

*From “a shrew from the Orkneys” to White Indigene :  
Re-inventions of Eliza Fraser.*

**Cynthia vanden Driesen**

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**Abstract:** Few episodes in postcolonial Australian history have shown so remarkable a capacity to generate ever-increasing cross-fertilisations between myth, history and memory than the narratives centred on Eliza Fraser. The archive of materials surrounding the shipwreck of this British woman and her brief sojourn among the indigenous people of the Badtjala community of Fraser Island in the nineteenth century continues to grow. Kay Schaffer's impressive work overtook earlier studies of the phenomenon but concentrates mainly on the many European re-constructions of the episode. The fecundity of the materials is far from exhausted. This paper explores some of the Aboriginal reactions to the tale but its main focus is Patrick White's novel *A Fringe of Leaves*, which grew out of his own research and constructs a new myth with implications for the nation. It is a work with the potential for developing (in Jim Davidson's words) "a myth of reconciliation, and possibilities of growth." This Paper shows White's melding of history, myth, memory and imagination in this novel is illustrative of the literary artist's contribution to "writing the nation."

**Keywords:** Eliza Fraser, indigene, myth, colonial.

'Myth, History, Memory' - the themes of this conference are full of evocative suggestions and the catalyst between them is the creative imagination. As the excerpts from their most significant essays included in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, highlight, theorists like Slemon and Lawson have emphasized the importance of the work of the creative writer in a settler culture in assisting the development of a sense of belonging within the new regions to which they came originally as colonial invaders (Ashcroft et al. 1995: 109 -110;168). In the transmutation of some historic events over time into myths of regeneration and growth, the creative imagination of literary and other artists is crucial; this paper traces the particular contribution of Patrick White's novel *A Fringe of Leaves* to the evolution of such a myth. (White: 1976, 77.) Based on the historical episode of the shipwreck of an Englishwoman Eliza Fraser off the coast of Queensland and her sojourn amongst the aborigines, it probes the possibilities of a myth of indigenization for the erstwhile white invader.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Eliza Fraser was the wife of Captain Fraser, captain of the 'Stirling Castle' which was shipwrecked off the coast of Queensland, Australia on May 22, 1836. A boat was landed at

The enormous archive generated by Eliza's shipwreck on the island has now reached such proportions, that, as those Aboriginal voices now beginning to be heard protest, it has totally erased attention to the history of the people of the island themselves. As Fiona Foley, activist and artist, a descendant of the Badtjala people has put it:

In 1836 she was marooned for five weeks on Fraser Island and her saga has been allowed to continue for throughout two centuries ... The absence of a dialogue with the Badtjala people has irrevocably damaged and put this people to rest. I often wonder when she will be put to rest (Foley, 1998: 165).

The Aboriginal peoples' version of the tale of Eliza Frazer has been conspicuously absent. White's novel is exceptional in that it tells the Aboriginal story alongside of Eliza's. The nineteenth century accounts consisted of the official record: a statement supplied by Eliza herself of her capture and the harsh treatment of herself and the ship's crew. It also recorded her rescue by the official party assisted by the convict John Graham. Another, more sensationalised account attributed to Mrs. Fraser was circulated to the broadsheets - the media outlets of the time - both in England and the United States. John Curtis' *The Shipwreck of the Stirling Castle* (1838) was designed to exonerate the lady when she fell under suspicion of attempting to extort public money for her advantage. She was depicted as a virtuous suffering woman. These accounts were essentially colonialist narratives designed to praise the virtues of the British race and to justify the colonial project as one designed to bring light to these benighted beings.

It is interesting to juxtapose these accounts with those of Aboriginal observers. In 1874 Archibald Meston spoke to old blacks at Noosa and Fraser Island who had actually seen the party come ashore. They told a very different story of how the white people were received in a friendly manner and were passed on in canoes to the mainland (Evans & Walter, 1977: 39-105). Information from the Badtjala people also recorded that there was no attempt to keep the woman captive, that she had been despatched marked with ochre signs indicating that she was not to be harmed, to the groups further down the coast so she could be handed over to the official search party (Miller, 1998: 34). Another convict living amongst the blacks, who had been detailed to accompany her, denied accusations of rape that she had made against him. Evans and Walker (cited above) also refer to the story of the second convict in an account given by another white settler, Henry Stuart Russell in his memoirs entitled *Genesis of Queensland* (1888).

