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Responses to imperialism of four women writers at the Cape Eastern frontier in the nineteenth century

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a journey to South Africa has a moderating effect on Hicks's New Woman convictions. Her response to the imperial context is to make certain inevitable compromises with her ideals.

4.2 The New Woman movement

The precise origin and dimensions of the New Woman movement are not easily determined. David Rubinstein has shown in his study of late nineteenth-century feminism that it was fairly common by early 1894 for journalists to write in terms of a 'new' womanhood. This term emerged from an interchange between two prominent women novelists in the pages of the North American Review.[2]

The term 'New Woman' gave a name to a nascent feminism which had begun to emerge as early as 1860. Before the term was coined, writers had referred to the growing aspirations and discontent of modern women as the 'Woman Question'.

It is doubtful whether 'movement' is the most appropriate term to describe a phenomenon that was both leaderless and unorganised. Its name was conferred upon it by its enemies, and the naming process failed to result in an increased cohesion between those who professed to support it. Nevertheless, certain aspirations and convictions can be identified as characterising the New Women: these women allied themselves with such causes as higher education for women, freedom from chaperonage, greater employment opportunities and increased property rights for women. Many New Women were also involved in the campaign for Women's Suffrage.

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of a whole cluster of myths, half-myths, and truths - of sunlight, of liberty, of innocence, of sexual freedom, of the fantastic and the healing, of the unknown and the mysterious - all those concepts that stood in direct confrontation to domesticity (Hamalian, x).

He suggests that this liberating influence is reflected in the travel narratives they produced: 'Thus, the once-lowly travel book, rather unexpectedly, became an important instrument for the emancipation of women' (Hamalian, xii).

2 The novelist 'Ouida', responding to an article by Sarah Grand, wrote that the New Woman 'meet[s] us at every page of literature written in the English tongue' (Ardis, 11).

More important than the struggle for social equality, however, was the attempt by New Woman writers to disassociate the concept of womanhood from conventional notions of femininity. In particular, they questioned the accepted notion that marriage and motherhood were the ideal destinies of all women. By 1896, Margaret Oliphant, the popular and conservative novelist, was able publicly to accuse the New Woman writers of constituting an 'Anti-Marriage League' (Cunningham, 45).

The New Woman movement had a far-reaching if brief influence. For a short while in the 1890s, it seemed set to precipitate a minor social revolution. But the controversy gradually died down and the term was seldom invoked after the turn of the century. In the press and in public debate, the New Woman was almost entirely obscured by the Suffragette.

4.3 Hicks's class affiliations

It is difficult to determine into which class of colonial society Beatrice Hicks fitted. The fact that she was educated at the North London Collegiate School suggests that her family was of upper-middle class standing in England. However, the compulsion she was under to earn her own living argues that her circumstances were not affluent.

Both in England and the Eastern Cape, the class affiliations of governesses were somewhat ambivalent. Although their origins were generally genteel and their level of education sophisticated, they were often little more than well-paid servants in the homes of their employers.

While it is evident that Hicks does not rank herself with the servants, white or black, in the colonial households in which she is employed, she does not make her class allegiances clear. The only social affiliation she claims for herself is based in gender - her alliance to the New Woman movement.

4.4 The Cape As I Found It

4.4.1

Beatrice Hicks's main reason for writing The Cape As I Found It was to exhort other unmarried, educated Englishwomen in straitened circumstances to emigrate to the colonies. The book was published in 1900, at the height of the second South African War, when South Africa was not considered a desirable place to which to emigrate. However, Hicks's sojourn in the Eastern Cape occurred during a time of peace (1894-1897). She admits that she was in South Africa at the time of the Jameson Raid, but argues that this event took place so far north that she scarcely noticed it.

Hicks's choice of title alerts the reader to the importance of personal perspective in the text. She makes no attempt to present a complete or detailed description of conditions prevailing in the Cape during the 1890s. Rather, she records her own impressions of the colonial situation and intersperses these with comments and value judgments. The result is an idiosyncratic work which does not pretend to scholarly accuracy.

The text exemplifies the didactic function of the storyteller. In the course of her narration, Hicks endows herself with two forms of authority: the first is derived from her status as a newly immigrant colonial among the settlers of the Eastern Cape. This confers on her a metropolitan sophistication which enables her to enlighten the 'simple' settlers about worldly matters; the second is the traditional authority of the returning storyteller to instruct the home-bound community in the lessons she has learned on her travels.

At the outset of the text, Hicks identifies herself with the so-called 'surplus women' of London in the 1890s. She declares that

these women are her principal audience, and addresses her work to them:

> [T]here are many men who will rush out [to South Africa] 'when affairs are settled' for better - or maybe for worse - and there will be going a crowd of women also, I hope, both for their own sake and that of the surplus females in England - and it is for them chiefly that I am recalling these reminiscences of South Africa, hoping that these may be of some use and entertainment to them, in showing what the country was like to me, and how I got on there (CFI 1).

The phrase 'surplus females' refers to a significant imbalance in the population ratio of women to men in Britain in the 1890s. In England and Wales alone, as Rubinstein has shown, women outnumbered men by more than a million during this decade (Rubinstein, 12). Consequently, there were over a million women in Britain who were statistically prevented from marrying. These women had to be accommodated in the extremely limited workplace. Their only other alternatives were to accept the charity of relatives or, as Hicks advocates, to emigrate.

