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978-0-521-49920-0 - In the Wake of First Contact: The Eliza Fraser Stories

Kay Schaffer

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The Eliza Fraser Stories

KAY SCHAFFER

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.orgInformation on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521499200

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First published 1995

Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2009

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library**National Library of Australia Cataloguing in Publication data*

Schaffer, Kay, 1945– .

In the wake of first contact: the Eliza Fraser stories.

Bibliography.

Includes index.

1. Fraser, Eliza Anne – In literature.
2. Fraser, Eliza Anne – In art.
3. Australian literature – History and criticism.
4. Literature and history – Australia – History.
5. Race in literature.
6. Women and literature – Australia – History – 19th century.
7. Literature, Modern – History and criticism.
8. Aborigines, Australian – First contact in literature.
9. Aborigines, Australian – First contact with Europeans.
10. Australia – History – 1788–1851 – Historiography. I. Title.

A820.9351

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Schaffer, Kay, 1945–

In the wake of first contact: the Eliza Fraser stories / Kay Schaffer
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Australian literature – History and criticism.
2. Fraser, Eliza Anne – In literature.
3. First contact of aboriginal peoples with Westerners – Australia.
4. Literature and history – Australia – History.
5. Australian Aborigines in literature.
6. Race in literature.
7. Women and literature – Australia – History – 19th century.
8. Literature, Modern – History and criticism.
9. Fraser, Eliza Anne – In art.
10. Australia – History – 1788–1851 – Historiography. I. Title.

PR9605.7.F73S33 1995

820.9'351–dc20

95–17890

ISBN 978-0-521-49577-6 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-49920-0 paperback

Every effort has been made to trace the original source material contained in this book. Where the attempt has been unsuccessful, the publishers would be pleased to hear from the copyright holders to rectify any omission.

Production of this book was assisted by the
South Australian Government through the
Department for the Arts and Cultural Development.

Indexed by Meryl Potter

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Preface

In May 1989, I slumped back in my chair at the Sorbonne, attempting to disguise my stunned surprise after hearing that the lecture I had been invited to give had been cancelled. Little did I know that the acute frustration I was feeling would result in my writing the book you are about to read. It has had an interesting genesis.

I was in France at the invitation of two universities, Paris III (Sorbonne) and Toulouse-le-Miral, to lecture to their post-graduate students in the Literatures in English program. My book, *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire and the Australian Cultural Tradition*, had just been launched in Australia and was due for publication in Europe. I was on study leave and on my first trip to Europe. I had been invited, with the assistance of the Australia Council, to give lectures at emerging Australian Studies Centres in some twenty universities in the United Kingdom and Europe while overseas and to present an overview of the book. I took delight in the opportunity.

French universities taught very little Australian literature at the time. At the Sorbonne, for example, Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* appeared on the syllabus (as the only Australian novel) perhaps once every three years. When the novel was taught in Europe, lecturers and students tended to focus on a comparison between the historical antecedents of the novel and their fictionalisation, about which I knew nothing. Nonetheless, I had responded to the invitations with enthusiasm, and promised to deliver a lecture entitled 'Australian Mythologies: Ideas of the Feminine in Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*'. I imagined that it would not be too difficult to utilise the frameworks from *Women and the Bush* to provide a point of departure for the *Fringe of Leaves* lecture. Any further research necessary for the paper could be managed in between lectures and other research activities in the three months prior to my arrival in Paris.