The twentieth-century versions of the events show a new twist being given the Fraser saga, beginning with the Sidney Nolan paintings of the 1940's. In these and in Alexander's *Mrs. Fraser on the Fatal Shore* (1976) the story of a second convict is retained. The woman is constructed as domineering and exploitative, yet also endowed with a sensual attraction. This sensuality and the salacious possibilities of the story are emphasized in the Burstall /Williamson film of (1976). Kay Schaeffer, commenting on these twentieth century versions enlarges on the nationalistic ambience surrounding the

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Waddy Point on Fraser Island where the Captain and some of the crew were killed by Aborigines. Mrs. Fraser was found later by an official search party assisted by a convict who had lived with the Aborigines and returned to England. The mention of a second convict who, supposedly, escorted her through the bush before her rescue by the official party is not mentioned in the early records.

convict figure as an Australian folk-hero and the positioning of Eliza as the stereotypical exploitative female, the more reprehensible for being aligned also to the colonial power. While Schaffer's analyses of these varied renderings of Eliza Fraser are consistently insightful, her response to the White text bypasses its unique resonances. She allows that his treatment of Eliza is more complex yet feels she remains little more than the stereotypical instinctual female. (Schaeffer, Melbourne :168).

Schaeffer's discussions of the texts of the 1990's comment on the new configurations emerging in the national context they seem to refract - particularly an awareness of the significance of black/white relationships which perhaps had not emerged as significantly in the previous decade. Allen Marrett's Noh play in English performed in Sydney and Tokyo in 1989 and 1990 present two facets of Eliza's role: Eliza as the victim of horrid savages in Act 1, while Act 2 presents her as a visionary with access to spiritual power granted her by the indigenous custodians of the country. Gillian Coote's documentary *Island of Lies* (1991) records past massacres of Aboriginal peoples and how white materialism has debased the land. The ghost of Mrs. Fraser is rejected by both descendants of both black and white people because of her lies about the people. None attempts the extent of the innovative re-telling of events that the White text accomplishes and which Schaeffer's reading certainly does not appear to appreciate sufficiently.

White's attention was first drawn to the Fraser story by the painter Sidney Nolan but he also conducted his own research into these events. It is not widely known that he actually financed the earliest project looking into the anthropological artefacts of the island ( McNiven,1998:38).He also met with Wilf Reeves a descendant of the Badtjala people. Reeves warned him he needed to be sceptical of the whites' account of the episode (Marr,1991:542). Nevertheless when he finally came to compose his work, White refused to be constricted by versions given by either group, shaping an imaginative reconstruction of his own, one which involved a radical re-shaping of the image of Eliza.

Foley laments the fact that the role of indigenous women has been so completely ignored: "I cannot recall one Aboriginal heroine ... yet in this landscape her skeletal remains at Lake Mungo have been carbon dated in the region 30,000 years ago."(Foley, 1998, 165).The Badtjala woman does appear in the White text in the image of the young woman whom Eliza glimpses in all her youthful beauty diving for lily roots and although she dies tragically Ellen's participation in her funeral ritual ensures her continuity. Most important is the re-construction of the community life of the people and, most significant, the reinvention of Eliza herself as a lubra of the tribe.

Eliza's origins are changed: from "a shrew from the Orkneys" to that of a wholesome farm girl from Cornwall, who married into the English aristocracy. From her aristocratic home in Cheltenham she is hurled across the world to Australia and subjected to the experience of living among the Australian Aborigines. At the end of her sojourn in that world, she is not returned to England (as in the original story) but seems destined to make her home in Sydney.

The writer's sleight of hand sets going a process that suggests Eliza's gradual and consistent transformation into white indigene. As a British 'savage', from the beginning it is suggested, Ellen is closer to the Australian indigene than to the British colonial aristocracy. Miss Scrimshaw comments on Ellen's dark appearance and that Cornwall (

her place of origin) is “a remote country.” In girlhood “Rocks had been her altars and spring water her sacrament ...”(248).

Most striking, is her effortless bonding with the Australian landscape. Almost immediately after Ellen’s arrival in Hobart town, the foreign place begins to be conflated with home:

The scent of the cow’s breath, the thudding of her hooves, and the plop of falling dung, filled Ellen with an immeasurable homesickness...she might have been driving Gluyas’s cart to market. ( 83)

When “a drizzle started blowing in their faces,” she declares, “I am used to it” ( 85). Ellen frequently walks and rides into the countryside; deliberately choosing the less frequented scene to the more orderly and settled. At Dulcet, her response to her surroundings is deeply sensual:

fronds of giant ferns caressed her, and she in turn caressed the brown fur which clothed their formal crooks. She was so entranced she sat down in a small clearing ... Removing the superfluous bonnet and loosening her matted hair, she felt only remotely related to Ellen Roxburgh, or even Ellen Gluyas (92).