The proponents of women's emancipation in the late nineteenth century regarded emigration as no solution to the 'surplus women' problem. They perceived it as an opportunistic attempt by the authorities to avoid addressing the real problems which confronted women, such as restricted access to jobs and disproportionately low salaries. In his 1977 article about women's emigration in the nineteenth century, Hammerton argues that this problem was debated as early as 1862:

> The interlocking controversies over the 'redundancy' of women and the panacea of emigration raised sensitive issues for feminists. Many of them opposed female emigration because it was a popular anti-feminist solution. It appeared all too readily as a device to confine women to their 'proper sphere' of the household and as an unjust

> safety valve to siphon off pressure for progressive reform (Hammerton, 57).

According to the feminism of the day, women like Hicks who elected to emigrate rather than remain in England and campaign for social reform, were betraying the principles of the New Woman movement. Driver's research indicates that this feminist disapproval went against popular opinion: 'The dominant belief was that British women should join the men in the colonies - as long as, in all other respects, the women remained in their proper place' (Driver, 6). This controversy surrounding the emigration issue was so widespread that Hicks was undoubtedly aware of it. The fact that she nevertheless recommends emigration to other 'surplus women' is an indication of her refusal to place feminist principles above pragmatic considerations. It is significant that Hicks is writing after her three-year stay in the colonial environment. She has experienced at first hand the advantages of colonial life over metropolitan life and has come to realise that practical considerations must be afforded greater weight than ideals. She is willing to sacrifice Utopian notions for the increased degree of material comfort she and other women like her can gain by emigrating.

4.4.1

Hicks begins her story with a disclaimer for the benefit of those readers who are expecting an adventure story in the 'African Romance' genre. Hicks emphasises the tameness of the Eastern Cape region and denies, in her characteristically ironic fashion, having had any adventures at all:

> And as for adventures, I'm afraid I cannot boast of having had any all the time I was away, although I was on the look-out for them. I had no exciting experiences. I always got food to eat in the daytime and a bed to sleep on

> at night, and these without any difficulty, so I was not even thrilled by the ordinary emotions of hunger and sleeplessness (CFI 3).

This common-sense approach is offered as a corrective to the conventional masculinist perspective which generated the 'African Romance'.[3] Hicks is deliberately waiving the storyteller's prerogative to tell a tall tale.

This determination to emphasise the everyday aspect of colonial life over the adventurous is not, as Susan Blake suggests, an inevitable characteristic of women's travel writing (Blake, 19). The examples of Harriet Ward and Anna Howarth, both of whom employ exaggeration and sensationalism in their descriptions of colonial life, serve to refute Blake's theory. In Hicks's case, her prosaic narrative is largely a consequence of the increased stability of the Eastern Frontier in the 1890s and the overwhelming success of imperial interests in this region.

Hicks also declines to assume the role of an 'agent of empire' in the Cape Colony. Disengaging herself from the imperial endeavour, she travels for purely personal reasons. Her situation is very different to that of Harriet Ward and Helen Prichard, both of whom travelled in an official or representative capacity as the wives of men in the employ of the British government. Hicks's detached indifference to the imperial endeavour frees her to focus on the conditions of women at the Cape.

4.4.2

As an educator herself, one of Hicks's primary concerns is with the state of women's education in the Colony. Her first post in

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3 Hicks's perspective may be compared with that of Mary Hall in her 1907 travelogue A Woman's Trek from Cape to Cairo. Hall begins her narrative in the following way: 'I hope that a book, written from a woman's point of view, minus big game romances, and the usual exaggeration incidental to all things African, may be acceptable' (quoted in Blake, 19).

the Eastern Cape was as a teacher at the Diocesan School for Girls in Grahamstown. She professes herself shocked by the frivolous attitude to women's education she encounters there:

> I was astonished at many little things at first, but I suppose I was a bit prim. As I said before, I had been educated at an excellent school, where the one idea was to prepare for an exam. When that had been successfully mastered, there was another one and stiffer looming in the distance. It was a case of 'Excelsior', and the steeps we climbed were those of knowledge. Frivolity and boys did not enter into our calculations. Boys we only looked upon as inferior and conceited beings, whom it was our duty to beat in exams, and who afterwards in time grew into undergraduates, who were more inferior and more conceited beings still, who denied us our rights and whom it was necessary to beat again in order to vindicate the honour of our sex. Having been brought up in these wholesome and vainglorious ideas, it was somewhat of a shock to me to find myself landed in a school where scarcely any of the scholars seemed to come with any idea of learning (Hicks, 47).

The 'excellent school' which Hicks attended was the North London Collegiate School, founded in 1850.[4] Hicks appears to be aligning herself with the movement which sought to obtain permission for women to enrol for degrees at Oxford and Cambridge.[5] She is referring to this ambition when she writes of the male undergraduates who 'denied us our rights' and 'whom it was necessary to beat again in order to vindicate the honour of our sex'.

Hicks is scornful of the attitude she encounters in the Eastern

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4 Rubinstein suggests that this institution was known in the nineteenth century to be a breeding ground for a generation of highly educated New Women (Rubinstein, 185).

5 It was hoped that the authorities would relent if women candidates proved themselves in examinations. This hope was not realised until 1920 in the case of Oxford, and until 1948 in the case of Cambridge (Rubinstein, 18).

Cape, which holds 'frivolity and boys' to be more important to a woman than the acquirement of an education. There is, however, a touch of irony in her description of the ideas she was brought up with as 'wholesome and vainglorious'. There is also a measure of self-mockery in her characterisation of herself as 'a bit prim'. At this stage, there is already an indication that her feminist ideals may be inappropriate to the colonial milieu.

This indication is strengthened when Hicks resigns from the Diocesan School for Girls to take up a post as a governess to a farming family in the region of Queenstown. Here, she is confronted with the opinion that scholarship is not an appropriate acquirement for young women. Of the children she is assigned to teach, 'the girls were much the quicker at their lessons' (CFI 106). This fact occasions their mother some concern:

> She used to say to me:
>
> 'Dear me! I shouldn't mind if it was the girls who couldn't learn. The boys, you see, have to get on in the world. It doesn't matter for the girls if they have brains or not.' (CFI 106).