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Upon rereading the novel, however, I realised that I had made a serious error in judgement. *Women and the Bush* had examined the democratic nationalist notions of Australian national identity and how they had evolved across a range of cultural forms (particularly historical and literary texts, film and the media); the ways in which these forms and their institutional supports (from sociology, history, literature, politics and popular culture) evoked concepts of ‘femininity’, particularly in regard to landscape representation; and what effects these representations might have on actual (white) women in Australia. Finally, the text employed deconstructive strategies to challenge the myth of Woman/women in regard to two key short stories, one by Henry Lawson (‘The Drover’s Wife’) and one by Barbara Baynton (‘The Chosen Vessel’). Patrick White barely rated a mention. He appeared on page 17 in a list of modernist writers from the 1950s who challenged the democratic nationalist canon of Australian works, the perspective with which I was preoccupied. His novel is inspired by a shipwreck and ‘captivity’ of a white woman (his Cornish Ellen Gluyas) amongst indigenous peoples on what is now called Fraser Island; it proceeds from a set of modernist assumptions and critiques about what it means to be Australian that are very different to those of the democratic nationalists.

Clearly, if I were to impress my French audience, I had some work to do. I set myself to the task. Because the first questions Europeans tend to ask about the novel are: ‘Is it true?’ or ‘Did it really happen?’ I began to plan some archival research in London, Derbyshire, Edinburgh, and the Orkney Islands, hoping to examine the differences between what was known of the actual historical event and the ways in which it was transformed by White. Along the way, I examined the varied, but universally enthusiastic, critical reviews of the novel by Australian and overseas critics. At the same time, I was dismayed by the stereotypic characterisation of femininity and the harsh depiction of Aboriginal characters in the novel. I worried particularly about the act of cannibalism in which Ellen and her hosts engaged at a taut and fragile moment in the narrative, a moment elided in most of the critical reviews. This led me to ponder, from a post-colonial perspective, modernism’s fascination with ‘the primitive’. With these issues in mind, I began to structure the paper; I thought of it as a contained, short-term, interesting project directed to a particular goal.

My stunned response in the office of my professorial host in Paris occurred when he advised me that, contrary to his previous letters, he now did not want me to deliver a lecture to his post-graduate students on Patrick White’s novel, *A Fringe of Leaves*, as he had not been able to include the novel on the syllabus. Rather, he said, he hoped that I might introduce students to what I believed they should know before reading their first piece of Australian literature. A daunting project, especially when presented to me at 3 p.m. for a 5 p.m. lecture! I had just spent the last two days in Paris confined to my

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hotel room, rewriting the lecture, restructuring and timing it carefully, articulating it clearly into a tape recorder, and practising my introduction with a sprinkling of French. This, in the city of the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the Beaubourg, and other Parisian enticements. I had resisted them, all for the sake of the lecture which was now not going to take place. In fact, I had spent the greater part of my non-lecturing time in Europe researching the woman and the legend which provided the historical basis for White's fiction.

The frustration was exacerbated a week later upon my arrival in Toulouse for what I believed to be a Friday lecture to post-graduate students on the novel, only to find a note on the door of the *U.E.R des Langues Littératures Civilisations Etrangères et de Linguistique, Section d'Anglais*. It informed students that the department was closed for the day in preparation for a weekend conference, to which students were not invited. I was to give a paper at the conference – but it concerned Henry Lawson and Australian nationalism, not Patrick White nor Eliza Fraser. I left France never having delivered the paper. But the research had provoked my interest. The inability to articulate my early speculations or share my growing enthusiasms with a scholarly audience – *any* audience – meant that I returned from study leave with a feeling of unfinished business and a project which is only now nearing its end.

So, I would have to say that I never intended to write this book; I never chose the topic, nor the area. Rather, it chose me. And once chosen, the relationship held.

Authors develop complex relationships with their objects of study. We get to the end not only by intellectual interest and dogged determination, but by weathering the emotional highs and lows, as well. Often this particular relationship which I have had with my elusive Eliza held only tenuously, attached to my tenacious curiosity. It carried me through many more months of intermittent archival work over a five-year period in Sydney and Melbourne, London and Kew, Derbyshire, Edinburgh, the Orkney Islands, and Sri Lanka. As well, extensive work was carried out on my behalf by archivists in New Zealand and South Africa, in search of further traces (never found) of the 'real' Eliza Fraser and her fictional avatars. The historical dimension of the project presented an interesting set of intellectual conflicts. It tested my delight in and commitment to post-modern perspectives against my considerable affection for and skill at historical research; it tested my knowledge that there is no 'real' person to be found in the archival materials which mark a life against my keen desire to know more about the actual woman and the times in which she lived.