Even in the most traumatic moments following her husband’s death and her own enslavement: “Despite her misery and the child in her arms Mrs. Roxburgh could not remain unmoved by the natural beauty surrounding her.” ( 247)..”

Her physical transformation is immediate and dramatic. Stripped of her clothing, her skin is blackened, her hair chopped off, so “she had become a stubbled fright such as those around her or even worse.” (224.) The women, noting her body still bore the signs of recent childbirth compel her to suckle the sickly infant and she is later allotted a special role in the community as the children’s nurse. She participates fully in the corroboree: “She slapped and moaned, was carried away.” Jack Chance tells her when he discovers her diving for lily roots, I didn’t bargain for a lubra.’ As she herself admits to the Commandant later, recalling her stay amongst the aborigines: “I was one of them.”

White’s construction of the indigene avoids the customary colonialist dehumanising of the indigenous people evident in so many of the retellings of the Fraser story. Ellen observes the community as a group of individuals “the noble forms’ of the men, presented as ‘handsome’ even with a bone stuck through the cartilage of the nose:” They were none the less superb, as their women did not fail to recognize.”She vividly recalls the young girl in life: “her breasts so youthful and shapely as she rose laughing and spangled from beneath the quilt of lily pads”. Later she recognises the grandmother of the girl, seated amongst the crowd at the corroboree. Schaeffer’s discussion misses the subtleties of the novel’s construction of the aboriginal world. To her the aborigines appear ‘anonymous, a grovelling crowd of savages ... “(Schaefer, 1990:168).

Jack Chance the convict is represented as already a fully-fledged indigene when he erupts onto the stage of the novel’s action:

One giant of a fellow ... would twirl and leap in the air slapping his heels and entertain those within earshot of his patter. She could tell he was respected and envied. (279)

Besides his mastery of bush skills Jack has all the appearance of an Aborigine, even to the 'stench' noted in their first appearance. When he crawls into the shelter, he brings with him "the now familiar stench, a warmth which combined with her own as a comfort against the hostile night." (265) Ironically, Ellen's escape from the Aborigines does not end her induction into their world — rather it appears completed through her encounter with Jack. Ellen herself becomes aware of the resemblances between them: 'She sighed and snorted and thought how foolish she must look naked and filthy beside the naked filthy man' (266). They are pictured as a pair of Aborigines as "they lay thus in passive communion and snoozed and throbbed and groaned ... under a sifting of trees and ants crawling all over their all but unfeeling flesh. (331). Their wandering through the bush is presented as an idyll suggestive of an indigenous Adam and Eve in an Australian Eden. He picks up his spear and leaves their 'camp' in search of food, while she makes a fire as she remembered seeing the black women do, using sticks and fibre, When he re-appeared 'he had speared one of the giant birds, and while preparing the feast 'they did not speak but communicated by grunts and sniffs. (282). When she encounters a lily-pond, she plunges in determined to make a contribution by bringing him a meal of lily roots.

The White text also writes back to Orientalist constructs of the Aboriginal world as degenerate and innately inferior to the European. This represents a major re-invention of the historic representations of the Fraser story and interrogates the nineteenth century accounts which represent the indigene as innately degenerate, savage, and in need of the saving influence of the white culture. In contrast, the indigenous world emerges here as one with its own established rituals and way of life, an autonomous order, a community which brushes off the white invasion as irrelevant to its own way of life. The initial clash with the whites is quickly over and the women of the tribe are left to deal with the female captive while the group returns to its customary activities. Ellen observes the

blacks were proceeding with their various duties, beneath a splendid sky, beside a lake the colour of raw cobalt shot with bronze. While dusk crept amongst them an elder rose and led the tribe in a kind of lament... the natives were at their prayers, for their wails sounded formal rather than spontaneously emotional (248).

Early the next morning, the tribe awakens, and repeat their incantations of the evening before. Ellen observes that "the men were gathering up their spears, clubs, nets and ropes, the solemnity of the superior sex preparing for an expedition. The men did look superior. (250). Later, she observes that "The whole of life by now revolved round the search for food" (253).