This opinion is a reflection of the particular social circumstances in the Colony. There was no industry at the Cape to support the so-called Typewriter Girl or other women office-workers such as had emerged in England. Moreover, the male population substantially outnumbered the female at the Cape. There were virtually no white women for whom marriage was not a viable option. This simple fact is at the basis of Hicks's employer's conviction that 'it doesn't matter for the girls if they have brains or not'. Her daughters' futures are secure - they will marry as a matter of course. Clearly, she does not perceive intellectual development to be necessary for a woman to make a successful career as a wife and mother.

Hicks responds to her employer's assertion in a way that

demonstrates her pragmatic readiness to adjust idealism to reality:

> In theory I could not quite agree with her; it did seem hard that the poor girls should not be allowed to keep what few brains they possessed! But after considering the position of women at the Cape, and that their whole duties seemed to consist of marrying, housekeeping, and cooking, I could not help thinking that she had common-sense on her side (CFI 106).

Hicks retains her 'theoretical' conviction that her employer is wrong, but is prepared to consider dispassionately the situation of women in the imperialist context and to conclude that 'she had common-sense on her side'. Hicks unconsciously echoes her employer's opinion that education is superfluous to women who operate solely within the domestic sphere - 'marrying, housekeeping, and cooking'. This is contrary to the New Woman conviction that education for women was desirable for its own sake.

At the conclusion of this conversation with her employer, Hicks indicates that she will not permit her ideals to be entirely overborne by 'common-sense': 'But, well, there it was: the girls had the brains, and the boys hadn't and it wasn't any use bothering about it' (CFI 106). This is an ironical reminder of the fact that nature may allot talents irrespective of gender stereotyping and role-distribution.

4.4.3

Although the issues of education and employment for women were central to the New Woman movement, they were not responsible for the violent controversy surrounding that movement. As Gail Cunningham argues, 'the crucial factor was, inevitably, sex' (Cunningham, 2). A group of popular writers dubbed the 'New

Woman novelists' challenged the prudery of the day by writing explicitly and defiantly about female sexuality. The Victorian notion, that women were innately passionless was openly challenged, along with the societal injunction which prohibited women from engaging in sexual relations before marriage. These polemical texts seemed set to forge a new code of morality and sexual ethics.

Hicks does not deal directly with the issue of female sexuality, but aligns herself with novels which do. The first of these is George Moore's Esther Waters, published in 1894 - the year Hicks came out to South Africa. Moore's novel is a reworked version of the conventional Fallen Woman story, in which the heroine emerges triumphant from her experiences and is never obliged to 'pay the price' for her promiscuity. It is a courageous venture into the portrayal of alternative lifestyles - particularly alternatives to marriage. Esther Waters was one of the most controversial of the New Woman novels, dealing as it did with a highly sensitive subject.

Hicks mentions Esther Waters in the context of her sea-voyage to South Africa. Recently published, it 'was making some stir at that time, and was supposed to be rather improper' (CFI 17). It is a topic of discussion between the leader of the Woman's Emigration Society (Sister Henrietta) and the arch-imperialist, Colonel Rhodes, who agree to keep it out of the way of the young women on board the ship:

> At the end she said: 'You will be careful, please, not to let that book lie about. I should not like any of the girls in my charge to read it. It would not be proper for them to do so.' 'Oh yes, I understand - certainly,' said Colonel Rhodes (CFI 17).

Sister Henrietta's solicitude is shown to be superfluous when Hicks reveals, 'I'm afraid most of us had read "Esther Waters"' (CFI 17). This serves to remind the reader that conventional

authority figures are losing a measure of control over the activities of young women of the 1890s. This impression is reinforced by the satirical attitude Hicks adopts towards Sister Henrietta's excessive concern for the moral well-being of the young women in her charge:

> Sister Henrietta - I shall always think of her as being very kind and good to us all, for I am sure we must have been a trial to her at times, especially as she still had many good old-fashioned ideas about girls and what they should do and what they should not do. She looked after us physically, mentally, and morally, and I am sure we ought to have been very grateful to her. She was very particular about our morals especially (CFI 17).

Hicks directs her irony against a traditional enemy of the New Woman movement - the institution of the chaperon. This institution was grounded in the Victorian belief that unmarried women should be shielded from any knowledge of sexual matters. Hicks assumes the pose of an amused and tolerant observer of the Sister's concern for 'our morals'. Her remark that she and the other young women 'ought to have been very grateful to her' suggests that they were not.

The opponents of the New Woman movement were especially perturbed by the effect that New Woman literature might have on unmarried women. As Cunningham notes, 'it was generally feared that what women read about, they might do, and thus the new type of novel appeared to threaten the whole domestic structure' (Cunningham, 18). The impression was that the New Woman was aligning herself with all the most radical sentiments contained in the fiction she read. This indicates that Hicks's comment ('I'm afraid most of us had read "Esther Waters" ') is not as innocuous as it seems. Moore's novel represents an attack on orthodox morality - an attack with which Hicks is tacitly associating herself.

The second novel with which Hicks aligns herself is Olive

Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm - a prototype of the New Woman novel. She expresses her disappointment at encountering no 'Lyndalls' or 'Waldos' in the Eastern Cape, 'nor anyone else that was "advanced" or had ideas' (CFI 50). This attitude exposes her metropolitan snobbery in consistently portraying the colonists as backward and lacking in sophistication.