I had confronted this dilemma before. In 1984, after having engaged in doctoral research on Katharine Susannah Prichard for some three years and toyed with the idea of writing a critical biography using the techniques of

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psychohistory, I abandoned the project. In an article in which I examined the attendant problems of biographical work, I wrote of the need to handle historical projects differently:

Recent post-structuralist and French Feminist theorists have challenged [historical] notions of the individual. They suggest a new point of departure . . . To say something different one needs to read both the woman and the text [her biographic traces] as signs, traversed by the various discourses and contradictory codes of meaning. To do so restores to the woman, and to the text, a plurality, a multiplicity of meanings, a diffuse diversity. A deconstructive reading subverts attempts to reduce the woman/text under the master's critical gaze, a gaze which narcissistically reflects back the critic's identity while it obscures that of the object.¹

Why, then, I asked myself, was I once again engaged in a historical/biographical project? What was so enticing about primary research in dusty archives? I knew I was in pursuit of fool's gold but I could not resist it, despite my inability to turn up any more information on this mysterious woman than that contained in the few books and articles previously published concerning the event. One night, after a twelve-hour session at the Public Records Office, Kew, in a concerted effort to conquer the problem, I dreamt of being an archival librarian digging a dirt floor with a shovel. The shovel continued to hit unyielding stone below the floor. It stymied my work. I listened to the dream: I shifted my perspective and abandoned the libraries, but not the endeavour.

The pleasurable aspects of the project expanded considerably during several 'on-site' visits. I wrote the first draft of what was to be the aborted Paris paper in Stromness in the Orkney Islands in April 1989. I recall several bleak, stormy days of sitting at a window of an upper-storey room facing the grey sea, only four houses down the cramped flagstone laneway from the stone cottage in which Eliza Fraser had lived with her husband, Captain Fraser, and their three children prior to her departure with the Captain on their fatal voyage to the antipodes. It was in the Stromness Museum that I first read *The Rescue of Eliza Fraser* (1986) which had been prepared by Neil Buchanan and Barry Dwyer for the Fraser Island Historical Society's 150-year commemoration of the shipwreck. That text makes a well-reasoned effort to reconcile dilemmas presented by a number of contradictory reports of the event. It tests documentary evidence against the authors' considerable knowledge of local history and topography in order to get closer to the 'truth' of 'what really happened'. I began, however, to see the contradictions in the texts as signs of the making of 'colonialism's culture', to use Nicholas Thomas's suggestive phrase. I began reading the documents as sites for the production of colonial knowledge and power relations, as exercises of power whereby

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women, escaped convicts, mutinous seamen and indigenous peoples all came under (and at the same time resisted) the imperial/colonial gaze.

