiction. It tells the story from her perspective and not that of other survivors. Still, 'her' story, itself, is authorised by colonialism; her personal testimony places her within the discourses and institutions which shaped her daily life. The retelling also utilises terms which are racially charged and historically determined (natives, captivity). It masks the divergent voices and positions of marginalised others (the indigenous people, the crew, the runaway convicts). It inevitably employs a terminology which speaks on behalf of those in authority (*whose mutiny, whose captivity, whose savages?*). It brings to life a unified subject, Eliza Fraser, who evokes the sympathy of the reader ('her sufferings were great', etc.). It suggests an immediacy and authenticity through a first-hand, eye-witness account ('You never saw such an object . . .'). It engages in speculations, motivations and intentions supplied by later historians (the frenzied Captain, the stroppey crew, her Svengali husband). And it reconstructs aspects of the event which, despite their presence in the historical accounts, are obscure (her pregnancy, the birth at sea, innuendoes of sexual abuse, conflicting stories of her rescue, and her psychological condition after the event). In terms of narrative structure, it employs a logic necessary to a progressive realist text: it has a beginning, a middle and an end; it constructs a story through principles of cause and effect; it revolves around the theme of survival; it suggests a series of links between the event and its aftermath; and it provokes reader interest with reference to the mystery of a shipwreck, a captivity, murder, sex, savagery and rescue. In addition, it provokes speculations and fantasies around an enigmatic woman/Woman and her alleged captors. All these structuring devices are already invested with significant meaning from other narratives, other genres, other discourses.

Further, any discussion of a 'first contact' event presents problems of perspective, particularly with reference to the location of the speaker/writer. The event itself is a liminal experience – one which takes place in an in-between space of cultural and psychic incomprehension, outside representation.<sup>9</sup> It becomes known and codified through the texts, discourses and histories in which it becomes embedded. There are always multiple histories, perspectives and contestations, including the overlapping cultural domains of the coloniser and the colonised, which involve contesting cosmologies, each with their own understandings and imaginings.<sup>10</sup> But textual representations within a colonial or a nationalist history reduce these multiple perspectives into a narrative of Empire and/or nation. The story becomes a sign of 'The People', one of many events told within a people's history which establishes an 'imagined community', in Benedict Anderson's terms, a

cultural community of common interests and identifiable social and psychic identities.<sup>11</sup>

There are a number of 'takes' on the term 'first contact'. They have relevance for the ways in which the story has been represented within Australian history and the problems of that history's monologic, Eurocentric reductions. Henry Reynolds studies first-contact interactions on the frontier as a space of negotiation. In attributing agency to Aboriginal actors, he addresses the politics of frontier contact from both sides, in terms of the ways in which Aborigines engaged in acts of both accommodation and resistance to white invasion. He interprets the Aboriginal response to invasion as 'positive, creative and complex'.<sup>12</sup> In his reassessments of the evidence of first contact, Reynolds challenges white historians to reassess Eurocentric tellings so that they and the historical endeavour they support might deal with Aborigines on more equal terms.

If one accepts Reynolds's perspective in examining the data available in relation to the Eliza Fraser story, several problems emerge. One could say that the event when represented as a 'first-contact' story in colonial discourse is a fabrication in many senses. These shipwreck victims were not the first white people to interact with the Fraser Islanders. The indigenous peoples had gathered to watch explorers' ships pass by the island on several occasions, sightings which they had recorded in song.<sup>13</sup> Captain Cook records in his journal that a group of natives gathered and gestured to the *Endeavour* as it made its way up the north-east coast in 1770. In an imperial gesture of naming, he called the promontory 'Indian Head' in recognition of the sighting. There were also a number of contacts between whites and Aborigines in the Fraser Island area between 1823 and 1836. These included a number of shipwreck victims and absconded convicts who encountered Aborigines in the area. From all extant reports they were treated with 'uniform kindness'.<sup>14</sup> After the penal settlement was established at Moreton Bay in 1824, a number of convicts escaped to the bush, found refuge in Kabi territory and were integrated into Aboriginal life as 'white blackfellows'. At least one of them, John Graham, had returned to the penal settlement and was pressed into service as a key player in the rescue of the *Stirling Castle* survivors. In addition, there had been a number of minor skirmishes between the colonial administrators and the indigenous peoples in the decade preceding the wreck of the *Stirling Castle*. British troops had encountered the local people during hunting parties and in attempts to recapture the bush convicts. Although murders are not recorded, several 'unfortunate' encounters are alluded to in the colonial records.<sup>15</sup> The *Stirling Castle* was not the first shipwreck in the area, nor the first time these indigenous peoples had encountered shipwreck victims. It was, however, the first reported instance of white 'captivity' amongst 'savages and cannibals'. Even in regard to the *Stirling Castle* incident, in opposition to Mrs Fraser's claims that the survivors