She is consequently not surprised to discover that Olive Schreiner, a revered and respected figure in New Woman circles in London, is not much admired by the women of South Africa:

> I soon discovered that a prophet is not without honour save in his own country [...] About that time, too, she wrote another tale about Mashonaland, in which Rhodes, Jesus, and a policeman were somehow mixed up, and the people did not like it - even the ones that had not read it; but they talked about it and her, and I heard many wonderful anecdotes and much gossip, and, of course, did not believe half of it. But, still, Olive Schreiner is the only woman in South Africa, so they ought to be proud of her, and be thankful for whatever mercy has been bestowed on them (CFI 50).

Hicks employs Schreiner as a standard against which to measure other colonial women. Inevitably, she finds them wanting. The notion that Olive Schreiner is 'the only woman in South Africa' is rather curious. The reader is forced to conclude that Hicks is attaching a particular significance to the word 'woman'. She uses it to signify her ideal of womanhood, which is apparently synonymous with the New Woman; she admires Schreiner because Schreiner is 'advanced' and 'has ideas'. She does not admire the 'backward' colonials who disapprove of her work without having read it. Hicks's self-assumed cultural superiority is revealed by her statement that the Cape women should be proud of Schreiner and 'thankful for whatever mercy has been bestowed on them'.

4.4.4

Among the 'advances' made by the New Woman movement was an increasing scepticism about the traditionally feminine preoccupations with romantic love, marriage and motherhood. In abandoning the well-worn formula of the marriage-plot, New Woman novelists, in the words of Ann Ardis, 'attack[ed] the totalizing ideology of romance' (Ardis, 61). This ideology generated an image of romantic love as an exalted, intense, private emotion which provided a validation for human existence, and which culminated naturally in a happy marriage. Maternity was the inevitable and desired consequence of this union for women. The New Woman writers responded to this tradition with varying degrees of criticism and scorn. Cunningham argues that their criticism amounted to an attack on the domestic order:

> Some [new] women jeered openly at the ideal of the maternal instinct, and scorned the notion that the care of children was the highest duty to which they should aspire. The family, long regarded as a microcosm of the state, if not of the divine order, was exposed as a nest of seething frustration, discontent and deception (Cunningham, 2-3).

In keeping with her New Woman ideals, Hicks criticises the notions of romantic love, marriage and maternity in her characteristically satirical manner. At the time of writing The Cape As I Found It she was as yet unmarried, and it is apparent from the tone of her discourse that she does not consider marriage to be a likely future for herself. It is not clear whether this is the result of a conscious choice or of a fatalistic pragmatism based on the belief that, 'I have not even the redeeming - I mean the all-important - quality of being good-looking' (CFI, 46). Whatever the case, her attitude towards the romantic idealism she encounters in the Cape is one of mockery:

> But talking of the moon makes one think of love; the one is supposed to be symbolical of the other, is it not? [...]

> The captain was a very sentimental man, and often shook his head and sighed when he told us these tales. He believed in True Love with capitals - but that is so easy for a sailor, who only sees his wife occasionally [...] But still, he seemed to find life very comfortable all the same, in spite of romance (CFI, 11).

Hicks portrays romantic love as a fanciful delusion which is soon shattered by the mechanisms of domesticity. The captain (who is a 'sentimental' man, Hicks reminds us disparagingly) has only retained his delusions intact because he seldom sees his wife. The last sentence of the passage implies that romantic emotions are usually uncomfortable to live with.

Hicks is also inclined to mock the veneration with which imperialist society regards motherhood. The targets of her satire are the Eastern Cape girls who 'grow up and develop much sooner than English ones' (CFI 51). She deplores the young age at which colonial girls marry, but admits that they make good wives:

> However silly, frivolous, and flirting girls may be before they marry, directly after they settle down and develop into good cooks and good mothers. I don't know, though, if it is right to put it in that order, or whether good mothers oughtn't to come first; but we all like good cooks, and good mothers - well, they are sometimes apt to be a bore, as they wander off into rhapsodies over their offspring in the mistaken idea that everyone is as interested in their children as they are themselves. No, I like good cooks best (CFI 51).

In preferring 'good cooks' to 'good mothers' Hicks is clearly being, primarily, facetious; but she is also denuding the role of motherhood of its aura of sanctity and reducing it, with her devastating bathos, to no more than a tiresome mannerism. She continues: 'Unfortunately, I am not a mother, so perhaps I cannot

understand a mother's feelings, but I do understand something good to eat' (CFI 51). The implication is that she has no ambition to become a mother if she would also subsequently be 'apt to be a bore'.

4.4.5

Despite these and other indications that Hicks's personal philosophy was largely in accord with that of the New Woman movement, the full extent of her commitment to that movement is uncertain. She subjects the enthusiasms of the New Woman reformer to the same mocking irony that she directs at the devoted wife and mother:

> When I first landed, and was still possessed of some of my English energy, I inquired after the progress of 'women's rights' at the Cape.
>
> 'There are none out here,' they said.
>
> 'What!' I said. 'I thought the Cape was like New Zealand and America. Don't women vote or try to? Don't they take an interest in politics? Don't they run crazes or head movements? Aren't there any societies for women's suffrage? For I should like to join one, for unity is strength, and I always agree with women banding together' (CFI 49).

At first glance, Hicks's indignation at the 'retarded' state of the women's rights movement at the Cape appears to be genuine; but closer examination reveals a strain of irony running through the passage. The spectacle she evokes of women running 'crazes' and heading 'movements' suggests a degree of fanaticism which is more laughable than admirable. Similarly, her employment of the slogan 'unity is strength' is so pat as to draw attention to its cliched nature. Her reference to 'English energy' emphasises the metropolitan origins of the New Woman movement. It suggests that the imperial experience quickly saps a New Woman of her reformist

zeal. Hicks readily admits to having become a victim of this process herself.