Upon arrival back in Australia, I made several trips to Fraser Island where, whipped with sunshine, sea air and sand, and assisted by a number of enthusiastic local historians and environmentalists, I retraced the locale of the shipwreck of the *Stirling Castle* in 1836 and the fate of its crew. I became conscious of other layers of meaning connected to the history of the event, concerning environmentalism, Aboriginal mythology, and contemporary political and historical perspectives. Often there was exhilaration as, with my friends, I traversed up and down the coast, over wilderness trails and up to lookouts, around lakes, across swamps and lagoons, in what is now a stunningly beautiful World Heritage area. I became increasingly familiar with the territories which before Eliza Fraser's arrival had belonged to the Badtjala, Gabi-Gabi and Undambi peoples of the Great Sandy Region, every patch of this 'uncharted' land and sea familiar to them. I walked the Cooloola Wilderness Trail, an established Aboriginal track and site of Mrs Fraser's rescue, which was in the process of being widened: the rainforest root system was damaged, its fragile canopy of foliage rent by bulldozers. I learned the Badtjala creation myths of the ancestral beings who shaped the land, including the story of Teewah, the rainbow serpent, who was in love with the maiden Cooroibah who was herself abducted by Cootharaba. The act enraged Teewah: in his fury he crashed into the sandy cliffs of Cooloola, creating the spectacular Coloured Sands at Rainbow Beach.² The irony of another abduction and rescue, that of Eliza Fraser from her Aboriginal hosts, in the same environment did not escape my notice. Although most of my travels were exhilarating, sometimes I experienced terror as I travelled along the coast. Once I wandered off by myself in a mock attempt to find a way through the paperbark swamps at Teewah landing which Mrs Fraser traversed with John Graham to her rescue point. My mood turned sombre and then I panicked upon becoming totally disoriented within an enveloping wilderness so like that captured by Sidney Nolan in his evocative Mrs Fraser series of paintings from the 1956–7 period.

The study by Buchanan and Dwyer which I read in Stromness also suggested that Mrs Fraser was 'born and reared in Ceylon', another location I would visit before completing the research. The phrase stunned me at the time – two more incongruous colonial locations for the story could not be imagined. It was then that many Mrs Frasers began to dance before my mind's eye. There was the historical figure: Eliza Anne Fraser, née Slack; mother, Elizabeth Ann Britton; age given as thirty-six at the time of the shipwreck in May 1836. No one had been able to locate a birth, baptismal or death certificate for her; her accident-prone, sea-faring husband left no will; none of her family appears in either the 1820 or 1830 census for Scotland;

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details of her life after her marriage to Alexander John Greene and return to England in 1838 remain a mystery. And there was the plethora of images produced by historical commentators to supplement the considerable gaps in the archives: an indulged daughter of the Raj; a child of Derbyshire peasants displaced by industrialisation; an ardent and devoted wife; a sea-going mother who abandoned her children; a stern Presbyterian churchgoer; a devilish 'She-Captain'; a victim of shipwreck and starvation; a widow facing a 'fate worse than death' at the hands of 'cannibals and savages'; a seductive, sensual and fickle betrayer of her convict rescuer; a vengeful rape victim; a survivor; a sideshow performer; an opportunist, a fraud, a cheat and a liar.

The idea of this, perhaps the first, white female shipwreck victim facing 'the natives' in a remote and uncharted area of Australia evoked strong responses in all of Eliza Fraser's commentators. In the wake of 'first contact', the tale adapted itself to fantasies and myths of national and racial origin for white writers in a number of post-colonial settler societies – the United States, South Africa and Canada, as well as Australia. Versions appeared in 'high' and popular forms, directed at serious scholarly audiences as well as a mass public. And 150 years after the event, it still had the ability to capture an audience. 'Mrs Fraser' had been rebuked, sensationalised, sensualised, vilified, revered, mocked, and politicised in a variety of contexts and locales; imperial, colonial, neo-colonial, and now anti- and post-colonial. Clearly, the story resonated with divergent meanings across time, the effects of which I had only begun to recognise.

Although I never gave my paper in France, I was able to present an abridged version of it at a conference in Giessen just a few days before my departure back to Australia. The paper, an expanded version of which was subsequently published in *Kunapipi*, drew enthusiastic responses. Many of my listeners encouraged me to continue the project, suggesting new sources of material and avenues of investigation. They offered insights, information, and new directions to pursue. Upon my return to Australia, my relationship to the project had changed, becoming at once more subtle and enticing but also far more demanding, as my attention turned to novels and plays, paintings and installations, poetry, films and television documentaries which have come in the wake of the shipwreck of the *Stirling Castle* and Eliza Fraser's alleged 'captivity' amongst 'savages and cannibals'.