The black world has its own social protocols, and there are numerous occasions when Ellen is reminded of some analogous ritual in the European world. For example, she recalls the labours of her mother-in-law and others who helped her make the transition from farm girl to lady when the women who dress her for her dual role as both slave and goddess in this society, "sighing with satisfaction" at the outcome. In the preparations for the corroboree, Ellen is seated amongst the group of women, with as much decorum as she would have shown in attending any ceremony in her drawing-room in Cheltenham: "To have started screaming in a drawing-room would not have

been worse than to return by the way she had come, between the rows of correctly seated black women (282).

Beyond the synergies, there are several aspects of this society which offer not only a contrast to, but even a critique of, the white world. There is an underpinning of violence which characterizes the white world from the opening scenes of the novel which has to do with the endemic violence of colonialism as reflected in the reports of the atrocities committed in the remoter areas of the settlement, at the start of the narrative. This is reinforced by the extreme cruelty the Europeans' accord their own kind as seen in the treatment of the convicts. A remarkable aspect of the indigenous world is the mobility allowed the white initiate, who moves from captive slave to nurse and finally wife-to-be to the medicine-man of the clan. The 'primitive' indigene's capacity to hold the slave and goddess-figure in the same gaze shows a capacity to avoid the simpler binary oppositions so characteristic of European attitudes in the Colonial encounter.

What of the practice of cannibalism - possibly the most fear-inspiring of all the practices associated with the 'heathen' tribes encountered by the European? Russell quotes local authorities to bear out her view that while the Aborigines practised a degree of ritual cannibalism, they did not customarily consume human flesh for their physical survival (Russell, 1998:56). A careful distinction is drawn between the practice of cannibalism by the blacks and that observed by the whites in this novel. The blacks are shown to practise a form of ritual cannibalism (such as has been referred to in the studies of anthropologists); it is the whites who are shown to indulge in a form that is more nearly the 'abomination' of human behaviour. Pilcher, at the end confesses that the survivors in his group have resorted to this desperate strategy in order to survive in the wilderness. In this representation the reader is presented with still another - and possibly the most striking - of the comparisons that recur between the so-called 'savage' world and the world of the European that calls in question the assumed superiority of the European.

The colonialist belief in the hegemony of the white culture is dramatically undermined. From the first sighting of the blacks, the shipwrecked whites fear for their lives:

The natives were armed besides with spears and other warlike implements ... their dark skins had the glint of ominous metal ... The two parties remained watching each other for an unconscionable time before the blacks silently melted away into the shadows. ... (236) .

Shortly after, with barely a blow exchanged, the whites are captured.: The party of ineffectual whites was soon surrounded by the troop of blacks all sinew stench and exultant in their mastery ... The blacks had begun stripping their captives garment by garment ... driving their white herd by thwacks and prodding into the hinterland. (241).

Shortly after, the English lady is reduced to being the slave of the black women. She is first assigned the task of caring for the sick child and is gradually allotted other tasks. She is even driven with a fire-stick held to her buttocks to climb trees to search for possum; the pangs of hunger drive her to fight off the native dogs for scraps of food.

Her return to the "civilised" world is marked with all the trauma of a re-birthing but she

carries within her psyche a new knowledge which is not to be forgotten. Ellen, despite her many frailties, emerges as the archetypal hero of Joseph Campbell's classic work bringing back from her sojourn in the strange world of the indigene lessons which have not only changed her spiritually and mentally but have positive implications for the wider world. Jim Davidson has articulated the potential of the Fraser story as a myth of regeneration for the Australian context:

Here the Fraser myth as it is developing is important for three reasons. First, it involves acceptance of the land (together with a greater ease in it). As a corollary of that it encourages, second, an acceptance by whites of Aboriginal people (and hopefully the reverse). These in turn entail not repatriation for us, but reparation for them. In short Australia is in need of a reconciliation myth as much as South Africa (more now) and Eliza Fraser seems best placed to provide it. (Davidson 1990: 449-61)

Patrick White's text has explored the heights and the depths of its rich potential.

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Cynthia vanden Driesen teaches and researches in the field of Australian writing and other new literatures in English( Indian, African and Caribbean) at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia. Her publications, besides articles in a range of journals and presentations at international conferences, include eight books ( four co-edited) ; the last, *Writing the Nation, Patrick White and the Indigene* (2009) has just been released by Rodopi Press.NY. Amsterdam.