Hicks may, as she claims, 'always agree with women banding together', but the effect of her writing is occasionally divisive. She readily adjusts to the fact that feminist enthusiasms are out of place in the imperial context, and is quick to turn her satire against them. As she inquires further into the situation of women at the Cape, she is informed that colonial women do not pursue careers or engage in politics because 'there are always enough men' (CFI, 49). Marriage is almost always a viable option for women, and the one most often chosen. Hicks accepts the validity of this explanation without question. In so doing, she places herself once again at odds with the New Woman movement. The suggestion that the emancipation struggle was simply a consequence of statistics and one that would not have arisen had the gender ratio been in balance, was profoundly subversive to the feminist cause. As Cunningham states: 'a woman was only genuinely New if her conflict with social convention was on a matter of principle' (Cunningham, 10). Hicks's response to imperialism is to adapt or abandon many of her principles.

In her efforts to draw attention to the contrast between colonial and metropolitan life, Hicks is frequently guilty of exaggeration. She depicts the Cape as a site of social backwardness and overstates the advances made by feminism in England. This is evident in a discussion she has with a group of colonists about the New Woman movement:

> 'No,' they said. 'We have no new women here. They don't think of that sort of thing.'
>
> 'Well, what do they think about then? What do they do?'
>
> 'They stay at home and look after the house.'
>
> 'Why that's what our women did fifty years ago. We've outgrown that' (CFI 49).

Hicks's suggestion that Englishwomen have been emancipated from domestic duties for fifty years is one of several attempts on her part to create the impression that the New Woman movement has been overwhelmingly triumphant in England. Another such attempt is evident when she comments on the domestic arrangements of an Eastern Cape family she encounters near Queenstown:

> It was a household managed in the real old-fashioned manner, where the master was everything and the wife was nowhere. but the funny part was, he was little and his wife was large; but it was truly delightful, in these days of new women, to find at least one man who still upheld the authority of his sex. (CFI 118; emphasis added).

Hicks attempts to create the impression that the new feminism has wrought such far-reaching changes in society that it is both refreshing and novel to encounter a male-dominated household in an age which has been conquered by the New Woman. In the light of the feminist convictions she expresses elsewhere in the text, her expression of delight at confronting this household is clearly intended to be ironic.

This passage may be compared with a later one in which Hicks employs the image of the bicycle to symbolise the New Woman's successful conquest of England:

> This reminds me how, at the time when every woman in England was riding a bicycle, they [the inhabitants of Queenstown] were still with us discussing the played-out question, 'Should a woman ride a bicycle at all?' Which things show that if one goes three weeks' journey from England, and then for a day or so up-country, one cannot expect to be quite up-to-date (CFI, 126).

The spectacle of 'every woman in England' riding to and fro on bicycles is clearly a caricature. Moreover, it was by no means a 'played-out' question as to whether women should ride bicycles

at all. The bicycle remained a highly controversial symbol of women's liberation throughout the last decade of the nineteenth century. It represented an unprecedented degree of freedom and mobility for women and was associated with certain reforms in women's clothing, such as the development of the 'Rational Dress'.

It is not clear what Hicks is hoping to achieve by her overstatement of the success of the New Woman movement. On one level, she is simply conveying her sense of the contrast between the 'advances' of England and the 'backwardness' of the Eastern Cape. To achieve this, she presents the New Woman as the norm of womanhood in England, and downplays the controversy that raged around the Woman Question. This controversy was so heated that few writers specifically identified themselves or their characters with the New Woman because, as Cunningham suggests, 'the term was too loaded with associations of eccentricity and fanaticism' (Cunningham, 17).

It is unlikely that Hicks was as unconscious of the potentially explosive and damaging consequences of her writing as she seems. It is possible that she was attempting to defuse the issue by presenting it in non-polemical terms. Alternatively, she may have been the unwitting victim of a popular and sensationalist journalistic myth which held that the New Woman movement had swept across England like a plague, infecting every aspect of society. Journalists referred to the New Women as a 'Blushless Brigade' (Cunningham, 1), 'women warriors' (Showalter 1991, 39), a 'monstrous regiment', and an 'innumerable host' which 'threatens before long to spread throughout the length and breadth of London' (Ardis, 22). While Hicks would not have perceived the New Woman movement in quite such negative and menacing terms, it is possible that she was misled by journalistic rhetoric into believing it to be more prevalent than it ever was.

4.4.6

Olive Schreiner was not the only New Woman role-model to emerge from the Eastern Cape. Hicks displays considerable enthusiasm in recounting the story of Dr James Barry who spent some years on the Eastern Frontier in the 1820s. Dr Barry took a medical degree at Edinburgh University and thereafter enjoyed a long and illustrious career in the British army, serving in Malta, St Helena, the West Indies, the Cape Colony and finally as Inspector of Hospitals in Britain. Dr Barry died at the age of eighty five. The corpse was stripped and discovered to be that of a woman[6].

By the 1890s, Dr Barry's story had become one of the treasured myths of the Eastern Cape. Hicks recounts it with approbation, dwelling particularly on the lovesick ladies at the Cape who broke their hearts over the little doctor: 'At last he died, and then they found out it was only a shrivelled little old woman, after all. That was a good joke, and a good tale about a woman' (CFT, 183).