What had begun as a limited investigation of Patrick White's depiction of the Eliza Fraser story in *A Fringe of Leaves* had been transformed into a touchstone event supporting an intensive and ongoing study of the culture of colonialism and its contemporary effects. When I shifted my interest from the woman and the shipwreck as historical subjects to the culture that her story and the event had helped to produce, I found, if not the perfect feminist heroine, an engaging, multi-faceted colonial legend requiring an extensive

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post-colonial critique. Colonial writers at the time of the shipwreck represented the event in ways that attempted to establish the boundaries of identity and difference, to secure what was then a precarious power base. Post-colonial critique enabled me to challenge those boundaries after colonial power (but not its legacy of race, class and gender relations) had been dismantled. I abandoned my search for 'truth' and began to trace the specific and interconnected, unfinished and ongoing contestations of power made possible by representations of the event.

Along the way I have had many helpers, the book's extended kin so to speak, to whom I am gratefully indebted. I would like to extend my gratitude to all who have assisted me during the last six years of the project. Special thanks to Anna Rutherford and Gordon Collier for their early support and to Gordon for his ongoing and rigorous intellectual and editorial assistance along the way. Late in the day, I am grateful to the staff at Cambridge University Press, especially Janet Mackenzie, my able sub-editor, and Jane Fargo, who has kept me on track with copyright details and permissions.

On a number of occasions while writing the book, I sought out readers with specific areas of expertise who provided additional information or generously made helpful critiques of various aspects of the study. They include: Jude Adams, Mary-Ann Bin Sallik, Elaine Brown, Gordon Collier, Yolanda Drummond, Shirley Foley, Lee Cataldi, Andrew Lattas, Frances Lindsay, Roslyn Poignant, Margaret Plant, Sidonie Smith and Carolyn Williams. I am also grateful to the many creative artists whose work I examine in the book whom I visited, or corresponded with, or contacted by phone, or to whom I sent chapters for comment. They responded with enthusiasm and helpful critical advice. They include: Michael Alexander, André Brink, Gillian Coote, Fiona Foley, Allan Marett, Peter Sculthorpe, Barbara Blackman Veldhoven, and David Williamson.

I received generous help from a number of researchers, archivists and librarians. They include: Thomas Askey, of Chatsworth House, Derbyshire; Alison Fraser, Archivist at the Kirkwell Library, Orkney Islands; Dr Wimalaratne, Director, Sri Lankan National Archives, and the charming Sam Mottau, its former Director; as well as numerous helpful staff at the Fryer and Oxley Libraries, Queensland; the British Library; the Public Record Office, Kew; Somerset House, London; the Guildhall Library, London; the Derbyshire Record Office, Matlock; the Stromness Museum, Orkney Islands; the Newberry Library in Chicago; and the State Library of New South Wales, Mitchell Library. Thanks also to Peter Lauer, former Director of the University of Queensland Anthropological Museum, and the late Gerry Langevad, of the Queensland Division of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, for guidance on anthropological aspects of the research, and to Professor K. M. DeSilva and Dr Ian Goonetilleke for their expert advice

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concerning Sri Lanka's colonial history. I am also grateful to Julia Millen, Jenny McDonogh and Sharmilla Henry, my New Zealand, South African and Sri Lankan researchers respectively. A special thanks to the woman, whose name I have lost but who lives vividly in my memory, who silently sacrificed her lunch and her lunch hours to keep open the Museum at Stromness after hours, thus enabling me to read the extensive files.