Not only was it 'a good tale about a woman', it was also one that was frequently told in New Woman fiction. The woman who overcomes the societal restrictions attached to her gender by passing herself off as a man and competing successfully in a masculine field of endeavour, was a popular icon in the New Woman novel.[7] Hicks, with her self-proclaimed New Woman affiliations, would greatly have admired Dr Barry's achievements, which came to acquire considerable significance for feminists. As the historian, Noel Mostert, comments: 'Of all the various examples of feminist resistance to and escape from the rigours of nineteenth-century convention, Dr James Barry's independent pathway must always stand as one of the most remarkable'

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6 Some historians have speculated that Dr Barry was a hermaphrodite. See Margaret Bevan's Dr James Barry (1795?-1865) Inspector-General of Military Hospitals: A Bibliography (1966) for a guide to the literature surrounding the Dr Barry controversy.

7 Sarah Grand's The Heavenly Twins (1893) and Florence Dixie's Gloriana: Or, The Revolution of 1900 (1890) are examples of novels which employ this formula (Ardis, 119-122).

(Mostert, 448).

Hicks may have felt a certain affinity with the late doctor on the basis that, by travelling alone, she was similarly engaged in stepping out of the feminine sphere. She acknowledges, half-ruefully, that her competence as a traveller is 'mannish':

> I don't know if it was considered very correct for a girl to travel alone at all, for several people asked me if I minded going about by myself; but, as a matter of fact, I often knew of someone else going for the holidays, and we would travel together.
>
> 'I always like to come with you,' said a girl to me once. 'You always seem to know what to do, and never get nervous. I feel just as if I were travelling with a man.' And she meant it as a compliment! (CFI 22).

Hicks makes no attempt to contradict or refute her companion's conviction that such characteristics as competence and efficiency are 'male' attributes, whereas nervousness and helplessness are 'female' attributes. On the contrary, it seems that she has herself internalised this and other forms of Victorian gender stereotyping.

Hicks's adherence to the tenets of the New Woman movement does not prevent her from falling a victim to the doctrine of inherent female weakness. She was not the only feminist of her day to be afflicted by this ambivalence. Rubinstein argues that many of the 'most talented and determined' representatives of the New Woman movement were similarly plagued by self-doubt and a lack of confidence in women as a sex (Rubinstein, 7). He speculates that the dominant discourse of male superiority constituted such 'a crushing weight of age-old prejudice' (Rubinstein, 1) that very few women could free themselves completely from it.

Hicks reveals the limitations of her feminist beliefs in the obvious disillusionment she displays towards women as a sex. She

is particularly scathing about the 'tendency' of colonial women to gossip:

> It sounds rather unfair for me to have sat and listened all the time, and never to have said anything. I thought so myself once, until I remembered how many women there are in the world who like to talk, and how very few there are who care to listen. That quite altered the case. In time I grew to look upon myself quite as a philanthropist (CFI 132).

Hicks explicitly exempts herself from this 'feminine foible'. The picture she creates of herself listening in indulgent silence while a group of colonial women chatter around her, is clearly intended to convey her superiority in this respect to the rest of her sex. It also reinforces the impression that her metropolitan upbringing has endowed her with a sophistication lacking in her colonial counterparts.

Elsewhere, Hicks's deprecation of women is extended to include herself. On one occasion, she is caught in a flock of locusts in the veld and describes her reaction as follows: 'I never knew they were such big, fat, horrid creatures before, so, being a woman and wise, I covered up my head and screamed' (CFI 170). Here she reenacts, with comic effect, the classic stereotype of the irrational feminine horror of insects.

4.5

Hicks's conflicting attitudes to women and the New Woman movement emerge from a confusion of discourses. She is unable to discard entirely an inherited cultural tradition that disparaged women, despite her commitment to the new feminism. For this reason, her ideas tend to be contradictory and difficult to categorise. On one hand, it is clear that she saw herself as a New Woman and intended her writing to uphold the New Woman cause. On the

other, her adherence to feminist ideals is tempered by a lack of faith in the abilities of women in general. This lack of faith is extended at times to include herself.

Contact with the imperialist situation has the effect of undermining Hicks's commitment to the New Woman movement still further. She admits that the colonial environment sapped her of her 'English energy' (CFI 49), and diluted her reformist zeal. She is acutely, even exaggeratedly, aware of the societal differences between the Eastern Cape and England. This awareness leads her to perceive her metropolitan ideals as inappropriate to the colonial setting. Her response to the imperial encounter is to adapt these ideals to suit the realities of life at the Cape.

5 LANDSCAPE

5.1 Overview

For the purposes of this chapter, the word 'landscape' is applied broadly to refer to all aspects of the physical environment in which the colonial writers of the Eastern Cape found themselves. Following the example of Daniels and Cosgrove in their 1988 study of landscape iconographies, landscape is taken to signify a way of 'representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings' (Daniels & Cosgrove, 1988).

Descriptions of the 'surroundings' of the Eastern Cape constitute a large and important part of the writings of Helen Prichard, Harriet Ward and Beatrice Hicks. While, as Kathryn Wagner argues in an unpublished PhD thesis proposal, so-called 'background description' in a piece of writing is never neutral or innocent - that is, never mere objective and detached representation (Wagner, 2) - it contributes significantly to the generation of meaning in the work of these three writers.

Prichard, Ward and Hicks imbue the African landscape with iconographic significance. The imagery they employ is drawn both from contemporary cultural myths about Africa and from their own personal encounters with the African terrain.

Feminists critics have argued that women colonial writers did not have access to the same appropriatory/proprietorial metaphors of landscape description employed by their male counterparts. In her Imperial Eyes, Pratt claims that women writers respond to the African terrain in a manner that 'denies domination and parodies power' (Pratt 1992, 213). According to Pratt, they refuse to contemplate a 'civilising or beautifying intervention' for the landscape and detach themselves from the imperial impulses of domination and exploitation (Pratt 1992, 214-215).

This chapter argues that Pratt's theory is valid in the case of Beatrice Hicks, but conspicuously invalid in the cases of Helen Prichard and Harriet Ward. The fact that Hicks rejects the imperialist attitude to the landscape may partly be attributed to the state of unalarming stability prevailing in the Eastern Cape by the 1890s. Prichard and Ward visited the Eastern Frontier during a time of war, when the imperial mission appeared to be in grave danger and the frontier seemed entirely hostile to the European. It was scarcely possible for an English writer to develop the same affection for the African environment that Hicks expresses several decades later.

Both Prichard and Ward resist a feminist attempt to absolve them of complicity in the imperial enterprise. While it is true that they do not employ the sexualized metaphor of penetration and conquest so common to male explorers,[1] they are entirely capable of adopting the appropriatory discourse of imperialism.

The way in which Prichard, Ward and Hicks interacted with the African environment was influenced to a large extent by the temporary nature of their sojourns on the continent. They belong to the type of colonial dweller known as the colon, rather than to that known as the settler. Smith defines these two terms as follows:

> The colon (for which there is no satisfactory English term) is the semi-permanent colonial sojourner who never gives up his metropolitan identity, yearnings, and pretensions; the settler, with varying degrees of success, at least attempts to negotiate a new home in what may be conceived of as either paradise or wilderness, but to which there is no real alternative elsewhere (Smith 1990, 9).

Smith's argument shows that the colon impulse in literature

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1 For discussions of this tendency in men's writing, see Driver's article 'Woman as Sign in the South African Colonial Enterprise' (17-18), and Bunn's paper 'Embodying Africa: Woman and Romance in Colonial Fiction'.

perceives the colonial terrain as an exotic alternative to the 'real' existence of the metropole. The settler impulse, on the other hand, 'encourages a literature of realism, in which the wilds have to be confronted as the only world there is' (Smith 1990, 9).

The three texts with which this chapter is concerned - Friends and Foes in the Transkei, Jasper Lyle and The Cape As I Found It - were all written when their authors returned to England. At the time of writing, therefore, Prichard, Ward and Hicks were not under the immediate necessity of negotiating even a temporary existence for themselves in the African environment. Their retrospective perspectives encourage them to perceive the Eastern Cape landscape in allegorical rather than realistic terms. The landscape is employed almost exclusively as a symbol (either positive or negative) and seldom as a site of prosaic everyday life.

In their depictions of Africa, these writers drew upon an ambivalent cultural tradition. By the nineteenth century, Africa was viewed both as an Arcadian utopia and as a savage dystopia (Smith 1979, 13). These two traditions were not necessarily contradictory. They frequently coexisted in the belief that, while Africa was generally a hostile and inhospitable continent, there was a lost utopia to be found somewhere within its borders (Smith 1979, 13). There was much speculation as to whether this Paradise was located in the west, the east, or the south of Sub-Saharan Africa. By the nineteenth century, however, it was the southernmost part of Africa that was regarded, at least potentially, as an idyllic, golden land (Smith 1979, 16).

Various natural and historical factors were responsible for the popular European opinion that the African continent was 'dark' and dangerous: the climate was notoriously unpredictable; colonists were subjected to savage thunderstorms and harsh droughts; and the sun was far hotter and more dangerous than that to which any Briton was accustomed.

The south-east coast of Africa was also littered with shipwrecks. This was responsible for the impression that the continent was so hostile to the Europeans as to scuttle their vessels before they even reached the shore. In the nineteenth century, contemporary accounts of shipwrecks were widespread and popular, inspiring a considerable tradition of fictional works which contributed to the myth of 'treacherous Africa' (Smith 1979, 22).

The association of Africa with slavery, cannibalism and witchcraft also contributed to this myth. While these practices were obviously connected with the inhabitants of Africa rather than with the continent itself, it may be argued, following Brantlinger, that they had a 'darkening' effect on the African landscape.[2]

The reactions of the three women writers to the African landscape was also influenced by contemporary English aesthetic tastes. Raymond Williams has shown that, by the nineteenth century, the English appreciation of landscape had become dependent upon private ownership of land and upon the ability of the landowner to shape and control natural scenery.[3]

The Eastern Cape landscape, however, was highly intractable to any man-made attempts to mould it. The nineteenth-century English observer had either to accept it as it was or to reconstruct it fictively in mythical terms that bore little resemblance to the reality.

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2 Brantlinger writes that, 'the constant association of Africa with the inhuman violence of the slave trade did much to darken its landscape even before the Romantic period' (Brantlinger, 175); and also that, 'the British tended to see Africa as a center of evil, a part of the world possessed by a demonic darkness or barbarism, represented above all by slavery, human sacrifice, and cannibalism, which it was their duty to exorcise' (Brantlinger, 179).

3 According to Williams, it was the English landowners of the eighteenth century who originated the notion that natural beauty was the prerogative of man rather than nature. By the nineteenth century, a belief in the ameliorative influence of man over nature was a firmly entrenched part of the English landscape aesthetic:

> It was that kind of confidence, to make Nature move to an arranged design, that was the real invention of the landlords. And we cannot then separate their decorative from their productive arts; this new self-conscious observer was very specifically the self-conscious owner (Williams, 124).

5.2 Landscape in Friends and Foes in the Transkei

In the course of her husband's work as an engineer, it became necessary for Helen Prichard and her family to cross the Kei River, which formed the border between the Cape Colony and the Transkei, in order to join the tiny British settlement at Idutywa. Their timing was unfortunate. Within a short while, they became embroiled in the Frontier War of 1877/78 and were fleeing for their lives as refugees in a desperate attempt to regain the relative safety of the Colony.