I would also like to thank Ann Mather, Art Librarian, University of South Australia; Juliana Engburg, Curator, and Anna Clayburn, Assistant Curator, Heide Gallery; Jane Clark, then curator at the Queensland Art Gallery, now with Sotheby's in Melbourne; and staff at the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, all of whom assisted in my art research and the pursuit of paintings and illustrations included in this volume. I am immensely grateful to Sue Murray at the Geography Department at the University of Adelaide for providing the knowledge, skills and patience to enable me to produce the maps included in the book. For various forms of support, information and assistance, thanks to Janine Burke, Geoff Brown, Lanie Carroll, Kate Darian-Smith, Dorothy Driver, Barry Dwyer, Greg Greco, Sue Kossew, Alan Lawson, Michael Luke, Ian McNiven, Wendy Morgan, Lynette Russell, Ron Slack, Leon Scatterthwait, Pauline Strong, Peter Sutton, John and Sally Treloar, Michael Venning, Mike West of FIDO, and Nancy Williams.

A special thanks to Irene Christie, Secretary, Tewanin Historical Society, for her excellent guided tour of the Cooloola region and for taking the 'author's' photograph of me beside the commemorative plaque which (incorrectly) marks the site of Eliza Fraser's rescue. Similarly, to Mrs Gomeja, Banda, and the staff of the Grand Hotel, Nuria Elya, for their extraordinary generosity in providing contacts, guided tours and transport, and for making arrangements for my research in the hills district of Sri Lanka.

Closer to home, I am grateful to my research assistants Anne Barrie, Rob Foster, Helen Innes, Arien Koppe and Sarah Shepherd, who performed many odd jobs and often coped patiently with my confusion and panic in the face of various deadlines along the way. Many of the ideas in the book were first tested with Women's Studies post-graduate students, always a vital source of inspiration, in my subject 'Women and Popular Culture' at Adelaide University in 1992. I am particularly grateful to Janet Kitchner, Chrissy Bryce and Margaret Smith for their research and writing, which extended my own thinking about contemporary, popular cultural formations. In addition, I made a number of wonderful friends in the course of the project. Special thanks to Elaine and Geoff Brown and Barbara and Harry Garlick in Queensland, Roslyn Poignant in London, and Anne Abeywardene in Colombo, for opening their homes and hearts to me, extending hospitality, personal and intellectual companionship, and lightening the load at the bleary end of an extended research day. Finally, to my colleagues, friends and family,

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especially Muriel Lenore, Jill Golden, Maureen Dyer, and my husband Robert, who lived with me through the highs and lows and never failed to assist as supporters of the project, sounding-boards and 'ideal' readers, my heartfelt gratitude.

Sections of this book have appeared elsewhere. My first article on the Eliza Fraser story contains the seeds of ideas developed over several chapters. It first appeared as 'The Eliza Fraser Story and Constructions of Gender, Race and Class in Australian Culture' in *Hecate: Special Issue on Women/Australia/Theory*, 17, 1 (1991). An expanded version of this article was republished under the title 'Australian Mythologies: The Eliza Fraser Story and Constructions of the Feminine in Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* and Sidney Nolan's Eliza Fraser Paintings', in *Them and Us: Translation, Transcription and Identity in Post-Colonial Literary Cultures*, edited by Gordon Collier, and published by Rodopi Press, Amsterdam and Atlanta, 1992. Portions of Chapters 2 and 3 have appeared in several articles. These include parts of my article entitled 'Nationalism and the American Captivity Narratives' in *Captured Lives: Australian Captivity Narratives*, co-authored with Kate Darian-Smith and Roslyn Poignant and published by the Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, University of London, 1993; 'Colonizing Gender in Colonial Australia: The Eliza Fraser Story', an article published in *Writing Women and Space*, edited by Gillian Rose and Alison Blunt, and published by Guilford Press, New York, 1994; and 'Trial by Media: The Case of Eliza Fraser', which appeared in *Antipodes: An American Journal of Australian Studies* (USA), 5, 2 (Winter, 1991). Parts of Chapter 10 are included in my article 'Australian Feminisms, Aboriginality and National Identity in the 1990s', which appeared in the *Journal of Cultural Studies* (UK) (1995). I am grateful to the publishers for permission to reproduce material in this book.