Helen Prichard's representation of the African landscape is fraught with contradictions resulting from the unsettled nature of her stay on the frontier. She depicts the landscape as both beautiful and unsightly, lush and desolate, inspiring and depressing. These changing attitudes are directly related to the sense of security she feels within a particular environment and the extent of her ability to control that environment.

Prichard is not unaware of the contradictions in her work. This is revealed in her description of a night on which she and her family are obliged to camp out in the veld. She describes the evening in lyrical terms and refers to her surroundings as a 'realm of peace and love' (FFT 209). Then she remarks ironically: 'This was the poetical side of the affair; the prose version was not so agreeable!' (FFT 209; emphasis in original).

This alerts the reader to the fact that Prichard adopts two different discourses or modes of expression in her description of landscape: the 'poetical' and the 'prosaic'. The poetical mode is responsible for her rapturous eulogies about the beauties of the Eastern Cape scenery, while the prosaic mode produces a wary and hostile attitude to the landscape. Prichard's employment of one mode over another is transparently determined by the extent to which the imperial forces have been successful in establishing dominance over the landscape she is describing. She invariably constructs the settler-controlled Cape Colony as

a glorious paradise and the Kaffir-controlled Transkei as a desolate wasteland. As she leaves the Colony and enters 'the very heart of Gcalekaland' (FFT 107), she records a marked deterioration in the beauty of the scenery.

Both Prichard's 'poetical' and 'prosaic' modes tend to result in exaggeration and overstatement. The landscape that is invoked in Friends and Foes in the Transkei seems to be less a realistic terrain than it is a projection of the author's state of mind. Prichard's perceiving consciousness is the agent that creates and continually transforms the landscape, investing it with iconographic significance.

From the moment of her arrival in the Eastern Cape, Prichard's confidence in her ability to master the unfamiliar frontier environment wanes. The product of an upper-class metropolitan upbringing, she is acutely aware of being 'little fitted' for the 'rough frontier' (FFT 4). Despite this lack of self-confidence, she perceives her duty to be the establishment of a domestic haven for her family in the hostile frontier environment. She expresses her determination to 'prepare for this strange, weird Kafirland, to which I resolutely turned my face, and in which I hoped to make a happy home for my husband and children' (FFT 5). This resolve to assume control of the environment by domesticating it is frequently reiterated.

When Prichard and her husband are settled in their temporary home at Idutywa, she distracts herself from her fear of the approaching war by launching into domestic activity:

> [T]he house was really looking rather black! I thought an air of neglect would impress the Kafir servants with the idea that we did not expect to remain there long; so partly from loyalty to good Queen Victoria, and partly from respect to my own love of order, we cleared the decks and prepared for action. All that Saturday morning we scrubbed, and dusted, and polished, and sang, and laughed,

and scolded (FFT 150-151).

Prichard believes that her activities resist the forces of entropy which threaten to overwhelm the British settlement at Idutywa. Although she can do no more than keep up the appearance of order, this is elevated to the status of a patriotic task ('from loyalty to good Queen Victoria'). This assumes that a woman can be an agent of empire, even within the limits of the domestic sphere.

The African bush and its hostile inhabitants threaten to close in on Prichard's home. Her only attempt at staving them off can be to maintain orderliness within her immediate environment. She hopes thereby to deceive the hostile forces, as represented by her Kaffir servants, into believing that British imperial influence in the Transkei is as strong as it ever was.

That this attempt is not quite successful, is indicated by a subtle encroachment on the part of the neighbouring Kaffirs into the domestic terrain Prichard considers her own. The Kaffirs begin to invade her personal 'space' in a way that is as impossible to repulse as it is disconcerting:

> In front of our house was a piece of ground which we hoped to convert into a flower-garden; but during these troublous times no one could be induced to fence it for any consideration. We had therefore no means of shutting out the public [...] When we first arrived at Idutywa, the natives would pass our house respectfully; walking on the side of the path farthest away from me, and almost invariably addressing me as "Inkos": their whole demeanour expressing deference and respect (FFT 146-147).

When war is looming, the physical barriers which demarcate British-owned land from the rest of Africa are immediately threatened. This is symbolised by the fact that Prichard cannot find anyone to fence in her garden. At first, the absence of a

fence does not matter much because the real state of British control over the Transkei is such that the Kaffirs will not dare to encroach upon her land. They indicate their respect for British authority by walking a wide circle around the English lady sitting at her needlework on the verandah - 'their whole demeanour expressing deference and respect.' When war is on the point of being declared, this formality is summarily abandoned. Although Prichard and her husband are still nominally in possession of their land, the Kaffirs indicate the temporary nature of this ownership by venturing ever closer to the house:

> Now all was changed; the men swaggered past me with a most insolent air; often brushing my dress carelessly with their assegais, for all were armed to the teeth, and displayed their weapons as much as possible (FFT 147).

As British power crumbles, the Kaffirs approach so near to the verandah as to brush against Prichard's dress with the symbols of their hostility - their assegais. This is a covertly sexual image, containing within it the threat of rape. Once again, Prichard's response is to assume an air of unconscious indifference: 'I thought the most loyal thing to do was to bear it patiently and sit quietly until they were out of sight' (FFT 147).

Prichard understands that the Kaffir threat is explicitly bound up with the question of land-ownership. The land belongs to those who are strong enough to defend it, and the British are rapidly losing this position. Prichard imagines that the passing Kaffir warriors are deriding her for her insecure position:

> Some would even laugh and nod; first at each other and then at the house, and I fancied these significant looks meant, "Oh! yes my fine lady-chief (Inkos), these pretty things belong to you for a few more days, but they will soon change hands"! (FFT 147).